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**EMERGENCE AND INFLUENCE OF THE ZAPATISTA  
SOCIAL NETWAR**

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*Editors' abstract. Social netwar is more effective the more democratic the setting. We condense this chapter from our earlier RAND book, The Zapatista Social Netwar in Mexico (1998). The case shows how the Zapatista movement put the Mexican government on the defensive during 1994–1998, a time when Mexico was evolving from an authoritarian to a more open, democratic system. NGO activism even impelled the government to call a halt to military operations on three occasions—yet the air of crisis also prompted the Mexican army to adopt organizational innovations that meant it too became a more networked actor. Until the “Battle of Seattle,” this case, more than any other, inspired social activists to realize that networks—and netwar—were the way to go in the information age.*

The Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) is composed of rural insurgents. But they are not ordinary, and they were quickly perceived by intellectuals (e.g., Mexico's Carlos Fuentes and Pablo Gonzalez Casanova) as representing the world's first postcommunist, “post-modern” insurgency:

Many people with cloudy minds in Mexico responded to what happened in Chiapas by saying, “Here we go again, these rebels are part of the old Sandinista-Castroite-Marxist-Leninist legacy. Is this what we want for Mexico?” The rebels proved exactly the contrary: Rather than the last rebellion of that type, this was the first post-communist rebellion in Latin America (Fuentes, 1994, p. 56).

This marvelous argument makes an important point: The EZLN insurgency was novel. In addition, the features that make it so novel—notably the links to transnational and local NGOs that claim to represent civil society—move the topic largely out of an “insurgency” and into a “netwar” framework. Without the influx of NGO-based social activists, starting hours after the insurrection began, the situation in Chiapas would probably have deteriorated into a conventional insurgency and counterinsurgency, in which the small, poorly equipped EZLN may not have done well, and its efforts at “armed propaganda” would not have seemed out of the ordinary.

Transnational NGO activism attuned to the information age, not the nature of the EZLN insurgency per se, is what changed the framework. The EZLN was not a “wired” indigenous army. In the leader known as Subcomandante Marcos, it had a superb media spokesman, but the guerrillas did not have their own laptop computers, Internet connections, fax machines, and cellular telephones. These information-age capabilities were in the hands of most transnational and some Mexican NGOs—and they used them to great effect for conveying the EZLN’s and their own views, for communicating and coordinating with each other, and for creating an extraordinary mobilization of support.

### **THREE LAYERS TO THE ZAPATISTA MOVEMENT**

In retrospect, Mexico and Chiapas were ripe for social netwar in the early 1990s. Mexico as a whole—its state, economy, and society—was (and still is) in a deep, difficult transition. Traditional clannish and hierarchical patterns of behavior continued to rule the political system. But that system was beginning to open up. Presidents Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988) and Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994) had started to liberalize the economy and, to a much lesser degree, the polity. Mexico was beginning to adapt to modern market principles. And independent civil-society actors, including a range of NGOs, were beginning to gain strength and to challenge the government for lagging at democratization and for neglecting social welfare issues.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>On civil society and the NGOs, see Fox (1994) and Fox and Hernandez (1992).

Meanwhile, Chiapas, once an isolated backwater on Mexico's southern border, was becoming awash with outside forces. It was still characterized by tremendous, age-old gaps between the wealthy and impoverished—kept wide by privileged landowners who ran feudal fiefdoms with private armies, by dictatorial *caciques* (local bosses), and by the plight of poor *indigenas* (indigenous peoples) who wanted their lives improved and their cultures respected. Mexico's neoliberal economic reforms, especially those instituted by the Salinas administration, made matters much worse for many *indigenas*, and that set the stage for the organization and rise of the EZLN.<sup>2</sup>

Local economic and social conditions are important, but more to the point for this chapter is that Chiapas was increasingly subject to a plethora of transnational influences. During the 1980s, it became a crossroads for NGO activists, Roman Catholic liberation-theology priests, Protestant evangelists, Guatemalan refugees, guerrillas from Central America, and criminals trafficking in narcotics and weapons. These transnational forces were stronger and more distinctive in Chiapas than in two other nearby states—Oaxaca and Guerrero—that have been likely locales for guerrilla insurgencies. Transnational NGOs, notably those concerned with human-rights issues, were showing far more interest in conditions in Chiapas, and they had better connections there (mainly through the diocese and related Mexican NGOs in San Cristóbal de las Casas) than they did in Guerrero or Oaxaca.<sup>3</sup> This helps explain why Chiapas and not another state gave rise to an insurgency that became a netwar in 1994.

How, then, did network designs come to define the Zapatista movement? They evolved out of the movement's three layers, each of which is discussed below:

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<sup>2</sup>Sources consulted include Collier (1994a, 1994b), Gossen (1994), Harvey (1994), Hernandez (1994a, 1994b), Nash (1995), and Ross (1995). Chiapas has a long history of rebelliousness over land issues and was viewed in Mexico City as being filled with truculent *indios*, according to a century-old but still interesting report by Stephens [1841] (1988).

<sup>3</sup>In Guerrero and Oaxaca, the *indigena* cultures and structures were also not quite as strong, distinctive, and alienated from the Mexican government as they were in Chiapas.

- At the social base of the EZLN are the *indigenas* from several Mayan language and ethnic groups. This layer, the most “tribal,” engages ideals and objectives that are very egalitarian, communitarian, and consultative.
- The next layer is found in the EZLN’s leadership—those top leaders, mostly from educated middle-class *Ladino* backgrounds, who have little or no Indian ancestry and who infiltrated into Chiapas to create a guerrilla army. This was the most hierarchical layer—at least initially—in that the leadership aspired to organize hierarchical command structures for waging guerrilla warfare in and beyond Chiapas.
- The top layer—top from a netwar perspective—consists of the myriad local (Mexican) and transnational (mostly American and Canadian) NGOs who rallied to the Zapatista cause. This is the most networked layer from an information-age perspective.<sup>4</sup>

These are very diverse layers, involving actors from disparate cultures who have different values, goals, and strategic priorities. This is far from a monolithic or uniform set of actors. No single, formalized organizational design or doctrine characterizes it—or could be imposed on it for long. The shape and dynamics of the Zapatista movement unfolded in quite an ad hoc manner.

The social netwar qualities of the Zapatista movement depend mainly on the top layer, that of the NGOs. Without it, the EZLN would probably have settled into a mode of organization and behavior more like a classic insurgency or ethnic conflict. Indeed, the capacity of the EZLN and of the overall Zapatista movement to mount information operations, an essential feature of social netwar, depended heavily on the attraction of the NGOs to the EZLN’s cause, and on the NGOs’ ability to impress the media and use faxes, email, and other telecommunications systems for spreading the word. But the nature of the base layer, the *indigenas*, also drove the EZLN in network directions, as discussed below. These distinctions about the layers are significant for

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<sup>4</sup>Not much is done in this chapter with the point that tribal, hierarchical, and networked forms of organization have coexisted within the Zapatista movement. But for an explanation as to why this point may be significant, and a hint that more might be done with the point, see Ronfeldt (1996).

sorting out which aspects of the Zapatista movement correspond to netwar, and which do not.

To understand why a social netwar emerged in Mexico—and why an insurgency mutated into a social netwar—the analyst must look at trends outside Mexico involving activist NGOs.<sup>5</sup> Such NGOs, most of which play both service and advocacy roles, are not a new phenomenon. But their numbers, diversity, and strength have increased dramatically around the world since the 1970s. And mainly since the 1980s, they have developed information-age organizational and technological networks for connecting and coordinating with each other.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the NGOs' ability to swarm into Mexico in response to the EZLN's insurrection was no anomaly; it stemmed from a confluence of network-building efforts spread over a decade or two at global, regional, and local levels.<sup>7</sup>

Some of the activist NGOs were more radical and militant than others, and some were more affected by old ideologies than others. But, altogether, most were in basic agreement that they were not interested in seeking political power or in helping other actors seek power. Rather, they wanted to foster a form of democracy in which civil-society actors would be strong enough to counterbalance state and market actors and could play central roles in making public-policy decisions that affect civil society (see Frederick, 1993a). This relatively new ideological stance, a by-product of the information revolution, was barely emerging on the eve of the EZLN insurrection, but we surmise that it had enough momentum among activists to help give coherence to the swarm that would rush into Mexico, seeking to help pacify as well as protect the EZLN.

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<sup>5</sup>Here, the term NGO includes many nonprofit organizations (NPOs), private voluntary organizations (PVOs), and grassroots organizations (GROs). It does not include international governmental organizations (IGOs), and what are sometimes referred to as government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), government-inspired NGOs (GINGOs), and quasi-NGOs (QUANGOs).

<sup>6</sup>Ronfeldt (1996) cites documentation for this general phenomenon. Mathews (1997) and Slaughter (1997) are significant additions to the literature.

<sup>7</sup>Our background comes in part from Frederick (1993b) and other chapters in Ronfeldt et al. (1993).

Thus, by the time of the EZLN's insurrection, the transnational NGOs that had been building global and regional networks, notably those concerned with human rights, indigenous rights, and ecumenical and prodemocracy issues, had counterparts to link with in Mexico City, San Cristóbal de las Casas, and other locales. Then, as NGO representatives swarmed into Chiapas in early 1994, new Mexican NGOs were created to assist with communication and coordination among the NGOs—most importantly, the Coalition of Non-Governmental Organizations for Peace (CONPAZ), based at the diocese in San Cristóbal.<sup>8</sup> (An NGO named the National Commission for Democracy in Mexico was established in the United States, but it was basically a public-relations arm for the EZLN.)

Were the EZLN's leaders aware of this potential? Did they foresee that numerous NGOs would swarm to support them? We have no evidence of this. Yet conditions in Chiapas were well-known to activists. Amnesty International and Americas Watch had each published a similar report of human-rights violations in the area, the former in 1986, the latter in 1991. Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights and the World Policy Institute published a joint report in August 1993 about soldiers beating and torturing a group of *indigenas* in May 1993. And the Jesuit Refugee Service, long active in the area to deal with Guatemalan refugee issues, became alarmed about the treatment of the *indigenas* in Chiapas and issued an "Urgent Call to the International Community" in August 1993. The Jesuits' demands are nearly identical to those voiced a few months later by many Mexican and transnational NGOs in January 1994.

What we see, then, is the emergence of a movement composed of several layers. The *indigenas* and the NGOs preferred nonhierarchical, network forms of organization and action, while the EZLN was drawn in this direction despite tendencies, as in any traditional Marxist armed movement, to want a hierarchy at its core. This overall bias in

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<sup>8</sup>CONPAZ was formed by 14 Mexican human-rights groups that were active in Chiapas before January. They came together because they were troubled by the outbreak of war, wanted to promote peace, knew they would be more influential if they united, and lacked funding to operate well independently. CONPAZ's aims included coordinating the delivery of emergency supplies and services in the conflict zone, monitoring and denouncing human-rights violations, keeping up communication with affected communities, and generating international visibility for NGO activities.

favor of nonhierarchical designs made for affinities—and uneasy alliances—that would facilitate the mobilization of the NGOs on behalf of the EZLN and the *indigenas* and contribute to the solidarity of the movement once mobilized. Moreover, by the end of 1993, strong organizational and technological networks were in place to sustain a multilayered mobilization.

## MOBILIZATION FOR CONFLICT

The insurrection did not begin as a social netwar. It began as a rather traditional, Maoist insurgency. But that changed within a matter of a few days as, first, the EZLN's military strategy for waging a "war of the flea" ran into trouble, and second, an alarmed mass of Mexican and transnational NGO activists mobilized and descended on Chiapas and Mexico City in "swarm networks" (the term is from Kelly, 1994). Meanwhile, no matter how small a territory the EZLN held in Chiapas, it quickly occupied more space in the media than had any other insurgent group in Mexico's if not the world's history.<sup>9</sup>

### The EZLN in Combat—A "War of the Flea"

The EZLN's leaders may be credited with intelligence, flexibility, and innovation for working with indigenous ideas and institutions. Marcos in particular succeeded at adapting the EZLN's world views to those of the Maya. Even so, the EZLN—as a small guerrilla force confronting a far stronger state opponent—evidently intended, at least initially, to pursue a very traditional strategy of armed struggle: a "war of the flea" (a term popularized by Taber (1970) and repeated in regard to Chiapas by Ross (1995)).

This is often an optimal design for small, lightly armed, irregular forces. It allows insurgents to keep the initiative through surprise attacks by small units, following Mao's dictum of combining central strategic control with tactical decentralization (see Griffith, 1961, p. 114). Acts of sabotage against Mexico's economic infrastructure were to be features of the EZLN's campaign plan. Victory in such a war would hinge

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<sup>9</sup>Point adapted from writings by Mexican commentator Carlos Montemayor (e.g., "La Rebellion Indigena," *La Jornada Semanal*, February 9, 1997).

on the ability of dispersed operational units (like the *focos* of Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s theory of guerrilla warfare—see Guevara [1960], 1985) to pursue a common strategic goal, strike at multiple targets in a coordinated manner, and share scarce resources with each other through strategic and logistical alliances.

This strategic approach has antecedents throughout the history of Mexican wars and struggles for independence (Asprey, 1994, pp. 159–171). Emiliano Zapata, to whom the EZLN owes its name, waged a flea-like guerrilla war that played an important role in determining the outcome of the Mexican Revolution. Guerrilla operations were key forms of resistance in earlier periods as well, against both the Spanish drive (1815–1825) to maintain control over this part of its overseas empire in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars and the French effort to rule Mexico in the 1860s. Each time, guerrilla warfare succeeded against powerful opponents. The EZLN’s leadership was cognizant of these historic episodes and of earlier uses of guerrilla warfare techniques by the Indians who had resisted the Spanish conquest in the 16th century.<sup>10</sup>

When the EZLN commenced hostilities on January 1, 1994, it thus continued in the long guerrilla-warfare traditions of Mexican insurgency and resistance. And, like so many previous movements, it quickly found itself in trouble—perhaps by adhering too closely to the basic tenets of the “war of the flea.”

Two major problems emerged, one at the organizational level, the other at the tactical. First, at the outset of its campaign, the EZLN or-

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<sup>10</sup>For the *Mexica*, as the Aztecs referred to themselves, guerrilla tactics emerged naturally, as a way to counter the Spanish invaders’ advantages in firepower, cavalry, and body armor. As Prescott ([1843] 1949, p. 428) put it, “In the open field, they were no match for the Spaniards.” Yet this deficiency drove the Indians to innovate, even to diverge from their own military traditions. Thus, “The *Mexica* themselves were fighting a different kind of war . . . all just fought as best they could, without many orders, but with instinctive discipline” (Thomas, 1993, p. 400). This drove the conquistadors to make doctrinal adjustments of their own, the most prominent being a shift from their traditional close-packed formations to what Díaz ([1568], 1963, pp. 353, 364) recalled, in his memoir, as a more loosely knit “skirmishing” approach. This was made necessary by the firepower of the guerrilla bands: “The enemy discharged so many stones from their slings, so many darts, and so many arrows, that although all our soldiers wore armor, they were wounded.” Despite the hard fighting, the Spanish doctrinal innovation paid off with complete victory.

ganized itself into just a few units of almost battalion size (500–700 fighters), which was the optimal battle formation according to Mao (Griffith, 1961, p. 80). While separate detachments were formed out of these larger units, they remained under central command and control, which left them with little initiative to pursue further action in the wake of their occupations of the small towns in Chiapas. Consequently, much of the Zapatista force simply sat in place until orders were given to retreat into the Lacandón jungle. Also, these dispersed detachments were simply too far away to come to the aid of the main forces in a timely manner when the latter came under attack by the Mexican army.

This dispersion of the fighting forces turned out to be a serious problem for the main EZLN components, because it bled off fighters at a time when the EZLN fully expected to be engaging in pitched battles. Indeed, their tactical doctrine was also much influenced by Mao, whose dictum was that “Guerrillas concentrate when the enemy is advancing upon them” (from Griffith, 1961, p. 103). For example, in the firefight in the Ocosingo market, the EZLN units stood their ground, with most of one operating field unit, comprising hundreds of fighters, engaging the Mexican army openly. The results were disastrous: The insurgents were quickly pinned down and exposed to heavy fire from artillery and helicopters. There is some evidence that the EZLN military leadership tried to avoid this engagement by calling for a prompt retreat, but the Zapatista commander on the ground in Ocosingo continued to follow what he took to be his standing orders, and EZLN casualties were very high (scores dead, over one hundred wounded).<sup>11</sup>

EZLN leaders quickly became aware of the flaws in their traditional guerrilla strategy, and they promptly began adapting. They retreated from their exposed positions in the cities and towns and dissolved their large combat units, replacing them with much smaller fighting bands of roughly squad size (12–16 men). Their doctrine of open confrontation, which they expected would spark a national uprising

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<sup>11</sup>Tello (1995) is a useful source on the first days of the fighting. The authors thank an anonymous Mexican military intelligence official for his comments on the EZLN's organization and doctrine.

(which showed no signs of emerging),<sup>12</sup> was replaced with a series of ambushes and minor skirmishes. Combat operations were thus dying out, and when the public, the media, and human-rights NGOs, both domestic and transnational, got involved, the EZLN was ready to shift gears to a very different sort of conflict in which the principal maneuvers would take place off the battlefield.

The most apparent organizational shift in the EZLN was its decentralization and downsizing of maneuver forces.<sup>13</sup> This took place within weeks of the initial attacks on the cities and towns of Chiapas. The other significant development was the EZLN's campaign to attract NGOs and other members of "global civil society" to their cause. As discussed below, these nonstate actors mobilized quickly, and they helped to constrain the Mexican government's military response to the uprising, even during a period when the United States may have been tacitly interested in seeing a forceful crackdown on the rebels. While reaching out to these nonstate political allies, the EZLN altered its own declaratory political goals, calling explicitly for reform instead of the overthrow of the government. As these changes occurred, the EZLN's "war of the flea" gave way to the Zapatista movement's "war of the swarm."

### **Transnational NGO Mobilization—A "War of the Swarm"**

As word of the insurrection spread, U.S. and Canadian activist NGOs that had earlier participated in the networks opposing the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and U.S. policy in Central America were among the first to mobilize to express support and sympathy for the EZLN's cause and to criticize the Mexican government's response. Also quick to mobilize were NGOs that belonged to the growing, highly networked human-rights and indigenous-rights movements. Soon a broad array of peace, ecumenical, trade, and other issue-oriented NGOs joined the mobilization.

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<sup>12</sup>The EZLN proved to lack a strong nationwide structure. Moreover, despite exhortations by Marcos and other EZLN leaders, no other armed indigenous groups rose up elsewhere in Mexico in this period.

<sup>13</sup>Later, we shall see that the Mexican army decentralized in response. Thus, one type of decentralization was countered by another.

Within days, delegations were flowing into Mexico City and San Cristóbal de las Casas, where links were established with local NGOs and EZLN representatives. Demonstrations, marches, and peace caravans were organized, not only in Mexico but even in front of Mexican consulates in the United States. The NGOs made good use of computerized conferencing, email, fax, and telephone systems, as well as face-to-face meetings, to communicate and coordinate with each other. They focused on improving their ability to work together (as in the creation of CONPAZ) and began to struggle ceaselessly through fax-writing campaigns, public assemblies, press conferences and interviews, and other measures to make Mexican officials aware of their presence and put them on notice to attend to selected issues. The fax numbers of Mexican and U.S. officials were often posted in Internet newsgroups and mailing lists; if a number became inoperable, a new one was sometimes discovered and posted. In addition, the activists worked to ensure that the insurrection became, and remained, an international media event—swollen by the “CNN effect”—so that the EZLN and its views were portrayed favorably. Indeed, all sides waged public-relations battles to legitimize, delegitimize, and otherwise affect perceptions of each other.

Meanwhile, Marcos and other EZLN leaders kept urging NGO representatives to come to Mexico. Likewise, the NGOs already there began calling for other NGOs to join the mobilization. A kind of “bandwagon effect” took hold. A dynamic swarm grew that aimed to put the Mexican government and army on the defensive. NGO coalitions arose that were characterized by “flexible, conjunctural [*coyuntural*], and horizontal relations” held together by shared goals and demands (Castro, 1994, p. 123).<sup>14</sup>

What did the NGOs demand? The list included the achievement of democracy through nonviolent means; respect for human rights; a cease-fire and withdrawal by the army; peace negotiations, with the local bishop in Chiapas as mediator; freedom of information; and respect for the NGOs’ roles, including access to monitor conditions in the conflict zone. Except for the commitment to nonviolence, the NGOs’ collective agenda closely resembled the EZLN’s. To some ex-

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<sup>14</sup>Also see Reygadas (1994).

tent, this was a compromise agenda. At first, there were tensions (notably in meetings at CONPAZ) between those NGOs that wanted to voice solidarity with the EZLN and those that preferred neutrality. Some activists also had other agendas, notably to achieve the erosion if not the downfall of Mexico's ruling party, the PRI, since it was viewed as the linchpin of all that was authoritarian and wrong in Mexico's political system.<sup>15</sup>

Many NGO activists sensed they were molding a new model of organization and strategy based on networking that was different from Leninist and other traditional approaches to the creation of social movements. As keen scholar-activist Harry Cleaver states,<sup>16</sup>

[T]he process of alliance building has created a new organizational form—a multiplicity of rhizomatically connected autonomous groups—that is connecting all kinds of struggles throughout North America that have previously been disconnected and separate (Cleaver, 1994a).

The new organizational forms we see in action are not substitutes for old formulas—Leninist or social democratic. They provide something different: inspiring examples of workable solutions to the post-socialist problem of revolutionary organization and struggle (Cleaver, 1994b).

For these information-age activists, nonviolent but compelling action is crucial; to this end, they need rapid, far-reaching communications, as well as freedom of information and travel. Much of the netwar has

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<sup>15</sup>It should be noted that there was a partial disjuncture between some demands of the *indigenas*, which were quite specific and immediate (e.g., electricity), and those of many intellectuals and NGO activists, which were general and sweeping (e.g., electoral reform). In a sense, the *indigenas* and the intellectuals spoke in different languages. The latter generally made for better press.

<sup>16</sup>Harry Cleaver (1994a) was among the first to identify and discuss the advent of new network designs and to show (1994b) how the NGOs' responses to Chiapas grew out of networking by groups opposed to NAFTA and by groups concerned with the rights of indigenous peoples. Cleaver (1995) expands on this. When journalist Joel Simon (1995) wrote an article proposing that netwar might be an interesting concept for understanding this model of conflict, a brief storm of discussion followed its circulation on the Internet. See the interesting article by Jason Wehling (1995) and other texts at [www.teleport.com/~jwehling/OtherNetwars.html](http://www.teleport.com/~jwehling/OtherNetwars.html).

thus been waged through the media—both old media like newspapers, magazines, and television, and new media like faxes, email, and computer conferencing systems. (Old-fashioned face-to-face and telephone communications were important, too.)

Since word of the Zapatista insurrection first spread via the new media, activists have made heavy use of the Internet and such conferencing systems as Peacenet and Mexico's nascent La Neta (which came online in 1993) to disseminate information,<sup>17</sup> to mobilize their forces, and to coordinate joint actions. By the end of 1994, a remarkable number of web pages, email listserves, and gopher archives had been created on the Internet to convey the EZLN's and Marcos' statements for anyone to read and download,<sup>18</sup> to communicate the views and policy positions of various NGOs, and to show how to conduct what would later be termed "electronic civil disobedience."<sup>19</sup> The Zapatista movement gained an unprecedented transnational presence on the Net, and that presence endures and grows to this day.<sup>20</sup>

As the netwar got under way, two types of NGOs mobilized in regard to Chiapas, and both were important: (a) issue-oriented NGOs, and (b) infrastructure-building and network-facilitating NGOs. The former received most of the attention, but the latter were equally important. In a sense, the former correspond to the "content" and the latter to the "conduit"—or the "message" and "medium," respectively—of social activism.

Issue-oriented NGOs consist of those whose identities and missions revolve around a specific issue area, such as human rights, indigenous rights, peace, the environment, or trade and development. Numerous NGOs were active in each such issue area.

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<sup>17</sup>And sometimes misinformation and disinformation, as discussed later.

<sup>18</sup>An early and famous site, regarded as the EZLN's unofficial home in cyberspace, was established by an American student, Justin Paulson, [www.peak.org/~justin/ezln/](http://www.peak.org/~justin/ezln/), now located at [www.ezln.org/](http://www.ezln.org/).

<sup>19</sup>See Stefan Wray's web site ([www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/ecd.html](http://www.nyu.edu/projects/wray/ecd.html)) for background and materials on electronic civil disobedience.

<sup>20</sup>The best general guide is Harry Cleaver's web site, *Zapatistas in Cyberspace: A Guide to Analysis and Resources*, [www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html](http://www.eco.utexas.edu/faculty/Cleaver/zapsincyber.html).

Acting in tandem with these organizations were the second type: the network-facilitating and infrastructure-building NGOs. These are not defined by specific issues; rather, they assist other NGOs and activists, no matter what the issue. They specialize in facilitating communications; organizing demonstrations, caravans, and other events; and fostering education and exchange activities.

Of these, the most important from a technological and training standpoint is the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), a global network of computer networks that has many affiliates, such as the U.S.-based Peacenet and Conflictnet, and La Neta in Mexico. All are attached or have access to the Internet. The APC and its affiliates amount to a worldwide computer-conferencing and email system for activist NGOs. It enables them to consult and coordinate, disseminate news and other information, and put pressure on governments, including by mounting fax-writing and email campaigns. The APC also helps activist NGOs acquire the equipment and the training their members may need to get online.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, using the Internet to accomplish all this depends on there being good telecommunications systems for making Internet connections. In Mexico, such systems—including APC affiliates like La Neta, which came online with a weak presence in 1993, as well as direct connections available only at universities or through a few commercial providers, many of which are expensive for activists—were pretty reliable in Mexico City, other major cities, and at universities. Connecting to the Internet from a place like San Cristóbal de las Casas is another story; it can be done, but only at slow speeds and not very reliably. Faxes and telephone calls afford better communications.<sup>22</sup>

The APC itself did not have activists in Mexico specifically for Chiapas, but other important infrastructure-building NGOs did. These included an American NGO, Global Exchange; a Canadian networking NGO, Action Canada; and Mexico's CONPAZ. Again, cooperative connections existed among all such organizations. (At the same time, it

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<sup>21</sup>For general background, see Frederick (1993a).

<sup>22</sup>The notion that Marcos uploads his statements to the Internet is apocryphal. He does reportedly have a laptop computer with him in the jungle, but uploading and downloading anything is accomplished by having diskettes taken to San Cristóbal.

should be noted that issue-oriented NGOs also serve as disseminators of information to other NGOs. One of the most important and reliable has been the “Miguel Agustín Pro” Center for Human Rights, which issues daily and weekly bulletins.)

Few transnational NGOs had or would install a permanent presence in Chiapas—a key exception was Global Exchange (not to mention some international governmental organizations, like the International Red Cross). Most had representatives who would come and go episodically, with their timing often depending on meetings organized by the EZLN, activities organized by other NGOs, or on their own plans to visit and draw up a report. Nonetheless, the new communications technologies enabled many NGOs to maintain a “virtual presence” by being on mailing lists of supporters, signing petitions, participating in fax- and letter-writing campaigns, and circulating NGO-derived reports on the Internet and in other media. Such a “virtual presence” may be important to the conduct of a transnational social netwar.

Throughout, the fact that the Catholic Church, especially the diocese at San Cristóbal and church-related Mexican NGOs like the “Fray Bartolome de las Casas” Center for Human Rights, had a strong presence in Chiapas was crucial for the whole array of NGOs discussed above. The diocese and the NGOs related to it, soon to include CONPAZ, provided a physical point of contact—a key node—for the transnational activists. (Such a node is missing in other states, like Guerrero and Oaxaca, where new conflicts are emerging.)

Thus the Zapatista networking conformed to what we would expect from a netwar. The activists’ networking assumed informal, often ad hoc shapes. Participation shifted constantly, depending partly on the issues—although some NGOs did maintain a steady involvement and sought, or were accorded, leading roles. While the NGOs generally seemed interested in the collective growth of the networks, to create what would later be termed a “network of struggles,” each still aimed to preserve its autonomy and independence and had its own particular interests and strategies in mind. Clearly, the NGOs were—and are still—learning how to use this new approach to strategy, which requires that they develop and sustain a shared identity as a network and stress information operations.

There was impressive solidarity and harmony when a swarm took shape around a hot issue, such as demanding a halt to military operations or pressing for the release of an imprisoned Zapatista. At the same time, there was never complete solidarity and harmony among all members of the Zapatista networks at all times. According to our interviews, coordination was not always smooth. Problems and differences would get worked out most readily among activists present in the conflict zone, while the tone of debate might be quite different and more contentious in Mexico City. Indeed, some significant tensions existed, and surfaced, that had limiting effects.

For example, the EZLN's initial rhetoric in January 1994 was quite socialist in style and content, and it barely acknowledged the importance of *indigenista* issues like cultural rights and autonomy. In February, following Marcos's lead, a rebalancing occurred: The socialist rhetoric diminished, and demands for attention to indigenous rights came to the fore (see Van Cott, 1996, pp. 74–77; Nash, 1995). This reassured many indigenous-rights NGOs that were already supporting the EZLN. Yet some wanted to see even more Indian and less Marxist language used, and wanted the EZLN to join in building a pan-Indian movement—but the EZLN remained determined to keep its goals in a nationalist framework. From another perspective, some leftist activists were not comfortable with the EZLN's elevation of ethnicity as a factor; the Marxist left in particular regards economic class as the key factor, and ethnicity as a divisive rather than unifying factor, in social struggles.

Overall, however, many Mexican NGO activists gained confidence in their turn to networked approaches to communication, coordination, and mobilization, in regard not only to the conflict in Chiapas but also to other efforts to promote reform in Mexico. As Sergio Aguayo remarked (as a leader of Civic Alliance, a multi-NGO prodemocracy network that was created to monitor the August 1994 presidential election and later chosen in August 1995 by the EZLN to conduct a

national poll, known as the National Consultation, about opinions of the EZLN):<sup>23</sup>

We're seeing a profound effect on their [the NGOs'] self-esteem. They've proven to themselves that they can coordinate and do difficult tasks which have significant political implications.<sup>24</sup>

[Furthermore,] if civic organizations have had so much impact, it is because they created networks and because they have received the support and solidarity of groups in the United States, Canada, and Europe.<sup>25</sup>

## TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONFLICT

The physical—and electronic—swarming of activist NGOs into Mexico rapidly transformed the context and conduct of the Zapatista conflict. Within days, a traditional guerrilla insurgency changed into an information-age social netwar. The principal participants already had, or had shifted in the direction of, networked organizational structures—a point that is much truer for the EZLN and its NGO cohorts than for the Mexican government and army, but applies to the latter as well.

Within weeks, if not days, the conflict became less about “the EZLN” than about “the Zapatista movement” writ large and included a swarm of NGOs. This movement had no precise definition, no clear boundaries. To some extent, it had centers of activity for everything from the discussion of issues to the organization of protest demonstrations, notably in San Cristóbal de las Casas and Mexico City. It had organizational centers where issues got raised before being broadcast, such as the diocese in San Cristóbal and CONPAZ. And it drew on a core set of NGOs. Yet it had no formal organization, or headquarters, or leadership, or decisionmaking body. The movement's mem-

<sup>23</sup>Sergio Aguayo has been one of the keenest analysts of the rise of NGOs in Mexico. For example, see Sergio Aguayo Quezada, “Los modos del Marcos,” *La Jornada*, January 10, 1996, as received via an email list.

<sup>24</sup>As quoted in Scott (1995).

<sup>25</sup>From Sergio Aguayo, “Citizens Chip Away at the Dinosaur,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 1996, p. B9.

bership (assuming it can be called that) was generally ad hoc and in flux; it could shift from issue to issue and from situation to situation, partly depending on which NGOs had representatives physically visiting the scene at the time, which NGOs were mobilizable from afar and how (including electronically), and what issues were involved. Evidently, some NGOs took a constant interest in the Zapatista movement; others showed solidarity only episodically, especially if it was not high on their agenda of concerns. In short, the Zapatista movement writ large was a sprawling, swirling, amorphous collectivity—and in a sense, its indefiniteness was part of its strength.<sup>26</sup>

As “information operations” came to the fore, the insurgents further decentralized organizationally and deemphasized combat operations in favor of gaining tighter links with the NGOs. Meanwhile, the latter utilized, and advocated that others utilize, nonviolent strategies for using varied new and old media to pressure the Mexican government to rein in its military response and accede to negotiations.

After 12 days of hard, sometimes brutal fighting in January, the government did indeed halt its initial counteroffensive. Since Mexican military forces were proving quite effective against the Zapatistas, the government’s forbearance remains a puzzle. The cessation of combat operations cannot be explained by traditional state-centered theories wherein, for example, it might be thought that fear of recrimination from the U.S. government would constrain Mexican behavior. In this case, there was no overt U.S. support for the suppression of the EZLN, although there may have been some tacit or indirect support. Despite tacit external support from other governments, the Mexican government found itself unable to deflect the initiatives of the EZLN and the NGOs.

As the netwar developed, it actually impelled two Mexican presidents to halt combat operations and turn to political dialogue and negotiations: The first, as noted above, was President Salinas in January 1994, after which negotiations took place at the main cathedral in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Then a year later, in February 1995, his successor,

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<sup>26</sup>The literature available on the Zapatista movement so far simply does not provide for a precise definition of “the Zapatista movement.”

President Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000), four days after ordering the army to expand its presence in the conflict zone and go arrest the EZLN leaders, called a halt and agreed to a new round of negotiations, now at San Andrés Larráinzar. Both turns of events surprised government officials, army officers, and the public at large. The halt in January 1994 also came as a surprise to the EZLN, whose leaders expected to wage war for months before seeing any possibility of negotiations. The government even agreed to treat the EZLN home base in the rain forest as a “free zone” essentially under the EZLN’s own rule, for the time being.

What led President Salinas, and later Zedillo, to halt military operations and agree to dialogue and negotiations? Varied propositions have been raised for explaining their decisions: e.g., confidence that the army had gained the upper hand, or worries about a backlash among foreign creditors and investors, damage to Mexico’s image in the media, infighting among Mexico’s leaders, or a widespread aversion to violence among the Mexican public. Our analysis, however, is that in both instances, the transnational activist netwar—particularly the information operations stemming from it—was a key contributing factor. It lay behind many of the other explanations, including arousing media attention and alarming foreign investors. This activism was made possible by networking capabilities that had emerged only recently as a result of the information revolution. In this conflict, global civil society proved itself for the first time as a key new actor in relations between states and vis-à-vis other nonstate actors. The NGOs were able to accomplish this because of their information operations. Mexican officials admit that they were overwhelmed by the “information war” in the early days of the conflict.

## **BEYOND MEXICO**

As noted earlier, the Zapatista case has been hailed from the beginning as the world’s first “postmodern” insurgency or movement. As such, it has generated enormous comment outside as well as inside Mexico, and much of that has involved whether, and how, this case offers an information-age model of social struggle that can be further developed and replicated elsewhere.

That view is not without critics. For example, writing from a rather traditional leftist position, Daniel Nugent (1995) has decried the post-modern label by pointing out that the EZLN remains quite traditional and premodern in many respects:

It is difficult to see how a rebel army of peasants, aware of itself as the product of five hundred years of struggle, that quotes from the Mexican constitution to legitimate its demand that the president of Mexico immediately leave office, that additionally demands work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice, and peace for the people of Mexico, can be called a “postmodern political movement.” How can the EZLN move beyond the politics of modernity when their vocabulary is so patently modernist and their practical organization so emphatically pre-modern? Their democratic command structure is a slow-moving form of organization—requiring as it does direct consultation and discussion with the base communities in five or six different languages—which is difficult to reconcile with postmodernist digital simultaneity. Do their demands include a modem and VCR in every jacale or adobe hut in Mexico? No. Is their chosen name “The Postmodern Army of Multinational Emancipation” or “Cyberwarriors of the South”? No.

But his points draw sharp dividing lines between what is deemed pre-modern, modern, or postmodern. The marvel, according to Chris Hables Gray (1997, pp. 5–6), in opening his book *Postmodern War*, is that the Zapatistas represent a hybrid of all three eras, and in a sense to be a hybrid is to be postmodern:

Theirs is a hybrid movement, with the traditional virtues of peasant rebellions augmented by media-savvy spokespeople who use the internet and the tabloid press with the shamelessness of athletic shoe companies. . . . [Marcos] is clearly part of a sophisticated attempt by the Zapatistas to break their political isolation with a strange combination of small unit attacks, national mobilizations, and international appeals. . . . Victory, for Marcos, isn't achieving state power, it is reconfiguring power.

Irrespective of whether the postmodern label is applied, there is no denying that information plays a seminal, decisive role in this movement. As Manuel Castells (1997, p. 79) points out, in an important,

wide-ranging discussion about how the information age may affect the nature of social conflict around the world,

The success of the *Zapatistas* was largely due to their communication strategy, to the point that they can be called the *first informational guerrilla movement*. They created a media event in order to diffuse their message, while desperately trying not to be brought into a bloody war. . . . The *Zapatistas'* ability to communicate with the world, and with Mexican society, propelled a local, weak insurgent group to the forefront of world politics.

And his points are not unique to the *Zapatistas*. As a result of the information revolution, many new social movements—Castells also discusses environmental, religious fundamentalist, women's liberation, and American militia movements—are being redefined by the rise of a “networking, decentered form of organization and intervention” (Castells, 1997, p. 362). What is important about these networks is not just their ability to organize activities, but also to produce their own “cultural codes” and then disseminate them throughout societies:

Because our historical vision has become so used to orderly battalions, colorful banners, and scripted proclamations of social change, we are at a loss when confronted with the subtle pervasiveness of incremental changes of symbols processed through multiform networks, away from the halls of power (Castells, 1997, p. 362).

The Mexican case is so seminal that Harry Cleaver (1998, pp. 622–623) speaks of a “Zapatista effect” that may spread contagiously to other societies:

Beyond plunging the political system into crisis in Mexico, the *Zapatista* struggle has inspired and stimulated a wide variety of grassroots political efforts in many other countries. . . . [I]t is perhaps not exaggerated to speak of a “Zapatista Effect” reverberating through social movements around the world—homologous to, but ultimately much more threatening to, the New World Order of neoliberalism than the “Tequila Effect” that rippled through emerging financial markets in the wake of the *Peso Crisis* of 1994.

Anti-Maastricht marches in Europe and the roles played by Zapatista-inspired Italian radicals are among the examples he cites. But his analytical point is broader than any single example: A new “electronic fabric of struggle” is being constructed, helping to interconnect and inspire activist movements around the world (Clever, 1995 and 1998).<sup>27</sup>

We should note that there is some intellectual circularity in our presentation here. Most of the writings that we cite and quote from as evidence for the rise of netwar are by authors (e.g., Castells, Cleaver, Gray) who cite and quote from our original work proposing the netwar concept (especially Arquilla and Ronfeldt, 1993 and 1996). However, this circularity does not invalidate our using their writings as evidence for the spread of netwar. Instead, it confirms, as have discussions at the two Intercontinental Encounters organized by the Zapatistas, that the “network” meme<sup>28</sup> is taking hold in intellectual and activist circles and diffusing to new places around the world.

Thus, Chiapas provides the first of what may become a plethora of social networks in the years ahead. Each may have its own characteris-

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<sup>27</sup>Further evidence for this point appeared with news reports that a coalition of transnational civil-society NGOs, including the Council of Canadians and the Malaysia-based Third World Network, making use of the Internet and other media, had “routed” international negotiations that were supposed to lead to a Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI):

The success of that networking was clear this week when ministers from the 29 countries in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development admitted that the global wave of protest had swamped the deal.

Some of the Canadians involved in this network had previously been active in anti-NAFTA networking. See Madelaine Drohan, “How the Net Killed the MAI: Grassroots Groups Used Their Own Globalization to Derail Deal,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 29, 1998—as posted on the Internet.

<sup>28</sup>Dawkins (1989) originated the notion of memes as a postgenetic basis for continued human evolution, in order to convey his point that cultural as well as biological bodies are based on units of “self-replicating patterns of information” (p. 329). In his view (p. 192),

Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation.

Lynch (1996) discusses how memes spread through “thought contagion.”

tics, depending on the country and region in which it occurs. Chiapas, partly because it is an early case, may turn out to be a special case; so we should beware of generalizing from it. Yet it is portentous.

The case of Chiapas instructs that netwar depends on the emergence of “swarm networks”<sup>29</sup> and that swarming best occurs where dispersed NGOs are internetted and collaborate in ways that exhibit “collective diversity” and “coordinated anarchy.” The paradoxical tenor of these phrases is intentional. The swarm engages NGOs that have diverse, specialized interests; thus, any issue can be rapidly singled out and attacked by at least some elements of the swarm. At the same time, many NGOs can act, and can see themselves acting, as part of a collectivity in which they share convergent ideological and political ideals and similar concepts about nonviolent strategy and tactics. While some NGOs may be more active and influential than others, the collectivity has no central leadership or command structure; it is multiheaded—impossible to decapitate.<sup>30</sup> A swarm’s behavior may look uncontrolled, even anarchic at times, but it is shaped by extensive consultation and coordination that are made feasible by rapid communications among the parties to the swarm.<sup>31</sup>

The Zapatista case hints at the kind of doctrine and strategy that can make social netwar effective for transnational NGOs. The following are three key principles. (1) Make civil society the forefront—work to build a “global civil society,” and link it to local NGOs. (2) Make “information” and “information operations” a key weapon—demand freedom of access and information,<sup>32</sup> capture media attention, and use all manner of information and communications technologies. Indeed, in a social netwar where a set of NGO activists challenge a gov-

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<sup>29</sup>For elaboration, see Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1997), and Chapter Ten in this volume.

<sup>30</sup>However, particular leaders can make a difference. The development of many NGOs is at such an early stage that a leader’s abilities and preferences can make a big difference in how a specific NGO behaves. Brysk (1992) makes this point well and provides examples.

<sup>31</sup>Of course, there may be significant divisions and factions within a network that affect its overall shape and behavior. Intranetwars may arise that alter or limit the network’s capacity.

<sup>32</sup>On efforts to create an international charter on NGOs’ rights to information and communications, see Frederick (1993c), among other sources.

ernment or another set of activists over a hot public issue, the battle tends to be largely about information—about who knows what, when, where, how, and why. (3) Make “swarming” a distinct objective and capability for trying to overwhelm a government or other target actor. Although, as noted above, swarming is a natural outcome of information-age, network-centric conflict, it should be a deliberately developed dimension of doctrine and strategy, not just a happenstance.

Where all this is feasible, netwarriors may be able to put strong pressure on state and market actors, without aspiring to seize power through violence and force of arms. In some instances, this may pose a potential threat to some U.S. interests. But in other cases, like Mexico’s, a social netwar may amount to a challenge rather than a threat—it may even have some positive consequences, especially for spurring social and political reforms. Indeed, in its more positive aspects, the Zapatista netwar has not been bad for Mexico (or for U.S. interests), even though it has heightened uncertainty in Mexico and abroad regarding Mexico’s stability and future prospects.

### **POSTSCRIPT (SUMMER 2001)**

That was the case in 1998. 1999 and 2000 were mostly quiet years for the Zapatista movement and all related actors. Marcos rarely spoke out. The EZLN did not mount new operations. The Mexican army confined it to a small zone. Mexican officials kept a sharp eye on foreign activists. And many NGO activists turned their attention to other matters in Mexico and elsewhere. Whatever its potential negative consequences might be, the Zapatista movement writ large continued to have varied positive consequences in this period. In Chiapas, it stimulated the Mexican army to respond innovatively, refining the organization and performance of small units and networking them across the zone. For Mexico as a whole, the movement may have contributed, directly and indirectly, to the improved climate for democratic competition and electoral transparency that brought a new party—the National Action Party (PAN)—to power in December 2000.

Since assuming office, President Vicente Fox has energized a new peace initiative, released many imprisoned Zapatistas, and with-

drawn army forces from some positions in the rebel zone. Subcomandante Marcos and the EZLN responded by expressing both hope and doubt, highlighted by a dramatic two-week march from Chiapas to Mexico City. Thus 2001 began with a traditional, theatrical political give-and-take between the government and the EZLN. Yet, the prospect of a renewed social netwar lingered in the background, fed by fresh disagreements between the Fox administration and the Zapatistas over indigenous-rights legislation.

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