

The Cultural and Economic Foundations of the Zapatistas Movement.

Indigenous peoples of Mexico weathered amidst inequity since the period of conquest instigated by Spanish conquistadores. This opposition ensued through the ongoing progression of globalization and neoliberalism. One model within the Mexican indigenous movement concerns the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or the Zapatista movement, within the state of Chiapas, one of Mexico's most impoverished states. Chiapas also holds one of the country's highest indigenous populations.

Animosity grew among indigenous peoples and subsistence farmers as a land reform bill terminated land distribution and would denationalize collective farms. Negotiations of economic reforms through NAFTA were also introduced, increasing hostility. The EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army; Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional) argued that NAFTA and the land reform bill would undermine Mexican indigenous people, their presence, and their history.¹ On January 1st, 1994, the day NAFTA would come into effect, the Zapatista uprising commenced as the EZLN besieged locations across the Chiapas province.

After a ceasefire by the Mexican government, the Zapatistas became a national illustration of the Mexican indigenous cause in the struggle for autonomy. For this historiographic paper, however, queries remain. How has indigenous expression and media formulated the identity of the Zapatistas movement? How have indigenous and Mexican women influenced the origins of the movement? How have contributions from Zapatista women helped in the causes of the movement? Why have these contributions promoted the development of a rich culture among the Zapatistas? How have different anthropological and sociological approaches contributed to the study of Zapatistas' cultural and economic objectives? This historiographic paper examines both the cultural and economic backgrounds of the Zapatista movement and how they contribute to the purposes of the rebellion.

Contemporary narratives, however, reveal analysis on cultural, aesthetic, and political resistance within many Native cultures. This is remarkably represented by the development of "indigenous

¹ Iker Reyes Goodman, "The Zapatistas Movement: The Fight for Indigenous Rights in Mexico," 30 July 2014, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/news-item/the-zapatista-movement-the-fight-for-indigenous-rights-in-mexico/>

media,” or “video indigena,” as a form of self-determination in these tribes’ fight for indigenous autonomy.

Notably, *Indigenous Media in Mexico: Culture, Community, and the State* renders a substantial assessment of indigenous media and cultural visibility through ethnography, anthropology, and oral history/interviews. The experiences documented throughout this narrative by author and anthropology professor Erica Cusi Wortham demonstrate state-sponsored media through the punitive division of cultural phenomena like indigenous media from politics, how indigenous media was lectured rather than created, media programs and initiatives distancing themselves from state sponsorship and *neindigenismo*, or neoliberal assimilation policies, and precise exemplars of the Zapatistas movement and their foundation of the Chiapas Media Project.

The evaluation is allotted into three sections, structured by the noteworthy argument of “making culture visible”.² The first section contextualizes the historical emergence of indigenous media programs in association with local and global contexts of notions within indigeneity. Section two scrutinizes the historical narratives of indigenous media organizations detached from state sponsorship. Section three explicitly assesses *Radio y Video Tamex*, a communal-conducted broadcasting initiative in a Mixe community – Wortham specifically contributes her ethnographic experiences in Tamazulapam del Espíritu Santo – and how indigenous media operates within a community rather than by the state. Section four creates a cohesive, enticing synopsis of the author’s ethnographical immersion in Mexico.³

Wortham writes about the substance of indigenous media and advocacy – both community initiatives and from the state’s *National Institute of Indigenous Peoples* (INI) – and its structure as a *postura* alongside its relationship with the visibility of culture. Wortham extends her perspective on cultural visibility with the following quote:

“Making culture visible” is a blended phrase taken in part from the field – specifically from an image I had taken of Oaxaca’s *Canal 8*’s phrase “la cultura tambien se ve,” or “culture, too, can be seen” – as well as some of my informants’ exasperation that members of their own community didn’t “see” what they were trying to accomplish with their media collective – and mixed with my own ideas, analyses, and imperatives.⁴

² Erica Cusi Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2013). 5.

³ Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico*, 19-22.

⁴ Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico*, 9-10.

The argument draws on the division of the expression in three sections: Making as a cultural progression and endeavor concentrated on the production, circulation, and consumption of indigenous media, culture in a perpetual condition of formation under individuals and collectives, and visibility of narratives within their cultures that have long been subjugated by colonizers, depicting themselves as protagonists within their stories.⁵

Wortham utilizes her anthropology field research in Mexico as a method of genuine immersion in the matter of indigenous media, along with tying her comprehensive discipline in a coalesced approach. Her experiences in Oaxaca, Chiapas, Mexico City, and Guatemala provide us sustained-participant observations as a process of valuing disconnects and convolutions in broadcasters and their diverse viewers. Through ethnography, anthropology, and oral history, Wortham affords us abundant narratives of individuals within the field of indigenous advocacy and media by employing a broad integration of each topic based on the histories of assimilation, marginalization, prejudice, and community resistance.⁶

The accounts provided by Wortham diverge from the traditional sense of historical research by offering the authentic history behind the indigenous autonomy movement and its origins from prejudice and *indigenismo* assimilation policies. However, Wortham also grants reflection on her ethnographic experiences with such an idiosyncratic lens of ethnography that give the history an innovative, striking life of its own. The narrative displays extraordinary – immersive even – writing that elicits awareness and empathy of the indigenous autonomy movement and how broadcasters exemplify their work with their cultural values alongside notions of cultural visibility and shattering the impediments behind culture and politics. Engagement in these studies through ethnography and oral history provides significant dimensions behind what is learned within traditional history, and it gives the reader a perspective not often found in accounts like these. Historical and cultural background are present within this book, but since Wortham's research is primarily anthropological, Wortham fails to provide additional historical background that would offer clarification to the reader.

Wortham's research concentrates specifically on indigenous media and how their presentation contributes to indigenous autonomy but lacks clear discussion of how women and children

⁵ Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico*, 10.

⁶ Wortham, *Indigenous Media in Mexico*, 13-15.

contributed to the movement and its culture. Hilary Klein's *Compañeras: Zapatista Women's Stories* gives readers specific and articulate narratives of women involved in the movement and how they contribute to the Zapatista culture. Klein clarifies the use of *Compañeras* by the women of the movement as synonymous with the movement, as the word's approximate translation lies between "comrade" and companion."⁷ The use of *Compañeras* expresses Zapatista women's tightly gripped collective identity even through the individual stories presented by Klein. Klein also organizes the book through testimonies and interviews collected through field research in Chiapas.⁸ Klein's interview with Roberta, a Tzeltal woman, over topics of land reform and distribution create a meticulous illustration of the celebration of contributions from Zapatista women to the EZLN during the beginnings of the movement:

Roberta also explained why, in the Guarrucha canyon, they celebrate the land occupations on September 9th. "In 1994, all the landowners left, all the fincas were abandoned, and it became the 'conflict zone,'" she said. "Until September 9th, 1997, we were just taking care of the land." She said that, after the uprising, no one was sure what would happen next – if the landowners would put up a fight to get their land back, or if the Mexican army would invade the occupied land to drive the Zapatistas out. So the Zapatistas quietly planted their corn and beans on this abandoned but fertile land and bided their time. In 1997, they decided the moment was right. In September of that year, the EZLN organized a march of 1,111 Zapatistas to Mexico City. The public attention focused on the Zapatista mobilization provided cover for the EZLN in Chiapas. "When the 1,111 Zapatistas left for Mexico City, we began to form new villages. Each person looked for land they liked. When the 1,111 Zapatistas arrived in Mexico City, we were already in our positions."⁹

Klein's analysis and involvement in field research provides a distinct perspective not otherwise allotted in analyses covering broad strokes of historical background. However, while Klein offers succinct interviews with Zapatista women, she fails to provide substantial historical background over the Zapatistas movement like Wortham. Both are anthropologists by trade and provide interdisciplinary examples for historical and sociological discussion, but due to their anthropological focus, the topics covered extend such broad lengths in understanding humans and culture.

⁷ Hilary Klein, *Compañeras: Zapatista Women's Stories* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2015). xxii-xxiii.

⁸ Klein, *Compañeras: Zapatista Women's Stories*, xxiii.

⁹ Klein, *Compañeras: Zapatista Women's Stories*, 77.

Wortham and Klein's research explores the insights provided by the culture and media of the Zapatistas movement. The economic components behind the indigenous and peasant movement create an extension to this cultural narrative.

Writer and Mexican history correspondent Bill Weinberg's *Homage to Chiapas* broadly covers the Zapatistas through the lenses of anti-globalization, neoliberalism, and economics. Weinberg delves into extensive history of indigenous peoples in Mexico, beginning the discussion of origins and purposes of the Zapatistas movement. Weinberg also introduces the study of the movement with analysis of the Mayan and Aztec civilizations. Weinberg then employs radical journalism by analyzing the impact of NAFTA on the indigenous peoples of Mexico. Interviews with Subcommander Marcos and display evidence of NAFTA pushing indigenous peoples to revolt. Weinberg chronicled an interview with Subcommander Marcos discussing "narco-imperialism," or the War on Drugs in Mexico:

In January 1994, the EZLN had sent President Clinton a letter protesting the use of military aid in Chiapas: "Troops, planes, helicopters, radar, communications technology, weapons, and military supplies are currently being used not to pursue drug traffickers... but rather to repress the righteous struggle of the people of Mexico... The support that the North American people and government offer the Mexican federal government does nothing but stain your hands with indigenous blood." As Marcos told me three months later, they did not receive a response... "We know from the prostitutes that service the army that they had been taking care of a group of soldiers we assume were from the US, because they were tall, blond, blue-eyed, and they spoke English. Obviously we did not see their supports," said Marcos. Marcos claimed that many of the same elements who masterminded the 1980s terror campaigns in Central America were now at work in Chiapas. "Another bit of information we have is that the US army was functioning as an intermediary in bringing the Argentine mercenaries who were present at Chiapas..."¹⁰

Weinberg's interviews coincide with Wortham and Klein's interviews with leaders in indigenous media. While each study differ significantly in the subject, both provide an extensive array of evidence through approaches of anthropology, sociology, and oral history. However, as mentioned above, Weinberg's comprehensive study gives the reader substantial historical background and context dating back to pre-conquest in Mexico, unlike Wortham's research.

Weinberg's research is akin to George Collier's *Basta!: Land and the Zapatista Rebellion*. Collier, an anthropologist like Wortham, employs 30 years of field research in Chiapas into his

¹⁰ Bill Weinberg, *Homage to Chiapas: The New Indigenous Struggles in Mexico*, (New York: Verso, 2000), 190-91.

study of land reform and the Zapatistas movement. Collier, unlike Weinberg and Wortham however, argue that the Zapatistas movement began primarily as a peasant rebellion, locating origins in social antagonism, mobilization, and intersections in classism and the party-state.¹¹ He traces the struggles of rebellions prior to the Zapatistas movement and how it connects to current events and anti-globalization, something also noted in Weinberg's broad study. Collier answers the difficult question of why indigenous people instigated the rebellion rather than the urban poor:

Although there is no clear answer to this question, one possible explanation is that on top of the severe hardships peasants have had to endure during the past decade of economic restructuring, they were also disappointed by a number of broken promises from the government: land reform that never occurred; price supports guaranteed, then taken away; and credits extended, then withdrawn. When, in 1992, the government of President Salinas de Gortari brought land reform – the issue on which his party had originally risen to power – to a halt, he signaled an abrupt end to a traditional government covenant with the peasantry divided and deprived many peasants of not just the possibility of improving their livelihoods, but of their power as a constituency. The Zapatistas, in their uprising and its aftermath, were trying to reclaim that constituency.¹²

Collier's study delves into the rich social, political, economic, and ethnic history of Chiapas and the Zapatistas rebellion, along with employment of anthropological approaches in studying peasant life and grassroot peasant organizations, along with indigenous autonomy and neoliberalism.¹³ Collier's research, however, takes the approach of an economist while analyzing macroeconomic trends, economic restructuring, and restriction of public funds due to political oppositions. Like Wortham in proposing policy changes for indigenous media and expression, Collier also proposes policy solutions on the capitalization of the peasant constituency and efforts in change.¹⁴

Collier analyzes the Zapatistas' argument against neoliberalism and summarizes the argument by stating "free market globalization falsely promises to benefit all through trickle-down economic growth, while actually enriching transnational corporations and financiers at the expense of people and communities around the globe."¹⁵ Collier states the following about the Zapatistas' counterargument and policy proposals:

¹¹ George A. Collier, *Basta!: Land and the Zapatistas Rebellion in Chiapas* (Oakland: Food First Books, 2005), 8-9.

¹² Collier, *Basta!*, 8.

¹³ Collier, *Basta!*, 10-14.

¹⁴ Collier, *Basta!*, 13.

¹⁵ Collier, *Basta!*, 187.

The Zapatistas call for a different kind of global planning that enhances rather than diminishes social equity in diverse local and regional landscapes by networking people and communities in grassroots initiatives for their own futures. Appealing for “a world in which many worlds fit” (*un mundo donde quepan muchos mundos*), the Zapatistas stand for a globalization that is radically democratic and yet diverse in which different people work together to find solutions that accommodate the differing world views and needs of their local, regional, and national circumstances.¹⁶

Both Collier and Weinberg grant historians and readers powerful and extensive analyses of the economic foundations within the Zapatistas movement. Yet, they also provide succinct historical and cultural backgrounds that illustrate the perspectives of the Zapatistas in an articulate manner. The discussion of the Zapatistas movement, while involved in current events, is difficult to tackle. However, the analyses provided by Wortham, Klein, Collier, and Weinberg give historians and readers an all-encompassing perspective on the rebellion with interviews, testimonies, illustrations and maps, and much more to fully grasp the concepts, purposes, and events regarding the movement.

¹⁶ Collier, *Basta!*, 187-188.