

FOREWORD

BY PETER ROSSET

The Zapatista rebellion that began on January 1, 1994, was an event laden with significance for Mexico and for the world. Thus this extraordinary book can be read on various levels. First and foremost, it is a clear and informative history of the uprising and its relationship to that most important of commodities in rural areas: land. It shows why indigenous people and peasants in the Mexican state of Chiapas chose to take up arms. Yet it also takes a remarkable step toward a more nuanced understanding of indigenous and peasant communities than we have had before. It helps us understand how and why the Zapatista Army of National Liberation—the EZLN—is different from previous armed struggles in Mesoamerica and elsewhere. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is a poignant case study of how neoliberal economic restructuring reaches into the very heart of communities, enriching the few while impoverishing the many; ultimately turning neighbor against neighbor and leading inexorably toward violent confrontations.

George Collier draws upon more than thirty years of research among the indigenous people of Chiapas to shatter the images held by the Left and the Right, whether they be of “noble savages” holding out against the ravages of capitalism or of “backward Indians” holding back economic development. Taking us inside people’s lives, he and Elizabeth Lowery Quaratiello show how the poor in indigenous communities are doubly victimized—first by the relationship between their communities and national or international economies, and second by relatively wealthy leaders inside their own villages who exploit them further in a myriad of ways. Yet Collier and Quaratiello also show how, when given half a chance, peasants and indigenous people can seize upon economic opportunities in dynamic ways that intellectuals of either persuasion had previously claimed were impossible, exposing the myth of the insular community, cut off from the

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outside world. Without taking this additional step in our understanding of peasant societies, we would be doomed to endlessly repeat the past failures of rural development policies throughout the world.

The rank and file members of the EZLN are refugees from villages where local strongmen, or *caciques*, denied them the right to make a living. Given this anti-leader mentality, it should come as no surprise that Zapatista ideology rejects the vanguardism and top-down organization of previous guerrilla movements. Rather they emphasize communal decision making and stake no claims on state power, instead calling, Gramsci-like, upon Mexican civil society to remake the nation in a form more responsive to the needs of the poor. Collier and Quaratiello show how this uprising, despite coming from largely indigenous communities, reaches out to all of the poor and disenfranchised regardless of their ethnicity, something surprising and perhaps even refreshing in this age of ethnic conflict.

This is a book about the Zapatistas, and about the “indigenous” and “peasant questions” that have troubled Latin America for so long. But it is also a book about people’s lives, a book that cuts easily across the geographic and cultural distances that separate readers in the North from Mayan communities in Chiapas. It is in showing ordinary lives, complete with petty and not-so-petty struggles, that the authors are at their best. This book makes it absolutely clear what the economic restructuring of the 1980s has left in its wake, and while their chosen case study is of Chiapas, what they have to say is equally relevant to South Central Los Angeles or any other community that has had its fabric ripped asunder by homegrown or exported neoliberal policies. The growing gulf between rich and poor leads to the desperation and violence of neighbor against neighbor. In Chiapas, at least, a new social grouping has emerged from the desolation, represented by the Zapatistas and their spokesman, Subcomandante Marcos. Perhaps they are showing all of us a path forward, setting aside the ethnic differences that separate us and the verticalism that often stifles popular movements.