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*Latin American Perspectives* 2008; 35; 112

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X08318982

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# Rebel Youth and Zapatista Autonomous Education

by

Bruno Baronnet

Translated by Mariana Ortega Breña

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*The Lacandón rain forest of Chiapas, Mexico, has been progressively colonized by Maya peasant families since the middle of the twentieth century. Recently, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation—EZLN) unilaterally implemented indigenous rights policies, and young women and men have been taking part in the autonomous local political structures—particularly the schools—through a community-based process in which teachers or “autonomous education promoters” are supervised and maintained by the community. The active participation and engagement of young indigenous people in autonomous education implies a new type of instruction in accordance with communal political traditions and collective priorities. With the help of other international youth groups, Zapatista educators are trying to contribute to a new society in which ethno-political differences are recognized and respected.*

**Keywords:** *Youth political engagement, Education policies, Indigenous autonomy, Zapatistas*

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In June 2005, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation—EZLN) put forward a new plan of political thought and action in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle. The text summarizes the principles that guide the Zapatista struggle, and its first part mentions an essential aspect of its current political and military structure:

Those who were children in that January of '94 are now youths who have grown up in the resistance and have been trained in the rebel dignity carried out by their elders during the past 12 years of war. These youths have a political, technical, and cultural training that those of us who initiated the Zapatista movement did not possess. They are increasingly sustaining our troops and are taking leadership positions in our organization.

This statement also applies to the civilian support bases in the 38 *municipios autónomos en rebeldía zapatistas* (Zapatista autonomous municipalities in rebellion) established in December 1994. Indigenous rebel youth participate actively in communal politics and, particularly, in education. Their daily actions help call Mexico's indigenous educational policies into question in that they reflect the social challenges that have emerged from the particular implementation of ethnic autonomy rights in various parts of Chiapas's Lacandón rain forest.

The lack of involvement of indigenous peoples in the planning and management of educational centers at all levels is one of the many problems

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LATIN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES, Issue 161, Vol. 35 No. 4, July 2008 112-124

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X08318982

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plaguing national policy with regard to indigenous education (Stavenhagen, 2005: 21). During the past decade, Maya and campesino Zapatistas in Chiapas have addressed this issue with municipal projects that include autonomous school networks. The role of young actors, who are responsible for teaching and administrative activities in these municipal projects, is of particular interest. These projects, unique in Mexico, constitute a challenge to the homogenization and centralization of national education policy. They also emphasize the need for a new nation-state concept that fully accepts ethnic minorities and their own forms of social organization, which so far have helped them resist total incorporation into a mestizo and Westernized society.

Before we take an in-depth look at indigenous and Zapatista youth, we must consider how "youth" is defined. As in the case of any other social category in constant flux, we cannot expect a clear-cut definition of "youth": the social reality it encompasses has blurry, permeable, and flexible borders that are dependent on the particular sociocultural context. Study of the social positions and dispositions of youth in a given social space leads us to understand the type of social and political relations encompassed by intergenerational dynamics. Every social field has its own rules about aging, and in order to know how generations are delimited we must be aware of these internal workings (Bourdieu, 1980: 144). This means that we must examine the social-class divisions that separate youth groups in matters such as access to education and the labor market. According to the sociologist Olivier Galland (2007), who specializes in the study of French youth, in order to analyze a particular social category in a precise historical and spatial context we must first contextualize the formation and transformation of its social practices and relations over time, including the construction of civil or political youth associations and the impacts of precarious employment.

Now, in the Latin American context as in other world regions where colonialism has created interethnic relations that are highly unfavorable to aboriginal groups, consideration of sociocultural differences requires attention to any category as heterogeneous as youth. More than simply by the use of a native language, the participation of Mexican rural youth in the political life of their communities is shaped by communal processes of deliberation, representation, and collective control (e.g., the communal assembly and system of local offices) that provide them a sense of ethnic belonging.<sup>1</sup> Ethnic distinctions fundamentally characterize members of these marginalized segments of society, neither children nor adults but representing a bridge between the two. For example (and without conducting an in-depth ethno-linguistic analysis), the social attributes of the Tzeltal<sup>2</sup> *kerem* (that is, the young male between approximately 17 and 22 years of age, who is considered old enough to marry and have children) differ significantly both from those of the *alal* (child) and from the social image of adolescence and youth employed in the contemporary Western world. In fact, the agencies of socialization (family, school, associations, etc.) of young people vary widely with the social, ethnic, and national context. From the time they are 16 years old, young people must start contributing to the community's needs and attending communal assemblies; males begin to work as communal policemen (Leyva, 1995: 382) and/or take on educational, health-related, communication, or agroecological responsibilities.

Among the Tzeltal of the Lacandón forest, primary school and, in the past few years, preschool and middle school have increasingly become agents of socialization alongside of the family. Education is heavily influenced by the activities of political, social, and religious organizations that have been competing against each other for decades.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the inequities and precariousness of employment that oppress Mexican youth as a result of an economic policy aimed at increasing the country's international competitiveness (Oliveira, 2006: 61), Maya and campesino youth must contribute substantially to their families' subsistence. This is a major difference among youth of social classes with differential access to income, education, and the labor market. Jobs are very scarce in the eastern valleys of Chiapas, although there are occasional opportunities to earn US\$3–6 per day. Young people make up a significant portion of the migration flow to the United States, an increasingly important income source for Chiapas families.

### THE LACANDÓN FOREST: PROMISED LAND FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH?

The Lacandón region was reclaimed by the tropical forest after the pre-Columbian Maya groups abandoned it centuries ago and has been undergoing repopulation since the mid-twentieth century by immigrant families from the highlands and from the large cattle ranches. Rather than breaking completely with their earlier culture, these new communities have transformed it. The new forms of administration that they have created have produced an alternative campesino society based on a communal democracy without political bosses (Aubry, 2005: 182–184) that can be seen as an expression of an indigenous movement of cultural revitalization that dates back to the 1970s (Benjamin, 2000: 435–438). The life stories of the current elders, who founded the first *ejidos* (communities based on common property) in Ocosingo, reveal that this multiethnic agrarian colonization process was led by poor youths determined to gain access to land with which to support their families. The adaptation of these young Maya families (which sometimes include young children) has been accompanied by evangelization and the transformation of political rituals. In contrast to those elsewhere in Mesoamerica, the political institutions of these Maya colonists have no gerontocratic component (e.g., a council of elders). Moreover, because of the limited presence of the state and its educational institutions until the 1970s, indigenous campesinos have learned to read and write in Spanish through the agrarian struggle and political and religious movements (Rockwell, 2005: 18–19). The first Tzeltal, Tzotzil, Ch'ol, and Tojolabal colonists were usually illiterate and came from villages and haciendas where the uniform national discourse espoused by the Ministry of Public Education had not yet taken hold. Schools have reached the hot lowlands sporadically and slowly in the years since the establishment of these new settlements, with the result that, according to the 2005 official survey, only 68 percent of the population over 15 in the vast forested municipality of Ocosingo is literate. Although the ministry has managed to build schools in the area, its teachers no longer share the nationalistic and revolutionary ideology espoused by

many instructors and federal inspectors during the 1930s (Lewis, 2005: 206). In other words, the integrationist nationalist policies that sought the incorporation of indigenous groups into the dominant culture through education do not seem to have obtained the desired effect in this region, partially because access to education has been extremely limited. At the same time, ethnic resistance to the imposition of education<sup>4</sup> is well illustrated by the many adult women who failed to learn Spanish during their short-lived school instruction and are “embarrassed” to sing the national anthem. The politicization of ethnic identity in the region can be traced back to the organization of united ejido communities in the 1970s. Long before the Zapatista uprising, the campesino and indigenous leaders of Ocosingo were already participating in the political arena, negotiating with the state to satisfy agrarian, commercial, health, and educational demands (Harvey, 1998: 61–88; García de León, 2002: 166–176, 193–218). Since then, rebel communities have opposed the direct influence of Mexican political parties and organizations from their territories and sought to construct an alternative strategy for dealing with the consequences of the capitalist policies that affect the socioeconomic fabric of the country’s indigenous communities.

Today the elders in the Chiapas lowlands tend to occupy honorary positions linked to religious activities, but still have active education affairs. Having renounced their agrarian rights in favor of their children, they do not participate in all of the communal assemblies but continue to influence local political life. Their ceding of secular power to their children and grandchildren does not mean that they lack moral authority. Six decades after the official recognition of the first ejidos, men between 25 and 50 years of age still control the Maya communities’ political scenes. The generational profile of traditional community and regional leaders is the same as that of teachers in the federal education system, which is officially categorized as “bilingual and intercultural.” Indigenous teachers, in contrast, are generally under 35 and do not hold direct local public positions because they are not residents of the little towns in which they work.

Two-thirds of the population of Chiapas are under 30 years of age. In indigenous and rural localities demographic growth continues to be perceptible. Although the ejido system is in effect in most of the region’s agrarian nuclei, young people lack land of their own. Consequently, when they do not opt for migration to nearby cities, the coasts of the Yucatan peninsula, or the United States, they work with their parents on the same plots of land. Male ejido owners younger than 30 make up a mere 12 percent of Chiapas’s total ejido proprietor population; women proprietors in this age-group are practically nonexistent (data for 2004 from the Procuraduría Agraria de Chiapas). Those who are not ejidatarios (named beneficiaries of land reform communities) cannot fully participate in local political-agrarian affairs. However, this does not completely impede upon their contribution to the collectivity to which they belong and are identified by the local political institutions, which in turn are governed by indigenous customary law (*usos y costumbres*).

### THE EDUCATIONAL COMMITMENTS OF ZAPATISTA YOUTH

The agrarian situation is quite different in the autonomous municipios. Whereas the modification of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution in 1992—right before the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement

(NAFTA)—ended the historical distribution of land, the 1994 recovery of thousands of arable hectares previously held by mestizos enabled Zapatista youth to enjoy rights to land. This has not stopped them from performing other functions such as that of the *promotor* (promoter), positions that are assigned and legitimized through local town assemblies.<sup>5</sup> Ocosingo's rural communities had some health promoters and *maestros campesinos* (peasant teachers) before the Zapatista uprising. Now the four rebel municipalities of the Tzeltal area have more than 400 autonomous health promoters and 200 autonomous education promoters occupying nonremunerated but otherwise highly valued positions. This struggle for autonomy is linked to the reinvention and reelaboration of deeply rooted ethnic traditions that are constantly being transformed and adapted to address current conditions.

Almost all of the teachers designated by these communities are between 13 and 26 years old, with an average age of 20. In the Tzeltal territories there are some 120 rebel schools following their own calendars and curricula. Hundreds of other Zapatista communities do not yet have their own education promoters because of difficulties involving their recruitment and support. Even before the 1997 implementation of the "resistance" strategy, which bars entities from making use of government funds and programs, some Zapatista municipalities were already training their own teachers, and now young people from the rebel communities are taking the place of government career teachers and apprentice teachers (scholarship holders). Their curricula and pedagogical approaches are supervised by an education committee elected by the local assembly. This means that the municipal councils play a fundamental role. In the words of Gabriel Maldonado, president of the Ricardo Flores Magón autonomous municipio El Camino del Futuro (interview, La Garrucha, August 2005):

There are many promoters when the people are well organized and have the will to defend them; we are participating in a resistance movement, and we serve voluntarily, as it does not bring us any profits. We draw no salaries. All we do is sacrifice [our own interests] and work for the people, but the people must also be aware of that and support their promoter, provide support. . . . We work in the fields over there. If it's time to plant, then the people plant the promoter's bean field and then harvest it, give the promoter a portion for his sustenance, and sell the rest, giving that money back to the promoter to cover the necessary expenses. This is why promoters are very dedicated to their work: they know that the people back them. The people have taken on a commitment, and the people honor it.

Many young promoters openly complain, however, about people's irregular fulfillment of their collective commitments. Many of them have completed sixth grade in the national educational system, but increasing numbers have been educated entirely in Zapatista schools. They have seldom traveled outside of their territory, but they seem quite interested both in the natural and archeological riches of Chiapas and in the urban areas of the Yucatán peninsula, central Mexico, and North America. In contrast to many official teachers, the young Zapatista instructors do not necessarily aspire to teach in the region's urban centers. Rather, they want to foster the social and cultural development of their communities of origin. In keeping with their sociocultural context, their pedagogical approaches are reminiscent of Paulo Freire's popular and

emancipatory education techniques in that they seek to empower students (Gutiérrez Narváez, 2006: 99–103). Here it is important to note that this educational alternative is part of a collective and participatory communal project that favors the use of Mayan languages over Spanish both in socio-political decision making and in education.

According to the coordinator of the Francisco Villa autonomous municipio's education sector, his assistant and his supervisor, all of whom have been elected by the group of young promoters, their educational goal is to "open the eyes of our children." In their view, "autonomy means that we are going to construct our own education," and school subjects are derived from ethnic lore and collective memory (interview, January 2007):

Our elders like it because we are reviving the culture; we are reconstructing that which was lost. It had been lost before because the government didn't want these cultures and traditions, but thanks to autonomous education we are rescuing them. The people do not want to lose their traditions, their language. We have to conduct research, interview the oldest members to properly understand and have a clear idea of how words were used before, and leave a written record of our grandparents: what happened, what happened before. . . . We teach many things about the beginning of the struggle, because the struggle is not something new: it goes back 500 years, and we are looking into the reasons for this suffering, since we don't want it to happen again. We are now demanding freedom, justice, and democracy for the people. . . . I think it is important that all children know how this struggle began or what kind of religion existed before, because the struggle began with the Catholic religion but now that is no longer the case. Before that, we Mayas had different gods and goddesses with their own functions—fire, the sun, rain, even play. Children should know all kinds of things so that they are aware of how things used to be.

In their own way, these autonomous teachers are unilaterally implementing the 1996 San Andrés Agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture, which have also gone unfulfilled by the government with regard to education (see García de León, 2002: 272; Esteva, 2002: 381; Baschet, 2005: 218; Aubry, 2005: 188). Indigenous Zapatista villages name, supervise, and, if necessary, dismiss their own teachers in accordance with their own organizational systems and autonomously defined priorities. The fact that the position of teacher is given to younger people rather than mature adults may mean that it is considered a politically and hierarchically minor function in comparison with other local civic responsibilities. In order to be named an education, health, communication, or agroecological promoter, an individual must fulfill a number of requirements, among them moral irreproachability, availability, a political background, and the ability to communicate efficiently in two or more languages. New promoters should also know how to count, read, and write, although there are cases in which the candidates selected are technically illiterate but willing to learn.

According to the Zapatista campesinos, young promoters usually have their own coffee plantings and milpas (cornfields). Although their teaching posts occasionally allow them to avoid some of the more physically demanding agricultural tasks, they still share in the activities of the poor and indigenous peasantry. Female promoters (about a fourth of the total instructors) are not exempt from the domestic chores associated with women's social role, and male promoters cannot neglect their harvests or their homes. Additionally, a

minority of male promoters must also support several children, which means that they must manage to combine teaching and agricultural activities. The flexibility of the autonomously organized calendar and school schedules provides some help.

By trusting young promoters with the education of their children, Zapatista autonomous education systems create new interactions between teachers, students, and parents. As *kerem*, the young male promoters differ from the more traditional image of the teacher as an authority figure with elevated social status. Since they belong to the community, they enjoy the trust of both students and adults as personal acquaintances whose competence is accepted or, at times, publicly questioned. The fact that they are usually younger than the government instructors seems to be not a delegitimization but a relegitimization of their role. This transformation is based on a reconfiguration of educational goals, forms of instruction, and pedagogical and disciplinary methods that seeks to satisfy collective educational priorities. The promoter is not only a “comrade” but a close acquaintance of the family—often an uncle, cousin, brother, godfather, or even father of his students—and because of this is much more accessible and, above all, more controllable in the eyes of the parents.

The consequences of the collective designation, supervision, and support of the young promoters are multidimensional. First of all, we have the empowerment of indigenous rural youth, whose cultural identity is seen as threatened in areas where capitalism and the mass media have taken hold. The promoter is charged with the valorization of native languages and the reaffirmation of the identity-related aspects of the local culture. Secondly, educational power is no longer in the hands of a distant bureaucracy and a government-sponsored teacher who takes regular leaves from work; instead, it depends on consensus arrived at through collective deliberation, representation, and local control. People younger than 30 are not excluded; the rebel communities have a substantial proportion of single and married youths who occupy positions in the education and health sectors as well as some of the *consejos autónomos* (autonomous councils) in charge of individual municipios. Thirdly, the relatively stronger influence of youth in the implementation of autonomous policies of social development does not mean that they are beyond the control of other active participants in the intense local political life. It may seem that, in terms of numbers, the young have taken local political and municipal power away from their parents and grandparents, but the assembly-based exercise of what the Zapatistas call “good government” prevents the older, more experienced generations from being excluded from political responsibilities. In fact, it appears that they continue to be highly influential (and often decisive) at all levels of autonomous regulation: the local communities, the autonomous municipios, and the *caracoles* (intermunicipal organizational centers).<sup>6</sup>

### DANCES, AUTONOMOUS COUNCILS, AND GOOD-GOVERNMENT BOARDS

The substantial political participation of young Zapatistas greatly contrasts with the status of young people in other communal organizations and political parties and coincides with the dynamic integration of the youth into the local

political and cultural fabric. Without unnecessary lessons of guerrilla tactics, many young Zapatistas receive consistent training in ideology and participate in political actions with communal, regional, national, and international repercussions. Their political socialization is part of the self-governing development of their communities; after all, they have grown up in the midst of a low-intensity war (Pérez Sales, Santiago, and Álvarez, 2002).

Despite continual harassment on the part of the army and paramilitary groups, the Zapatista towns have continued to organize political and cultural events and meetings that include substantial youth participation. This is particularly true in the case of the dances organized to commemorate some of the most important dates in the Zapatista calendar: January 1 (the anniversary of the uprising), March 8 (International Women's Day), April 10 (the anniversary of Emiliano Zapata's death), and November 20 (the anniversary of the Mexican Revolution). During these celebrations, hundreds of young people travel to one of the seats of the 38 municipios and the five caracoles to dance to *tropical* and *ranchera* tunes, take part in a collective meal, and participate in basketball tournaments and cultural activities. These festive but serious events also serve as opportunities for courtship.

These politicized and enthusiastic youth become a central collective actor in locally valued cultural activities. For example, some education promoters are distinguished musicians, actors, and basketball and soccer players, while others are excellent archeologists and tourist guides. Some serve as catechists and secretaries or scribes for agrarian, agroecological, and human rights groups. Thoroughly involved in the social and cultural life of their communities of origin, they also participate in the regional political agenda as elected local representatives, taking three-year-long turns as members of autonomous municipal councils. Despite their youth and lack of experience, they regularly participate in the construction of the civil and democratic Zapatista movement, whose autonomous project can be seen as a reaction to neoliberal homogenization (Stahler-Sholk, 2007: 54–57). Far from establishing a gerontocratic system, the age-based distribution of positions of authority is fundamentally intergenerational and encourages youth participation: people as young as 20 may be chosen to fulfill local responsibilities by taking positions that are not necessarily low-level. While there are no reliable data on this, the average age of elected representatives seems to vary considerably from one autonomous municipio to another. Between 2005 and 2007 most of the 12 council members in the Francisco Villa municipio were under 35 years of age, whereas in Francisco Gómez young parents were in the minority. Nevertheless, the young people who take on temporary political posts seem to have communication skills that are not always shared by their elders: they tend to speak Spanish more fluently, have a higher literacy level, and adapt more easily to the computer technologies that have recently been introduced in the seats of the Zapatista autonomous municipios. In short, being young does not present an insurmountable obstacle: young people may share administrative and political responsibilities with the members of the early Zapatista cadres that developed clandestinely at first and were consolidated in the first stages of confrontation with the government after 1994. Youth activism covers all of the political and cultural aspects that characterize the Zapatista project of autonomy without displacing or devaluing the influence and experience of older generations or aspiring to the kind of professional politics that would result in a political elite.

Still, one cannot deny the strong influence of certain generations over others, much less the male supremacy that characterizes many indigenous and campesino societies in Chiapas. Since 1994, Zapatista women of all ages have been gradually incorporated into the political administration of agrarian, education, health, and productive sectors on the communal, municipal, and regional levels. This inclusive system of administrative positions allows for the participation of women, including young women, who for the first time can occupy political posts once reserved for men (see Millán, 2006). Although women's participation in local politics seems to have been vigorously promoted by the EZLN's political and military command and women and men have been ascribed equal rights, we cannot yet speak of participatory equality. Besides playing an increasingly important role in politics during the past decade, women have become increasingly aware of their social oppression and have begun to rebel against the subordinate position conferred on them by gender, class, and ethnic hierarchies. The changes have, nevertheless, been limited, as both the EZLN and women themselves acknowledge (Olivera, 2005: 625). Women are numerically underrepresented in the education, health, municipal, and intermunicipal areas and rarely account for more than a fourth of communal office-holders. They do not have the same opportunities as males and are less likely to become education promoters. Strong communal preferences and traditions continue to bar them from participating in daily political life on an equal basis with men. Indigenous families often fear that young single women serving as instructors might engage in unsanctioned relationships during the periodic training workshops. The biographical accounts of female promoters reveal that they must inevitably violate familial and communal behavioral norms. As some women anthropologists have pointed out (Speed, Hernández Castillo, and Stephen, 2006: 43–49), there is a need for more in-depth studies that examine the dissident position adopted by these women rebels, who seek social emancipation without renouncing their cultural identity and are in the process of reinventing traditions and rejecting certain "bad customs."

### OTHER YOUTH'S COMMITMENT TO ZAPATISTA EDUCATION

One of the fundamental characteristics of the social and cultural movement carried out by the EZLN is its ability to interweave the ethnic, national, and international dimensions (Baschet, 2005: 224) that coalesced during the summer of 2005 with the announcement of the "Other Campaign" (Mora, 2007: 64–67). The national and international movements that identify with the Zapatista cause are led by young people whose sociological backgrounds are quite different from that of Zapatista youth. These supporters consist of urban middle- and lower-class students, communists, and anarchists, people who respond to the EZLN's anticapitalist, feminist, and autonomist message and defend common ideals such as freedom, democracy, and justice. The contrasts between the indigenous Zapatista youth and their young supporters, who tend to come from urban centers in Mexico, Western Europe, and, to a lesser extent, North and Latin America (with Argentina being a prominent case), are interesting for

two reasons. First, they allow us to observe that the classification or segmentation of contemporary societies into age-groups is an arbitrary act that ignores the heterogeneity of social generational categories and the primordial differences encapsulated by systems of class, gender, and ethnic domination. Secondly, despite the contrasts there is convergence in terms of discourse as these young people defend (in theory and practice) the social policies of the autonomous municipalities and agree that the future of this rebellion is based on autonomous education.<sup>7</sup>

This issue lies at the heart of national and international Zapatista support networks that, despite their limitations, seek to encourage the development of these autonomous school projects. On the one hand, various associations made up of student and popular groups based in Mexico City contribute to the training of young promoters through pedagogical workshops. On the other hand, numerous pro-Zapatista committees in English-speaking and European Mediterranean countries contribute to finance schools' infrastructures and educational materials by selling organic coffee and products crafted by Zapatista cooperatives,<sup>8</sup> gathering donations from individuals and organizations, etc. This politicized network of transnational solidarity seems to regard the Zapatista movement as a symbol of the social struggle rather than as the object of unilateral and altruistic solidarity (Olesen, 2005: 122, 147). A study of the political commitments of the youth networks that mobilize during events such as G8 and World Trade Organization summits shows that many of these leftist and anti-imperialist discourses and practices have been influenced by the Zapatista movement and have developed from highly individual and ephemeral projects (Pleyers, 2004: 125–127). Hundreds of young international militants visit the Zapatista communities every year and help reaffirm the sense of solidarity that pervades the discourse and actions of a new generation of altermundista (otherworldist), communist, and an archist (many of whom in Europe refer to themselves as "libertarian") youth in Western countries.

Although, in the absence of home-based promoters, autonomous municipalities sometimes invite outsiders to provide temporary support by teaching bilingual children, meetings between indigenous and international youths usually take place during moments of solidarity such as the building of infrastructure. A journalist has observed that more than 80 members of the Athens School for Chiapas Committee physically participated in the construction of the Ricardo Flores Magón autonomous municipio's training center, which has classrooms, dormitories, a library, and a collective kitchen (Muñoz Ramírez, 2004: 8–10). Such intercultural encounters between discontented and politically committed youths naturally result in reciprocal curiosity and the stimulation of political and ethnic awareness. At the same time, the heterogeneity of their age-group can lead to confusion and mutual lack of understanding. Separated by social barriers, these young people can nevertheless impress each other by displaying norms of behavior that may often seem exotic or extravagant.

The indigenous struggle for autonomy and reconstitution of communities forms the basis of a proposal for global transformation that articulates a national project of social majorities (Esteva, 2002: 396) and finds expression in the actions of rebel youth in pursuit of another way of thinking about formal childhood education. Without losing sight of the national framework of which they are a

part, the Maya peoples of Chiapas envision collective self-government by an assembly that represents the highest authority recognized by each member and is limited to the territory of the autonomous region (Lenkersdorf, 2002: 98–99). As far as education is concerned, the Tzeltal, Ch’ol, Tojolabal, and Tzotzil youth of the Lacandón forest occupy responsible positions subject to the decisions of their local assemblies, but they cannot be considered dominant because their activities are scrupulously supervised, controlled, and evaluated by an intergenerational body made up of other social actors. These communities, which are demographically dominated by young people and children, appear to be interested in achieving an educational system that is not subject to alien norms. Their struggle to appropriate the school calls into question the current national cultural policy and project, in which indigenous self-determination in the area of formal education is still illegal. In order to overcome this constraint, young Zapatista education promoters have been attempting for years to do what the Sixth Declaration proposes: “to reconstruct another way of doing politics, one that once again has the aim of serving others without material interest, with sacrifice, dedication, honesty; one which keeps its word, whose only payment lies in the satisfaction of fulfilling one’s duty—that is, emulating the earlier leftist militants who were not stopped by beatings, jail, or death, let alone by dollar bills.”

## NOTES

1. According to the official 2005 Population and Household Survey (INEGI, 2005), nearly 16 percent of Mexicans over 5 years of age who speak an indigenous language are concentrated in the state of Chiapas, where they amount to 26 percent of the population (957,255 individuals, a fourth of them monolingual, whereas at the national level monolinguals amount to only 12 percent of indigenous language-speakers). The censuses and surveys carried out by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática (National Institute of Statistics, Geography and Informatics—INEGI) do not take into account the several tens of thousands of extended families who comprise the EZLN’s support bases.

2. The linguistic variants of Tzeltal (*Batsil K’op*) are spoken by more than a third of the indigenous Chiapas population over 5 years of age (INEGI, 2000; 2005), which includes most inhabitants of the Lacandón region. Tzotzil, Ch’ol, Tojolabal, Lacandón, and Zoque are also spoken in the area.

3. Many social researchers have documented the substantial influence of liberation theology and left-wing revolutionary activism on indigenous social and political participation in the Chiapas southeast since the 1970s (Harvey, 1998: 69–90; Benjamin, 2000: 436–437; García de León, 2002: 174–176, 189–199, 217; Aubry, 2005: 182–184; Baschet, 2005: 21–37).

4. Much of the communities that remain faithful to government policies have access to the Oportunidades (Opportunities) assistance program, which provides money for the mothers of poor families on the condition that their children attend school regularly. However, the complex official school system continues to be unequal and of limited quality and relevance. In spite of a growing number of professionally trained, bilingual federal teachers (who, nevertheless, may not necessarily speak their students’ language), hundreds of schools in small localities depend on the federal and state systems of hired community teachers, which employ mostly untrained indigenous instructors who hold government scholarships and are between 15 and 20 years of age.

5. These ethnographic data are derived from fieldwork conducted between 2005 and 2007 in the Tzeltal forest zone of the rebel area. The vast autonomous region is administered by the *junta de buen gobierno* (good-government board) in La Garrucha, which was established in August 2003. This Tzeltal locality is a two-hour drive from the Ocosingo market.

6. The Zapatista *caracoles* are political and social centers containing the offices of the good-government board, the supreme civil authorities, which are made up of rotating representatives of the autonomous municipal councils. For details on the political challenges currently facing the Zapatista leadership, see Stahler-Sholk (2007: 55–61) and Mora (2007: 69–71).

7. The international conferences held in the *caracoles* in December 2006 and July and December 2007 provided the opportunity for a series of unprecedented public presentations by young autonomous-municipio authorities, coordinators, and promoters on the concrete developments in their territories (see <http://www.zetztainternacional.org> and <http://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/>).

8. Philipp Gerber (2005), an anthropology graduate student at the University of Zurich, has examined the experiences of Mut Vitz, one of the largest Zapatista coffee cooperatives, which exports most of its produce to Europe and the United States.

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