

Chiapas Under Siege by Global Industries

A Critical Gaze at the Festival of Dignified Rage

Feb 17 2009

John Ross

The commodification of the Zapatista movement recently reached absurdist heights with the New York Times designation of rebel villages in southeastern Chiapas as a hot budget tourist destination. "Chiapas Is Cheap! Indian Villages Flourish And The Price Is Right!" read the cut line in the NYT's Sunday Travel section November 16 – ironically, the eve of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN.) The double truck spread also featured a photo of the Zapatista cultural/political center, or caracol, at Oventic, a 45-minute drive from chic San Cristobal. "Their failed revolution (sic)" has given the Zapatista zone "a frisson of danger" the Times' so-called "frugal traveler" Matt Gross wrote a few days later after tricking his way into the caracol for a self-serving hit piece that even listed the bargain price of quesadillas at Oventic's Che Guevara general store. Spearheading the state of Chiapas's all-out tourism assault on the rebel zone is the on-again, off-again through highway from San Cristobal ("the new Soho" according to tourism publicists) to the magnificent Mayan ruins at Palenque that would infringe on a dozen Zapatista autonomous villages en route. The push to open up Chiapas as a transnational tourist venue continues to generate violence between Zapatista and non-Zapatista communities over control of such sites as Agua Azul, an eco-tourist resort in the San Cristobal-Palenque corridor.

Further south, both Zapatista and non-Zapatista communities have been forcibly evicted from the Montes Azules Biosphere, a 300,000-hectare swatch of the Lacandón jungle as Big Eco-Tourism combines, backed by such transnationals as Ford Motors, stake a claim on the untrammelled sanctuary. The eco-tourism boom has brought five-star hotels and Israeli-led caravans to the region.

The exploitation of sacred Mayan sites like Palenque by the local and transnational tourist trade has also ratcheted up tensions in southeastern Chiapas. In January, Zapatistas threatened to occupy Mayan ruins at Tonina just outside Ocosingo, "the Gateway to the Lacandón Jungle," over a land dispute. Last October, six non-Zapatistas were gunned down by Chiapas state police after activist Tojolabal Mayans took over the ruins at Chinkultik in the Montebello lakes area near Comitán, demanding a bigger slice of the tourism pie.

Tourism is one of Chiapas' "four horsemen of progress" notes daily La Jornada correspondent Hermann Bellinghausen, one of the most knowledgeable writers on the Zapatista struggle whose "Heart Of Time" (Bellinghausen wrote the screenplay), set in the Zapatista zone, was recently shone at Robert Redford's Sundance Film Festival. Petroleum, biofuels, and mining also add "frisson" to this southernmost Mexican state's future. Interest in drilling for petroleum in the "Lacandón basin" was revived this past December by Mexico's energy secretary Georgina Kessel. Although she failed to specify just what she meant by the "Lacandón basin," drilling for oil in the jungle is sure to conflict with that other horseman of Chiapas' future, eco-tourism. PEMEX, Mexico's state-controlled oil consortium, drilled sites in the rebel zone in the 1980s and early '90s. The Nazaret complex of 31 platforms less than 10 miles from the Zapatista caracol at La Garrucha was sealed up after the indigenous rebellion exploded in 1994. Confidential assessments by PEMEX noted scant oil (400 barrels a day) at Nazaret, but tens of thousands of cubic feet of natural gas, exploitation of which was put on hold by the uprising. The biofuel component in the horserace for Chiapas's future is more transnational flimflam. Under the once-upon-a-time Plan Puebla-Panama, now re-dubbed Plan Mesoamerica and extended through Central America to Colombia, Colombian industrialists are growing 7,000 hectares of non-food biomass on the Pacific coastal plain near Puerto Chiapas. Although the plantation involves a non-food crop (pinion), it removes considerable land from food cropping. The biofuel project represents an initial collaboration between Colombia's widely disparaged president Álvaro Uribe and Mexico's illegitimately elected Felipe Calderón, both darlings of the U.S. State Department.

As the price of gold has soared, transnational mining is gaining a leg up in the race for Chiapas' future. At least 55 permits for mining development have been granted by state authorities to mostly Canadian speculators in the sierra and highlands of Chiapas. Such transnationals as Linear Gold and Blackfire are decried for widespread deforestation, slave labor wages, and the suppression of workers' rights at the mining sites.

While the state of Chiapas is being put out to bid, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation marked its 25th

anniversary as a rebel force and its 15th year on public display over the year-end holidays with an annual conclave of supporters this year slugged, "The World Fiesta of Digna Rabia" ("Rage with Dignity"), a more modest outing than previous get-togethers. This year, special invitees such as the French-British critic John Berger sent along videotaped contributions rather than traveling to Chiapas for in-person appearances.

One international celebrity who did show up live was the Zapatistas' quixotic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos who delivered what has become his yearly diatribe against self-designated political enemies. (Marcos's public statements have been in short supply since the EZLN's ill-fated "Other" campaign and his once-daily epistemological output was virtually reduced to zero in 2008.)

Headlining public sessions of the Digna Rabia Fiesta at San Cristobal's University of the Earth, the Sup picked up where he left off last year by attacking Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), the left leader of the Movement to Defend Mexico's Petroleum and the Popular Economy, who was swindled out of the presidency by Felipe Calderón in 2006. Among other calumnies: Marcos damned AMLO and Calderón as two sides of the same coin. The Zapatista mouthpiece also accused López Obrador of being in cahoots with the CIA and labeled his movement, the broadest activist alliance in Mexico today (AMLO recently drew upwards of 100,000 to Mexico City's Zocalo) as "sectarian, intolerant, and hysterical" – all pejoratives that could well be applied to the rebel Subcomandante.

In an excess of "mala leche" (spoiled milk), Marcos also equated the deaths of 11 young people during a stampede when Mexico City police raided a teenage hang-out last July to Israeli genocide in Gaza, and lambasted veterans of the watershed 1968 student movement and López Obrador's successor as Mexico City mayor Marcelo Ebrard for enshrining the government massacre of 325 students on October 2 of that year as a national day of mourning.

Other worms in the Subcomandante's can include the unexplained exclusion of Barcelona solidarity workers led by Iñaki García from the Zapatistas' international support network and the removal of French leftist Olivier Besancenot from the Digna Rabia panelists' lists after he met with supporters of Senator Rosario Ibarra, founder of the Eureka Mothers of the Disappeared committee in Mexico City. Even the International Womens' Day celebration of the life of the late Concepción García de Corral ("Mamá Corral") who lost two sons in Mexico's 1970s' "dirty war" and was a member of the Eureka committee is a backhanded slap at Doña Rosario, who was once close to Marcos but is now aligned with López Obrador.

The Subcomandante's shameful performance at the Digna Rabia Fiesta is an embarrassment to long-time Zapatista supporters such as this writer who has authored four books chronicling the rebel movement. This writer offers his profound apologies for misleading readers about Marcos's exalted status. In recent years, the Sup has transformed himself into a vituperative, narcissistic charlatan who is single-handedly responsible for the depreciation of the Zapatista movement as a national and international player on the Left.

But if Subcomandante Marcos's public posture has been disastrous for the rebel cause, Zapatista communities in the highlands and jungles of southeastern Chiapas have continued to demonstrate the capabilities of collective action. The rank and file rebels' creativeness in providing a Zapatista education for their children and their defense of their environment, particularly native plants, are exemplary.

Moreover, epidemiological studies as reported by former National Autonomous University rector Pablo González Casanova underscore the continuing excellence of Zapatista health care projects. In areas such as pre-natal care, Zapatista health providers have extended coverage to 63% of all expectant mothers – double that of non-Zapatista communities in the region. Three-quarters of all Zapatista homes have access to toilets as opposed to 54% in non-Zapatista homes and in terms of vaccination, increased newborn weights, and the diminishment of infant mortality, the EZLN health projects far outshine their non-Zapatista neighbors.

While the EZLN eschews the public spotlight and has auto-marginalized itself from participation in national and international political activism, autonomous Zapatista communities in southeastern Chiapas continue to be living proof that another world is possible.

Response to Ross: A Second Look at the EZLN's Festival of Dignified Rage

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Hillary Klein

I would like to respond to John Ross' article "[Commodifying the Revolution: Zapatista Villages Become Hot Tourist Destinations](#)," published by CounterPunch on February 17 and [NACLA](#).

As someone who has supported the Zapatista movement for the last 15 years, and worked in Zapatista communities for six years, I was disappointed by this article. In the first part, Ross presents an accurate critique of the role of tourism and eco-tourism in Chiapas. After making some important points, however, Ross goes on to deride *Subcomandante* Marcos and the recent *Festival Mundial de la Digna Rabia* (Worldwide Festival of Dignified Rage), organized by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). What Ross presents in his article is a subjective and rather limited view of the *Digna Rabia* festival, of *Subcomandante* Marcos, and of the Zapatista movement itself. Of course no one person can paint the whole picture, but I would like to provide some balance to Ross' perspective.

While Ross presents himself as a supporter of the Zapatista movement, he says very little about the *Digna Rabia* event itself; one of his few comments is that "special invitees such as the British writer John Berger sent along videotaped contributions rather than traveling to Chiapas for in-person appearances." By mentioning one esteemed individual who did not show up, he implies a lack of interest in, or support for, the event and the movement – an unfair generalization. In fact, an impressive array of national and international intellectuals and leaders of social movements came to Chiapas to speak at the event: Michael Hardt from the US, Oscar Olivera from Bolivia, Mónica Baltodano from Nicaragua, and Sylvia Marcos, Adolfo Gilly, Gustavo Esteva, and Pablo González Casanova from Mexico, to name just a few. There were also representatives of dozens of organizations present: Via Campesina (an international peasant movement), the National Indigenous Congress (of Mexico), the National Association of Rural and Indigenous Women of Chile, the Mexican Network of Sex Workers, the Movement for Justice in El Barrio (from New York), and a number of international solidarity committees, again, just to name a few.

Personally, I was more impressed by the energy and enthusiasm at the event than by the big name speakers. The auditorium—which seats 1300 people—was constantly packed to overflowing. I spoke with a number of participants, people who have supported the Zapatista movement for years and who felt energized by the event, and people who were getting to know the Zapatista movement for the first time and were inspired by what they were learning. For anyone who is interested, there is extensive information about the *Digna Rabia* event on the Chiapas Indymedia [website](#).

After dismissing the *Digna Rabia* event, Ross goes on a personal tirade against Marcos. Marcos is not above criticism, and I don't agree with everything that Marcos says. I do believe, however, that the form as well as the content of Ross' criticism is unreasonable. In his article, Ross states that Marcos "is single-handedly responsible for the depreciation of the Zapatista movement as a national and international player on the Left." This is a ridiculous statement. It is true that the Zapatista movement currently faces significant obstacles. And admittedly, the Zapatista movement has made its share of mistakes. But the most serious obstacles the movement faces have more to do with external factors than with Marcos' behavior. These external factors include the toll that 15 years of state-implemented counter-insurgency tactics have taken; efforts to privatize the land that the Zapatistas occupied in 1994; and the global financial crisis and the related fact that members of indigenous villages—Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas alike—are being forced to leave their communities and migrate, looking for work.

Many of us on the left acknowledge the importance of leadership, but also recognize the problematic nature of focusing too much attention on any one leader. Whatever his faults, Marcos has played and continues to play a key role in the Zapatista movement. Yet Marcos himself acknowledges that allowing a cult of personality to flourish around him was a mistake. In an interview with Laura Castellanos, Marcos states: "If there's anything that I would go back and do differently, it would be to play a less protagonistic role in the media." [1] By focusing solely on Marcos,

Ross reproduces this individualistic framework which Marcos has himself acknowledged as problematic. For example, John Ross focuses on what he calls *Subcomandante* Marcos' "shameful performance" at the *Digna Rabia* festival, but does not bother mentioning any of the other Zapatista leaders whose voices were heard at the event. *Teniente Coronel Insurgente* Moisés spoke on a panel discussion with other leaders of indigenous and peasant movements, emphasizing that "indigenous and non-indigenous peoples have to think about how we are going to live together on Mother Earth without exploitation." *Comandanta* Hortensia spoke about women in the Zapatista movement during a panel on gender and sexuality, saying even though "there are still men who don't really understand the importance of women's participation," that one of the most important things that they had achieved was "the participation of women at almost all levels." *Comandante* David closed the event with these words: "Having listened to each other, it's clear to us what is happening in other places, and we see that it's not that different from what is happening here... And we know that another politics, another path, another culture, another everything is possible." Why does Ross choose to ignore these and other contributions to the event in favor of a single-focused critique of Marcos?

Of course criticism is important, even essential, for social movements to thrive. When someone has a critique to offer to a movement or a movement leader, however, and especially from the left, it's critical to present that critique in a constructive manner, to direct it strategically, and to consider the impact that airing it publicly might have on the movement. John Ross has written valid critiques of the EZLN's political postures within its Other Campaign. It is one thing, however, to express an ideological disagreement, and another thing altogether to launch a petty and vitriolic personal attack, such as calling Marcos a "vituperative, narcissistic charlatan."

At the end of his article, Ross describes the important work of constructing autonomous health care and education in indigenous Zapatista communities. His positive comments, however, are buried in the last few paragraphs, and his tirade against Marcos is a blow against that very same work being done by the Zapatista support base. As someone who worked in Zapatista communities for many years, my impression is that the people who make up the movement do not distinguish between the work they are doing in their communities and their military leadership; they see it as one integrated movement. Because the military aspect of the Zapatista movement is the most clandestine, perhaps it is the least understood; and because it is the most hierarchical, perhaps it is the easiest to criticize from the outside. But there is no denying that without its political-military character, in other words, without its initial commitment to armed struggle and its guerrilla army, the Zapatista movement would not be what it is, 15 years ago or today. Of course I cannot speak for the Zapatistas, but there is no doubt in my mind that the communities Ross claims to support would consider his attack against Marcos an attack against their entire movement.

As Ross mentions, the *Digna Rabia* festival marked the 25th anniversary of the founding of the EZLN and the 15th anniversary of the Zapatista uprising. For any social movement to survive for 25 years is no small feat, especially when this movement was clandestine for 10 of those years and has withstood a consistent campaign of low intensity warfare for another 15 years. At a party to commemorate these anniversaries in Morelia (one of the Zapatista centers of resistance), I was struck by their profound significance; the simple fact of these anniversaries deserves recognition and respect. For those of us in the United States, it might be worthwhile to reflect on what it would take to build a strong, militant social movement in the US which has been around for 25 years and has succeeded in creating regional structures of autonomous government, education, health care, and economic infrastructure; and then give it some thought before we criticize radical social movements in other countries.

John Ross calls himself a "long-time Zapatista supporter." Indeed Ross' writing over the last 15 years has been instrumental in generating interest and support for the Zapatista movement. However, any long-time Zapatista supporter should understand that an article like this does nothing but add fuel to the fire of the counter-insurgency strategies being employed against Zapatista communities by the Mexican government and other actors. This article would not have surprised me if I had read it in the mainstream media. Ironically, Ross criticizes the New York Times article about tourism in Chiapas as a "self-serving hit piece" and then goes on to write a hit piece himself. I think we should be able to expect better from a committed radical journalist like John Ross.

This response was originally published by [The Narco News Bulletin](#).

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working with women's cooperatives in Zapatista communities and is currently working on a book about women's participation in the Zapatista movement.

[1] Laura Castellanos, Corte de Caja; Entrevista al Subcomandante Marcos (Naucalpan, Mexico: Grupo Editorial Endira México, 2008), 92