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## Review/Reseña

Nick Henck, *Subcommander Marcos: The Man and the Mask*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007.

## Unmasking Mexico

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Who is that masked man? Anyone with a burning interest in that question will find in this tome an exhaustive assembly and meticulous dissection and assessment of every shred of evidence, covering virtually every known action or statement by or about the colorful spokesperson of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN. The author notes that this is the first English-language biography of Marcos, and that the two main works in Spanish are limited: The first, by César Jacobo Romero,<sup>1</sup> appeared before the Mexican government announced that it had discovered Marcos's identity to be Rafael Sebastián Guillén Vicente, son of a furniture

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1. *Marcos: ¿Un profesional de la esperanza?* (Mexico City: Planeta, 1994).

maker from Tampico, former professor at the Autonomous Metropolitan University (UAM) Xochimilco campus. The second, by *Le Monde* correspondent Bertrand de la Grange and Maite Rico,<sup>2</sup> is marred by its flagrant bias against all things Zapatista, and relies excessively on Carlos Tello Díaz's uncritical rendering of information supplied by Mexican military intelligence.<sup>3</sup> This book, by comparison, is more comprehensive and balanced.

Nick Henck offers the reader a scrupulously fair sifting of the sources. Since the available information is fragmentary and sometimes deliberately misleading (whether from the government or from Marcos's own fanciful and often contradictory comments about his past), what emerges is more like a mosaic than a high-resolution picture. The Subcommander, "El Sup," is obviously intelligent, humorous, and media-savvy. But Henck's scrutiny is unsentimental, noting opportunities missed as well as seized. He depicts a personality at times prickly and pleased to be at the center of attention; though also willing to endure personal sacrifice, having earned legitimacy through ten years of discomfort and obscurity in the jungle before the movement went public. The evidence he reviews suggests that Marcos's rise to stardom was in part accidental. The Zapatistas themselves did not anticipate the way the January 1994 uprising would quickly turn into a ceasefire and public relations war, and Marcos was not initially at the top echelon of the National Liberation Forces (FLN, which spawned the EZLN) nor scheduled to play the role he would eventually assume. But he turned out to be too good at the showmanship, and it proved too useful to the movement, to reverse course.

Following the trail of Marcos gives us occasionally revealing glimpses of important crossroads where decisions were made that would shape the movement. It was in the key 1992-93 period in the jungle that the decision was made to go to war, and leaders who disagreed left the organization. What is less clear is whether this decision reflected growing impatience within the indigenous communities, or clever out-maneuvering

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2. *Subcomandante Marcos: la genial impostura* (Mexico City: Aguilar, 1998).

3. *La rebelión de las Cañadas* (Mexico City: Ediciones Cal y Arena, 1995 and 2001).

of competitors by Marcos (148-69). Henck is careful to note that the record here relies heavily on subsequent testimony of the high-level defector Subcomandante Daniel (Salvador Morales Garibay) and the unreliable De la Grange and Rico. In any event, the departure of Daniel and the return of Comandanta Elisa (Gloria Benavides) to the urban front left Subcomandantes Marcos and Pedro in charge of preparing the insurgent forces for the rebellion. When Subcomandante Pedro was killed in the insurrection (207-8), that left Marcos in the senior position of operational command. Then on January 1, 1994 when Marcos stepped forward to explain what was going on to some bewildered tourists in the plaza in San Cristóbal (202), his career as an icon was launched, and his interviews and communiqués would resonate across the Internet and around the world.

Another important crossroads came when the New Year's 1994 rebellion sparked massive mobilizations of civil society, forcing the government to halt its counteroffensive and call a ceasefire after 12 days. The Zapatistas had boldly declared war on the Mexican army and announced their intention to march on Mexico City. The rebels made some significant military blunders in the first couple of days of fighting (210-12), and it quickly became clear that their real strength was the outpouring of public sympathy for their cause rather than armed might. Henck gives Marcos considerable credit for seizing the moment and turning the EZLN on a dime, from a guerrilla force that had spent ten years preparing for war to a social and political force to be reckoned with.

The biography format nevertheless has limitations as a vehicle for understanding the larger issues. This book's focus on the documentary record about Marcos is a very literal-minded, if not at times pedantic approach to the subject. The brief interpretive excursions, heavily referencing secondary sources, might have been enriched by some direct observation or interview material; but it is not apparent whether the author actually spent significant time in Chiapas—or even speaks Spanish, given the awkward translations and recurrent misspellings in the text. While Henck's cautious assessment of incomplete evidence may be a useful scholarly exercise, many readers of this volume will be left wishing for more synthesis and interpretation. Virtually every other sentence has a footnote.

The author's determination to get to the factual bottom of every rumor or clue leads to long evaluations of evidence on such descriptive details as whether or when Marcos spent time in Nicaragua (39-41), whether his arrival in Chiapas was May or August of 1984 (72), and repeated references throughout the book to Marcos's reported marriage(s).

Attention to such details runs the risk of missing the forest for the trees. For example, in the discussion of negotiations over the 1996 San Andrés Accords on indigenous rights and culture, there is relatively little analysis of the content of debates over how to define the crucial concept of autonomy. The book does not take the opportunity to discuss the August 2003 reorganization of the Zapatista structure of local governance, creating five regional Caracoles governed by representative Good Governance Councils (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*); or to assess the relation between these structures and the military side of the EZLN. The 2005 Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle and the Other Campaign get only a brief mention at the end (353-60), without delving into the political significance or risks of this new phase of the movement.

Of course this is a book about Marcos, not about zapatismo. But even so, it offers no overarching theory, for example of revolutionary leadership. Instead we get an odd psychological digression on birth order (15-17); multiple references to Marcos's apparent stylistic imitation of Che; and a brief conclusion (361-7) that compares Marcos to a grab-bag of Latin American rebels including Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa, Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, Guatemalans Rolando Morán and Mario Payeras, Nicaragua's Carlos Fonseca and Jaime Wheelock, Joaquín Villalobos of El Salvador, and Abimael Guzmán of the Peruvian Shining Path. The author praises Marcos's pragmatism in contrast to more dogmatic traditions on the left, but it would be interesting to explore the tradeoffs a bit further. For example, the "pragmatism" of Wheelock and Villalobos, or of Mexican academic/politico Jorge Castañeda—all cited approvingly here (364)—veered off into opportunism that took them far from their former left trajectories as they entered mainstream politics and punditry.

As the Zapatistas have cast their lot with an amorphous and fractious "civil society," which they hope to mobilize into some kind of

coherent alternative force through the Other Campaign,<sup>4</sup> they face a new set of challenges: Can the national outreach be sustained without the charismatic Marcos at the center of it? Has the cultivation of Marcosmania reached the limits of its usefulness? Can the autonomy movement in the communities in Chiapas continue to thrive while organizational energies are expended on national tours? What are the opportunities, risks, and commitments involved in building coalitions with other left groups?

When Marcos has been asked in the past why he wears a mask, among his witty responses has been the promise that he will remove his mask when Mexico takes hers off. Masks of course have multilayered symbolic significance in Mexican popular culture (think Superbarrio). El Sup has also used the play on words in reference to the Spanish word “marcos,” or frames, to suggest that the Marcos symbol is a device to get people to direct their gaze to the portrait of what Mexico has become. The frame may be interesting, but the Mexico it reveals is perhaps more significant. In looking past the Marcos/frame, the Mexican political system has been in a process of recomposition since the breakdown of the elaborately constructed clientelist model sustained by the PRI for 71 years.<sup>5</sup> After the floundering efforts of President Vicente Fox to chart a new course from 2000-2006, including his fatuous promise to resolve the conflict in Chiapas “in 15 minutes,” the administration of Felipe Calderón appears determined to build a more openly repressive form of authoritarianism.

The large-scale repression and ongoing perversion of justice in the cases of Atenco and Oaxaca, the creation of new militarized and unaccountable elite police units, the government’s increasing reliance on

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4. For discussion of the Zapatistas’ “Other Campaign,” announced in June 2005 in the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle, see: Neil Harvey, “Inclusion through Autonomy: Zapatistas and Dissent,” *NACLA Report on the Americas* 39(2), Sept.-Oct. 2005:12-17; Pablo González Casanova, “Las razones del zapatismo y ‘La Otra Campaña,’” Buenos Aires: *CLACSO/OSAL* (Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales/Observatorio Social de América Latina) 6(19), Jul. 2006: 291-303, <http://bibliotecavirtual.clacso.org.ar/ar/libros/osal/osal19/debatescasanova.pdf>; and Mariana Mora, “Zapatista Anticapitalist Politics and the ‘Other Campaign’: Learning from the Struggle for Indigenous Rights and Autonomy,” *Latin American Perspectives* 34 (2), Mar. 2007: 64-77.

5. For analysis of this conjuncture in Mexico, see Jan Rus and Miguel Tinker Salas (eds.), “The Mexican Presidency, 2006-2012: Neoliberalism, Social Movements, and Electoral Politics,” special issue, *Latin American Perspectives* 33 (2), Mar. 2006.

the military and the slide toward a Colombia-style “war on drugs,” and the direct linkage of trade to militarization under the new “Security and Prosperity Partnership” or “NAFTA Plus,”<sup>6</sup> all suggest the contours of this recomposition of Mexican authoritarianism. The Zapatistas have bet on civil society in their struggle for liberty, justice, and democracy, and the stakes are rising. The Marcos frame may be dazzling and the man behind the mask intriguing, but it is time to shift the focus to the state and society on the other side of the mask.

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6. See Laura Carlsen, “‘Deep Integration’—The Anti-Democratic Expansion of NAFTA,” *This Week in the Americas* (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, May 30, 2007), <http://americas.irc-online.org/am/4276>