The Zapatista Uprising, Indigenous Autonomy and Radical Democracy in Mexico

By June Nash

Mayas of the southernmost state of Chiapas are expanding the meaning of liberty, justice and democracy as they mobilize to assert their rights to land, political participation and retention of their distinctive cultures. In the process of changing the political system of Mexico, they are transforming the basis for their ethnic identity from fragmented, ethnically distinct communities to multicultural coexistence in regional and national arenas. Nation building has often assumed the assimilation or even annihilation of marginalized cultures, but their survival after 500 years of colonization demonstrates the potential of a pluricultural approach to democracy.

Radical Democratic Mobilization, 1994-96

The Zapatistas are striving to bring about democratic changes demanding access to land and rights promised, yet never delivered, in the Constitution of 1917. They are also seeking constitutional changes that will promote the free expression of distinct languages and cultural practices in the context of social justice. The land seizures and takeovers of municipal offices in 1994-95 by indigenous populations, who constitute about a quarter of the Chiapas population, have challenged hegemonic control by the Partido Revolucionario Democratico (PRI) exercised through the "mestizocracia" that dominates it. The August 1994 elections, judged by mainstream press to be the fairest in recent history, were not accepted by the majority of the people in Chiapas. A parallel "government in rebellion" headed by Amado Avendano, who challenges his defeat by the PRI candidate, officiates in the Zapatista territory and in the northern regions of the state. The government in rebellion was an attempt to put the principles of multicultural autonomy into action. The dialogue process in San Andres during 1995 and the National Indigenous Forum held in January 1996 were important steps that resulted in the first signing of limited peace accords between the EZLN and the Mexican government since the Zapatista uprising began in January 1994.

Despite the many provocations within the territory designated as Zapatista throughout the spring and summer of 1995, the Indigenous General Command Committee of the EZLN persisted in their attempts to negotiate with the government. The first peace dialogue meeting in April 1995 took place in San Andres Larainzar, renamed Sakam Ch'en or San Andres de los Pobres (of the poor). Over 7000 indigenous supporters congregated in San Andres from throughout the highlands and the rainforest to demonstrate their support of the Zapatistas.

The government commission refused to attend until the thousands of indigenous supporters of the Zapatistas left the town. Forty-eight hours later they transformed the scene, with a thousand troops stationed in the town added to the 4000 quartered on the hill overlooking the town. Under these conditions, the dialogue achieved little except to set dates for further meetings in the summer.

With the resumption of the peace dialogue in September 1995, also held in San Andres Sakam Ch'en with a heavy military presence, the Zapatistas succeeded in moving the process for peace with democracy to a new level. The participants engaged in 6 sessions: community and autonomy, justice, political representation, situation and rights of women, access to media and promotion and development of indigenous culture. Indigenous representatives made it clear that the relations between the state and *pueblos indios*, or Indian peoples (the term applied repeatedly in the context of the negotiations), "could only be resolved in the framework of a profound reformulation of the state, modifying at the root the daily forms of public life that generate and reproduce domination, discrimination and racism." Given the shaky condition of the PRI government, with President Zedillo commanding only a 12% approval rating, the government could not afford a public rebuttal of their position, and so they yielded on most of the points.

In their discussions about indigenous autonomy during the peace dialogue the Zapatistas pointed out new lessons in democracy. Equality, they stated, has been interpreted as sameness, not allowing for differences, but while economic and social inequalities ought to be eliminated, the goal was not to arrive at cultural sameness. In a phrase that catapults the Zapatistas into the postmodern condition, they conclude that, "We are all Mexicans, but each lives and feels his/her Mexicanness differently."

The most provocative material demand of indigenous autonomy in relation to economic development is the right to resources of the soil and subsoil. This means, in Chiapas, returns from the sale of oil on which the Zapatist territory sits, as well as hydroelectric power generated from the swiftly flowing rivers that produce 52% of the eletricity for the nation. Education and health programs are to be self-administered in programs that would validate the history and cultures of Indian peoples as well as their knowledge of medicine and herbs. This aspect of development was vigorously expressed in the session on the rights of women, who asserted the contribution of native practitioners in midwifery.

In addressing the human rights of women, the text of the Zapatistas recognizes (but very summarily) the potential conflict between autonomy and universal rights. In the summary report of the women's rights platform we find the statement "The practice of local customs should never validate violations of women's rights," but the question of violence against women and the abuse of power by diviner curers or those who claim to possess three or more souls is not addressed.

The Fiesta of the Word

In January 1996, the Zapatistas called a National Indigenous Forum to discuss ideas on indigenous rights and autonomy at a national level. The National Indigenous forum, which Comandante David called "the fiesta of the word," was attended by indigenous people from throughout the country, visitors from Argentina, France, Switzerland, the US, Canada, Germany, Holland and Ireland. It signaled the birth of a political front, named Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, "a civil, peaceful organization, independent and democratic, Mexican and national that fights for democracy, liberty and justice in Mexico," in Subcomandante Marcos's words (Cuarta Declaracion de la Selva Lacandona, January 1, 1996). While the Zapatistas handed over their arms, the army intensified its maneuvers in the rainforest.

In his opening address, Tacho urged the indigenous people of Mexico to speak with their own voice without asking for permission, and to join in constructing a world where everyone loves without the need to dominate others. Chiding "the government that we have now has wanted to kill, buy and silence us" and adding, "now we must form a new nation," he invoked the meaning of being indigenous in this new movement.

> We are indigenous people; we have suffered centuries of rejection, of persecution, of abandonment, of death. Many times the oppressor has had white skin, but other times death and treason has had dark skin and our same language. The good path also takes on the word of men and women of white skin and of a different language. In the world that the Zapatistas want, all skin colors fit, all the languages and all the paths. The good world has many ways and many paths. And in those paths there is respect and dignity.

David opened the plenary session on January 8 with what sounded to me like a counterpoint to Tacho's opening remarks on January 3. Stating that the assembled group did not have to ask the permission of the government to speak their own words, he asked permission of Tatik Dueno de la Creacion, the Lord Father of all creation, to begin "la gran fiesta de la palabra en el gran pais de Mexico," the great fiesta of the word in the great country of Mexico. Each of the raconteurs for the 6 sessions summarized their discussion. Antonio Hernandez Cruz summed up the specific changes called for in his session: changes in the electoral law to include indigenous customs in the choice of their authority, constitution of autonomous regions embracing indigenous peoples, participation of women in government at all levels and an ongoing critique of the methods and practice of self-government. The rights of women in employment and of those who were forced to migrate should be recognized and made explicit in the governance of pueblos.

A month after the National Indigenous Forum in San Cristobal, Zapatista leaders announced in San Andres Sakam Ch'en that they would sign an agreement with the government clearing the way for a final peace accord. Tacho indicated that the group who represented the Zapatistas in San Cristobal had consulted with dozens of thousands of the colonizers in the rainforest and that 96% had endorsed the accord. The accord charts "a new relation between the state and the indigenous people" throughout Mexico, requiring changes in practice at state and national levels as well as constitutional reforms. Recognition of the "autonomy" of indigenous pueblos, their right to "multicultural" education including teaching in their own languages and "adequate" representation in local and national congresses are the basic conditions in this accord, which is only one of 6 sets of negotiations under way (Julia Preston, *New York Times*, February 15, 1996, p A12). Specifically, indigenous communities will be exempt from the national requirement that they must be members of a political party to present candidates in elections. The Zapatistas "want to shift from an Indian army to an unarmed leftist pressure group," a change in status that was in fact achieved during the January 1996 forum (Preston, A12). Further negotiations over issues of land, resource shares for the riches contained within indigenous areas and social justice regarding human rights violations, are expected to take months to reach a final accord.

Forging a New Federalism

In the pluripolitical, pluireligious and pluricultural settings in colonizing areas of the Lacandon rainforest and in the urban barrios to which highland indigenous people who have dissented with caciques have been forced to migrate, we find the vanguard of movements that are forging a new understanding of what liberty, democracy and equality might be. The Zapatista call for autonomy of indigenous pueblos is not to isolate themselves from modernizing influences but, rather, to embrace this diversity in a governance that responds to a multiplicity of cultural traditions. From recent reconstructions of Maya history prior to the conquest we can discern what this might be: coexistence of local and regional groups that retain distinctive traditions while becoming integrated in the larger circuits of trade and politics. This is not to say that such governance is a revitalization of ancient practice; rather it is an expression of tolerance for pluriethnic and pluripolitical coexistent groups characteristic of diverse communities that retained their boundaries.

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The editors welcome your comments and contributions (both a hard copy and a diskette). We reserve the right to edit all submissions.

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

Niko Besnier, Contributing Editor

From Your Column Editor

This is the last column I am editing. After more than three years of editing this forum, it is with some nostalgia and much relief that I hand over the pen to Leila Monaghan, who has actually been active in helping out with the column for some months now. In the last three years the submission rate to the column has increased, which I take optimistical-

ly as a sign of renewed interest. Linguistic anthropology is also in better shape than in 1993: jobs are more plentiful, the journal is alive and well after some difficult moments and the new wave of graduate students and recent PhDs—judging from the tone of recent AAA sessions—are full of energy and ideas.

I hope that the readership will continue to submit materials for this column, which from now on should be addressed to Leila Monaghan, Dept of Anth and Sociology, Box 5074, U Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, MS 39406; monaghan@ocean.st.usm.edu. Thanks for your contributions over the last three years.

Yet More Journal-ism

By Judy Irvine (Brandeis U)

By the time you read this column, the next issue of the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* will be on its way to you. This issue (vol 6, no 1) is transitional: although it bears the names of the new editorial officers and board, it was actually put together by Ben Blount, to whom my thanks are due. You will find in this issue several papers concerning topics in diachronic analysis. Luisa Maffi's "Liquor and medicine: A Mayan case study in diachronic semantics" and Eugene Hunn's "Columbia Plateau Indian place names: What can they teach us?" both stem from the cultural semantics tradition, but expand on it to explore semantic change (Maffi), the history of interethnic relations (both papers) and the reconstruction of indigenous ways of life (both papers, but especially Hunn's). Peter Patrick and Arvilla Payne-Jackson, in "Functions of Rasta talk in a Jamaican Creole healing narrative," discuss changes in the relationships among Jamaican registers, as well as the dynamics of personal history reflected in an individual narrative. Other items in the issue include a paper on possible universals in the linguistic form for "Yes" (Steve Parker), and a review article on new approaches in the study of literacy (Jill Brody).

Those of you who were present at last fall's SLA business meeting will recall that there was some discussion of revenue enhancement and production matters regarding the *Journal.* Since I have my hands full at the moment just with getting the editorial office running, and with the content-oriented editorial functions, Harriet Klein has put together a committee to work on these ancillary, but important, problems. I shall be grateful for their help.

Let me remind you once again that I welcome your suggestions for topics and authors *JLA* should be publishing, and new books we should review. And above all, your manuscript contributions are always and especially welcome. Remember, the subfield must have a strong journal that serves as an intellectual focus for our membership and draws the attention of readers in other fields. I can be contacted at irvine@binah.cc.brandeis.edu.

Ethics in Linguistic Anthropology

This is the third and final part of a discussion of ethics and linguistic anthropology emerging from the 1995 AAA sessions and the Ling-Anth e-mail network. Comments are solicited and should be sent to me (L Monaghan) at the address specified at the beginning of the column.

The Ethics of Data

By Barbara LeMaster (California State U-Long Beach)

As Forstorp eloquently pointed out in the March 1996 issue of *AN,* "ethics is an emergent, interactive and communicative phenomenon," and this is particularly true within linguistic anthropology.

Linguists do not always use data that they themselves have collected. For scholars engaged in certain kinds of activities, it seems reasonable for them to seek data from others. But, for many, it is difficult to conduct our analyses without understanding the sociocultural contexts within which the texts are embedded. Additionally, it is the trust given to us and our activities by the language users themselves that enable us to collect rich linguistic data.

Sharing raw data can become politically charged, especially from the viewpoint of empowering people who provide such data for research purposes. Before data can be shared, we have an obligation to protect the rights of their providers. People do not sign consent forms because they know what they are signing, but because of the relationship they have established with the data collector. People develop a trusting relationship with the individuals doing the research, and extend that trust to the research activities in which they are involved, regardless of whether the researchers have a clear idea of how the data will be used.

Not only does one have to consider the rights of the data providers, but also the rights of researchers. Junior scholars may not be in a position to publish as quickly as more senior colleagues. Scholars who spend enormous amounts of time and money collecting data may feel very protective of their investment. Scholars with very rare data may be protective of the edge those data afford them. Should these scholars agree to share their data, how might they be compensated adequately? Additionally, might the data collectors retain rights over what can and cannot be published from the data, or control access to these data by colleagues they have never met (thereby further protecting the data providers)?

Finally, we might ask whether linguistic anthropologists would find it feasible and worthwhile to develop a database of raw language samples for widespread use among colleagues. Such databases have been developed for use among linguists, psycholinguists and conversational analysts. Whether or not it is possible, or even of interest to us remains a question.

Group Discussion

By Rudi Gaudio (Stanford U)

Three major points emerged from our discussion about the ethics of data. First, who owns data? Participants related their discomfort when confronted with requests for access to data they have collected, especially when such requests come from individuals with a higher institutional status, eg, advisors or senior colleagues. Junior scholars sometimes cannot afford to respond honestly to such requests, or to ask for due credit or acknowledgment. Second, ethics vary according the conditions under which the data are collected. Some data are already part of the public domain; what sorts of ethical obligations accompany their use? Regardless of the source, researchers can't always predict how innocuous or harmful our data might turn out to be. And what about informants who will only cooperate in the provision of data under certain conditions; should researchers pursue such data? Another question was whether researchers ought only to try to get data that everyone can use. Third, data collection raises issues of representation. The researcher invariably acts as a gatekeeper, simply by focusing on some materials and not others. What are the ethical implications of such gatekeeping activities? For example, if we exclude certain data because they are socially or politically sensitive, are we not likely to exclude the same voices that are already muted and devalued?

Participants also noted a distinction between official ethics versus real-life morals: the legalistic focus of human subjects boards in the US is not relevant to many fieldwork situations. Finally, whereas some observers fault the "orientalizing" effect of transcripts that translate subjects' speech verbatim or quote their use of nonstandard language, some linguists take issue with the practice of other anthropologists who paraphrase their subjects' utterances, rather than transcribing them. The larger anthropological community should be engaged on this issue, as it touches on ethnographic practices beyond the confines of linguistic anthropology.

The Ethics of Faculty, Students and Research

By Melissa Lefko (California-Los Angeles)

When I first began graduate school at U South Carolina, I was thrown into fieldwork. I was told to find a field site, interview informants and gather, analyze and present data to my peers. I did it because I had to, but I felt as if I were making things up as I went along. While I believe that such an experience was important to my development as an anthropologist, as an ethnographer I wanted more guidance about what I was doing.

The curriculum at USC included a course on ethics in anthropology, during which we read case studies and the Principles on Professional Responsibility, and applied these guidelines to our own experiences. Though many classes touch on the subject and many professors urge their students to understand ethical issues, few departments offer a separate course on the subject. Yet no curriculum should be considered complete without such a course.

Science in Anthropology: Some Closing Comments

By Niko Besnier (Victoria U Wellington)

In the last 9 months this column has included several opinion pieces on the *AN* theme of the year, "Science in Anthropology." While I would not go so far as to describe the discussion as lively, important issues have nevertheless been raised for consideration. I have found thought-provoking, for example, discussions of the extent to which science is fetishized in anthropology and elsewhere, and the extent to which we can identify a single "scientific method," in contrast to the methodologies of the humanities.

But I cannot help wonder whether we anthropologists have not missed the boat. Decisions are being made—and probably have long been made—about what constitutes science, and in particular science that is worthy of funding. And the people who make these decisions—politicians, for the most part—have very specific, and specifically old-fashioned, ideas of what science is. Science is something that deals with testable hypotheses, control populations, laboratories full of people in white coats (and those ever-so-fashionable plastic pocket protectors!) and, above all, numbers—lots of numbers. Science is certainly not something that will or should challenge received ideas about the social world and the political order, and anything that attempts to do so can simply be branded with a farm iron that says "Not Science" and taken out of the running at funding agencies. This picture is all too real around us. The National Science Foundation is currently under enormous pressure to step up the accountability of funded projects. While the move is commendable in principle, the accountability methods that are being tested give an awful lot of prominence to notions like "hypotheses," "testability" and other concepts that are highly appropriate to engineering and the hard sciences, but leave most social anthropologists uneasy. Here in New Zealand, the only government funding agency (and, for that matter, the only funding agency of any significance) will only consider projects that are couched in such terms: social scientific research that is not based on questionnaires, focus groups and multiple regressions is not science.

How do linguistic and sociocultural anthropology fare in this picture? Our ability to survive as a fundable enterprise depends crucially not so much on discipline-internal debates on whether we are scientists or humanists, but rather on our ability to convince people with very definite ideas about the world that the *criteria* for what constitutes good science may be different from their preconceived ideas. The task at hand is thus formidable. Arguing over the validity of an entire discourse is considerably more challenging than conducting a dialogue within a particular discourse. Particularly when our interlocutors start out with attitudes that range from dubious to hostile, as they have come to characterize, with the help of such "hard science" as books like *The Bell Curve* and *Higher Superstition* represent, endeavors outside of "white lab coat" science as a left-wing feminist plot to sap the moral fiber of decent-folks-like-us.

Obviously there will be resistance to such representations, and it is clear that we are a long way from having works of the ilk of *The Bell Curve* call the shots in the dominant scientific discourse. However, it is worrisome that such books, however badly construed and ill argued, get much more public recognition *as science* than any other ethnographic writing. We live in a world where, more and more frequently, decisions about funding priorities (and therefore, in effect, the right to exist) are made on the basis of demagogical criteria that are locked up tightly in a room with a sign on the door that says "Common Sense." Perhaps it is now time, more than ever, to attempt to take the debate about science in anthropology outside of the discipline.