PART 5

Mexico's Zapatistas and the Globalization of Protest

The Greens, Solidarity, and Shining Path appeared in countries with diverse social conditions and political arrangements. This partly explains differences in their goals, strategies, and tactics. Yet, they appeared and flourished at roughly the same time, that is, prior to the end of the Cold War, when many people still viewed the nation-state as their primary political reference point. Although spokespersons for each movement occasionally talked grandiloquently about worldwide change, the movements themselves primarily acted on behalf of constituencies within the borders of a nation-state and defined their adversaries as, in part, the incumbent rulers of nation-states. The few public statements about igniting a global transformation could not hide the reality that these were primarily single-state movements.

In 1989, the Berlin wall fell and the world seemed to change. To some observers, the destruction of the Berlin Wall symbolized a larger convergence of the world's economic, political, and cultural systems. Free trade, the electronic media, and the language of human rights seemed to be gaining momentum everywhere. Some writers speculated that a new generation of social movements was arising to defend local economies and cultures from foreign influences, and whose activities and constituencies spanned the globe. In some writers' opinions, Mexico's Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) epitomized the distinctively post–Cold War generation of social movements (Foran 2003: 11–12; Kopkind 2002; Paulson 2001).

The Zapatistas were, indeed, concerned with developing international alliances and addressing global problems. The movement's international features, however, were inextricably linked to efforts to survive locally and to solve local problems and quandries—processes that might be typical of other postwar movements that respond to the challenges of globalization (Tarrow 2005: 94–95, 139).

To make sense of the evolution of the Zapatistas' international goals and activities, let us follow our practice and begin with an examination of the social conditions that the movement wanted to change and of the political situation in which it was embedded.