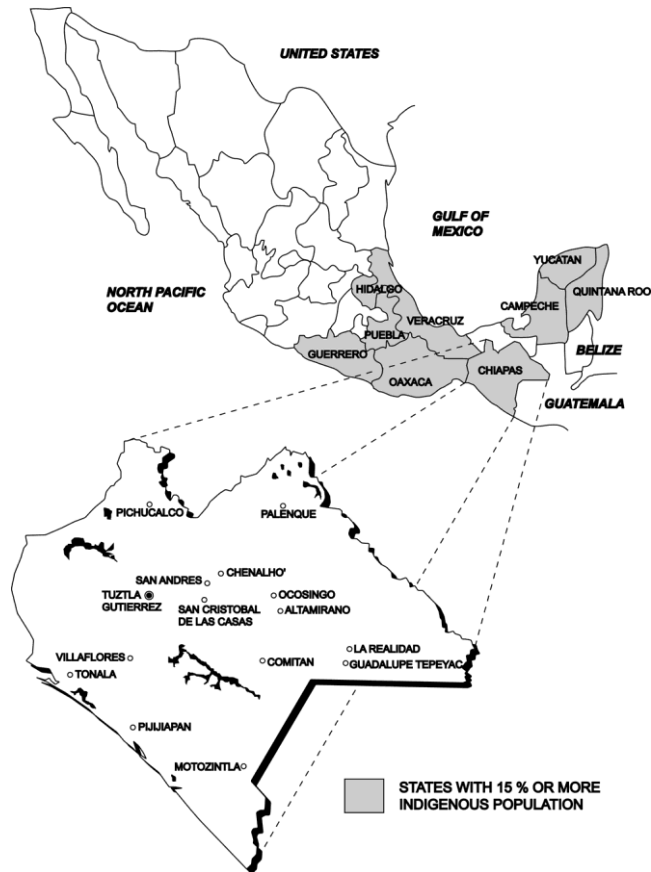


Globalization Effects in Chiapas, Mexico¹

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Chiapas in the context of Mexico and the indigenous Mexico

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Today, Mayan indigenous communities from Chiapas, Mexico continue to organize their resistance against imposed politico-economic programs associated with globalization. In a recent visit to indigenous communities in the Highlands of Chiapas, I observed a growing resistance movement against the Plan Puebla Panama (PPP). Introduced by President Vicente Fox, the PPP is a massive economic development project that includes southern Mexico and Central America. Following hundreds of indigenous, civil society and nongovernmental organizations, numerous indigenous communities and nongovernmental organizations strongly criticize the PPP for benefiting only rich people and corporations. Indigenous communities who have sympathized with the ongoing resistance of the Zapatista movement emerged since 1994 don't oppose progress. Contrary to the understanding of many people who misinterpret their resistance as 'staying as they are', they want to step out of their poverty but not by becoming *maquiladora* (sweatshop) workers or exploited in other postmodern forms of slavery. The territory affected by PPP is in the heart of coffee production. Most indigenous people in Chiapas are coffee producers, but imposed market prices and free trade policies have forced entire families of coffee producers into extreme poverty and hunger. They know first hand that free trade is not beneficial to poor people. They seek out alternative development, investing their efforts into organic production and fair trade thanks to the support of numerous Americana and European solidarity organizations.

The economic trend of globalization, known in Latin America as neoliberalism, has intensified a worldwide economic inequality. Yet, it is unclear how the international spread of neoliberal policies affects the formation of indigenous and international social movements. With frequent international networks of communication facilitated by the use of the Internet, new social movements and international political activism are emerging around the issue of indigenous culture, environmental protection, labor rights and human rights. Several social scientists argue that with the integration of Mexico into the global economy collective actors are dismantled, collective identities are annihilated and spaces of communicative interactions are shrinking. Several contrasting 'Méxicos' emerge from the economic crisis produced by the global economy. The modern Mexico, identified with the supporters of the NAFTA, contrasts with the rebellious Mexico, identified with the indigenous organizations of Chiapas and their ongoing rebellion and resistance against the dehumanization of neoliberalism. The indigenous communities of Chiapas resisting neoliberalism do not refuse globalization in itself. Rather, they resist only one edge of the double-edged sword of globalization. On the one side, globalization has a destructive form reflected in processes of declining capacity for collective action from the part of marginalized racial groups and classes of society. On the other side, globalization produces a process of social re-articulation in the creation of new strategies of resistance. These contrasting views reflect what is generally identified as globalization-from-above, meaning the neoliberalism and other imposed trends, and the globalization-from-below, meaning the international networks of information, identities and actions of grassroots groups and organizations.

Globalization-from-above, particularly neoliberalism, NAFTA and PPP explain the persistence of poverty and violence in Chiapas. Corporations have been interested in the rich land of Chiapas since the early 1980s. The government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, after he claimed the presidency in disputed elections in 1988, further implemented the integration of Mexico into the new global economy. Educated at Harvard University, Salinas favored neoliberal economic reforms in place of land reforms implemented after the 1910 Mexican Revolution. NAFTA became the clearest sign of the Mexican government's program of integration into the neoliberal economy. Certain sectors of Mexican and international civil society criticize NAFTA and the economic global integration of neoliberalism for breaking up social dimensions such as communicative interactions, critical public spheres and collective identities. In other words, neoliberalism in Mexico tends to undermine cultural traditions and increase poverty.

Integration of Mexico into the world economy has affected corn producers in different ways. Chiapas, along with Guerrero and Oaxaca, is one of the largest producers of corn surpluses, which are then exported to the rest of Mexico (Fox and Navarro 1992). With the 1986 signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), later renamed World Trade Organization (WTO), and the

implementation of NAFTA in 1994, the government began to favor large scale producers of agricultural products. Fruit, vegetable and cattle were among the most exported products. Small-scale producers of corn and beans, such as the indigenous cooperatives in the Highlands of Chiapas, were negatively impacted by these agreements. The government did not protect the producers of crops from foreign competitors who imported tons of cheap corn and other crops into the Mexican market. Absent protectionist policies favored the integration of local, regional economies into the world economies but made peasant-indigenous communities of Chiapas more vulnerable to the cycles and fluctuation of global capitalism.

The 1910 Mexican Revolution wanted to change inequality and marginalization by creating the system of land ownership (the so-called *ejidos*) and reconstitute land to indigenous communities. Unfortunately, in Chiapas an effective redistribution of land was slow to arrive, blocked by politically powerful landowners. Thirty years after the revolution, about 50 percent of the land in the Highlands was held by *ejidos* of communal farms, but the wealthy and politically powerful *ladino* minority retained the best lands and the resources to develop these lands. The incomplete land redistribution and the low quality of the land that was returned to indigenous communities is one of the main reasons why land remains one of the main concerns of the indigenous living in the Highlands. For more than 80 years, this incomplete land distribution insured the maintenance of economic inequality between landowners and indigenous communities in Chiapas. Many agree that, even after numerous social and economic programs promoted between 1940-1980, high levels of economic inequality and poverty continue to characterize the indigenous populations of Chiapas mainly because of the lack of access to land and its resources. Even though some scholars have challenged the assumption that land reform never arrived in Chiapas, it has been recognized that only a few communities managed to get *ejido* lands in the Highlands. Many acted too late, but many others never received state support of their claims or only received a minimal portion of their claims.

With the 1992 amendment of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, the Mexican government eliminated the inalienable guarantee of communal property for *ejidos*, allowing them to be sold, rented or mortgaged. This reform ended land redistribution and made it possible for foreign investors to buy or invest in existing *ejido* lands. Although the reformed Article 27 recognizes the specificity of indigenous people's claim to protection of their lands no positive conditions are actually provided for such protection. For many indigenous peasants, this reform represented the killing of hope. Indeed, Subcomandante Marcos indicated that this was the ultimate act of betrayal that pushed the Zapatistas to bear arms: "The government really screwed us, now that they have destroyed Article 27, for which Zapata and his revolutionaries fought. Salinas de Gortari arrived on the scene with his lackeys, and his group, and in a flash they destroyed it. Our families have been sold down the river, or you could say, they have stolen our pants and sold them. What can we do? We did everything legal that we could so far as elections and organizations were concerned, and to no avail" (*El Tiempo* February 6, 1994).

The goal of the reform was to open the market to the strategic importance of Chiapas' land. Chiapas land is extremely important for Mexico and the United States not only for its wealth of resources, but also because of its geographic position as the corridor of communication between North and South America. These economic interests took precedence over the promotion of adequate political negotiations and authentic democracy. Although the Mexican government offered promises of guarantees that indigenous *ejido* lands would not be alienated, most indigenous groups that are not able to repay the loans made in joint enterprises on communal lands, could lose their land. Consequently, the reform of Article 27 explains the shift of many indigenous communities from civil to violent resistance.

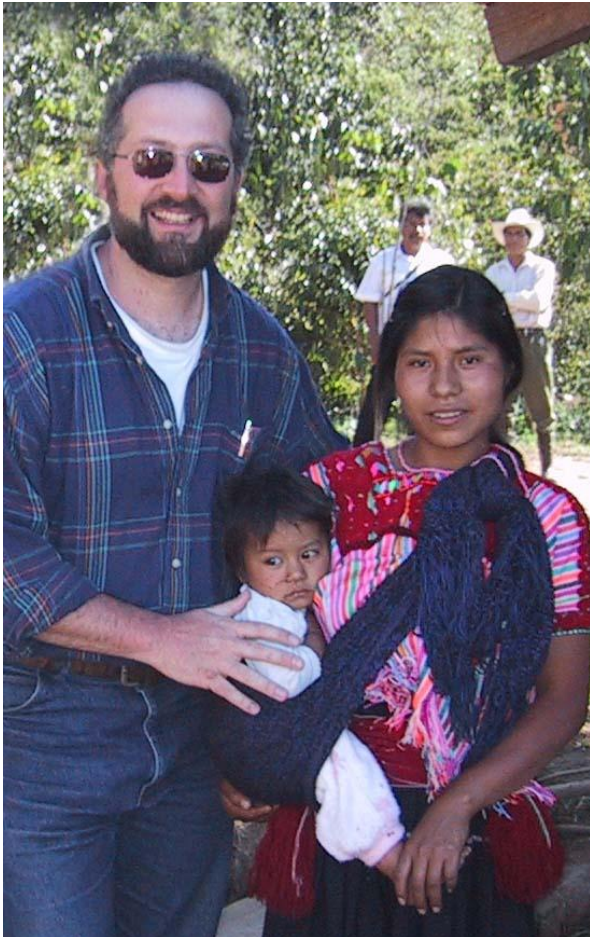
Economic inequalities and land struggles are not the only explanation of poverty among indigenous communities. Racism goes hand in hand with poverty. Most Chiapas indigenous communities have long histories of being victims of a double marginalization. Beginning in the late 1960s, Mayan descendants of the Highlands realized how both their social conditions of poverty and their ethnic identity as indigenous contributed to their marginalization and exclusion. Social scientists explain Chiapas'

contradictory reality of poor people living in a rich land as a sort of conspiracy against indigenous people. Mayan descendants living in Chiapas are among the most impoverished of Mexico's population. Their marginalized conditions are not caused by lack of economic resources or because their conditions of underdevelopment. Rather, Chiapas' marginalization is produced by unjust political and social structures based on the exploitation of land and the exclusion of indigenous people. At the local level, indigenous people perceive their marginalized condition as caused by the adverse intentions of economic and political institutions.

Indeed the distribution of power and wealth within Chiapas has changed very little in the last fifty years. But racism has even deeper roots in Mexican society. Historical racial discrimination clearly contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of Chiapas' indigenous population. Throughout Mexico's history, indigenous populations have never been considered for government projects. Mexican nationalism has historically posited a national *mestizo* (mixed race) identity, in opposition to Indian identity. In the Mexican national ideology of *mestizaje*, appearance and behavior, not ancestry and descent, are the key indicators of racial identity. So, an indigenous person can transcend his or her indigenous identity by adopting the *mestizo* behaviors, clothing and manners of 'modern' Mexico. In this way, Mexican nationalism has adopted a racist attitude toward those 'Indian' people who continue to show the external cultural signs of their traditions and continue to live in poverty. This negative perception of 'Indian' identity was reflected in the 1990 Mexican national census that recorded only 7.8 percent of the population as 'Indian people'. Most of the indigenous population of Mexico (78 percent) is concentrated in the southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Yucatan.

With the 1994 Zapatista rebellion, the claim of the indigenous people "Never again a Mexico without us [the indigenous people]" challenged national neoliberal and *mestizo* ideologies. It also challenged common stereotypes of submissive "Indians" unable to reason and invited Mexico and the world to look at the indigenous of Chiapas to recognize the contradictory consequences of economic and cultural impositions.

What can indigenous people teach in the increasingly globalized world? The indigenous people of Chiapas neither seek independence from Mexico nor do they oppose globalization by seeking isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, they propose a society where ethnic, cultural, religious, political, and gender relations are built upon respect and dignity. They want to be recognized for their diversity, values, and long tradition of resistance. They appeal to humanity for the recognition of their dignity as 'people of corn' who carry in their blood and skin the color of the earth. Their ongoing struggle and suffering do not resolve in open conflict or terrorist actions. Rather, their example of pacific resistance in search of peace, justice and dignity as human beings reminds us about the power of nonviolence. Perhaps in the increasing debate between supporters and resisters of globalization the indigenous communities of Chiapas provide new pacifist and effective alternatives. Their experiences as pacifist resister indicate how the Chiapas struggle is actually our struggle as it reflects national and global struggle for the recognition of cultural diversity. In Mexico, the political struggle ignited by the neozapatista indigenous movement reflects global challenges for the recognition of minority rights, self-determination, and the just integration of diversity. The Chiapas peace accords, so-called San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Cultures, teaches us to consider culture beyond folkloristic images and invites us to link cultural and ethnic identities with economic, political, and human rights dimensions. From Chiapas comes a lesson for our neighborhoods, cities and states. It's a lesson of bridging diversities, building mutual respect, and constructing cross-cultural dialogue as crucial strategies for social justice and world peace.



Dr. Marco Tavanti with a Rosa Mendez, a Maya-Tzotzil community leader in the Highlands of Chiapas (March 2002). In 1998, just a few days after the Acteal massacre, Rosa and other young leaders of Las Abejas resisted the Mexican Army for occupying their only source of water in the internally displaced camp of Xoyep, Chenalho, Chiapas. This famous La Jornada photo became the symbol of women resistance. Dr. Tavanti was the first person to share a copy of this image with Rosa and her family.