

# View from the Ground

## Thanksgiving in a Place Called Chiapas

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Thanksgiving 2010. No turkey. No gravy. No pumpkin pie. Instead: armed men in ski masks, hitchhiking through the mountains, and a Catholic church filled with incense and two thousand candles. I divided the holiday between two villages near San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, Mexico. Both of these villages are notable for their distinct cultures. The first place I visited, Oventic, is operated by indigenous rebels who seized autonomy through the 1994 rebellion by the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (the Zapatistas) in protest of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The second place, San Juan de Chamula, is operated by local political bosses and village elders, who serve as the leaders of a distinct belief system that mixes Catholicism and indigenous spirituality into a literally intoxicating local religion.

In Oventic and San Juan, I encountered a part of Mexico desperately trying to preserve its identity. In the first village, this was achieved by blending revolutionary Marxism with indigenous identity. In the second city, identity preservation took the form of integrating Catholicism into the local religious context, bringing parishioners closer to their unique understanding of God.

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## THANKSGIVING IN A PLACE CALLED CHIAPAS

My time in Chiapas provided me the opportunity to evaluate the concept of “contesting citizenship,” a term coined by Deborah Yashar, professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University. This phrase typifies the recent phenomenon of indigenous political movements across Latin America. For centuries, indigenous populations have been considered passive, myopic, and backward. But, as the world has grown increasingly interconnected and the global economy more liberalized, indigenous resistance movements have emerged. These peoples challenge the assumed notion of passivity; they contest the “historical scholarly conclusions about the politicization of ethnic cleavages.”<sup>1</sup> My time in Chiapas provided me a new perspective on the intersection of NAFTA, indigenous identity, and globalization—topics I had studied as a researcher, but only in Lauinger Library at Georgetown University and never on the ground.

Through my experiences during Thanksgiving 2010, I began to understand more coherently what I had previously understood only from the perspective of an undergraduate student and researcher. In visiting with people and bearing witness to their everyday difficulties in Mexico, my academic work became far more profound because it became far more human.

**Historical Background and NAFTA.** To understand Oventic and San Juan, one should understand the seventy-some odd years of the Mexican experience leading up to the Zapatista rebellion. From the beginnings of the Mexican Revolution in 1910 and

onward, a complex relationship evolved between specific sectors of the Mexican economy and the Mexican government. Through corrupt bargains with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) regime, various sectors of the economy carved out an entrenched role for themselves in Mexican politics.

The PRI regime gave benefits to targeted sectors of the economy in exchange for electoral support. The relationship was maintained through barriers to trade, welfare benefits, and the discouraging of intra-industry competition. Almost like a benevolent Leviathan, the PRI became a well-disposed dictatorship during its reign.<sup>2</sup>

Agriculture benefited from and contributed to the system initially instituted by the PRI. From the 1930s through the 1970s, agriculture was a primary source of foreign exchange for Mexico—consistently delivering positive trade balances. From the 1960s through the 1980s, two prominent agricultural support programs, the *ejido* program and the National Company for Public Sustenance (CONASUPO), were the key mechanisms through which the government supported agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

Mexican agriculture, however, began a process of transformation in the early 1980s, as Mexico faced a severe balance of payments crisis. Unfortunately, the sector has been on the decline ever since. As Mexico began its process of modernization to correct past economic mismanagement, the grossly inefficient and undercapitalized agriculture industry experienced substantial transformations. Market oriented reforms prepared the way for NAFTA, which was ultimately the keystone of economic liberalization. Prominent agricultural

support programs, including the ejido program and CONASUPO, were put on a path toward liquidation. Of all the groups expected to suffer as a result of liberalization, indigenous farmers were to pay perhaps the heaviest costs. Without the government programs, they could not remain viable.

On 1 January 1994, the day NAFTA took effect, the Zapatistas declared war on the Mexican government to protest the free trade deal. They claimed that NAFTA would only further marginalize the indigenous poor. The people

ize the agricultural market, making it that much harder for indigenous peoples in places like Chiapas to survive. The opposition was also driven in part by a demand for the increased democratization of Mexico. After seventy years of political domination by the PRI, the Zapatistas believed Mexico deserved a more representational and diverse government. Longing for the realization of land rights promised by the seventeenth amendment of the 1917 Mexican constitution, the rebels demanded autonomy from the Mexican govern-

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of Chiapas—where nearly 40 percent of the population is indigenous, and 99 of 118 municipalities are at or below the poverty line—fell into the category that would suffer.<sup>4</sup> On that day, three thousand revolutionary soldiers stormed San Cristobal. They freed prisoners, set fire to numerous government buildings, and tried to take control of the city. The next day, the Mexican military intervened and inflicted great losses on the rebels. On 12 January, the armed conflict ended when the Catholic Diocese of San Cristobal negotiated a ceasefire.

Led primarily by spokesman Subcomandante Marcos, the Zapatistas initially sought to instigate revolution all across Mexico. They wanted to draw the world's attention to NAFTA, which they believed would increase the gap between the rich and the poor. The free trade agreement would further liberal-

ment to control their land and natural resources and, at the same time, to keep intact their own cultural identity.<sup>5</sup>

**My Visit to Chiapas.** In exploring Oventic and San Juan, I realized how important cultural identity and freedom from interference are to the various indigenous peoples of Chiapas.

When I arrived at the entrance to Oventic with my exchange friends, three men in ski masks, one of them armed, greeted us at the gate. Ten minutes of skeptical questioning proceeded. Where are you from? Why are you here? What do you know about the movement?

At first, it struck me as odd that the Zapatistas would be so skeptical of people who had come to explore their village. It soon became clear that they had good reason to be. For one, Oventic is an autonomous region and trav-

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eling there is somewhat analogous to traveling to another country. Also, the Zapatistas are actually quite media savvy. During the revolution, Subcomandante Marcos was known for his telegenic charisma. The Zapatistas remain preoccupied with how the outside world perceives them, and they do not want visitors with cameras recording potentially damaging images.

We waited for twenty minutes while the men appeared to discuss letting us enter with their leaders. After showing our passports, we eventually gained entry. We were given a brisk twenty-minute tour of the village. Our guide was amiable enough, and his Spanish was fluent (not especially common in the indigenous villages of Chiapas, where most people speak only a native dialect). Our guide did not spend much time telling us his opinions on NAFTA or explaining the political transformation that took place in the region afterward. He was instead rather terse. "This is where people live." "This is where our leadership meets." (We were certainly not allowed in.) "This is where our children go to school."

The poverty was stunning. There was no running water in the bathrooms, and the villagers lived in cottage-like shacks. But the modest gains made by the Zapatista rebellion were evident too. The Mexican government had since helped bring electricity, ambulances, a health clinic, and a school to the village. Our guide instructed us not to take pictures of the village except for the large mural paintings of Che Guevara, Marcos, and other ideological heroes of the group. The guide did, however, encourage us to purchase Zapatista memorabilia—a mildly ironic concept,

considering that the group's ideology is based on a blend of indigenous beliefs and Marxist socialism.

Not all villages that achieved de facto autonomy through rebellion are governed by Zapatistas. These are the villages that remain under the control of political bosses and village elders. Our next stop in Chiapas was to one of these villages, San Juan de Chamula. Our transportation options were limited. We could have waited an indefinite amount of time for the San Cristobal bus to pick us up. We could have walked. Or we could have hitched a ride with a local. My slightly more adventurous Australian friend did not even consider it a choice: he flagged down the first pick-up truck to pass by, asked for a ride, and then jumped in the bed of the truck. The rest of us followed. The forty-five minute drive through the mountains was beautiful, albeit slightly terrifying.

After a quick lunch at a local eatery, we headed to the church in the main square. One of our history teachers in Mexico City had told us that entering the church in San Juan was like entering another world. Of course, I expected her description to be exaggerated. I was wrong.

On the outside, the cathedral appeared to be a typical colonial Catholic church. On the inside, it could not have been more different. Instead of pews and pulpits, the church was filled with kneeling worshipers chanting in Tzotzil. Crowded around thousands of burning candles and surrounded by life-size statues of major Catholic saints, the people of San Juan de Chamula had gathered here to practice their unique blend of indigenous

beliefs and Catholicism.

At these ceremonies, curanderos (medicine men) diagnose physical and psychological ailments, suggest remedies, and lead the worshippers. Chanting prayers, making sacrificial offerings (including animals from time to time), and drinking Coca-Cola and a sugarcane-based liquor blend with the basic tenets of Catholicism to create a mystifying syncretic religion that is nearly impossible for outsiders to understand. The centuries-long blending of Mayan spirituality with Catholic ritual has left in place an emergent belief system that only those immersed in the environment could begin to appreciate.

Through visiting the village, I observed that these people identify less with the cultural identity of Mexico than they do with the cultural identity of the civilizations that inhabited the area centuries before Mexico was born.

The people of Oventic and San Juan aspire to the ideals that unify most of human kind. They want security for their families. They want to practice their own beliefs. They want to put food on the table and provide a good life for their children. Given the treatment of the indigenous in Mexico, it is not a stretch to draw a path dependant relationship between historical oppression and indigenous skepticism of the government. It then makes sense that these people choose not to live as Mexicans in Mexico City do, but instead as armed revolutionaries or spiritual mystics, seeking to preserve their identity.

The fact remains that the crop fields in the hills of Chiapas would benefit from the type of modernization that NAFTA sought to bring. It is a sad reality that these adaptations never took

place. Inefficient farming practices still lead to resources being squandered, but these sorts of concerns are absent from the minds of the people in Oventic and San Juan de Chamula. They are concerned instead with being allowed to practice their culture and raise their children as they see fit. They are concerned with being allowed to be themselves.

**Negative Externalities?** The story of the Zapatista rebels and other villagers in Chiapas highlights a broader, more intensely debated topic in modern international affairs: the effects of globalization driven by neo-liberal economic policies on indigenous peoples. The Zapatista rebellion sought to shed light not only on the plight of Mexico's indigenous poor but, more generally, on all poor people marginalized by the thrust of globalization. The effect of globalization—the further integration of world markets and the subsequent cultural spillovers that result—is a fiercely debated topic.

In short, the controversy arises from two seemingly incompatible understandings of free trade. From David Ricardo to Paul Krugman, most established economists have always defended free trade. Indeed, for all the concepts economists disagree about; close to 90 percent believe free trade to be beneficial.<sup>6</sup> The underlying idea is that specialization determined by comparative advantage in productivity raises the welfare of consumers between trading nations. Competition leads to lower prices and greater product choice.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, politicians, pundits, and activists alike attack free trade as a cause of job loss, wage suppression,

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and low-quality commercial products. Some also criticize free trade as a new form of colonialism—the idea that wealthier countries take advantage of poor ones for low-cost primary goods and cheap labor. It is claimed that the benefits of free trade arise from dreadful working conditions, low accessibility to technology, and exploitation of low wages.<sup>8</sup>

Deborah Yashar explores indigenous demands for the rights to preserve their cultures and territories and achieve greater political autonomy within Latin American societies. This political organization has coincided with the movement toward liberalization in Latin

intensive industries would benefit, and that land-intensive industries would suffer—were largely substantiated. The maquiladora industry added nearly half a million jobs in the decade after NAFTA's passage, and real wages increased by 22 percent. During the same time period, nearly 1.5 million farmers lost their jobs and suffered wage losses of 25 percent.<sup>10</sup>

Of all places in Mexico, Chiapas stood to lose the most from NAFTA. About a quarter of the population of Chiapas are indigenous people of Mayan decent. Most are rural farmers, cultivating small farms situated in the hills and mountains. These are the

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America. Yashar argues that indigenous movements have emerged to challenge the disadvantages of their contemporary citizenship in Latin America. Political liberalization has given these groups an unprecedented ability to mobilize. Yet, at the same time, economic liberalization has limited the access to state-provided resources on which these populations had come to rely.<sup>9</sup>

My research project, "Liberalization in a World of Patronage: NAFTA and the Mexican Worker," considered the effect of NAFTA on two specific sectors of the Mexican economy: agriculture and maquiladoras (low-skill manufacturing). Through this work, I learned that the economic expectations for NAFTA—that low-skill, capital-

farms that for forty years received government subsidies to maintain viability. After NAFTA, these comparatively unproductive farms stood no chance of competing with their larger, more technologically advanced counterparts in the United States.<sup>11</sup>

The Zapatista rebellion failed to instigate the country-wide political chaos it was intended to, but the message of the movement was heard. Instead of seeking out and persecuting the rebel leaders, the Mexican government negotiated with them. In 1996, the San Andres Accords were signed between the Mexican government and the Zapatista rebels.<sup>12</sup> Although it has not yet been entirely fulfilled, the agreement guaranteed the Zapatistas

and other indigenous villagers the right to own land and set up self-governing communities. The Mexican government has since set up a number of social development programs in Chiapas in order to increase access to better health care and education.

### **A Different Thanksgiving.**

Trained at Georgetown and a general adherent to neoliberal economics, I have grown accustomed to viewing the world with a sort of “Washington Consensus” mindset—one in which free trade is always beneficial in the long run and should therefore be sought after despite the temporary hardship it may cause. I still believe this. But my experience in Chiapas made many of the nuanced arguments against free trade come into sharp relief. My multifaceted college education provided me the lens through which I filtered these experiences. I drew on knowledge gained from my international economics classes and my research work. Oventic and San Juan de Chamula taught me that, despite the relative gains from trade that people may accrue in the long run, a sense of culture and identity loss can be associated with the costs of economic development. Some of the very

people that free trade claims to help in the long run may have no interest in participating in free trade at all. This loss of culture and this top-down model of improving quality of life might be understood as just another iteration of indigenous oppression. This was something that I could not have learned in the classroom. It is something I could have learned only from my experience on the ground.

After returning from the mountain villages, my exchange friends and I had a typical evening filled with nourishing food and enriching conversation. That night, in reflecting on my abnormal Thanksgiving experience, I could not help but think of the original feast at Plymouth Rock, celebrated by the Pilgrims. The original Thanksgiving celebrated a kind of redemption—pragmatic, economic, and hard-earned. This is our American identity. But during Thanksgiving 2010 in Oventic and San Juan, I came to understand a different type of redemption—one rooted in collective consciousness and spiritual transcendence, instead of in individuality and self-reliance. I will never forget the lessons I drew from the vivid and indelible Thanksgiving I spent with the indigenous peoples of Chiapas.

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## NOTES

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