To What Extent can the Zapatista Movement in Southern Mexico be considered as being part of Civil Society?

Introduction

Globalisation is today seen by many as an actual threat to democracy. Its overriding of governments and subsequent dissolving of trade barriers has left many, especially those who are poorest feeling increasingly marginalized and powerless. Mexico was seen as a success story of the Neo-Liberal market reforms “the golden child of Neo-liberalism” (Holloway, Pelaez 1998) liked by the IMF and the World Bank during the 1980’s. As a result of this new economic agenda Mexico has capital coming in but many are left behind. Many are therefore concerned about the need to ‘redress the balance’, Civil Society is seen as a means to do this, a method of ‘deepening democracy’.

The Chiapas rebellion of 1994 drew the attention of the world to the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, the long fought struggle of the Zapatista movement and to the thoughts, actions and even poetry of its figurehead and spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos. It was Marcos and his rebel army the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) having been pushed from urban areas where their struggle first took root that then focused their attention and aspirations on the state of Chiapas and in particular its seemingly ‘downtrodden’ ethnic Indian communities.

This uprising by the rebel Zapatista movement and the subsequent counter reaction by the Mexican authorities brought to the fore issues of resistance not only to what was seen as an repressive federal structure but also to issues of a wider nature. These included actual racial and ethnic discrimination as suffered by the indigenous people of Chiapas state, affecting issues such as economics, the status of women, education and land rights.

In the time since the uprising on 1st January 1994 (timed to coincide with the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement) the Zapatistas, the EZLN have formed themselves a sister civic organisation as well as holding a number of conventions and consolidating democratic power back to those who had been without it through conventions known by the historically significant name as the Aguacalientes.

In this paper I will try and determine using existing notions of what defines Civil Society, if in fact what the Zapatista movement and the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN) created could be defined as been a Civic organisation. Has the movement deliberately tried to define itself alongside common themes and struggles found throughout the world? Does this qualify it to be considered as part of a wider Global Civil Society seen beyond Mexico’s borders?

I have decided to focus on primarily on the events of the past twenty years with respect to the Zapatista movement and the rebellion in Chiapas. This I hope will throw light on the origins of the modern day movement, its consolidation in Chiapas and its moves to influence the stance of the Mexican government. I will look at briefly issues of Governance and Social Capital but hope to concentrate on analysing
the concept of Civil Society and how it relates to what the Zapatistas have achieved thus far in their struggle.

I will argue in this paper that the Zapatistas although not following many of the conventional norms of forming into a Civil Society are so in any case. Not merely in the commonly accepted mould either but at the forefront of what is now known as Global Civil Society where through modern communications they have relayed their ideas and fears to supporters and sympathizers around the globe as John Holloway and Eloina Pelaez described as “the first revolution of the electronic age.” (Holloway, Pelaez 1998) The sympathisers who have in return focused much of the worlds anti-globalisation movements’ attention to Southern Mexico.

‘Here we are!’ - The Zapatistas

‘Zapatista lives, the struggle continues!’  ‘We are all Marcos!’

These were the cries of the mobilised masses. The product of a once neutral Mexico City and the middle class. Now thanks largely to the spread of the Zapatista movements’ ideals, goals and ambitions and because of broad disgust with the way in which in 1994 the Mexican authorities reacted with overwhelming force to the capture of the town of San Cristobal. Their message was spread into broader areas and beyond and was beginning to resonate with other parts of society that felt the injustices and felt like the indigenous peoples of the Chiapas that they too had no influence over those in power. Housewives, students the unemployed all rallied to the cause. Up until this point the Zapatistas were a somewhat isolated independent peasant struggle with limited connections with the outside world.

The seeds of the discontent were mixed coming as they did from centuries of discrimination against the indigenous population. This discrimination held the indigenous communities at a disadvantage when confronted with the other challenges facing the south. Much of the state of Chiapas was facing ecological ruin, foresters were busy altering ecosystems, there was a lack of productive land and a faltering economy.

“Theyir land was wanted by cattle ranchers, by oil companies by paper producers eager to replant the jungle with fast growing eucalyptus trees, and by capitalist planners eager to exploit the unique biodiversity of the jungle and its resources.” (Holloway, Pelaez, 1998)

The people of the state were marginalized and isolated. This was fertile ground for dissent and rebellion. Whether or not the EZLN were the natural purveyors of this rebellion is to some questionable. The critics of the Zapatistas in Mexico itself have often levelled accusations of opportunism and against Subcommandante Marcos. They argue that the Zapatistas true identity is that of a leftist Marxist revolutionary group, common to those found across Latin and South America. That Marcos is from a middle class Mestizos family and that therefore must surely share little in common with the indigenous populations.

It is no accident therefore that the EZLN’s charismatic and well educated spokesperson Subcommandante Marcos should evoke the image of Emiliano Zapata.
General Zapata is an iconic image in Mexico. “This unforgettable photographic image has served as a model for Mexican filmmakers, and had become the archetype of the good revolutionary”. (Rajchbery, Hian-Lambert; Zapatista! 1998). Marcos used this evocative image and his self belief and skill to align the demands of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) with the plight of the indigenous population of the Chiapas State.

Descending from the cities and made up mainly of *Mestizos* (city dwellers) the EZLN, if it were to make connections with the indigenous population used its few indigenous members to make initial contact. This had to be achieved through contact with family members to ensure support. As the EZLN slowly gathered support in the state of Chiapas the sense of a embryonic Civil Society was there.

“In a ‘bottom-up’ sense, Civil society is the realm in which those who are disadvantaged by globalisation of the world economy can mount their protests and seek alternatives”. (Cox, 1999)

Marcos realised the need amongst the indigenous population. His experience early on in the mountains of Chiapas taught him that highly conflicting westernised notions of how states should be run had little resonance with a people who simply longed for an improvement in their situation. Marcos used his experience in the mountains to tell another story, that of the indigenous community’s own humiliation. “It was here that the ideological discourse of Marxism ran up against the distinctive cultural beliefs of the indigenous communities.” (Harvey, N 1998) The convergence of thought is again played out. Marcos realised the futility of approaching people that have real and pressing needs to explain the politics of Marx. “Your word is very hard, we do not understand it” (Harvey N, 1998) he was told on occasions. Marcos when questioned about the convergence of ideas that has occurred between the indigenous communities and the *Metizos* explained;

“We had a very fixed notion of reality, but when we ran up against it our ideas were turned over. It is like that wheel over there, which rolls over the ground and becomes smoother as it goes, as it comes into contact with the people in the villages. It no longer has any connection to its origins. So, when they ask me “What are you people? Marxist, Leninists, Castroites, Maoists or what?” I answer that I don’t know. I really do not know. We are the product of a hybrid, of a confrontation of a collision in which luckily I believe we lost.” (Harvey, 1998)

The grassroots approach to their uprising we can see as being very important to the EZLN achieving their aims. The EZLN tries to submit itself with a mandate from the indigenous community. It is persistently searching for links to form what can be described as a Civil Society.

The above passage attributed to Marcos shows that he had recognised that the EZLN had grown through assimilation as David Lewis as we will see later recognised, through an ‘adaptation’ form.

One of the principle reasons for the lack of diversity in Mexico was the stagnation caused by Mexico effectively having a one party state system for much of the 20th Century. With the continuing desire of the establishment in Mexico to encourage and
endorse the pre-veiling neo-liberal trade reforms such as those endorsed through the Washington Consensus and those that were deemed as necessary for membership of the North America Free Trade Agreement. Mexico’s lack of regional representation led the Federal government to overlook or in the case of the state of Chiapas be hostile to many of the concerns particularly of the Indigenous communities who predicted adverse affects for their way of life if the Federal government was to implement proposed reforms.

This lack of representation given with the historical context of discrimination against the majority indigenous population of Southern Mexico can perhaps be seen as the spark for the rapid mobilization of Civic action for Civic Society not only in the State of Chiapas but across Mexico. The growing strength and influence of the *Zapatismo* meant that they were able to apply pressure for greater democratic representation.

**Civil Society**

There has been various definitions as to what and how to define Civil Society. Civil Society it seems and the need to define it has dipped in and out of fashion over the last few centuries. Often the term Civil Society is attacked by academics as being too loose and ill defined.

Global institutions such as The World Bank, which recognises the growing part played by Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO’s) and Organisations set up for non profit ventures in development describes what it means by Civil Society as follows;

“Civil Society organizations refer to a wide array of organizations: community groups, non-governmental organizations (NGO’s), labour unions, indigenous groups, Charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations and foundations”. (World Bank, website)

This near text book definition gives us a basis to understanding the term ‘Civil Society’. However authors combine or distort many ideas of the notion of civil Society and in a paper such as this where my goal is to asses the appropriateness of this term to a particular movement I will look at the Civic nature of the Zapatistas and evaluate that to differing notions of what constitutes Civil Society.

I think it is important for me to give a pretext to what I believe Civil Society is. I do not consider political organisations to be part of Civil Society for they have then crossed the boundary into the political sphere. Jean Cohen argues that “the political role of Civil Society is not directly related to the conquest of power, but to the generation of influence.” (Cohen, 1998)

Ernest Gellner, in his text *The Importance of being Modular* describes Civil Society thus;

“Civil Society is that set of diverse non-governmental institutions, which is strong enough to counterbalance the state, and whilst not preventing the state from fulfilling its role of keeper of the peace and arbitrator between major interests, can nevertheless prevent the state from dominating and atomising the rest of society”. (Gellner, 1995)
Gellner’s definition is helpful, although broad. At first it seems to have said what has been written so far about the Chiapas rebellion. That it was very important for it to counterbalance the state, in this case the Federal Mexican authorities but arguably the state was not the ‘keeper of the peace’ or the ‘arbiter between major interests’. Or at least in the eyes of many it failed in its obligation to be any of these.

The Zapatista movement which came to prominence during their uprising of the mid 1990’s, has in many ways began to focus contemporary Global society’s attention to the notion of Civil Society, its purpose, uses and the reasons for its existence.

“Mexican Civil Society has flourished, boosted by the call of the Zapatistas to carry the revitalization of Mexico’s democratic life and social organizations from Chiapas to the rest of the nation.” (Collier, 1994)

It is an important notion of Democracy that is the essence of most understandings of Civil Society. Civil Society seems to emerge where democracy is threatened or where the state seems too distant from the citizen. In the case of the indigenous peoples in Chiapas state, that state was indifferent at best and hostile at worst. It was this background that the fledgling EZLN found when it began to integrate itself with the plight of the indigenous communities in Chiapas.

David Lewis, an academic many turn to for a contemporary view of how to define Civil Society gives us four possibilities of what Civil Society can achieve. ‘Yes’, a positive development in a society, an improvement in social development. ‘No’, where Civil Society does not fit into the contexts it desires. ‘Adaptational’, a way of defining what is meant by Civil Society in terms of the private sphere or through kinships and ‘instrumentational’ a broad definition but useful in terms of negotiation. I have already talked about the usefulness of thinking of the Zapatistas in terms of Lewis’ thoughts on adaptation. This best describes their period of consolidation with the indigenous peoples in Chiapas state.

A central point in Robert Putnam’s book ‘Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy’ is what are the conditions for creating strong, responsive, effective, representative, institutions? In other words how does a what can be defined as a Civil Society come into being? Many would argue in response to his point that Civil Society comes about at a grass roots level in response to conditions. The Zapatista movement in Mexico through harnessing and articulating the concerns of the indigenous populations outlines some of the conditions as put by Putnam.

Putnam’s work during the 1970’s in Italy focuses primarily on making democracy work by means of recognising the regional nature of the Italian state. The role Civil Society played in some regions and not in others is recognised by Putnam when he says;

“Some regions of Italy are blessed with vibrant networks and norms of civic engagement, while others are cursed with vertically structured politics, a social life of fragmentation and isolation, and a culture of distrust. These differences in Civic life turn out to play a key role in explaining institutional success.” (Putnam, 1993)
Putnam’s analysis of Italy’s regionalized structure at the beginning of the 1970’s before the government recognised the need for decentralization from Rome has parallels perhaps with modern day Mexico. Mexico’s combination of regional diversity borne of internal population shifts and the contrasting nature of its ethnic make-up where indigenous Mexicans are largely disadvantaged and under privileged.

Putnam recognised that the top down means of governance as practised in Italy before the 1970’s suppresses to an extent the role which can be played by Civil Society. Civil Society as that which represents the issues and concerns of local communities, villages, towns or states is able to work more effectively and more inclusively the closer that government representation is towards the people. In short the process of bringing democracy closer to the people. This notion of ‘Closer democracy’ as recognised as important to the still centralized government of Italy during the late 1960’s and early 1970’s was not it can be argued recognised by the Mexican government even up until the early 1990’s. Therefore as in Italy places that are perhaps distant or less economically important can find themselves disadvantaged.

In the Southern Mexican State of Chiapas a discourse had established itself whereby the indigenous Indians were seen as being naturally inferior to the Ladino’s (non Indian population). A spokesperson for the EZLN Commandante Susana highlighted this in a speech. ‘When we go into big cities they see us as nothing more than indios… they curse us for being indigenous people as if we were animals… We are not seen as equal to the Metizo women’ (Gilbreth, Otero 1999; Interview, San Andres Larrainzar, March 1996).

The intermixing of the indigenous communities and the EZLN can be described as David Lewis phrased an ‘Adaptational’ form of Civil Society. The Civil Society that was formed in the jungles of the state of Chiapas was the Horizontal amalgamation of the mainly ladino’s of the EZLN and the indigenous population of Chiapas. The EZLN’s distrust of the stagnant Mexican government and the realisation amongst the indigenous population of what membership of NAFTA might do to their already perilous economic plight. The Zapatistas effectively changed. They linked up the indigenous community’s problems with the issues concerning the Neo-liberal agricultural reforms as vaunted by NAFTA. In a statement Subcomandante Marcos himself recognised the significance of this;

‘The EZLN and the Civil population are so intermixed that it is difficult to draw a line marking the interests or territory of one or the other. In order to eliminate the Zapatista army, this territory itself must be wiped from the face of the planet. Not only must it be destroyed, it must be completely erased because there is constant danger in the dead who lie below it.’ (Marcos, Holloway, J & Pelaez, E 1998)

The sometimes confusing nature of how to define Civil Society, notions often based on a Gramscian form would lead one to suspect that the Zapatistas are not a form of recognised Civil Society. However we have seen that through the growth in kinship and family lines a form recognisable to Lewis’ interpretations that aspects of the movement to correspond to at least how a Civil Society might form.

The Zapatistas and Civil Society
It is clear to see from my examination of Civil Society thus far from authors such as Gellner and Lewis that the Zapatistas do not fit squarely in to a definition of what Civil Society is. They are after all an armed insurgency group. However it is obvious from studying their tactics and beliefs that they do not seek power but seek justice for those including themselves that they feel live a disadvantaged life in the mountains and jungles of the state of Chiapas and beyond. This reluctance to hold power but to influence is a strong facet of what a Civil Society is recognised by thinkers on the subject since Gramsci.

Another interesting point on looking at the Zapatista movement and its possible shift to a Civic organisation is the way in which its membership grew. In Western Europe, the United States and indeed in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980’s Civil Society grew largely through voluntary participation. Civil Societies in Eastern Europe during the end of the Communist era played a major part in the dismantling of the communist state apparatus and the unravelling of totalitarian regimes. They fulfilled their role of influencing the state to reflect the views, hopes and beliefs of those who wished to have control over their lives but did not wish to govern. A famous example been Polish Solidarity, largely born out of ship builders striking for better working conditions.

In his text *The Importance of being Modular*, Ernest Gellner argues that man cannot “be bonded into a social organism easily or at will” (Gellner, 1995). That man “can combine into effective associations and institutions without these being total, many stranded, under-written by ritual and made stable through being linked to a whole set of relationships, all of these then being tied in with each other and so immobilized”. (Gellner, 1995) This does not perhaps reflect totally the ‘horizontal’ growth through families and family ties that I have mentioned earlier in this paper and that occurred in the mountains and jungles of the Chiapas state as the Zapatistas began their integration with the indigenous communities. Gellner also notes that the spread of ethnicity is of a much faster pace than that of other aspects of a growth in Civil Society. This I believe is a major factor in the initial growth of the Zapatista rebellion. The key to the Metizos success at first was that although they were middle class and on the surface and different in many ways to the indigenous people. The formation of the EZLN in *la Montana* (the mountainous region) was achieved through kinship networks. These networks spread through the indigenous communities. Whilst there was ethnic tension between the ethnic population and settlers in the Chiapas state this was largely created through a preconceived fear from the settlers. Scenes of ethnic conflict that were seen in some parts of Eastern Europe notably in Yugoslavia were not on the whole repeated in Mexico with the emergence of the EZLN. This is because of the duel emergence of a fledgling organisation that was in many ways a Civil Society.

Whilst the example of Eastern Europe shows that the emergence of Civil Society was important to the pace of the downfall of Communism as well as a unifying force, in the case of the rebellion in Mexico it is clear that it also was a call to arms against the forces of NAFTA and globalisation. This common enemy was the unifying force for the indigenous communities in Chiapas and beyond. A sense of helplessness and powerlessness galvanised the movement. The neo-liberal restructuring of Mexico’s economy to gain NAFTA membership and the debt crisis that followed allowed the activism that had long been present in Mexican society to blossom.
The Zapatistas however were able to circumvent much that would retrain Civil Society in a western context. They represent their following at community, state, nation and international level. The Zapatistas’ ability to recognise the global backlash against Globalisation and through modes of communication such as Fax and especially the internet to contact international sympathizers. Manuel Castells in *The Power of Identity* recognised that “without the communication capacity enabling the Zapatistas to reach urban Mexico in real time, they may have remained an isolated, localized guerrilla force, as many of those still fighting in Latin America”. (Castells, 1997) Castells here recognising the articulacy of the Zapatistas acknowledges how important that is for a group with a global message. Ironically many other rebel movements in Latin America share the same Neo-Marxist ideals as the Zapatistas and would arguably benefit from the same global reach that the Zapatistas have demonstrated they can achieve. Josee Johnston writing in *Global Civil Society and it’s Limits* argues that “effective resistance to globalisation is seen as dependant on transcending national boundaries and establishing a Global Civil Society” (Johnston, 2003) This global outreach I believe began to take the movement from of Civil Society within a state to what many now look to when thinking of a Global Civil Society.

The embodiment of this was the *Aguascalientes*’ a series of conventions that took place in Zapatista controlled jungle in the Chiapas. The movement managed to gather thousands of delegates from around the world and construct facilities for them to use. From the second convention was formed the National Convention for Democracy (CND). The CND I believe is Civil Society in a very real sense to the people of Mexico. The EZLN had by this point politicised and the Zapatista movement had now formed into essentially a form of Civil Society because of its interactions with Civic networks though also maintaining in the EZLN an ‘armed-wing’. If the CND is seen as incorporating to a substantial extent the indigenous peoples then the Zapatistas et al might have created what could be considered a shining example what Civil Society can achieve, namely a consensus of popular opinion. “The CND gave the Zapatistas an opportunity to strengthen their network of support”. (Stephen, 1995)

The elections in Mexico in 1994 were given unprecedented levels of scrutiny largely as a result of the uprising. “In some parts of the country, the network created by the convention proved effective in mounting activities, to protest electoral fraud and press the participants other demands”. (Stephen, 1995) The CND identified Civil Society as the stalwart of democracy and in doing so has removed political parties form the discourse, the sense of unity felt throughout the movement is enough for now. Lyn Stephen in her article *The Zapatista Army of National Liberation and the National Democratic Convention* describes the effect on the discourse thus;

“One of the greatest potential contributions of the CND is a redefinition of democracy in Mexico. During it’s first meeting, it defined democracy as the participation of Civil Society in its own governance by identifying a project of nation building, rather than voting. (Stephen, 1995).

One of the greatest enemies of Civil Society as identified by many authors is Nationalism. The successive Mexican governments over a long period of time from the 1920’s onwards displayed this as a act of uniting its people. Mass population
transfers as practised in the Chiapas state in order to ‘dilute’ the numbers of the indigenous peoples demonstrated this. By it’s manipulation nationalism can subvert states and as a result puts it at loggerheads with Civil Society. “Civil Society gained in self-consciousness from the experience of fighting against politico-religious unification drives”, (Hall, 1995) However with increased globalisation in Mexico nationalism may abate. Nationalism with its empowerment to government is often seen as the enemy to Civil Society, but ironically it was a form of Nationalism in the United States that halted fast track renewal of the terms and conditions agreed with NAFTA through the US Congress.

This paper though I think demonstrates that the Zapatistas do not fit any easily defined notions of what constitutes Civil Society. There are too many contradictions. However I do believe that they are a Civil Society insomuch they essentially in the Mexican context and since the armed uprising in the mid 1990’s fulfil the role of what Civil Society does. Through the CND and the FZLN a whole multitude of Civilian apparatus has been born. Its heart is a democratic one and it has arguably stuck to the ideals which led Subcommandante Marcos and his initial band of Metizos in Mexico City. Yet they have skilfully integrated and been wholly accepted into a section of Mexican society that had previously been ignored. In doing so they have won the respect of many of their critics and arguably even changed the state of Mexican democracy.

Conclusion

The impact of the uprising raised the issue of socio-economic disparities particularly with regard to land distribution. The uprising in the Chiapas state has brought new levels of democratic representation to the state and to the indigenous communities. Not only have the Indians of the south arguably benefited from this but also as I have discussed women have had seen their representation increased dramatically, thanks largely to the National Convention for Democracy. This is Civil Society as Gramsci, Lewis, Gellner et al would have recognised it. A strong and persuasive force representing those with concern over how they are governed.

With what many see as a new radicalisation of development there can be fewer examples of a radical form of development in the way that the Zapatistas have consciously moved from armed struggle to trying to influence the Mexican government and the world to their cause, to battle against the liberal agenda which seems to be that of consolidation of wealth in the rich countries and exclusion to the detriment of the poor. This is a radical Civil Society a broadening of the term Civil Society undoubtedly.

In 2000 Vicente Fox was elected to lead the Mexican government. His election represented a massive shift in Mexican politics due in no small part to the pressure the Zapatista insurgency placed on the old status quo for change. However the state is still following the Neo-Liberal trade reforms practised by previous administration and to which the Zapatista movement feel would be too damaging to the poorest in Mexican society. But what legitimacy does the Mexican government have if the laws which are most affecting the people of the Chiapas region are coming from Washington? The Zapatistas are fighting the ‘Washington Consensus’ as much as the Mexican government. This then places them by definition on the world stage. They
are ‘civil’ as has been shown with what the CND articulates and they are global through their communications and the international gatherings in the Chiapas jungle. However it is yet to be seen what place they have in an increasing inter dependant world where it is not only trade and politics that is global but also what ordinary people lean on to influence it, Civil Society.

Bibliography


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