

condition of the poor. Today there are 280 organizations affiliated to CEDIC, the state-level Council of Indians and Peasants. Despite their great diversity of perspectives and goals, the central issues of justice and dignity give unity to them all, emphasizing agrarian policy, land, respect for individual and communal human rights, politics free of corruption, just prices for their products, and public services such as running water, electricity, schools, health care, sanitation, roads, etc. This upsurge of organizations “from below” parallels, and to a certain extent reflects, the increased repression from the top, as rich ranchers, landowners, plantation owners (sugar and coffee) have organized private armies known as *guardias blancas*, which, although clandestine and illegal, operate freely throughout Chiapas.

Thirdly, there is the clash of rising expectations and increasing demands, especially among the Indians, which the *politically powerful totally ignore*. The Indian communities saw NAFTA and the entire “neoliberal” project imposed by the Salinas administration as a mere scheme by the political elite to garner international capital, which in turn produced the Chiapas conflict.

For the natives of Chiapas, as for most of the world’s poor, the globalization of the economy is a disaster that has already happened. With the ability of transnational corporations to relocate their plants around the world, the global economy forces all workers, communities, and nations to become competitors for the corporation’s favors; and as governments wish to attract investments, they also seek to pulverize ethnic communities that persist in their traditional economies, thus making the poor vulnerable to corporations as sources of cheap labor. This explains why Chiapas’ poor, especially the Indian communities, have regarded the NAFTA agreement as their own death sentence. During 1993, when the agreement was being negotiated, the Salinas administration used the power of the state to break down the institutional protection of the native communities (Article 27 of the constitution) in preparation for Mexico’s entry into NAFTA. Through its total control of the senate, the government approved a constitutional revision that prohibited further expropriation of large landholdings under the agrarian reform laws while allowing for the breakup and sale of *ejidos*, the peasants’ cooperative farms. Thus,

one of the key achievements of the Mexican revolution was sacrificed at the altar of the New Economic Order, thus aggravating the plight of Indian peasants all over Mexico.

After the initial attempt to wipe out the rebels militarily, the federal government came to its senses, agreeing to negotiate a solution, a process that has dragged on for over a year and a half. Meanwhile, the federal army and other security forces carry on a parallel strategy taken from the textbooks of counterinsurgency training at the School of the Americas, of which the three generals in charge of the Chiapas operations are graduates. It is known as “low intensity conflict,” which was successfully applied in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. In this well-structured war plan, the target is the civilian population. It involves the careful management of the “image of the army,” making it appear friendly, giving public concerts, carrying on social service activities, passing out candies to children and food to the communities. Meanwhile, sporadic but systematic violations of human rights occur: the sudden search of a peasant home, another peasant leader tortured, a young woman raped, another local leader “disappeared,” a sudden takeover of a certain village. The fact that these violations are not generalized enables the army to portray them as isolated cases, “excesses” or “abuses” to be investigated later. The timing of the operations is also carefully considered. In the Altos de Chiapas, for example, military penetration took place during the critical weeks when the peasants were preparing their plots for planting beans and coffee, the staples of their diet. In some cases, the meager food reserves were destroyed or sprayed with insecticide. The end result was to leave the entire population dependent for its survival on food distributions by the army. In some cases, even the water tanks were contaminated with petroleum. Thus, the “low intensity conflict” strategy in fact intensifies the human rights crisis which the poor and especially the Indian population of Chiapas has suffered for many years.

Different from most Latin American guerrilla wars of the Cold War period, the Chiapas rebellion, whose social base comprises Indians and small farmers or *campesinos*, is not aimed at toppling the state, but at achieving respect (“*reconocimiento*”), and gaining a say in how their lives are governed. It is the search

for a sustainable Mexican society “with room for everyone,” where the “little ones” are guaranteed the right to speak “the truthful word” and to be heard and taken into account; for a community of life gathering the traditions of a people yearning for equality, justice, and the ancestral democratic structures of the rural population that are based on dialogue, consensus, continuous consultation, and persistent vigilance of local leaders through communal assemblies, what the Tzeltal Indians call *wojk ta wojk* (“to throw and gather the word”).

Every struggle for “dignity and justice” is frail and uncertain. Its outcome is linked to, and to a large extent depends on, structural changes in the economic, social, political, and cultural fields, which threaten recalcitrant habits, established forms, and vested interests, and in the case of the present Mexican crisis, the interests behind the NAFTA agreement. The leaders of the Chiapas rebellion are very aware of this, as shown by the fact that the denunciation of NAFTA is a central feature of EZLN’s platform. In the end, EZLN does not see itself as a pressure group, but as the militant conscience of the country as a whole.

Gonzalo Castillo-Cárdenas is a professor at the Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. This letter is based on a recent visit to San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

Letter From Romney Marsh

by Derrick Turner

Casting an Eye



As the car purred southward into the blue distance along the Kent-Sussex border, I felt as if we were gently falling into the sea. As you approach the Marshes, you are approaching a land which has always had an ambiguous relationship with the sea, which has always looked seawards rather than landwards, which bears little resemblance to the gentle English landscapes that surround it. You always feel that these lands so lately rescued from the waters may some day gently

subside back below them—as if they had never been, like some latter-day “land of lost content.”

As you get closer, and slip into the windy, grassy immensity, you relinquish real life with relief. You fall into numinous abstraction, as you look over the bare desolation, and cannot but think of unworkaday things—how the moon rides high and white over the damp levels, of flocks of lapwings (*Vanellus Vanellus*) breaking the sky, long days of heat-haze above the sheep-dotted flatness, chilly worship in damp churches, and shades of the humble, faceless medieval workers who yet achieved immortality by wrenching a piece of England from the reluctant sea and tilling it into submissive fertility, fighting a generations-long Agincourt of the soil. You can nearly hear church bells tolling, guiding travelers home through the drenching fog, along narrow paths through bogs and over precarious plank bridges above weed-choked dikes full of frogs.

The Marshes have an archetypal, dreamlike quality that encourages such reveries. Although the area is small, and many tourists cross it every year, it manages to preserve an air of ghostly remoteness. “Romney Marsh,” wrote Richard Church in his *Kent* (1948), “shrinks away from the mob, turning unto itself and the ceaseless music, aeolian harp music, that seems to hover above it in the air.” Even more practical people fall under an enchantment when they visit. “There are northerners who call it too beautiful; we have visitors who cannot keep awake in the strong, soft air coming up from Romney Marsh . . . and who, on waking, eat vastly,” reported H.E. Bates in *The English Countryside* (1939). Someone who escaped being enchanted was Lambard, who described the marshes as “evil in winter, grievous in summer, and never good.”

After spending a little time in the much-photographed, tourist-full town of Rye, we headed along the coastal road toward Lydd. The road between Rye and Lydd is sparsely populated, although there are many caravans near Camber Sands. The only sounds to be heard usually are the songs of larks and the hyperboreal screeching of seagulls. The beaches near Lydd are used for artillery practice (the explosive Lyddite was first used here) and the long fences along the seafront add to the feeling of strangeness. The most interesting building in Lydd is the Church of All Saints,

known as “The Cathedral of the Marshes” (mostly 13th century, but with Saxon remnants). Although Lydd was once an island, and became a full member of the Cinque Ports Confederation in 1155, it lost its harbor after storms in 1287 shoved the shoreline southward.

Even stranger, more remote and more postapocalyptic than the road to Lydd, is the shingle promontory of Dungeness, which is growing seawards at about 20 feet a year. There is an important bird reserve here, two lighthouses, plenty of bungalows, and even a nuclear power station, and it is a favorite place for angling, but it still preserves an aura of frontier territory. Beached boats stand amongst the sea-thistles and the black-painted bungalows, on a sloping, banked beach littered with feathers, driftwood, fish skeletons, crab carapaces, and pieces of lobster pot. A touch of surrealism is added by the tiny railway lines that carry the miniature steam railway across the stony wastes between Hythe and the tip of the promontory. The men digging for lugworms on the tidal flats were suspended in vagueness, as if they were in midair, their very reflections broken by the rippled wet sand.

We went back into the Marshes proper, northwards as the evening started to close in, to St. Mary in the Marsh, with its little Norman church of St. Mary the Virgin. This church is best known as the burial place of E. Nesbit, author of the children’s story *The Secret Garden*. There are two lovely floor brasses here, one from 1499, the other from 1502. Inside it is tastefully Spartan (the Church of England’s gospel was always: “By taste are ye saved,” according to Emerson), although the ascetic effect was relieved by the Harvest offerings that were ranged around.

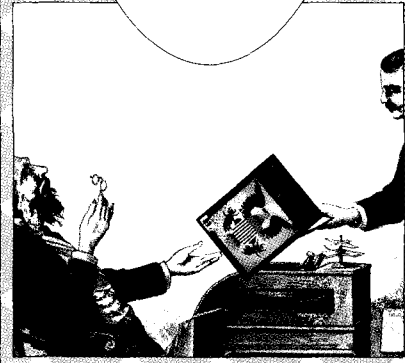
We got back into the car and traveled north past yet more fields of Romney Marsh sheep (a distinct breed, probably introduced by Flemish settlers). On the very edge of the Marsh, where the land rises into the Weald, and the remnants of primeval forest still wave ragged defiance of the modern world, and whisper of drowned Dimsdale, stands the hamlet of Bilsington, where the church of Peter and Paul gives you a last taste of Marsh numinousness. The mostly Norman church is up a narrow lane, and is almost invisible from the road. It is surrounded by trees, some of them yews, supposedly planted by pilgrims to Canterbury, who would often stop here for the night.

One of the churchyard epitaphs reads: “Stop stranger, stop and cast an eye, / As you are now, so once was I / As I am now soon you will be, / Prepare for death and follow me.” There is a 15th-century bell from the tower on a frame in the churchyard, with the inscription “For many a year John’s bell shall sound.” There is a sign in the porch asking one to be careful to shut the door, so as to exclude sheep from the building. The gleam of encaustics, the faint smell of polish, and the bright colors of the hassocks, even in the declining light, speak volumes for the devotion of the women of the parish. We left the silent, darkening church and stood quietly for a while, watching a tractor ripping up the rich tilth, and beyond, at the whole elegiac expanse of England. The tractor stopped, and now the only sound was the rush of the wind in the black trees, and among the dark grasses.

Derrick Turner is the editor of *Right Now!*, published in London.

• READERS! •

If
you have
friends or relatives
who may enjoy
Chronicles,
please send us their
names and
addresses.
We would be
pleased to send
them a
complimentary
issue!



M E D I A

The Truth About the Million Man March

by Marc Morano

“It’s time for the government to pay us reparations for the 300 years of slavery that they put on us,” declared a marcher in the Million Man March in Washington, D.C., on October 16. I attended the march on assignment for *Rush Limbaugh, The Television Show*. My coverage of the march aired on Mr. Limbaugh’s nationally syndicated program on October 18. The focus of my coverage was exclusively on the marchers who came from all across the United States. The interviews that I conducted with the marchers revealed a Million Man March that was far different from the one portrayed by the mainstream media.

The press coverage of the Million Man March was highly selective, portraying the marchers as a unified group, without controversy. The national news reports focused on superficial feel-good sentiments about why the marchers attended. As in the past, the mainstream media failed to delve into any of the issues surrounding the march.

While the participants were generally friendly and dedicated to the concept of the march, several divisive issues boiled beneath the surface. The responses were far from unifying. Many of the participants expressed hostility to white people, if not downright hatred. A sample of the comments: “We don’t listen to white people no more”; “Shame on you White America, Shame on you”; “Whites, if you are willing to apologize, we are willing to forgive.” I was referred to at one point during an interview as “you people.”

I was refused literature from one man passing out “Afrikan Liberation” tracts because I was white. When I asked for his leaflet he looked at me and said, “You’re not African,” and turned his back. I found one of his leaflets on the

ground; it was a call to “National Liberation.” It stated, “black people could never be free in Amerikkka [sic]—our state of neo-slavery . . . our liberation is tied to Amerikkka’s destruction.”

Other marchers displayed this same attitude. A group of men marched under an upside down American flag. A sticker being distributed at the march read, “100 Million Africans died for America’s sins.” One man railed against what he termed “the Republican Fuhrmanistic attitude” that prevailed in America. Another man expressed his distrust of police officers by explaining how we have traded “white sheets for blue uniforms.”

The mainstream press referred to the “controversial” Nation of Islam without fully examining its charter beliefs. The literature distributed at the Million Man March provided the details. *The Final Call* is the bimonthly publication of the Nation of Islam. In every issue, the back page is a reprint of their platform entitled, “What the Muslims Want.” It states in part: “We want our people in America whose parents or grandparents were descendants from slaves to be allowed to establish a separate state or territory of their own. . . . We believe that our former slave masters are obligated to provide such land . . . and that our former slave masters are obligated to maintain and supply our needs . . . for the next 20 to 25 years—until we are able to produce and supply our own needs. . . . We do not believe that after 400 years of free or nearly free labor, sweat and blood, which has helped America become rich and powerful, that so many thousands of Black people should subsist on relief, charity or live in poor houses.” The platform also states, “We believe that intermarriage or race mixing should be prohibited.”

Even though the marchers I spoke with did not mention the establishment of a separate nation, many of them agreed with the sentiments expressed in the Nation of Islam platform. One man proclaimed, “We deserve reparations . . . we were enslaved and beat down for over 439 years in this country, a lot of man hours, a lot of free labor. That’s how this country got so rich and powerful so fast, they had no overhead. Me and my ancestors and the seed that come after me

are owed something.” Another man stated, “How can we forget the past when the past continues to haunt us today? How can you tell me to forget the past when you continue to afflict with the same thing that we have been afflicted with for 400 years?” Another marcher agreed, commenting that nothing has changed since the days of slavery. He stated, “You take us from my native land, you put us in shacks behind your big mansions . . . and today you take big buildings and put us in projects.”

One man explained why many of the marchers believe the odds are stacked against them in America today. “You don’t want to give us no jobs. You don’t want to give us no way to take care of ourselves. But you want to give us drugs and guns and then you want to arrest us and put us in jail for it.”

Successful blacks in America were explained away as either flukes or traitors for turning on their fellow blacks. One man used the following analogy to illustrate how some blacks can become successful: “It’s like if I step on an ant mound, the masses are going to be at my feet and only so many are going to get up around my neck and I’ll knock those off as they come: O.J., Tyson, I’ll flick them off.” Another man lamented, “What’s wrong with most of the black men who do make it? They become sellouts. They become what we call house niggers. They’re just ‘yes’ men, not for the people.”

Race-mixing comments and signs were in evidence. One T-shirt had a picture of O.J. Simpson on it with the words, “Take it from me, leave them white bitches alone.” One man explained that interracial marriage was harmful, because “that which you seek outside the community, weakens the community.” He urged black men and women to “marry people that look like our mothers and look like our fathers.”

Another theme that prevailed was black economic separatism. There was resentment toward Asian-Americans for the perception that they profit unfairly from businesses in black neighborhoods. In addition, one man deplored that blacks are “totally dependent on the white community,” saying “blacks have got to hand another black dollar to another black hand.”