

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

DISREGARDING THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF TOURISM AT LOS ALTOS DE CHIAPAS

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For decades, the federal government of Mexico and the government of the state of Chiapas, on the Mexican-Guatemalan border, attempted unsuccessfully to foster the development of tourism in the region. However, the armed insurrection of *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN), started on the 1st of January of 1994, unexpectedly gave both governments the chance to promote the region and its natural and archaeological heritage internationally. Paradoxically enough, the governmental strategy of promotion of Chiapas as a touristic destination set its focus on the same indigenous populations —involved in the Zapatista uprising— who claimed for support in meeting their basic need, such as work, land, healthcare and education, among others.

With the EZLN's uprising —and besides the Mexican military and government representatives— an unusual flow of journalists and human rights observers from different countries arrived at San Cristóbal de las Casas (SCLC). The attention caught by the state of Chiapas implied an increased tourist activity in the region, but it did not impact in enhancing the visibility of the Zapatista movement. This article explores the elements that may elucidate the disregard of the movement despite the increased tourism by two explanation lines: the internal and the external factors. The external elements deal with the military and communicational siege adopted as a counterinsurgent strategy at the area, which included not only the persecution and criminalization against human rights observers but also the implementation of policy fostering tourism in the region. The identified internal elements focus on the EZLN's interest in gaining and maintaining external support, especially the international one, meanwhile creating new territorial centres of autonomous character.

In the introduction, the article presents the methodological aspects of the research. By following Decrop's (1999) triangulation method, different information sources are contrasted: a) literature review of theory, reports and official statistical data, b) two fieldwork periods carried out in July 2016 and 2017 (between May / October). During fieldwork, the

methods of gathering information were: participant observation including passive, moderate and active following the degrees of involvement proposed by Spradley (1980); and 28 semi-structured interviews with different actors: related to tourism (private and public actors), scholars, human rights observers, members of Junta del *Buen Gobierno Zapatista* JBG (Good Government Zapatista Boards) and mass media active at that time. All the interviewees were contacted originally by following Noy's (2008) snowball method.

The second section deals with the theoretical framework which includes Henri Lefebvre's (2013) production of space, Claude Raffestin's (2013) notions of social relations and power and, for analysing the concrete case of Los Altos de Chiapas, the concept of the region of refuge developed by Aguirre Beltrán (1991). The latter intends to explain the mechanisms used by the ruling elite in order to control the indigenous people. In doing so, two extremely different and unequal societies have shaped in parallel: the indigenous society and the criollo society. When it comes to the theoretical insights provided by Claude Raffestin, the article nourishes from his ideas of centre/ periphery, nodes and asymmetry —explaining the relationship between the state and other organisations.

In section number three, the article exposes the background elements shaping the relation between the increased tourist activity and the counterinsurgent strategy to vanish the EZLN from the spotlights. The Zapatista movement challenges the hegemony of the state that provoked the response in the form of a military and communicational siege. This process brought in the militarisation of the region and the creation of special paramilitary forces to control the zone. These armed forces perpetrated human rights violations against the civil society and especially against the indigenous sectors of the population. Simultaneously, the abuses against human rights motivated the massive arrival of observers with the mission of documenting and denouncing these infringements. The state responded with more repression, also persecuting and forbidding the free entrance of human rights NGOs to the area of the conflict. The criminalisation causes that NGOs' representants strategically entered to Chiapas many times disguised as tourists in order to avoid deportation, which also causes that these activists could do not fulfil their purpose as long they are in Mexico. During the fieldwork carried out in the region, it was possible to witness both the harassment suffered by human rights observers and policing actions exerted whenever expressions of support to the Zapatistas movement rose.

The fourth chapter of the article develops another of the external factors identified as impacting in the visibility of the Zapatistas movement when it comes to the expanded tourist industry in Chiapas. The external element is the state strategy to redirect its presence in SCLC to tourism; in this context, some official agencies established in the area, such as *Secretaría de Turismo del Estado de Chiapas*, opened in March 1994. This state agency had as aim to generate a peaceful external image of Chiapas focusing on the Maya and the colonial heritage. However, positioning the area as a touristic destination, even when it was a goal during a long time, was only achieved after the uprising of the EZLN, which is confirmed by statistics.

The statistical figures show a decrease in visitors the years that followed the uprising, but simultaneously the demand for other associated services, such as lodging, grew due to the establishment of certain groups (military groups, authorities, government officials, journalists, human rights observers). Also, some initiatives, during the first years after the

insurrection, tried to attract visitors offering services related to the Zapatista movement that may be connected to trends such as war tourism, dark tourism or revolutionary tourism. However, those types of tourism do not develop further, and currently, they are not relevant anymore within the traditional tourist offer.

Section number five analyses the internal factors playing a role in the invisibility of the Zapatista movement being the focus of the EZLN both the production of new forms of organising their territory and the interest of the movement in strengthening the support networks. The new forms of organising the Zapatista territory develops as a counter hegemonic strategy that creates autonomous municipalities organised, in turn, in *Juntas de Buen Gobierno* (JBG). The JBG have as their primary task to exert self-ruling government. The decisions made by JBG are always based on principles like reciprocity, food sovereignty and direct-participative democracy. For that reason, the Zapatista model endures not only the military siege but also other counterinsurgent strategies such in the case of social aid programmes that intend to co-opt members of the organisation dividing the communities and attacking the EZLN economically. The Zapatista movement has expanded its efforts in keeping their economic autonomy instead of participating in the traditional tourist industry.

Another internal factor is the need for networking outside the Zapatista movement, both national and internationally. These networks are supposed to work as a protection wall against counterinsurgent strategies being crucial, then, the formation of a transnational identity that joint diverse people and collectives against a common enemy: neoliberal capitalism. The consequence of this strategy implies an anti-neoliberal rhetoric that usually neglects the everyday struggles of the communities, making them even more invisible.

The final discussion argues that the EZLN would have the capacity to participate in the Chiapas' tourist routes and circuits. However, the counterinsurgent strategy carried out by the Mexican state has intentionally rendered the Zapatista movement invisible. The EZLN must, instead, centre their efforts in protecting themselves against the siege. Additionally, the unwillingness to establish dialogue by the different Mexican governments has drastically changed during the current administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, which opens new possibilities for further research.

In the end, a warning is developed regarding the dependency on international solidarity and support since the universalist discourse may compromise the struggles that the Zapatista communities experience at the local level. Besides this, it is also important to remind that the lack of visibility of the EZLN in the tourist industry in Chiapas does not relate to a lack of political project of the rebel group. On the contrary, their vision develops along with the communities prevailing beyond the essentialist reading and the messianic burden that sometimes the group bears and that might move out from similar processes both in Mexico and abroad.