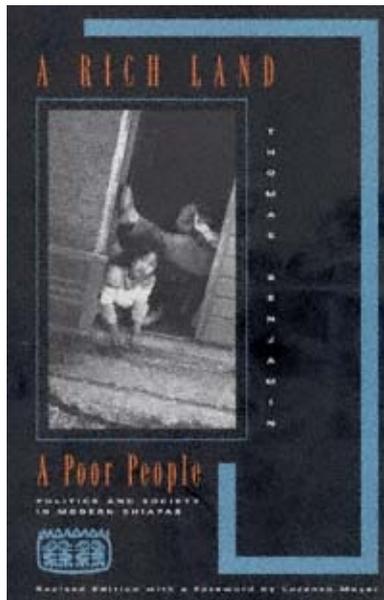


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A Rich Land, A Poor People

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Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, Where wealth accumulates, and men decay.
Oliver Goldsmith *The Deserted Village*

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A Rich Land, A Poor People
Politics and Society in Modern Chiapas
 REVISED EDITION WITH A FOREWORD BY LORENZO MEYER

Thomas Benjamin

UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO PRESS
Albuquerque

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*FORÂ MYÂ MOTHER
ANDÂ INÂ REMEMBRANCEÂ OFÂ MYÂ FATHER*

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FOREWORD

Lorenzo Meyer ¹

The violence that recently erupted in southern Mexico, as a result of extreme conditions of misery and injustice, is not the best path for the country; but neither is authoritarian neoliberalism, which has been followed up until now. A new national political covenant is necessary, one without tricks and one that responds to the needs of Mexico the way it really is and not the government's image of Mexico. It should be a covenant that does not repeat the pattern in which the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) government obtained 97.7 percent of the vote in 1976, 90.2 percent in 1982, 89.9 percent in 1988 and an armed rebellion in 1994!

Today, as at few other times, the Mexican political class, in its broadest sense, has been united: the PRI and the Party of the Democratic Revolution, the bishops and the Ministry of Government, business leaders and public opinion makers. All have declared that the political violence that erupted in the highlands of Chiapas is not the right response to the old and obvious problems of misgovernment and extreme social injustice which have accumulated there. The motives/fears which explain why each group rejects violence are different but essentially correct: as a national project, the declaration of war by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) against the national army for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Carlos Salinas and establishing social justice is untenable and suicidal given national and international conditions in the aftermath of the collapse of communism.

We must do more than condemn the violence of a few rebels (which has profound and historic causes) and reject State violence as an acceptable response. We do not need another 1968 in 1994.² If violence is not

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the solution, what is? No one, being completely honest, would suggest that Mexico's existing political institutions and current leaders are satisfactory. Today the electoral system and the political parties do not work and, as a result, are more illegitimate than legitimate. The aberration in Yucatán has just demonstrated this clearly: the loser is the official winner and vice versa, giving elections in Mexico an Alice-in-Wonderland quality. The state legislatures and the national congress are perfect examples of total and absolute political uselessness since the majority of their members represent no one except themselves and their only purpose is to serve the president. Finally, the judiciary is neither powerful nor dedicated to the provision of justice (indeed, the opposite is true); anyone in Mexico seeking justice before a prosecutor or a court who finds it has only luck to thank.

Given these circumstances which everyone, the people and the politicians, has understood for a long time how can one give a clear and credible response to the question regarding the best way to resolve the profound injustice which Chiapanecos, and many more Mexicans throughout the country, suffer? A new political system has to be designed and rapidly put into place: the current authoritarian system has to be brought to an end, not only because it is extremely unfair but also because it is dysfunctional and obsolete, and it should be replaced by a modern, genuinely representative system, in which the marginalized in society have a voice and an effective vote. In short, what has to be done is what has been announced a thousand times in official pronouncements and negated a thousand times in practice: the development of a state of law, one that is

democratic, fair and just, and one that gives primacy to votes rather than bullets. The basic political problem that confronts a poor and premodern Mexico whose leaders try to fool themselves and foreigners alike that the country has achieved First World status (the Mexican government's petition that it be considered equal to the other members of the OECD in this respect seems like a cruel joke) became tragically evident twenty-five years ago, in Tlatelolco. Nevertheless the powers-that-be then and now have sidestepped seeking any fundamental solutions. The problem can be summed up like this: while Mexican society has grown and matured, the political system has remained the same as it was in the 1940s. For this reason our institutions as well as those who direct them have been overwhelmed by circumstances. The result is an accelerating failure of the political process. Now

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the chain has shattered at its weakest link: in Chiapas, land of the poorest of the poor.

According to the pamphlet published in 1990 by the Consultative Council of Solidarity ³: "If the share of wealth generated by petroleum (which does not remain in the state anyway, same as the electricity produced by the hydroelectric dams at Malpaso, Chicoasen, Angostura, and Penitas) is eliminated from the economic statistics of Chiapas, its per capita gross internal product is substantially reduced and that state is then placed among the poorest in the country," which is to say, alongside Oaxaca and Guerrero. The problem of Chiapas is, as the manifesto of the EZLN indicates, a hundred years old. Anyone who wishes to better understand this problem today would do well to read the book by Thomas Benjamin, *A Rich Land, A Poor People*. Professor Benjamin's thesis is stated in the title: Chiapas is a rich land with a poor people as a result of a political process burdened by violence, and a society profoundly divided ethnically and, above all, economically.

Violence has been a constant element in Chiapanecan society; in the nineteenth century and the Mexican Revolution of 1910, it had particularly destructive effects on native communities. Revolutionary factions "Mapaches" and Carrancistas although mutual enemies, both plundered native communities during the Revolution. The postrevolutionary era did not bring an end to the violence because disputes over land the key to wealth in every rural society, such as Chiapas were not settled by agrarian reform; indeed, with the growth of the cattle industry, the violence became worse. The "cattle-ization" of the state, beginning around 1950, was fast, as fast as the ecological destruction it generated. Between that year and 1985, land under cultivation and population growth increased at the same rate quadrupling but the number of cattle increased even faster: it septupled. As a result, cattle ranchers and native communities found themselves in conflict, fighting for the same fundamental but scarce resource: land.

The distribution of wealth in Chiapas today, Professor Benjamin writes, is not very different from that which prevailed at the end of the Porfiriato (1910). The general standard of living has improved, but the profound sense of injustice and the insecurity these communities feel about the future have not changed. In 1960, landowners with properties of one thousand hectares and larger constituted 2.4 percent of all private landowners in Chiapas but they controlled 60 percent of all privately owned

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land. On the other hand, ejidos there are more than a thousand possess lands valued at less than one third of the value of privately owned lands. In Chiapas, according to General Absalón Castellanos in 1982, then at the beginning of his gubernatorial term, "there is no middle class," the rich are very rich and the poor are extremely poor. Recognizing that fact and doing something about it, however, is not the same thing; in 1987 the Mexican Academy of Human Rights published a report ("Chiapas: cronología de un etnocidio reciente") which characterized the administration of General Castellanos as one of the most repressive and corrupt in the country.

In the 1970s, as social polarization became worse, a movement of agrarian and native community organizations developed, which was generally independent of the traditional control of the PRI: the First Native Congress of Chiapas (1974) organized by Bishop Samuel Ruiz was followed by the 10th of April Campesino Alliance (1976). Then came the Campesino Bloc of Chiapas, the Union of Ejidal Unions and Marginalized Groups, the Miguel de la Cruz Agricultural Workers' Union, and the Emiliano Zapata Campesino Organization. The aggressiveness of peasant communities in the defense of their interests is apparent in certain figures: during the 1970s there were 115 agrarian conflicts characterized as serious, among these were 87 disputes between native ejidatarios and ranchers for control of communal and ejidal lands. The use of the army and the police to regulate conflict between landowners and ejidatarios became all too common. Hamlets and villages were frequently burned and destroyed; the murder of campesinos also became common, and the murder of landowners by campesinos should not be ignored. After the state of Veracruz, Chiapas reported the greatest number of violent incidents. In 1983, for example, the community of Monte Libano in Ocosingo sent a letter to the President complaining that in 1976, 1979, and again in 1982 the state police had burned down their hamlet. The letter concluded with a warning: if we have to, we will fight to recover our lands because we know that no one else will help us struggle against bosses and land barons. A similar warning was made the same year by the Tzeltales of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of Southeastern Mexico in a proclamation: "We have learned from the study of the history of man and the history of Mexico that only by struggling in an organized form can we achieve a new and better way of life."

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Investigation of the history of Chiapas since Independence has brought me repeatedly to an understanding of the great importance of government as the essential shaping force of wealth and poverty in the region. The power of the familia chiapaneca, an economic group and not a social class, was often translated into an ability to use government to promote its interests. The connection between power and interests was never simple, but a pattern is discernible over the course of decades. The way the familia chiapaneca has used government to modernize and reform Chiapas could have had no other result but narrow economic growth without broad-based social development. The greatest challenge to this program was the Mexican Revolution, which intruded into Chiapas with its momentum for economic redistribution and social justice.

Historians of regional Mexico during the last two decades have been drawn to the Mexican Revolution. While undermining the traditional "populist" interpretation of the Revolution as a triumphant peasant movement, they too often view it as the fundamental watershed initiating modern Mexico. Historian John Womack, Jr., in this regard, suggests that the Revolution has become a fetish for historians and that in the larger sense "we have resisted comprehending what the Revolution meant."³ Hans Werner Tobler poses the right question by asking "whether the revolution is to be understood as a profound and radical reorientation of Mexico's political, social and economic systems or rather for all the surface change in politics as the expression of a basic continuity in the country's development since the Porfiriato."⁴

Most students of the Mexican Revolution have difficulty answering this question in detail because of the limited chronological focus of their monographs. "It would be much more invigorating and perhaps more fruitful," writes Paul J. Vanderwood, "to think of [the Revolution] over the *longue dur e* as advocated by the Annalist school of historical thought."⁵ The primary value of this study of Chiapas is its extended temporal perspective the entire modern period, with particular emphasis on the period 1890 to 1950. The answer to Tobler's question for Chiapas is clear and unequivocal: continuity reigns. The great historical project of Chiapas since the 1890s has been the modernization of commercial agriculture. The Mexican Revolution, which intervened from without in Chiapas, interfered with and in time contributed in an important way to this development. In the final analysis, however, in

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In 1989 Professor Benjamin concluded that Chiapas was under a "state of siege" and that politics in the state was a matter of force. By 1987 the national army had four thousand soldiers in the state, today the number is said to be twelve thousand and this will surely increase.

The drama now occurring in Chiapas took many of us by surprise although it shouldn't have: the coming of violence had been announced long before. Guillermo Correa, (echoing the concern of the Catholic Church) writing in *Proceso* in 1983, warned that Chiapas was "one step away from guerrilla war." That was ten years ago, just about the time when the Zapatista movement, according to one of its leaders, was becoming organized. What did regional politicians and the national authorities do at this time? What did the current Minister of Government do when he was governor of the state? As far as anyone can tell, not very much, at least not enough.

Now is not the time to grumble about lost time but to make proposals and do something. There has to be decisive, intelligent, sensible, and rapid action. The challenge facing Mexico and its political class is more serious and profound than that faced by the government when it negotiated the Free Trade Agreement with the United States. A new political covenant between the governing elite and the majority of the people has to be negotiated, one which recognizes the people as citizens, one that redistributes the burden of economic development in a fairer and more equitable manner, and one without the corruption, chicanery, pretense, and the irresponsibility that have made the Mexican political class world famous ("the perfect dictatorship"). Is the government and the political opposition up to the challenge? For their own sakes as well as that of all Mexicans, I hope so.

Notes

1. Originally published as "Fallaron las Instituciones" ("The Institutions Failed"), on the front page of Mexico's newspaper of record, *Excelsior*, January 6, 1994. Lorenzo Meyer is a historian and the coordinator of the Program of Mexican-U.S. Studies at the Colegio de Mexico in Mexico City. He is the coauthor of *In the Shadow of the Mexican Revolution: Contemporary Mexican History, 1910-1989* (1993).

2. In 1968 the Mexican government used the national army to violently repress a civic movement for democracy and social justice in the Plaza of Three Cultures, Tlatelolco, Mexico City.

3. Solidarity, the shorthand name given to the National Solidarity Program, was an anti-poverty program established by President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

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PREFACE

Despite the fertility of this province, it is extremely poor. . . ." ¹This description of Chiapas, written in 1823, has been repeated time and again over the past century and half. In 1985 President Miguel de la Madrid rendered it into the language of modern technocrats: "The natural wealth of the state of Chiapas contrasts with the imbalances in its development."² A rich land, a poor people. It is the unhappy byword of Chiapas.

Distant, provincial, and underdeveloped, Chiapas has generally kept to itself and is largely unknown even to most Mexicans except by reputation. A political cartoon in one of the Mexico City newspapers represented Chiapas in 1982 as a medieval castle surrounded by a hostile jungle. In the 1980s, as in the 1880s, the news from Chiapas is bad. Reports of endemic poverty and repression occasionally make their way into the newspapers and magazines of Mexico City. In the public mind the state is representative of the worst conditions of rural Mexico.

Chiapas is rich, in fact rich in fertile farmlands, pastures, and forests: in coffee, cattle, cacao, and petroleum; and in productive enterprises owned by a few families. Yet most Chiapanecos remain very poor despite the wealth of the land, the reforms of the Mexican Revolution, and the modernization policies of successive state and federal governments. Natural plenty, of course, does not necessarily create social plenty. Modernization and reform need not lead to progress for all. That is the paradox of Chiapas, a rich land of poor people.

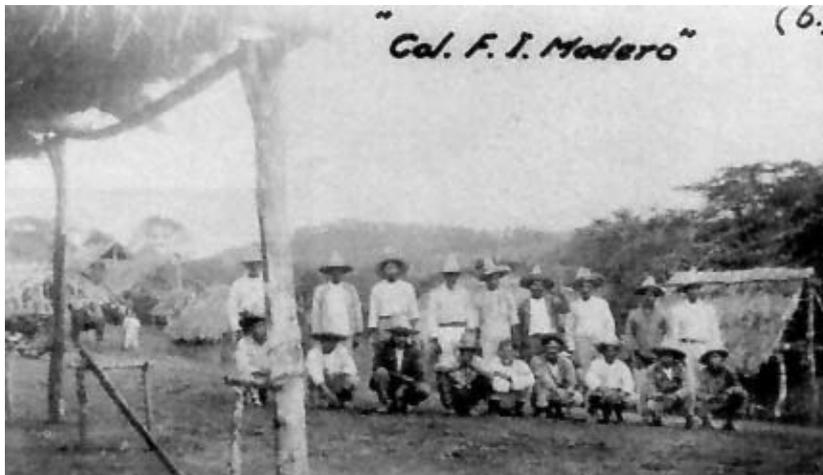
Beginning in the 1890s commercial farmers and ranchers, primarily those of the Central Valley, and their mercantile and professional allies initiated a sustained effort to use government to make Chiapas a pro-

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Campesinos, recipients of a land reform grant, in Colonia F. J. Madero, in the municipality of Cintalapa, 1930. From: Archivo "seis de enero de 1915" de la Secretaría de Reforma Agraria, Mexico City.

ductive agricultural region integrated into national and international markets. Across sixty turbulent yearsspanning intraregional conflicts, revolution from without and popular pressure within, and national political centralizationthe landowners of Chiapas successfully adapted to changing circumstances within the region and the nation and carefully transformed their state. This book is about those landowners, the so-called *familia chiapaneca*their governments and political struggles, efforts to modernize and reform Chiapas, and efforts to preserve and advance their power and wealth. It is also about the large majority of Chiapanecos whose toil (and, at one time, village lands) has made Chiapas a rich region but who have themselves been kept poor. What follows is a regional history of power and interests, that is, a study of the social and economic basis of politics and the socioeconomic impact of government.

The persistence of mass poverty admittedly is a topic of great complexity. Any one effort to unravel this problem, particularly one based on primary sources, can only suggest answers for one place. My in-

Chiapas the Revolution was but a chapter in the longer historical process of elite-directed modernization and reform.

This is a regional history that explores, in the words of Stuart Voss, "the character and evolution of a region in its own right." ⁶ The Prologue tells of the development of an intense regional rivalry within Chiapas from Independence to the 1880s. During this period the farmers and ranchers of the Central Valley politically and economically eclipsed the colonial oligarchy of the Central Highlands, to become the political constituency of "modernizing" state governments during the latter Porfiriato.

The three chapters in Part One chronicle the efforts of energetic governors, the so-called enlightened caciquismo, to develop the state economically in the 1890s and 1900s. Their program of modernization (implemented during a favorable time for national and international markets) appeared at the time to be

remarkably successful in promoting commercial agriculture; what the prospering elites of Chiapas did not see were the high costs of their "progress" paid by Indian and mestizo villagers, migrant laborers, and indebted servants.

Part Two, composed of two chapters, is an account of the Mexican Revolution in Chiapas, or rather, the decidedly unrevolutionary political-military regional movements sparked by the national revolutions. The convulsions in Chiapas between 1910 and 1920 were affairs of the familia chiapaneca (and intruding outsiders); "the people" did not rebel for land and liberty, but the long years of disorder and war did fracture the tight system of social control and open the door to their participation in regional politics.

The three chapters in Part Three consider the popular challenge to the familia chiapaneca, and the response and survival of landowners, from 1920 to 1950. Landless villagers and agricultural workers were mobilized into agrarian leagues, labor unions, and political parties to secure land, just wages and working conditions, and power. Popular mobilization, however, also served the cause of factional political struggle within the state and, in time, the interests of landowner-politicians.

The Epilogue follows the success story of the familia chiapaneca from the 1950s to the 1980s and describes the agrarian rebellion, so long delayed, which erupted throughout the Chiapas countryside in the 1970s and continues to this day.

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From the 1890s to the 1950s and beyond, the governments of Chiapas sought the modernization of the regional economy and society by means of roads and schools, developmental projects, and social reforms. If we accept their statements and promises at face value, they wanted to create a productive and prosperous regional economy that would in time benefit all social classes. If mass poverty persisted, as it did, it was understood to be the result of too few roads, insufficient federal investment, low market prices for crops but also the "backwardness" or traditionalism of Indians and the complacency, laziness, alcoholism, and corruption of villagers, farm workers, peasant farmers, and ejidatarios. The model of modernization, although often adjusted and reinvigorated, was never doubted. And the intimate protection government provided private property against "bandits," "agitators," and "communists" never faltered. This institutionalized protection extended in the name of free enterprise but actually reinforcing a narrow monopolization of land, resources, and opportunity was never acknowledged as destructive of truly free enterprise, economic opportunity, and regional prosperity more widely shared. In short, the familia chiapaneca attempted to purchase regional growth and development cheaply, unwilling to forego their de facto monopoly privileges for genuine regional development and widespread prosperity, to say nothing of social justice. Unknowingly, Charles Darwin was speaking to them: "If the misery of the poor be caused not by the laws of nature, but by our institutions, great is our sin."

I have been most fortunate in the personal and institutional support given me in the research and writing of this book. Archival research was undertaken in Mexico and the United States during the years 1978 to 1981 and the summers of 1982, 1983, and 1984. Financial support for travel and residence was generously provided through fellowships by the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University, the Henry L. and Grace Doherty Charitable Foundation, and the Faculty Research and Creative Endeavors Committee of Central Michigan University. Research leads, suggestions, and assistance were given by M. Favio Gálvez, Natalio Fuentes, Gary Gossen, Alfonso López, Prudencio Moscoso Pastrana, Thomas Neihaus, Peter Reich, Gloria Sarmiento, Daniela Spenser, Angeles Suárez, Lawrence Taylor, and John Taylor. I

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would also like to thank the staffs of the archives listed in the bibliography; without their friendly cooperation and assistance, I would long ago have given up.

Several friends read and criticized various drafts. The advice (and just as important, encouragement) of David C. Bailey, Friedl Baumann, Leslie Rout, Jan Rus, Paul Vanderwood, and Allen Wells has been invaluable and is gratefully acknowledged. Daniela Spenser, my Chiapaneca soulmate, read each draft and pointed me in the right direction countless times. Despite the best advice, of course, errors of fact and interpretation are mine alone.

Finally, the support of my family through the lengthy and rocky course of research and writing proved vital. Christina Johns patiently put up with Tuxtla Gutiérrez, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Mexico City, and my Mexican obsession, and gave me the confidence to do more than I thought I could. Christine Mattley helped me put my life in order enough to finish writing and rewriting. My parents, even under trying circumstances, provided unswerving encouragement and support. To my father who did not live to see the fruit of those efforts but who lives in me, and to my mother, this book is dedicated.

Political Abbreviations

CCCR Comité Chiapaneco de la Confederación Revolucionaria

CCM Confederación Campesina Mexicana

CCOC Confederación Campesino y Obrera de Chiapas

CGOCM Confederación General de Obreros y Campesinos de México

CLA Comisión Local Agraria

CNA Comisión Nacional Agraria

CNC Confederación Nacional Campesino

CROM Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana

CTM Confederación de Trabajadores Mexicana

INI Instituto Nacional Indigenista

LCA Liga de Comunidades Agrarias

LNC Liga Nacional Campesina

PCM Partido Comunista Mexicana

PNR Partido Nacional Revolucionario

PRI Partido Revolucionario Institucional

PRM Partido de la
Revolución
Mexicana

PSC Partido Socialista Chiapaneco

PSS Partido Socialista de Soconusco

STI Sindicato de Trabajadores Indígenas
SUTICS Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Industria del Café del Soconusco

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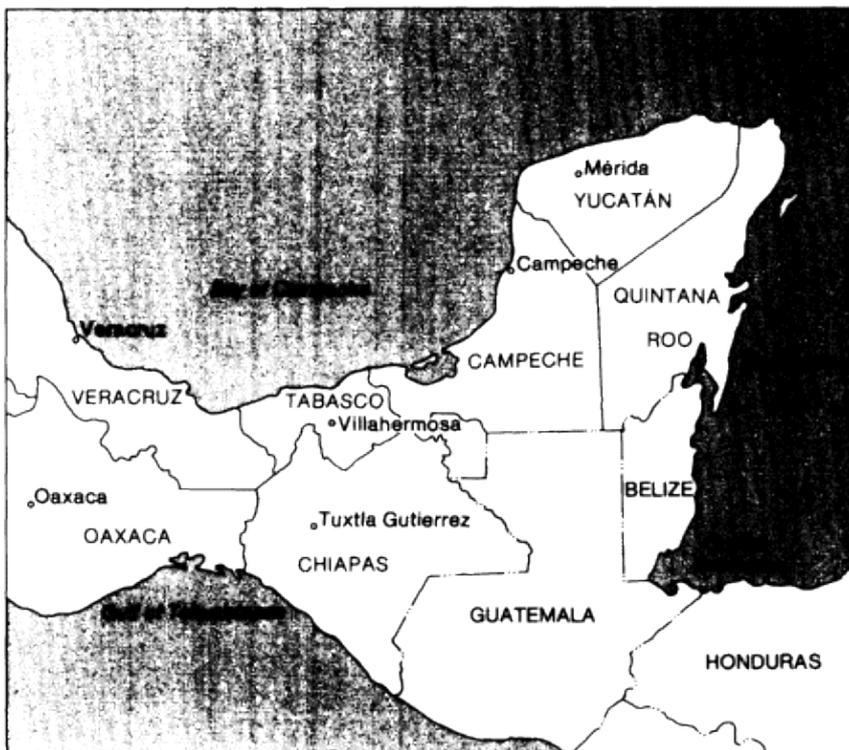
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The State of Chiapas and Southeastern Mexico

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Page 1

PROLOGUE THE SENTIMENT OF LOCALISM IS VERY DEEPLY ROOTED (1820s-80s)

Politics in nineteenth-century Chiapas involved local conflicts of interest within the landowning familia chiapaneca to the disadvantage of the powerless and dispossessed *pueblo*

chiapaneco, whose land and labor was most often the focus of contention. In a province with an Indian majority and a history of Indian insurrection, competing elite factions in Chiapas did not seek or enlist the support of peasant villagers until the twentieth century. Politics was not a matter of class or race but of economic geography. The surviving colonial oligarchy of the province the clergy, landowners, and merchants located in the provincial capital in the Central Highlands subsisted on the labor and the surplus production of the large nearby Indian populations whom the elites regarded as a "natural resource" (in the phrase of one contemporary). The farmers and merchants of the less populated but more fertile Central Valley coveted Indian labor and church lands and, therefore, provincial governmental power to implement "reforms" to transfer those resources into their more productive hands.

National politics, particularly competition and conflict in the center of Mexico to control Mexico City and certain key provinces, intersected with but by no means dominated regional politics and local interests. Given the weakness of the national state until late in the century, the peripheral provinces of Mexico enjoyed considerable home rule; but they were not, however, immune from the conflicts of the center. The farmers and merchants of the Central Valley of Chiapas identified with and became loosely allied to the national Liberals in a mutually beneficial arrangement. The former colonial oligarchy of the provincial capital associated with the former colonial oligarchy of the national

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capital, the national Conservatives, and were motivated less by the fate of the nation than the fate of their province and their predominance in it. The Liberal triumph over the Conservatives, nationally and provincially, in time favored the construction of a stable national state, which emerged near the century's close. The politics of local interests, however, still governed Chiapas even as the new century began. "The sentiment of localism," complained a governor in 1891, "is very deeply rooted in the sons of each community in this state."

That "sentiment of localism" became the target of modernizing provincial politicians beginning in the 1890s, of revolutionary proconsuls sent from the center in the 1910s, and of state and national government bureaucrats in the 1920s, 1930s, and beyond. To future reformers, localism was synonymous with backwardness, disorder, and poverty. And the cure to these maladies was strong, effective central government.

La Provincia de Chiapa

"Its territory is composed of beautiful valleys and magnificent mountains," wrote Brigadier General Vicente Filisola of Chiapas in 1823. ¹ "La provincia de Chiapa," as it was called prior to Independence (it became Chiapas after 1821), which Filisola rediscovered on behalf of Mexico, was located to the south and east of the Mexican provinces of Oaxaca and Tabasco and northwest ("in the backyard," it was generally said) of Guatemala.²

Chiapas, like Mexico generally, is physically contorted by mountains interspersed among valleys. The Sierra Madre de Chiapas, a volcanic range that rises from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, dominates the topography of the region. This range is bisected by an intermontaine basin comparable in size to the Valley of Mexico. Through this great Central Valley of Chiapas (elevation 1500-2,500 feet), also called the Central Lowlands, the Central Depression, and *tierra caliente*, flows the R o Grande de Chiapas, which becomes the R o Grijalva farther north and flows into the Bay of Campeche on the coast of Tabasco. The Central Valley is composed of a number of wide alluvial valleys, possesses fertile soils and extensive grasslands, and is usually hot and dry. As a result of a series of epidemics during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the native population of this area was severely re-

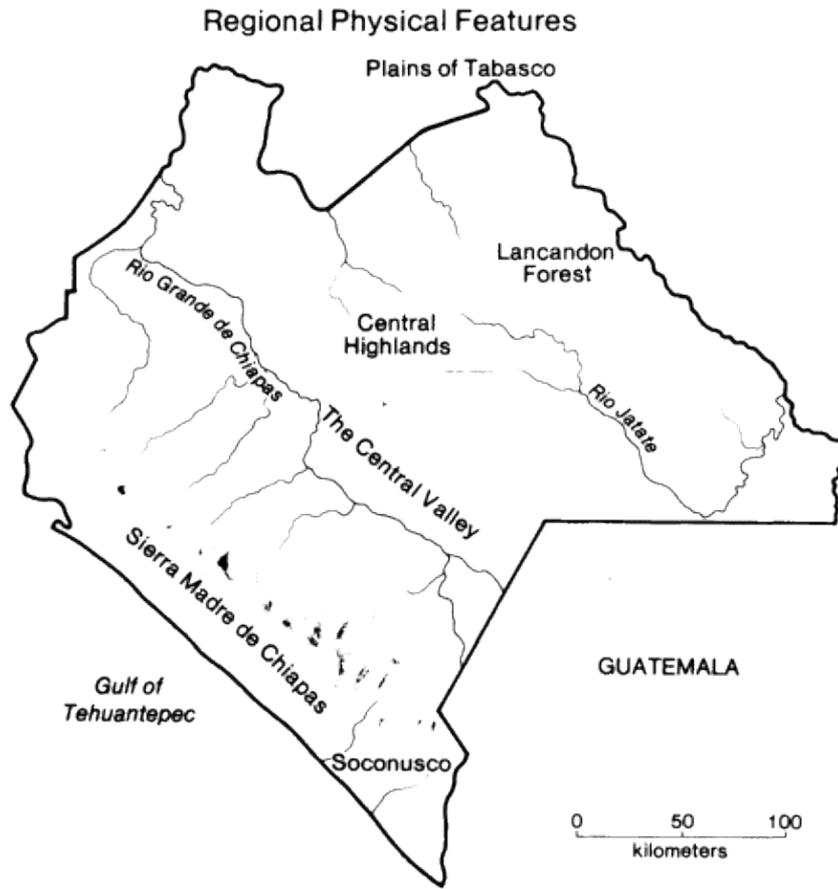
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The Topography of the State of Chiapas

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duced. The Meseta Central (elevation 5,000-7,000 feet), also called the Central Highlands and *tierra fría*, rises sharply from the Valley of Chiapas and dominates the northern portion of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas. This region is an extremely rugged and heavily forested area containing several small rocky valleys and is generally cold. Here the epidemics of the early colonial period were less deadly due to the colder climate and the wider dispersion of settlements, thus making the highlands the home of the vast majority of Chiapas's native peoples, speakers of Tzotzil and Tzeltal principally and sharing the general Mayan culture of southeastern Mesoamerica. To the north and east, the Central Highlands gradually fall off and eventually disappear into the plains of Tabasco and the Lacandon tropical forest. The portion of the Sierra Madre south of the Central Valley gradually rises to a maximum elevation of 12,000 feet and runs along the Pacific coast into Guatemala. The Pacific Littoral (its southern portion is called Soconusco), bounded by the Sierra Madre and the Pacific Ocean, is a sea-level plain no more than fifteen to twenty-five miles wide. The native population along the coast was so reduced by epidemics during the sixteenth century that it came to be known as "el Despoblado," the uninhabited place. Chiapas is not a natural region; instead it's the political artifact of the Conquest and Spanish rule and contains several regions, a condition giving rise to opposing local interests and political conflict.

Chiapas in the early 1820s was and had always been a frontier. It formed the northern border of the kingdom of Guatemala. The pre-Columbian cities of Palenque and Bonampak were located on the northern periphery of classic Mayan civilization. By the end of the fifteenth century, Aztec political-military influence had

advanced as far south as the towns of Zinacantan and Soconusco. Chiapas was conquered early in the sixteenth century by Spanish military expeditions proceeding from Mexico City in the north and, a few years later, from Guatemala in the south. Spanish settlements in the region, like small European islands in an Indian sea, were rustic frontier towns, "no fit place for Jesuits," commented the English Dominican monk Thomas Gage.³ Regionalism striving for cultural, economic, and political autonomy flourished on this periphery of Mexico and Guatemala.

On the eve of independence and annexation by Mexico, Chiapas possessed a population of about 130,000 inhabitants. Most of the pop-

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ulation, wrote Filisola in his report to the Mexican government, was Indian, there were fewer mestizos ("or ladinos, as they call them") and still fewer creoles and Spaniards. The 1814 census counted more than 105,000 Indians, 21,000 mestizos, and fewer than 4,000 Spaniards. "Although those called Spaniards have in general the same culture that is common in the towns of MÃ©jico . . .," noted an 1822 report sent to Filisola, "the Indians remain most ignorant, and are very degraded, because in this part of America [meaning all of the Kingdom of Guatemala] they have been treated with much contempt, and they have been forced always into a very humiliating submission."⁴ The province had 2 cities, Ciudad Real and ComitÃ¡n; 3 towns, Tuxtla, TonalÃ¡, and Palenque; and 157 villages. The capital of the province, Ciudad Real de Chiapa de los EspaÃ±oles (also called San CristÃ³bal after the city's patron saint), was located in the valley of Jovel in the Central Highlands. Of the 6,000 Cristobalenses (residents of Ciudad Real) reported in 1814, fewer than 700 were American-born or European-born Spaniards. The capital was surrounded by nearly 70 Indian

villages. The towns and their surrounding countryside in tierra caliente were generally described at the time as possessing fertile lands, extensive pastures, and an unhealthy climate.⁵

"Despite the fertility of this province," wrote Filisola, "it is extremely poor."⁶ This was Chiapas as described two years after its independence from Spain and one year before its permanent annexation by Mexico: a rich land, a poor people. And so it had been for nearly three hundred years, an age when Chiapas was a backwater province within a bypassed corner of Spanish America, the Kingdom of Guatemala.

There was wealth to be had here, although it was insignificant compared to the fortunes made in Mexico, Peru, or even Guatemala proper. The wealth of Chiapas was squeezed from the native population in the form of tribute and tithes, forced labor, and forced sales of merchandise for the benefit of a small circle of royal officials, prominent settlers, and enterprising friars.⁷ These privileged few were located for the most part in the Central Highlands and in the provincial capital Ciudad Real. Their power and wealth were derived from the privileges and prerogatives ingrained in the colonial Central American system of government. Competitors for the wealth of the regioncriollo (creole or American-born Spanish) and ladino (mestizo) farmers and rancherswere gen-

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erally excluded from this system and most of its benefits. They lived more modestly from the land of the Central Valley surrounding the towns of Chiapa, Tuxtla, San Bartolom , and on the long grassy plateau south of Ciudad RealComit n. They produced sugar, cotton, maize, cattle, and horses for export to Guatemala and to parts of Mexico. ⁸ By the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, two ill-defined, regionally based groups of Spanish-speaking settlers were forming in Chiapas. The rivalry between them for land, labor, and political power became increasingly bitter and violent as the decades passed. It accounts for the political turbulence of this region during the time of independence (from Spain and Guatemala) and annexation by Mexico, and was the essence of politics in nineteenth-century Chiapas.

The One that Wanted to be of Mexico

The immediate stimulus to the movement for independence in Spanish America was the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1807-8. Provincial Spanish councils of resistance arose to oppose the French, while in America creoles established loyal governing councils in many cities to rule until King Ferdinand VII was restored to the Spanish throne. In 1810 the Spanish councils united, formed a central council, and summoned a national parliamentthe Cort s. The Cort s, which assembled in the port city of C diz to write a constitution, also granted American representation. This move encouraged provincialism and separatism, which was already high, in Central America. The delegate from Chiapas, for example, introduced a slate of eight propositions outlining home rule. The C diz Cort s promulgated its liberal constitution in 1812; both the constitution and the governing body, however, were suppressed in 1814 upon the restoration of King Ferdinand.⁹

In January 1821 a liberal faction of the military seized power in Spain, restored the C diz Constitution, and reconvened the Cort s. The new government enacted measures restricting the privileges of the Catholic Church and the military, reforms that were not welcome in elite circles in America. In response, the royalist military commander of Mexico, the creole Agust n de Iturbide, published his Plan de Iguala in February 1821. In defense of the existing social order, Iturbide and his Mexico City backers made a conservative