Foreword

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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

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

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

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."

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.