



The Zapatista Indian women's march and protest in San Andrés Larráinzar on International Women's Day, March 8, 1997.

Come with Me to Reality

Frank Bergon

We fight for land and not for illusions.

—Emiliano Zapata, 1918

Last March I tried to find the road to Reality—La Realidad—the Zapatista village in the Lacandón jungle of Chiapas, headquarters of Subcommandante Marcos, the ski-masked, pipe-smoking, multilingual leader of the 1994 peasant uprising that stunned Mexico and offered the world media its first postmodern revolutionary hero. An energetic writer, Marcos has sustained a guerrilla war for four years, launching weapons of words out of the jungle via e-mail and fax.

His detractors call him a better media star than revolutionary: darling of intellectuals and celebrities, more subpoet than subcommander. Marcos fights back with words about Mexican reality, giving voice to thousands of Indians without land or hope, swept under the governmental rug of modernism and progress and left to sift into the country's cast-off state of Chiapas. In the jungle region of Reality they dwell, "the ones with no name, the ones with no face, willing to die in order to live." The Zapatistas wear *pasamontañas*—ski masks—that cover their faces because, Marcos says, "to have no land is to have no face."

Despite Marcos's efforts to publicize the continuing struggle in Chiapas, little news about the conflict has reached the United States during the past year. Has the Zapatista movement simply petered out, as one U.S. journalist told me? Or is the troubled state of Chiapas, as a Mexican senator recently claimed, actually leading Mexico into its gravest national crisis since the 1910 revolution?

I spent a month in Chiapas to find out, and during a week on the road to the village of Reality, I came to see that Chiapas is engulfed in a conflict that is fundamentally environmental. The continuing clash between the government and peasants is about the land. Who owns it? What is it to be used for?

March 7th. It is Friday evening in the colonial town of San Cristóbal de las Casas, and I am sitting in the apartment of Janet Schwartz, a reporter for the Chiapas newspaper *Cuarto Poder* (The Fourth Power), when her groaning fax machine begins to spew forth a letter from Marcos addressed to the Committees of Solidarity with the Zapatista Struggle Everywhere on Planet Earth.

"Brothers and Sisters," the letter begins. "Good health and greetings. Here we are, here we carry on. The night above is scarcely a gray reflection of the night below. For some reason, the night down here is always darker than the night above." The letter moves through quotations from Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-*

Glass to a witty fictional dialogue between a cyberspace hacker and a government official to a visionary assertion that the governmental failure to honor the 1996 peace agreement signed with the Zapatista rebels has actually served a positive purpose: “The government likes to pull out a map to show foreigners that the Zapatistas are just a little problem in a little corner of a little southeastern part of Mexico, perfectly contained and controlled by the powerful military force of the federal government. But now it’s clear that Zapatista demands are not just those of the Indians in Chiapas. They express the aspirations of all this nation’s Indian peoples, and they also reflect, despite individual manifestations and needs, the shared longings of all indigenous people on the American continent.”

“We are you,” he tells his readers. “With astonishment and admiration we have been coming to understand your collective history of rebellion against religious intolerance, against xenophobia, against militarization, against ecological destruction, against fascism, against segregation, against hypocrisy, against big capital, against poverty, against corruption, against new-liberal economics”—the Whitmanesque litany goes on to suggest that all the world is Chiapas. “So,” Marcos concludes, “persevering on our journey, we want to thank you for once more turning to see us and giving us a hand so that we’re not again left to fall among the forgotten.”

Tomorrow the letter will appear in its entirety in Mexico’s newspapers, and Janet has to write an analysis for her paper. She’s in a hurry to meet a deadline. I haven’t spent much time around reporters, but I’ve come to learn that they’re always in a hurry. Dressed in a flouncy Mexican skirt and embroidered blouse, with a gamin’s face and abundant energy, Janet looks a decade younger than forty-three, like the art student she once was, when friends affectionately called her “Janet Planet.” A Fulbright grant brought her to Chiapas to study the Mayan murals at Bonampak at a time when the Mexican government was kicking foreigners out of major archeological sites. Now patching together a living as an occasional tourist guide and “accidental journalist,” Janet receives only \$200 a month from *Cuarto Poder* because it is understood that she can sell the same stories to other newspapers and magazines. The city government, federal archeological organizations, and other civil and political groups seeking representation in the press may also pay her. That’s the way journalists make a living in Mexico.

“Isn’t this emolument a problem?” I ask.

“It’s a real problem,” Janet says, “but it’s the reality.”

Janet has been to the jungle village of Reality several times during her coverage of the Zapatista conflict. An exhibition of her photographs currently hangs in a local gallery. One image of Marcos as a guerrilla swashbuckler on horseback galloping toward the camera suggests a matinee idol playing the role of Emiliano Zapata, the 1910 revolutionary hero whose name and cause the Zapatistas have adopted: “*Tierra y Libertad!* Land and Liberty! Land to those who work it!” Zapata’s unflagging cries for agrarian reform became codified in the Mexican Constitution of 1917, theoretically, at least, guaranteeing Indians and poor peasants an inalienable right to communal lands.



Zapatista military leaders: (left to right) Commander Tacho, Subcommander Marcos, and Commander Ramona.

A close-up of Marcos in a black ski mask reveals light skin, non-Indian eyes, and ubiquitous pipe. A group shot at the peace talks shows him in his role as “The Sub,” spokesman for actual Zapatista Indian commanders, such as Tacho and Ramona. The Mexican government has claimed that Marcos is a former university professor named Rafael Guillén who spent ten years organizing the Indians in the Lacandón jungle. Not everyone in San Cristóbal is so sure. Supposedly, Marcos was educated by Jesuits in Tampico, and some still believe he may be an ex-priest, as was originally speculated. Marcos himself has said, “I heard that they discovered another Marcos and that he is from Tampico. Not bad, the coast there is beautiful. Is this new Marcos good-looking? I ask because lately they have all been extremely ugly, and they are ruining my female correspondence.”

Janet’s photos display a man whose hazel eyes are alternately mischievous and solemn. One could certainly imagine his angular fingers raising a host. Those long, delicate hands repeatedly flash out of the frame.

Ten years ago if you had told me the Indian women of Chiapas would demonstrate in a mass march, I would’ve said you were crazy. As a woman myself, I can only say it’s both inspiring and thrilling.

—American resident of San Cristóbal de las Casas

March 8th. More than two thousand Maya women in bright red woven blouses, red sashes, blue shawls, and black woolen skirts, their faces covered with Zapatista red bandanas or black ski masks, form a colorful river through the streets of San Andrés Larráinzar under a liquid blue sky in the mountains north of San Cristóbal. This town is a hot spot in the Zona Norte—the

North Zone—that extends from the edge of the jungle south of Palenque to the Indian highlands of northern Chiapas. Out of this village emerged the Zapatista Commanders Ramona and David. To both the federal and state armies, the North Zone is the current “zone of conflict.”

The marching women stop in front of a federal army encampment at the edge of town, and for half an hour, with fists raised, they chant: “Get out of here! Away with the tanks! Stop militarization!” A Zapatista woman addresses the crowd in both Spanish and her native Tzotzil: “We are the Zapatista Indian women of Chiapas. We have come out of our homes today to make the nation and all the world aware that we are suffering Indian women because of the militarization of our towns and communities. On this International Women’s Day we join the many exploited workers mistreated by bosses, the government, and North American imperialism, who have had to die in order to reclaim justice and defend their rights as women.”

She beseeches President Zedillo to hear their voices and to immediately remove the army and its machines of destruction. “We are the women and children suffering from this incessant war of low intensity in the North Zone.” For years, she warns, Indians have been begging for a dignified living, land to produce food, medical clinics and health workers, schools and teachers, electricity, uncontaminated water, justice, and respect. Instead, armed soldiers, tanks, helicopters, and war planes have invaded communities, threatening day and night to put an end to Indian peoples. She asks for renewal of the peace talks and completion of the now-suspended 1996 agreement signed by the government and the Zapatista army.

Her words echo the same Zapatista demands I heard when I attended the San Andrés peace talks as an international observer during the summer of 1995. At that time, Commander Tacho had exclaimed that if Mexico had a good government, Indian villages would have health clinics and doctors and decent roads to connect their communities and transport their crops. “Why is it that we don’t have any of these things?”

In the liberal press, the “conflict” in Chiapas often appears as a clash between “modernity” and “tradition”—the struggle of Indian people to retain their indigenous way of life against a technological, capitalist society advanced by the government’s recent free-market economic reforms. But testament to the complexity of this struggle is that many Zapatista demands are for technology, which, elsewhere in Mexico and throughout the Third World, is ironically hastening the transformation of indigenous cultural diversity into a global civilization. Change is at hand in Chiapas, and the real issue is what voice the indigenous people have in that change. The problem with the Mexican government’s recent calculations for projected change through the North American Free Trade Agreement and its undergirding new-liberal economics is that Indian needs are not even considered as part of the equation.

Janet has to rush back to San Cristóbal to e-mail her article and to send her photos on an hour-and-a-half journey by taxi to her newspaper in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the state capital of Chiapas. Images of the marching women and their

story appear in the next morning's issue of *Cuarto Poder*, but they are not picked up by the Associated Press. Too many people think that unless news makes it into the U.S. media, it's somehow not real. As the postcolonial British writer Timothy Mo has said, "If it doesn't get onto TV in the West, it hasn't happened."

What's covered in the U.S. media at the moment is news of Mexican drug scandals, the Salinas brothers' involvement with drug cartels, and the threatened decertification of Mexico in the war against drugs, not the historic mobilization of Indian women. But the women are striving to make themselves heard. They now have the power to vote. After seventy years of autocracy in Mexico, as democracy emerges, women's votes will matter. They are growing aware of their communal power.

"The women are mad," Janet says. "We're mad."

For everybody, everything! For us, nothing! We want the great quantities of land that are in the hands of the finqueros and the national terratenientes and the foreigners and other persons who own a lot of land but are not farmers. We want lands to pass into the hands of those villagers who have no land at all.

—Zapatista Commander Humberto, March 1994

March 9th. Percy and Nancy Wood have turned their beautiful San Cristóbal retirement home into a four-bedroom guest house. Now in their seventies, they continue to work as day-and-night hosts and guides, while Percy, a former Princeton psychiatrist, occasionally returns to work in the United States. Their guests have included Carlos Fuentes, Joe Kennedy, and Bianca Jagger.

We sit with drinks on the terrace amid colonial antiques and vases of flowers, overlooking a panoramic view of the city. The servants—Fidelia and her two daughters—are preparing Sunday lunch. Momentarily free of house guests, Nancy has invited over some American locals. Percy is upstairs in bed fighting off an onslaught of that perennial downer called *la gripe*.

I hear about the Indian takeover of many homes and lands owned by both foreigners and Ladinos—a local term applied to nonindigenous Mexicans. A group called the Lombardistas seized the stables where Percy and Nancy kept their eight horses. They took over adjoining land in the hills that had been donated to Pro Natura, a local conservation organization. Nancy is the only gringa on the board of directors.

"They invaded houses, chopped down the trees, and began selling plots to the Indians," Nancy says. "They put up signs saying, 'We are Zapatistas. No Gringos.'"

Much land along the ring road surrounding San Cristóbal, which just a few years ago was sleepy farm country, now sprouts jumbles of wooden shacks with roofs of tin and thatch. Without sufficient clean water, dysentery is a problem. Massive shantytowns with names like The Anthill press against the city. Most of the land invaders are *expulsados*—Chamula Indian converts to evangelical Protestant sects who have been expelled from their traditional Catholic villages—if "traditional" can include village churches where mass is never said, chickens are

daily sacrificed in Mayan curing rituals, and the sun is honored as the embodiment of Jesus Christ. Over the past thirty years, land grabs in the name of religious purification have left more than thirty thousand Chamula Indians homeless—until they invaded private lands. Since the 1994 uprising, Indians and peasants have encroached on an additional two thousand private ranches and farms in Chiapas.

“The situation is volatile,” a guest says.

The reality of too many people and not enough land glares from the surrounding mountains stripped of oak and pine.

“The Indian invaders cut trees to build their huts. Many make their living by selling firewood—to us. It’s a real problem.”

We’re all part of it. Four years ago, in 1993, when my wife Holly and I were spending a sabbatical in San Cristóbal, the government had imposed a ban on all woodcutting, except for trees already dead. Living in a charming, drafty old house with high ceilings and a leaky roof that welcomed rain, we ordered contraband firewood from a Chamula woodcutter, which had to be delivered secretly before dawn. On Percy and Nancy’s patio stands a square pile of neatly stacked oak firewood the size of a small storage shed. I ask if the wood is still delivered in the dark.

“Oh, no,” Nancy answers. “There are no laws in Chiapas anymore. Everything is done in the open now. If there’s anything illicit you’re desiring to do, now’s a good time to do it.”

Lunch is ready, and we eat some of the tastiest food available in San Cristóbal. Nancy rings a small silver bell on the table. The solemn cook, her cheek creased with a dark scar, and her lovely smiling daughters bring us seconds.

The Zapatistas in the jungle around Reality aren't a threat to anyone. Their war is symbolic. The Indian groups up here in the North Zone are the danger. They're real.

—American observer in San Cristóbal de las Casas

March 10th. The road from San Cristóbal de las Casas to Palenque slithers through misty mountains of pine and red clay into muggy green densities of palms and broad-leaved tropical plants. Janet has to cover a land dispute and shoot-out between Indians and the state army outside Palenque. Two soldiers are dead and five seriously wounded. Two Jesuit priests and two Indian leaders have been arrested and charged with murder and incitement of the Indian ambush.

Janet recounts events since New Year’s Day of 1994 when the mysterious Zapatista rebels seized four towns and three villages in Chiapas, including San Cristóbal. We eat lunch in Ocosingo, where the heaviest fighting took place. After twelve days of gunfire and 150 deaths, the president, surprised by international support for the rebels, ordered a unilateral cease-fire and the initiation of peace talks.

Janet talks on her cellular phone while I drive the VW Jetta into Palenque. A blue army truck packed with soldiers turns in front of us. Janet says, “Follow them, babe.”

Janet has taken to calling me “babe,” but since she also calls her son “babe,” and on the phone she says, “Hi, babe,” to the woman at the AP desk in Mexico City, the affectionate sobriquet floats free of personal attachment.

The army truck leads us to a street lined with a dozen trucks and milling soldiers. Insignias on their dark blue uniforms identify them as the State Public Security Battalion of Riflemen, Maya Division. Indians simply call them *Azules*—the Blues. Wielding automatic weapons, they swarm around us as we climb out of the car.

Janet shows her press credentials and asks, “Where’s the commander?”

The heavy-set commander, Mario Ruiz Ortega, out of uniform, sits casually on a cement embankment like a relaxing tourist in a blue T-shirt. The smooth undersides of his wide forearms bear crudely designed tattoos: a blue skull and a blue dagger. Soldiers with automatic weapons and bolt-action rifles slung every which way cluster close to overhear the conversation. Across the street in a toy store a knot of soldiers whoops while playing a video game. The undisciplined milling of these armed men is unnerving.

The commander tersely assures Janet that Palenque is calm. The army has things under control. “Everything is tranquil,” he says.

I recall the comment of Mexican General Othón Calderón that was reported in the *Los Angeles Times* shortly after the Zapatista uprising: “Human rights are just plain silliness. My job is to restore order, and I’m going to do my job.”

On the way back to the car, Janet asks a soldier to see the copy of *Tabasco Today* he is reading. A photo of patrolling troops and an article headlined “Nervousness in Palenque” appear on an inside page. We go to the town square looking for the newspaper, but vendors have no copies of *Tabasco Today*. A man on a park bench lets Janet borrow his, but the key page has been ripped out. The man says that’s how the newspaper was when he bought it.

Chiapas is in a civil war. Like a low-grade fever, it escapes detection because it's of low intensity, but it's still a war. Corpses are turning up everyday.

—Taxco silver dealer and photographer in Chiapas

March 11th. In San Martín Chamizal, a village in ranch country halfway between Palenque and the Lacandón jungle, Indian peasants on the dirt road point to where the ambush took place. They hold up metal tear-gas canisters flung at them, they claim, from government helicopters. The AP photographer, Gregory Bull, who has driven that morning from San Cristóbal, snaps close-ups of the canisters. Printed on the metal are the English words *riot gas*.

A campesino writes our names into a spiral notebook. Everyone is suspicious of everyone. Even reporters, peace workers, and international observers might actually be *orejas*—ears—for the government.

Janet interviews distraught refugees who have fled from their homes in the nearby hamlet of General Emiliano Zapata. The day before the ambush, they say, hundreds of soldiers swept into their village, knocking down doors, overturning furniture, hacking down walls, and evicting sixty-five families. A schoolteacher



Frank Bergov

Mexican state soldiers sacking the Indian village of Emiliano Zapata.

says his third-graders fled to the mountains. People are scattered, lost. The ambush, an Indian explains into the tape recorder, was in retaliation for the army raid. He is a member of a peasant organization called *Xi'Nich*—the Nocturnal Black Ants. Like their counterpart organization, the Bees, they're workers. They sometimes call themselves the Aroused Night Ants. "We are the Zapatistas of the North," he says. "The priests had nothing to do with the ambush. The soldiers gave us no alternative. We had to fight back."

When we arrive at Emiliano Zapata, green army trucks and a humvee roar out of the village carrying helmeted troops in federal olive green uniforms. The village squats on the fringe of an eight-thousand-acre ranch owned by Manuel Huerta, who controls the distributorship of Superior beer in Palenque. A white sign displays the name of the *ejido*—communally owned land—and a cartoon figure of a thickly mustached General Zapata wearing a sombrero, bandolier, and sword, his raised hand gripping a rifle. The revolutionary slogan, "Land and Liberty!" appears along with the name of the rural primary school and the serial number of this *ejido*, occupied and farmed by *Xi'Nich* for three years in the municipality of Palenque. At present, there are 28,000 *ejidos* in Mexico, many originally claimed from fallow ground or illegally oversized ranches.

In a sweeping field of green grass, the abandoned thatch-and-tin-roofed huts with stick walls look almost peaceful until the broken doors and hacked walls become visible. Inside the huts, clothes and kitchen utensils lay scattered across dirt floors. Greg takes photos of a pupil's abandoned mathematics book and an overturned bowl of bright red chilis on the ground. The *Azules* are everywhere, their trucks parked under trees and along the river. The commander we met in Palenque is now in uniform with an automatic AK-47 slung from his shoulder, muzzle downward. His fingers hold a hunk of cooked chicken, and with a seemingly rehearsed casualness, he takes a bite. He makes a sweeping

gesture with the chicken meat and tells the journalists to go ahead, look around, take pictures. Janet fiddles with her long-lensed camera; it momentarily appears to be jammed. The commander gestures toward my little point-and-shoot automatic and says, "Use that one." His smile is surprisingly sweet.

Greg strides through the village recording the havoc. He shoots and walks, shoots and walks. Soldiers swivel their faces away from the camera. "This is good stuff," Greg says. Both he and Janet want this eviction to make the news. The Associated Press is contemplating closing its Chiapas office. With peace talks abandoned, the AP considers nothing much newsworthy to be happening in Chiapas.

Janet tells Greg he should've brought his transmitter to send the photos quickly to Mexico City. "They wouldn't be interested," Greg says, "unless somebody's being shot."

Soldiers with machetes appear to be lackadaisically repairing a demolished grammar school. With twine they slowly reattach a fallen sign: VICENTE RIVA CENTRAL EDUCATION AND GARDEN OF CHILDREN. I wonder, What's the point? A photo would still show the school half-destroyed.

A husky soldier in a floppy blue jungle hat and a sleeveless blue T-shirt stares at me, the muzzle of his casually slung rifle directed at my legs. We stare at each other. He's only a boy, but his surprisingly bright blue eyes generate a corresponding coldness in my stomach. Do those eyes, I wonder, accurately reflect my sense that I'm looking at a man who might kill me without a second's regret? I'm grateful for the almost tangible atmosphere of restraint that seems to be pressing these troops into self-conscious slow motion.

A reporter from the Mexico City newspaper *Universal* arrives in a taxi. He says that some thirty families twelve miles down the road have also been evicted from the community named New Hope. Soldiers have set the houses on fire. He expects the same will happen here after we leave.

Article 27. Ownership of lands and waters within the boundaries of the national territory is vested originally in the Nation, which has had, and has, the right to transmit title thereof to private persons, thereby constituting private property. . . . The Nation shall at all times have the right to impose on private property such limitations as the public interest may demand, as well as the right to regulate the utilization of natural resources which are susceptible to appropriation, in order to conserve them and ensure a more equitable distribution of wealth.

—Mexican Constitution, 1917

This country was once all tropical rain forest, but deforestation has been rampant. By mid-century, river-based logging companies had cut all the hardwoods they could reach. In 1957, the government decreed the jungle open for colonization. Like the homesteading "safety valve" of the American West, the Lacandón jungle served as Mexico's dumping ground for thousands of homeless peasants. It was a neat way to avoid the true land reform that was promised by the visionary

Mexican constitution after the 1910 revolution. Government-cut roads into the jungle during the fifties attracted thousands of displaced slash-and-burn corn farmers. In the sixties, cattle ranchers spread into the cleared land with funding from the World Bank to produce beef that was then exported in large part to U.S. fast-food franchises. Valuable hardwoods were being destroyed at an alarming rate.

With two-thirds of the original jungle ravaged, the government in 1972 decreed the remaining one and a half million acres to be the sole property of sixty-six Lacandón families, who were labeled the “original owners of the rain forest”—another neat trick allowing government-owned logging companies to sign a contract with the Indian “owners” to clear the interior jungle of ten thousand mahogany and cedar trees a year. Forgotten in the deal were thousands of other migrant Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Tojolobal Mayan-speaking Indians who were expanding into the most rapidly growing population in Mexico. According to World Bank figures, in 1960, just three years after the beginning of official colonization, the population in the Lacandón jungle had grown to six thousand. By 1994, it had jumped to three-hundred thousand. As Alma Guillermoprieto has written, “These were Maya Indians in the process of becoming Mexican peasants . . . true pioneers willing to listen to a new gospel and experiment with radically different ways of doing things.”

When Marcos and his five revolutionary comrades arrived in the largely deforested jungle in 1983, they didn’t enter a vacuum. Activist Catholic priests, evangelical Protestant missionaries, Maoist leftists, and union leaders had spawned a welter of acronym-laden peasant organizations and cooperatives fighting for political and social change. Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution provided the basis for land distribution by limiting the size of private ranches and guaranteeing communal lands to peasants banded together in *ejidos*.

In 1992, armed revolt became reality when the government declared an end to land reform. Claiming that there was no more land to dispense, the government revised Article 27 to halt further land distribution and to open existing *ejidos* to “mercantile speculation.” For the first time since the revolution, communal land in *ejidos* could be sold or mortgaged as private property to foreign and national investors. Landless peasants could no longer harbor hope for communal land. An invader of private land became subject to a maximum sentence of forty years in prison.

The government, Marcos proclaimed, “really screwed us when they destroyed Article 27, for which Zapata and his revolution fought. We and our families were sold down the river, or you could say that they stole our pants and sold them. What could we do? We did everything legal that we could so far as elections and organizations were concerned, and to no avail.”

Not everyone in the jungle welcomed the armed revolt—certainly not the Lacandón Indians who had benefited from government payments.

The 1994 Zapatista Declaration of War from the Lacandón jungle generated demands on behalf of both “Indians and peasants,” a repeated phrase indicating that the struggle encompassed more than Indian rights. The fight was for Mexico’s rural poor and dispossessed, whether Indian or Ladino. The issue was not just of ethnicity but of social class. In its rush toward modernism and progress, the government of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari had simply writ-

ten off Indians and peasant *mestizos* as an anachronistic, disposable part of the economy. Their farming methods were seen as primitive and inefficient. Suspension of land reform was a way of preventing further erosion of good land into poor agricultural production unable to compete in a global market. Why should Indians and peasants wastefully scratch away in *milpas* for a few corn stalks when tons of cheap Kansas corn could flow into Mexico?

Opening the economy to free trade and foreign investors, it was argued, would force the backward peasantry into the modern world and a global economy. Crop subsidies and credits for peasant farmers clanged to a halt under Salinas, and in the summer of 1993 came passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement, officially tolling, as Marcos says, the death knell for Indians and peasants. Meanwhile, Mexico's neglected urban poor in the north streamed into *maquiladoras*, mostly American-owned-and-managed sweat factories that assemble U.S.-made parts into toasters, microwaves, TVs, VCRs, sports clothes, and children's toys for tariff-free export back into the United States. During the Salinas administration, Mexico's gross national product soared, millionaires became billionaires, leaving workers on both sides of the border screwed, as Mexico, according to many observers, became an entrenched colony of the United States. A country dependent on the United States for more than four-fifths of its trade is a colony.

TV and modern technology have done more in the last twenty years to destroy Indian culture than the previous five hundred years of conquest.

—A Chiapas observer

K'in Bor is repairing a bicycle when I arrive at his compound of tin-roofed houses on the edge of the jungle. His battered brown pickup is parked in a lean-to. K'in Bor is in his mid-forties, muscular, and with dark intense eyes. His black hair falls to his shoulders in traditional Lacandón style. Described in a current guidebook as "Mexico's last wild people," the Lacandones—long haired men in simple white tunics and similarly dressed women with free falling hair or single braids decorated with toucan feathers—are Yucatec-speaking Mayas who originally fled into the jungle nearly four hundred years ago. Escaping Spanish conquest and conversion, they survived as self-defined *Hach Winik*—Real People.

With two Lacandón villages now converted to evangelical Protestantism, only the northern village of Najá remains fully non-Christian. When I visited Najá in 1995, Old Chan K'in, the charismatic spiritual leader of the Lacandón, sat in a hammock while his two wives—Koh and María Koh—cooked tortillas over fires on the dirt floor. Dogs crowded the smoky room along with several of Old Chan K'in's twenty-one children and their offspring. Diminutive in a flowing tunic and with long hair still ebony, the old man said, "I can't see too well, my ears are bad, and I've had the grip all winter." With glinting eyes narrowed, he burst into laughter. "But of course I am very old."

Old Chan K'in died in December 1996. His family said he was 104. Janet Schwartz wrote an AP article, which the *New York Times* published as an

obituary. The piece quoted Chan K'in Cuarto, a son who worried that the death of his father spelled the end of Lacandón culture: "The young people, nobody learned to pray, and they don't want to anymore. Now the young people cut their hair. The world is going to end."

K'in Bor is married to one of Old Chan K'in's daughters. He and his family moved to the Protestant village of Lacanjá Chan Sayab when loggers began devastating the northern forest. "It's better here," he says. "You can still walk in the jungle. Nothing's left in Najá." Refusing conversion, K'in Bor nevertheless accepts the Pentecostal religion of his parents and other Lacandonese with tolerance: "It seems to help some," he says.

K'in Bor says that the protective boundaries of the 815,000-acre Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve, created in 1978, are more real on maps than in the jungle. Settlers still invade the rain forest, cutting trees, clearing land, and selling wood illegally. He describes the situation as one of chaos, even worse since the Zapatista uprising. Some land-starved Tzetales are even taking over Lacandón *milpas*. The national oil company, PEMEX, has experimental wells throughout the reserve. K'in Bor is concerned that the government has given a retroactive land title to a growing squatter community, called Indio Pedro, located in the heart of the so-called protected bioreserve.

K'in Bor's compound is one of three tourist camps in Lacanjá. A painted sign in the yard propped against a tin-roofed hut announces: K'IN BOR ECO-TOURISM. Four years ago, I spent a week in the jungle with K'in Bor without seeing another tourist. Two years later, I watched a convoy of Maya Road tourist vans pull into his compound. Tents sprouted across the grass. Today, an enormous tour bus sits on the grass.



Frank Berger

Lacandón Maya Indians paddling a mahogany dugout canoe across Lake Najá in the Chiapas rain forest.

"I have thirty-seven tourists here," K'in Bor says, explaining that he's home because he has hired two relatives to serve as guides for the day.

K'in Bor asks if I want a beer and something to eat. We go into the kitchen where his wife, Nuk, and two daughters are preparing dinner for the tourists. Towers of tortillas are stacked on the table. Nuk tells me to help myself.

Under the euphemism of eco-tourism, the Mexican government is getting into the business in a big way. Its Maya World initiative includes plans to build highways across pristine jungle areas to facilitate travel to Maya ruins. The road from Palenque to Lacanjá is now paved. K'in Bor thinks that the road builders will finish the extension to Bonampak in three or four months. What only a year ago was a tortuous five-hour drive from Palenque over a rutted dirt road, followed by a hot three-hour walk with K'in Bor through the jungle, will become a quick trip in an air-conditioned bus right to the Bonampak ruins. As always, settlers in need of land will follow new roads into the jungle.

Before his death, in the most famous statement attributed to him, Old Chan K'in had fearfully warned, "The roots of all living things are tied together. When a mighty tree is felled, a star falls from the sky. When the last tree in the forest is cut, the world will end."

I ask K'in Bor if he has managed to buy the TV equipment he was looking for when I last saw him. Electricity came to Lacanjá only six years ago, and K'in Bor's TV watching was then limited to videos.

He nods. Now he watches the news at seven o'clock every morning and at seven every evening. "I have a parabolic dish," he says, smiling. "It's in the jungle. The tourists wouldn't like it. It's well hidden."

*Tourists come to see the Maya ruins, but they refuse to see the ruined
Mayas.*

—Father Gonzalo Ituarte, Vicar General, Diocese of San Cristóbal

March 12th. Seven thousand Maya Indians from twenty-five villages in the North Zone are marching to Yajalón to demand the return of the American priest, Loren Ribe, and two other priests—a Spaniard and an Argentinean—who were expelled from Mexico for political activities. The planned march now also becomes a rally for the Mexican Jesuits and Indian leaders jailed for the ambush and murder of state soldiers.

Driving from Palenque, Janet and I turn north through a village and pull behind an army vehicle, not unlike an open-topped cattle truck, crammed with soldiers, heading toward the march. Janet leans out the passenger window and snaps a photo.

"Gun it, babe," she says. "Pass them."

I swing the Jetta left, right, left again; each time the truck swerves to cut us off until, sideways, it blocks the narrow street. Two dozen soldiers tumble from the truck and surround the car, pointing their weapons. A young soldier writes down the license number as the heavy commander with graying hair and mustache leans into the passenger window. With his elbows braced on the window

edge, he dangles his thick fingers in front of Janet. "What do you think you're doing?" he asks.

Janet produces her press credentials. "My work," she answers. "You've got your work, and I've got mine. Let me do it."

The commander says we're in the zone of conflict; thousands are gathering in Chilón and Tilón; we have no business snapping pictures. He could take the camera. Janet shows a card requesting governmental support for journalists. The argument goes back and forth until Janet backs off enough for the commander to save face and let us go.

"They can go to hell," Janet says.

In Yajalón, marchers converge on the town, pack the village church, and form a massive crowd outside. The atmosphere here is more Guatemalan than around San Cristóbal. Tzeltal Indian men wear campesino straw hats and Ladino pants and shirts, but the women dress in bright billowy skirts and white blouses with colorful neck embroidery originally adapted from sixteenth-century Spanish designs. Yellow and red satin ribbons twist through thick braids falling down their backs.

The fiery words of a Dominican priest in the church boom from loudspeakers, protesting the imprisonment of the Jesuits on ridiculous charges. He characterizes the arrests as the further persecution of the Catholic Church in Chiapas and as governmental sabotage of the peace process. The Dominican is an eloquent speaker, a rabble-rouser whose effective demagoguery incites the cheering crowd to chants of "Justice! Liberty! Peace!"

The AP photographer Greg says that the wire service didn't pick up his photos of the sacked houses at Emiliano Zapata. Tomorrow he's flying to Costa Rica, where Mexico is playing in the soccer games. Perhaps soccer will elicit more interest in the international media. Certainly, the peaceful mobilization of seven thousand Indians marks a significant moment in Mexican history. I wonder why the media can't assume responsibility for educating the public. If such peaceful actions generate no interest, no wonder people resort to bullets.

The photographers snap pictures, and I surreptitiously snap pictures of them. Photographers, as I've come to learn, don't like to be photographed.

The tension in Mexico grows, but in Chiapas it is more intense than in the rest of the country. The state and federal authorities seem not to understand that the nation is now in the gravest crisis of its postrevolutionary history.

—Heberto Castillo, Mexican congressional senator, March 12, 1997

March 13th. Spanish sentences scroll across Janet's computer screen as she types an article, smokes a cigarette, and drinks from a bottle of cane *aguardiente*. It's Thursday night. Our plan now is to drive to Reality on Saturday.

Janet has finished an article about the release of the Jesuit priests and the two Indian leaders. A judge threw the case out of court and ordered that the Jesuits and Indians be freed after determining that insufficient evidence existed to support the charges. "Our arrest and imprisonment was totally unjust and illegal,"



Thousands of Maya Indian women support Zapatista demands on 1997 International Women's Day in Chiapas.

one of the priests says. Still, it's heartening to know that the Mexican justice system maintains enough independent clout to thwart governmental perfidy. Meanwhile, a report arrives today announcing that the Vatican has ordered two Jesuit institutions closed. Citing the propagation of radical Liberation Theology and encouragement of religious engagement in partisan acts of opposition against the government as reasons, the Vatican has ordered the Jesuits to shut down both the Interreligious Center of Mexico and the Center of Theological Studies.

Another letter has also arrived from Marcos: eight pages detailing governmental "imprecisions, omissions, and half-truths" about events that have led to the current rupture in peace talks—"the rupture, that is, the war—the everlasting threat the government believes can make up for its mediocrity and lack of intelligence and creativity." Marcos concludes, "We, the Indians and *mestizos* of the Zapatista National Liberation Army, want to be part of Mexico, one free, sovereign country. This is not Mexico as it currently is, but we will transform it. We will not fragment it."

March 14th. Friday. The planned trip to Reality again gets scrapped. A government report arrives about another ambush on the army in the North Zone of El Bosque. Three Indians have been reported killed, six wounded, twenty-seven arrested, and more than eighty families evicted from their homes.

Janet appears uncharacteristically apprehensive. "El Bosque is a bad region," she says. The plan is for reporters to rent cars and drive in a convoy. It's safer

that way, and roads are too rough for Janet's Jetta. "These reporters beat the shit out of rented cars," she says. "They don't care. They drive like insane fucking idiots. You're going to have to keep up with them, babe. I don't want us coming back in black bags."

On Saturday morning, only one car is available at the rental agency, a VW Bug. While stranded reporters seek other transportation, Janet and I drive north from San Cristóbal with a twenty-four-year-old Argentinean woman working as a photographer for Agence France-Presse.

Indians line the mountain road outside San Andrés Larráinzar looking into the gorge where the previous day a pickup transporting Indians had plunged off and rolled down the steep slope, killing six and injuring fourteen. We whip past an enormous federal army encampment lined with tanks. Laughing, bare-chested soldiers play soccer on a dirt field.

The rough road descends like a dried river bed into San Pedro Nixtalucum, a small *ejido* in the municipality of El Bosque. Army trucks and troops occupy the town. Janet interviews the local Indian president of the PRI, the Institutional Revolutionary Party that has ruled Mexico for the past sixty-eight years. We drive to the El Bosque headquarters of PRD, the leftist Democratic Revolutionary Party that was founded in 1988. Like many towns in the North Zone, this Indian village is split between the two.

We drive to a clandestine meeting of PRD refugees from San Pedro, who are openly proclaimed civilian Zapatistas. More than three thousand PRD-Zapatista sympathizers in Chiapas have been displaced from their lands in recent months. Catholic Church human rights investigators videotape the testimony. Under a tin-roofed lean-to, Indian leaders contradict the official army report. There was no ambush, they say. The conflict began in the *ejido* between PRI and PRD factions when troops arrived and attacked the PRD supporters. The first to fall was an eighty-year-old man. One helicopter carried a PRI official who pointed out the homes of Zapatista sympathizers, while others fired at the houses. Soldiers broke down doors, smashed TVs, windows, and furniture, and carried people off.

"We live simply," an Indian leader says in Spanish. "We have no arms. We had only machetes and sticks to defend ourselves. We had to flee into the mountains. Now we can't return to our homes. We don't know how many have been wounded or are missing. They 'disappeared' us without warning. We don't want military intervention in our internal affairs. We can solve problems ourselves between the PRI and PRD with dialogue and the help of human rights organizations."

A maroon pickup that arrived at the beginning of the meeting is parked next to the lean-to. The shaken driver said that a helicopter had shot at him as he drove along the road. At head level, piercing the center of the windshield, a bullet left a hole the size of a dime.

A man begins to read the names of the dead Indians: the three previously announced and a fourth whose body lies in a shed adjoining the lean-to. Clustered behind him, the widows, children, and mothers of the slain men begin to cry. Other men speak, and then the Church's human rights investigator videotapes the testimony of the widows. Dressed in the distinctive red-embroidered

huipiles of the region, the women speak in Tzotzil. A clattering racket grows louder as a low-flying U.S.-made helicopter looms into view and swoops toward the lean-to. The women and children run for cover. Janet and the man with the video camera step into the open, looking skyward to photograph the helicopter.

On a map, the United States floats like a galleon, while extending downward Mexico hooks like a huge keel cutting through the sea. A ship and its keel always turn together.

In his latest effort to forge public awareness of the connections between the two countries, Marcos has written a letter asking Indian leaders in the United States to intervene in the U.S. government's practices, on behalf of Mexican Indians. He says that U.S. money, war machines, and military assistance for the drug war are used to shed Mexican Indian blood.

On Tuesday, we go to see Father Gonzalo Ituarte, who serves as adviser to the bishop in his role as chairman of the National Commission of Intermediation between the government and the Zapatistas. We tell Father Ituarte that we want to visit Reality. We ask him to deliver a letter to Marcos.

"No problem," Father Ituarte says.

A Mexican of Basque heritage, the balding priest has the engaging, ebullient manner of an archetypal Friar Tuck. His smiling face, though, becomes grief-stricken when Janet tells him she is going to the hospital to see two Chamula Indian leaders, directors of the Organization of Evangelical Peoples of the Chiapas Highlands, who were shot and wounded on the road outside San Cristóbal. Early this morning, just twelve miles out of town, while driving their pickup to the state capital to meet a government official, they were ambushed and sprayed with bullets from high-caliber weapons. The unknown attackers escaped.

"The Church in Chiapas has chosen to walk with the poor," Father Ituarte has frequently said, and the poor know that their religious or political affiliations do not affect the Church's allegiance. Even evangelical Protestant Indians, expelled from their homes around San Cristóbal, hang the picture of Bishop Samuel Ruiz in their homes. They call him *Tatik*—Little Father.

Nearly thirty Indian men crowd the dark hospital corridor outside the room of the wounded Chamulas. A mestizo evangelical minister in a blue sports coat comes from the room, and Janet records his account of the ambush.

"The government can't get away with this," Janet says.

"How do you know it's the government?" I ask.

"I know," she says.

That night after driving her car into the city's new underground lot where she can park for free, Janet and I walk through the busy central square. We talk about what we have seen in the North Zone during the past ten days: the historic mobilization of Indian women, religious conflicts, disputes between peasants and large landowners, involvement of the state and federal armies in land evictions, work of the Catholic Church and evangelical Protestant churches, effects of government-sponsored tourism, efforts of reporters attempting to be heard in the international media, confrontations between political factions in

Indian villages, and the persistent influence of Marcos and the Zapatistas in a region crying for “Land and Liberty!”

The joined course of Mexico and the United States is apparent when we look at Mexico in the context of what is occurring throughout the world. Chiapas then becomes the sensitive pivot point on the underwater keel where we first notice how the ship will turn. The United States simply reflects what we see more intensely in Chiapas: an overbrimming population, a ravaged environment, an immense chasm between rich and poor, an engulfing global economy, and the dissolution of local cultures. Marcos appears to be right: All the world is Chiapas.

“It just keeps happening,” Janet says. “Next week we’ll just repeat everything we did this week.”

“Except,” I say, “we still have to get to Reality.”

“We’re there, babe,” she says.

Frank Bergon is the author of the novels *Shoshone Mike*, *Wild Game*, and *The Temptations of St. Ed & Brother S*. He teaches English at Vassar College.