

❧ [ P R E F A C E ] ❧

From: John Womack,  
Zapata and the Mexican Revolution (1969)

**T**HIS IS A BOOK ABOUT COUNTRY PEOPLE who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution. They did not figure on so odd a fate. Come hell, high water, agitators from the outside, or report of greener pastures elsewhere, they insisted only on staying in the villages and little towns where they had grown up, and where before them their ancestors for hundreds of years had lived and died—in the small state of Morelos, in south-central Mexico.

Toward the turn of the present century other people, powerful entrepreneurs living in the cities, needed to make the villagers move in order to progress themselves. And between the entrepreneurs and the villagers a vivid conflict took shape. Not only in Morelos but in similar districts in other states this conflict emerged, less dramatic but no less bitter. Everywhere in Mexico, entrepreneurs reasoned that without basic changes in the country they could not maintain their level of profits or keep the Republic in business. But wherever bases were changing, villagers protested—not knowing how to make money out of their fatherland.

In 1910, after thirty-four years of regular government, the high politicians of the regime let a revolt break over presidential succession. Almost alone among Mexico's villagers, those of Morelos deliberately joined. In a few months national directors of the revolt gained office. But they proved as reckless of local traditions as the men they replaced, and the progress of free enterprise continued. Threatened and bewildered, the villagers of Morelos revolted again. There ensued nearly nine years of warfare, during which ordinary farmers and field hands became guerrilleros and terrorists, endured sieges, and carried on sabotage and passive resistance to pacification. They had several leaders, chief among them one Emiliano Zapata.

Partly because of their insurgency but mainly because of stronger movements of different kinds in other regions, Mexico underwent radical reforms

in the decade after 1910. And in 1920, Zapata dead, the Morelos revolutionaries won official recognition as a legitimate body in Mexico. Implicitly they had forced on its regime a policy of concern for the nation's rural poor. Even today agrarian welfare remains an official commitment in Mexico.

What follows is a story, not an analysis, of how the experience of the Morelos villagers came to pass—how their longing to lead a settled life in a familiar place developed into a violent struggle; how they managed their operations; how they behaved in control of territory and in subjection; how they finally returned to peace; and how they then fared. Zapata is most prominent in these pages not because he himself begged attention but because the villagers of Morelos put him in charge and persistently looked to him for guidance, and because other villagers around the Republic took him for their champion. Through him the country people worked their way into the Mexican Revolution. If theirs was not the only kind of revolutionary experience, it was still, I think, the most significant.

The word "peasant" does not normally appear here. I have preferred other words on purpose, maybe out of crankiness, to make a point. It seems to me that "peasant" generally sounds exotic, suggests a creature that properly fits in an exotic society; and if I were writing the history of a society essentially foreign and out of our time, in the past or the present, anyway strange to us, I would use the word to indicate a particular kind of country person. But I doubt that since the 1860's Mexico has developed in a dimension different from ours. I do not deny that there were and still are peasants in Mexico, but only affirm that by 1910 most families outside the cities there probably were not peasant; certainly most families in Morelos were not. What they were is clear in Spanish: *campesinos*, people from the fields.

Besides, to refer to "peasants" is to verge on raising abstract questions of class. And this is a study not in historical sociology but in social history. It is not an analysis but a story because the truth of the revolution in Morelos is in the feeling of it, which I could not convey through defining its factors but only through telling of it. The analysis that I could do and that I thought pertinent I have tried to weave into the narrative, so that it would issue at the moment right for understanding it.

To produce this book I have knowingly depended on many people, and unknowingly no doubt on many others. First I thank Donald Fleming, who headed me into Latin American history. To the Faculty Committee on Latin American Studies at Harvard University I owe a generous fellowship from the Robert Woods Bliss Fund for 1961-5, and a generous grant

from the same fund for the summer of 1966. For their courtesy and efficiency I thank the staffs of Widener Library, the New York Public Library, the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the University of Texas Library, and the University of California at Berkeley Library in the United States; and in Mexico those of the Archivo General de la Nación, the Hemeroteca Nacional, the Biblioteca Nacional, the Biblioteca de la Secretaría de Hacienda, the Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, the Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas and the Archivo Histórico at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, the Instituto de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, the Centro de Estudios de Historia Mexicana at Condumex, S.A., the Colegio de México, and the Biblioteca Central Miguel Salinas at the Universidad de Morelos. For their care and cheer in typing the manuscript at various stages I am grateful to Claire Murray, Joslyn Allen, and Carol Thorne. For interesting interviews I state my thanks to Daniel de la O, Diego Zapata, Daniel Gutiérrez Santos, Cristóbal Rojas Romero, and the late Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama. For interviews and permission to use private papers I am deeply indebted to Marte R. Gómez, Porfirio Palacios, José García Pimentel, José Ignacio Conde, Elena Garro de Paz, and Juan Pérez Salazar. For archival directions and tips on facts and interpretations I owe much to Luis González y González, Fernando Sandoval, Manuel González Ramírez, Valentín López González, Antonio Pompa y Pompa, Stanley R. Ross, Juan Luis Mutiozábal, Salvador Azuela, Luis Muro, Lothar and Josefina Knauth, Catalina Sierra Casasús, J. Ignacio Rubio Mañé, Beatriz Arteaga, and Daniel Cosío Villegas. For good recommendations on style I thank my editors, Ashbel Green and Edward Johnson.

Five men in particular were of great importance to me as I worked through this study: José María Luján, for teaching me about the Mexican Revolution; Jesús Sotelo Inclán, for teaching me about Mexico, Morelos, and agrarian struggles; Juan Marichal, for teaching me about Latin America; and Ernest R. May and Oscar Handlin, for teaching me about history. To them I am profoundly grateful. On no account are they responsible for what is wrong or stupid or ugly in the following pages. But little that is good would be there if they had not helped me.

The special sacrifices my friends, my family, and my daughter made for me while I did this work rubbed sores too deep to cure now. I can only ask them to forgive me.

John Womack, Jr.

Cambridge, Mass.  
November 22, 1967

§ [ P R O L O G U E ] §

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*A People Chooses a Leader*

*“Like a wound, the country’s history  
opens in Anenecuilco.”*

—*Gastón García Cantú*

THE OLD MAN WAS ABOUT TO SPEAK NOW, and the crowd of farmers waiting under the arcades behind the village church quieted down to hear him. They knew the meeting must be important. To make sure everyone could come, the elders had called it for this evening, on a Sunday. And to hide it from the hacienda foremen, they had passed the word around in private instead of ringing the church bell.<sup>1</sup>

Almost all the family men in the village were there, and most of the other grown but single men. Some seventy-five or eighty had come, kin-folk, in-laws, cronies, and feúdistas. And now, waiting together in the shadows of the September evening, they listened carefully for what the wrinkled old man would say. They knew José Merino was never a man to ignore. Uncle or cousin to many of them, respected for miles around, he was chief elder in the village that late summer of 1909 and president of the village council. The crowd could see he was too tired not to go

<sup>1</sup> For an account of this meeting, see Jesús Sotelo Inclán: *Raíz y razón de Zapata. Anenecuilco. Investigación histórica* (México, 1943), pp. 175-6.

straight to the point, and as he spoke they listened, quietly and intently.

He was telling them he was too old, over seventy, and too worn-out, that all the elders were too old and worn-out. In the last year, he said, the job had just gotten to be too much for them. To defend the village's land titles and water rights in the fields as well as in the courts required energy they could no longer muster. Traveling back and forth to the state capital in Cuernavaca, journeying even to Mexico City, arranging for lawyers, facing the jefe político (the district prefect) in Cuautla, dealing with the hacienda managers and foremen and field guards—it was too much for old men. And with the new real-estate law passed in Cuernavaca three months before, reforming taxes and titles, the job was getting worse.<sup>2</sup> The elders had served the village as best they could for years, and they served it best now by resigning. The times were changing so fast the village needed more than the wisdom of age. The people of Anenecuilco would have to elect new men—younger men—to stand up for them. That was all, he said, and then he asked for nominations for his own office, the council presidency.

The four old men who composed the council began to take names and prepare for the vote. They needed to offer no advice or admonition: their presence alone guaranteed that the choice would be free, serious, and respected. For seven hundred years Anenecuilco had lived by the strength of will of men like them, and it had no better strength to trust in now. One of the elders, Carmen Quintero, had taken an active and independent part in local politics for twenty-five years, having started his career before some of the men at the meeting were born. Another, Eugenio Pérez, had loaded his rifle to defend village lands as early as 1887. As for the other two, Merino and Andrés Montes, they had been firm and faithful leaders for well over a decade.<sup>3</sup> Nearly four hundred souls made up Anenecuilco, and probably every one of them could look on at least one of the four elders as uncle, great-uncle, cousin, brother, father, or grandfather.<sup>4</sup> Before those four solemn, independent old men, no one would dare try to steam-

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 173-4. For the text of the law, see *Semanario Oficial del Gobierno de Morelos*, XVIII, 26, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Quintero had been elected to a district electoral college for federal elections as early as 1884. *Periódico Oficial del Gobierno del Estado de Morelos*, XVI, 23, 5. He was also elected to an electoral college for federal elections in 1900. *Semanario Oficial*, VI, 28, 7. For Pérez, Merino, and Montes, see Sotelo Inclán: op. cit., pp. 155, 159.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Holt Büttner: "Evolución de las localidades en el estado de Morelos según los censos de población, 1900-1950" (Maestría de Geografía thesis, U.N.A.M., 1962), pp. 94-7.

roll a vote, or to walk out if defeated. In Anenecuilco village business was too important for muscles or tempers to interfere with.

The nominations were in. Modesto González's had been first. Then Bartolo Parral had proposed Emiliano Zapata, and Zapata had in turn proposed Parral. A vote was called, and Zapata won easily.

It could not have been a surprise. Zapata was young, having just turned thirty a month before, but the men voting knew him and they knew his family; and they judged that if they wanted a young man to lead them, they would find no one else with a truer sense of what it meant to be responsible for the village.<sup>5</sup> He had had his troubles with the district authorities, the first time when he was only seventeen, a year or two after both his parents died. He had had to leave the state for several months then, hiding out on a family friend's ranch in southern Puebla.<sup>6</sup> But no one held that against him: in the countryside troubles with the police were almost a puberty rite. Anyway for the last three years he had been one of the leaders in the group of young men active in village defense, signing protests, taking a junior part in delegations to the jefe político, generally helping to keep up village morale.<sup>7</sup> Recently he had helped to organize the local campaign of an opposition candidate for governor; and though his party had suffered a disastrous defeat—voters intimidated, votes not counted, leaders arrested and deported to labor camps in Yucatán—he had met opposition politicians from all over the state and established connections with them.<sup>8</sup> After the enactment of the new real-estate law, he had begun working regularly with the council.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Dates for Zapata's birth vary. For 1873, see Alfonso Taracena: *Mi vida en el vértigo de la revolución. Anales sintéticos, 1900-1930* (México, 1936), p. 86. For "around 1877," see Gildardo Magaña: *Emiliano Zapata y el agrarismo en México*, 3 vols. (México, 1934-41), I, 104, and the second, posthumous edition of his work, 5 vols. (México, 1951-2), I, 94. For the same guess, see Baltasar Dromundo: *Vida de Emiliano Zapata* (México, 1961), p. 27. For "around 1879," see Baltasar Dromundo: *Emiliano Zapata. Biografía* (México, 1934), p. 21. For 1883, see Octavio Paz: "Emiliano Zapata," in José T. Meléndez, ed.: *Historia de la revolución mexicana*, 2 vols. (México, 1936-40), I, 319. The two most conscientious historians of matters Zapatista, Sotelo Inclán and Porfirio Palacios, both agree on August 8, 1879, for which see respectively: op. cit., p. 169, and *Emiliano Zapata. Datos biográficos-históricos* (México, 1960), pp. 16-17. Following them are Alfonso Reyes H.: *Emiliano Zapata. Su Vida y su Obra* (México, 1963), and Mario Mena: *Zapata* (México, 1959), p. 169.

<sup>6</sup> Palacios: op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>7</sup> Sotelo Inclán: op. cit., pp. 162-6, 172-3.

<sup>8</sup> See Chapter I for an account of this election.

<sup>9</sup> Sotelo Inclán: op. cit., pp. 174-5.

In country terms, the villagers knew, he was not a poor man: the Zapatas lived in a solid adobe-and-stone house, not a hut. Neither he nor his older brother, Eufemio, had ever worked as day laborers on the haciendas, and both had inherited a little land and some livestock when their parents died. Eufemio had liquidated his for capital to start business in Veracruz State—peddling, hawking, marketing, no one knew quite what. But Emiliano had stayed around Anenecuilco. He worked his land, sharecropped a few acres more from a local hacienda, and in slack seasons ran a string of mules through the settlements south along the Cuautla River.<sup>1</sup> He also bought and sold horses in a small way. For lack of land the Zapata family had years before started dealing in livestock, and Emiliano had learned the trade young. He had also learned the pride horses stir in men, and so as he made money he used it on them—buying a new one, outfitting a favorite with a fancy saddle, outfitting himself to sit, worthily booted and spurred, on the shining back of the horse he most admired.

The reputation he earned with horses paid, for hacienda owners throughout central and eastern Morelos and western Puebla, and even in Mexico City, spoke of him as the best trainer around and competed for his services.<sup>2</sup> But their flattering attention never won him over; people always sensed a painful independence about him. Anenecuilcans recalled a story of his childhood—that once as a child he had seen his father break down and cry in frustration at a local hacienda's enclosure of a village orchard, and that he had promised his father he would get the land back.<sup>3</sup> If the incident occurred, he was nine years old at the time, the ninth of ten children, only four of whom lived to adulthood.<sup>4</sup> If the story was apocryphal, still the determination that it chronicled did burn in his glance; and sometimes, though he was as tough as nails and no one fooled with him, he did look near tears. A quiet man, he drank less than most of the other men in the village and got quieter when he did. Once for several weeks he managed the ornate Mexico City stables of a Morelos sugar planter. It was a good chance to start climbing socially and eco-

<sup>1</sup> Serafín M. Robles: "El General Zapata. Agricultor y Arriero," *El Campesino*, October 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Sotelo Inclán: op. cit., pp. 170, 172. Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama: *La revolución agraria del Sur y EMILIANO ZAPATA, su Caudillo* (México, 1960), pp. 245-6.

<sup>3</sup> Dromundo: *Vida*, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> Surviving besides Emiliano were Eufemio and two sisters, María de Jesús and María de Luz. Sotelo Inclán: op. cit., pp. 169-70. Mario Gill: *Episodios mexicanos. México en la hoguera* (3rd edn., México, 1960), p. 50-1.

nomically—to feather his nest and wind up with his own stables and maybe even a little ranch. But toadying, wheedling petty obligations, maneuvering, operating, pulling deals—it sickened him, literally. Uneasy and depressed, he was soon back in Anenecuilco, remarking bitterly how in the capital horses lived in stalls that would put to shame the house of any workingman in the whole state of Morelos.<sup>5</sup> If he dandied up on holidays and trotted around the village and into the nearby town of Villa de Ayala on a silver-saddled horse, the people never questioned that he was still one of them. Despite his fine horses and suits, Anenecuilcans never referred to him as Don Emiliano, which would have removed him from the guts and flies and manure and mud of local life, sterilizing the real respect they felt for him into a squire's vague respectability. He was one of their own, they felt in Anenecuilco, and it never made them uncomfortable to treat him so. 'Miliano, they called him, and when he died, *pobrecito*—poor little thing. To them he was a neighbor, a younger cousin who could lead the clan, a beloved nephew as rough and true as seasoned timber.

This was the man the villagers elected president of their council. But when they elected him, they were also laying bets that he would stay as they knew him. What convinced them that once in power he would not change and abuse their trust—what kept the question from rising in anyone's mind—was the reputation of his family. Zapata was an important name in Anenecuilco. It had first appeared in local affairs as a rebel name during the War of Independence in the 1810's.<sup>6</sup> Emiliano's father, Gabriel, a quiet, popular, hard-working man with a slight-stutter, and his mother, Cleofas, were by all accounts plain folk, but they passed on to their son the rare, plain qualities of unambitious courage and dogged, abiding integrity that glint through the family history. The Zapatas and the Salazars (his mother's people) had it bred into their bones what Mexican history was about. When a Spanish army besieged the rebels in Cuautla during the War of Independence, boys from the neighboring villages sneaked back and forth across the lines for weeks, smuggling tortillas, salt, liquor, and gunpowder to the insurgents: one of the boys from Anenecuilco was José Salazar, Emiliano's maternal grandfather. Two of his father's brothers, Cristino and José, had fought in the War of Reform and against the French Intervention in the 1860's,

<sup>5</sup> Silvano Barba González: *La lucha por la tierra. Emiliano Zapata* (México, 1960), pp. 35-45. Sotelo Inclán: op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 138-42.

and years later Emiliano remembered the stories they used to tell him of their campaigns against the Reactionaries and the Imperialists.<sup>7</sup>

Besides, there was another José Zapata, whose career definitely fixed the Zapata family high in village esteem. In 1866-7 during the War of Intervention, the young Republican general Porfirio Díaz organized companies of men all over south-central Mexico to take part in the final push against the French. In every neighborhood he needed a reliable agent to mobilize and lead the local forces. His man in the country around Villa de Ayala was this other José Zapata.<sup>8</sup> Zapata was already an old man, but he knew the region and its people like the back of his hand, and he commanded respect wherever he passed. His home was in Anenecuilco, and after the war ended in 1867 in the restoration of the Republic, the people there and in Villa de Ayala naturally counted on him to lead them in reestablishing a popular peace and order. During the troubled times of the late 1860's and early 1870's he was chief elder in Anenecuilco and held elected posts in the Villa de Ayala municipal government as well.<sup>9</sup> Through these years José Zapata kept faithful connections with Díaz, now an ambitious but ill-advised and confused opposition politician. He organized a secret Porfirista club in Anenecuilco and carried on a clandestine correspondence with his old chief about defending the villagers' lands against the sugar plantations, which he described as a "malign infirmity."<sup>1</sup> Anenecuilcans revered him: when his comrades reported his death to Díaz in 1876, it was "the death of our beloved president, whom we considered almost as a father."<sup>2</sup> And for years afterward they continued along the political course he had marked for them, trusting, even after Díaz came to power and betrayed his earlier promises, that in the end he would remember to help them protect their fields. Still in 1892, in a bitter presidential election, young Anenecuilcans like Eufemio Zapata, Octaviano Gutiérrez, and Teodoro Placencia

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> Victoriano Gómez to the auxiliary mayor of Anenecuilco, July 9, 1867, Archivo de Jesús Sotelo Inclán (henceforth ASI). José Zapata to Narcizo Medina, February 9, 1867, ASI.

<sup>9</sup> José Zapata to the municipal aide of Anenecuilco, October 10, 12, and 19, 1870, ASI.

<sup>1</sup> J. Zapata, A. Solares, and Teodosio Franco to Porfirio Díaz, June 14, 1874, cited in Alberto María Carreño, ed.: *Archivo del General Porfirio Díaz. Memorias y documentos*, 24 vols. (México, 1947-58), XI, 142-3.

<sup>2</sup> Teodosio Franco, Alfredo Solares, and Justino Arriaga to Porfirio Díaz, January 23, 1876, *ibid.*, XI, 300-1. I owe this reference and the preceding one to the generosity of Jesús Sotelo Inclán.

considered it their civic duty to enroll in local Porfirista clubs and vote for the leader old José had given the villagers faith in.<sup>3</sup> Exactly how Emiliano was related to this patriarch, who died three years before he was born, is still unclear, but José Zapata was probably a brother of his grandfather, a great-uncle. In any case his part in village history served to establish Zapata as an honored name there.

Finally, the security of kinship was in the present meeting's very air: Emiliano was also a nephew of the incumbent chief, José Merino.<sup>4</sup> The villagers knew they were in for trouble for the next few years. They had no better bet than Zapata to see them through.

Other offices were then opened to nominations and filled by young men, the unofficial leaders for the last five years of the new generation in the village. Francisco Franco, a close friend of Emiliano's, was elected secretary; Eduwiges Sánchez and Rafael Merino, José's son, were named treasurers; and José Robles became *vocal*, a sort of member without portfolio. It was a short and simple ceremony—the assembly, election, and transfer of authority. Really it was not unusual, since in hard times the traditional procedure was for the elder "judges" to give way to the younger "warriors," and on that Sunday evening, September 12, 1909, the times in store for Anenecuilco looked grievously hard.

Zapata spoke briefly. He said that he accepted the difficult responsibility conferred upon him, but that he expected everyone to back him. "We'll back you," Francisco Franco thirty years later remembered someone in the crowd calling out to Zapata: "We just want a man with pants on, to defend us."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *La Idea Patriótica*, March 10, 1892.

<sup>4</sup> Dromundo: *Vida*, p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Sotelo Inclán: *op. cit.*, pp. 175-6.