
by

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Indigeneity, Warfare & Representation: The Zapatista Case

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Abstract

This thesis deals with issues of indigeneity, warfare and representation as they relate to the Zapatista struggle in Chiapas, Mexico between the years of 1994-2003—a period widely known as a period of low intensity warfare. During this period, militants of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) engaged fiercely in the creation and defence of de facto “indigenous” municipalities and territories, posing a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the Mexican “state” and its faculty to govern. The environment of war, accompanied by a prevalent Indianist discourse, highly structured the ways in which Zapatista lives came to be represented by activist and academic writings alike. Generic images of Zapatista militants came to dominate the literature. Within this context, my thesis argues for the importance of moving away from images of Zapatistas as public figures and investigating, instead, everyday Zapatista lives. I argue that a refocus on specific-situated-local-everyday politics necessarily entails engaging with “internal” conflict, division, hierarchies, and power differentials. Framed by an ethnographic approach, the analysis presented here is based on 17 months of fieldwork. My discussion on indigenous autonomy and self-determination, therefore, goes well beyond claims to indigenous rights and engages, instead, historical as well as on-the-ground expressions of what self-determination looked like on an everyday basis. My discussion on warfare, moves beyond condemnations of
militarization in the area and pays attention to some of the ways in which warfare worked to
structure peoples’ lives and daily perceptions as well as outsiders’ understanding of the conflict.
While generally my analysis is confined by the particularities of time and space, a generous
examination of an ample literature gives it theoretical depth and political relevance beyond the
Zapatista case.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Indigeneity, War & Representation

This thesis deals with issues of indigeneity, warfare and representation as they relate to the Zapatista struggle in Chiapas, Mexico between the years of 1994-2003—a period widely known as a period of low intensity warfare. An armed political organization largely known for bringing indigenous issues to national front, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) has over the past 15 years sought to re-distribute power and resources to marginalized indigenous citizens.1 Its public struggle has focused on demands for the democratization of power in Mexico and the constitutional recognition of indigenous rights. At the local level, the EZLN has engaged in the creation and defense of de facto autonomous municipalities and territories which

1 The Zapatista National Liberation Army owes its name to one of the most significant Mexican historical figures: Emiliano Zapata. The movement’s official identification as Zapatistas suggests its commitment to Zapatas’ original demand for “land and liberty”. Zapata’s figure as the father of the Revolution has played an important role in the imagining of the Mexican nation since the 1920s. The myth of Zapata has come to embody the interest of the poor, which the Revolutionary state was originally said to represent. The EZLN is by no means the only political actor that has appropriated the figure of Zapata to legitimize its political struggle. Throughout recent Mexican history, different political actors have sought to maintain a measure of legitimacy by re-appropriating the Zapata myth (Brunk 1998, Stephen 1997). State representatives have used the figure of Zapata visually and verbally to maintain popular support, particularly in the countryside where conflict around land tenure has been most characteristic. Presidents Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994) and Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000), for example, appealed publicly to Zapata’s legacy to legitimize Neoliberal reforms that aimed to privatize communal lands in the countryside (Brunk 1998, Stephen 1997). In an analysis of the various appropriations of Zapata, Samuel Brunk (1998) states that “in Mexico’s various corners” ritual observances of [Zapata’s] death gradually created the conditions wherein communities of protest could form around him and use him to challenge the state’s legitimacy” (Brunk, 1998: 463). Zapata was present, Brunk states, “in the student movement of the late 1960s and among urban guerrillas of the early 1970s” (ibid.478) as well as in the peasant and Indian movements that developed in Oaxaca and Chiapas in the 1990s.
operate autonomously from Mexican governmental authority and influence. Since 1994, the EZLN has claimed political and military control over a territory comprised of 38 Rebel Autonomous Municipalities located in and around the area of the Lacandon rainforest. Within this territory, the EZLN has assumed a law-making capacity posing a direct challenge to the legitimacy of the “state” and its faculty to govern. The EZLN’s governmental project has developed in a contentious environment in which the key opponent has been the Mexican government assisted by the repressive actions of the Mexican Army in the area.

Mostly framed by an ethnographic approach, the analysis presented herein is based on 17 months of fieldwork (March 2002-August 2003) most of which took place in a small Zapatista community located within the boundaries of the Lacandon rainforest – specifically in the region known as Las Cañadas – and which I have named Tres Ríos. Fieldwork in the area had two interrelated objectives: first, to grasp the everyday struggles of a community in resistance, a community that was part of the politico-military structure of the EZLN. The aim was that an understanding of local dynamics of power would shed light on the larger EZLN political struggle. My second interest had to do with questions of autonomy and self-determination. While the struggle for indigenous autonomy and self-determination set forth by the EZLN had established general parameters of how autonomy could be exercised within the framework of the

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2 See map #2

3 The word “community” here refers to relatively small settlements or groups of people with well defined geographic and political boundaries. Chapter 3 provides a historical discussion of how these “communities” formed.

4 Analytically, the Zapatista movement can be divided into two parallel structures: one is the EZLN itself, a hierarchical organization composed of the Clandestine Indigenous Revolutionary Committee (CCRI), the High Command, the officers, and the insurgent forces. The second structure is composed by the bases de apoyo or communities in rebellion which have a particular form of social and political organization. It is within the second kind of structural arrangement that my research took place. Tres Ríos is a pseudonym.
National State, how autonomy was lived/exercised in the everyday context was under-explored. Grasping what autonomy meant locally was, therefore, key. The contribution of scholars who have been working systematically on Chiapas (Neil Harvey, Aracely Burguete Cal y Mayor, George Collier, Aida Hernandez, Xochitl Leyva, Shannon Mattiace, Shannon Speed, and Jan De Vos among others) has been essential to this thesis. Their consideration of the complex and contradictory social and economic dynamics in the region, before and after the uprising, has considerably informed the ways in which I interpreted the conflict.

While generally my analysis is confined by the particularities of time and space, a generous examination of an ample literature gives it theoretical depth and political relevance beyond the Zapatista case. Both indigeneity and warfare directly affected the ways in which Zapatista lives came to be represented by activist and academic writings alike. Below I outline some of the ways in which these issues figure in my thesis as well as the ways in which they came to influence my own writing.

**Indigeneity, Conflict, and Division**

The issue of indigeneity – understood as the process through which indigenous actors emerge as such in particular historico-political contexts – has not only been a growing reality over the last two decades in many parts of the world, it has also been at the heart of recent scholarship.\(^5\) The relatively recent emergence of important international human rights treaties

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and covenants\(^6\) forced many Latin American countries to adopt policies of inclusion towards indigenous populations at the national level.\(^7\) Constitutional reforms that recognized multicultural nations containing plural citizenries occurred in countries like Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Ecuador, Argentina, Peru, and Venezuela. This kind of political recognition at both national and transnational levels has encouraged a process of re-indigenization in many parts of Latin America (Jackson & Warren 2005: 551). Political actors previously identified as *campesinos*\(^8\) in countries like Ecuador and Brazil, for example, have recently been classified as indigenous and assigned specific territories (ibid.). The use and expansion of the term “indigenous” as an “identification framework and mobilizing language by [diverse] marginalized groups” (Muehlebach, 2003:250) has generated debates over the meaning of the term itself beyond its specific empirical reference. Trying to define and identify the “indigenous” has, therefore, become a contested political and theoretical terrain (Beteille 1998, ________


\(^7\) In Latin America, the International Labour Organization’s Convention 169 was ratified by Mexico in 1990, “Bolivia and Colombia in 1991, Costa Rica and Paraguay in 1996, Ecuador in 1998, Argentina in 2000, Venezuela and Dominica in 2002, and Brazil in 2003. Outside of Latin America, only Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, and Fiji have signed” (Stocks, 2005:90).

\(^8\) Peasants. The notion of “peasant” has generally referred to rural populations engaged in subsistence farming (Shaning 1973) and has been extensively used in Latin America to analyze processes of modernity and inequality. There is, however, debate over the meaning of the category of “peasant.” While Michael Kearney (1996), for example, sees it as an analytical category no longer functional in a context of globalization and transnational movement, Marc Edelman (1999, 2000) sees it as a political tool still available and legitimate for political mobilization.
Aminzade 2007, Purcel 1998, Rosengren 2002).\(^9\)

Reflecting this larger political and academic interest, much of the analysis on the EZLN,
between 1994-2003 made reference, in one way or another, to indigeneity. As a political tool
through which the EZLN itself structured its public struggle for democracy, resources, and
recognition, indigeneity was indeed relatively successful, particularly in the context of
negotiating the San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture with the Mexican
government (see Chapter 2). In the public imaginary, indigeneity was often evoked as a taken-
for-granted quality of the Zapatista movement; intimately tied to this quality was the image of
the EZLN’s social basis as cohesive and consensually based collectivities. Some of the EZLN
literature, mirroring EZLN official discourses, also engaged in this kind of representation
1997a, Poniatowska 2002, Poynton 1997), paying considerably less attention to the unfolding
“internal” conditions of communities in the conflict zone.

Although the first years of the rebellion were mostly characterized by outward political
unity among Zapatista constituencies, soon afterwards many Zapatista communities experienced

\(^9\) Larson & Aminzade (2007) provide a useful historical overview of some of the different meanings the term
“indigenous” has acquired over the years. Aware of present debates, UN bodies that deal with indigenous issues
(Working Group on Indigenous Populations and the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues) tend not to define
indigenous peoples, allowing instead for self-identification.
unprecedented division and intra-communal conflict. State intervention –in the form of massive militarization and increase of governmental development programs –affected Zapatista consensus. Nevertheless, the intense political atmosphere in Chiapas led many scholars to de-emphasize examinations of division and contradictions “within”, and favor instead a critique of the repressive actions of the Mexican state and military. Both EZLN leaders and academics who sympathized with the movement’s demands made the state the primary target of their critique (Chapter 2). Moreover, restrictions of physical access to Zapatista communities, added to a number of security measures implemented by the EZLN in its territory, highly limited an exploration of everyday politics, forcing interested academics to rely on secondary sources (such as public speeches and interviews). Both of these factors –priority to critique the state and restrictions to Zapatista spaces (political and physical) –led, ultimately, to a pronounced reproduction of romanticized visions of Zapatista indigenous actors (see Chapter 2).

**Contextualizing Division: the Politics of Expulsion**

The kind of internal division that many communities experienced in the conflict zone as a result of the military and political conditions that followed the Zapatista uprising was part of a larger structural process of fracture and fragmentation taking place throughout the state of Chiapas where commonplace disagreements and conflicts became framed in antagonistic terms: pro-government vs. anti-government or pro-Zapatismo vs. anti-Zapatismo. The divisive character of the political process heighted local tensions leading in many cases to the braking up of villages and communities. Although internal disputes and disagreement had always been
part of daily life, communities historically governed through the *ejido* system\(^{10}\) and which enjoyed a certain level of (internal) political autonomy (of the kind described in Chapter 4) found more severe (although not necessarily new) ways to deal with dissent. Between 1994-1998 massive expulsions took place in the area, generating a great number of displaced people – approximately 21,159 (Hidalgo, 1999: 31), 98% of whom identified themselves as opposing the regime (ibid. 37). According to Julián Rebón (2001), this phenomenon occurred mostly in *politically* heterogeneous communities.\(^{11}\)

It is important to note that prior to the Zapatista uprising some communities in Chiapas already practiced expulsion as a way of solving internal confrontations. In the 1970s, for example, Highland communities expelled approximately 30,000 people. The first massive expulsion in the area took place in 1974 when 161 people from the town of San Juan Chamula were expelled as a result of politico-religious differences (CDHFC, 2002:3). In contrast to communities in the Lacandon area, communities in the Highlands have historically been characterized by centralized governments composed of local religious-political authorities (known as *caciques*) who have accumulated wealth and land mainly through their alliance with

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\(^{10}\) In the context of Mexico, the *ejido* is a form of (communal) land tenure with a particular form of social organization that was introduced during the early years of the 20th Century through the revolutionary design of a national agrarian reform (1915-1922). For more details on the *ejido* in the context of Chiapas see Chapter 4.

\(^{11}\) Between the years of 1995-1997, for example, the Northern region, produced approximately 8,000 displaced people (Rebón, 2001: 61) who were expelled from their communities by other community members with the help of the paramilitary group ‘Paz y Justicia’ – an entity openly allied to the PRI, which defined itself as a “self-defense” organization created as a result of the radicalization of Zapatistas in the area (ibid. 56). The municipality of Chenalhó (located in the Highlands) produced by 1996 approximately 6,000 displaced people, 74 per cent were Zapatistas, 23 percent identified themselves as “civil society” and only 3 percent identified themselves with the PRI (ibid. 70).
the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Russ 1994). Because (traditional) religious and civil responsibilities were intertwined, dissent manifested itself as religious opposition and resistance to tradition. Thus, those who challenged the cacique’s authority within the communities were expelled on the grounds that they represented the “enemies of tradition” (Harvey, 1998: 57). By 2002, the expelled population from San Juan Chamula (most of whom were Protestants) amounted to 50,000 people (CDHFC, 2002:4).

While most cases of displacement during the period of low intensity warfare can be attributed to the violence instigated by military and paramilitary presence in the conflict zone, a smaller number can be attributed to the EZLN’s radical position (particularly between the years of 1993-1994) in the jungle region; ¹² although little is known about this process (Rebón 2001). The decision of the EZLN, a year prior to the uprising, to declare warfare to the Mexican government prompted inhabitants of the Lacandon region (particularly in the area of Las Cañas), who did not support the EZLN’s decision, to leave their communities. In 1993, for example, 30 families affiliated with the PRI and who belonged to the ejido of Morelia left (Rebón, 2001: 41). According to Xochitl Leyva Solano (2001), “in 1994 communities in the Plan de Guadalupe area expelled dissenting members who had been EZLN militants as early as 1988 but who had decided not to continue with the movement” (Leyva Solano, 2001: 27). 1994 saw a massive displacement of non-Zapatistas to the cities of Las Margaritas, Ocosingo, and Altamirano (Luevano et al., 1995 as cited by Rebón, 2001: 48). According to the EZLN’s

¹² In general, the geographic area that generated fewer displaced people due to the conflict between the EZLN and the Mexican government was the jungle areal: the Highlands generated 9,902 displaced persons, the Northern region 5,557, the Border region 4,905, the Central region 405, and the jungle region 290 (Hidalgo, 1999: 37).
leadership, however, these were product of people’s fear of the violence associated with war and not of community expulsion (Rebón, 2001: 47).

Expulsion, as an strategy to control dissent, ultimately worked to maintain a certain level of “internal” cohesion. Those displaced often sought refuge in places where people shared their political identity, e.g. displaced Zapatistas sought refuge in Zapatista communities and those affiliated with the PRI relocated to areas where the government retained more power. In this way, political polarization translated into geographic polarization (ibi.73).

In the area of Las Cañadas (where Tres Ríos is located), the armed conflict in 1994 produced an unprecedented social and political fragmentation (Leyva Solano 2001), forcing communities to find new ways of coping with political diversity and polarization. According to Leyva Solano, before 1994 the region of Las Cañadas had (historically) enjoyed a particular level of unity and cohesion through the work of a regional organization known as the Union of Unions (UU) which exerted control “over a large area including seven valleys” (Leyva Solano, 2001:21). Ejido Unions united several communities and in many ways functioned as regional governments, helping resolve intercommunity conflict, representing its members before state functionaries, providing services, and managing local and regional development projects. The UU representatives were integrated organically into the internal structure of the communities which primarily functioned on consensual agreement. Local, regional, and general assemblies were periodically convened by the UU and the communities (ibid.22). For years the UU was the main intermediary force between the communities and the state. The (historical) absence of government institutions (including political parties) in the area contributed to this. Leyva Solano affirms that that no other political organization in Chiapas before had managed to attain so much power and cohesion (ibid.).
With the outbreak of armed conflict in 1994 the UU fractured into five different organizations (one of which was the EZLN). “With the Zapatista uprising and the fracturing of the Union of Unions, local authorities no longer shared a single political axis, and the former unity thus disappeared” (ibid.). For Leyva Solano “it would be too simplistic to say that “communal harmony” was shattered by the war, for it had never really existed. What had existed, however, was the possibility of attaining a far-reaching consensus” (ibid.). According to Leyva Solano, the political pluralism that unfolded in Las Cañadas did not exist before the war. Such pluralism became subsequently experienced as “violent polarization and conflict-ridden negotiation” (ibid. 39).

**Government Aid**

In addition to the militarization and threat of violence in the area, two other factors contributed to deepening division and polarization: the massive development programs that the government launched in the aftermath of the 1994 uprising and the radical position of the EZLN towards government aid. In the conflict zone, state intervention included the strategic building of public roads, highways and other infrastructure as well as the creation of social programs and financial support for development projects in non-Zapatista communities. In an effort to control the insurgency, governmental resources were directed towards the areas defined as the “most vulnerable”, that is areas that were not only the poorest and most marginalized but also the most affected by the political conflict. Governmental aid was distributed according to three kinds of

13 These are Independent and Democratic ARIC (ARIC is the Spanish acronym for Rural Associations of Collective Interest), “Official” ARIC, Union of Union’s ARIC, Union of Jungle Ejidos, and the EZLN (Leyva Solano, 2001: 22).
priorities: 1) the provision of basic services such as health services, education, and food 2) the creation of basic infrastructure such as the construction of roads, and 3) the creation of productive projects (Reyes Ramos & Burguete Cal y Mayor 2002: 23). In Chiapas, between the years of 1995-1997 there was an increase of between 77% to 87% of health services, 53% of school breakfasts, and 11% in primary school enrolment (Reyes Ramos, 2002: 23). There were approximately 314 schools built, electricity for 550 rural communities, supply of potable water for a population of 310,000 inhabitants in 576 rural communities, subsidies for food essentials such as milk and tortillas, and funding for 350,000 small farmers (ibid.)

The Cañadas Programs (1995-2000) which was specifically designed for the region of Las Cañadas mobilized, within the first five years of its operation, 386 million pesos (approximately US$38 million) to realize some 4,381 projects. However, according to Niels Barmeyer (2008), “more than half of this money went in the building of roads and power lines, which had the principal purpose of supplying new army camps” (Barmeyer 2008: 512). One of the main objectives of this program was to neutralize social support for the EZLN by responding to the demands of the different social organizations that were not affiliated to the EZLN as well as to increase the presence of the state in an area where, as stated previously, state institutions had been historically absent (Velasco Sánchez 2002).

In a context in which increased militarization and lack of commitment to the peace process (see Chapter 2) constituted the main background of government aid, the response of the EZLN was radical. The EZLN officially rejected any kind of government support and obliged its constituencies to reject government involvement regarding development, education, health, and agricultural subsidies. The introduction of this policy (in 1996) generated radical splits and further encouraged the flow of state resources towards organizations and communities affiliated
to the PRI. While a portion of the EZLN’s social basis abided to this policy, others did not. The consequence for the latter was the expulsion from the EZLN, a process through which the movement lost a substantial part of its social base. By the year 2000, “deep rifts and political division marked most of the EZLN’s core-communities” (Barmeyer 2008: 507).

A Call for an Ethnographic Approach

The material that structures this thesis has been written in continuity with the work of scholars who aim to understand the Zapatista phenomena “from below” (Estrada Saavedra 2005 and 2007, Barmeyer 2009) and who have paid particular attention to the structure and internal dynamics of the EZLN’s social basis. In 2008 John Gledhill rightfully stated that firsthand observation of developments within Zapatista autonomous communities “remains relatively scarce in the published literature in both English and Spanish” (Gledhill, 2008: 496). In Chapter 5, I argue specifically for the need to move beyond indigeneity in the form of generic claims to autonomy and self-determination and make the case for a refocus on specific-situated-local-everyday politics; that is, an examination of the everyday actions or tactics (de Certeau 1984)14 that have an effect (or threaten to have an effect) on the immediate social and political relations within which such actions are embedded.

A call for an ethnographic approach, however, needs not be mistaken for an invitation to provide the “voice of the people”, “voice for the voiceless”, or to engage in the recuperation of

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14 Framing his analysis in terms of “the battles or games between the strong and the weak” and the “actions that remain possible for the latter” (ibid.34), Michael de Certeau (1984) described everyday practices as tactical in nature, that is as calculated (but circumstantial) actions, manoeuvres, and manipulations that take place “within an immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities (ibid. 40-41).
the “history of the people”. The primary objective of introducing (ethnographic) complexity – not in the form of systemic and detailed descriptions of everyday rituals, rules, meanings, and practices as has been traditional in anthropology, but rather through a focus on everyday contradictions and conflict – is to minimize the possibilities of romanticizing the actions of political actors and move away from pervasive cultural imaginaries (i.e. noble savage and revolutionary others). While this approach might be redundant for many anthropologists, it is not so for non-anthropologists who often rely on interviews, official documents, and public discourses as the basis for their analysis. It is important to note that the EZLN literature is not only vast, it is also highly interdisciplinary. My call for an ethnographic approach, therefore, engages this interdisciplinarity.

15 The Subaltern studies group (founded by Ranajit Guha and other Indian historians and social theorists concerned with issues round colonialism in modern India) were widely known for this approach. They argued that mundane forms of resistance were obscured by the elites’ ultimate failure to grasp the subalterns’ idiom and focused on recovering the experience and distinctive cultures of subaltern groups; a perspective which tended to essentialize the “other”. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) influential article “Can the Subaltern Speak? was a critique to this approach and argued that the subaltern subject was “irretrievably heterogeneous” (Spivak, 1988: 284) and that the intellectual attempt to reclaim the subaltern’s voice ironically worked to re-inscribe the Other’s subordinate position. Michael de Certeau (1984) in an insightful analysis of writing, as a modern mythical practice, makes a similar point. He argues that the “conviction that far, too far away from economic and administrative powers, “the People speak” (de Certeau, 1984: 132) is a result of the establishment of what he calls “the scriptural apparatus” – made possible by the development of printing – which was accompanied by a structural separation between the “bourgeoisie” and the “people” (ibid.144). Arguing for a plurality of voices and assuming that plurality is originary, de Certeau states that setting off in search of this voice which “has been simultaneously colonized and mythified by recent Western history” (ibid. 132) is simply useless (ibid.).

16 For a critical analysis of the image of the Noble Savage in Anthropology see Sykes (2005) and Trouillot (1991).

17 For an analysis of idealized images of guerrillas see Gonzales (1984).
In embracing an ethnographic approach, I also find it imperative to address Sherry B. Ortner’s (1995) theoretical considerations. In an excellent critique of resistance studies in 1995, Ortner identified several areas in which resistance studies were ethnographically “thin;” two are of particular relevance in the case of Zapatista communities: “thin on the internal politics of dominated groups” as well as on “the subjectivity -the intentions, desires, fears, projects- of the actors engaged” in resistance (Ortner, 1995: 190). Ortner forcefully argued that those engaged in resistance (whether it is everyday and individual or large-scale and organized) have “their own politics” and that their actions “are often themselves conflicted, internally contradictory, and affectively ambivalent” (ibid. 179). In order to appreciate resistance as more than opposition and as truly transformative, Ortner stated, one has to appreciate “the multiplicity of projects in which social beings are always engaged, and the multiplicity of ways in which those projects feed on as well as collide with one another” (ibid.1991). In light of Ortner’s suggestions, Chapter 5 describes Tres Ríos’ inhabitants as social persons caught in webs of complex relations and performances of power, reflecting a variety of locations and disparate interests as well as differing capacities to advance their own interests.

1.2 Warfare

Like indigeneity, war has also been a recurrent theme in the EZLN literature. Descriptions of military aggression and state repression often figure as the backdrop against which claims to indigenous rights become further legitimized. The deployment of thousands of troops in and around Zapatista areas and the political instability that came to characterize Chiapas in the years that followed the uprising, have made this constant reference to war legitimate and appropriate.
While my study is not an ethnography of war per se, it describes some of the ways in which questions of (war) violence and conflict affected people’s everyday lives. My analysis focuses on subtle forms of violence and subscribes to Jon Abbink’s (2000) understanding of violence as the contested and pre-emptive use or threat of “damaging physical force” to gain dominance over others (Abbink, 2000: xi).18 Violence – as actions and practices which threaten life directly – is contingent and context-dependent and often has the effect of reconstructing, redefining or reshaping social relations – whether intended or not. Like most Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas in the conflict zone, during my stay in Tres Ríos, I came to perceive war as an ever-present possibility of armed confrontation that would inevitably lead to physical violence and/or death. In their classic analysis of fieldwork in war-torn contexts, Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius Robben (1995b) describe the everydayness of war as a “never-ending stream of worries about the next meal, the next move, and the next assault” (Nordstrom & Robben, 1995b: 3, my emphasis). There is no question that this immediacy of action affects the ways in which

18 Gerard Martin (2000) makes the important distinction between physical and symbolic violence. He states that the concept of physical violence is more restrictive because “its application depends less strongly on perceptions and social representations than the concept of symbolic violence” (Martin, 2000: 262) particularly when acts of terror (such as massacres) and cruelty (such as torture) exist. In contrast, “the concept of symbolic violence remains a very extensive one, being used for a broad range of phenomena (insignia of power, language discrimination of minorities, inequality between men and women, bullfighting, rituals of birth, initiation or death)” (ibid.). Patricia Steinhoff & Gilda Zwerman (2008), writing from the perspective of social movement theory use the term “political violence” to refer to “deeply contested actions, events, and situations that have political aims and involve some degree of physical force. The same events may be called by many other names: terrorism, insurgency, guerrilla warfare, counter-insurgency, self-defence, retribution, security policing, national defence, national liberation, state-sponsored terrorism, or even genocide, depending on the circumstances and who is doing the naming” (Steinhoff & Zwerman, 2008: 213). This definition is also appropriate for my analysis of war in Chiapas.
people organize their lives as well as the ways in which they come to perceive “reality”. Moreover, “the complexity of violence”, Nordstrom and Robben state, “extends to the fieldworkers and their theories as well.” (ibid.4), the result of which is, according to Christopher Kovats-Bernat (2002), “an ‘epistemic murk’ that extends the problem of ethnographic observation and representation beyond the merely philosophical” (Kovats-Bernat, 2002: 212). For Kovats-Bernat, the experience-near of ethnographers in dangerous fields, makes it difficult “for the ethnographer to locate the violence beyond weapons and bodies used to accomplish the violent act itself” (ibid.). “[T]he very instruments of terror (rifle, machine gun, machete, rock, baton) and their targets (bodies)”, he states, tend to become “distractions, diverting ethnographic attention away from the subtext of the violent act that is by focusing it on what the act ought to be...” (ibid.212, original emphasis).

There is no question that my own fieldwork experience and subsequent analysis was substantially shaped by some of these problems. During my stay in Chiapas, a preoccupation with war, conflict, and safety often guided my research priorities and constantly refocused my ethnographic attention. In Chapter 3, I describe the military context within which Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas lived their lives. I also describe some of the ways in which such context constrained people’s movements (including my own) and access to particular spaces. In line with what Kovats-Bernat addresses, the overall tone of the chapter itself, particularly the ethnographic description, works to reflect (and to a certain extent reproduce) my informants’ as well as my own preoccupation with violence and war. Most of chapter 3 was written immediately after my return from the field and was therefore influenced by the immediacies of war which I carried with me (to Canada) for at least a year after my departure from the field. In their insightful analysis of war, Nordstrom and Robben make the crucial point that “[u]nderstandings of violence should undergo a process of change and reassessment in the course of fieldwork and writing”
It is imperative to deal with war reflexively in order to go beyond descriptions of chaos and terror and to appreciate the creativity that people employ to reconstruct their lives amidst violence and war (Nordstrom 1995a). After a few years in Canada and no longer affected by the proximity of potential violence, I was able to see warfare not just as a military strategy to intimidate the population and demobilize Zapatista militants (Chapter 3), but also as something much broader and pervasive. In Chapter 6, I analyze war as a discourse around which people were forced to organize their lives as well as the ways in which it influenced their particular understandings of their “reality”. The role outsiders played in reproducing such a discourse outside the conflict zone is also analyzed.

1.3 Notes on Representation, Reflexivity & Positionality

While there is no question that the production of ethnographic knowledge is largely shaped by the fieldwork experience, the ways in which one decides to represent ethnographic others is ultimately structured by who the recipient of such representation (audience) is perceived to be. João de Pina-Cabral (2000) puts it simply: “all ethnography is written with the spiritual presence of some sort of audience hovering over the shoulders of the ethnographer and metaphorically peeping into the screen of our computers” (Pina-Cabral, 2000: 343). During the process of writing my thesis, the question of “who am I speaking to?” was always present in my mind but was never fully answered. At times I was sure to speak to other anthropologists who were interested in issues of ethics in the field (Chapter 3), for example. Other times I was speaking to academics generally interested or involved in the formal production of knowledge (Chapter 2), and other times to local and transnational activists and leaders concerned with issue of mobilization (Chapter 5). There were probably instances in which this internal dialogue (see conclusion of Chapter 2) included all these political actors simultaneously, but what was always
clear in my mind was that addressing a multiplicity of audiences ultimately worked to silence the position of the people directly involved in the research project itself.  

It is important to make the analytical distinction here that Quetzil E. Castañeda (2006) rightfully makes between ethnography as fieldwork and ethnography as text. While fieldwork “points towards the immediate lived-in interactions and engagement with others” (Castañeda, 2006: 122-123), “questions of representation point to more general problems in which others can become abstracted in generic categories (e.g., genders, tribes, races, cultures, or civilizations) and reified in [analytical] notions such as the Self-Other, modernity (premodernity or postmodernity), savage minds, and savage slots” (ibid.). Although these are obviously interconnected, they respond to different epistemological and political priorities. According to Castañeda (2006b), the valorization of the experience and interaction of fieldwork within the discipline of anthropology “corresponds not to the right then and there but to the subsequent re-constitution of information and experience as knowledge in writing, text, and representation that circulates for other audiences of readers and viewers [that are] detached from the specific time and space of the fieldwork.” (Castañeda, 2006b: 82, my emphasis). The requirement that ethnography be mainly conceptualized not as fieldwork but “as the representation and re-circulation of “knowledge” and/or “experience” to audiences outside and beyond the audiences and encounters of fieldwork” (ibid. 84-85, my emphasis), implies that the interests and concerns

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19 According to Castañeda (2006), there is an increasing demand within the social sciences to be accountable to (or at least acknowledge) a variety of stakeholders—who may themselves hold conflicting interests, i.e. sponsors, government officials, NGO workers, subjects of research, publics, audiences, consumers, students, etc (Castañeda 2006). The revised 1998 AAA Code of Ethics, for example, “establishes deontic responsibilities and obligations not only to those with whom and for whom research is conducted but also to (1) scholarship and science, (2) the public, and (3) students and trainees” (Castañeda, 2006: 137). Not having one specific audience makes the issue of representation particularly difficult to articulate in a clear-straight forward manner.
of the audiences that emerge during the fieldwork encounter (what Castañeda calls “emergent audience”) become relegated to larger disciplinary interests. The academic demand that one’s analysis not only acknowledges but transcends the specificities of those whom one studies was, in my case, constantly experienced not only as an analytical contradiction but, most importantly, as a political one.

My valuing of the representation of Zapatistas as complex and contradictory political actors, therefore, was not only the result of the contingencies I faced during the fieldwork encounter, nor of my own positionality (shifting and complex) in the research project itself, but also of disciplinary trends. Here I want to point out that approaching reflexivity as a representational strategy in which one tries to textually attend to the relations of power and inequality inherent in the academic production of knowledge, may not be as illuminating as reflecting about some of the ways in which particular disciplinary traditions (and requirements)

20 In a similar analysis, Wing-Chung Ho (2008) examines the break anthropologists often make between the experiential fieldwork and the theorizing moment of writing ethnography (Ho, 2008: 359). The problem according to Ho, is that the “here-and-now idea as such is not considered “meaningful” for social scientific investigation. It only becomes so within the world of contemporaries…who theorize the ideas as text” (ibid.361).

21 By “contradictory” I mean that political actors often operate in multiple historical contexts of inequality which can generate a complex, culturally mediated, mix of resistance with accommodation to hegemonic premises (Hale 1994). I am making reference here to the notion of “contradictory consciousness” which according to Gramsci referred primarily to a fundamental contradiction between classes; that is a contradiction between “the world-view of a dominant group (whose domination rests ultimately on their dominant economic position and on the economic exploitation of those they dominate) and an implicit, as yet unarticulated, understanding of ‘how things are’ on the part of the dominated” (Crehan, 2002: 192).
work to inform and shape one’s work (Sangren 2007). My desire, thus, to challenge
generalizations and appeal to empirical specificity, was from the start embedded in a broader and
dominant anthropological trend, itself founded on the discipline’s critique of culture which
originated in the 1980s (Bunzl 2008). The rejection of culture as an essentialized abstraction
advanced “a fundamentally empirical claim, namely that what ha[d] been misinterpreted as
homogenized culture [was] really a set of complex negotiations and contestations” (Bunzl, 2008:
57, my emphasis). The practice of eschewing “false generalizations in the interest of more
accurate representations of complexity” (ibid.) has since come to structure the ethnographic gaze
irrespective of whether or not this kind of representation is compatible with emergent audiences.
If within the context of what Michael de Certeau (1984) in his analysis of everyday practices
called the “scriptural economy”, all academic writing becomes, wittingly or unwittingly,
implicated in the “modern project” of producing society as a text (de Certeau, 1984: 134), the
virtual absence of systematic and close scrutinies and critiques of the so-called subjects of
research, works to strengthen not only the ethnographer’s traditional authority but also the
hegemony of the scriptural apparatus.

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22 Two main problems have been identified by feminist writers regarding reflexivity (Benson & Nagar 2006, Nagar 2002 & 2003, Rose 1997). First, the privileging of reflexivity that emphasizes the situatedness or positionality of the researcher in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, etc. overshadows a more explicit discussion of the economic, political, and institutional processes that structure ethnographic writing. Second, the demand to situate oneself in the process of producing knowledge assumes that the intricacies that shape the fieldwork encounter and subsequent writing can be fully grasped.

23 de Certeau describes the “scriptural economy” as the process (economic, social, political, etc.) by which (European) societies become regulated by writing. de Certeau argues that writing has becomes a practice of modern discipline that attempts to reorganize all domains of life (de Certeau, 1984: 134).
Related Considerations

Scholars working from the perspective of collaboration (Field 1999, Rappaport 2008, Leyva and Speed 2007) or ‘engaged’ research (Hale 2006, Speed 2006 and 2008) have questioned the discipline’s authority and endeavor to re-imagine or ‘de-colonize’ (Leyva and Speed 2007) the process of knowledge production by attempting to deliberately and explicitly include –from project conceptualization, fieldwork and writing – those directly involved in the research.

In the particular context of Chiapas, my academic interest in the “thickness” (Ortner 1995) of the everyday became restricted by a political environment in which “essentialist” images of indigenous Zapatistas were being mobilized (by EZLN leaders and supporters) to, on the one hand, gain national and international support and, on the other, to legitimize the movements’ demands for indigenous autonomy and self-determination. At the local level, where division and factionalism characterized daily life, and where political positions had been highly radicalized by the militarization of the area and the latent threat of warfare, such an interest was not open to negotiation (see Chapter 3).

In the context of indigenous struggles for legal recognition, other academics have also had to negotiate dealing with the (strategic) essentialism of indigenous actors (who are often interoplated through a set of static characteristics and who must conform to this in order to get access to a minimal set of rights) and academic interests that value a more complex and fluid approach to the study of social and political processes (Field 1999). In this respect, Les W. Field (1999) states that critical academics are often “tempted to pour old essences into new bottles in defense of and in collaboration with the indigenous communities with which they work. These temptations stem from the rules of the systems of power in which both are positioned” (Field,
The key question for “politically engaged” researches is then “how to combine criticism of the existing order with the interests and actions of those most oppressed by the existing order” (Collins, 1999: 203). For politically engaged researchers (Hale 2006, Speed 2008, 2006) this is an ethical as well as a methodological question that can only be addressed in dialogue with those involved in the research. In Chapter 3, however, I describe some of the limitations a context of low intensity warfare posed for collaboration and dialogue of this kind. The context of militarization in the region obliged Zapatista militants to implement a number of security measures towards outsiders in order to restrict the flow of information outside the conflict zone. Such restrictions included, among other aspects, non-communication with non-Zapatistas and isolation (of the outsiders) from the daily social and political activities of community members (including Zapatistas) (Chapter 3). The details of the origins of the political division within Tres Ríos, for example, was kept a secret from outsiders, and although, I am able to discuss the particularities of this secret (Chapter 5) because presently the political conditions in Tres Ríos and surrounding area has considerably changed (see Epilogue) and the secret is no longer regarded as such, this serves as a particular example of the extent to which polarization affected the prospects for open dialogue (Estrada Saavedra 2007). Given this particular context, the critical question then becomes not whether academics should commit to ethnographic complexity, on the one hand, or to political engagement with the people they study, on the other, but rather under what conditions do academics commit themselves to one or the other (or both). The fact that collaboration and dialogue might be contingent upon temporal conditions, does not mean that scholars should return to neo-colonial approaches; on the contrary, it means that continued scholarly debate in this direction is much more urgent.
1.4 Methodology

While an argument for ethnographic complexity – of the kind I am advocating – might be relatively easy to maintain theoretically, providing the empirical data to substantiate it can prove to be a complicated task, particularly in conditions restricted by militarization, political polarization, and clandestinity. If before arriving in Chiapas long-term participant observation seemed like the most appropriate method to investigate conflict and contradiction within Zapatista communities, once I arrived in Tres Ríos, it became the only means through which I was able to gain substantial information. In a context in which formal interviews often turned into political speeches and duplicates of the EZLN official discourse, having (long-term) access to people’s daily (inter) actions helped me fill the enormous gap between what people often “said” and what they (actually) “did”.24

Of the 17 months I stayed in Chiapas, the first three months were spent between the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas and three other Zapatista communities (Chapter 2). During this time I held formal and informal interviews with members of various non-governmental organizations as well as activists, academics, and international observers residing in San Cristóbal. I also collected formal interviews from Zapatista militants during my short visits to the communities in the region. The next eight months were spent in Tres Ríos where, as a (full-time) participant observer, and after initial difficulties (see Chapter 2), I was able to gain significant

24 This relationship can also be conceptualized in terms of the long-established anthropological distinction between theory and practice which can range from a systematic look at the connection between people’s thoughts and their practical engagement with the world to “the more complex outlines and developments of a theory of practice that attempts to show how theories are produced and reproduced through social practice” (Wilson & Mitchell, 2003:4, original emphasis). For an analysis of the latter see Ortner (1984), Reckwitz (2002), and Spring (2008).
access to the community’s social and political dynamics. Physical access to Tres Ríos was facilitated by a local non-governmental organization (The Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center) known for its support to Zapatista constituencies. Nevertheless, access to people’s daily interactions and relations was negotiated on a daily basis, particularly during the first months in the community.

Two particular aspects made participant observation peculiar in Tres Ríos: the fact that the community was politically divided between Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas and the fact that Tres Ríos’ public sphere was characterized by a somewhat rigid gender divide. Regarding my relation to non-Zapatistas, local conditions restricted any relation and interaction with them – in the context of Tres Ríos, a non-negotiable factor (see Chapter 2). The limited information I was able to gather about non-Zapatista community members was, therefore, through the views and accounts of Zapatistas themselves; a factor which, at times, made non-Zapatistas appear as the victims of Zapatista actions. In relation to the community’s gender division, I had anticipated that (as a “woman”) negotiating access to male meetings and daily activities was going to be a difficult (if not an impossible) task. I had also anticipated that women’s daily life was going to be easily accessed. And indeed, within a few days in the community I was constantly approached by women (of different ages) wanting to make conversation and inviting me to their homes. My relationship to men was initially distant and formal. It was the arrival of my father in the field (two weeks later) which changed dramatically my expectations and facilitated my access to male

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25 I am not suggesting here that one’s gender necessarily determines the kinds of relationships, access, and rapport one can develop in the field. Gender, like other social categories (race, class, etc.) is interactive and negotiative (Mazzei & O’Brien 2009). Nevertheless, during my first days in Tres Ríos I felt that before I learned how to navigate Tres Ríos’ social landscape, I had to accommodate to public gendered expectations which included moving within what were considered women’s public spaces.
activities and discussions. The two months my father stayed in Tres Ríos with me were pivotal in helping me build relationships with some men in the community. Once my father left the field, my relationship with these men and their families was somewhat consolidated.

Most of the data collected during my stay at Tres Ríos was mainly gathered through informal conversations that took place at the Civil Camp for Peace (a humble house designated for international observers at the top of a hill), while community members paid me a visit or when they stopped by for a few minutes on their way to their milpas, at the river while bathing with other women or washing our dirty clothes, at the cafetales while helping pick the coffee beans, or around the fire while women made delicious tortillas or warmed up the coffee. Given the context of repression, secrecy, and fear (as well as low levels of literacy in the community), written consent was out of the question. The use of tape recorders was restricted, unless it was used for recording children’s songs. Fieldnotes were mostly taken at the Camp and at the end of the day. Most of people’s views and thoughts were, therefore, not written down literally (nor immediately) but as memory (and time) allowed it.

The final six months in Chiapas were spent travelling back and forth between the city of San Cristóbal and Tres Ríos. During this time, I was able to do library and archival research in the city as well as keep myself informed about developments in Tres Ríos. Overall, my research approach can be described as multi-sited (Marcus 1995) not only because I moved within

26 Cornfield.
27 Coffee field
28 Corn bread
different geographic spaces but, most importantly because I was able to engage subjects who differed significantly in their social location.29

The overall structure of this thesis was highly influenced by Valentina Napolitano’s (2002) notion of “prisms of belonging”. Napolitano frames her study of urban Guadalajara through the notion of “prisms of belonging” which helps her capture “the heterogeneous perceptions, feelings, desires, contradictions, and images that shape experiences of space and time” (Napolitano, 2002: 9-10). Although I am not explicitly dealing with processes of belonging and identity formation (like Napolitano does), “prisms of belonging” encouraged me to frame the material in terms of “issues” as opposed to one overarching argument. This approach highlights some of the discursive, material, and political processes that mediate everyday life and politics in Zapatista territories. The body of this thesis is composed of four main chapters. Chapter 2 presents a general description of the political context within which the Zapatista struggle for land and autonomy is embedded. It also presents an overview and critique of the literature on the EZLN between 1994-2003, problematizing, in particular, academic and activist inclinations to romanticize the movement and its militants. Chapter 3 describes some of the ways in which conditions of low intensity war affected the local population as well as the process of (academic) research. The possibilities and consequences of doing “ethical” and “collaborative” research in a context of violence are thoroughly examined. In Chapter 4 I turn to the issue of autonomy from a

29 The notion of “multi-sited” ethnography was coined by George E. Marcus (1995) and refers to a particular research strategy that privileges the movement and circulation of people, objects, ideas, images, cultural meanings, identities, etc. Multi-sited research is designed around “chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among [geographically or conceptually] separate sites” (Marcus, 1995:105).
historical perspective and argue that Zapatista notions of self-determination were a product of relatively recent governmental projects and historical configurations. Chapter 5 presents a description of the economic, social and political structure of the community of Tres Ríos as well as an in-depth analysis of what I call “everyday politics”. Chapter 6 considers how a discourse of “warfare” structured people’s daily life and influenced the representation of Zapatistas beyond the conflict zone. Finally, in the Epilogue I provide a snapshot of how conditions in Tres Ríos have changed since my departure from the field (2003) and restate the thesis’ contribution to the understanding of indigeneity, warfare and representation.

1.5 Location

Chiapas is the southernmost state of Mexico and has an area of 73,887 km². Its population is approximately 4,222,800 people of which one third is officially identified as “indigenous” or of indigenous descent (Lomelí González, 1999:242). The estate is geographically divided into four distinct regions: the Highlands and border zone, the Central region, the Coastal region, and the Soconusco region (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1994:6). The Highlands are the traditional homeland of the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal and Chole peoples. The border region, which includes the Lacandon rainforest, is mostly inhabited by migrants from the Highlands and constitutes the regional and social base of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (ibid.).

The area of the Lacandon holds a population of approximately 200,000 inhabitants and is divided into six sub-regions: Cañadas of Las Margaritas, Cañadas Ocoseno-Altamirano, Zona Norte, Lacandon Community, Montes Azules Bioreserve, and Marqués de Comillas (De Vos, 2002:39). Las Cañadas, considered the heart of the EZLN’s social basis, constitutes a mountainous region with high rocky hills and valleys and holds a population of approximately
30,000 inhabitants settled in more than 200 localities (Leyva Solano & Asencio, 2002:21).

Although both Cañadas share a history of colonization, the division between the two is primarily a linguistic one. While in Las Cañadas of Ocosingo-Altamirano the ethnic and linguistic groups that predominate are Tzeltales and Choles, in Las Cañadas of Las Margaritas it is Tojolabales (ibid.). In 2002, Tres Ríos was a small settlement of approximately 700 inhabitants grouped into 80 households located within the boundaries of Las Cañadas of Las Margaritas.

As reference points, the Lacandon area has the cities of Villahermosa, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, and San Cristóbal de Las Casas; it is here where decisions concerning the rainforest’s economic and political development are made because it is here where the centers of power (federal, religious, and financial institutions) are located (Leyva Solano & Asencio, 2002: 105). It is also in these cities where peasant and indigenous organizations officially negotiate their interests and confront governmental policies (ibid.). The forest area is also surrounded by the intermediary cities of Ocosingo, Tenosique, Palenque, Las Margaritas, and Comitán. Although these constitute primarily urban areas, they are characterized by a pronounced rural influence. Municipal authorities, religious representatives, ranching and peasant organizations, as well as local representatives of cattle and coffee merchants can be found in this area (ibid.). These also represent main entrance points to the jungle area and have, therefore, light aircraft stations as well as routes that lead to the forest region (ibid.).
Map #1, Chiapas in Mexico.

Source: CIEPAC (the Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action),
http://www.ciepac.org/mapas/economicos.php

Map #2, The Lacandon rainforest. Source: Andrés Barreda (2001)
Map #3: Main Cities in Chiapas. The area of the Lacandon rainforest is located between Palenque, Ocosingo and Comitán De Domínguez.

Source: CIEPAC (the Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action), http://www.ciepac.org/mapas/economicos.php
Chapter 2

Between the years of 1994 and 2003, the conflict in Chiapas and the EZLN’s struggle for the legal recognition of indigenous rights was characterized by several factors: 1) a lack of commitment on the part of the Mexican government to the peace process, a factor which antagonized EZLN leaders and supporters, 2) the increasing militarization of the region and repression of EZLN militants and supporters by the Mexican army and 3) the participation of a wide range of social and political actors (Leyva Solano 1998) which gave the conflict unprecedented national and international visibility (Nash 1997b). These factors considerably influenced the ways in which the conflict came to be represented. The urgency of documenting and denouncing state violence and military repression shaped the ways in which activists and academics tended to talk and write about the conflict. A tendency to “sanitize” – to use Bourgois (2001) words – Chiapas’ highly politicized context came to characterize the EZLN literature.30

As in the case of Bourgois in El Salvador during the Cold War, the context of low intensity warfare in Chiapas made it difficult for academics and activists to “perceive and portray the revolutionary peasants as anything less than innocent victims, at worst, or as noble resisters at best” (ibid.28); ultimately obscuring local power relations and the diversity – ethnographic and historical – which characterizes local political struggles.

30 Bourgois (2001) uses the word “sanitize” to describe his predisposition to overlook the ways in which structural violence had permeated everyday relations among revolutionary peasants and guerrillas in El Salvador during the 1980s.
The years that followed the Zapatista uprising saw an academic production which tended to speak more about the ways in which the Zapatista struggle was being absorbed and redefined by actors “outside” the conflict zone than about the lives of the people who were actually making the process possible. In this chapter I will discuss two of the main (interrelated) tendencies that characterized the body of literature on the EZLN between 1994 and 2003: 1) a persistence of “indianist” discourses which led to the over-romanticization of ‘indigenous’ subjects, and 2) a constant reference (implicit and/or explicit) to the “movement vs. state” dichotomy as the main theoretical mechanism to explain the socio-political and economic context in which the EZLN’s struggle was embedded.\textsuperscript{31} It was tendencies such as these ones that, according to Hellman (2000), made the conflict in Chiapas appear “as a direct confrontation between the powerless and the powerful, the pure and the impure, the honest and the corrupt” (Hellman, 2000:157) and that made the “decision to weigh in on the side of the oppressed relatively easy” (ibid.).\textsuperscript{32}

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\textsuperscript{32} In 2000, Hellman published a very strong critique to activists outside Chiapas for their reliance on electronic communication and their uncritical use of dichotomies to describe the political and military conflict. While mainly directed to activists, her critique, could easily be extended to the academic production that followed the uprising.
\end{flushright}
2.1 Political Context

PEOPLE OF MEXICO. We, men and women, upright and free, are conscious that the war we now declare is a last resort, but it is also just. The dictatorship has been waging a non-declared genocidal war against our communities for many years. We now ask for your committed participation and support for this plan of the people of Mexico who struggle for work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace. We declare that we will not stop fighting until we win these basic demands of our people, forming a free and democratic government. Join the Insurgent forces of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. (First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, January, 1994. Original emphasis)33

It was with this declaration of war, in addition to the military seizing of some of the most important municipal centres in Chiapas,34 that the Zapatista National Liberation Army initiated its public life in Mexico. The militants –equipped with rubber boots, homemade uniforms, ski masks and rudimentary weapons ranging from machetes and handmade wooden rifles –were predominantly poor rural Mayan speaking (self-identified) “indigenous” young men and women. They denounced the “illegal dictatorship” of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, censured the monopoly of power held since the 1930s by Mexico’s ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), and condemned decades of governmental neglect for peasants and indigenous people’s elemental rights: “work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace” (First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, January, 1994.). Their actions were a response not only to the political and economic marginalization rural populations had endured for decades (Collier 1997, Harvey 1998b), but more specifically to the Neoliberal

33 Full communiqué can be found in Ava, August 3, 1994.

34 San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Las Margaritas, Altamirano, and Ocospingo.
restructuring the Salinas administration was undertaking (as recommended by the World Bank) as an attempt to radically transform the agricultural sector (Harvey 1998a). In particular, theirs was a direct reaction against the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution which in 1992 had ended land distribution, allowed the privatization of *ejido* lands throughout the country, and permitted foreign companies to buy or rent lands for agricultural and forestry activities (Stephen & Pisa 1998:127). The response of the Mexican government to the uprising was the immediate deployment of 12,000 troops, ultimately positioning half of Mexico’s military forces in the region.

The Zapatista’s radical call for social transformation resulted in the development of an impressive network of local, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (see below) which demanded a ceasefire and withdrawal by the army, respect for human rights, peace negotiations, amnesty for EZLN members, and the formation of civil commissions to investigate violations of human rights. Dozens of demonstrations took place throughout Chiapas and beyond in support of the rebels’ demands. The political pressure generated by this

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35 These reforms called primarily for a drastic reduction of public expenditure and investment (Villafuerte Solis, 2005) as well as for the “privatization of state-owned enterprises an the gradual elimination of price support and other input subsidies” (Harvey, 1998a:193). The participation of Mexico in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) further eliminated the possibilities of any kind of protection for small producers, fair access to credit, technical assistance, and introduced “marketing mechanisms favouring multinational corporations” (Villafuerte Solis, 2005:465). In a context in which agriculture represented the main source of employment, these reforms had real impact on the livelihoods of many Chiapanecans.

36 It is believed that the state of Chiapas contains huge oil deposits (Barreda 2001), the privatization of *ejidos* were therefore also going to facilitate the exploitation and privatization of the oil fields.

37 Just in Mexico City, for example, a few days after the uprising over 100,000 people demonstrated in support of the uprising and called for a peaceful resolution of the conflict (*National Catholic Reporter*, February 25, 1994).
unprecedented mobilization forced President Salinas de Gortari to announce a unilateral ceasefire only 12 days after the uprising. Peace negotiations began officially in the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas on February 21, 1994 but their progress became highly irregular.

By the end of 1994 the EZLN had initiated yet another powerful and highly visible political mobilization. Reacting against an electoral fraud in the 1994 elections in the state of Chiapas and guided by the belief that Mexican citizens had the constitutional right to “alter or modify the form of their government” (First Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle, January, 1994), between December 9 and 19, the EZLN mobilized diverse indigenous communities to create and determine the new boundaries of communities, municipalities and territories that were committed to subscribe to the regulations of the General Command of the EZLN. Conforming to the newly created jurisdictions required the election of new local and regional governments, the strict adherence to the “General Law of Rebel Autonomous Municipalities”,\(^{38}\) and the rejection of established constitutional governments run by those affiliated with the PRI. The 32 (rebel) municipalities controlled by the EZLN were those municipalities in which the PRD (Party of the Democratic Revolution, center-left political party) had claimed fraud (Nash, 1997:263)\(^{39}\). The arguments for the new autonomous governability were primarily the principles of democracy and

\(^{38}\) According to the *Ley General de Municipios Rebeldes Autónomos*, the ‘rebel’ municipal government had, among other duties, the obligation to inform periodically about its activities, visit regularly the communities that belong to the municipality, take measures to ensure the conservation of the natural environment, create mechanisms to prevent the pollution of rivers and lakes, “respect the rights of “both sexes”, prohibit the selling of alcoholic beverages, and respect the culture and religious beliefs” (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1998: 254). Other Revolutionary Laws included the Women’s Revolutionary Law, the Revolutionary Agrarian Law, the Urban Reform Law, the Labour Law, the Industry and Commerce Law, the Social Security Law, the Justice Law, the Law of Rights and Obligations of Peoples in Struggle, the War Tax Law, and the Law of Rights and Obligations of the Revolutionary Armed Forces.

\(^{39}\) See Map #5 for the names and location of the Zapatista Autonomous Municipalities.
the legitimacy of governments elected by a majority (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1998:247). The demand, however, was not for electoral democracy but for the application of the direct participatory democracy of the local assembly which involved collective decision making based on consensus rather than voting, a concept intimately tied to practices of referendum and plebiscite (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1998:248). By the end of 1994 the EZLN had territorial control of almost 40 percent of the Chiapanecan geography and had ideological and political influence on over 80 percent of indigenous communities (Lomelí Gonzales, 1999:248). The response of the Mexican government to this massive mobilization was, once again, the further militarization of Zapatista areas and the launching of a military offensive to arrest Zapatista leaders.

In April 1995, however, the Mexican government – pressured once again by the public support the EZLN was able to attract – agreed to respect the “rebel” territories and dialogue with the EZLN was reinstated. EZLN leaders and government officials agreed to present proposals and find negotiated solutions through four consecutive discussions on several themes.\footnote{The themes were Indigenous Rights and Culture, Democracy and Justice, Welfare and Development, and Women’s Rights in Chiapas} The first panel began in October 1995\footnote{This discussion was divided into six themes: autonomy, justice and human rights, participation and political representation, women’s rights, and mass media and culture (Presunta Justicia, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center, March 1999).} and culminated with the signing of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture in February 1996.\footnote{The Accords took on this name because the negotiations took place in the town of San Andrés Larráinzar, Chiapas. An English copy of Document Two of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture can be found in Cultural Survival Quarterly, Spring 1999.} The Accords laid the ground for significant
changes in the areas of indigenous rights, political participation and cultural autonomy. The right to autonomy and self-determination which the Accords granted did not imply secession from the country; on the contrary, it was to take place within the framework of the National State and expected to “strengthen the country’s sovereignty” and to “contribute to the unity and democratization of national life” (The San Andrés Accords, Document II, Section II, point 2).

The Accords were significant because they encompassed the demands of at least 178 indigenous organizations (Cunningham and Corona, 1998:19). It is important to note, however, that while the Accords stated the importance of the territory (conceived as the “entire habitat occupied by indigenous peoples” and the material base of their reproduction) and drew a clear link between “people-land-nature” (ibid: Section II, point 4a), they did not deal directly with key issues of

43 The right to autonomy and self-determination specifically entailed the recognition of indigenous peoples’ “internal normative systems for regulation and sanction, insofar as they [were] not contrary to constitutional guarantees and human rights” (ibid: point 6b). The State assumed the responsibility to acknowledge “the authorities, norms, and procedures for internal conflict resolution” in municipalities and communities, “understanding these as the means for applying justice according to internal normative systems” (ibid: Section III, point 2). Additionally, indigenous communities were granted the right to “associate freely with municipalities that [were] predominantly indigenous” (ibid: Section V, point 1a). Municipalities were also permitted to “form associations in order to coordinate their actions” as indigenous peoples (ibid: Section II, point 4). The right to autonomy further gave indigenous peoples the power to determine their development projects and programs and committed the Mexican government to “incorporate in local and federal legislation, the ideal mechanism that would promote the participation in the planning for development at all levels” (ibid: point 4d). Other rights included the right to promote and preserve indigenous languages and the right of indigenous peoples to “acquire, operate, and administer their own communications media” (ibid: Section III, point 8).

44 This was in addition to the numerous debates that took place in forums, community assemblies, and universities. Among some of the most important organizations that were involved in the peace process are the following: the Asamblea Democrática del Pueblo Chiapaneco (AEDPCH), Chihuahua Para Todos, Caravana de Caravanas, COMPAZ, the Civil Zapatista Movement (MCZ), the National Democratic Convention (CND), the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), the National Congress of Women (CNM), and the Permanent National Forum of Indigenous People (FNPI).
land distribution and agrarian policy (specifically the revision of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution), issues particularly important for EZLN militants. The original response of Zapatista base communities to the Accords noted their lack of resolution regarding land and indigenous control of resources. In the context of the Peace Accords between the EZLN and the Mexican government, these issues were supposed to be dealt with in upcoming discussions on political reform, economic development, and land reform. As militarization increased in the area, attention to these issues eroded and mobilization around the fulfillment of the San Andrés Accords gained prominence. The second topic for negotiation began in July of the same year but was soon suspended due to the reluctance of the Mexican government to comply with the first round of accords.  

The lack of commitment to the peace process on the part of the Mexican government soon became manifest not only through a sustained campaign to disable the legislative process for the implementation of the San Andrés Accords, but also through a violent and highly visible military campaign to dismantle the self-declared autonomous governments. Six months after the signing of the Accords, the National Commission of Concord and Pacification (COCOPA) 46 (which had been established in 1995 to facilitate the negotiation process) prepared a legislative proposal on indigenous rights and culture, with the objective of integrating the San Andrés Accords into the federal constitution. Although the EZLN publicly acknowledged that the

45 It is important to note however, that even though the discussion on ‘Democracy and Justice’ was suspended, the participation of different social sectors during the initial meeting was considerable: “44 academics, 46 representatives of civil and religious organizations, 16 union representatives, 5 representatives of political parties and 11 social and religious leaders (including a famous soccer player)” (Ce Acatl 1996 as referenced by Leyva Solano, 1999: 4. My translation).

46 The COCOPA was conformed by deputies and senators of all the political parties represented in Congress.
proposal had failed to fully observe the stipulations contained by the San Andrés Accords, it accepted it. The Mexican government, however, rejected the proposal and on March 15, 1998, President Zedillo presented a counter-proposal which, according to EZLN leaders, considerably restricted the “capacity of [indigenous] peoples for self-government” as well as the “collective access to the use and enjoyment of natural resources on [indigenous] lands and territories” (Indigenous Revolutionary Clandestine Committee General Command of the EZLN, January of 1997). The government proposal was rejected by the EZLN on the grounds that it contained errors of legal interpretation so serious that it would become “impossible, incongruous, and aberrant” to apply the new laws (ibid.).

Neither of the proposals came to a vote in Congress during the term of President Zedillo (1996-2000) (SIPAZ REPORT, August, 2001). Meanwhile, the militarization of Chiapas continued and the politico-military operations against Zapatista autonomous municipalities and communities increased. Just in the year of 1998 alone, the Mexican army carried out military offensives in four important autonomous municipalities leaving a great number of displaced people, ten dead, dozens detained, and more than 200 international observers expelled from the

47 The governmental proposal allowed indigenous peoples to associate themselves only in relation to economic and cultural aspects, nullifying thus political and jurisdictional rights. In addition, the right to autonomy and self-determination became limited to areas in which indigenous populations constituted the majority. This formulation not only restricted the ability of indigenous peoples to define and incorporate various multi-ethnic communities and municipalities in the process of autonomy, it also, according to the EZLN, opened “the possibility for the creation of reservations where ethnicity or the ‘purity of blood’ [would be] privileged” (ibid.) over “the creation of a culture of tolerance and respect for diversity” (ibid.) According to the EZLN, “this mono-ethnic position [would] only provoke internal conflicts among the different Indian communities which share[d] territory” (ibid). In relation to access to land and the use of natural resources, unlike the COCOPA’s initiative, the government’s proposal eliminated the recognition of access to lands and territories which were held collectively (ibid.).
country (Enlace Civil, 1998). These military operations took place only days after President Zedillo had publicly reiterated his desire for peace and dialogue with the EZLN. Moreover, the attempt to counteract the strength of established autonomous municipalities and prevent the emergence of new ones, was further reinforced in 1998 by a government initiative to create new municipalities or “remunicipalize” the state. Claiming that its government was complying with the San Andrés Accords, the governor of Chiapas launched a program for the “remunicipalization” of the state. The program was highly criticized because the conditions under which the new municipalities were going to be created were not discussed with the population involved. In addition, it had been oriented to the areas which had a Zapatista majority and not to the entire state. The attempt to remunicipalize was aimed at creating the basis for controlling the “rebel” communities and municipalities, dividing the Zapatista organization and debilitating the autonomous indigenous movement in order to have greater control over the natural resources located within Zapatista territories (La Jornada, August 7, 1999). Despite considerable opposition, the state government redrew the official borders of the municipalities and eight new “official” municipalities were created.

48 In the Autonomous Municipality of Ricardo Flores Magón, nine people were detained, twelve foreigners were expelled from the country and prohibited from returning to Mexico, and a military camp and a police checkpoint were set up (Enlace Civil, 1998). The military operation in the Autonomous Municipality of Tierra y Libertad left 63 detained, 3 wounded, 3 women raped and 140 displaced (ibid.). As well, a military camp and various police checkpoints were set up. In the Municipality of Nicolas Ruiz a seven-month pregnant woman was beaten and 21 people were detained. Finally, in San Juan de la Libertad, after thousands of soldiers entered the municipality and opened fire against the population, 8 indigenous people and two police men lost their lives, thousands were displaced and houses and harvests destroyed (ibid.).

49 The new municipalities were Montecristo de Guerrero, Maravilla Tenejapa, San Andrés Duraznal, Marqués de Comillas, Benemérito de las Américas, Santiago and Aldama.
By the year 2000, as President Vicente Fox – the first opposition president in seventy one years – assumed office, another attempt was made by EZLN leaders to present the COCOPA proposal on indigenous rights and culture to Congress. This attempt was accompanied by the mobilization of more than 100,000 people in Mexico City (Global Report, March 2001). President Fox responded positively and sent the COCOPA proposal to Congress. However, on April 25, 2001 the Senate unanimously approved a significantly different one (SIPAZ REPORT, August 2001). The government proposal failed to provide legal recognition of autonomous status and did not recognize indigenous rights to land and the use of natural resources (ibid.). The EZLN refused the new law arguing that “it [was] not in the spirit of the San Andrés Accords, it [did] not respect the COCOPA legislative proposal, it completely ignore[d] the national and international demands for recognition of indigenous rights and culture, it sabotage[d] the incipient process of rapprochement between the government and the EZLN, it betray[ed] hopes for a negotiated solution to the war in Chiapas, and it reveal[ed] the total separation of the political class from popular demands” (ibid.). Nationally, the reform was approved, with 17 state congresses voting in favor and nine voting against. Significantly, those voting against the law included the states with the highest concentration of “indigenous” inhabitants (La Jornada, August 20 and September 1, 2001). Although numerous organizations and communities filed 329 constitutional challenges to the law in the Supreme Court, the reform passed into law (SIPAZ REPORT, August 2001)

50 These states were Morelos, Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, San Luis Potosi, and Oaxaca.
2.2 Representing the Conflict

The years following the uprising were characterized by an unprecedented political mobilization. The position of EZLN leaders became strengthened by the commitment and support of local, national and international social and political organizations. Around the EZLN’s public politics and activities developed what Leyva Solano (1999) called the New Zapatista Movement (NMZ) composed of a broad network of diverse political actors mobilized beyond Chiapas. By 1996 the New Zapatista Movement was characterized by a heterogeneity of actors

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51 Leyva Solano (1998) called it ‘new’ “because it [was] a political movement which synthesize[d] and re-elaborate[d] past and present experiences of popular struggle” (ibid.). By calling the Zapatista movement ‘new’, however, her analysis fell within the very much critiqued ‘old vs. new’ movements dichotomy (Fox & Starn 1997, Foweraker 1995, Edelman 2001, Meyer et al 2002, Scott 1991). In spite of this, hers was a relevant contribution as she provided a general picture of the different actors and alliances that gave form to the NMZ.

52 Leyva Solano identified at least 4 levels of involvement and participation through which different actors worked around the EZLN’s cause and politics, adding in the process their own concerns and struggles and which as a whole form the NMZ. The first level was the EZLN itself (considered a closed and localized organization). The second level “represent[ed] the central unit of strategic alliances which played a prominent role in the advancement of the EZLN’s aims” (Leyva Solano, 1998:47). It was composed mainly of non-governmental organizations, the San Cristóbal Diocese, and numerous popular organizations that originated as a result of the 1994 uprising. “These organizations generally voice[d] their preoccupations through committees, conventions, councils, fora and broad alliance groups.”(ibid.). The third level included political organizations and individual actors whose history of struggle was prominent prior to the uprising and whose work was independent of the EZLN. It is within this level that “certain individuals and political organizations identif[ied] themselves as ‘sympathizers’ with the Zapatista movement unlike others who [were] openly militants” (ibid.48). Examples of these were, among others, the Asamblea Democrática del Pueblo Chiapaneco (AEDPCH), Chihuahua Para Todos, Caravana de Caravanas, COMPAZ, the Civil Zapatista Movement (MCZ), the National Democratic Convention (CND), the National Indigenous Congress (CNI), the National Congress of Women (CNM), and the Permanent National Forum of Indigenous People (FNPI). Finally, the fourth level encompassed political actors tied to the international sphere and whose level of commitment to the Zapatista struggle varied; but whose important participation worked to inform the NZM’s discourses and strategies of collective resistance and mobilization in addition to strengthening its international image: “[m]any of them [were] sympathizers with or militants of the various pro-Zapatista overseas
and juxtaposed discourses which incorporated “agrarian, ecologist, guerrilla, national liberation, feminist, pro-democratic, pro-human rights and indianist, anti-imperialist and anti-neoliberalist” demands (Leyva Solano, 1999:6). What gave public political coherence to this diversity of claims was the EZLN’s central demand for democracy as well as its ferocious critique of Neoliberalism. In accordance with this, the EZLN’s main strategy of mobilization became characterized by the creation of appropriate spaces for meetings and discussions of diverse political issues; a strategy through which the EZLN sought to “avoid falling into a dialogue exclusively with the government and political parties” (EZLN, 1995 as referenced by Leyva Solano, 1998:49). Mobilization usually centered around issues of militarization in Zapatista areas, the democratization of the political system and the fulfillment of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. The targets were, in general, the Mexican government and Army and, in particular, government officials.

committees, such as the groups supporting Zapatismo in Barcelona, Berlin, Toulouse or London… Others… visited the conflict zone to inspect and evaluate the local situation; some came as representatives of international institutions and agencies such as Amnesty International, the Latin American Commission of the European Parliament and the Commission of Latin American Bishops” (ibid.).

53 My translation.

54 Among some of the most relevant encounters there was the National Democratic Convention held in July 1994 in the community of Guadalupe Tepeyac in which more than 6,000 people participated (Holloway, 1998:178). The objective of the event was to discuss possible ways of organizing the transition to democracy in Mexico: “a transitional government, the adoption of peaceful strategies to achieve democracy, an alternative national project, the organization of a new Constituent Assembly, and the elaboration of a new federal Constitution” (Harvey, 1998:205). In July 1996 the International Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism gathered more than 3,000 representatives from 43 countries in the community of La Realidad (Holloway and Pelaez, 1998:12).
Within this highly public political context, political and academic interest in the events and activities surrounding the EZLN took precedence over an interest in the more mundane everyday political life of those involved in the conflict. While the objectives and scope of the numerous articles and books written about the EZLN since 1994 varied greatly, their content and empirical information became highly repetitive. Most of the material tended to follow a chronological order on the events and activities surrounding the EZLN’s public appearances and diverse forms of mobilization (meeting, encounters, forums, etc.), only to relegate to the imagination of the reader the many ways in which the daily life of Zapatista men, women, and children might have been implicated in such public processes. In addition, the EZLN’s public discourse – published communiqués, leaders’ speeches and interviews, etc. – became the main starting analytical point for many of the reports. Almost non-existent were the articles that made the distinction between what Leyva Solano (1999) called official and colloquial discourses, where the former represented the result of a collective effort of “intellectuals”55 to synthesize the EZLN’s political aspirations and the later the daily expressions of the EZLN’s social basis (Leyva Solano, 1999: footnote 3). The lack of engagement with the complexities of everyday lives and politics led to the reproduction of generic images which misrepresented people’s ability to act and react, resist and accommodate simultaneously to particular (often shifting) political contexts.

55 Following Gramsci, Leyva Solano refers to the ‘intellectuals’ as the actors in society whose function is to “organize, administer, lead and educate others” (Forgacs 1998:300 as quoted by Leyva Solano, 1999: 10. My translation). In the context of the Zapatista mobilization those intellectuals include “academics, professors and researchers, religious and political leaders such as bishops, priests as well as indigenous and peasant leaders”, these in addition to the political and military leaders of the EZLN itself (ibid. My translation).
Indianist Discourse

There is no question that following the 1994 uprising the image of the Noble Savage was forcefully brought back into the literature by a great number of authors, albeit in very different ways. Michael Lowy in 1998, for example, concluded that the most important factor of the Zapatista struggle was the Mayan culture “with its magical relation to nature, its community solidarity, its resistance to neoliberal modernization” (Lowy, 1998:1) and that “Zapatism [harked] back to a community tradition of the past, a pre-capitalist, pre-modern, pre-Columbian tradition” (ibid.). Speaking of the “communism of the Mayas”, Lowy affirmed that without the magic of revolutionary romanticism the “steel cage” of capitalist modernity could not be broken (ibid.). In 1997 June Nash described Zapatista indigenous peoples as “a living embodiment of the movement for a pluricultural democratic society, tolerant of difference and respectful of others” (Nash, 1997a: 265). These images mirrored EZLN discourses which attributed “collective work, democratic thinking, [and] obedience to the will of the majority” (EZLN as quoted by Holloway & Pelaez, 1998:32) to an indigenous tradition.

In 2001 Berger critiqued these kinds of images and challenged in particular the work of Gosner and Ouweneel (1996) for linking explicitly the rise of the EZLN to the history of “indigenous resistance and revolt in Mesoamerica and the Andes” (Berger, 2001:157) and for interpreting the Zapatista struggle as primarily an attempt to “recover indigenous ideas and practices” (ibid.). To counteract some of the premises present in the book (particularly Gossen’s contribution), Berger pointed to the work of Nash (1995b) and convincingly demonstrated that a
pan-Mayan discourse disregarded regional historical differences in Chiapas. Most of the EZLN’s social base were communities located in the Lacandon area, a region where indigenous identity was reasserted in drastically different ways than those of the highland communities. Inhabitants of the Lacandon rainforest were landless peasants who settled in the jungle in the 1940s and 1950s and differed significantly in ethnic and linguistic background (see Chapter 4). Settlers were forced to leave behind many of the traditions of their places of origin and remold their identity around the central desire to obtain land and basic services. Their new experiences in the jungle strengthen “their nascent campesino identity, substituting for their communal (Indian) identity” (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1994:9). This historical context radically contrasted with that of indigenous villages in the central highlands which were generally organized around ethnicity, Catholicism or traditional indigenous religious practices and which were usually politically and economically controlled by caciques – authorities closely related the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Referencing Nash, Berger stated that “the emergence of assertive indigenous communities in lowland Chiapas [Lacandon jungle] [was] directly linked to the way in which marginalization, migration, and repression… helped to reconfigure ethnic identity” (Berger, 2001:159).

56 Quetzil E. Castañeda (2004) provides an excellent critique of the Pan-Mayan identity discourse. He states that the term “Maya” is itself an embattled zone of contestation of belonging, identity, and differentiation” (Castañeda, 2004: 41) and that too often the “Maya are analytically positioned … as passive and docile subjects who simply undergo processes that are “externally” introduced. Or, a very specific and delimited kind of agency is asserted, that of “resistance” (ibid.51). He argues that Maya agency should be analyzed in a more complex fashion “neither as staged ‘voices’ nor as subaltern resistance, but as diverse forms of manipulation, adaptation, selective borrowing, negotiation, inversion, measured acceptance, calculated rejection, and revalorization of the languages and mechanisms of government” (ibid.52, original emphasis).
Ironically, two years later Nash (1997) herself was also falling for essentialist descriptions of Zapatista Indians. In 1997 she asserted that the Zapatista “vision of progress” contained communal values found in “mythopoetic traditions that survived from the preconquest period” (Nash, 1997a:270). “Accustomed to cultural diversity”, Zapatista indigenous peoples, she stated, “learned to live with it, not attempting to eradicate or dominate the others in their midst” (ibid.) and that “[f]ar from being primordial remnants of a past, the behaviors and beliefs of the groups engaged in the struggle [had] been enacted continually in everyday life since the conquest.”

The prominent inclusion of the “Indian” in the Zapatista literature was without a doubt embedded in the EZLN’s own public engagement with indigenous issues in Chiapas following the uprising; an engagement embodied particularly in the process of formulating and signing the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. In fact, the issues of indigenous rights and culture (and particularly the issue of indigenous autonomy and self-determination) did not constitute an original demand in the Zapatista agenda, the EZLN incorporated it as a result of its relationship with the indigenous organizations that participated in the process of formulating the San Andrés Accords (Ruiz Hernandez and Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1998:32; Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2002:287). With the signing of the Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture Zapatista struggles for land and democracy became transformed into demands for control over indigenous territories and a profound transformation of the state to allow for indigenous self-

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57 For similar approaches, see Nash 2001 and 2001a.

58 It is important to note that indigenous discourses circulated within the Lacandon rainforest since the 1960s. The San Cristóbal diocese played an important role in disseminating indigenous discourses (see Chapter 3). However, it was not until 1995, that the EZLN incorporated them in its official discourse.
governments within the national context. With the failure of the Zedillo and subsequent
governments to implement the accords, the call for their implementation became one of the main
mobilizing themes for the EZLN as well as for indigenous peoples throughout Mexico.

Academic concerns about indigenous issues between 1994 and 2003 can be understood
within this immediate political context.\(^{59}\) The EZLN’s attention to such issues, however, was part
of a larger history of indigenismo\(^ {60}\) in Chiapas and Mexico (Hewitt de Alcántara 1984, Hvostoff
served to crystallize a transformational process which had in fact been initiated years before the
rebellion. In approximately two decades, the public image of the “Indian” in Mexico had
changed in rather drastic ways. While the 1970s mainly recognized the “Indian” as poor,
primitive, and backward, by 1994 this imagined construct had become a combative, authentic,
and emancipated subject. The “Indian” had come to “embody the communitarian and
democratic conduct per excellence…In a curious inversion of concepts, there [was] a growing


\(^{60}\) In the context of Mexico, indigenismo refers to Mexican governmental ideologies and policies designed after the
Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) with the objective of incorporating indigenous populations into the building of the
Nation (Leyva Solano 1999). Although indigenismo introduced a positive vision of the ‘Indian’, it did not break
away with the ideal of a mestizo civilization. As expressed by President Lázaro Cárdenas “indegenismo does not
intend to indianize Mexico but Mexicanize the Indian” (as quoted by De la Peña, 1998:77, my translation). See De
la Peña (1998), Hewitt de Alcántara (1984), and Knight (1996) for similar definitions of indigenismo. In a recent
article Leyva Solano (2005) makes the distinction between indigenismo which refers to the official “or from the
above” state policy (Leyva Solano, 2005: 568) and indianismo which refers to an “ideological and political
movement” which “centred on the liberation of the Indian” (ibid.) and reacted against indigenismo. The indianist
discourse emphasized the recognition of ethnic groups as political entities (ibid.).

The 1960s and early 1970s was characterized by the absence of an independent Indian movement that placed ethnicity or Indian identity at the center of its demands (Mattiace, 1997:37). An Indian identity was not employed as a political strategy nor as a framework within which to define political goals; demands were primarily articulated within a peasant/class framework (ibid.). While there were Indian leaders and an Indian movement, their concerns were founded in the indigenista ideology (like preserving traditional cultural features) which itself assumed that ethnic differences would eventually be “subsumed into the larger project of the nation-state” (ibid.). “Que sucedió?” Hvostoff rhetorically asks (Hvostoff, 2000:57). In answering his own question, he identified two key moments in the history of Mexico which greatly influenced the transformation of indigenous representation: the period of governance of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) and Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994). The first period was characterized by the appearance for the first time of indigenous independent (from the state) organizations through which agrarian claims began to acquire an “ethnic” character. Agrarian demands which had previously been defined by peasant organizations became officially reclaimed by groups whose ethnic identity played a central role in their politics (ibid.65). The

61 My translation.

62 What happened?

63 Outside Mexico, around this time as well, a favorable international environment for the political emergence of indigenous peoples and the protection of their rights was developing (Wright, 1988: 375). Numerous indigenous advocacy organizations and regional, national, and international meetings flourished in the 1970s. For example,
second period coincided with the signing and ratification of Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in 1989 as well as with the constitutional recognition of the Nation’s pluriethnic character (ibid.62), events which gave further legitimacy to political and economic struggles organized around an ethnic identification.

According to Niezen (2000), the political reality of “being indigenous” in Mexico and beyond was indeed “a product of the past several decades, originating in the terminology of international law and broadening to become a new form of group identity.” (ibid. 119-1320, see also Tenant 1994 and Wright 1988). The use of the term “indigenous” was broadened by the necessity of marginalized groups to identify themselves as indigenous, in order to gain access to the protection and rights conferred by national and international institutions to “indigenous” peoples. “Indigenous” identification, then, was not merely a product of the shared experiences of marginalized groups facing economic, cultural, and political extermination but also of “international legislative bodies of states [which]…provided the conceptual origins and practical

“Cultural Survival, founded in 1972; INDIGENA, In 1973; The World Council of Indigenous Peoples, in 1975; the First Indian Parliament of South America, in 1974; and, in 1977, the following events: the First International Indigenous Conference of Central America, the United Nations Non-Governmental Organizations Conference on Discrimination against Indigenous peoples of the Americas, and the second meeting of the Barbados group…” (ibid.)

Convention 169 “Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries”, recognized the rights of indigenous peoples to “exercise control over their own institutions, ways of life and economic development and to maintain and develop their identities, languages and religions, within the framework of the States in which they live.” The whole document can be found at http://www.unhchr.ch/html/menu3/b/62.htm

For a historical analysis of the process through which political actors previously identified as “peasants” came to reconstitute their struggle in terms of indigenous rights in Mexico see Courtney Jung (2008).
focus of indigenous identity” (Niezen, 2000:121, Jung 2003, Speed 2002, 2005, 2008). The centrality of ethnic issues in the Zapatista struggle, rather than being the result of an essentialist resistance to “civilization” and “modernity” – as Lowy (1998) states and Nash (1997) implies – was the result of historically “interactive processes of ‘resistance-negotiation-creation’ of [self-identified] indigenous people in their dealing with the government and other ethnic and socio-economic groups.” (Leyva Solano, 1998:51). In this process, more often than not, indigenous peoples themselves ended up reproducing official indigenist discourses in order to gain access to governmental resources specifically assigned for the “Indian” population (ibid.52). It is important to remember that during the colonial period complex and diversified societies were all converted into “indians” (Varese, 1996:58; Saldana-Portillo 2003) and as such the antithesis of Europeaness, a view also prevalent during the building of the post-revolutionary Nation-State (Hvostoff, 2000:81). Indigenous struggles in Chiapas, then, attempted to reverse colonialist constructions of the “Indian” to question the post-revolutionary assimilationist project but were unable to transcend the problems associated with a mestizo/indian dichotomy. While an appeal to essentialist identities by indigenous groups can be understood within this context, its uncritical reproduction by academics should be questioned.

In the context of Chiapas, reducing the conflict to a mestizo/indian framework further disregarded the fact that within the state of Chiapas, townships and communities differed substantially in ethnic composition as well as in economic, political, and ecological situation

66 For example, the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture in general and the rights to autonomy and self-determination in particular draw heavily on the existing legal international framework that supports indigenous claims such as Covenant 169 of the International Labour Organization (to which Mexico is a signatory) as well as documents by the United Nation Working Group on Indigenous Populations.

67 For an analysis of Colonial constructions of the Indian see Knight 1996.
(Cancian & Brown, 1994:22). The region was characterized by “dozens of different communities, speaking different Maya languages and many different dialects of these languages, with striking differences in wealth and political power within each of these communities” (Gossen, 1994:21. Original emphasis). This heterogeneity made it difficult to separate ethnicity from class because very often economic conflicts were phrased in ethnic terms (Hale 1994 and 1997; Jackson 1995; Warren 1998). In some communities Indian meant poor peasant or laborer and ladino meant rich landowner or merchant. In these cases, class and ethnicity interrelated to form “a single identity that manifested itself in diverse [and complex] ways” (Cancian and Brown 1994:25). Yet, in other communities, rich meant rich and poor meant poor, independently of particular ethnic identifications (ibid.).

**EZLN vs. State**

Tied to the tendency to homogenize the multiple forms in which the “indigenous” might have been expressed in various parts of the Chiapanecan geography and beyond, there was an inclination in the literature to analyze the “state” as the objective structure or apparatus which the EZLN (and/or the NZM) was attempting to transform. It was repeatedly said that the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture called for “a new relationship between the State and the indigenous peoples”. This statement encouraged analysis that focused primarily on how indigenous socio-cultural diversity could have been incorporated into the state system. While it was important to discuss and analyze the ways in which particular laws and state institutions (or the absence thereof) might have worked to reproduce the subordination and marginalization of indigenous peoples, the literature ended up reproducing an image of the state as the structure (or instrument) that worked for the particular interest of the “dominant classes”.
The EZLN itself relied heavily on this ideological construct as a political strategy for the mobilization of people and the advancement of its demands. In adopting this framework, the EZLN also assumed that its struggle for democracy belonged to the realm of “civil society” which itself was believed to be the “arena of non-state institutions and practices” (Kumar, 1993: 383). Thus, a large number of communiqués identified the government as a central source of domination and therefore the main target for social and political transformation. A great part of the literature on the EZLN took on this problematic view, portraying the state as a uniform monolithic entity “out there” with clear intentions, objectives and goals; an understanding of the “state” that had, by then, been critiqued extensively by a number of important scholars (Abrams 1988, Foucault 1991, Joseph and Nugent 1994, Li 1999, Mitchell 1991, Rose & Miller 1992, Roseberry 1994, Rus 1994, Sayer 1994). Abrams (1998), for example, challenged the idea

68 The EZLN’s official discourse tended to reproduce the assumption that the ‘state-civil society’ distinction constituted an empirical reality. Consider for example the following explanation Subcomandante Marcos gave me in a 1999 interview: “According to us, there are two great social actors: the political class or the political society which we say is composed by the professional politicians and the political parties (which in one way or another make modern politics); and the rest of society which has been condemned to be an spectator of that way of doing politics. What we are saying is that in the last years that sector of society, what we call civil society…is starting to abandon its role as spectator and is struggling for its own space as a political actor. What this group of people, this social sector is demanding is that political space opens up, so that politics can be done by the people who are not professional politicians” (August 3, 1999. My translation). Similar definitions are provided by Leslie Hems & Fran Tonkiss (2000) and Ellen Wood (1995). Nevertheless, Yael Navaro-Yashin (1998) explores the concept of civil society as a political construction, an approach which opens up the possibility to grasp not just the different meanings of the concept in particular contexts but also the politics behind its use.

69 Consider, for example, the following statement made by Cunningham & Corona (1998) in an attempt to explain the EZLN’s objective and struggle: The EZLN’s aim is to help to construct a network of such [small] movements, both nationally and internationally, against the designs of NAFTA in Mexico and of globalized neoliberalism in general, so transforming society ‘from the bottom upwards’ and autonomously from the political and economic institutions of both the state and the market. (Cunningham & Corona, 1998:15; my emphasis)
of the state as an “organized political force” that acted “in its own right”. He believed that this view led scholars to engage in an investigation of the “relationship between the actions of that force and the field of class struggle” (Abrams, 1998:71). In other words, it was not the study of the state-system (as a palpable apparatus) that was to be abandoned, but the illusion of the state as an “entity, agent, function or relation [acting] over and above the state-system and state-idea” (ibid.82). He convincingly argued that a thorough examination of the specificities of social subordination should reveal that state-apparatuses (particularly administrative, judicial and educational agencies) formed part of “some quite historically specific process of subjection” (ibid.76). Abrams suggested that the state as an “ideological project” (rather than an agency that has such project) claimed to give unity and coherence to what were in fact fragmented attempts at domination (ibid.79).

As a whole the EZLN literature assumed the existence of a hegemonic state project, an assumption which worked to conceal the various forms of power and domination which ultimately might have structured the (everyday) lives of Zapatista people in particular villages. In a context such as the Lacandon area, and particularly in the context of rebel autonomous territories which remained to a large extend outside the control of the state apparatus (and where the EZLN increasingly tended to function as a proto-state), abstract images and categories such as “the state” only worked to complicate and obscure particular relations of power in concrete situations. Within this context instances of intra-community violence in Zapatista areas, for example, became rationalized by academics and other analysts as instances in which government or military officials were manipulating the indigenous population. People’s agency became ultimately measured in terms of their opposition to or collaboration with “state” ideologies and practices. In their conversations with “outsiders”, Zapatista constituencies tended to reinforce this view as the government always figured as the source of their political and economic
problems. When Zapatista militants spoke to outsiders the “enemy” was clearly identified: “It is the government who sent thousands of troops to the Lacandon jungle”, they would say. “It is the government who did not comply with the peace accords signed in 1996”, “it is the government who is dividing people within Zapatista communities by offering economic assistance to non-Zapatistas”, and “it is the government who is responsible for the death of so many malnourished children”. From this perspective Zapatista actions became almost logical: they (Zapatistas) created their own governments, marked their territorial boundaries, created autonomous hospitals, rejected economic assistance from state and federal governments, in addition to protesting, marching, and conducting military training. Such an analysis tended to impose a coherence in power relations that did not necessarily exist in people’s everyday lives. By imposing this artificial framework academics neglected the powerful role everyday politics played in the unfolding political process.

2.3 Conclusion

As scholars and activists focused on documenting the public face of the Zapatista struggle, the everyday life of the communities within the conflict zone was becoming increasingly divisive. As the EZLN gained increasing solidarity from different national and international entities, the solidarity that characterized many communities during the first years that followed the uprising was waning. At the local level Zapatista militants were waging a severe territorial and jurisdictional dispute over resources and population. The development of autonomous structures that paralleled official local governments produced serious confrontations between Zapatista (rebel) autonomous governments and constitutional governments, creating, what Burguete Cal y Mayor called in 1998, a problem of governability in the region (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 1998). The level of support for Zapatism within constitutional municipalities and
communities became unevenly spread. There were municipalities in which there was nearly unanimous support for the EZLN. There were other communities, however, which lacked unanimous consensus, and support for Zapatista governments was articulated only by groups and fractions within communities. There were, furthermore, small groups, sometimes families, within communities, who expressed their support for the EZLN and decided to ignore local authorities (ibid. 255). Very often “minorities”, whether Zapatista or not, were confronted with harassment, tension, and violence (ibid.256).

As the dialogue process between the EZLN and the Mexican government in Chiapas disintegrated, academics were engaging in a dialogue of their own. As I prepared for the writing phase of my doctoral studies, one of my professors advised me to think about the writing process as a conversation I was having with other academics who had written about similar issues (resistance, mobilization, etc.). Such an “imaginary” dialogue would help me place personal perceptions and interpretations of the EZLN (based on one and a half years of fieldwork in Chiapas) within a larger theoretical perspective and discussion. As I became immersed in the literature on the movement, I realized that I was not the only one engaged in this mental exercise and that in fact the whole literary production was based on an “imagined” conversation which, to my surprise, did not include the visions and experiences of those directly involved in the struggle. While I had previously acknowledged that the academic “dialogue”, being itself immersed in perverse unequal structures of power, was by nature elitist regardless of how progressive it claimed to be –as most of the actors at the grassroots level only heard of it as a translated version of NGO workers, activists, etc., when they did listen to it – I did not expect to
find such an empirical vacuum. \textsuperscript{70} This was particularly the case because a considerable amount of the literature on the EZLN included anthropologists as well as activists – political actors whose traditional interest laid (at least in theory) at the grassroots level.

To be clear, it was not that actual actors and people from the EZLN were missing from the picture, \textsuperscript{71} but that they were incorporated in very particular ways; ways which did not speak clearly about the complex reality in which those actors were daily involved; instead they appeared in very simplified and romanticized ways. These images worked to portray an image of continuity and stability in a context where division and conflict were in fact the norm. Perhaps this tendency spoke more on the one hand, about contemporary prejudices and expectations of the “intellectuals” involved in the literary production, and on the other, the kinds of (global) relations of power which tended to prioritize particular images (Conklin & Graham 1995). While there is no question that the Zapatistas used identity politics and dichotomies as an effective tool for political mobilization, the power to mobilize on the basis of these generic images was there provided that they resonated with hegemonic ideas and symbols (ibid. 706). Here I voice Aida Hernandez Castillo (2002) when she states that the “[m]ystification of the “other”, however noble the overall objective, merely serves to make the “other” into a reflection of Western aspiration” (Hernandez Castillo, 2002: 399). Similarly, Stefano Varese (1996) states that political movements that do not “express themselves using Western discourse (which means the hegemony of Western political culture) are acknowledged neither by the social scientists nor by

\textsuperscript{70} Chapter 3 provides an analysis of some of the methodological and political obstacles that may hinder the participation of most Zapatistas in this academic dialogue.

\textsuperscript{71} In fact a great amount of the literature includes the thoughts and writings of the EZLN’s leadership, particularly Subcomandante Marcos.
the national society” (Varese, 1996:66). Zapatista leaders seemed to have been overly aware of this.
Map #4, Municipalities with Zapatista presence.

Source: CIEPAC (the Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action),
http://www.ciepac.org/mapas/economicos.php
Map #5, Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Municipalities and Territories.

Source: CIEPAC (the Center for Economic and Political Research for Community Action),
http://www.ciepac.org/mapas/economicos.php

1.- Libertad de los Pueblos Mayas
2.- San Pedro Michoacán
3.- Tierra y Libertad
4.- 17 de Noviembre
5.- Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla
6.- Ernesto Che Guevara
7.- 1º. De Enero
8.- Cabañas
9.- Maya
10.- Francisco Gómez
11.- Flores Magón
12.- San Manuel
13.- San Salvador
14.- Huitiupán
15.- Simojovel
16.- Sabanilla

17.- Vicente Guerrero
18.- Trabajo
19.- Francisco Villa
20.- Independencia
21.- Benito Juárez
22.- La Paz
23.- José María Morelos y Pavón

24.- San Andrés Sacamch'en de los Pobres
25.- San Juan de La Libertad
26.- San Pedro Chenalhó
27.- Santa Catarina
28.- Bochil
29.- Zinacantán
30.- Magdalena de la Paz
31.- San Juan K'ankujk'
32.- Regiones Autonómicas Tierra y Libertad.
33.- Región Autónoma Tzoj Choj

34.- Regiones Autónomas Pluríétnicas
35.- Región Fronteriza
36.- Región Autónoma Norte

37.- Región Soconusco
38.- Región Selva
39.- Concejo Autónomo de Nicolás Ruiz
Chapter 3
Fieldwork Politics:
Working in a context of Low Intensity Warfare

A close look at the military conditions in Chiapas during the period under study (1994-20003) reveals some of the reasons why many intellectuals may have chosen to focus on the more public aspect of the Zapatista struggle and rely so heavily on secondary sources (communiqués, newspapers, formal interviews, etc.). Carrying out fieldwork under conditions of militarization certainly posed great methodological and political challenges. Physical access to Zapatista territories was highly restricted by the presence of thousands of Mexican soldiers and hundreds of military checkpoints. The same reality of military violence and aggression, however, led many academics to carry out fieldwork under the titles of “human rights observers”, “intermediary in peace talks” or “political consultants”. While in most cases these positions guaranteed entrance to Zapatista communities (as well as direct contact with Zapatista leaders and militants), they also tended to interfere with the academic’s position as a critical scholar. The possibility of “observing” (and “participating” in) the daily lives and interactions of Zapatista constituencies was highly limited by a number of security measures Zapatista communities took to ensure the movement continued clandestinity (see below). In the context of these structural limitations, questions of “ethics”, “collaboration” and “accountability” (contemporary concerns within the social sciences) became restricted by very particular circumstances where ethics primarily meant denouncing military repression and human rights abuses, collaboration meant reproducing EZLN’s goals and discourses, and accountability meant responding to EZLN leaders and the non-governmental organizations that supported the movement. As a critical researcher I sought to go beyond the reproduction of the EZLN’s official
discourse (and dichotomies such as indigenous/non-indigenous and state/movement) and capture the complex relations of power within which constituencies operated in their everyday lives. My position as an international observer in a context of low-intensity warfare, however, compromised this interest. Below I provide a description of the military conditions that pervaded Chiapas between 1994 and 2003 followed by some of the methodological and political challenges I encountered.

3.1 Military Surveillance, 1999-2000

By the time I arrived in Chiapas (2002) military conditions in the region had changed dramatically. My first trip to the state to do my MA field research in 1999 was characterized by recurring encounters with permanent military bases and temporary checkpoints. During this time, in a regular trip from San Cristóbal de Las Casas to La Realidad (one of the most visited Zapatista communities in the Lacandon area), for example, one expected to be stopped at no less than three military checkpoints along the road.\(^\text{72}\) At most checkpoints soldiers would, often in an aggressive manner, demand identification documents, take photographs and/or videotape, and document the place of origin and destination of the traveler as well as personal information such as gender, height, eye and hair color etc. These unconstitutional procedures were perceived by both local human rights organizations and people from the area as intimidating strategies on the part of the military to prevent human rights observers from visiting the conflict zone. Some community members at La Realidad doubted that the video cameras used daily in fact had tapes.

\(^{72}\) In 1999, approximately twenty five to twenty seven military vehicles, transporting an approximate of one hundred and sixty soldiers from the Mexican Army patrolled the community of La Realidad twice a day. La Realidad was at the time one of the most visited Zapatista communities. Many important encounters took place there. This political center in the jungle attracts visitors also because it was believed that La Realidad was Subcomandante Marcos’s permanent base.
“They would need a lot of tape”, they would say, “to record every observer that has come to La Realidad”. By 1999 thousands of national and international observers had visited the area.

For the five years prior to my first arrival (1999), Chiapas had been constantly described by human rights reports and general international media as being under conditions of low-intensity warfare, a politico-military strategy that involved a long-term plan to divide Zapatista communities and debilitate the support of the EZLN. Such a strategy included low but constant body counts (a huge disruption in the daily lives of community people), accompanied by the strategic use of partisan development aid. Between 1995 and 1999, it was estimated that the Mexican government had positioned more than 60,000 troops in 66 of Chiapas’ 111 municipalities, roughly 40 percent of the entire Mexican army. Such military activity had mostly been concentrated in areas of Zapatista influence (Hernandez Navarro 1999a, La Jornada, April 23, 2000). By early 2000, military positions in Chiapas had increased from 197 to 300. The same year, police presence escalated with 300 more positions established by state Public Security Police, federal and local Judicial Police, and Road and Immigration Police—all of which were working jointly with the Mexican Army (La Jornada, April 23, 2000). In addition, the Mexican government instituted the new Security Plan which involved an increased deployment of officers from the PFP (Preventive Federal Police), State police forces, and the army, on every road in rural areas of Chiapas (La Jornada, May 10, 2000). The heavy militarization of the area was exacerbated by the presence and activity of approximately twelve paramilitary groups operating in 20 municipalities, which had by 1999 been responsible for

73 See map #6
hundreds of civilian assassinations (Hidalgo and Castro 1999). In some Zapatista strongholds such as Los Altos, Cañadas and Northern regions, it was not uncommon to see up to eight different police forces, including Rural Police (local), Municipal Police (local), State Public Security Police, Federal Preventive Police, and Federal Transit Police, stopping, interrogating and searching the population.

The Effects of Militarization

Military surveillance in Chiapas had become part of the daily life of many communities, particularly in the Lacandon area. More and more communities were being affected by this forceful military presence. One such example was the community of Amador Hernandez (a Zapatista community with a population of approximately 600 inhabitants) which in August 1999 was invaded by 500 elements of the Mexican army with the excuse that they were there to protect a group of topographers who had come to the community to take measurements for the construction of a new road and who were being harassed by members of the community. The community opposed the construction of the road on the grounds that the road was not intended to bring “development” to the area, as claimed by state officials, but to bring about a higher degree of militarization to control the EZLN’s social base. The forceful occupation by the military lasted until December 22 of the following year when national and international human rights organizations put public pressure on state and federal governments to remove them.

By the year 2000, however, the army had completed numerous major road projects connecting previously inaccessible communities to main population centers, thus facilitating troop movement. It had also built permanent installations in hundreds of communities and altered

74 See map #7 for the location of the main paramilitary groups in Chiapas.
significantly the lives of the local population. During this year, dozens of communiqués were released by many Zapatista communities denouncing the daily abuses by the military. The following excerpt is a representative example of such communiqués and is particularly relevant because of the wealth of details it provides about the process of militarization in Zapatista areas and some of its effects on the daily lives of community people:

…The bad government has filled our territories with the shadows of war and death, with the shadows of federal army which has invaded our territory to hunt us, to harass us, to persecute us, to divide us and perpetrate a war of extermination against our indigenous communities of resistance. The federal army expands as a stain of death and destruction in our communities and populations…. The federal army also frightens our communities with their helicopters and airplanes, with their patrols and paramilitary forces…

The military forces install night checkpoints obstructing the roads, harassing our people, we are insulted, they check our burdens, they empty our morralitos until they destroy our bags of pozol [traditional beverage]. The soldiers have brought a bad example; prostitution, alcohol, drugs and the bad life. Wherever the soldiers have invaded, they have converted the land from life to death, where we had milpa or coffee plantations, today we have mines and military forces, where we had schools and teachers, now we have brothels, cantinas and prostitutes. The soldiers shower in our fresh water springs and contaminate our good water. The soldiers harass and trick our daughters, with them, they have brought the venereal diseases…

This is how we are living, brothers and sisters. We can not go out to work in peace. Women and children are afraid of leaving heir homes. Our men are afraid to go out, of being in jail the next day or being beaten, or when coming home, find out the community has been evacuated or who knows what else. Our sustenance and few possessions are in constant danger, they want to take our land one way or another. Our heart is sad, our time has been darkened by the soldiers, by the lies, by the paramilitaries, for fighting to construct a life of dignity for our people… (Rebel Autonomous Municipality of Ricardo Flores Magón, June 18, 2000).
In addition to the growing militarization, some Zapatista communities were also being affected by a low intensity chemical war. On March 20 and March 21 the Autonomous Municipality of Tierra y Libertad released two communiqués denouncing low-intensity-war attacks by the Public Security police and the federal Army who had fumigated its lands with the excuse of fighting the spread of the Mediterranean fly (a highly destructive pest) in the area. The communiqués denounced the aerial and land spraying of highly toxic chemicals (such as Malathion) which was destroying Zapatista plots (planted with coffee, maize, beans, pineapples, bananas, and other fruits and vegetables), contaminating the water and worsening the health of the population. The Municipality of Tierra y Libertad regarded these actions as part of the “war of extermination against the indigenous peoples” (Autonomous Council and Communities of the Tierra y Libertad March 21, 2000). Communities of at least 31 municipalities reported to the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center similar actions (Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas 2001:92).

**Difficult conditions for fieldwork**

In the context of these particular conditions, accessing Zapatista communities was not an easy task. Visiting Zapatista communities often involved painfully long and difficult trips through forest areas to avoid military harassment. Under these conditions, for example, a trip that would regularly take twelve to fifteen hours from the City of San Cristóbal de las Casas could take up to three days. In such cases, arrangements had to be made well in advance by Zapatista members to ensure that travelers would have safe places to stay over night. I remember my first trips to a Zapatista community (in June 1999) which had a military base right

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75 The communiqués were addressed to Conscientious National and International Ecologists, the National and International Press, Non-Governmental Organizations, Human Rights Centers, and the Peoples of the World.
at the entrance. I was traveling with two young men, one from the Basque Country and the other from New Zealand. From San Cristóbal we were supposed to travel by bus for approximately 45 minutes, get off at a particular place, look for a specific house (a house with a concrete corridor) and ask for Juan. Juan was responsible for bringing us to the community. Part of the recommendations made by the non-governmental organization involved in helping us get there was that we would not tell anybody (except Juan) about our destination. If asked we were advised to say that we were tourists and that we wanted to visit the Mayan ruins. If we did not follow instructions strictly we could face deportation as, according to the Mexican Constitution, it was illegal for foreigners to become involved in domestic political issues. At the time, this recommendation was taken particularly seriously as approximately 150 foreign human rights observers had been expelled from the country by 1999. Despite our attempt to follow instructions closely, during my first trip things did not develop smoothly. My companions and I missed the stop and instead of traveling 45 minutes by bus, we traveled over an hour and a half. By the time we realized we were lost and took a bus back to the original stop it was late in the afternoon. When we finally arrived at the “house with a concrete corridor” and asked for Juan, he had already left. We waited over three hours to see what could be done. Finally, three young men arrived and took us into the forest where parts of the road had to be cleared with machetes. A long one and a half hour later, we arrived at the community where we stayed for a couple of weeks documenting the presence of Mexican soldiers. While the building of alternative roads by Zapatistas worked to evade, momentarily, military harassment, the reality of growing military surveillance in Chiapas, and particularly in the Lacandon area, was impossible to avoid.
Changing Conditions, 2002

By 2002 when I began my PhD fieldwork, conditions in Chiapas seemed radically different. Between March and July of that year, I traveled to three different Zapatista communities encountering, to my surprise, only two military checkpoints. One was about 20 minutes away from San Cristóbal de las Casas and was not permanent. Its justification was the prevention of the trafficking of drugs and illegal arms. Soldiers stopped cars and combis randomly and searched them thoroughly but seldom asked for identification documents. The search lasted a few minutes and did not require the passengers to get out of the vehicles. In contrast to 1999, the attitude of the soldiers towards the population seemed less aggressive. The other military base I encountered was permanent and was well into the jungle area, approximately two hours walking distance from the Zapatista community of Tres Ríos – the community where most of my participant observation took place. According to local accounts, during the past year soldiers at this base had rarely asked for credentials and had not publicly harassed the local population.

With the electoral victory of the National Action Party (PAN) and President Vicente Fox – the first opposition president in seventy-one years – overt surveillance of Zapatista communities decreased considerably. Aiming to gain support for his Party and administration, Vicente Fox promised that if elected, he would resume dialogue with the EZLN and finally solve the conflict in Chiapas. Once elected, one of the conditions the EZLN’s leadership made for returning to peace talks was the demilitarization of the area and the release of detained Zapatistas from jail. On December 1, 2000, the day of Vicente Fox’ inauguration, it was reported that 53 military

76 Vans used as public transportation.
checkpoints had been dismantled in Chiapas (SIPAZ, February 2001). In addition to the liberation of five jailed members of the EZLN, in March 2001 Fox announced the dismantling of the last three of the seven bases that the EZLN had requested: La Garrucha, Río Eusebia, and Guadalupe Tepeyac.

While the Mexican government claimed that military forces had left the state, Zapatista authorities and local human rights organizations maintained that Mexican military bases had only been relocated deeper into the jungle area where they could not be seen by the general population throughout the main roads of Chiapas. By August 2001 the municipality of San Juan de la Libertad denounced an increase in military troops in San Cayetano, Puerto Café and El Bosque; the Autonomous Communities of Tierra y Libertad observed an increase in troops in Nuevo Huixtán and Poza Rica; and communities in the autonomous municipalities of Francisco Gómez stated that a great number of troops were seen at the Patihuitz military base (La Jornada, August 17, 2001; Independent Media Center, August 16, 2001)

3.2 Accessing the Field

Becoming an International Observer

Given a history of six years of uninterrupted and open military repression, gaining access to a Zapatista community to do long-term participant observation was a particularly delicate issue and, even though the politico-military conditions in the area seemed to have improved considerably, people were doubtful of the long-term duration of the new state of affairs. Thus, in the context of Chiapas the most practical and safe way of accessing the field was to become a Human Rights International Observer. With the formation of the Civil Camps for Peace seven years earlier (in 1995), the presence of national and international observers had become part of the daily social and political life of many Zapatista communities. In 1995, and as a result of
persistent harassment on the part of the military, Zapatista communities publicly requested that national and international observers have a permanent presence in their communities. The Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center (a non-governmental organization which since 1989 had supported indigenous struggles for land and social rights) soon made an appeal to “civil society” (particularly to national and international non-governmental and human rights organizations) to make themselves present in the conflict zone. This gave rise to the formation of observation brigades and Civil Camps for Peace. The objective was to create “autonomous” spaces within the conflict zone in which civil society’s groups could witness the activities of the military and document human rights violations in the area. By the year 2000, 5,733 people from 44 countries (including Mexico) had visited more than 80 Zapatista communities under the status of observers (CDHFC, 2001:31) and been part of the daily lives of Zapatista community members.

Becoming an international observer, then, entailed traveling to Zapatista areas under the guidance and support of either the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Human Rights Center or another similar non-governmental organization known as Enlace Civil. While this greatly facilitated

77 Argentina, Australia, Austria, The Basque Country, Belgium, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Chile, Denmark, El Salvador, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Holland, Honduras, England, Ireland, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg, Mexico, Nicaragua, Norway, New Zealand, Paraguay, Poland, Portugal, Czech Republic, China, Dominican Republic, San Marino, Scotland, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Uruguay, USA, and Venezuela.

78 Before traveling to the communities, one was required to participate in an information session prepared by the organizations involved and during which one was informed about the political situation of Chiapas. Usually, a short description of the events following the 1994 uprising was provided and the actual political and economic condition of the communities. In addition, the session provided some recommendations for the observers. Environmental recommendations included bringing biodegradable soaps and shampoo to prevent the pollution of rivers and water
access to the conflict zone, it also entailed particular restrictions and responsibilities. For one, once in Zapatista communities, observers were allowed to move only in designated areas. In addition, regular visits to the Camp by community members were usually prohibited, making the main purpose of participant observation – engaging in regular contact with local people – a very difficult task (see below). One has to remember that Zapatista communities engaged in clandestine activities and people continued to operate, despite military changes in the area, under the logic of low-intensity war. In most cases the daily activities of observers, such as documenting the presence of the military or paramilitary and incidents of human rights abuse by these or other bodies, tended to generate more solidarity amongst themselves than with community members.

Soon after my arrival to Chiapas I made arrangements with the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center to travel to at least 3 Zapatista communities in the Lancandon area before I decided where my study was going to take place. I had expressed my interest to el Frayba79 in doing long-term participant observation, as part of my PhD studies, in a place that would present the following characteristics: 1) A community where the Spanish language was spoken; 2) a community that was preferably small, (40-60 households) which would allow for better contact with most members; and lastly, 3) a community that was politically divided (having both Zapatista and non-Zapatista members). This would allow for careful observation of springs as well as not leaving cans and plastic containers in the communities. Other recommendations included not wearing revealing clothing (particularly women) such as shorts or short dresses and skirts, not to interfere in the internal decisions of the community, follow the rules of the community, and abide by the recommendations of the Civil Camp community representatives.

79 Local short version of the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Human Rights Center.
how people dealt with internal political differences and how this, in turn, affected community relations on a daily basis. 4) A community that was close to a military base. This would allow for a close observation of how military presence affected the daily lives of community members. 5) Finally, a community that was not easily accessible. My experience in 1999 was that communities that were more accessible tended to have more observers. Communities located close to the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas (a beautiful tourist city where most hotels and non-governmental organizations are located) were often the most visited because the majority of international observers did not have much time (usually two to three weeks) and did not want to spend most of it traveling. Communities with more observers tended to be stricter about how much contact community members were allowed to have with outsiders. Not only was contact restricted but there was also a more conscious and forceful effort to present observers with a particular version of the conflict in Chiapas—a version aimed at helping the EZLN advance its cause. While people in more isolated communities were definitely aware of the position of the observer as mainly an “outsider”, my impression was that they tended to be more open in their relations with observers and their version of the conflict was not as rehearsed.

Based on these characteristics, el Frayba suggested that I visit Ibarra first. The community was small, consisting of approximately thirty families, the second language spoken was Spanish (Tzeltal was the first language), and it was close to a military camp and to a non-Zapatista community (named New Ibarra). I was told that people were extremely friendly and that I would have ample opportunities to make meaningful relationships.

The trip to Ibarra was complicated and took several days. Zapatistas had arranged the trip in such a way as to evade various military bases and also non-Zapatista communities that could potentially inform the military of the presence of observers in the area. As in most cases (and for
security reasons), I was traveling with another observer. We left the city of San Cristóbal at 6:30 am and by 1:00 pm we had arrived at La Garrucha (one of the five Zapatista main political centers). We had to travel from here to the community of Santa Marta (three hours away) but were not able to catch the truck (public transportation) until 2 days later. Because transportation was privately owned and scarce we had to depend on its availability to move around. At la Garrucha, there was very little contact with community people; in fact the Civil Camp was designed in such a way as to limit such contact. There were, however, various international observers at the Camp. Since there was little contact with community people and walking too far away from the Camp was not permitted, reading was the main activity of observers; in fact the Camp was full of revolutionary books other observers had left behind for those to come. Once at Santa Marta, we handed in a letter from the human rights center which introduced us as international observers to the person responsible at the community school. We were told that the next morning somebody would take us to the community of Santa Elena. And indeed, the next morning two men showed up and took us there. The journey required that we walk up the mountain four and a half hours. We slept at Santa Elena and the following morning at about 8:00 a.m. a man took us for the three-hour walk to Ibarra.

Ibarra was beautiful and its people the friendliest. Children were especially sociable and curious to know about us. In contrast to the Zapatista communities I had visited in 1999 (which were closer to the city of San Cristóbal), people seemed willing to establish conversation all the time. I truly believed that if I were to do participant observation at Ibarra, the thesis would basically write itself. Unfortunately within a few days of my stay I got sick and was advised by
the Zapatista authorities to return to San Cristóbal before my condition worsened. It would have taken me at least ten hours to reach the nearest health center.

The second community I visited was through Enlace Civil and was named San José. Community members did not speak an indigenous language but considered themselves of Tojolabal origin. In contrast to Ibarra, getting there was not difficult at all. If transportation was available, the trip from San Cristóbal could take around seven hours. People, however, were distant and almost unwilling to engage in conversation with observers. It seemed that attempting to do participant observation there would truly be a challenge. The advantage, however, was that the community had a small autonomous hospital (mostly for Zapatistas from the area) and given my previous experience this was something important to take into account. In fact, it was the existence of the hospital, added to the easily accessible main road, which attracted me to the community in the first place; the thought of getting sick and having no access to a main road had frightened me. My stay at San José, however, only lasted a couple of weeks.

By the time I traveled to the third community, Tres Ríos, the traveler’s diarrhea and upset stomachs were becoming less frequent. It seemed that my body had finally become accustomed to the environment. The road to Tres Ríos was long and difficult. By most standards, the community would probably be considered remote, as it was about six hours (walking distance) away from its nearest neighbors where transportation was available. There were no paved roads in the region, only dirt roads which, during the rainy season, became impassable even for horses.

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80 The first three months in Chiapas were characterized by constant health problems. In fact, diarrhea and upset stomach are the most common problems confronted by international observers during their first weeks in Chiapas.

81 I omit details of the road to Tres Ríos as an attempt to conceal as much as possible the identity of the community.
and mules. Elementary services such as potable water, electricity, high schools, hospitals, etc. were simply non-existent. Similar to the case of Ibarra, however, people at Tres Ríos were warm and welcoming. In accordance with the characteristics I originally had in mind in developing my research question, in Tres Ríos most people spoke Spanish as either their first or second language (although there were some elders that could only communicate in Tojolabal); the community was small (it had approximately 500 inhabitants, most of whom were children, distributed among approximately 60 households); it was politically divided (half the community belonged to the EZLN and the other half had recently abandoned the organization); and it was close to a military base (only two hours, walking distance). The Civil Camp for Peace, located on a small hill at the entrance to the community—a strategic point where every household could be observed but also a point that could be observed from every angle of the community—served as my home during my stay. On the hill, observers could easily feel that every movement people made within the physical boundaries of the settlement (the space where all households had been built) was at their reach. Once they moved down closer to the households, however, it was obvious that it was the observers themselves who were at all times being observed.

Tres Ríos seemed unique in that it was very open in including national and international observers in community life and activity. People were allowed, for example, to invite observers to their homes and their milpas, share meals with them, and visit the Camp occasionally. It was precisely this openness and warmth which immediately attracted me and which later allowed me to build solid and long-term relationships.82

82 A thorough description of the community of Tres Ríos is provided in the following chapters.
3.3 Fieldwork: Ethical Dilemmas, Problematic Approaches

By the time I began my fieldwork in Tres Ríos, many communities in the area had been suffering intra-community violence and conflict, a particularly growing tendency within Zapatista territories. The levels of social and political division within and among communities in the conflict zone had been at time highly exacerbated by the EZLN’s firm resolution to refuse any form of governmental aid –under circumstances of militarization it was perceived as a contra-insurgent tactic to weaken or completely disable the organization. Soon after the uprising, Chiapas was not only highly militarized, it was also bombarded with federal and state programs, supposedly designed to ameliorate the levels of poverty and marginalization as well as to bring social and political stability in the region. Many indigenous and peasant constituencies, while sympathetic to the EZLN’s cause, wished to take advantage of these resources. The EZLN’s radical position, however, precipitated the confrontation and division between those who had accepted government projects and programs, as an immediate way to improve their life condition, and those who supported the EZLN’s call to refuse any form of governmental assistance –as another form of civil resistance. Within this context, it was common, for example, that militants of the EZLN considered groups and individuals who had accepted governmental money to be “priistas” or the local representatives of the Mexican state and, therefore, their

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83 For a good summary of the governmental programs implemented in the conflict zone see Reyes Ramos & Burguete Cal y Mayor (2002).

84 Generally the term ‘priista’ is used to identify those who officially belong or support the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). In the everyday context of the Zapatista struggle, however, the term has come to describe those who openly oppose the EZLN or those who do not belong to it. The people who do not officially belong to the EZLN but who are not against its cause find the term offensive when applied to them. In the context of the community under study, the Zapatista group did not use the term publicly when non-Zapatistas were around,
immediate enemies. This kind of polarization was commonly experienced as personal and domestic battles when, as was often the case, those who had decided to accept governmental aid were close relatives of Zapatista militants (see Chapter 5). Tres Ríos had indeed been deeply affected by this kind of political division.

My position as an international observer provided me with a legitimate opportunity to gain physical access to Tres Ríos, but it significantly limited my access to non-Zapatista members (considered “Priistas”). The Camp in the community was exclusively directed by EZLN militants, non-Zapatista community members were, therefore, prohibited from visiting the Camp and from engaging in conversations with observers. In the same way, observers’ contact with non-Zapatistas was highly restricted.

These kinds of prohibitions were not exclusive of Tres Ríos, most Zapatista communities implemented these as security measures. Marcos Estrada Saavedra (2007) who did extensive sociological research on various Zapatista communities, for example, describes similar conditions. His research team was also restricted from contact and dialogue with “priistas”. Moreover, Estrada Saavedra states that every time a formal interview (with Zapatistas) was requested, the interviewed were always under supervision to ensure that the internal politics of the community was not discussed. In addition to having limited movement within the communities, Estrada Saavedra’s research team was not allowed to choose the communities for the study, it was the Zapatista municipal authorities who selected the communities (Estrada

but they used it frequently among themselves to refer to those who were not in the organization. To acknowledge the ambiguity of the term, in the remaining chapters I will use it under quotation marks.
Saavedra, 2007: 40-41). According to Estrada Saavedra, this kind of censorship was not an issue in the non-Zapatista communities he visited (ibid.).

Generally, the kinds of limitations described by Estrada Saavedra and experienced by myself during my stay in Tres Ríos were meant to control the information travelling outside Zapatista communities that could have an impact on the EZLN as an organization as well as on its public image. The essentialist images that circulated outside the conflict zone (Chapter 2) were partly maintained and reproduced through the restrictions the EZLN enforced in its territory.

During my first weeks in Tres Ríos I adhered to these restrictions and limited myself to recording the weekly military helicopter trips to the area, which –besides transporting food and women85 for the soldiers at the nearby military base –mainly worked to keep the community under surveillance. As time passed, however, it became clear that the political division had an impact in people’s everyday lives and that such impact differed considerably among community members (see Chapter 5). The dynamics of the division were part of the thickness of the everyday context I was trying to capture but writing or talking about it openly was not allowed. Writing about the internal division and everyday contradictions of Zapatismo challenged directly the essentialist discourse being deployed by EZLN leaders and supporters (Chapter 2) in order to attract political and material support to the struggle. Although I was aware of this, I started nonetheless to record the ways in which the political division was affecting people’s everyday lives hoping that at one point I could engage the issue openly in conversation with community...)

85 Soldiers’ wives, girlfriends and prostitutes.
members. However, the radical position of the EZLN, itself product of the military atmosphere and counterinsurgency of the time, did not allow much negotiation in this respect.

It was in the context of these kinds of restrictions that the ethical recommendations strongly advocated by anthropologists interested in issues of “collaborative” and “politically engaged” research, and which strongly appealed to me before accessing the field (because of their particular sensibility towards research subjects), became, at that particular moment, difficult to implement. Not only were Zapatista authorities in Tres Ríos reluctant to discuss (at least

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86 The last decades within the social sciences have been characterized by profound analysis and debates regarding the ways in which fieldwork was traditionally conceived. Classics such as *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986), *Anthropology as Cultural Critique* (Marcus and Fisher 1986), and *The Predicament of Culture* (Clifford 1988) generated widespread concern among academics regarding, among other issues, the power inequality built into the research process and the ways in which “anthropological writing has obscured those inequalities and bolstered the analyst’s authority” (Hale, 2006: 102). Debates around the politics of fieldwork and interest in the ‘democratization’ of the production of knowledge has given rise to debates and practices of positionality, reflexivity, collaboration, and politically engaged research. Collaboration, as a methodological strategy aims to reduce the distance between the researcher and the researched and in the last years has moved beyond formal co-authorship and intellectual property rights to integrate the process of defining and addressing the research problems themselves. For recent discussion on these particular issues see Boser 2006, Benson & Nagar 2003, Davis 2006, Hale 1994 & 2006, Nagar 2002 & 2003, Mosse 2006, Rose 1997, Sanford & Angel-Ajani 2006, Simonelli 2003, Sitzia 2003, Speed 2006, Staeheli & Nagar 2002, Warren 2006.

87 Lynn Stephen (2002), for example, advocates a kind of anthropological research that primarily “seeks to serve the community it studies” (Stephen, 2002:12) and suggested, among others, the following recommendations: 1) that the anthropologist should present his/her proposal to “the community, answering questions, and being prepared to submit to collective opinion the issues of whether and how one may proceed”; 2) hold conversations “with only those people willing and interested in one’s research”; 3) be prepared to “justify how and why information collected is used and who has rights to it”; and 4) be prepared to have the “research product be that which the people one works with request” (ibid.). Nagar (2003) takes a similar position and proposes a collaborative approach “in which academic agendas and frameworks can get interrogated and recast” (ibid.). Such an approach would require the researcher to use his/her “analytical and linguistic skills, mobility and access to resources to help the activists meet their own goals” (ibid.366, my emphasis) as well as prioritize the “activists’ own articulation of how they want
with outsiders) the community’s internal politics; moreover, in the context of Tres Ríos “collaboration” and “dialogue” essentially implied compliance with Zapatista community authorities. My role as an observer/researcher, as perceived by Zapatista community authorities, was to provide symbolic protection from the abuses of the military and government officials (by eventually denouncing state repression and militarization) and, as such, my loyalty to the Zapatista cause and struggle was assumed. Such loyalty implicitly implied overlooking local hierarchies and power differentials (not only between Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas but also between men and women), as well as internal exclusions.

Reflections on Collaboration

In 2007, once the political and military conditions in the area had changed (see Epilogue for more details) and the social atmosphere was more propitious to the kind of dialogue and collaboration advocated by activist researchers (Hale 2007, Speed 2006 and 2008), I was able to obtain verbal consent to write and analyze the instances of internal conflict and political ambivalences I had documented four years earlier. Although, 2007 (on wards) was a more appropriate political moment for dialogue and collaboration, I did not count with the time or resources do so. It is important, however, to reflect on the conditions that hindered the kind of

their understanding to be recorded, written, disseminated and deployed, and the kind of role they want the academic researcher to play in the process” (ibid., my emphasis). According to Nagar, this approach would allow academics to interrogate dichotomies such as theory/praxis, expert/non-expert and academic/community-based (ibid.). A similar position is also taken by Davis (2006), Kemper & Royce (1997), and Speed (2006, 2008).

88 My visit to Tres Ríos was short and the fieldwork for my doctoral studies had officially finished in 2003. Here it is important to recognize that collaborative ethnography necessarily demands a “level of commitment to long-term dialogue that is not possible for all scholars” (Rappaport 2008: 23). Charles Hale (2007) states that the principal
dialogue and collaboration advocated by Charles Hale (2007) and Shannon Speed (2006 and 2008), for example, in 2002-2003 and that forcibly made the “field” more of a place for data collection rather than a potential social space for the creation of conceptualizations and mutual interpretation (Rappaport 2008).

There is no question that adopting an activist research approach necessarily entails moving beyond feelings of sympathy and solidarity for a particular cause towards frontally addressing the politics of knowledge production as well as the need to engage in the process of decolonizing knowledge (Leyva Solano and Speed 2007). This is particularly the case if one is dealing with indigenous actors actively engaged in struggles for autonomy and self-determination. For Charles Hale (2007) the word activist conveys an explicit “intention to modify anthropology, to transform the conventional practice in methodological terms” (Hale 2007: 105). According to Hale, activist research “reorients research practice around a different answer to the basic question “knowledge for whom?” (ibid.) and “involves a basic decision to align oneself with an organized group in struggle for rights, redress, and empowerment and a commitment to produce knowledge in collaboration and dialogue with members of that group” (ibid.). Similarly, for Shannon Speed (2008) activist research entails a desire to transform disciplinary legacies by questioning neocolonial power dynamics in the research process and by

drawback of activist anthropology is that it is exhausting: it requires continued commitment with one’s allies (on the ground) and at the same time producing research result for academia (Hale, 2007: 125). He states that younger scholars are generally forced to choose the latter “as a matter of career survival” (ibid.) even when they share the views of engaged research. The only answer Hale proposes for this problem is the institutionalization of activist anthropology “so that the alternation between the two distinct worlds is more fully acknowledged, valued, and rewarded” (ibid.)
explicitly choosing to engage rather than simply analyze the research subjects. For both scholars such engagement is not necessarily free of conflict. They recognize that organized struggles are often riddled with conflict, power disputes, and internal hierarchies. Nevertheless, they contend that these contradictions and tensions are better approached and analyzed in dialogue with those involved in the process.

The military context in which I found myself in 2002-2003 and the political polarization it provoked in people’s everyday lives clearly impeded this kind of dialogue. Although the context itself allowed for a critique of larger structures of power and domination, it closed the doors to an examination of localized everyday relations and inequalities through dialogue. Although critical scholars understand that it is through the everyday that structures of power and inequality are reproduced, being both critical of larger systems of oppression and of the particular relations of power which reproduce such systems (in the everyday) becomes particularly challenging in a context in which war, violence, and conflict tend to antagonize social relations.

Not only do politico-military contexts such as the one described in this chapter limit potentials for collaborative research. It is important to point out that communities’ internal hierarchies also complicate this approach. The question of whose interests one chooses to represent is not a simple one. Circe Sturm (1999) rightly points out that “critical anthropologists who have taken an activist stance in their work with [indigenous peoples/communities]… must pay greater heed to the ways in which their choices …often silence other elements of native communities, whether these be elites, women, “traditionals”, elders, or even “unrecognized” individuals and groups.” (Sturm, 1999: 206). In the case of Tres Ríos, for example, aligning myself with the Zapatista group implied complete disassociation with the non-Zapatista group.
That the particular context of Tres Ríos, during the time of my fieldwork, did not provide an open space for activist/collaborative research does not mean that collaboration and dialogue between academics and the “researched” should not be sought. While I do explicitly distance myself from neo-colonial projects, I also want to point to the limitations of collaborative research in hopes of continuing the conversation about its possibilities and potentialities, particularly in contexts of military surveillance and conflict of the kind described in this chapter.
Map #6, Municipalities with Mexican military presence: barracks, encampments, military bases, checkpoints.
Map #7. Paramilitary and other armed groups.
Chapter 4  
Autonomy and Governance:  
Historical Context

During my first weeks in Tres Ríos, the visits of Pablo, one of the two young Zapatista community teachers (locally known as *promotores de educación*), were regular. Every two days he would come up to the Camp with his dictionary in hand and ask for the meanings of words he had encountered in his educational courses at the Zapatista municipal center. He had been attending such courses for the last three years but was having difficulties with words I considered simple enough for his literacy level. Surprisingly, some of the words he had difficulty with were very much part of the EZLN’s public discourse, like “democracy” and “civil society” for example. What I soon realized was that such words, however simple or popular outside the conflict zone, were simply not part of the community’s everyday vocabulary.

During one of his short visits, Pablo asked whether I could explain what homosexuality meant. The idea of homosexuality was foreign to most people in the community; in fact, it took Pablo several days to realize that I was serious about my explanation. Curious of his

89 Instantly I recalled several instances in which Subcomandante Marcos’ communiqués had made reference to the marginality of gays, lesbians and even transsexuals and how the EZLN could identify with such marginality. Take for example the following statement: “Even if we took our ski masks we would not be as marginalized as gays, lesbians, and transsexuals. These sectors of society have not only been ignored by the traditional Left in Latin America during the previous decades –an ignorance which still persists today – but the theoretical model of Marxist-Leninism has been to leave them out or consider them as part of the problem to be eliminated. The homosexual for example, is suspected as a traitor, as a malignant force for the movement and for the socialist state. And the Indian is a backward element that impedes the forces of production… (Marcos 2001, Interview found in García Marqués 2002)
reaction, I asked Pablo what would happen if community members discovered that they had homosexuals living in Tres Ríos. “They will probably be thrown out of the community *porque eso no es el costumbre*,” 90 he stated. As I learned more about community politics I realized that Pablo’s answer was a real possibility. When I learned that the human rights organization that had facilitated my access to Tres Ríos was mediating a case in another community where a young woman was being asked to leave because she was pregnant and unmarried, Pablo’s reasoning took on structural form. In the context of Tres Ríos, *el costumbre* did not necessarily mean ancient traditions or old practices; it simply meant community rule. Although hypothetical, the case of homosexuality seemed, to me, a clear instance in which the community could legitimately assert their right to *autonomy* regarding issues of sexuality. When I asked Pablo if I was correct about my supposition, he politely requested that I explained the meaning of *autonomía*. 91 Autonomy, to my surprise, was not part of people’s local vocabulary either.

Prior to my arrival in the field, my understanding of the local process of autonomy within Zapatista communities was limited. The EZLN’s public struggle for social transformation in Chiapas between 1994-2003 focused primarily on the *institutionalization* of self-determination. In general this meant demanding constitutional and legislative reforms that would allow (self-identified) “indigenous peoples” to exercise their own forms of social, political, economic, and cultural organization. More concretely, this struggle took the form of advocating for the constitutional recognition of indigenous peoples’ internal normative systems for regulation and sanction; the power to elect authorities according to their own norms, procedures and traditional

90 “because that is not our custom.”
91 Autonomy.
practices; the power to determine their development projects and programs; as well as access to their lands and the natural resources they contained (San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture). Understanding the ways in which life functioned within Zapatista communities, however, necessarily required an understanding of how autonomy was \textit{locally} conceived. While the word “autonomy” within Tres Ríos was not part of people’s localized knowledge, notions of \textit{self-government} were very well grounded. In fact, the restrictions many international observers faced within the Zapatista communities they visited represented much more than merely a mechanical reaction of Zapatista militants towards the increasing militarization of the area. Such restrictions and limitations were closely tied to local notions of rule and government and could legitimately be read as particular instances in which Zapatistas were asserting the right to autonomy and self-determination that the EZLN had been publicly demanding. Once collective decisions about “outsiders” (however “engaged”) were made there was little room for negotiation.

Within Zapatista territories government and community worked as inseparable concepts. Government happened first and foremost at the level of the “community”. It was here where larger political, social, economic, environmental, and territorial processes were to take shape. The centrality of “community” to Zapatista lives and struggle was clearly expressed in the San Andrés Accords of Indigenous Rights and Culture which defined indigenous “communities” as entities with public rights (The San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture, Document II, Section II, Point 4) entitled to “develop their specific forms of social, cultural, political and economic organization” (ibid. Point 6a). In the context of the Lacandon area, the
“community” was a very concrete space with clear geographic, social and political boundaries. The territoriality of community was as essential as the everyday contact between its members.\(^9^2\)

Anthropologists have clearly demonstrated that when “community” is evoked, its existence, as a spatial/jurisdictional or cultural space, should not be assumed (Thornton & Ramphèle 1989, Gupta & Ferguson 1992) as its existence (empirical and/or ideological) is often tied to larger processes of state formation (Anderson 1983, Woost 1994) and product of particular governmental interventions (Jensen 2004). Ultimately, community (however defined) is, as Thornton & Ramphèle (1989) state, “the unpredictable product of history” (Thornton & Ramphèle, 1989:86).\(^9^3\) In the context of the Zapatista struggle, the idea of self-governing communities whose sovereignty was to be respected by the Mexican government as well as by other institutions, organizations, and individuals (whose everyday existence was not directly tied to those communities) did not arise instantly. The EZLN’s public struggle for autonomy and

\(^9^2\) It is possible to legitimately describe the ‘community’ of zapatistas as an ‘imagined’ community (to borrow Benedict Anderson’s (1989) concept) since EZLN’s constituencies imagine themselves as part of a larger ‘community’ of EZLN militants who share similar concerns, duties, and struggles. It is imagined because the EZLN members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983:6). In the context of Tres Ríos, however, people used ‘community’ to refer to their immediate geographic space and the people that lived within it and the word ‘organization’ to refer to the Zapatistas with whom they shared ideas and struggles but who may never come in contact with.

\(^9^3\) The deployment of ‘community’ in the San Andrés Accords in particular (and in the EZLN discourse in general) could easily be read in line with contemporary developmental discourses on “community development”, “community participation” and “community sustainability” (Gold 2005, Jensen 2004, Thornton & Ramphèle 1989) which construct the “community” as a discrete social and spatial entity in “which relationships and responsibilities; identities and ideals; motivations and morality are neatly contained” (Gold, 2005:1). Some scholars indeed opted to read “community” in this way (Holloway & Pelayez, Lorenzano 1998, King & Villanueva 1998) disregarding the political and historical context within which Zapatistas tended to evoke the concept.
self-determination which followed the uprising was in fact a call for the official recognition of a process its militants had been living years prior to the uprising. Communities from the Lacandon area –whether Zapatista or not– had, since the early 1940s and 1950s, established a social, political and economic life relatively independent from the intervention of state institutions.

The “autonomous community” developed as the result of a number of intersecting historical processes and competing political projects. Two were, however, the most influential: 1) the establishment of the *ejidal* system (through the Mexican Revolutionary Agrarian Reform) in the 1940s and 1950s which gave groups of settlers in the area legal rights to determine their internal economic, social and political life, and 2) the long term theological and political work of the San Cristóbal diocese in the 1960s which helped strengthen the process of self-reliance in the area and encouraged the building of independent (from the state) grass roots organizations. Both, state and church interventions in the area, can be defined as “governmental interventions”.

Drawing on Foucault’s notion of governmentality, the term “government” is defined here as the organized “attempt to shape human conduct by calculated means” (Li, 2007:5). 94 Both

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94 Michael Foucault is known for linking the constitution of the modern state to the emergence of a particular kind of governance which tended to move beyond the mere administration of wealth and resources to include the management of the health and happiness of the population (Foucault 1991, DuBois 1991, Rose and Miller 1992). The “art of government”, as Foucault called it, sought to go beyond the mere imposition of laws to involve the tactics and techniques designed to persuade individuals that it was in their best interest to subscribe to prescribed regulations (Foucault, 1991). Thus, it mainly operated by configuring people’s desires, habits, aspirations, and beliefs. Foucault maintained that since the eighteenth century, the ‘state’ had been characterized by an increasing ‘governmentalization’ (Foucault, 1991:103); that is, administrative apparatuses came to concern themselves with “the welfare of the population, the improvement of its conditions, the increase of its wealth, longevity, health, etc;” (ibid.102). Government was primarily a domain of strategies, techniques and procedures aimed at structuring the lives of the governed in certain desired directions.
governmental attempts\(^{95}\) highly influenced the ways in which people came to imagine property, government and power, as well as the ways in which they came to relate to themselves and to “outsiders.”

4.1 Initial Settlement

The Making of Spatial Communities

The community of Tres Ríos was part of a larger geographic entity called *ejido* Río Nuevo. Río Nuevo, was a small *Tojolabal* settlement of agricultural laborers composed of approximately 800 inhabitants grouped into proximately 80 households. The settlement belonged to an area known as Las Cañadas which was located within the depths of the Lacandon rainforest, a region recently populated by landless peasants and (self-identified) indigenous peoples from different parts of Chiapas and Mexico who migrated during the early 1940s and 1950s in search of land and a decent form of living. Most migrants were escaping the colonial conditions of large ranches and plantations which functioned primarily under systems of debt peonage or debt servitude.\(^{96}\) Opening up the rainforest for settlement brought together

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\(^{95}\) I prefer the word attempt as opposed to project simply because it captures the partial and contested nature of any governmental project.

\(^{96}\) In Chiapas, plantations developed primarily at the end of the 19th century (after 1890) as the price of coffee began to rise on the world market. The labour force in these plantations was controlled in several ways. Labourers who migrated to plantations were given advanced payments (prior to their arrival) by contractors who “would travel to indigenous communities and offer a small sum of money to establish a debt” (Benjamin 1996:77). Once on the plantation, workers’ debt tended to increase as they were required to buy food and other basic items at the plantation’s store. “In this way, workers rarely accumulated enough to pay back initial loans, were obligated to accept new loans, and as a result, accumulated more debt” (Harvey, 1998:50). In addition, landlords increased their workers’ dependency “by financing religious ceremonies and selling cheap liquor at the company store” (ibid.). In the cases where labourers had accumulated large debts, they were prohibited from leaving the plantations and were,
indigenous peoples from different ethnic groups, mainly Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal, and Chol. The Luis Echeverría administration during the 1970s further increased migration by allowing peasants from other states of Mexico to relocate in this region.  

The first inhabitants of Río Nuevo, four men and their families, arrived in the early 1950s and came from the nearby coffee plantations located in the department of Comitán, the department where the Tojolabal population was concentrated and which had more people in debt servitude than any other place in the state of Chiapas (Benjamin 1996: 65 as quoted by Stephen, 2002:97). Don Eligio, one of the elderly from Río Nuevo and a very charming storyteller remembers what it was like to be a mozo:

We used to work the whole day, from dawn to sunset. We only had one day to work on our own field, that was Sundays. The rest of the week was for the landlord. Whenever we would finish our work at the plantation early, we would go to the patron and let him know that we were done, hoping that we would get the afternoon off. But he was so vicious that he would throw a pack of corn on the floor and make us pick it up, one by one until it was time to go home. At that time, the landlord did thus, “obliged to work for their patron in exchange for the use of a small plot of land” (Harvey 1996, 50). By the end of 1927 there were 94 coffee plantations in Chiapas, most of which were not Mexican (Rus & Hernandez 1990:3)

97 The Luis Echeverria administration (1970-76) revived agrarian reform and encouraged peasant organization as an strategy to “regain political support after the brutal repression of the 1968 student movement” (Washbrook, 2005:436).

98 The migratory movement of the Tojolabal people to the Lacandon area started in 1950 (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2002:85)

99 Indebted worker.
not pay us with money, he would give us tokens which we could use only in the plantation’s store and *cántina*. (Fieldwork, December 2002)

Taking advantage of the agrarian policy of the time which allowed landless peasants to settle in the Lacandon rainforest, a region mainly characterized by extremely poor soils unsuitable for cultivation, the first inhabitants of Río Nuevo founded the *ejido* of Río Nuevo. In the context of Mexico, the *ejido* was a particular form of land tenure that was introduced after the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The Revolutionary Agrarian Reform was a response to popular demands for “land and liberty” and the *ejido* law offered a solution to the problem of the unequal distribution of land which had pervaded Mexico since the end of the 19th century. Big extensions of land were expropriated and handed over to landless peasants for their use and administration. Forming *ejidos* was, therefore, the principal way in which landless peasants could lay claim to the usufruct of a small piece of land. While peasants could work and live on the *ejido*, the state remained the official owner and therefore *ejido* lands could not be left uncultivated, leased to a

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100 Liquor store.

101 In general terms, the Mexican Revolution was a broad “popular movement with strong agrarian demands” (Nuijten, 2003:27) which opposed the authoritarian regime of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1910). The *Porfiriato* was characterized mainly by the extreme concentration of land by a small group of large landowners. As rural populations became landless, they were forced to work on large landholdings under severe conditions. Between 1908 and 1910, an economic crisis and severe food shortages intensified agrarian grievances. The regime of Porfirio Diaz was finally overthrown in 1910 with massive support from the rural population. After the revolution, millions of hectares of land were taken from Mexican and foreign-owned estates and redistributed to peasants. “Mexico became the first nation in the Americas in which an agrarian reform was systematically implemented by the state.” (Nugent & Alonso, 1994:211).

102 The 1940s were characterized by an extensive movement of expropriations and formations of *ejidos* that took place throughout the country.
third party, sold or mortgaged.\textsuperscript{103} If the law was infringed, usufruct rights could be taken away from the \textit{ejidatarios}.\textsuperscript{104}

In the context of the Lacandon area, the formation of \textit{ejidos} was closely associated with the colonization\textsuperscript{105} of the forest. During the 1940s, the Mexican government officially encouraged landless peasants to settle in the Lacandon area.\textsuperscript{106} This historic move allowed the government to avoid the redistribution of fertile lands which were mostly controlled by Chiapanecan landowners. This was a premeditated strategy in which state officials had managed

\textsuperscript{103} Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 established that the lands distributed belonged originally to the “Nation” giving the state the authority to give or take away land rights. When land was granted, it figured as a “gift from the state; a gift for which peasants were expected to express their gratitude, demonstrating their indebtedness by becoming the loyal subjects to the state” (Nugent & Alonso, 1994:229). The ‘state’ thus became visible to peasants “as a force operating on the basis of a moral imperative” (Van Der Haar, 2005:494). This was also the first time in which peasants were addressed as citizens (ibid.).

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Ejidatarios} refers to the individuals in an \textit{ejido} who have legal access to a piece of land to work and to live in. There may be other members that live and work in the \textit{ejido} but who have no legal access to a piece of land, they are called \textit{avecindados}.

\textsuperscript{105} ‘Colonization’ in this context refers to the migration and settlement of landless peasants into the Lacandon area.

\textsuperscript{106} In Chiapas, the greatest land distribution occurred between 1934-1940 under the administration of President Lázaro Cárdenas. During this time the “greatest amount of land was expropriated and the greatest number of \textit{ejidos} established throughout Mexico” (Nuijten, 2003:28). The agrarian policies, however, were primarily a response to an economic crisis the country was facing as a result of the collapse of the American stock market in 1929. As the demand for Mexican exports decreased, the government instituted a six-year plan to substitute the export-oriented economy with domestic industrialization. Import substitution industrialization in turn was dependent on peasant production of cheap foods (Collier, 1994:31). Nonetheless, by the end of the 1930s the Mexican government was forced to change the policies that had facilitated access to land. As U.S. demands for fruits, vegetables, fiber, and textiles were reinstated, the government encouraged the development of large-scale commercial agriculture by financing infrastructure. These changes reversed the process of land distribution Cárdenas had put in place (ibid.34) and as a result, the land distributed after this period within the state of Chiapas was mainly part of National Lands (lands belonging to the state) (Cal y Mayor 1994, 1998).
to avoid conflict with local elites and at the same time evade the implementation of a substantial agrarian reform (Cal y Mayor 1994, Ruiz Hernández & Cal y Mayor 1998). The region served as a relief valve for land distribution to hitherto landless campesinos from densely populated areas.\(^{107}\)

The granting of land to landless peasants also served an additional purpose: to open up virgin lands for settlement in order to integrate them into regional production and the market (Reyes Ramos, 1992:33; Leyva Solano & Asencio 2002:128). The *ejido* became the particular structure that would supposedly allow such integration. The Federal Government had indeed, from the beginning, conceived the *ejido* as a productive unit able of competing with the private sector. With this in mind, since 1926 it had institutionalized financial and technical assistance for the *ejidal* sector through the promulgation of a number of laws and the creation of a complex legal apparatus (Hinojosa Ortiz 1983). By the early 1990s communal property had not only displaced, almost completely, private property in the forest area (Haar 1998; Villafuerte *et al* 1997:31-38), but equally important, it had stimulated the creation of a new social class of *ejidatarios*; a social class with the capacity to demand political and material resources through the legal formation of associations, cooperatives, and ejidal Unions.\(^{108}\)

The settlements or ejidal communities formed by the new migrants around the area of Río Nuevo ranged from 30 to 150 families which represent an approximate population of between

\(^{107}\) It is estimated that by “1970 approximately 100,000 colonists had settled” in the Lacandon area (Washbrook, 2005:439).

\(^{108}\) In the 1970s, under the presidency of Luis Echeverría Alvarez, the *ejidos* that “joined together in new productive units, know as uniones de ejidos (ejidal unions), could receive increased governmental support through subsidized inputs and preferential rates of credit” (Harvey, 1998:76).
150 and 750 people (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2002:85). The social composition of the ejidos in the area differed significantly. Some settlements were composed of people who had come from the same village or neighborhood; while other settlements were composed of people who spoke the same language but came from different villages; others were multilingual and practiced different religions. \(^{109}\) Río Nuevo was composed of relatives from neighboring Tojolabal villages and whose main religious beliefs were founded in Catholicism.

While the original impetus that moved the first inhabitants of Río Nuevo to settle in the jungle was the desire to own a piece of land (apparently fertile) that would support agricultural activity as well as the growth of cattle and other animals, the price of accessing land was high; people had to deal with physical and economic isolation, which inevitably implied a lack of any kind of health, educational, and transportation system, as well as having to bear with the abuses of merchants, forest agents, and income tax collectors. The settlement of landless peasants in the Lacandon jungle was encouraged without any kind of government planning, communicational infrastructure, or any kind of services that would ensure the physical reproduction of settlers. In addition, the new migrants became caught up in long, costly, and bureaucratic trips to Tuxtla Gutierrez and Mexico City as part of the legalizing process. By the 1970s the Lacandon region remained marginalized and excluded from national development programs. \(^{110}\) Settlers were

\(^{109}\) Womack (1999), for example, describes how Catholics from Abasolo and Presbyterians from Oxchuc, both Tzeltal villages, constructed their community in what is presently known as San Quintín where they “built two churches, one for each creed, right in the middle of the settlement.” This reality sharply contrasted indigenous villages in the central highlands which were usually organized around ethnicity, Catholicism or traditional indigenous religious practices (Collier, 1994:55).

\(^{110}\) Barmeyer (2003) attributes this marginalization to two probable reasons. One is the fact that governments did not have an agricultural agenda for the region’s resources (timber, oil, mineral deposits of uranium and aluminum,
obliged to grow corn for subsistence and endure extreme conditions (lack of drinking water, roads, and electricity characterized the region).

**Production & Subsistence**

As the ejidal system was instituted in the Lacandon area, it provoked clear irreversible economic and socio-political changes. For one, the proliferation of the *ejido* as the main form of land tenure in the forest area destroyed traditional forms of production. As indebted workers were freed to access a piece of land, the *finca*\(^ {111} \) started to lose supremacy over the *ejido*. These developments forced private capital to change its control over land for more profitable economic activities such as the acquisition of livestock and the commercialization of cattle and coffee (Leyva Solano & Asencio, 2002:195). As the lands that were once used by indebted workers to plant (while working in the plantations) their own corn and beans were abandoned, landlords started to transform such spaces into large and productive pastures suitable for raising cattle. As a substitute for the recruitment of indebted workers, landlords opted to hire paid laborers to work on the pastures (ibid.92).\(^ {112} \) These changes greatly influenced the new migrants’ economic

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\(^ {111} \) Large extensions of land owned by families (as opposed to companies) with a kind of labour organization that dates back to colonial times.

\(^ {112} \) By early 1970s the *ejido* constituted two thirds of land-holding in the Lacandon jungle, only one third persisted as private property (Leyva Solano & Asencio 1991:192). According to Leyva Solano & Asencio (1991) and Haar (1998), this tendency increased considerably during the following years. By 1990 43.7% of Chiapas’ total
choices in making a living; adopting, for example, coffee as a cash crop and raising cattle as the
main form of local economic investment.

For the inhabitants of Río Nuevo the cultivation of corn, beans, and coffee as well as
livestock rearing then became the basis of their economy. 113 People’s subsistence was also
complemented by the cultivation of less important crops such as sugar cane, pineapple,
watermelon, and bananas, raising of secondary animals such as pigs and hens, as well as foraging
for fruits, nuts, mushrooms, and wood in the surrounding area. People’s livelihoods were
affected not only by the ups and downs of nature but also by the uneven distribution of labor
throughout the agricultural year. During the months of February and March (the dry season), for
example, the ejido’s men did not formally work on their land. It was during this time that they
sought paid work in the nearby pastures or cities for supplementary wages.

For Río Nuevo, individual family farms became the main units of production and social
organization (see below); nevertheless, ejido members had different kinds of property rights to
different kinds of land. Although some ejidos in the area decided to carry out productive
activities collectively, ejidatarios from Río Nuevo divided the arable lands individually among
themselves (a process done without maps or formal registration of the various individual plots).
Ejidatarios held individual plots of agricultural lands but they also had access to pasture land and

population lived on ejidos (Stephen, 2002:63). According to Nuijten (2003), presently there are in Mexico 28,000

113 By the 1970s 45% of the cultivable land in the Lacandon area was used for the planting of corn and beans, 9% for
coffee, and 5% for pastures (Burguete Cal y Mayor, 2002:100)
woodlands which belonged to the *ejido* for collective use (these common lands comprised the majority of the ejidal territory).

The basic division of labor was closely related to family structure and ran along gender lines. Men were usually in charge of the planting and harvest of corn and beans, planting of coffee and tending of cattle. Women, on the other hand, tended to take care of the household and the harvest of coffee. Training in these activities was defined mainly in terms of the direct transfer of experience and was usually carried out within the family; this factor tended to strengthen family ties and relations. Functions and responsibilities were rigidly assigned. Overall patriarchal relationships persisted since relationships were embedded in the fact that it was the father of the family who was the formal owner of the family farm. The *ejido*’s economic and political activity was, thus, administered by an oligarchy of male household heads forming what Shanin has called a major form of peasant “grass-roots democracy”, a fundamental characteristic of the peasant economy (Shaning, 1973:73).

**The Making of Ejido Subjects**

The governmentalization of the Mexican state implied that the Agrarian Law would move beyond the distribution of land to incorporate the reformulation of new norms and behaviors for the target population. Through the distribution of land, revolutionary state officials sought to radically shape the beliefs and conduct of rural populations which were largely construed as ignorant, illiterate, and backward. Through the processes of *ejido* institution and legalization, Río Nuevo’s inhabitants were, like most peasants in the area, introduced to new forms of social and political organization as well as to participatory practices and discourses that tended to favor consensus and plebiscite. The legal recognition of the *ejido* deeply engaged the *ejidatarios* not only with government authorities (for long periods of time) but also with the members of the...
ejido themselves. Before petitions were processed members of the ejido had to elect internal authorities that would represent them before governmental officials. The law required the establishment of mainly two kinds of internal structures: the Comisariado which was composed of six members responsible for the execution of the agreements of the General Assembly and the Consejo de Vigilancia composed also of six members responsible for the supervision of the activities of the Comisariado. The process of election, according to the law, was through the General Assembly which was composed of the majority of ejido members and was legally considered the “supreme authority” of the ejido. The law even dictated different kinds of assemblies and how often they had to be called on (Hinojosa Ortiz 1983: 22).

Decisions made in the General Assembly were considered the law and disrespecting such decisions could lead to the payment of fines or imprisonment. It was through the General Assembly that members were granted the power to approve the internal norms that would regulate them; elect, remove, and supervise internal authorities; decide whether the labor organization of the ejido would be communal and/or individual; as well as approve the ways in which to exploit, distribute, and use ejidal resources (ibid.126).\textsuperscript{114} The General Assembly became the main mechanism through which ejido members were able to negotiate their interests and differences.

Although the ejido law “contained detailed regulations for the administration of the ejidos concerning, among other things, the assignment of land rights, inheritance, conflict resolution, and the administration of collective resources” (Van Der Haar, 2005: 495), the intervention of

\textsuperscript{114} It is important to mention that the law gave economic and technical preference to collective exploitation of resources over the individual.
state officials was minimal and most of the ejidos in the area had ample space for keeping their internal affairs largely out of the reach of state administrators (ibid.). In a context in which state buildings and officials were at great distance from the settlements, coupled with the failure of state and federal governments to provide economic and infra-structural development, communal authorities (themselves regulated by the general assemblies) “came to constitute de facto local governments” (ibid.496) which operated relatively autonomous from municipal or state governments (ibid.). Internal conflicts over land and resources, domestic disputes, the rules regulating social behavior as well as the corresponding sanctions if rules were to be broken, and the political affiliation of the community, are all examples of issues commonly addressed by the local authorities and assembly. Small crimes were solved within the ejido itself without having to involve municipal authorities.

An important characteristic of the process of governmentalization in general has been the creation of techniques and programs that allow state officials to govern at a distance (Rose & Miller, 1992: 180-181). In the Lacandon area, the physical distance of state institutions contrasted radically with the proximity of Church representatives whose role in the politicization of peasants worked to reconfigure agrarian law in very particular ways. Here I want to point out that “government” is not by any means the monopoly of those tied to state institutions (the “state”); there exists a multiplicity of competing and often overlapping attempts to govern, each with their own agendas, objectives, and techniques (Li, 2005:384). Hence, I incorporate the role of the San Cristóbal diocese in the area not just as another social/political actor but as a forceful governmental intervention which also sought to reorient people’s actions and behaviors, albeit in very different ways.
4.2 Influence of the Church

The Making of Political Subjects

Given the government’s unwillingness to provide any kind of physical or social infrastructure to the growing settlements in the interior of the Lacandon jungle, Río Nuevo’s inhabitants were forced to confront social, agricultural, and economic difficulties by themselves without the aid of state institutions. The San Cristóbal diocese – one of the most influential institutions in the region of Las Cañadas – aided settlers in dealing with some of their difficulties and, in the process, helped strengthen people’s process of self-reliance in the area as well as their ability to negotiate with government officials at the municipal, state, and federal levels.

Through a systematic understanding of the reality of “indigenous” campesinos, Bishop Samuel Ruíz and his pastoral team (composed of Jesuits, Dominicans, Marists and Diocesans) adapted the liturgy to the particular cultural, economic and social situation settlers were facing. As priests learned the indigenous languages, they began to interpret the bible in light of the experiences of the Lacandon settlers. Río Nuevo’s inhabitants, for example, learned to compare the book of Exodus – which describes the journey from slavery to freedom – to their recent experience of migration. The themes of liberation and a “promised land” resonated with their

\[115\] The term ‘political’ here refers to people’s awareness of the social, political, and economic inequalities of rural populations in general as well as of the relations of power that affected their concrete lives.

\[116\] It is important to note that Evangelical and Protestant churches have also had an important role in the history of Chiapas; nevertheless, in the region under study it is the Catholic Church’s work through the San Cristóbal diocese that has prevailed. For information on Evangelical and Protestant churches in Chiapas see Hernández Castillo 1995 and Nash 2001 (pages 170-172).
experience of escaping slavery in the plantations and seeking a better life in the forest lands. Settlers were living their own Exodus, and liberation became not only a spiritual endeavor but also a political one. Constructing the “kingdom of God” was a process that needed to be started right in the communities (perceived then as the “promised land”). By the late 1970s the bible had been translated into various indigenous languages including *Tojolabal*, the book of Exodus was titled “We are looking for liberty”.

The diocese’s particular approach was based on the politico-religious proposal of the Theology of Liberation, a proposal which advocated its “preferential option for the poor” and which was supported by a number of official meetings and documents generated by a radical part of the Catholic Church.\(^\text{117}\) The radical point of the departure of the Catholic Church was The Second Vatican Council and the Bishop’s Conference in Medellín, Colombia (1962-1956 and 1968 respectively) in which Church leaders sought to “reorient Catholicism from a mere spiritual terrain towards a greater attention to people’s material needs” (Hernández Castillo, 1995: 419; my translation).\(^\text{118}\) Structured by this perspective, in the early 1970s the San Cristóbal diocese established two theological schools to train indigenous lay preachers locally known as *catequistas*\(^\text{119}\) who acted as religious and “cultural mediators between the communities and the church” (Leyva Solano, 1995: 393). The objective of the schools was to provide each community with its own catechists. Their work aimed at stimulating the participation of community members in a critical analysis of their reality and a dynamic search for better life conditions.

\(^{117}\) For a historical overview of the influence of Theology of liberation in Latin America see Lowy & Pompan (1993) and Robles (2008).

\(^{118}\) This perspective was endorsed by the writings of theologists such as Leonardo Boff and Manuel Gutierres.

\(^{119}\) Catechists.
Within the community, catechists were also responsible for promoting basic health principles such as the importance of maintaining a clean home; building separate spaces for domestic animals (such as chickens, pigs, and horses) at a distance from the household; building and using latrines, as well as the need to boil drinking water. The influence and role of catechists within (and between) communities became so central to the everyday lives of settlers that their position was incorporated in the ejidal structure and they came to be considered internal authorities (together with the ejidal authorities). By 1974 the Church had over 1,000 catechists in indigenous areas (Washbrook, 2005:429). The number of catechists in the Tojolabal region alone was ten times higher than the number of school teachers (Marinez Lavin, 1974a as referenced by Van Der Haar, 2005:505).  

**Constitution of “Indigenous” Subjects**

As the presence and influence of the Church continued to grow, so did the number of catechists and religious representatives. It was through the courses imparted by the priests of the diocese that catechists perfected the Spanish language and learned to read and write. This acquired knowledge gave them access to greater information and transformed them into the principal (sometimes the only) interlocutors between the communities and the “outside” world (the church, government institutions, political parties, non-governmental associations, etc.). According to Legorreta Díaz (1998), this new indigenous elite (formed by politico-religious leaders) constituted itself into the foremost reproductive mechanism of idealized notions of “community” and of the “indigenous.” The latter ideal tended to resemble the myth of the “noble savage” and was a product of anthropology courses that priests from the diocese started to

120 There were 150 catechists and only 15 teachers (Marinez Lavin, 1974a as reference by Van Der Haar, 2005:505).
take in the 1970s (Legorreta Díaz, 1998: 21). “The job of the clergy as outlined by Samuel Ruiz was to validate indigenous cultures and build on their insights” (Stephen, 2002: 114). The pedagogic material for indigenous catechists included Mayan culture and the history of the Spanish conquest as well as its consequences for indigenous peoples. The courses promoted the idea that before the Spanish conquest indigenous peoples lived in egalitarian societies and were, therefore, “good” by “nature” (Legorreta Díaz, 1998: 45-47). According to Villafuerte Solís et al (1999), the emancipatory role the diocese had taken on became highly influenced by anthropology’s limited vision of culture which tended to depict indigenous peoples as the “radically others” (Villafuerte Solís et al, 1999: 35-36). Indigenous cultures and communities were then seen as homogeneous and stable entities; the alteration of one part of the cultural system would represent the modification of the whole, which would, consequently, be perceived as the tragic loss of (irreplaceable) “ancient” cultural values (ibid.34). The mission of the diocese’s priests encompassed not only providing the conceptual and practical tools that would encourage the liberation of indigenous peoples – and ultimately the building of a just society – but also promoting a profound respect for indigenous peoples, languages, and “cultures” (ibd.43). Liberation was a question of overcoming not only economic, political and religious exclusion but also cultural oppression. By defining themselves as victims of economic and political structures, catechists “created a twofold ideological space: on the one hand for an internal reaffirmation of cultural self-esteem (pride in existing selfhood), and on the other for claims made against a variety of external “others” (national, international) to recognize this

121 According to Villafuerte Solís et al (1999) the seminal anthropological writing that inspire Bishop Samuel Ruiz and his diocese was that of anthropologist Reichel-Dolmatoff, and later Guillermo Bonfil (1988) with Mexico Profundo and Carlos Lenskendorf (1996) with Los Hombres Verdaderos.
politically” (Leyva Solano 2005: 574); a process which tended to reify the mestizo-Indian dichotomy. It was through the Church that the indianist discourse first entered the imagination of many people in the Lacandon jungle.

The liberationist and indigenist discourse of the San Cristóbal diocese ultimately worked to encourage internal solidarity and accountability within communities in the region, reinforcing the General Assembly as the main form of collective decision-making and as the main mechanism for the decentralization of power. The politicization of settlers ultimately gave the structure of the *ejido* a participatory character. In this respect, the work of the diocese radically questioned prevalent official religious practices and ideologies of the time which tended to be silent about unequal relations of power and peoples’ lack of material and political resources in marginalized areas. Nevertheless, it was the diocese’s role in the promotion and creation of grassroots organizations in the region that became pivotal for the mobilization of people and resources, along with the maintenance of community and regional self-sufficiency. It was through these organizations that community members started to make legal demands for services and access to credit, a process through which settlers reached an unprecedented political maturity.

122 While the formal ejidal structure is laid down in detail, in fact many *ejidos* in Mexico do not really function strictly according to the prescribed model (Nuijten, 2003:48). The description Nuijten makes of the *ejido* of La Canoa, in the valley of Autlán in Jalisco, Mexico for example, contrasts radically with the experience of participation in many communities in the Lacandon area: “The *ejido* meetings were characterized by many ejidatarios talking and quarrelling at the same time. There was seldom a central discussion and, when there was, it soon dissolved into side-discussions in which old fights were recalled and often the same people started criticizing each other again…Although some times meetings were held to discuss important *ejido* matters, collective decisions were never taken and voting never took place” (Nuijten, 2003:52).
Grassroots Organizing

Central to the process of self-reliance for the people of Las Cañadas was the first Indigenous Congress organized by the San Cristóbal diocese in 1974. Originally encouraged by the state government, the purpose of the Indigenous Congress was to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the birth of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. Through the Congress, the government sought to co-opt indigenous leaders; nevertheless, its limited presence in indigenous areas led the state’s governor, Manuel Velasco Suárez, to ask Bishop Ruiz to organize it (Harvey, 1998: 77). The congress became the first political space that allowed indigenous representatives from different regions to come together and articulate common demands for social change (Collier, 1995:17). Preparation for the Indigenous Congress began in August 1973. For a year, community representatives met to discuss relevant themes: land, commerce, education, and health. In the course of these meetings representatives were selected to attend the congress. Twelve hundred indigenous delegates from the state of Chiapas participated: 161 Choles, 152 Tojolabales, 587 Tzeltales, and 330 Tzotziles. They represented a population of 250,000 people distributed throughout 327 communities (Kovic, 1995:105). “The diocese invited teachers, students and lawyers to give courses in agrarian law, history and economics in preparation for the conference, which provided many community leaders with a broader political education” (Washbrook, 2005:429). As settlers found that “they had many common grievances against the state”, they “resolved to remain independent of the PRI” (ibid.). The outcome was the constitution of a number of independent ejidal unions in the region through which settlers were able to make their struggles and demands legal.

Encouraged by the 1971 Federal Agrarian Reform law, which “allowed ejidos to join together in larger productive units know as uniones de ejidos, or union of ejidos” (Stephen, 2002:
119), the catechists and activists who had participated in the congress took action on the many
issues that had emerged during the congress itself, particularly issues related to control over the
productive and marketing process in the region. Two years after the congress had taken place,
three regional *ejidos* were formed: *Ejido Union Quiptic ta Lecubtecex (UEQTL)*\(^{123}\) in Ocosingo;
*Ejido Union Tierra y Libertad (UETL)*\(^{124}\) and *Ejido Union Lucha Campesina (UELC)*\(^{125}\), both in
Las Margaritas (Harvey 1994, 29).\(^{126}\) These organizations took the initiative in confronting
social, agricultural and economic problems such as the construction of roads, clinics, schools and
advances in the production and marketing of coffee and livestock.

By 1980 these, together with other similar peasant organizations had formed a larger
umbrella organization known as Union of Ejidal Unions and Peasant Solidarity Groups of
Chiapas through which the economic, social and political demands of the local population were
voiced. This organization grouped together 180 communities with approximately 12,000
household heads (De Vos, 2002:261). Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s the Union
of Ejidal Unions (UU) was the main intermediary force between the Las Cañadas population and
state institutions. Through this organization, regional authorities “were able to control the

\(^{123}\) Ejidal Union United in Our Strength

\(^{124}\) Ejidal Union Land and Liberty

\(^{125}\) Ejidal Union Peasant Struggle

\(^{126}\) In the Lacandon area, four other political organizations were influential as well: the Independent Confederation
of Agricultural Workers and Indians (CIOAC), which was affiliated with the Communist Party, worked to achieve
land reform and organized independent unions of agricultural workers; the Emiliano Zapata Peasant Organization
(OCEZ) focused primarily on land reform and worked to prevent evictions of *ejidos* and assisted peasants to obtain
titles in contested lands (Collier, 1994: 69-70); the Independent Peasant Alliance Emiliano Zapata (ACIEZ); and the
Independent National Peasant Alliance Emiliano Zapata (ANCIEZ).
provision of services to the population, giving them final say over primary schooling, health
campaigns, the building of infrastructure, and the flow of subsidies.” (Leyva Solano, 2001:31).
Its role in the region worked to prevent peoples’ cooptation by the government and party
officials (Leyva Solano, 2002:69). The absence of political parties in the region further
contributed to the hegemony the organization exerted, converting Las Cañadas into “an
autonomous, unified region with its own boundaries, its own authorities, and its own forms of
government” (Leyva Solano, 2001:31).

4.3 The Armed Option

By the time the EZLN appeared as a new political actor in the Lacandon area in the early
1980s, communities had a well established social/political structure as well as a solid history of
grassroots organization in the region. The long-term work of the Church and the development of
glass roots organizing in Las Cañadas laid the foundation for the acceptance and expansion of
the Zapatista National Liberation Army. The EZLN was originally formed by 3 left-wing
militants who arrived in the region in 1983 and whose ideological and political constitution was
directly associated to an urban military organization known as the National Liberation Forces
(FNL). The FNL militants arrived in the Lacandon area with the explicit purpose of
promoting an armed struggle and organizing a guerrilla army critical of all levels of capitalist
relations and prepared to build a more equitable society. According to these activists, “the
triumph of the revolution would result in a “socialist republic” in which there would no longer be
“rich or poor” (Estrada Saavedra, 2005:532). The presence of the FNL activists in the jungle

127 For an analysis of the influence of urban guerrilla movements in Latin America see Castro (1999), Petras (1997)
and Wright (2001).
provided a new political outlook since it offered settlers an understanding of their local circumstances from a national perspective as well as the opportunity to seek solutions to local problems through the making of national demands.

The activists’ initial priority was to build membership and trust among the communities in the area. The recruitment of settlers initially took place on an individual basis and in great secrecy, first approaching catechists and peasant leaders who enjoyed authority and influence in their own grassroots organizations and communities (ibid. 533). These individuals were “politically the most conscious members of their communities, a situation that – it was thought – might make them more receptive to the ideas of the revolutionary left” (ibid.). As “peasant leaders negotiated their involvement with the EZLN” (ibid.), they “rapidly rose to positions of civil and military authority” (ibid.). While the Zapatistas primarily offered armed training, the tactics used to gain support from the communities were also of a social nature; they promoted health and literacy campaigns as well as projects such as “digging latrines, giving vaccinations, and teaching women to read” (Stephen, 2002: 113.). By 1986, however, the EZLN only consisted of twelve members (Harvey, 1998: 66).

By the late 1980s it was becoming clear to many that the power of peasant organizations to radically improve the economic situation in the area was limited. A context of neoliberal expansion and economic crisis helped strengthen this perception. Following the prescriptions of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Salinas administration radically reduced subsidies for the purchase and marketing of coffee. This strategy was meant to improve The Mexican Coffee Institute (INMECAFE) which was in debt by “US$90 million due to managerial inefficiencies and corruption” (Muñoz, 2006: 253). The reforms to the “coffee sector put small-time growers in a precarious situation that was worsened by the Mexican government’s decision
not to offset a severe drop in the world market price for coffee by increasing payments to producers, and the overvalued Mexican peso” (ibid.). Given these conditions, peasants active in peasant organizations and *ejido* unions “started to question the usefulness of their organizations as vehicles for achieving their…economic goals” (Estrada Saavedra, 2005:531). They soon realized that “they lacked the power to influence national agricultural policies, much less international commodity markets” (ibid.). In Chiapas, economic changes were accompanied by an increased militarization and state-sponsored repression of independent peasant movements. As prominent land-owning families, who were allied to the state government (for example, the Absalón Castellanos Dominguez family), made increasing use of official peasant organizations to defend their interests, the levels of rural violence intensified (Washbrook, 2005:436). It was in this context that many local leaders active in peasant organizations around issues of credit and production eventually moved over to the EZLN. Between 1988 and 1989 the number of armed men grew form 80 to 1,300 (Harvey, 1998: 66). In 1989, after the collapse of the coffee market, it is estimated that more than half of the communities affiliated with the UU began to participate secretly in the EZLN. By 1992 support for the EZLN had spread widely to include Las Cañadas of Ocosingo, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas (ibid.167).

**Declaration of War**

By the time the neoliberal government of President Salinas de Gortari announced its decision to privatize *ejido* lands in 1992, the level of politicization settlers had achieved was irreversible and the reaction to changes to Article 27 of the Mexican constitution was the EZLN’s declaration of war against the Mexican government on January 1, 1994. Organized demands for land became central in Chiapas in 1992 as the government of President Salinas de Gortari reformed Article 27 of the Mexican constitution to allow the privatization of *ejidos*, with
the objective of attracting private investment in agriculture. The reforms granted legal rights to *ejidatarios* “to purchase, sell, rent, or use as collateral the individual plots and communal lands that make up the *ejido*” (Harvey, 1998:187). The reaction against governmental changes to Article 27 was further influenced by the dioceses of San Cristóbal de Las Casas which, on January 1992, gathered different organizations to reflect on the reforms. The discussion concluded that “the *ejido* reform was part of the government’s general strategy in favor of private capital; that the spirit of the original law had been broken as the public interest was subordinated to individual interests; that the reconcentration of land in few hands was likely; and that the reform reflected the objectives of the proposed NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]” (Harvey, 1998b:189). In addition, peasants in the area feared that privatization would inevitably lead to the concentration of economic and political power by *caciques*128 (ibid.).

In general the new agrarian changes were not welcomed in any sector of the rural Chiapanecan society because in many cases land tenure had not been regularized. While the idea of *ejido* privatization was worrying for many peasant organizations, it was the end of land distribution which concerned them the most (Harvey, 1998b:187; Nash, 2001:81; Stephen & Pisa, 1998:127). This agrarian policy was expected to have a devastating impact on indigenous peoples in Chiapas. With the privatization of *ejido* lands, people would be losing more than just land, their power to negotiate and make political and economic decisions was also at stake.

128 *Caciquism* refers to indigenous leadership, usually composed of a wealthy oligarchy of Indian elites who are economically and politically linked to Mexico’s traditional party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Gossen, 1994:20).
4.4 Conclusion

This method of autonomous government was not simply invented by the EZLN, but rather it comes from several centuries of indigenous resistance and from the Zapatistas’ own experience. It is the self-governance of the communities. In other words, no one from outside comes to govern, but the peoples themselves decide, among themselves, who governs and how… (General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, June 2005)

In 2005 I came across a well known EZLN communiqué (above) which described in some detail some of the history of the Zapatista struggle. It caught my attention because it claimed that Zapatista autonomy was not only “indigenous” in nature but also several centuries old. From a historical perspective, it can certainly be stated that the struggle that unfolded regarding the establishment of de facto rebel autonomous municipalities and the implementation of the San Andrés Accords between 1994-2003, was not about maintaining “ancient indigenous” institutions (although framed in this way by EZLN leaders and supporters) as much as it was about maintaining (relatively recent) Mexican Revolutionary institutions in the face of neoliberal attempts to privatize lands and resources. The demand for Zapatista autonomy after 1994 reinforced the ejido as the main form of land holding, the community as the main site for social transformation, and the General Assembly as the main form of collective decision-making. Local notions of rule and government, while grounded on the agrarian law model, developed in conjunction with competing discourses, practices, and struggles, allowing “self-governing” subjects to emerge. What in the context of the Lacandon area was identified as “indigenous” by the EZLN’s communiqué is better understood as the product of very specific governmental interventions. The recent history and political developments in the Lacandon area reveals that governmental approaches, no matter how seemingly effective, are always subject to contestation
Chapter 5
Autonomy: An Ethnographic Perspective

During most of my early days in the field, Río Nuevo’s internal workings and socio-political organization remained inaccessible. Three factors contributed to this:

1) The difficulties of asking people openly and directly who the “authorities” of the community were and their concrete responsibilities in a context where, on the one hand, the internal politics of the EZLN remained clandestine and, on the other, where Zapatista supporters constantly felt threatened by military presence. 2) From my position as an observer, I was somewhat confident that I would eventually have some access to the socio-political structure of the Zapatista group, but information about the non-Zapatista group—with which I as an observer was prohibited from having direct contact and relations—would remain fragmented if not obscured. 3) The existence of a third “community” not far away but to which I did not have (everyday) physical access, complicated the picture even further. What was the relationship of this group to the other two “communities”?

It was during those days that I heard, for the first time, the sound of a horn being blown at one end of the community. “That is the sign that there will be a Zapatista general assembly very soon”, a Zapatista child—who was accompanying me at the Camp—said. A few minutes later, I heard the same sound but, this time, at the other end of the community. “That is for the priistas, they will have a junta too”, the child said. “And what about the other community, the one up

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129 General meeting
on the hill? Do they also have a separate junta?”, I asked the child. He innocently nodded.

Within the ejido of Río Nuevo, three almost autonomous communities had developed, each with a different set of rules, authorities, economy and politics. For many communities in the region, adhering to the stipulations of the Zapatista National Liberation Army had implied a constant reorganization of local social and political relations. Internal division had become common place throughout the conflict zone as communities and groups within communities declared themselves “autonomous” and/or affiliated to particular Zapatista autonomous municipalities. In 1996 and as a result of some of its members’ involvement with the Zapatista National Liberation Army, Río Nuevo underwent its first political and geographic division which gave rise to the building of a separate community: Tres Ríos. In 2002 Tres Ríos itself underwent further division as half of the community members abandoned the EZLN. This kind of social fragmentation (communities braking up into smaller and smaller communities each with their own socio-political organization and the power to act autonomously from the original entity) was essentially the workings of autonomy and self-determination in an environment of political and military polarization.
Typology of Division

In Chapter 1 I make reference to how community division of this kind was indeed part of a larger structural process in which disagreements became framed in antagonistic terms (pro-PRI vs. anti-PRI or pro-Zapatismo vs. anti-Zapatismo) encouraging in many cases a politics of expulsion, which had been used historically as a local tool to deal with dissent in other parts of Chiapas since the 1970s, particularly in the Central Highlands. As in other parts of Chiapas, in Las Cañadas, one of the principal issues dividing communities was support for the EZLN. Preexisting disagreements became in many cases re-defined around support for or opposition to the EZLN.

In the region of Las Cañadas, scholars have documented the ruptures and splits of regional organizations in the 1980s and early 1990s, mostly between agrarista organizations which centered their demands on land reform and redistribution and organizations that were productivist and focused their demands on issues such as access to credit and marketing of their products (de Vos 2002, Tello Diaz 1995). It is important to note, however, that unlike the divisions of 1994 onwards, previous conflicts and disagreements did not lead to the expulsion of community members or the building of new “communities” by dissenting members. The internal dynamics of rupture and division generated by the EZLN’s position regarding governmental assistance differed from place to place, but in the region of Las Cañadas division took (at least) four general forms. Marcos Estrada Saavedra’s (2007) typology of division provides a general picture of how division became institutionalized in the area, he describes four general scenarios:

1. There were communities in the area in which Zapatistas represented the majority and the non-Zapatista minority –commonly named “priistas” –survived expulsion and managed to coexist with Zapatistas. In this case, “priistas” were usually isolated from the social and political life of
the community including religious services, traditional parties, school, and the general assembly (through which the most important decisions regarding the community were made). In many cases members of the minority group were even prohibited from contact with their Zapatista relatives. In this case, the “priistas” did not represent a real opposition and were, therefore, subjected to the rules of the majority to the extent that, in many cases, they were not allowed to participate in government programs or projects that required the physical presence of government officials in the community (or area surrounding the community) or the building of infrastructure (Estrada Saavedra, 2007: 502-503).

2. There were other communities in the area in which neither Zapatistas nor “priistas” constituted the majority. In this case, both groups reconstructed their lives in parallel ways. Both groups had their own social and political activities as well as their own internal authorities. In this case, the “priista” group became a real social and political opposition with which the EZLN was forced to negotiate (ibid. 504). It is important to note, however, that although non-Zapatistas had relative control over their (collective) lives, they were unable to challenge the hegemony of the EZLN since they were ultimately located in a territory controlled by a Zapatista majority and, therefore, ruled by Zapatista law (ibid. 505).

3. The third category included communities in which Zapatistas constituted the minority. According to Estrada Saavedra, in this case Zapatistas tended to strategically isolate themselves from the social and political life of the community (ibid. 508).
4. The last category in Estrada Saavedra’s typology is represented by communities composed of at least three different factions: Zapatistas, non-Zapatistas, and neutrales\(^{130}\) (composed of individuals who did not participate with the EZLN but who did not accept government aid either). These communities tended to maintain a relatively peaceful coexistence and maintained some balance by the sharing of common spaces such as the church, the communal assembly, and the school (ibid. 514).

It is important to note that although Estrada Saavedra’s typology is useful for the understanding of the particular form that community division took in Las Cañadas, these categories were neither static nor mutually exclusive. They are meant to shed light on an ongoing process and in many cases communities experienced all of these phases at different points (ibid.). It is also important to highlight that the types of divisions that Estrada Saavedra was able to identify in the region are representative of the complex ways in which autonomy and self-determination were locally worked out. They were a local response to sudden larger social and political transformations. The ways in which autonomy was practiced within these communities clearly took different forms.

In this Chapter I would like to go a bit further and describe the complex and ambiguous circumstances that emerged in Tres Ríos during my fieldwork and that further complicate broad understandings of autonomy and self-determination. Generally the chapter aims to provide a glimpse into the form that autonomy and self-determination took in its daily expression. This chapter first provides a general description of the social, economic, and political structures that organized life within Tres Ríos and that gave shape to daily relations and interactions. I then

\(^{130}\) Neutral or impartial.
move on to describe in detail some of the dynamics and contradictions involved in the process of
decision making and provide insight into the daily strategies and motivations of people as they
tried to find their place in a complex political field. What the discussion below reveals is that the
conflict in Tres Ríos (and the conflict in Chiapas in general) does not have to be seen in terms of
one group acting against another, but about how local relations of power worked to pervade
people’s behavior and actions in such a way as to draw them apart, transforming them into
antagonistic forces. The role EZLN militants played in this process is central.

5.1 Tres Ríos: Reorganizing Life

Until around 1996 Río Nuevo’s inhabitants had managed to share a common solid,
economic, and political structure without the need of resorting to an open political or geographic
division. The call of the EZLN to its social bases to publicly declare Zapatista regions and
communities as “rebel” or “autonomous” led to a radical division between EZLN militants and
non-militants. By 1994 there were approximately 60 families within Río Nuevo who had had a
clandestine political and military involvement with the organization since the mid 1980s. After
the uprising, their affiliation and commitment to the EZLN became public. As the political and
military instability in the region intensified, most of the non-Zapatista families entered the EZLN
temporarily but since such a decision had been precipitated by the conditions of war, their
commitment did not last.

As Zapatista militants within Río Nuevo responded to the EZLN call for “rebel
autonomy”, they decided to clear a piece of land about two kilometres away to establish their
new community. Only 20 families stayed behind. Moving away would allow EZLN militants to
keep their military and political activity secret and adhere to the structural changes required by
the organization without interfering with the economic and social activities of the rest of the
ejido members. The new community could maintain certain judicial autonomy not only from the other members of the ejido but also from the EZLN itself, allowing community members the power to define and deal with their internal issues and concerns. Nevertheless, as a *base de apoyo*\(^{131}\) of the EZLN, the new group took on particular responsibilities (see below) which drastically restructured the ways in which the new community—formally named Tres Ríos—was going to function economically, politically and militarily.

**Economy and Division of Labor**

Contrary to the tradition of Río Nuevo which had private family farms, the new community decided to have a collective *milpa*, collective cattle holding and pastures, as well as a collective store. While families could simultaneously have private corn, pineapple, sugar cane, and coffee fields, they were strictly prohibited from establishing private stores. According to the testimony of community people, the preference for collective labor and ownership had more to do with the influence of religious beliefs than with political affiliation. Nevertheless, it was the families with an already established history of political involvement with the EZLN who had also been involved in informal collective practices at the previous location.

In Tres Ríos, collective labor and responsibilities structured people’s lives differently. While family work-relations and responsibilities varied from house to house and depended mostly on the number of members that composed a particular household, community work was more predictable. Men became responsible for the collective planting, care and harvesting of *maíz*\(^{132}\) as well the tending of cattle, the maintenance of pastures, the construction and

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\(^{131}\) Support base

\(^{132}\) Corn
maintenance of roads, and the management of the community store. By the year 2001 there were approximately 250 men between the ages of 14 and 50 responsible for these kinds of activities.133 Women on the other hand did not participate in any kind of permanent collective work.

Women’s collective labor was done occasionally and usually involved cooking for particular community celebrations. At times they participated in the collective planting and harvesting of vegetables, but this was not an obligation and so they did it sporadically. This kind of communal division of labor tended to give men (as a collectivity) more say over community affairs and kept women at a political disadvantage and depending more on personal relations rather than on structural arrangements.

Some people in the new community did not have legal rights to a piece of land. As avecindados,134 they were usually working their personal milpas on the land of relatives or close friends. In contrast to their situation in the previous location, however, having no legal rights to land did not pose a real threat to their livelihood and survival because people depended more on the collective milpa and collective work than on individual family farms. While the collective milpa guaranteed the subsistence of community people (as it provided enough corn for the whole year),135 the collective holding of cattle and the maintenance of a community store represented a communal investment and the main source of cash for the community as a whole. Cattle were mostly kept for sale. The collective store provided the community with basic necessities such as

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133 Community males formally became part of the collective work at the age of 14.

134 Community members that live and work in the ejido but that have no legal access to a piece of land are called avecindados (Stephen & Pisa, 1998: 151).

135 The private planting of pineapple, watermelon, sugar cane, and plantain were complementary and were also for subsistence.
salt, candles, rubber boots, etc. and the surpluses were used to provide small loans to community people in case of emergencies. Within a few years, every family in the community had made use of such loans (which had no interest and could be paid slowly) mostly to travel to city hospitals and pay for medicine. Besides this limited access to cash, the only other source of capital families within Tres Ríos had was the selling of their coffee. Since this was not a profitable activity each family was responsible for the tending of their private coffee fields and the selling of coffee beans. In cases of extreme financial need, community members often travelled to the nearby cities for temporary work.

**Community Organization**

The kind of socio-political organization which developed within Tres Ríos broke away from traditional political configurations. While traditionally an ejido was expected to have one executive committee, Tres Ríos named its own executive committee which worked independently from the executive committee of the other grouping. Although Tres Ríos was legally part of the ejido, it named its own Comisariado responsible for the solution of community problems related to communal work, agrarian and domestic conflicts, etc. A new structure of community authority developed. Besides ejidal authorities and religious representatives, people created a number of additional committees and commissions responsible for the economic, educational, health, and military aspects to accommodate the exigencies of the EZLN.

As a support base of the EZLN, members of the new community were assigned particular tasks and responsibilities. Education and health promoters were appointed by the community to cover the needs of the Zapatista population. Formal training was available at the Zapatista municipal center. Promotores de educación were mainly responsible for the impartment of primary education within the community. Health promoters were in charge of taking hygienic
measures to prevent the spread of diseases and looking after the health of community members. They were trained in diverse areas such as herbal and pharmaceutical medicine, chiropractic health, gynecology, dentistry, and midwifery. Although the participation of women in these areas was considerable, men’s participation was prominent. Within a few months, at least twenty community members were participating in these kinds of training and were therefore making regular trips to the Zapatista municipal center. Other members were elected as formal EZLN responsables (representatives) for the community, the region, and the municipality. They were the official intermediaries between the EZLN and the respective entity they represented (community, region, or municipality). It was through these representatives that the EZLN coordinated its activities. In addition, and since the new community was directly connected to the general command of the EZLN and nearby Zapatista communities through radio, permanent and temporary radio operators were also appointed and trained.

Within a few months, there were approximately 40 militiamen training in the use of firearms. While considered a military unit, this group of mostly young unmarried men lived and worked in Tres Ríos but its existence and training were hidden from the members of the older community. The community’s militiamen trained regularly and were prepared in case of military aggression. It was the community’s responsibility to provide the military equipment. In addition to supporting the milicianos, Tres Ríos was also responsible for providing food and equipment supplies for the insurgents (full-time guerrillas stationed permanently in the mountains).

As the political and military context of the time became aggravated, people did not wait long to build their Civil Camp for Peace—which had by then become an important part of the

136 Militiamen
political and geographic structure of many Zapatista communities—at one of the main entrances of the new community. Delegates responsible for the Camp were also appointed. Soon, Tres Ríos accepted the visits of primarily national observers.137

**People’s Participation and the Role of General Assemblies**

The inhabitants of Tres Ríos managed to create a sophisticated participatory structure; first through the creation of different committees and commissions and secondly through the use of the General Assemblies as the privileged space for conflict resolution and communal discussion. While according to *ejido* laws the General Assembly—considered the highest authority at the local level—had to be composed of all *ejido* members and be called on every month or so, Tres Ríos’ inhabitants resolved to have their own General Assemblies as frequently as necessary and independent from the other members of the *ejido*.

Three different kinds of general meetings developed within Tres Ríos. One was the men’s general meetings held regularly to discuss economic issues (such as how much money the collective store was making, what kinds of products the store needed, whether or not to sell cattle, etc.) and political issues (such as who should or should not hold relevant positions in the community, whether or not as well as how to celebrate certain important festivities, whether or not to allow people to travel to the city for seasonal or short-term employment, etc.). The second kind were those meetings held exclusively by women. These were not held regularly and usually had to do with the study of the bible, the collective planting of vegetables (an uncommon

137 Because of the geographic and military conditions of the community, it was mostly Mexican observers who were involved. Soldiers at the nearby military checkpoint used to, for a number of years, question observers. International observers, who usually travel with tourist visas, could not justify their presence in the region as the nearby roads did not lead to tourist locations.
activity), or the collective cooking for community celebrations. The third kind were the general assemblies held by both men and women, however, these did not happen frequently. They were often spaces in which women were informed about important decisions already made by men at their general meetings. The presence of different kinds of general assemblies did not necessarily translate into democratic practices as the most important economic and political decisions were always taken in the men’s assemblies. Moreover, it was literate, adult, married men who tended to control the discussions. At times, when adult men considered it appropriate they even asked young unmarried men to leave the assemblies and withholding secrets from them was a common procedure. While young unmarried men participated fully in communal labor, their participation in communal assemblies was considerably limited. Similarly, women were usually excluded from concrete economic and political decisions. These kinds of gender disparities were embedded, at least partly, in the belief that educating women or preparing them for political positions was not a good investment as they eventually left their houses, and many times even the community, once they married. It made more sense to educate men because as they married they brought their wives to their households and, therefore, were able to contribute to the community much more and for longer periods of time.

**Household Structure**

Within Tres Ríos, the structure of particular households tended to determine not only the amount of work its members did but also its members’ concrete political participation within the EZLN. The amount and kind of work men, women, and children did for the household did not necessarily depend solely on their age and/or gender. While generally it can be stated that work

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138 This does not necessarily mean, however, that women may have lacked collective power but that such power was often relegated to spheres other than the general assemblies.
in the field depended mostly on men, and the household work mostly on women, more often than not this division of labor was not followed strictly; however, it is important to stress that this was not obvious in the “public” sphere. The ways in which collective work was divided tended to obscure the complexities that characterized household relations. Evidently, if a household had more than one woman, the amount of work was smaller for each. The same can be said for the work in the field, if there were several men in a household, labor was most likely shared. Take for example the following cases:

Pedro’s case:

In my house my father, my two younger brothers and I were responsible for the family’s corn, coffee, and pineapple fields. My mother, older sister, and my sister in law were responsible for the household work—which included cleaning the house, cooking, washing clothes, carrying wood for the cooking fire, harvesting vegetables, etc. We usually ended our work by two o’ clock in the afternoon and had ample time for other activities. My brothers and I would play soccer in the afternoons and walk around the community trying to see the girls. My mother would take naps or talk to my aunts. My sister and sister-in-law would visit other relatives in the community. My younger brother and I had enough time to participate in military training several days a week. I also attended courses on natural medicine and my sister often travelled to the municipal center to cook when we had important activities.

Don Ruben’s case:

My fourteen year old son (Pablo) and I were for many years the only two men in a house full of 8 women, including my wife. I had seven daughters between the ages of five and twenty living with me. The work in the field was hard because, as the men, we had to make sure that our work provided for the entire family. Many times, my wife Camila and some of my older daughters had to accompany me to the corn and coffee fields even though this was not el costumbre.\textsuperscript{139} They learned to work the

\textsuperscript{139} Our custom.
milpa like men. The household work was easy because there were so many women. My two younger daughters had time to attend courses on natural medicine at the Zapatista centers.

Jaime and Petra’s case:

We had six children in our household: one girl and five boys. While Jaime worked in the field with our oldest son, who was only nine years old, I struggled to finish the household work because my only daughter, who was ten years old, had to take care of her younger brothers. At the time Jaime was a catechist and also a *miliciano*, but he took great responsibility in the household work too, that was in spite of the community’s belief that men should not do women’s work. Soon after the birth of our twin sons, Jaime had to abandon his military responsibilities. His participation as a catechist outside the community—in regional meetings and courses—also diminished considerably.

Although household composition greatly influenced the kind of political participation within the community and within the EZLN, the formal organization of Tres Ríos tended to give priority to the participation of men over women. Collective labor seemed to have given men more power and limited the ways in which women participated in the political and economic decisions of the community. Women’s main roles as wives and mothers excluded them from public life. This kind of disadvantage impelled women, in many cases, to maintain close relationships with household members and close relatives. The success of such relationships would guarantee their access to information about the politics of the community as well as their indirect influence (through their husbands and sons) on relevant economic or political issues. This strategy, however, while an option, did not represent a real participatory alternative for women.

Despite these internal differences, for approximately five years, Tres Ríos managed to consolidate itself into one of the most economically and politically stable Zapatista communities.
in the area. A year before I arrived in the community to do my fieldwork, however, the community had radically divided into two additional visible groups. Although the geography had been intact, social relations had been, once again, re-structured. The casa ejidal[^140] which for several years witnessed countless assemblies and discussions had become a lifeless place and two new separate spaces (children’s schools) had replaced its function. How and why Tres Ríos divided is described below. The role the EZLN played and the consequences such division brought for different community members are thoroughly contemplated.

5.2 Second Division: (Re)Structuring People’s Lives

From the day of my arrival at Tres Ríos (2002), I was intrigued by the political division that characterized the community: Zapatistas vs. “priistas”. Originally this had much to do with the nature of my research question and my interest in examining the ways in which such division affected people’s everyday lives. Nevertheless, it was Zapatista people’s attitudes towards the political divide which stimulated my curiosity even further. The day after my arrival at the Civil Camp for Peace, my father (who accompanied me in my fieldwork for a number of weeks) and I were visited by the two men in charge of informing observers of their responsibilities while in the community. They advised us to be cautious with the “other group” and not to give them any kind of information that would compromise their work as Zapatistas. They also made it clear that while the “other group” was not part of the EZLN they were not “the enemy” and were, therefore, still considered “brothers and sisters.” Within less than a week, however, the two men visited us again to clarify what they thought was a misunderstanding on our part. They stated that they were aware that my father and I were holding regular conversations with Rafael (a non-

[^140]: The communal house where general assemblies took place.
Zapatista) and that we should be clear that relationships between non-Zapatistas and observers were strictly prohibited. “This is for security reasons”, they assured us. I was surprised not only to find out how strict Zapatistas were about observers engaging in conversations with “priistas” but also to learn that Rafael was not a Zapatista. Each day we would walk to the Zapatista store and since Rafael’s house was nearby he would immediately approach us and start a conversation on some reading of the bible. Rafael, like my father, was a catechist and from my perspective his reading of the bible was as critical of the government as Zapatista catechists were. Ideologically, there did not seem to be a difference between this so called priista and the Zapatistas I had contact with.141

Soon after this incident, two other events revealed the impact the division was having on people’s everyday lives. During one of my daily walks to the Zapatista school, I found two groups of children playing. One group was hiding behind an old mud oven and the other group behind a bush. As the children behind the oven started to throw stones at the other children, they screamed “los vamos a matar priistas!”142 The other children responded by throwing stones. That same day, when I was returning to the camp, a group of six little girls started to follow me asking where I was from and how long I was going to stay at the camp. They were between the ages of four and eight. As we reached the camp, they sat around the hammock in the front yard and asked me to take the tape recorder out. They wanted to sing some songs for me to bring to

141 In the few short (15 minute) conversations we had with Rafael, he talked about the conditions of poverty of the communities in the forest area, the lack of medicine and transportation that characterized the area and was not shy in blaming the Mexican government for that. “God does not like this situation”, he said, “and as Christians we must not remain silent”.

142 “We are going to kill you priistas!”
my family back in Canada, which was something they had done in the past with other visiting
observers. I went inside the camp to get the tape recorder. As I returned, one of the little girls
(four years old) was crying loudly. I asked them what had happened and after deliberately
avoiding my questions for a few minutes, the oldest girl said that “some of the girls pulled [the
little girl’s] hair because she is a priista, she can’t be at the camp. We asked her to leave but she
refused so they pulled her hair.” The divisionist attitude of the parents had obviously filtered
down to the ways in which children interacted with each other in the community. 143

After this experience, I came across a communiqué written by Subcomandante Marcos on January 2003. In it, I
read a statement about Zapatista children which radically contrasted with the ways in which I had perceived
children’s experience in the community. In the communiqué, Subcomandante Marcos engages in a powerful
romanticization of children’s life in Zapatista communities:

It is the powerful with its war that treats them [children] like adults. We talk to them
[children]. We teach them that the word, together with love and dignity, is what makes us
human. We do not teach them to fight. Or yes, but to fight with the word. They learn. They
know that if we are in this, it is so that they don’t have to do the same…

we teach them that words do not kill, but that it is possible to kill the words and, with them,
human beings.

We teach them that there are as many words as colors… that there are different ways of
thinking and we should respect them all…

And we teach them to speak the truth…

We teach them to speak and also to listen…

Speaking and listening is how we know who we are, where we are from, and where our
footsteps are going. It is in this way how we learn about the other, his/her pace and his/her
world. It is speaking and listening words how we listen to life…(Subcomandante Marcos,
January 2003. My translation)
During the next three months many Zapatistas would visit the camp regularly. Many times they made reference to how “the other group” or the “priistas” preferred taking the government’s money rather than struggling for the well-being of the poor. Every time a reference was made to the “priistas” I would anxiously ask them to tell me how the division originated and each time people would give me partial answers stating simply that the “other group did not want to continue in the organization”. Whenever I asked why they would leave the organization after being part of it for more than ten years, they would deliberately change the subject or get up and leave stating simply that it was time to go home. It took me seven months to finally find out how this division originated. My findings reveal much about the complexities that surround community members’ relationship to the EZLN.

Community Politics

The collective secret

Problems started in early 2001 when somebody outside the community accidentally found out that Tres Ríos (according to various accounts from community members one of the most organized and committed Zapatista communities in the region at the time) was receiving money from the government. Anticipating that this person would immediately inform Zapatista municipal authorities (who at the time were also the military authorities from the region), the men from the community immediately called for a general meeting to discuss what they were going to do. Every married man in the community had been receiving PROCAMPO (Programa de Apoyos Directos al Campo Mexicano) for several years. This, however, had been kept a

\[144\] PROCAMPO (Program of Direct Support to the Mexican Countryside) was a program the Mexican government started in 1993 to support agricultural producers. Producers of corn, beans, wheat, rice and soy could have access to a subsidy of approximately $100 (US dollars) per hectare during the following 15 years. The purpose was to
secret (from other community members including some grown children and wives) in order to avoid being expelled from the EZLN which had strictly prohibited accepting any form of economic assistance from federal or state governments. Not knowing exactly what the consequences for the community would be, the men engaged in a heated discussion on whether the community as a whole should take responsibility or if it was wiser to designate ten people that would admit to receiving the money. The environment of confusion was further complicated by the frustration of some young (single) men who did not know about the money and who were feeling deeply betrayed by their fathers and (male) relatives.\footnote{It is worth noting that once the decision to accept government money was made by the adult men of Tres Ríos, they also agreed to keep it a secret from their young-unmarried sons and wives. The extent to which this decision was observed varied and depended on the kind of relationship each man held with his wife and sons. For example, don Juan had informed his wife and eldest son (who at the time was 19 years old) about the money, but the secret was kept from his two younger sons (who were 15 and 17 years old) and daughter (who was 22 years old). In the case of don Elias, only his married son knew. His wife and three teenage daughters did not know. Whether family members new about the government money, was a reflection of the power relations and hierarchies that existed within each household.}

After much discussion and since nobody wanted to volunteer to be the scapegoat, they resolved to deny the truth at whatever cost. A week later, however, one of the municipality’s military authorities showed up for a meeting catechists from the region were having in a nearby

alleviate the economic effects of having to compete with cheaper imported products from the United States (as part of the North American Free Trade Agreement) and having to adjust local prices to international ones. Peasants who registered in 1994 had access to the subsidy for the following 15 years but peasants who did not register in 1994 could not participate in the program. To be able to access the subsidy, the men of Tres Ríos had to fill out an application where they were asked to provide their names, addresses, date of birth, the size of the cultivated plots, the kind of cultivated product, the results of the harvest and whether or not they were for the market. Most men from the community got approximately $500 dollars a year (5,000 Mexican pesos) which were used for the necessities of the household such as medicine and clothing.
community and questioned the Tres Ríos’s catechists publicly. It became impossible to deny the truth when the person who had originally found out showed up and gave his testimony. When asked for how long the community had been receiving government money, they said for two years. They hoped that reducing the amount of years (from approximately five to two) would work to lessen their punishment whatever that would be. For a year Tres Ríos was restricted from the activities and decisions of the organization. But in 2002 Zapatista municipal authorities requested a list with the names of the men (and their families) that desired to continue in the organization and that were, therefore, willing to pay the price of their wrongdoing (to give the money they had collected over the years of receiving PROCAMPO to the Zapatista municipal authorities or do five months of hard labor at the municipal center146). Approximately half of the community men sent in their names.147 This was the beginning of a number of deep political,

146 Given the precarious economic condition, most men chose the latter. Work consisted mainly of helping in the building of houses and collecting large quantities of wood for the municipal centre.

147 As to the reasons why some community members decided to rejoin the EZLN while others did not is to date not clear. When asked what had influenced people’s decisions, people tended to give ideological answers such as “el dinero es más poderoso que el compromiso a una causa justa” (money is more powerful than commitment to a just cause) or “el dinero puede más que la conciencia” (money is stronger than political consciousness). Not having access to the perspectives of non-Zapatistas made it more difficult to find clear answers. It is possible, however, to identify at least three factors that may have influenced people’s decision: 1. There were families that needed the money more than others. Households with too many children and not many adults, for example, could not produce enough coffee for the market. Households with teenage and adult children had more labour force to care for the coffee fields and to harvest the coffee beans. This kind of unequal access to cash may have been an important factor in the decision to whether or not continue to receive government aid. 2. A second factor, has to do with ‘militancy’: some of the Zapatista families that had teenage and adult children had greater political participation within the EZLN. For example, in the case of don Juan’s household, his 3 sons (15, 17 and 19 years old) were militants and trained regularly. His daughter (22 years old) travelled to the Zapatista center often to cook at political activities. Constant exposure to the EZLN’s political discourse had the potential to generate stronger political commitment than households in which there was no participation. 3. The third factor has to do with proximity; throughout Tres
economic, and even geographic changes Tres Ríos was about to experience as a consequence. 

Field notes taken on January 2003 – one year after the Zapatista group re-joined the EZLN – describe the extent of such changes:

Being in the community feels like the political polarization has been part of people’s lives for years. In the morning Zapatista children gather at the humble house they like to call the “autonomous school”, where promotores de educación – more worried about teaching the political discourses they learned at the Zapatista municipal center than teaching the basics of writing and reading – await ready to start the class. At the other end of the community, “priista” children also gather at the small school where state-trained teachers paid by the government await them. After class the children stay to play in their respective school spaces, a pattern that has divided the children into two visible groups, even when they play outside school time. Next to each school a basketball court has been built; every afternoon young men gather in their respective play areas. Like the children, young men’s social life at other times of the day has been structured by the political divide. When they are not playing basketball, both groups play soccer at the only soccer field in the community, but it is common to find one group playing against the other.

The recent construction of a new store has further reinforced the community’s social and geographic division. Until the beginning of December most men used to gather at the Zapatista store to socialize. While the “priista” group openly resented the building of a Zapatista store because nobody was buying at the communal store (Zapatistas’ merchandize is cheaper), it was still common to see men of both groups around the Tres Estrellas store. In early December the ‘other group’ decided not to continue with the community store and announced that they would be building their own. Two weeks later the store was ready and since then both groups gather around their respective spaces. It is common, however, to still see “priista” women buying items at the Zapatista store (as things continue to be cheaper there) in spite of their

Ríos, clusters of 4-6 houses could be identified as either Zapatista or non-Zapatistas. Since most of the community members were related, proximity rather than kinship seemed to be an additional factor.

148 Three Stars, name of the store.
husbands’ resolution at the “priista” general meetings not to spend their money in the Zapatista store. Right after the closing down of the community store, the community cattle and cornfield were also divided.

Like the children and the men of the community, women have also been affected by the political divide. Most Zapatista women wash their clothes at one end of the river, while “priista” women wash at the other end. Nevertheless, women’s attitude seems to be less antagonistic. This has probably something to do with the fact that their daily activities have not been drastically restructured around place or (formal) politics after the division and they are, therefore, still able to keep regular contact with “priista” women. The recent construction of a Zapatista mud oven, however, may change this as Zapatista women will have to spend more time working together.

One of the few public spaces that has not been openly divided is the temple where most members of the community gather four times a week to share and reflect upon readings of the bible. While members of both groups attend equally, active participation is relegated to Zapatista catechists who have taken advantage of such space for purposes of conscientización política.149

For several months I remained confused about the reasons why people’s affiliation to the EZLN would restructure community life in such drastic ways, specially when the so called “priista” group was not in essence opposing the EZLN’s struggle; in fact many of the “priista” men from Tres Ríos had been the main protagonists in the 1994 uprising in the city of Margaritas. Why could people not continue to function as one “community”? When I asked Zapatista people why they could not continue to hold cattle together, for example, or why they had to divide the cornfield which they used to work collectively, they would simply state that the “other group wanted it that way”.

149 Political consciousness raising. It is important to note that the official discourse of the Catholic Church in Chiapas was one of reconciliation which called Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas within communities to put aside political differences and reflect on their potential to work together as brothers and sisters. This kind of discourse was used at the temple by Zapatista catechists but in the context of the community, putting aside differences required members to stop receiving money from the government and take on the Zapatista cause.
Much later I learned that in fact it had been the Zapatista men who had forcibly suggested these changes. Keeping people away from the activities and decisions of the organization as much as possible was one of the reasons. Yet, the social transformations previously described had more to do with the requirements of belonging to the EZLN. Unlike the “priista” group, Zapatista people engaged in different kinds of work and activities outside the community. Men travelled every month or two to the municipal centre to work as payment of their penalty; health and educational promoters took courses at the municipal center at least once every month; and women travelled to the municipal center to cook for several days whenever an activity was under way. Being a Zapatista basically meant being ready when called for specific tasks at the municipal center or any other Zapatista community. This took a great amount of time away from community responsibilities such as attending to the cattle or working on the (collective) cornfield. According to Zapatista accounts, measures taken in the community after the division were meant to prevent community conflict and arguments about the (equal) distribution of labor. In addition, at times Zapatista people were obliged to sell cattle in order to comply with economic obligations to the EZLN. As well, sometimes people were asked to donate corn to the municipal center. If cattle and corn were owned collectively (by Zapatistas and “priistas“ alike), the Zapatista group could not count on their use for purposes other than self-consumption when required. The same can be said about the community store. It can perhaps be argued that this kind of division was a collective strategy to avoid further and sustained conflict, thus allowing individuals to continue functioning in a context in which people’s interactions happened on a daily basis.¹⁵⁰

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¹⁵⁰ “Priista” community members were pushed to engage in different kinds of economic activities. Free from any
Hidden Agendas

The re-entrance of the Zapatista group to the EZLN implied great social and political changes within Tres Ríos. Nevertheless, the relationship this group kept with the EZLN afterward was still less than transparent. Internal decisions and solidarity took priority over EZLN regulations. Consider, for example, the case of the Zapatista collective store. By February 2003 the “priista” group was openly wondering how the Tres Estrellas store had prospered so quickly. While it was obvious that the presence of observers in the community had contributed to its prosperity considerably (due to the fact that observers were not allowed to buy at the “priista” store), there had not been many observers that year and, therefore, such prosperity could not be attributed exclusively to them. As a result, there were suspicions that the Zapatista group was receiving money from somebody else and investing it in the store. Given the Zapatista group’s capacity to keep collective secrets, the “other group” had not been able to confirm their suspicions.

At the end of July 2003 I was called by three members of the Zapatista group (the deacon and two catechists) to a private meeting. They told me that an important Zapatista activity was approaching (in the community of Oventic) and that different people and organizations from outside Chiapas were being invited. Aware that many times people from the community find political responsibility, they tended to invest their energy in seeking alternative ways of making cash. Some “priista” men sought temporary work in the nearby cities and the United States. By 2003 approximately 10 young unmarried men had left the community to travel as undocumented workers to the US.

151 In August 2003, the EZLN made public the creation of the Juntas de Buen Gobierno, this is the activity the community men were referring to.
out about Zapatista activities only days before the activities themselves, I asked whether they
knew the purpose. They said that the EZLN wanted to announce some changes within the
organization. While those changes were somewhat unclear at that moment, the only thing clear
for the Zapatista group was that _el mando_\(^1\) wanted to channel the economic assistance of
national and international non-governmental organizations to the municipal centers directly as
many communities in the region had been known to be receiving money from organizations and
individuals without reporting it to their respective municipal authorities (who were responsible
for distributing economic resources according to the needs of the different communities). This,
as stated by the men, was creating considerable inequalities among Zapatista communities and
the changes to be announced in early August were an attempt to prevent this from continuing.
The reason they called me that day was to warn me about the political and economic implications
for the community if the _mando_ was to find out that the observers had been helping to supply
their store. The money community men had received from observers was a substantial amount
and was, therefore, supposed to be reported to the municipal authorities who in turn would
evaluate if the money was to be used within Tres Ríos or if it was going to go somewhere else.
The men feared that if discovered they would have to close the store or sell some of their cattle
to pay the fine.

**Contradicting Agreements**

I would be reluctant to interpret Zapatista people’s behavior towards EZLN regulations as
simply a form of covert resistance to the EZLN’s politics; such an analysis would lack the kind
of depth that Ortner (1995) calls for in resistance studies regarding people’s (situated) capacity to

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\(^1\) While the expression is used to refer to those in political and military command, it makes more reference to the
military aspect.
critically assess their condition and act accordingly in particular situations. In his study of
everyday life Michael de Certeau (1984) described everyday practices as tactical in nature, that is
as calculated (but circumstantial) actions, maneuvers, and manipulations that take place “within
an immense framework of socioeconomic constraints and securities (ibid. 40-41). Tactics, for de
Certeau, take advantage of opportunities and “vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular
conjunctions open” (de Certeau, 1984: 37). In the context of Tres Ríos, people’s actions (tactics)
were meant to deal with the contradictions of a movement that required them to be not only
economically self-reliant if they were to survive in the face of a severe low-intensity war but also
firmly committed to the movement’s regulations if opposition to the hegemonic powers was to
remain a collective priority. While the EZLN’s decision to prohibit its social base from receiving
governmental money was backed up by a considerable amount of regional consultation, it is
important to understand that the decisions reached after consultation often got back to
community people in the form of commands (la orden); commands which at times directly
contradicted the views and politics of the men in the community. When this was the case, people
agreed (after much formal and informal discussion) to secretly disregard such commands while
publicly advocating them. When I asked people whether they thought that prohibiting Zapatistas
from receiving government money was a fair strategy, I received ambivalent answers. Some
community members stated that government money had the potential to be used wisely for the
benefit of the movement. Nevertheless, they also stated that EZLN restrictions regarding
government aid impeded the Mexican government to publicly claim to be solving Chiapas’
economic problems; giving the Zapatista struggle legitimacy in and beyond Chiapas. These kinds
of comments illustrate the contradictions of being aware of the EZLN’s larger political goals
while, at the same time, having to put up with the difficulties of local dynamics of power in a
context heightened by military repression and political instability.
5.3 Gender, Division, and Power

There is no question that belonging to the EZLN increased women’s political participation within and outside Tres Ríos. Participating in the different courses and activities at the Zapatista municipal centre gave women increased exposure to the EZLN official discourse which was highly critical of gender inequality and encouraged the emancipation of women in general and of indigenous women in particular. Nevertheless, the structures of Tres Ríos kept women in a position of subordination regarding the communal processes of decision making. As a consequence, the division and subsequent re-structuring of people’s social and spatial relations took on gendered directions.

Before discussing women’s relation to the political divide, it is important to make an analytical distinction between what Mercedes Olivera (2005) calls “gender condition” and “gender situation”. For Olivera “gender condition” refers to “the role of women both in their communities and society as a whole” (Olivera, 2005:609) while “gender situation” refers to the “particular forms in which women live” their lives (ibid.). While “gender condition” points to the structural position of women within a particular context, the notion of “gender situation” opens the discussion to include some of the ways in which women may navigate differently the

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153 Soon after the uprising the EZLN made public the Zapatista Women’s Revolutionary Law which, among other declarations, declared women’s right to participate in communal decision-making and the right to occupy political and military positions of leadership within the EZLN. The participation of women in the public sphere (mainly Zapatista public meetings and activities) has since then been prominent. According to the EZLN women constitute about one-third of the combatants and half of the support base of the EZLN (Kampwirth, 2002: 84). While women’s presence and increased participation does not in itself guarantee gender equality in the day to day lives of Zapatistas, some authors argue that it has helped create a “cultural climate which allows the denaturalization of women’s inequality and the questioning of existing social and political behaviour” (Wener Brand, 1992:2 as cited by Hernandez Castillo, 2002:390).
structures of power within which they operate.\textsuperscript{154} These analytical approaches are not by any means mutually exclusive, but Olivera states that “a positive correlation does not always exist between them” (ibid.).\textsuperscript{155} Thus far, this chapter has provided a description of some of the structural arrangements which kept women in conditions of disadvantage regarding their participation in political and economic decisions in Tres Ríos. In other words my analysis thus far has favored a “gender condition” analysis. The discussion that follows, however, is framed by the “gender situation” perspective which, like de Certeau’s (1984) analysis, opens the possibility of looking at women’s daily and varied tactics within particular economic and political constraints.

In the context of Tres Ríos, it would be misleading to conclude that for adult men the decision to re-join the EZLN was a more or less a straightforward decision. While that may have been the case in the formal general meetings, it is important to stress that in the context of their households there was a constant discussion of the advantages and disadvantages either decision would carry with it. Such discussions were usually carried out to the coffee fields when men and


\textsuperscript{155} To illustrate, Olivera makes reference to how in Chiapas despite the fact that “many indigenous women currently earn their own income through wage labour or by selling handicrafts” (ibid.), they remain in a position of subordination “not just because the income of their partners is insufficient but also because maintenance/functioning of the family is considered their responsibility.” (ibid.). Indigenous women, therefore, experience a double dependency: “already subordinate to the domestic sphere, women are also subordinate in the public domain, by the market relations in which they enter” (ibid.). Nevertheless, according to Olivera, this new experience outside the home also provides skills and a platform that may serve as a base in the struggle to change their subordinate position.
their families went to work on them. While it is clear that the final decision was in men’s hands, they had to critically assess the impact of disregarding young sons and wives’ opinions before making any decisions. The fact that sons and wives’ opinions were always intimately tied to the contact and relationships they kept with other members of the community, complicates the picture even further. Whatever role these dynamics played, the community was radically divided in half and even a year after the formal division family relations were still trying to accommodate to their decision. This, however, did not prevent Zapatista men (as a collectivity) from trying to impose the political division on women and the rest of the community.

Given that in Tres Ríos political affiliation was determined by household (if the household head was Zapatista, so was the rest of the family sharing the same space), many women had to face adjusting to their husbands’ or fathers’ political decision or, alternatively, moving out of the house and in with other relatives or building their own. Most women opted for the former. The section below describes two exceptions; that is, two cases in which women resisted political impositions. These women’s tactics regarding the political divide differed considerably and were shaped by their particular circumstances and background.

**Family Politics, Gendered Politics**

My first days in the community were characterized by my regular visits to the house of a single adult woman who, from the second day of my arrival, had invited me to visit her house whenever I wished. Her status as a catechist gave her relative power; it at least allowed her to speak up at the temple as well as have direct contact with “outsiders”, particularly Church representatives who visited the community several times a year and other catechists from the region. Estela was one of the leading “intellectuals” among community women. Taking courses in the San Cristóbal Diocese and her visits to the city had allowed her to have access to
discourses circulating “outside” the conflict zone among church leaders, NGO workers, national and international observers, and human rights activists. The courses she attended aimed to prepare her in issues related to human, indigenous, and women’s rights as well as to inform her about governmental policies that affected indigenous communities. The aim was that Estela, serving as an intermediary between the diocese and community women, would pass the information on to community women, a task many times she failed to do, not necessarily because she did not understand the issues herself but because she had great difficulty making the information intelligible to community women, most of whom were illiterate. Estela’s experience allowed her to more easily approach observers than other women from the community. Furthermore, it had not taken her long to realize how a small gesture such as inviting observers to her home could lead to other benefits since observers would often leave her valuable goods before their return to the city as a sign of gratitude.

During most of my visits Estela was busy making mud bricks to build her own house.\textsuperscript{156} When I asked why she was building another house, she said that her relationship with her brother (with whom she was living at the time) was not good, but when I asked for details she simply replied that he was a “priista” and she was not. Estela’s house was surrounded by four houses all of which belonged to close Zapatista relatives. At the time of the division her household was a daily battlefield. Her brother had refused to re-enter the organization and, as such, had defied his (male) relatives’ attempts at enforcing their political choice on him, imposing, in the process, his own political decision on his mother, two sisters (including Estela), and his wife, Camila. Given

\textsuperscript{156} While mud brick houses are not common in the area, Estella had received written information on how to build a mud house from some people working with the diocese, they had also offered her technical assistance to finish the house.
that the EZLN had asked for the names of the men and their families who wanted to re-join the organization, the women had to either submit to his decision or move out of the house. Had Estela’s father been alive things would have been different as he was known for his unconditional commitment to the EZLN.

For several months the women in Estela’s household struggled to change her brother’s mind. Unable to convince her brother to join the EZLN, Estela decided to go to the Zapatista municipal center herself and explain her situation to the municipal authorities. A few weeks later Estela, her mother and her sister were officially recognized as Zapatistas. Her Zapatista male relatives soon built them a separate house. Estela’s sister-in-law, Camila, however, had to accommodate her husband’s decision which considerably limited her relationship with the women around her. This also isolated the couple (and their two little children) from the social and political activities of the rest of the family. Estela’s politico-religious experience outside the community gave her the confidence to openly challenge her brother’s position and resist Tres Ríos’ internal imposition by making use of official arrangements (approaching the municipal authorities). She was able to challenge her brother’s position and even defy to a certain extent the political structure within Tres Ríos. The support of her older brother who was the deacon – the main religious representative in the community and region – added to Estela’s privileged position.

While Estela’s was the only case of women publicly standing up for their political views, I should make clear that there were other cases in which women resorted to other, albeit more informal and less-obvious, means to resist the political impositions of husbands, fathers, and brothers (as in the case of Estela). Take, for example, the case of Maribel. Maribel was married and had two small children. While all of Maribel’s relatives decided to rejoin the organization,
her husband (and his relatives) did not. For a few months Maribel remained a “priista”, but later decided to leave her husband and move back with her parents, thus becoming a Zapatista member. It was not only the pressure from Maribel’s relatives to move back that influenced her decision, but also the fact that the relationship with her husband was characterized by domestic abuse. While Maribel’s relatives knew about her husband’s verbal and physical abuse prior to the division, they had not interfered in their relationship. In the context of political division, however, Maribel’s decision to leave her “priista” husband was highly supported by her Zapatista relatives.

Estela’s and Maribel’s cases exemplify some of the ways in which the community’s relationship with the EZLN (clearly a gendered one) affected women’s lives. Within the Zapatista group, the women who decided to stand by their husbands’ political decision but whose relatives were known to be “priistas” were openly distrusted. Emphasis was made in the men’s general meetings to withhold information from their wives if they were known to have “priista” parents. The fact that there were men in similar situations was bluntly disregarded.

5.4 Imposing Structures

Having to forcefully adjust to the new conditions in Tres Ríos was not only imposed on community women and “priistas”; the divisionist atmosphere also involved visiting observers. During the time I stayed in Tres Ríos I was able to witness the strong ties and long-term relationships various national observers had developed with various community members. Some observers had become godparents of community children and served as witnesses in community marriages. While most of these relationships began years before the community divided, the division within Tres Ríos came to complicate these relationships. In one particular occasion, for example, three observers from Mexico City, who had previously been in Tres Ríos on three
different occasions prior to the division, visited the community. While they had a prior understanding of the political situation in Tres Ríos, the extent of the political and social changes people were facing took them by surprise. As soon as they arrived at Tres Ríos, the Zapatista authorities told them that as part of the new security guidelines, they were prohibited from visiting their “priista” friends. The observers listened carefully and did not question the instructions. Later, however, as they tried to make sense of the instructions among themselves, they described the conditions the authorities had imposed as somewhat extremist. A few days later, as the observers responded happily to a meal invitation from one of the “priista” families, the Zapatistas responsible for the Civil Camp became openly upset. The observers were immediately asked to either follow the regulations strictly or leave the community the next morning. Although the authorities’ warning angered the observers, they decided after a long discussion to stay in the community given that they had come to Tres Ríos not as individuals but as representatives of their neighborhood’s church. People who had previously come as observers and were faced with a similar situation, found themselves visiting Tres Ríos not as observers but as friends of particular families. In such cases, they usually limited their visits to “priista” families. In the cases in which they decided to also visit Zapatistas, they were “distrusted” (by Zapatistas) but were not, however, asked to leave the community.

During the months I stayed in Tres Ríos, it became obvious that the Civil Camp for Peace was not an “autonomous” space for conflict resolution and certainly not a space in which “civil society” could take part in such resolution (as publicly claimed by EZLN leaders and the NGOs involved). During the time Tres Ríos was out of the EZLN the Camp did not function. After the division, it became the possession of the Zapatista group and as such observers were expected to be there to legitimize the group’s political position. Observers who visited the community after the political division had no problems adjusting to the new rules but, as in the previous case,
those who had been in Tres Ríos before the division found the extremist position of Zapatista authorities problematic.

5.5 Conclusion

The 2002 political division in Tres Ríos and the structural changes that followed meant a rethinking of political loyalties for all involved. For Zapatista men it meant a radical redrawing of labor and social relations in favor of EZLN stipulations. For “priistas” being outside the EZLN meant (in theory) that they could decide to either follow Zapatista law or constitutional law. The power the EZLN enjoyed in an area (not only very far away from constitutional offices –the city –but also) reclaimed as “autonomous” (added to people’s awareness that they could not count on the federal or state government to solve their economic or political problems) forced “priistas” to follow Zapatista law\textsuperscript{157} and adhere to the decisions of the Zapatista group. For most Zapatista women the division meant adhering to their husbands’ and fathers’ political decision with little room for negotiation.\textsuperscript{158} For observers and visitors, it meant obedience to Zapatista rules or the revalorization of old friendships. Overall, developments in Tres Ríos reveal that men’s tactics (de Certeau 1984) were grounded on a sense of autonomy/self-determination they

\textsuperscript{157}‘Priistas’ of Tres Ríos (and in Zapatista autonomous regions) were obliged, for example, to follow EZLN regulations concerning the conservation of natural resources such as limitation to fish in certain rivers, prohibition to cut trees for sale and hunt certain species.

\textsuperscript{158}Given the overall gendered economic and political arrangements in Tres Ríos, it is possible to conclude that ‘priista’ women probably faced similar limitations.
had historically developed and were unwilling to put aside. They also reveal that tactics, like autonomy/self-determination, were unmistakably gendered.\textsuperscript{159}

Drawing definite conclusions about autonomy/self-determination from the concrete experience of Tres Ríos is challenging because collectively held norms within the community were constantly formed and transformed not only in relation to external forces and pressures but also to internal challenges to everyday configurations of power. Given this reality, and contra the requirements of legalistic stipulations, any conclusions about autonomy/self-determination would have to be tentative. What is clear, however, is that the shape autonomic processes take at the local level is never static as they are dependent on constant-everyday (re)negotiations. In Tres Ríos renegotiation took the formal/visible form of community assemblies in which community men gathered at least four times a week to discuss social and political concerns. Renegotiation, however, also had its informal side. Decisions made at the general assembly were

\textsuperscript{159} Hernandez Castillo & Stephen (1999) discuss the gendered aspect of autonomy within the Zapatista struggle for indigenous rights. They point out that while many Mixtec, Otomi, Zapoteca, Nahua, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Tojolabal and Chol women actively participated in the process of formulating the San Andrés Accords, the actual signed document was not very specific about women’s rights; they omitted their demands concerning the democratization of the home and sexual violence. In the original proposals for the San Andrés Accord, organized women extended the definition of the concept of autonomy to include the notion of physical autonomy which addressed women’s “right to make decisions about their own bodies and the right to a life without violence” (as well as economic autonomy which included women’s right to have access to and control over the means of production) (Hernández Castillo & Stephen, 1999: 51). These particular demands were embedded in a context of marked gender inequality within and outside indigenous communities. Voicing such demands created internal tension between the indigenous male and female participants in the process of negotiating the Accords and reminded all participants that “indigenous peoples [were] not automatically democratic, as some indigenous leaders claimed” (ibid.). Women’s position problematized the Accords’ definition of autonomy and highlighted the fact that however autonomy was to be understood it had a gender component. For further discussion see also Hernandez Castillo (2002).
influenced by informal/everyday discussions and the relations men held with family members, close relatives and friends.

Despite intra-community division and fragmentation, the EZLN’s official demand for indigenous autonomy and self-determination between 1994-2003 gained substantial national and international legitimacy, a legitimacy largely supported by academic writing. In Chiapas, the discussion about autonomy and self-determination revolved mainly around the implementation of the San Andrés Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. Framed by a discourse of rights, the literature failed to capture the complexity of autonomy as a lived process; it addressed mainly regional and historical processes (Burguete Cal y Mayor 1998, 1999, 2002, ; Hernandez Cruz 1999; Mattiace et all 2002; Stephen 1997a, 1997b) and emphasized the development of the indigenous movement in Chiapas and the role of the EZLN in the public struggle for self-determination (Gomez Nunez 1999; Mattiace 1997; Ruiz Hernández & Burguete Cal y Mayor 1998; Ruiz Hernández 1999). It centered around a discussion regarding the relationship between autonomy and the nation-state (Diaz-Polanco 1997; Diaz-Polanco & Sanchez 1999; Esteva 2001; Gómez Rivera 1999; Hernandez Navarro 1999b; López Bárcenas 1999; Stavenhagen 1999; Stephen 1997a, 1997b, 1999a) advocating explicitly the legitimacy of the San Andrés Accords as well as their implementation as requisite to addressing the material and political marginalization of indigenous groups. This analysis tended to privilege autonomy as a legal and/or social institution, paying little attention to self-determination in its everyday form.\(^{160}\) The form

autonomy and self-determination were going to assume in particular historico-political contexts and the predicaments they were going to generate was still a question of ethnographic research.

Scholars working on issues of individual and collective rights outside the context of Chiapas have demonstrated that a discourse of human rights has in many instances worked to “mask power relations and stifle the possibility of engaging in critique” (Evans, 2005:1068, Denike 2008, Elias 2008, Corntassel 2008, Pieterse 2007, Shor 2008). Victories at the level of the constitution, while having significant transformative potential, do not guarantee just transformations at the level of the everyday social relations ( Stocks 2005). I agree with Sarah Bradshaw (2006) when she states that a focus on rights works to promote “a static rather than dynamic understanding of any situation, in that a set of claims are made rather than a set of diverse and evolving relations analyzed and challenged.” ( Bradshaw, 2006: 1338). Whereas international human rights law imagines subjects as abstract individuals, actual human beings live in complex circumstances with “ties and obligations to kin and neighbors” ( Speed, 2000: 902) and in places where structural inequalities “grant some people more power and authority than others.” (ibid.). An ethnographic perspective, such as the one provided in this chapter, works to complicate legalistic approaches to self-determination/self-government. People’s (everyday) pervasive uses and manipulations of imposed knowledge and rules ( de Certeau 1984) make self-determination a process imbued with internal contradictions and discontinuities no matter how uniform and consistent it may appear.

Chapter 6
Warfare, Discourse and Representation

During one of my daily visits to Estela’s house, I found her angry at two of her many sobrinos, Pablo and Jaime. They were 18 and 20 years old respectively. Even though they were very respectful towards Estela, they continuously disregarded her insistence in speaking Tojolabal, their indigenous language, at all times. They often said they felt silly speaking Tojolabal to their brothers, sisters and members of the community who communicated better in Spanish. In Tres Ríos Tojolabal was mostly spoken to the elders of the community whose Spanish tended to be minimal. Even when the parents spoke Tojolabal, children often responded in Spanish. I was curious to know why Estela was so forceful about maintaining the Tojolabal language when it was the Spanish language which allowed young people such as Pablo and Jaime to find work in the nearby cities, to communicate with other Zapatistas (whose first language was Tzeltal or Tzotzil) at meetings at the Zapatista center, to communicate with visiting observers, and to have access to governmental discourses which were mostly disseminated in Spanish.

“I have no hope on these boys, you know”, Estela stated to me. “That is why I focus on my younger nephews and nieces. Nelly who is only seven years old and Samuel who is nine speak better Tojolabal than these lazy boys” (pointing to Pablo and Jaime). Her angry voice embarrassed the young men who humbly agreed with her. “But why is it so important that they speak Tojolabal”, I further inquired almost afraid that she would react aggressively with me too.

162 Nephews
“What kind of question is this Irma? I thought you understood our struggle!”, she loudly stated. I was not sure if she got angrier because I seemed to be questioning her authority in front of the young men or because the answer to the question seemed too obvious to be answered. In any case, she took the opportunity, despite her irritation, to give a speech to the young men:

To keep our language is to keep our cause. We are indigenous and we struggle for our rights. We have been abused for over 500 years and we are struggling to force the government to respect our customs and language. When we lose our customs and our language, we loose a part of ourselves…

The young men listened respectfully and nodded every two or three sentences in a sign of agreement.

It was obvious that Estela had assimilated the Indianist discourse so prevalent outside of Tres Ríos. It seemed contradictory to Estela to be fighting for indigenous rights, including the right to maintain indigenous languages, and not wanting to speak their language in the everyday context of the community. Generally, the Indianist discourse was most prevalent among academics, human rights activists, EZLN’s leaders, and community representatives who, like Estela, moved with relative ease in and out of the conflict zone. These young men, like most

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163 EZLN demands for the legal recognition of indigenous autonomy and self-determination introduced a new generation of regional and local leaders to the language and discourse of Indian rights (Mattiace, 2003:21). As a result an interesting discursive divide has arisen, Shannon Mattiace (2003) describes it thus:

Leaders at the national level in Mexico tend to use ethnic frames more explicitly, while local leaders with more frequent and intensive ties to their home communities tend to use them less -focusing instead on older themes such as land reform, the marketing of goods, and access to credit. At the national level, Indian rights discourse is couched in the language of international law -specifically Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization…Indian leaders who spend the bulk of their time outside their home
people in Tres Ríos, however, were unable to relate. Their lives did not revolve around articulating an indigenous identity, but instead around issues of “survival” in a context where militarization and war were part of their daily discursive and material existence. Particular ideas and images of war defined many of their daily activities as well as their interaction with outsiders. In Tres Ríos, circulating ideas and images of war worked to legitimize the internal political division that characterized the community as well as Zapatista people’s continued commitment to the EZLN. This is why, in the context of the community, it was possible to observe a discursive divide. The priistas’ increasing disengagement from the activities and discourses of the EZLN generated a certain indifference towards the political conflict in Chiapas. Whereas Zapatistas felt that they constantly had to be (politically and militarily) “ready”, “priistas” in Tres Ríos felt that “things [were] not getting anywhere”. A discourse of war, analyzed below, heavily characterized Zapatista people’s everyday engagements, commitments, and interactions.

I do not wish to imply that EZLN militants adopted the indigenous discourse uncritically and only for strategic purposes. The process is much more complicated. For example, Shannon Speed (2002), referring to the case of the community of Nicolas Ruiz, makes the observation that in the process of mobilizing globalized discourses to their own ends, community members “also reinterpreted their history and their practices in ways that altered their own understanding of their community and their place in the world.” (Speed, 2002: 222, my emphasis).
6.1 Discourse of War

Talking about war in the context of Chiapas is different from talking about war in neighboring countries like Guatemala and El Salvador. Unlike these countries, Chiapas did not experience *massive* deaths, persecution and destruction.\(^{164}\) In comparison, one can state that the level of public military violence and aggression in Chiapas was considerably low. This is not to imply that massive militarization and continuous surveillance in the region did not have a profound impact on people’s livelihoods and lives. I consider, however, that the situation of Chiapas, and certainly of Tres Ríos, can be best described in terms of a discourse of war. \(^{165}\)

While in Chiapas open military attacks and armed confrontations were sporadic, military harassment and occupation were not. A heavy military presence and tight military surveillance made of the possibility of an armed conflict a constant and palpable preoccupation, not only for non-governmental organizations and international observers reporting human rights violations, but also for Zapatista militants and supporters in their everyday lives. The sense of urgency that

\(^{164}\) Over the course of Guatemala’s 36-year civil conflict, for example, more than 200,000 civilians died (Doyle, 2008: 3). In the case of El Salvador it is estimated that one out of every 100 Salvadorans died or disappeared. The civil war left approximately 80,000 people dead and 7,000 disappeared (Stephen, 1995: 808). While the number of deaths in Chiapas as a result of the armed conflict is unknown, reports often talk about approximately 1,000 deaths during the 12 days of war in 1994 and 45 deaths during the Acteal massacre in 1997.

\(^{165}\) I am borrowing Foucault’s notion of discourse which encompasses not only particular ways of talking and thinking about particular issues at particular historical moments, but also the *practical* field in which such discourses are deployed (Foucault, 1991b: 61). According to Foucault, discourse governs the ways in which “a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about” (Hall, 2001:72), it “limits and forms the sayable” (Foucault, 1991b: 59). Most importantly, however, is the fact that discourse also influences the ways in which “ideas are put into practices and used to regulate” people’s conduct (Hall, 2001:72). For a thorough analysis of the Foucauldian concept of discourse see Bührmann & Diaz-Bone *et all* (2007), Diaz-Bone and Bührmann *et all* (2007), Escobar (1985), Hall (2001), Harald Sande (2008), and McHoul (1997).
often accompanied public demands (made by EZLN leaders, activists, and academics) to the
Mexican government to comply with the San Andrés Accords was underpinned by the fear of
war.\textsuperscript{166}

In the context of Tres Ríos, this generalized anxiety was embedded not in the actuality of
armed confrontation but in somewhat institutionalized talk around war. It is important to note
that a discursive perspective does not make the subject of war and violence less relevant.\textsuperscript{167}
While a purely ethnographic approach to war has “proved able to grasp the complexities of local
constructions of alliances, enmities, and power previously reduced to a binary scheme of
oppressor and oppressed” (Lofving, 2005:79), it poses particular challenges. The constant rumors

\textsuperscript{166} Such fears were rightly founded not only on the visible militarization of the estate and the reluctance of the
Mexican government to negotiate but also on the recent experience of war and genocide in neighbouring Guatemala
and El Salvador which left hundreds of thousands dead, tortured, and disappeared.

\textsuperscript{167} As a subject of ethnographic interest, war is relatively new. Paul Richards (2005b) asserts that the idea of
carrying out fieldwork within war driven zones and writing ethnographies of war during the Cold War period was
“practically unthinkable” (Richards, 2005b: 1-2). After the Cold War (1989), the absence of the East vs. West
paradigm to explain local wars and violent conflicts, forced scholars and public intellectuals to find alternative
explanations and, thus, debate returned to the basics of trying to define what war was. The emergent anthropology of
war pays particular attention to the empirical and experiential dimension of war and violence arguing that “the lives
of those who suffer under violence or are engaged in warefare are not defined exclusively in global political,
economic, social, or military terms but also in the small, often creative, acts of the everyday” (Nordstrom & Robben,
1995b:4). Antonius Robben and Carolyn Nordstrom (1995a) forcefully argue that such an approach works to turn
academic attention away “from a singular focus on the devastating consequences of violence” and redirects it
towards a “more inclusive approach to conflict and survival” (ibid.). For ethnographic analysis on warfare see Assal
Guatemala, and Nordstrom (2005) on Mozambique. Ethnographic analyses that deal specifically with the
2008), and fears (Green 1994), that often surround contexts of violence and war, make warfare not only difficult to research, ethnographically, but also subject to a number of ethical and methodological concerns (Avruch 2001, Bourgois 1990 and 2001, Hume 2007, Kovats-Bernat 2002, Lofving 2005, Mahmood 2001, Scheper-Hughes 1995). Lying, misinformation and direct silence make the “truth” particularly contested (Lofving, 2005:89). A discursive perspective on war while grounded in an ethnographic approach, does not ask whether claims of violence and terror are true or false. What is most relevant is how a generalized preoccupation with war structures local practices and collective behaviors. In the particular case of Tres Ríos, war (as a kind of local discursive formation) structured not only daily community practices but also the behaviors and expectations of outsiders. Below I describe some of the ways in which the discourse of war was reproduced by both observers in their everyday life at the civil camp for peace and by community members in and outside Tres Ríos.

**War in Tres Ríos**

In analyzing warfare in Mozambique, Carolyn Nordstrom (1995) makes the obvious, but important, point that “each person’s experience of war is unique, and [that] the characteristics of the war –the form the conflict takes –varies from village to village, district to province” (Nordstrom, 1995:132). In Chiapas militarization took place mostly in rural Zapatista areas as

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168 In a recent article Carolyn Nordstrom (2008) argues that local everyday experiences of war are grounded in “larger constellations of considerations: military decisions, rebel retaliations, government programs both altruistic and corrupt, social services, non-governmental organizations, networks of family and friends, profiteers, foreign interventions, natural and human disasters” (Nordstrom, 2008:73). The difficulty that academics interested in ethnographies of war confront is that such realities are not transparent and that “those who benefit from exploiting them work hard to render these process invisible”(ibid.) . Philippe Bourgois (2005) talks about this invisibility in the context of the Holocaust and Lesley Gill (2008) on the case of paramilitary groups in Colombia.
opposed to important urban centers and cities. For the inhabitants of Tres Ríos, war was, among other aspects, about daily helicopters surveilling the community, military checkpoints and barracks surrounding the area, and visiting observers serving as “protectors” and spokespeople of the Zapatistas’ collective “suffering” and struggle. Even though there had not been military confrontations between the EZLN and the Mexican army since the uprising nor direct military violence against the civil population since 1995 in the area, Zapatista people often took concrete everyday measures in the event of military aggression, “we have to be prepared”, they often said. In this spirit, community people had, for example, designated particular places outside the community area for hiding in case of military invasion. During the first few years after the uprising such places (which were often naturally hidden or built in caves that could provide shelter) were equipped with food (e.g. coffee, beans, corn and tostadas\textsuperscript{169}), firewood, and blankets. As time passed and as the possibilities of military invasion decreased, however, people stopped supplying these places.

The antagonistic relationship Zapatistas held with “priistas” within Tres Ríos was also justified in terms of war. During Zapatista celebrations –which mostly took place at the Zapatista school –Zapatistas appointed four or five men to “safeguard” such celebrations. These men would stand at strategic places around the school and make sure that no “priistas” would come near the celebrations. When in 2003 the Zapatista group, for example, celebrated Mother’s day, I asked one of the EZLN representatives why they needed to guard the school. He stated that it was for “security” reasons. He explained that during this particular event, the militiamen were going to march in full Zapatista uniforms in the school’s backyard and that their identities

\textsuperscript{169} A special kind of toasted cornbread or tortillas that can last up to a month.
needed to be hidden from “priistas”. He also stated that the EZLN representatives were going to give an important speech intended for Zapatistas only. My personal impression was that the “safety” measures, in this case, were somewhat exaggerated. “Priistas” in Tres Ríos knew about the existence of the militia group and the supposed speech was rather general—it re-stated the Zapatista cause and urged people to continue their struggle despite the government’s continued attempts to debilitate the organization.

While, as I have stated, war was a more or less permanent preoccupation, there were moments when such feelings were more prominent than others. The anniversary of the uprising (January 1st), for example, was often one of such moments. As the date approached talks about possible military attacks tended to become prominent and the atmosphere of uncertainty as well as speculations about another rebellion increased considerably. January 1st, 2003 was no exception. About a week before the 9th anniversary of the uprising, a general assembly was called at the Zapatista school. The EZLN’s representatives announced that a huge march was planned to take place in the city of San Cristóbal on January 1st. They requested the appointment of 45 volunteers to participate. One of the main instructions from the Zapatista municipal authorities was that half of the volunteers had to be women. Two days later the volunteers (mostly young-unmarried men and women) departed and walked for about eight hours to meet other volunteers at the Zapatista municipal center. Two days of political preparation (which included dancing to live local music) awaited them before arriving at San Cristóbal where more than 20,000 Zapatistas gathered (La Jornada, January 2, 2003)—representing, at the time, the biggest concentration of the Zapatista social base in the city. Although the volunteers were clearly excited, the community atmosphere became more apprehensive after their departure. An excerpt form my field-notes grasps the extent of the anxiety felt by the relatives of the volunteers:
 January 1, 2003

In the camp:

Marta came to leave some beans and wood for us (the observers). She seemed particularly sad. When I asked if she was worried about her two sons and daughter she burst out crying. A few minutes later she became silent. For the next five minutes it seemed that her soul had been transported to the very place of the march itself. A deep silence took over her.

It was Teresa who broke the moment, when she appeared at the Camp’s door with some tortillas for us. She came into the house and sat down to rest her legs. She looked at Marta’s tears and could not contain herself. Two of her young daughters and a son had left towards San Cristóbal for the march. That same day I visited Conchita (whose young cousins had also left), and like the other women she could not hide her sadness when I asked how she was doing. They fear for the lives of their relatives. According to these women, nobody knows whether the march will be a peaceful demonstration or a bloody event.

On January 1st, the date of the march itself, safety measures were taken by Zapatista community members. The most obvious were the establishment of security posts in strategic places around the community and around-the-clock radio communication. The observers became so involved in this kind of high-security environment that they decided to stay over night in a house within the community area as a safety measure. The camp which at other times provided a measure of privacy because it was placed at a distance from most of the houses, suddenly felt particularly isolated. Nothing, however, happened.

After the march community members celebrated the arrival of the volunteers who were publicly praised for their courage and commitment to the Zapatista struggle. Caught up in the spirit of victory, I wanted to interview some of the people who had been in the march. Estela volunteered. Throughout the interview (and knowing the political implications of her words) she seemed more worried about her political discourse than talking about the details of the trip itself.
“We went to San Cristóbal determined to confront anything, even warfare…” After the *comandantes* finished their speech, we collected all the wooden sticks we had carried and burnt them at the plaza\(^{170}\), it was a symbol. The fire was a symbol that war continues”, she proudly stated.

The discourse of war, very much part of the reality of the Zapatista group, was often extended to the camp, the religious congregations, and the non-governmental organizations that worked with the EZLN and Zapatista communities. People often reproduced it quite consciously (as Estela did in the interview) in their contact with activists, academics, journalists, and human rights workers. For the national and international observers, academics, and outsiders moving in and out of the conflict zone, the discourse of war was often introduced to them through alternative media (e.g. the internet) as well as through the numerous and detailed reports about human rights violations in Zapatista areas provided by the non-governmental organizations that facilitated their movement in the conflict zone. For these outsiders, war was about reading the testimonies these organizations had documented from those directly involved in the conflict, about the flagrant presence of soldiers deployed on the main roads leading to rural areas (approximately 60,000 in total), and about being subjected to inspections at every military checkpoint they encountered. For outsiders, life in Zapatista areas was often mediated by what Nordstrom & Robben (1995) refer to as “existential shock” (somewhat equivalent to the notion of culture shock\(^{171}\)), which they describe as the sense of bewilderment and alienation one often experiences when encountering (potential) violence. “It is a disorientation about the boundaries

\(^{170}\) Main square.

between life and death, which [in the face of violence] appear erratic rather than discrete” (Nordstrom & Robben, 1995: 8). The immediacy of potential violence (Kovats-Bernat 2002) – in the case of outsiders concretized by visible military inspections, intimidation, threat of arrest, etc. – reinforced circulating ideas and images of violence and conflict; ideas and images which stayed with the observers long after leaving the conflict zone.

For many of these outsiders, however, war also involved spending time at the Civil Camps for Peace where their daily routine included counting and documenting the number of visible soldiers surrounding the communities, cooking their own frijoles, and playing with Zapatista children. Although being in these camps often restricted their physical movement within the communities and prevented close contact with community members, it gave them the possibility to document war. Many of the observers I met during my stay in Chiapas often kept personal journals, collected “war” drawings from Zapatista children, and always carried a camera with them.

During my stay in Tres Ríos, I shared the camp, on many occasions, with various national and international observers who, upon their arrival, were always greeted first by a crowd of curious Zapatista children (25-30 children between the ages of 3 and 12). As days passed, the number of children at the camp tended to diminish; however, if the campamentistas played with them and/or there were color pencils and paper available, one was sure to find groups of between 5-10 children. A short but telling excerpt from my field notes shows some of the ways in which the discourse of war was further reproduced in the observers’ daily interactions with community children:

172 Beans
July 2002

In the Camp:

A few days ago a group of about 10 boys came to the camp. They asked two of the observers from the Basque country to give them paper and color pencils to draw with. As the observers handed out white sheets of paper and pencils, the smaller boys sat on the floor and started to draw houses, mountains, birds, little people, etc. The older boys sat on the camp’s rustic bench and started to draw masked Zapatista figures, military helicopters, and fire arms. The two observers were amazed with the drawings that depicted a context of war and asked the children to draw more of those pictures to bring back home. Within a few days the observers had collected dozens of such drawings.173

I witnessed this reaction to the children’s drawings many times.174 In Tres Ríos, older children often assumed that all observers wanted such pictures to bring back to their home places. While the drawings indeed reflected the political and military context in which the children lived, the attitude of the campamentistas served to validate children’s identity as Zapatistas. Smaller children eventually learned that painting houses, birds, and mountains was not important and soon started to draw only what the observers expected. From the perspective of the observers, children were only depicting the harsh “reality” of war which had permeated every aspect of the children’s lives. There was little realization that the observers themselves had significantly influenced such representations. As with the pictures, children were also

173 See figure #2 for examples of these.

174 This was the case not only in Tres Ríos but also in the other Zapatista communities I visited.
encouraged, whenever they were at the camp, to sing the Zapatista hymn and other revolutionary songs.\textsuperscript{175}

But it was not only children who engaged in these kinds of dynamics with outsiders, mature and young adults did it too. Again, an excerpt from my field notes grasps some of the details through which the discourse of war mediated the interaction:

February 2003

Laura is finally getting ready to leave the community. After two months in Tres Ríos she is getting ready to go back to her country and tell members of her organization all about living in a Zapatista community. Although she has taken dozens of pictures of community members, today she was determined to take (as she herself puts it) “real” Zapatista photographs.

Today she went to the school where young women were taking literacy classes and during the break, she asked the women if she could take a couple of photographs to show her organization. She also asked the women to wear their red Zapatista bandanas and cover their faces. The young women were happy to do it.

After class, I accompanied Laura to Estela’s house who -to my surprise -was already waiting, dressed in the traditional dress (which nobody wears on a daily basis) and with a \textit{pasamontañas}\textsuperscript{176} in her hands ready to put it on for the photographer.

Later during the day Laura visited the house of Pablo, one of the community’s young militiamen, and asked him insistently to wear his Zapatista (military) uniform and let her take a picture of him proudly holding his firearm. In spite of her

\textsuperscript{175} Drawing on Louis Althusser’s (1971) reflections on ideology, the literature on identity has referred to this process as “interpellation” (Bassel 2008, Carr 2009, Coulthard 1997). Interpellation thus refers to the process by which subjects come to identify themselves with dominant forms of representation.

\textsuperscript{176} Ski mask.
insistence, Pablo refused saying that taking such pictures was prohibited in the community.

Pablo’s reaction to the photographs, as compared to the reaction of the women, had more to do with the semi-public way in which Laura was making the request than with his apparent commitment to respect community decisions. He eventually allowed other observers to secretly photograph him with the uniform and firearm within the boundaries of his home. The reason the women were so willing to have photographs taken was because it was generally considered that Zapatista men run greater risks (e.g. being prosecuted or incarcerated) if they were identified as Zapatistas by government officials and/or the military. This was particularly the case if they were identified as EZLN militiamen (rather than just EZLN supporters).  

177 This gendered outlook towards political participation is not uncommon in contexts of political violence. Accounts of war tend to “systematically exclude women either as victims or perpetrators” (Nordstrom, 2005:400). In describing the case of Sri Lanka during the early 1980s, Carolyn Nordstrom (2005) states that rioters were often identified as male whereas victims were identified as “mass casualties, generally nameless” (ibid.). According to Lynn Stephen (1999), in the case of Chiapas the “majority (but not all) of the victims of torture, illegal detention, assassination and disappearance [were] men” (Stephen, 1999:830), women were detained but less frequently (ibid.). General masculine and military images of war contrast drastically with the fact that in the contemporary world of the 90% of all war-related deaths, the majority are noncombatant women and children (Nordstrom, 2005: 402). Nordstrom attributes the high number of female casualties to the fact that women tend to be less mobile than men. “Women”, Nordstrom affirms, “are usually responsible for their homes, critical subsistence, and the young, and thus tend to be more directly tied to a set locale….in attacks, women generally search out and try to carry their children (and sometimes the infirm and elderly), and are thus among the slowest to flee. They are thus the most likely to be caught by troops, by bullets, and by bombs.” (ibid.). Stephen offers an alternative (but not necessarily contrasting) view. She makes the important observation that it is often the “groups of people who are gauged as the most vulnerable and least likely to be able to defend themselves [that] are often the first and most intensive targets of political violence” (Stephen, 1999: 823). It is important to point out that while in the Zapatista case women’s participation in public military and civil activities has been outstanding, they remain nameless, except for the well-known Comandante Ramona.
The particular desire observers expressed towards the kinds of photographs that depicted Zapatista militants as “rebels” was in part related to the fact that many of these observers were representatives of local anti-capitalist groups, collectives or non-governmental organizations (in their respective countries and/or cities), and as such one of the purposes of visiting the conflict zone was to gather testimonies from Zapatista militants for purposes of political mobilization. Scott Hunt and Robert D. Benford (1994) in an interesting article about identity-talk in the peace and justice movement describe some of the ways in which activists engaged in social movement activities use “war stories” in micro mobilization process. These “war stories” often involve descriptions of extraordinary personal sacrifices and situations of danger, providing verbal demonstrations of the activists’ commitment to a just cause and their willingness to sacrifice their safety and even their life for the good of the collectivity. The drawings and photographs often sought by outsiders served to validate the “war stories” they shared with their colleagues and fellow activists outside the conflict zone. This was certainly the case of Laura in Tres Ríos. Unquestionably these images enjoyed political currency in and outside Chiapas. The desire for these representational images was largely related to the widespread expansion of such images on the internet, newspapers, books, posters, and other political material about the EZLN as well as their vast commercialization in the city of San Cristóbal (mostly by street vendors, local crafts markets, and human rights non-governmental organizations). In the relationship between Zapatista community people and outsiders, war was certainly romanticized and even exoticized but for those who engaged directly the discourse, the inevitability of war was never contested.

6.2 Outside Tres Ríos

In its everyday form, war translated into a number of economic, social, and political restrictions (of the kind described in Chapter 5) which sought to control the political and social
behavior of community members as well as their physical movement in and out of Tres Ríos. During the time I stayed in Tres Ríos, people rarely travelled outside the community for more than a month and travelling to urban centers was particularly restricted. There had been a few cases in the community in which young-unmarried men had travelled to the nearby cities to work temporarily in the construction industry and other miscellaneous activities, even going as far as the state of Cancun to work in the estate’s tourist industry (mostly in the hotels and restaurants). These were situations, however, in which families had incurred large debts due to illnesses and were considered special cases, but the time limit of one month still applied. Restrictions to long-term movement outside the community (for non-political reasons) were justified by the state of “war” under which people in Zapatista areas lived and which demanded that people be prepared in the case of any war-related emergencies.

During the time I stayed in Chiapas, the EZLN gave Tres Ríos’s inhabitants official authorization to work outside the community only once. On July 2003, the EZLN asked communities in the region for an economic contribution to the purchase of a regional truck which was going to run daily from the Zapatista municipal center to the nearest city. Permission to work outside the community was meant to help community members get hold of the cash needed for the contribution. During that month, a number of young-unmarried men and women travelled to the city of San Cristóbal and Comitán to look for work; for some of them it was their first time in city. I had the opportunity to travel to San Cristóbal with three of these young men and witnessed some of the ways in which they carried the discourse of war beyond its physical boundaries.

On our way from Tres Ríos to San Cristóbal, we were required to pass by Comitán de Domínguez, a city which had a permanent immigration check point. This was an area that was
relatively close to the Mexico/Guatemala border and the existence of immigration posts were common and justified by the presence of many undocumented Guatemalans travelling to the US border. Immigration officers routinely stopped buses and taxis and asked travelers for identification credentials such as birth certificates, passports, etc. To speed up the process, immigration officers often opted to ask people deemed as “suspects” a few key questions instead of requesting credentials. If “suspects” failed to answer, they were immediately detained. The construction of “suspects” at the Mexico/Guatemala border was motivated by racist and classist beliefs which targeted those thought to be rural, “indigenous” and poor—a construction that directly affected most inhabitants of the Lacandon area. In the context of war and widespread images of EZLN public political activities, those thought to be rural, “indigenous”, and poor often became guerrilla suspects as well.

The three young men I travelled with had never travelled to San Cristóbal and had, therefore, no experience dealing with immigration officers. When the immigration officers stopped the bus we were travelling on, the young men became obviously nervous. Immediately, one of the immigration officers asked the young men to exit the bus and show their identification cards. Two of the men had photo ids and were quickly asked to wait at one of the offices’ corners. However, the other man, Julio, only had his birth certificate which did not have a picture. The officer asked Julio his date of birth. Julio, whose body was uncontrollably shaking, did not respond; instead, he looked at his two companions and asked them whether any of them knew when he was born. At this point, the immigration officer became convinced that Julio’s birth certificate was false. In Tres Ríos, most people do not know their date of birth as this

178 Such questions included names of particular streets, the name of the governor of Chiapas, and the names of particular high schools in the area.
information is irrelevant in their everyday dealings. Moreover, yearly rituals to celebrate one’s birth date are nonexistent. At the immigration office, Julio was told that he was probably going to be detained. The officer asked him his full name and Julio, terrified at the thought of being detained, could not speak a word. It was at this point that I decided to get off the bus and tell the officials that I was travelling with the men. I explained that Julio was from a very small community and had never travelled to the city. After paying the officer 400 pesos, we returned to the bus.

Once in San Cristóbal and behind closed doors, I asked Julio why he had become so nervous. For these young-men there was no difference between the soldiers that surrounded their community and the immigration officers they had encountered in Comitán. Both represented the Mexican government and both represented the state of war within which they lived their lives. Julio feared that the officers would discover he was a Zapatista and send him to jail. He feared that if asked to sing Mexico’s anthem (a routine request for “suspects”), he would get confused and sing the Zapatista anthem instead. We all laughed at his explanation, but the fear of physical violence outside their everyday context was a palpable reality for all of them.

During that month, a number of young-unmarried women also travelled to the city of San Cristóbal to look for domestic work; for them as well it was the first time in the city. But their preoccupation with war was experienced differently. The women found work almost immediately, but the low wages and inadequate work conditions did not keep them in the city for very long. They were asked to work long hours everyday of the week and complained that their bosses were unfair and did not treat them with respect. What these women described as unfair,

179 Equivalent at the time to $40 US dollars. When the intimidation of “suspects” did not lead to detention, it often led to bribing of the victims.
however, was actually the norm in the city of San Cristóbal where young unmarried women, with no formal education, and of indigenous descent were regularly recruited as domestic workers in the houses of middle class mestizos, who often felt they were doing “indigenous peoples” a favor by providing work for their daughters. What these women resented most was the lack of time outside the house which did not allow them to participate in Zapatista political activities. During those days, the women wanted to attend a public celebration the EZLN was hosting in a nearby community (Oventic) and which was expected to attract approximately 5,000 people from Mexico and around the world. The young women were only an hour away from Oventic and were anxiously awaiting the celebration. When their bosses refused to give them the day off, they immediately quit. Surprised at their radical reaction, I asked why the celebration was so important. They firmly stated that in times of war, they needed to be politically informed, especially when they were so far away from their home. Although they did not confront physical threats as directly as the men did, they carried the state of “emergency” with them at all times. While this state of “emergency” was indeed part of people’s everyday life in Tres Ríos, it became most apparent outside the community, where, far removed from their everyday environment, people felt most vulnerable.

6.3 Conclusion

In her study of the town of Munapeo, Mozambique, Nordstrom (1995a) describes life and war through the paradox of chaos and creativity. She starts her account by describing a depressing landscape of houses and fields razed, burned, and destroyed; a clear lack of social flow “–well-worn paths empty of men returning from farm plots, women carrying water home, children running in endless games…” (Nordstrom, 1995a: 129); and hundreds of people sitting, sleeping, and working “in a clump of humanity, eschewing the few remaining bombed-out
buildings in favor of makeshift tents” (ibid.). War, Nordstrom argues, unmakes the world. Unlike Nordstrom’s description, however, in Tres Ríos, one did not get a sense of chaos, disorder, or destruction; on the contrary, there was a profound and clear impression that every move and decision was very well planned, calculated, and organized – from the secret routes they had created to avoid the military checkpoints to control over peoples’ everyday social and political behavior. This pronounced sense of structure and order provided people with a sense of control in a situation in which military confrontation between EZLN militants and Mexican soldiers had the potential to erupt at any given moment. In the face of military surveillance and potential violence, structure and order made their present livable. In its various manifestations, the discourse of war provided not only a common language among Zapatista community members (along with a strong sense of solidarity) but also between Zapatistas and sympathetic outsiders. In its everyday form, the discourse of war was formative; it shaped peoples’ perceptions of who they were and what they were fighting for.

An essential part of Nordstrom’s argument is to conceive war and violence not as a domain of death alone but also as a dimension of living and to understand that “what is at stake is not simply destruction but also reconstruction, not just death but also survival” (Robben & Nordstrom, 1995b: 4). For outsiders in Tres Ríos, this aspect of war became most evident long after managing the signs of “existential shock.” Seeing beyond the daily helicopters, people’s talk about possible military attacks, and children’s powerful illustrations required a fair amount of time as well as daily contact and relation with community members outside the Camp; factors which were beyond the reach of most visiting outsiders. Within these limited circumstances,
outsiders (including academics) became easily “seduced” (Roben 1995)\textsuperscript{180} by Zapatista accounts of war, the implication of which was the (uncritical) reproduction of the war discourse beyond the boundaries of the conflict zone.

\textsuperscript{180} In describing his experience of research on the ‘dirty war’ in Argentina, Antonius Robben (1995), refers to the notion of “seduction” as a dimension of fieldwork in which informants “seduce” the researcher to accept their interpretations of events. He defines seduction not as manipulation or deception but “in its neutral meaning of being led astray unaware” (Robben, 1995: 83), similar to “the ways in which filmmakers, stage directors, artists, or writers succeed in totally absorbing the attention of their audiences” (ibid.). The notion of seduction allows the anthropologists to move beyond notions of truth and falsehood focusing instead on people’s own interpretations and constructions of conflict.
Figure #1, Zapatistas returning from the January 1, 2003 march.
Figure #2. These represent some of the most popular drawings among Zapatista children.
In the year 2007, four years after my fieldwork had officially finished, I travelled back to Tres Ríos and encountered a very different social and political context. The military checkpoints around the area had been dismantled and the era of low-intensity warfare was “officially” over. Responding to continued political pressure from the EZLN and numerous non-governmental organizations to demilitarize the area, 16 military positions within the Lacandon area retreated between 2006-2007. While the relocation of these military positions did not mean that militarization in Chiapas had diminished, there was a sense of “freedom” and mobility around Tres Ríos that was clearly absent before. With the military retreat in the area, most of the Civil Camps for Peace were also closed and the presence of national and international observers was considered unnecessary. The EZLN had become more open to accepting “priistas” back into the organization without penalty as well as allowing its social base to travel outside their communities for extended periods of time. To my surprise, the process of social fragmentation within Tres Ríos had intensified. While the original Zapatista group (described in Chapter 5) had grown in numbers – as some of the “priista” families re-joined the organization –, it had become subdivided into three separate groups. Each group had its own EZLN and “community”

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181 These included San Jerónimo Tulijá, Ocotalito, Ibarra, Río Corozal, Santo Tomás, Francisco Villa, El Vergelito, Chocoljaito y Amatitlán. Luego, Las Tacitas, La Soledad, Nuevo Orizaba II (where there were two camps and one was relocated in Loma Bonita), Quiringüicharo, Zamora Pico de Oro, Cintalapa (Ocosingo) y San Caralampio (La Jornada, July 17, 2007).

182 For the location of military positions in Chiapas see map #8.
representatives, its own general assemblies, its own division of labor, its own economic projects, etc. In the new circumstances, the discourse of war was being disabled (at least publicly) and replaced by other priorities and discourses. Structural changes within Tres Ríos were no longer justified on the basis of “war” but on the basis of “economic need”. This was the case even though economic conditions in the community had not changed significantly.

The social and political changes I encountered during my short return to Tres Ríos triggered strong feelings of nostalgia for the place I had previously experienced and which seemed, then, to be rapidly disappearing. Below I provide a short description of some of the social, economic, and political transformations that pervaded Tres Ríos in 2007 and thereafter, followed by a commentary on nostalgia and future directions for research on the EZLN.

**Division and Migration**

In early 2007, Zapatista men engaged in various long and heated discussions about whether or not young unmarried men should be allowed to travel to *el norte* \(^{183}\) to work. The EZLN gave official authorization to allow Zapatista militants to leave their communities for work as long as the communities themselves arranged the conditions under which people were going to leave and return. While in nearby areas it was not uncommon for non-Zapatista men to emigrate to the United States as undocumented workers, it was unusual for Zapatistas to do so. Zapatistas in Tres Ríos had been particularly strict about allowing long-term absences from the community, unless it was for political work or emergencies.

\(^{183}\) The United States.
In Tres Ríos, disagreements about allowing young men to travel to the US pervaded the men’s general assembly for days. In one of the general meetings in which the issue was being discussed, however, one of the young men, Angel, frustrated at the impasse the discussion had reached, left in the middle of the debate and a few days later departed to the US without previous notice. His departure ended the discussion and precipitated the division between those who wanted to grant permission to emigrate and those who thought that such permission would bring drastic social and economic changes to the community. Although most were particularly worried about the economic differences that were likely to arise between those who would have relatives in the US and between those who would not, many of them also saw migration as an opportunity to raise their standard of living. The discussion on traveling to the US for work in the community was part of a larger trend within the state of Chiapas of people wanting to emigrate as an alternative form of finding better economic opportunities and making a living for themselves and for their families.¹⁸⁴

Most of the men who favored migration in Tres Ríos, had grown unmarried (male) children and were planning to send them away as soon as permission was granted. Many of the men who disagreed did so because neither they or their children were in a position to emigrate, either because their children were too young to be sent away or because their children were

¹⁸⁴ According to SIPAZ (International Services for Peace, January 2009), “[b]etween 30,000 and 50,000 Chiapan migrants to the United States each year, of a total state population of close to 4 million” (http://www.sipaz.org/fini_eng.htm) and 65% are peasants or indigenous peoples from marginalized areas (ibid.). In 2004 it was estimated that $50 million USD were sent to Chiapas by migrants in the United States, which represents an equivalent to “all of the corn harvested – the principal generator of wealth in the state – in addition to the production of beans, bananas, and mangoes.” (ibid.)
already married and with families of their own.\textsuperscript{185} Once the decision about migration was made, the men proceeded to divide the grass land and cattle which were until then held collectively. The division of resources was based on the belief that families with relatives in the US (and therefore more access to cash) would want to engage in other kinds of economic activities, activities which families with no relatives in the US would not be able to afford.

Optimistic about emerging economic opportunities, Angel’s relatives did not join any of the Zapatista collectives. Within a few days in the United States, Angel had been able to send money to his relatives to buy cattle and corn for the whole year. Angel’s family therefore did not feel the need to plant corn or engage in any collective work for their subsistence. In a conversation with one of Angel’s brothers I mentioned that often migrant workers in the US are unable to send money back for a sustained amount of time particularly when they marry and have children there. Angel’s brother confidentially stated that “that will never happen” as Angel is well aware of how hard it is to make a living in the community. His confidence startled me even more when he admitted that Angel was not planning to return to the community because “he really likes the US and plans to live there forever”.

Soon after the redistribution of property and cattle took place, a group of 16 young unmarried men (between the ages of 15 and 20) made arrangements with a nearby coyote\textsuperscript{186} to travel to the US as potential undocumented workers. Each paid the coyote approximately $2,000

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\textsuperscript{185} Male household heads rarely sought work outside Tres Ríos since the household and wellbeing of the family was considered their main responsibility.

\textsuperscript{186} Men who make a living by smuggling undocumented men and women into the United States. In other parts of Mexico these men are also known as “polleros”.
USD. The money was borrowed from families in nearby communities who had relatives in the US and the arrangement was that interest would start to accumulate as soon as the men crossed the border. The trip from Tres Ríos to the Mexican border was to take approximately three days. After attempting to cross the border several times, some of the men were arrested, jailed for a few days and sent back home. Others were not arrested—they managed to escape and evade immigration authorities but with no money left were obliged to go back to the community as well. For a few months, this experience, added to the fact that the men were in debt and with little possibilities of paying the money back, discouraged other young men from attempting any new trips. Nevertheless, by the end of 2007 forty men from Tres Ríos had crossed the border, which represented roughly 20-25% of adult community men.

In the new circumstances those who were not able to travel to the US sought work in the nearby cities. For young unmarried people staying outside the community for long periods of time (6 months to one year) became commonplace; something unseen between 1994-2003. Young unmarried women (15-20 years of age) sought domestic work mostly in the nearest city (Comitán de Dominguez). By 2007 there were approximately 15 women working in Comitán de Dominguez.

**A Note on Nostalgia and Future Directions**

My return to Tres Ríos was characterized by recurrent feelings of nostalgia. In the face of increasing internal division and threats of further fragmentation by incessant desires to emigrate,

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187 According to SIPAZ (International Services for Peace, January 2009), it is calculated that “in less than 10 years, some 300,000 Chiapas residents will have established themselves permanently in the United States.” (http://www.sipaz.org/fini_eng.htm)
I found myself longing for a political and social coherence that was never really there. It was disturbing to realize that the past I momentarily longed for was in fact one characterized by antagonism and militarization. Nevertheless, there were community members who also engaged in nostalgic images of their recent past. For those who felt that the new conditions threatened to “break down” not only social norms but also political commitments to the EZLN, nostalgia became a temporary site for articulating their discontent with present circumstances (Bissel 2005, Huysen 2000, Stewart 1998, Turner 1987, Holbrook 1993, Herman 2002) and provided a legitimate space for social critique. Estela, for example, complained that young men were more interested in getting cash to buy “big-loud CD players” rather than *empuñar las armas.* Few in Tres Ríos would disagree. Implied in Estela’s statement was the conviction that in the past young men were more committed to the Zapatista cause, disregarding the fact that such commitment may have been the result of tight military surveillance and the immediate threat of armed confrontation. Nevertheless, longing for a better “before” served as temporal anchoring in a context of rapid social, political, and economic transformation.

To date, I still keep in touch with some of the men from Tres Ríos who now reside in the USA and Canada. Women sometimes call me from their cellular phones from the cities of Cancun, San Cristóbal, and Comitán were they continue to be employed as domestic workers. The photographs I sometimes receive (via cell phone) tell very different stories of the people I once met. Pictures of young women wearing red lipstick and tight jeans and proudly standing

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188 According to Bryan S. Turner (1987), the “nostalgic mood” is usually associated with the “loss or rural simplicity, traditional stability and cultural integration following the impact of industrial, urban, capitalist culture on feudal social organization” (Turner, 1987: 152).

189 The literal translation is “take up arms.” In the context of the community this phrase also meant “to commit politically”.
next to their home TVs, for example, tell a story about particular and concrete expressions of contemporary processes of modernity, globalization, capitalism, and consumption (among others) that were before obscured (in the EZLN literature) by an ever encompassing preoccupation with war and “noble savages”. Even though these stories continue to say something about structural inequality, they are disliked by many “engaged” researchers because they are too ordinary and commonplace to be taken (academically) seriously.

In the context of now very different circumstances, this thesis has argued for the importance of moving away from images of Zapatistas as public figures and investigating, instead, everyday Zapatista lives. Analyses which reproduce generic images of Zapatista militants need to be rethought on the basis of everyday politics; a move which, in the context of Tres Ríos, inevitably entailed confronting discontinuities, conflict and (internal) disagreement. The particular context of militarization between the years of 1994-2003 highly restricted academics’ access to everyday politics in the conflict zone, the product of which was an empirical vacuum in the literature which, thus far, has not been filled. I consider, therefore, that the main contribution of my discussion and analysis has been in this regard. My discussion on indigenous autonomy and self-determination went far beyond EZLN claims to indigenous rights and engaged, instead, with historical as well as on-the-ground expressions of what self-determination may look like on an everyday basis. My discussion on warfare, moved beyond EZLN’s condemnation of militarization in the area and dealt with it as a discourse which in the long-term served to structure peoples’ lives and daily perceptions.

In a context in which public interest in the Zapatista movement has considerably diminished, future research on Zapatista subjects requires a serious acknowledgement of Valentina Napolitano’s (2002) call to “let go of the fascination of doing research on what is
novel and “particular” (Napolitano, 2002: 1) and instead allow “particularity” to emerge from everyday, ordinary life (ibid.). In this new context, readers accustomed to dominant images of Zapatistas may experience a similar sense of nostalgia I experienced during my return to Tres Ríos.
Map #8, Military positions in Chiapas.

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