

INTRODUCTION

Insurgencies and National Security in Mexico (1993 - 2003): Political Frontiers, Myth and Hegemony, the Role of the EZLN

In this thesis I seek to contribute to our understanding of Mexican political history from 1993 to 2003, arguing that a detailed account of the nature and evolution of security discourse during this period should form a key part of any such understanding. It relies on general discourse-theoretic tools and suggests that the nature and evolution of Mexican security discourse is best understood as a function of the specific *interaction* between security and insurgency actors, rather than as a function merely of the vested interests or ideologies of these actors. This interaction, I argue moreover, takes the form of a *hegemonic* struggle. In other words, there is an attempt by each group to present itself as able to achieve not just its own specific goals, but also as able to satisfy the demands of a wide section of the population. I suggest that this takes place by means of their respective attempts to draw and re-draw the political frontiers of Mexican security discourse (or, to be more precise, of the *internal* security discourse of Mexico) through the production of a series of competing narratives or *myths*.¹

Given the visible emergence in 1993 of the EZLN as an insurgent movement adopting explicit military means, the thesis seeks to explain what made possible the relative stability of Mexican political and social relations, thus allowing Mexico to retain its status as the most stable Latin American state over the course of the last 80 years. It is widely believed that this insurgency movement under the leadership of *Subcomandante Marcos* has been successful in making possible a democratic challenge separated from political violence and exclusionary politics. My thesis, however, questions this uncritical rendition of the EZLN's role and qualifies significantly its supposedly progressive impact. I argue, instead, that the post 1994 political and social stability was largely a result of the Mexican regime's successful adaptation to the new situation by mobilizing elements in the pre 1994 national security

discourse in a novel way. In this view, the regime has effectively, though by no means always intentionally or through competence, outmanoeuvred the EZLN by setting up the latter as a *standard* against which to judge insurgency movements in general as legitimate or illegitimate.

My general hypothesis is that insurgency interventions, when unaccompanied by generalised popular support, instead of achieving progressive social policy outcomes, unwittingly tend to strengthen the system they challenge and produce a reorganisation of priorities around security aims. When, on the other hand, there is a process of negotiated interaction between an 'acceptable' insurgent actor (such as the EZLN, post 1994) and the government, the political frontier set up between them favours both actors. In this view, the boundary transforms such an insurgent actor into a legitimate interlocutor of the state, even while it does not take part in the political process as traditionally understood (eg., the kind of institutional processes linked with party politics and elections). The character of the political frontier, however, carries important implications for the way the regime is able to delegitimise and stigmatise new insurgency actors as they burst onto the political scene, conceived by the regime as *threats*, such as the EPR (Popular Revolutionary Army) and the CGH (General Council of Strike).

What I hope to show in this thesis is that the symbolic success of the EZLN (ie., the fact that it has created a space for acceptable resistance against the dominant political forces relevant for new generations of activists and radical political actors in general) was paradoxically combined with fairly substantial gains made by the security community: the very same operations that allowed the EZLN movement to become a relevant and ostensibly progressive political interlocutor also enabled the dominant electoral and security forces to re-inscribe their hegemony and define the boundaries of the conflict. Contrary to many

¹The concept of myth (drawn from the work of Ernesto Laclau) will be discussed later. For now it is sufficient to regard myths as narratives available to people offering them ways to interpret relevant political events and to solve political problems.

interpretations in this context, I argue that the EZLN-*Regime*² frontier does not necessarily signal an intractable contradiction but an unexpectedly complementary opposition, that is, even mutually beneficial under certain conditions. Therefore, according to my view, the dynamics of the interaction between insurgent and regime actors, understood in *internal* security terms, deserves a centrality that has been obscured by the notion that national security has mainly to do with *international* affairs, or the limits of the state understood as “the nation”.

I will now briefly place this interaction into a broader historical and political context.

The Predominance of the US Views and the Relative Autonomy of Mexico

Our understanding of national security and insurrectionary movements is to a large extent shaped by the particular context of their interaction. One major reference point in determining the character of such a context is, undoubtedly, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In this sense, we can identify two periods: before and after these events, both of which signal the same process of world reordering. There is one further major reference point, however, that is relevant in determining the character of the Latin American context, including Mexico: the Cuban Revolution of 1959. Its influence on the nature and outlook of insurrectionary actors is widely recognised as an important factor.³

² Despite the rather narrow understanding of “regime” in Mexican politics, an expression usually associated with the interests created around the dominant elite within the PRI before 2000, I will work with it as a signifier of the network of relationships between the government and society. “Regime”, in my vocabulary, refers to the totality that is frequently referred as “the polity”. In relation to *security* this notions are used as synonymous of “the state”, that is territory, society and, centrally, government.

³ According to Mexican military intelligence, the Cuban government has been important for giving political space - or by negating it and sharing information about it with certain governments on pro-armed activity issues - to young activists identified with ultra radical emancipatory projects. See, for instance, Mario Acosta Chaparro, *Movimiento Subversivo en México* (México: Author’s edition, 1990), 22-4 and 56-69. General Acosta was subjected to military trial in October 2002 for his participation in the “dirty war”. The definitive result of this inquiry is still unknown, while discussion about the responsibility for deaths, not just of guerrillas but of military and policemen during the last forty years as part of the confrontation with insurgent actors, remains a delicate topic in Mexico. The former, director of a security and intelligence office (DFS), Miguel Nazar Haro, a relevant counter-insurgent officer was captured on 18 February 2004 to be subjected to trial. According to Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, “the army cannot be blamed as an institution. However, responsibility for acting illegally - against

Until the late 1980s and early 1990s, insurgencies were seen by politicians and observers as part of the broader ideological and military confrontation emblematised by the Cold War. Since then, however, there has been a profound shift in the general framework defining the security context. In this respect the United States' response to the events of 11 September 2001 is significant, because it effectively highlighted this shift - a shift that had already taken place in the late 1980s under the Reagan administration. This mainly concerned the prioritisation of terrorism and drug trafficking in the United States security agenda and the reconstitution of US foreign policy, understood as both the (re)production and elimination of dangers around those axes. These new "threats" served as substitutes for the "Communist threat", the main menace in US politics and foreign policy until then. 9/11 simply highlighted the priorities of the previous decade's security agenda which continued to be associated with a broader project of US hegemony. In fact, 9/11 radicalised security operations already in place by shifting the focus to Arab insurgents who were readily confirmed as "terrorists".⁴

In the 1960s, with the United States' reaction to the Cuban Revolution as an underpinning element, the Latin American elite rethought and reorganised their approach to insurgent actors.⁵ They did it sometimes as a mere extension of the United States' security agenda, but often also as a response to political and military domestic priorities. More than four decades after the Cuban Revolution, the logic of the world's hegemonic force still dominates the scene of operation and conceptualisation of national security systems in the region, incorporated under the United States' so-called *umbrella of security*. This domination continues to provide the vocabulary for understanding Latin American rebellious organisations previously defined as pro-Communist and later as post-Communist attempts to reorganise the field of the political. Insurgencies tend to be construed and classified in relation to US interests. The influence of the climate created in Latin America after 9/11 can be seen

guerrillas - by some of its members must be recognised." My conversation, on 4 February 2004 at Oxford University.

⁴ See *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington: The White House, September 2002), and also Raúl Benítez, *La Seguridad de México Después del 11 de Septiembre*, downloaded on 18/05/2003 at <http://www.resdal.org.ar/lasa-raul.html>.

⁵ See Andrew Scott, *Insurgency* (Chapel Hill: University of Carolina Press, 1970).

in the controversial reactions of some governments to this climate, for instance, the Cuban government's creation of a new antiterrorist law which includes the death penalty.

Nevertheless, even though no country on the continent has had the material capacity to escape totally from the *security umbrella* of the US, some countries, such as Mexico, have shown, both before and after 9/11, a certain degree of autonomy. Despite Mexico's geographical proximity to the US and the enormous influence of the latter's conception of "national security" on the domestic scene, and despite the considerable technical support made available by the US to deal with internal crises, the Mexican case shows unparalleled peculiarities in comparison with countries with domestic armed dissent, whether in the north or the south or in Europe. In the period 1993-2003 the Mexican political elite and other societal forces were able to deploy a variety of tools with which to incorporate insurgency movements into the regime, such as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN), as *an acceptable difference within the system*. The EZLN, in turn, managed to survive as a distinct entity at the cost of dropping its calls to open insurrection: that is, it stopped supporting, publicly at least, the military overthrow of the government by "the armed people".

As already mentioned, in this thesis I argue that the construction of threats by national security institutions in Mexico is the result of hegemonic disputes whose lineage stretches back a long time, more specifically, to the 1920s. For instance, in 1924 the revolutionary government crushed a military rebellion, perceived as an internal menace to the revolutionary group of generals, and in 1926 the Calles administration (1924-1928) launched the most important counter-insurgent campaign ever, in this case against armed catholic dissenters, resulting in around 5 thousand deaths. In fact, the imaginary of the Mexican Revolution, incarnated by the PRI regime until 2000, has functioned as a dominant framework within which those insurgency-regime tensions were typically inscribed.

In sum, therefore, it can be said that the domestic prioritisation of threats has been at least as significant as the US influence. Of course, the US understanding and management of threats exercised some influence, as did its priority of having "a friendly neighbour": a stable commercial and financial market to the south, and a provider of raw materials and cheap

labour in the general reorganisation of the world market. But the Mexican government has had a certain degree of independence when dealing with internal threats, because it has actually been able to deal with them successfully. This independence has been reflected in the fact that, for instance, Mexico was for decades the only Latin American country to support the socialist Cuban government. It was also the only country offering asylum to left and radical-left activists expelled by the authoritarian regimes in the South, creating in this way a kind of alliance between the domestic left and the nationalistic forces in government.

Having sketched the broad historical and political context of the regime-insurrectionary interaction in Mexico, I intend to develop, in the remainder of the introduction, several topics which comprise crucial building blocks of my thesis: the specificity of the EZLN intervention in the context of the regime's ideology and key actors; the specificity of the EZLN intervention in the context of the peculiarly internal nature of the Mexican security discourse; and the interpretive framework I propose to deploy during the course of my thesis, including the insights it makes possible in relation to the study of political conflicts. I conclude the introduction with a summary of the thesis' chapter breakdown.

The EZLN Intervention in the Context of the Regime's Ideology and Actors

The EZLN made its first public appearance in *Los Altos* and *Las Cañadas* in the most southern state of Mexico, Chiapas. Though this took place in 1994 during the post Berlin Wall period, the EZLN's predecessor organisation had emerged as part of a process inscribed in the Cold War era. The EZLN was in fact the armed wing of another organisation - the FLN (National Liberation Front) - which was constituted in 1969 in Monterrey, an industrial and financial centre with next to no indigenous links. The EZLN, created in 1983 in Chiapas, was meant to embody the military character of the FLN; it was not justified as an armed group designed to defend indigenous interests (even though it would later come to be so identified). During the course of my thesis, especially Chapter 2, I will recall these origins: both the militaristic aspect of the EZLN, emphasising how it once comprised the core of its identity, as

well as its rather traditional insurrectionary stances. Notwithstanding some literature which received rather enthusiastically the EZLN's emergence by branding it as a 'democratic post-modern' organisation (Fuentes, 1996), I recall these origins in order to contest uncritical elements in the vast majority of the literature on the EZLN. There is a tendency to selectively forget its history, painting a rather one-sidedly rosy and progressive picture of its impact, whether in terms of the creation of new identities, the rescuing of lost utopias, or the defence of human rights. On the other hand, it is a historical fact that without the uprising, the notion of indigenous rights could not possibly be inserted into the national agenda, regardless the actual outcome.

The two Chiapas regions mentioned above are representative of an historical, cultural and political transition between the unstable agricultural political ambience in Central America - particularly in the period 1960s-1990s - and the more stable North American area of Mexico, and, at the same time, may be seen as illustrative of the nationwide spread of extreme poverty, particularly acute in the countryside where almost 30 per cent of the population still lives. Interestingly, Chiapas became part of Mexico in 1823, two years after the War of Independence ended, as an agreement between the ultra-conservative Guatemalan elite and the Mexican government.

After the 1910-1917 *Mexican Revolution*, Mexico did not experience, as the rest of Latin America did, any *coup d'état*. This is largely because of the success of the elite's military, and the political agreement constituted after the civil war in the early 20th century. Its main political party, even when it was frequently forced into a constant process of partial modernisation, the *Revolutionary Institutional Party* (PRI), enjoyed almost uninterrupted hegemonic sway for 71 years until 2000. It benefitted from the support of a strongly institutional army and the national financial elite, and, under pressure from the United States after the 1982 financial crisis and from domestic opposition, accepted the strengthening of an increasingly solid electoral system, visible in the mid 1990s. Moreover, the ideology of the *Mexican Revolution* contributed to its hegemony, because it gave it - through a well-organised corpus of beliefs embodied by the army, foreign policy, the constitution, and the PRI - a

credible image of itself as part of a horizon shared with society at large. This ideology comprised at least three central elements.

First, in that framework, there was the ideological assumption that no other social order or alternative political elite could exist. Second, it comprised the debatable belief that political violence had exhausted its function as a foundational moment for popular sovereignty and popular intervention during the *Mexican Revolution*. Finally, it included the contestable conviction that only the government, as representative of the state and *on behalf of the nation*, could legitimately resort to political violence. This meant that other social forces could face annihilation, as had occurred several times after the 1920s: for instance, in relation to insurgency cells in the 1960s, in relation to the 1968 student movement, and in relation to several guerrilla organisations in the 1970s. These shared convictions, then, contributed to the strength of the political elite, its ideological cohesiveness and its sense of what their national project should be. They are drawn from a great repository of resources and interests which the pro-PRI elite and, more broadly, pro-regime groups, could deploy in order to deal with any insurrectionary defiance without disrupting the logic of its reproduction.

The 1994 uprising in Chiapas must be located in that context. It emerged on the exact day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) came into force. It immediately questioned the alleged unanimity that was attached by the PRI elite to the modernising discourse promoted by former president Carlos Salinas (1988-1994). Salinas' project associated the trade agreement with his group's long range assumptions, particularly, the already "solved" and "fixed" character of the political elite and the nature of the modern Mexican state. In order for the state to succeed in an intensively globalised context, NAFTA became the embodiment of a broader strategy of socio-economic reorganisation. From the standpoint of the Salinas administration the *Mexican Revolution* still had space for both "modernising" policies within the PRI-regime and a controversial project of social development, which found its place in its programme of *Solidaridad (Programa Nacional de Solidaridad or Pronasol)*. By means of the *Solidaridad* the Salinas administration centralised the control of social policy and developed a *disloyal competition* against opposition political

parties⁶ in order to legitimise his project without needing to deal directly with the PRI. With *Pronasol*, Salinas built a direct link with the have-nots and mobilised them to regain control of congress in 1991. At the same time he deployed a profound process of privatisation of the economy and redistributed power within the financial and political elite.

Anything outside the dominant field of political representation entailed by this complex model could not even be envisaged, especially a cohesive “post-Communist” guerrilla organisation which, contrary to all expectations, managed to become relevant in an era of modernisation. Already in 1992 Mexico had been the site of the signature of the peace agreement between the Salvadorian insurgents and the government, which might be seen as an illustration of the end of hopes for any armed radical actor to overcome an elected government backed by the US. It also symbolised the end of any near-future possibilities for insurgent actors to successfully claim identification with a socialist project as an appealing factor for mobilising cross-national projects. EZLN’s public emergence in the context of the 1994 uprising, therefore, threatened the stability and the conceptions of modernity dominating the political debate and the vocabulary of the *Mexican Revolution*, even if it was unable to make headway beyond this imaginary. For Rafael Guillén (aka *Subcomandante Marcos*) appealed to the same ideological referent of the Mexican Revolution as did Salinas: Emiliano Zapata’s policy of communitarianism, as applied in the 1910s and 1920s. They merely espoused competing and opposing readings of it. To Salinas, *Zapatismo* was at the core of his social programme, adjacent to the intensive process of neoliberalisation. To the EZLN, it was at the base of its radical practices of land expropriation and a broader ideological project of political representation whose centrality resided in opposing the PRI regime.

In order to cope with the insurgent strike against the regime in 1994, the political elite and the electoral forces more generally undertook the task of reorganising their political arrangements. In the struggle for power, and in an effort to ward off both the danger of a rebellion and the temptation of resorting to repressive measures, they achieved new electoral

⁶ Comments by the ambassador Jorge Alberto Lozoya Thalmann, former coordinator of Salinas’ presidential cabinet. They were carelessly made in 1991 to foreign Central American officers in a door-

covenants. Consequently, by the end of 1994, the regime had responded to the rebellion with a rapid and unique redefinition of the coordinates of the political dispute and by reframing institutionally the specific political conflict posed by the EZLN. The success of the government's response was reflected in the fact that PRI won the presidential election in what was at that moment the most well-organised and supervised election. PRI attracted 51 per cent of the total turnout, the latter representing 76 percent of the electoral register. In the same election, the centre-left declined from 30 to 17 per cent - a loss of 43 per cent with respect to its previous electoral support in 1988. Also, a new political force began to emerge as a feasible alternative to the PRI regime, the *National Action Party* (PAN), which gained 27 per cent of the vote. These developments are significant because they illustrate the reorganisation of political preferences and the reorientation of the public mood towards centre and centre-right positions. They are also intrinsically connected within the framework of the identification of social and political dangers by the elite and by society after six months of political (rather than social) turmoil during 1994. The presidential campaigns concentrated on offering well-being, security, order and peace.

Ten years on, both the hegemonic elite and its most radical challengers have still not resolved the multiple issues raised by the insurgent actors - issues of extreme poverty, political representation, the fracture of the expectations of associating education with social mobility, unequal distribution of wealth, and the general definition of the validity of the parliamentary system, the frequently corrupted practices within political parties, to mention only a few. In any case, structural limitations - high rates of unemployment, unequal distribution of income and hyper concentration of opportunities in within the elite -, the inability of new radical actors to present these issues as a source of legitimate grievance, and the inefficacy of the system to offer satisfactory responses in economic and political terms, will remain. This will be so regardless of any eventual peace agreement in relation to the Chiapas conflict, because there is no guarantee that a peace agreement with the EZLN can stop the dynamics of the internal security state or the emergence of insurgent groups. So far

the government and the EZLN have maintained an *institutional armistice* without an ultimate peace agreement.

Because it had been thought that no “solution” was possible, in the sense of fully closing the political field to challenging actors, the state, as part of its strategy, introduced a tension into the system of representation. In this view, the EZLN was admitted into this system of representation as a relevant difference, but only *one* difference among others that gave substance to the general legitimacy of the regime. As a consequence of recognising the EZLN as an interlocutor, of course, the state gave up part of its authority and allowed the emergence in Chiapas of a competing notion of popular sovereignty, with daily effects in the reproduction of society in *Los Altos* and *Las Cañadas* and with occasional, and apparently less pervasive, consequences for the rest of society. In exchange, however, the EZLN renounced its commitment to taking the armed path to social and political change, becoming thereby a guerrilla “not interested in power” and constructing its identity as “rebellious” rather than “revolutionary”.

I think that while the government did not and can not actually think of “solving” the Chiapas conflict, it has been able to instrumentalise this conflict, pressing it into the service of its own ends. In fact, after deactivating the ephemeral danger of civil war,⁷ the EZLN has effectively become the limit of what the state is willing to tolerate, thus becoming for the government *the standard of the acceptable/tolerable*. It thus uses the EZLN as part of its strategy of containment as and when other insurgency groups emerge onto the scene. In this logic, the interaction between the state and the EZLN becomes a fascinating instrument in the hands of the hegemonic security actors. It is an interaction that has produced a political frontier whereby the government establishes a manageable distance vis-a-vis the EZLN, in particular, and other insurgent actors in general. As a social movement that is unlikely to become actively armed again, the EZLN is not unique simply because it has promoted the

⁷ The former president recognises as political priorities, in the first two weeks of 1994, the avoidance of: a civil war; the opening of other guerrilla front; and the disruption of the electoral process. Carlos Salinas, *México: un paso difícil a la modernidad* (México: Plaza y Janés, 2000), specially chapter 27. See www.elbarzon.org/cotuntura/coyuntura_libro_csg.shtml.

survival of the far-left utopia, but because it might have contributed to weaken the partisan left stance and unleashed the intensification of the security state in Mexico without appearing responsible for it. The EZLN, its advocates and its apologists, imagine they have contributed only toward the development of a progressive politics when in fact they have also strengthened the internal security system and the general legitimisation of the conservative regime, along with the neoliberal policies they claim to oppose.

So far, the insurgents have not been able to gain the generalised support they desired in the aftermath of the revolt. After ten years, the basic problem has not found a more plausible answer than the already enunciated internalisation of the tension that entails the emergence of two sources of authority in the area where the EZLN emerged. The organisation that was declared an “enemy” in the aftermath of 1994 and later “a group of non-conformist Mexicans” has authority and *de facto* control of a region of Chiapas while the government has generalised the *intensified securitisation* of the country.

Contrary to common belief, therefore, the Salinas administration and the EZLN became structural part of a mutually beneficial negotiation that seemed to be exclusively antagonistic. The ambiguous relation between the government and the EZLN, epitomised by the controversies around a limitless dialogue, has served as an opportunity and an obstacle for both of them. While regime actors have been successful in defining what counts as “acceptable” insurgency actions, they have been unable to limit the construction of the EZLN’s identity and demands, at least those which successfully appeal to other social and radical actors. On the other hand, while the EZLN has been able to make inroads in this regard, it has been unable to transcend the framework set down by the regime, even unwittingly reinforcing the conservative system they seek to challenge. In this regard, I claim that the political frontier established between the government and the EZLN represents the most *sui generis* space of negotiation and confrontation in current emancipatory/security

politics. It has also opened a potentially new era in the Latin American understanding of security.

The EZLN Intervention in the Context of Mexico's Internal Security Discourse

One of the peculiarities of the Mexican case involves the overall character of its security discourse, which has been historically “internal” rather than “national”. In fact, while there have been numerous domestic challenges to the state, virtually no hemispheric threat has been identified in the last 80 years of Mexican history. Since the main challengers to the regime have been *internal* and the national security rhetoric has never openly considered a single external threat, besides drug-trafficking in the early 1980s, I claim that the core component of Mexican security policies has actually been the identification and neutralisation of domestic threats. The predominance of what in consequence I call the *internal security state* has entailed the sophisticated deployment of military, intelligence and political operations against these domestic threats.

The centrality of internal security concerns for the Mexican state has not, however, always been obvious. On account of several other features peculiar to the Mexican case - a strong and institutionalised army that is constituted by “the people”, a stable system of incentives for the political elite, support of the US government for the political and financial class - the workings of the security system and the treatment of insurrectionary movements have been kept from public view. It is because the EZLN in 1994 made public its *stated* disproportionate project (to overthrow the most stable elite-based political system in Latin America, without even a national network of insurgent cells), and because it rhetorically organised it around politically-correct goals, that a new epoch began in security and insurgency matters.

Of course, international events did affect the dominant understandings of Mexican security, not least through the so-called US *security umbrella*. This entailed, for example, discussions aiming to reshape the responsibility of Mexican security forces around

Washington's hemispheric priorities after NAFTA was approved. Although these developments ostensibly put into question the idea of sovereignty, there was nevertheless considerable leeway in how this could be understood by different political actors in Mexico. While these external influences took place, one of the Mexican state's most important priorities, namely, the neutralisation of insurgent challenges, it was achieved.

At least since April 1993 the government had information about the existence of a guerrilla movement in Chiapas. However, at that point it decided that the presence of the guerrillas did not present any threat to its security, so long as the general public and other international actors were unaware of it. This is because its emergence on the eve of the US Congress evaluation of NAFTA - November 1993 - would have shattered the trade proposal. This assessment changed afterwards on the day of the rebellion on 1 January 1994, and was reviewed during the first three months when the first round of the dialogue between the government and the rebels took place.

Although the government and the insurgents have since continuously changed their views on the nature of their interaction, this interaction has remained constitutive of the Mexican political landscape. In February 2001, for example, a remarkable mobilisation took place. The same guerrilla movement that was militarily defeated shortly after the uprising it spearheaded on 1 January 1994, and which survived through its nimble interaction with the government and segments of civil society marched from Chiapas towards Mexico City. The Federal Preventive Police (PFP), a security institution created in 1998 with elements provided by the military, the navy and the political police, guarded the march, in which the insurgents were supported by thousands of sympathisers.

If the traditional understanding of security offered by military, presidential and intelligence documents had been applied, the 1994 guerrilla movement would have been denounced as a threat to Mexico's security and contained by the security institutions in 2001. This, after all, was the way the security systems had operated since the insurgent movement mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s. However, as already explained, the government reacted

in a quite different manner with regard to the Chiapas rebellion in 1994. While it did initially denounce the EZLN it rapidly moved to recognise in it a degree of political legitimacy.

Nevertheless, the government's response to the EZLN implied a potential problem: Would its recognition of the EZLN not set a dangerous precedent, thus risking the appearance of a series of other guerrilla groups and demands? First, there appeared to be no "objective" reason to differentiate one guerrilla organisation from another. And, second, it had already promoted the idea of a finalised institutional framework to deal with the socio-economic conditions that "explained" the guerrilla group's emergence. However, the government's apparent dilemma was partly resolved when the EPR appeared in 1996. On account of its explicit embrace of violent means, many regime actors and analysts created the dual image of a *bad guerrilla* and a *good one*. In fact, my attempt to shed light on the interaction between hegemonic forces and insurgent identities in general, will be grounded in the question of whether an insurgent actor *uses* or *implies the use* of political violence on behalf of a political community. From this perspective, the discursive construction of "threats" is the very site in which these political identities are formulated and contested. In any event, I argue that this differentiating feature is what enabled the regime to legitimately stigmatise and prosecute "bad" guerrilla movements which broke onto the political scene from 1996 onwards.

Unlike other Latin American countries, in which *coups d'etat*, military dictatorships, or military challenges to the authority of the civilian political class were prominent over the twentieth century, Mexico has been a predominantly stable regime after the *Mexican Revolution*. There appears to be no other case in which a unilateral cease-fire and an amnesty law had been applied as early as two weeks after a rebellion erupted. Besides, I could not find any reference to other case of a movement claiming to be insurrectionary without military interventions, that is, beyond the one that took place for less than a week. Certainly the Chiapas conflict seems to be the only occasion in which an armed organisation and the national political elite have basically kept a cease-fire for much more time than the period they were engaged militarily. Ten years of political interaction has followed four days of military skirmishes - two years of a relatively stable situation for each day of open military

confrontation. Among the conditions that made this possible were the advancement of a politicised civil society, the maturity achieved by the media, the displacement of authoritarian segments of the political elite, the strengthening of electoral politics, and above all, the emergence of a new generation of political, security and insurgent actors. Crucially, as I will show, the differential treatment deployed by the political elite in relation to radical challengers to the system made the *Zapatista march*, in particular, possible, and, in general, made the establishment of a new political frontier useful for the reproduction of the regime.

A Discourse-Analytic Interpretive Framework

Contrary to the commonsensical belief that the EZLN's appearance opened spaces and fundamentally renewed the possibility of progressive politics, a major claim of this thesis is that there is only marginal evidence for this. I will show that its emergence has also had considerable conservative and even reactionary effects, contributing to the hegemonic status of the elite-based regime. More specifically, and as already explained above, I will show how the national security practices became, more than ever, part of a more robust *internal security* system under the banner of both *national security* and *public safety* in the face of social unrest and the political constitution of threats. This is not to deny some marginal progressive impact that the EZLN has had, however. For instance, given that the presidential, military and political intelligence documents attempt to push and fix the meaning of "sovereignty", "nation", "security", and "threats" in a conservative direction, it is clear that these notions often have been successfully contested by radical movements, especially by the EZLN, in the last ten years.

Take the notion of popular sovereignty, for example. Based on documentary evidence deriving from both insurgency and security quarters, it is possible to say that the dynamic construction of the frontier between the EZLN and the government has in large part been the result of competing interpretations of *popular sovereignty*. Both the guerrilla movement and the government, as representation of a broader political and constitutional pact, have

advocated divergent notions of sovereignty and nationhood since 1994. While the EZLN advocated a radical understanding of popular sovereignty as part of the justification of its armed appearance, the regime supported an institutional reading of it as a central argument in the justification of its military and political intervention. From this perspective, the struggle since 1994 can be seen as a struggle over who can confer popular sovereignty with a meaning that will be acceptable to most: is it the “indigenous” people or is it the Mexican Congress?

The specific demands that were constructed as emblematic of the EZLN, that is, those concerning indigenous rights, were a set of demands aimed at transcending its particular and original demand which promoted the centrality of the rights of peasants and workers. By articulating the notion of sovereignty with the vindication of indigenous rights, the organisation sought to introduce a more universal dimension so that its demands would appeal to a broader audience. In addition, the EZLN has, since its first *Declaration*, bolstered its argument by invoking article 39 of the Constitution. In this way, its critique of the PRI government represents a line of attack out of which an armed struggle may be seen as legitimate by many other political actors. As popular sovereignty may be located in “the people”, and this “people” may be the representation of a national grievance that apparently had been neglected by the government, the validity of the demand could appear acceptable to several segments of society. From the perspective of the government, the question of sovereignty was understood in relation to the Constitution and Congress as the legitimate representative of the people. Hence, sovereignty has thus had at least two competing interpretations deriving from within the regime and the radical organisations, serving as the site for launching both security measures and insurrectionary challenges. Even so, it is worth recalling, that, as mentioned earlier, both interpretations were located in the vanishing horizon of the *Mexican Revolution*, which was the ideological cement of the PRI regime; and both interpretations sought legitimacy in the four-hundred-times-reformed Constitution.

Insurgencies are the outcome of a radical practice structured around an interpretation of sovereignty, understood as the essence of a political community whose *raison d’etre* ranges from self-defence to the attempt to overthrow the dominant elite. Seen from this

perspective, insurgent actors speak on behalf of “the people”, while the state - and more precisely the government and political parties - presents themselves as representatives of “the nation”. In that sense, the state and the insurgents compete with each other over the specific meaning of sovereignty in defining the limits of the society and the state.

Given the central importance of the meanings accruing to key political terms, as shown above, I have opted for an interpretative framework to understand the dynamic interaction between regime and insurgent actors - an understanding that is potentially relevant to other situations in which national security practices are invoked when facing insurgent challenges. I believe that such an approach addresses many of the deficiencies of standard approaches to security issues and will permit me to explain certain phenomena which would otherwise remain opaque. For example, no traditional approach to national security has provided an account of how and why the same organisation (the EZLN) that was attacked and encircled by the army in 1994 after having declared a war against the government, could have marched peacefully under the protection of the state in 2001. No satisfactory account has been given by conventional approaches⁸ to national security of the significance of the guerrilla movement’s abilities to reinstate its identity and of the government’s skills to redefine the field of contestation for insurgent challenges. In conventional approaches “national security” has to do with the state’s unity, defence of national sovereignty and territory, looking after economic, social and political development to guarantee public order, and the promise of social peace. All these values are presented as given and the authority that defines what “national security” means is seen as untouchable. By the same token it is implied that, by definition, those agents that cause “disorder” cannot contribute to “democracy” and “security”

⁸ In it “national security” is very much the extension of the United States’ understanding of the subject. See for example, *Seguridad Nacional* (Mexico: Revista Mexicana de Administración Pública 98, INAP, 1998 and *Los servicios de inteligencia en el nuevo siglo*. Mexico: Revista Mexicana de Administración Pública 101, INAP, 2000. Also, Ana Salazar, *Seguridad Nacional Hoy* (Mexico: Nuevo Siglo & Aguilar), 2002, 62. The *Informes de Ejecución del Plan Nacional de Desarrollo*, issued by the Presidency, under the sección *Orden y Respeto* do not even mention internal insurgency as a referent or internal security as a value. See pnd.presidencia.gob.mx/pnd/cfm/tpIIinforme.cfm. Especially, Section 3.1 *Independencia, Soberanía y Seguridad Nacional*.

which is meant to be the absence of threatening disorder. Not even analytical definitions of insurgencies and internal security are given.⁹

My contribution in relation to conventional understandings of security and insurgencies, and in regard to other approaches in which the centrality of identity-formation is at least partially accepted, is that the identity of the “state”, “the nation” and the specific content of “popular sovereignty” is never totally fixed. Very much to the contrary, the potentially shared meaning of these concepts is in constant negotiation, which amounts to saying that those speaking on behalf of “the nation” and “the people” need each other for the definition of their identity, even when they seem to merely relate to each other in an exclusive manner. Additionally, this interaction is enormously fluid. It may be said that neither the state nor the guerrillas exhibit the same character at two different points in time because of their interaction and the changing context in which they uphold radical operations in the name of a specific community: i.e. “the nation” or “the people”.

In relation to the concept of sovereignty suffice to introduce some aspects of its changing content. As the historian Hinsley asserted “at the beginning the idea of sovereignty was the idea that there is a final and absolute political authority in the political community...and no final and absolute authority exists elsewhere”.¹⁰ The concept that Bodin and Hobbes associated to the absolute power of the monarch was challenged by Rousseau to the extent that he located the sovereign within “the people” and acknowledged the tension between the “right to subject” and “the right to resist”. Later and *contra* Hobbes, the notion

⁹ Salazar, *Seguridad Nacional*. 62.

¹⁰ Francis H. Hinsley, *Sovereignty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966, 1986), 25-6. A summary of a historical discussion is available in Barry Clarke, Paul and Joe Foweraker, *Encyclopaedia of Democratic Thought* (London: Routledge, 2001), 673-5. Jean Bodin, *On Sovereignty* [Four Chapters from *The Six Books of the Commonwealth*] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1-45. For an exercise in deconstructing the notion of sovereignty see Jens Bartelson, *A Genealogy of Sovereignty* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12-52. David Miller, Janet Coleman, William Conolly and Alan Ryan, *The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Political Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, 1991), 492-5. Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985). For a discussion on the influence of NAFTA on security and political independence see Erfani, Julie, A. Erfani, *The Paradox of the Mexican State, Rereading Sovereignty from Independence to Nafta*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995), 127-82 and James Rochlin, *Redefining Mexican “Security”* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997). It may also be useful to remember the relevance of 1970s traditional Mexican thinkers on matters of sovereignty, security and power, among them, Jesús Reyes Heróles, *En busca de la razón de Estado* (México: Miguel Ángel Porrúa, 1982).

was partially reconstituted by the American, and the Republican tradition in general, when it was agreed that the indivisibility of power was no longer assumed as essential to sovereignty. From the notions of external and internal sovereignty, linked respectively to international law and to domestic order, I will emphasise the latter because I consider that any defence of national security approach is in fact a defence of certain internal status quo or, better, the defence of an “ideology of order” as actually applicable to the internal ordering of society.¹¹ The defence of internal sovereignty seems to accommodate the result of confronting scenarios that result from struggles “to resist” and the tensions created for “the rejection of popular revolution”.¹² The negotiation of the state’s authority over its subjects and the meaning attributed by political actors to the notion of sovereignty is central to the interaction between insurgent and security actors. The early competitors of the state, such as the city republics, leagues of cities, empires, the Church and remnants of feudalism, have been largely substituted by contemporary competitors such as transnational companies, intergovernmental agencies, and multinational government bodies, international criminality and, certainly, by the presence of internal and international insurgents that dramatically have been challenging the formidable but not absolute power that still resides in the sovereign representative of the state as embodied in federal governments or congresses.¹³ Insurgents defy the notion that the state is the location of an ultimate arbitral agent in the domestic realm, as has been traditionally thought to be the overarching source of legitimacy in charge of making decisions and settling disputes.¹⁴ The interaction of insurgent and security actors, from my view, radically question the attributes of a sovereign power, these being the notions of *location*, where the highest power in a political hierarchy is; *sequence*, the final and ultimate power of decision; *effect*, the involvement of the notion of generality, that is the ability to influence the overall flow of

¹¹ Preston King, *The Ideology of Order, A Comparative Analysis of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1974), 255-86.

¹² Quentin Skinner *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Vol. 2, 302-318.

¹³ Hendrik Spruyt, *The Sovereign State and Its Competitors, An Analysis of Systems Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 36-57 and 135-48.

action; and *independence*, that is the principle of not being subjected to any other agent. The main tension is the point at which the sovereignty is exerted by the formal source of power or modified and negotiated by the military, political or symbolic interaction with emerging political communities that vindicate the resort to political violence, namely the use of organised and armed violence against representatives of the state. In short, I will work with the assumption that sovereignty, as other concepts, is charged with competing meanings that represent competing political forces and theorisations that tell us about a relevant charge of subjectivity always present.¹⁵

This problematic insurgent-security interaction emerges alongside the political construction of a cherished concept in security discourse: *the threat* to the sovereign as legitimate embodiment of the community, this being the nation or the state. In order to understand the dynamics through which political actors try to define when and where a threat emerges, we need interpretative tools that traditional security studies tend to overlook. Traditional approaches, for instance, tend to locate the construction of “threats” as core practices whose democratic value is located only within the state,¹⁶ that define the subjects posing that “threat” as insurgents whose identity is created by the use of a protracted irregular warfare against the government;¹⁷ or consider the emergence of insurgent “threats” merely as evidence of the incompleteness of the Latin American states.¹⁸ They tend to overlook the contradictory complementarity of the identity of antagonistic actors as suggested in other

¹⁴ Harold J. Laski, *Studies in the Problem of Sovereignty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1917), 27-68. Albert, J. Paolini, Anthony P. Jarvis and Christian Reus-Smit, *Between Sovereignty and Global Governance* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 3-28.

¹⁵ Jenny Edkins, Nalini Persram and Veronique Pin-Fat, *Sovereignty and Subjectivity* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 163-73. John Hoffman, *Sovereignty* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), 75-84.

¹⁶ Willard Barber and Neale Ronning. *Internal Security and Military Power* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1966), 4.

¹⁷ Andrew Scott, Donald Clark, Bruce Ehrnman et. al. *Insurgency* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 5.

¹⁸ Georges Fauriol. *Latin American Insurgencies*. Washington: The Georgetown University Center for Strategic Studies and the National Defense University, 1985), 6.

approaches that promote a complete review of the conventional vocabulary;¹⁹ introduce the value of contextually defined changes and continuities;²⁰ that assume that defining the “essence” of national security is at least problematic;²¹ that presuppose that radical and armed conflict is constitutive of the state;²² or even rightly accept the redefinition of “threats” and the general framework of security as an opportunity to reform the law and actualise the contribution of security agencies.²³ Even so, still the changing character of those that are defined as the source of “threats” tends to be overlooked.

If we want to fully appreciate the changing nature of identities, therefore, a new interpretative framework is needed. This framework should be one in which a logic of articulation between the state operations and the insurgents is made visible. What is especially relevant here is the process by which “threats” and “vulnerabilities” are constituted, and the nature of the interaction between insurgent and security actors. From conventional perspectives, the “threat” tends to be pre-given as a result of the fundamental intervention of the executive branch and its interpretation of “vulnerabilities”. In contrast, I regard its constitution as a result of the interaction between the challenger, the political elite, and the vigilant presence of public opinion and the media. The nature of such an interaction modifies the perception of the “threat”, as well as the state’s reaction to it.

Therefore, I will pose another kind of question: How does the Mexican security discourse produce and reproduce itself, through the inscription of *threats* and their neutralisation; and how is the EZLN constituted in relation to this hegemonic operation.²⁴

¹⁹ Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde. *Security, A New Framework of Analysis*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 23.

²⁰ Samuel Fitch. *The Armed Forces and Democracy in Latin America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 129.

²¹ Edward Azar and Chung-in Moon. *National Security in the Third World, The Management of Internal and External Threats* (Cambridge: Center for International Development and Conflict Management University of Maryland, 1988), 45.

²² Paul Rich and Richard Stubbs. *The Counter-Insurgent State, Guerrilla Warfare and State Building in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan Press, 1997), 11.

²³ James Rochlin. *Redefining Mexican “Security”* (London Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1997), 165.

²⁴ The insurgent threat is taken here to be the element that triggers the variety of representations of danger to Mexican “stability” and “security” for two correlated reasons. On the one hand, insurgent organisations put into question the prevailing idea that political violence and security may be legitimately used by the state against them. By their mere existence and through evidence of some

From this perspective, then, this thesis offers an alternative understanding of the logic that has allowed the Mexican regime to operate in an ambiguous but effective manner with those sources of *threat* that come from radical organisations. What these radical organisations have in common is their *use* (or threat thereof) of political violence in the name of a political community: those “struggling for 500 years” in the EZLN’s case; the “working people” in the EPR case, or the “indigenous, the students and the people” in the case of the National Autonomous University of Mexico’s (UNAM) strike in 2000. If “threats” and “vulnerabilities” do not have any objective determination, the assessments through which alleged threats are constituted as such depend upon the specific evaluative contexts wherein they appear. As I will show during the course of the thesis, this is true in the cases of the EZLN, the EPR and the student movement, even when explanations of what can be considered a danger or threat emerges from allegedly non-politicised environments.

This opens up a space for the introduction of several concepts relevant for my analysis: *securitisation*, *myth*, *political frontiers*, and *hegemony*. Though most of these concepts will be developed and supplemented in more depth in Chapter 1, I will make brief mention of them here in order to better situate my interpretive approach. Let me begin with the concept of *securitisation*, as developed by Buzan and Waever.²⁵ Drawing on the interpretative tradition and the Copenhagen and English School of International Relations, those authors claim that there are “perceived threats” more than “threats” in the context of a community that shares certain values beyond the interests of the elite.²⁶ “Threats” are understood as definitions constructed by an elite and by society. If the political elite and the community in general participate in the definitional process, and a proposed common meaning is attached to a given phenomenon or political actor, the legitimacy of the *threat* and

popular appeal they fundamentally question the authority invested in the government. On the other hand, insurgent movements question the very source of sovereignty, the most cherished value that the broader notion of national security claims to be able to defend and monopolise.

²⁵ Ole Waever, *Securitization and desecuritization* in *On Security*, by Ronnie Lipschutz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 46-86. See also Barry Buzan, Waever, Ole and J. Wilde, *Security A New Framework of Analysis* (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 21-49.

²⁶ Ronnie Lipschutz, *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 193.

the *threat* itself, become, so to speak, constituted. *Securitisation* is then the collective, societal space in which the notion of “threat” acquires meaning and transient content. *Securitisation* can be thought of as the moment in which an event is located on the agenda of security as “an extreme version of politicization”. For an agent to be securitised implies that it becomes “an existential threat” for a collectivity that, by defining the *threat* it allegedly poses, justify emergent actions and define “the normal bounds” of its political procedure in dealing with it.²⁷ In this regard, my research also recognises its debt to the analytical framework developed by Campbell who utilises an interpretative framework over and above the traditional scheme that rigidly separates objectivity from subjectivity in the analysis of social phenomena. In so doing, he has shown some possibilities for an alternative understanding of political conflict in general, and security tensions in particular. What is particularly useful is his idea that “things are constituted in the process of dealing with them”.²⁸ More specifically, what will be useful for me is the assumption that the interpretation of danger and the *securitisation* of boundaries are indispensable in establishing the identities in whose name security policies are deployed.

Second, to what Campbell calls the performative dimension of identity and security, I will add the notion of *myth*. The EZLN, for example, was able to become a myth, in the sense Lefort put forward: it forged a positive and unitary representation of itself.²⁹ Moreover, as Laclau would put it, a *myth*, as in the EZLN’s case, functions as the space of inscription for demands and struggles from a diversity of particular³⁰ sources which are re translated as *reivindicaciones* originally advanced by the insurgents themselves in a process whereby they acquire different meanings. I claim that those communities that struggle for the representation of sovereignty of the people resort to imaginary representations of themselves, and this fact must be introduced in the analysis. A *myth*, as understood in discourse theory, may be seen as an elaborated self-representation that if it turns out to be predominant may become a *social*

²⁷ Buzan, et.al., *Security*. 24-5.

²⁸ David Campbell, *Writing Security, United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 5.

²⁹ Claude Lefort, *The political forms of modern society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1986). Quoted by Aletta Norval in *Frontiers in question*, Acta Philosophica XVIII, 1997, 52.

imaginary, this being understood as the dominant form of representation of what a society has as its image and as principle of interpretation of social reality. *Myth* and social imaginary are not exclusive components of any insurgent or national identity. I would say that they can be seen as a probable process of evolution from one stage to another.³¹

Third, the notion of *political frontiers* has its roots in the post-Marxist reading of hegemony and subjectivity. It is a concept which is very much associated with such thinkers as Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Etienne Balibar, Jacques Ranciere, Claude Lefort, Stuart Hall and Aletta Norval, who rely on the “working assumption of the non-closure of the social and the constitutive character of difference”.³² Norval’s critique on the tendency to over-emphasise the understanding of political antagonism in less-developed countries as the simple division between two opposing camps is also explored in the thesis.³³ In this regard, the Mexican case shows a complexity that reveals the sophistication of the challengers as much as the originality of the government’s response, and which stands in stark contrast to the comparatively simplistic responses to insurgent challengers to be found in the United Kingdom, United States, Israel, France, Italy, Germany and Spain, among others.

Finally, I come to the concept of *hegemony*, for my research will show that the way the regime has incorporated “difference” - illustrated by the government’s recognition of the EZLN as a valid interlocutor without crushing it - has been successfully hegemonic. Over ten years, the state has even been fundamentally strengthened by internal security operations unleashed as a response to the insurgent challenges. Paradoxically, the space in which this strengthening has taken place is the same space in which the EZLN and the EPR retain some form of representation. Even so I claim that in the contemporary experience, insurgents can be considered hegemonic only at the margins of the social, that is, as representatives of

³⁰ Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 62-63.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 61-79. *Social imaginary* is a stage in which a hegemonic force guarantees its reproduction by dominating the field of political representation and by persuading others that there is no other feasible horizon available; while *myth* is the conversion of a set of demands into a competing space of representation against adversary’s positions. *Demand*, then, is the space of a *particular* aspiration as opposed to the *universal* value that myth and, even more so, social imaginary might have.

³² Norval Aletta, *Frontiers in Question*, Acta Philosophica, XVIII (2/1997), 53.

³³ *Ibid.*, 57.

minority identities. For instance, the EZLN may be “hegemonic” in relation to other organisations in a sub-region of Chiapas, and as representative of the radical left speaking on behalf of the indigenous people identified with the radical left, but can by no means be considered “hegemonic” at a national level, not even among the majority of the indigenous people.

The Significance of the Constructed Nature of Threats in the Analysis of Conflict

In this section I would like to reiterate the central importance of the notion of *threats* for the analysis of conflict. In this regard, it may be helpful to develop this theme in relation to at least one scholarly discussion on conflict. Authors such as Gurr have recognised that conflict studies in general lack a wider understanding of political conflict, of which insurgencies are a central type. From his perspective, conflict should be evaluated as a *process of interaction*, in the long-term, and from the point of view of the effects provoked in the system.³⁴ Other authors, such as Sanders, in defending Gurr’s general argument that people resort to violence because they are ‘relatively deprived’, considers his contribution as illustrative of the best attempts to *explain* conflict. It is, Sanders maintains, an example of a scientific endeavour to explain rather than *interpret* or *understand*. This is because, “for behaviouralists, it is better to be clear and (possibly) wrong than to be so impenetrable that other writers are obliged to debate the ‘meaning’ of what has been written”.³⁵

From the perspective of the interpretative tradition, Gurr’s approach has been seen merely as a “traditional account” of antagonistic conflict in which there is a tendency “to focus on the conditions under which conflicts occur”, as opposed to the “mutual failure of identity” formation involved in any antagonistic relationship.³⁶ Despite the fact that authors such as Howarth insist that the novelty of discourse theory consists in the understanding of

³⁴ Ted Gurr, *On the outcome of violent conflict*, in his *Handbook of Political Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1980), 249-55

³⁵ David Sanders, *Behavioural Analysis*, in *Theory and Methods in Political Science*, by David Marsh and Gerry Stoker (London: Macmillan Press, 1995), 73.

antagonisms as the result of “the impossibility of agents and groups acquiring a full identity”,³⁷ an idea put forward in order to differentiate discourse theory from Gurr’s work, I believe that there are more similarities than differences between them. If we limit ourselves, for instance, to the notion of “deprivation” proposed by Gurr and the idea of “blocked identity”³⁸ as a triggering element of antagonisms, as defended by Laclau and endorsed by Howarth, it seems to me that the difference resides more in the method than in the outcomes. The subjective perception of being deprived and the political construction of antagonisms - resulting from perceived “blockages” - without far from addressing exactly the same process, are strikingly similar in frameworks allegedly antagonistic, be it from the quantitative or qualitative tradition.

From my point of view the actual contribution of discourse theory is specifically to widen the scope of the analysis already proposed by Gurr, among others, in the sense that the perception and understanding of collective actors is central in explaining and/or understanding political conflict. As opposed to the idea that these approaches are totally unbridgeable, I believe that the emphasis on political actors (and their identities) that feel “deprived” or “blocked” would take us to the horizon that Gurr himself has accepted as a pending task. In this sense, I share Laclau’s assumption that there are *processes of identification* rather than merely *fixed identities*.³⁹ If we mobilise this idea in political analysis, conflict will be better understood as a process transiently defined by the interaction of insurgent and security actors in their fluid, antagonistic, confrontation. In that sense, for instance, an interpretative framework tells us more about the EZLN in 1983, in 1993, in 1994, in 1996 and in 2003 - and about the status of its relation with the government - than an

³⁶ David Howarth, *Discourse Theory*, in Marsh, David, 122.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

³⁸ In short the notion of “blocked identity” is mobilised by Laclau to address the moment in which a collectivity makes sense of the perceived impossibility to acquire “a full and positive identity”, because an “enemy”, and “obstacle”, prevents the attainment of such an identity. For an insurgent group who speaks on behalf of community the obstacle tends to be the central government whose decisions are presented at the centre of a network of interests represented constructed as the origin of the “blockage” and as a consequent cause and justification of rebellion. See David Howarth, “discourse Theory”, in David Marsh and Gerry Stoker, *Theory and Methods in Political Science* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 122.

³⁹ Seminar in Ideology and Discourse Analysis, University of Essex, May 2002.

unthinkable time series analysis. In the latter the questions from which any survey analysis must proceed typically do not vary. In the quantitative literature it is absolutely indispensable to assume that certain basic contextual conditions and variables do not change, which, I would say, is its actual weakness - at least as concerns the topic of my own investigation. That is, 'meaning' and its shifts within different contexts are of crucial importance if we are to make sense of the EZLN's interventions and the government's response to them. Otherwise, we might end up with a situation in which Gallup, for instance, would continue asking about how relevant it is for public morality that men stop using full-length swimsuits on the beach. On the other hand, time-series analyses might tell us a great deal about people's perceptions of the army and the EZLN in the last ten years.

All of the above is said with the aim of highlighting the central importance of the fluid nature of antagonistic conflicts and the role of key actors in the drawing of political frontiers. It is here, therefore, that I would like to signal the relevance of my earlier comments on the constructed nature of threats. For even when security institutions defend a quasi-objective definition of "threats", these are actually better understood as delimited through the contingent interplay of political struggles and ideological disputes. In defining what any regime can and cannot accept, the elite mobilises a set of institutional and rhetorical devices to identify its enemy. In that operation, the definition of its "vulnerabilities" and "threats" becomes crucial.

In this way the analysis of the social construction of threats makes visible the borders between the identity of the government, its challengers, and society at large. It allows us to understand how the constitution of threats is crucial for defining what is inside and outside this boundary, that is, the *self and the other* of the community. In this context, then, one of the main claims I will make is that there is no "objective condition" that determines the ultimate source of danger and threats, as is largely assumed in analysis on Mexican national security as it might be seen if we consider as representative of them the identification of "vulnerabilities" and "threats", for example, in the official site of the main security institutions (CISEN) in

charge of providing them right until 2004 at least.⁴⁰ Against essentialist accounts that regard the identity of the state and its challengers as pre-given, I put forward the idea that the process of interaction and articulation mediates any constitution of political identity. And in order to justify this claim, the notions of “nation” and “security”, which are the basic components of the broader concept of national identity, will be shown to be the product of ongoing political operations, confrontations, and articulations. These shifts in meaning will be traced in relation to key political events that provoke processes of definition and re-definition by regime and insurgency actors.

Thesis Outline

The overall objective of this thesis is to contribute to our understanding of Mexican political history by showing how the very same operations that allowed the EZLN movement to become a relevant political referent also enabled the Mexican regime to re-inscribe its hegemony and define the boundaries of the conflict. The period I will be focusing on begins in 1993, when the army first undeniably noticed the existence of EZLN guerrillas in Chiapas, and ends in 2002, when congress and the judiciary gave their support to an “indigenous bill”. Some events in 2003 will also be mentioned.

The thesis comprises five chapters, each of which will tackle an aspect of the central object of my research, namely, the evolving political frontier constructed through the interaction between insurgent and national security actors. After reviewing the main literature relevant to the topic of my research and laying the theoretical foundations for my analysis (Chapter 1) I advance the argument that, given the uniquely specific Mexican context adumbrated earlier in this introduction, this political frontier was established in 1994 through the dynamic exchange between representatives of the regime and the EZLN (Chapter 2). I argue that the nature of its evolving character and impact can be grasped by examining in detail not simply the interaction between these central characters, but also their individual and

⁴⁰ <http://cisen.gob.mx>

collective response to, and interaction with, key movements and events: the emergence of the EPR in 1996 (Chapter 3), the CGH student movement in the context of the strike at UNAM in 2000 (Chapter 4), and the Zapatista March of 2001 (Chapter 5). I will now develop the content and argument of these chapters in a little more detail.

In Chapter 1, I offer a basic literature review of texts focusing on the EZLN as an insurgency movement, and a brief review of literature relevant to national security issues in Mexico. After scrutinising critically the notion of “post modern” insurgencies as a descriptive and analytical category, I outline the elements of discourse theory that will be important for developing an alternative understanding of the security/insurgency frontier. Overall, the EZLN literature appears to align itself along three axes. First, there are scholars who accept the EZLN’s self-attributed values and minimise the aspect of political agency, whilst other commentators underline the question of political agency in trying to de-legitimise the EZLN. There is a third, more nuanced, position, which emphasises the interaction between structure and political agency. I claim that the academic literature, as much as the regime-insurgency confrontation itself, is part of a broader ideological attempt to politicise our understanding of the movement, and that this is a result of its tendency to underestimate or completely ignore the shifting nature of identities and political frontiers when analysing political conflict. I will thus show how dominant approaches to the security and insurgency issues neglect the space in which “opposing” forces interact dynamically, demonstrate how this interaction is constitutive of their identities, and challenge the idea that “national security” has a fixed meaning associated merely with an elite understanding of it.

Chapter 2 develops an account of the EZLN in terms of a dynamic tension penetrating its identity, pulling it between two poles: an insurrectionary paramilitary force and a radical social movement. I will explore this tension by analysing the character of EZLN’s defiance and the reorganisation of its discourse around the indigenous question; by pointing to the creation of *Zapatismo* as a mythical principle of reading, appealing to a variety of struggles; and by offering evidence that the EZLN unwittingly helped unleash the intensification of the internal security state apparatus. My argument is that EZLN’s

intervention opened the space for both the strengthening of the regime and for the constitution of a space of utopian identification limited and framed by the state. This was made possible, I argue, on account of the regime's deft manipulation of the political frontier and the transformation of the EZLN into a standard of 'good' political behaviour, the latter of which was subsequently deployed to delegitimise and stigmatise a range of other movements and struggles.

Chapter 3 addresses the significance of the appearance of the EPR in 1996. According to my research, its emergence and the response it provoked provides very clear evidence for the existence of the political frontier identified in Chapter 2, namely, that between the regime (the government and the political elite generally) and the EZLN. In effect, its emergence reopened the *de facto* problematic of the insurgency-security frontier. I argue that the EPR did not threaten the regime *per se* but instead threatened to destabilise the political agreement it achieved with the EZLN. This chapter will thus analyse the regime's response to the EPR, more specifically its differential treatment of the insurgent, noting how this treatment was explicitly or implicitly supported by the partisan left and the EZLN.

In Chapter 4 the developments related to the student movement at UNAM in 2000 will be presented as an illustration of how the insurrectionary logic and discourse was reiterated in a different context and how the regime dealt with this. Special attention will be given to the role played by the media in making possible the rejection of CGH by virtually all quarters of society. Crucial in this respect is the place of violence in the rhetoric and practice of CGH and how this served to exclude it as a legitimate radical movement. In this sense, the CGH intervention adds to my overall thesis argument because it functions as an extreme case of an unwitting contributor to the refinement of the security state apparatus.

Finally, in Chapter 5 the *Zapatista march* of 2001 will be presented and analysed as evidence of the *reconstitution* of the political frontier. Given the electoral displacement of PRI by PAN in 2000, it was indispensable for the EZLN to reposition its discourse and for governmental actors to reaffirm the degree of refinement they could achieve in security matters. This was especially so because PRI's fall from power threw into relief two

competing notions of sovereignty: one advocated by President Fox and one by *Marcos*. Thus, government officials and guerrilla organisations fought to advance their respective understandings of sovereignty by attempting to impose specific meanings onto the march in particular, and to the intervention of insurgencies in general.

While government and radical actors might have been unable to transcend the frontier established during PRI's reign, they were capable of renegotiating its meaning. For instance, on its journey to the centre of power, the EZLN organised multiple rallies to reaffirm and redefine its radical credentials as defender of the people's sovereignty. It did so by, for example, explicitly supporting the return to public life of *Comandante Germán*, and by openly proclaiming its reconnection with EPR and other guerrilla organisations that had not given up violence as a legitimate means of intervention. After the mobilisation, the EZLN returned to the jungle without having obtained what they apparently would have considered a satisfactory congressional agreement on indigenous rights. As, however, the prime function of such a mobilisation was the EZLN's attempt to reposition itself in the new political environment signalled by PAN's ascent to power, this did not matter as much as one might think. Finally, and relatedly, I argue that the apparent paradox of using the PFP - regarded by some insurgents as a counter-insurgency tool - to protect the participants of the march on its journey from Chiapas to Mexico City, dissolves if we consider it in light of my thesis argument in general, and Chapter 2's argument in particular. From this perspective, the principal aim of the regime's deployment of the PFP was not the protection of the EZLN but the protection of the political frontier created in 1994, thus allowing its internal security policy to survive more-or-less intact.