Alternative journalism and the relationship between guerrillas and indigenous peoples in Latin America

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Abstract

Academic study of alternative journalism is dominated by an approach that celebrates alternative media for its capacity to "empower" citizens. Existing literature on alternative media and alternative journalism often highlight its potential for creating "spaces" where alternative voices can be heard and its value is seen in its contribution towards the construction of alternative "narratives". While it is important to celebrate the role of alternative media, it is equally important to remain self-critical in order to learn from past experiences, especially when they raise important ethical questions on the type of alternative narratives or alternative truths produced and the solidarity actions these truths and narratives helped bring about. This is the case with much of the reporting in the alternative media on indigenous issues and rights during the civil wars in Nicaragua, Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, in Chiapas, Mexico.

This article will try to engage critically with the history of European and North American alternative media reporting on indigenous issues in these countries during the 80s and 90s. The purpose is not to discuss empirical findings, but to reflect on theories that can guide future studies on alternative media and alternative journalism on the wars in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico. This article will discuss the usefulness of theories and understandings of alternative media and journalism that builds on postmodern and post structural versions of social constructionism. The article offers a critique of postmodern and post structural versions of social constructionism in studies of alternative media and alternative journalism. The critique builds on previous critiques of social movement theory and research made by scholars writing from a critical realist perspective.

Introduction

Academic study of alternative journalism is dominated by an approach that celebrates alternative media for its capacity to "empower" citizens (Atton, 2009: 274). Existing literature on alternative media and alternative journalism often highlight its potential for creating "spaces" where alternative "voices" can be heard and its value is seen in its contribution towards the construction of alternative "narratives". This form of "empowerment" is here loosely understood as a process that happens when new "narratives", insights or understandings make it possible for individuals and communities to participate and influence actively the decisions that affects their daily lives.

While it is often justified to celebrate the role of alternative media, it is equally important, from the perspective of someone who has been and still is engaged in solidarity movements and alternative media, to remain self-critical in order to learn from past experiences, especially when they raise difficult ethical questions on the validity of the alternative narratives or alternative truths they produced. This is in my view the case with much of the reporting in the alternative media on indigenous issues and rights during the civil wars in Nicaragua, Guatemala and, to a lesser extent, in Chiapas, Mexico.

I was deeply engaged in alternative media, reporting on and from the conflicts in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico (Krøvel, 1999, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2011d). I was (and still am) engaged in solidarity activities with social movements in the region; among other things living and coordinating projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador. This paper is therefore not written by someone positioned on the "outside" and independent from alternative media and the solidarity movement. Rather, it is based on the premise that solidarity matters. It is possible to do something that means something in the struggle for liberation or rights or whatever word we choose to describe the struggle. Alternative journalism and alternative media also matters for me because it produces information that helps us and plays a pivotal role in the production of alternative knowledge or understandings. Alternative media is important and can have an effect on the lives of those engaged in the alternative media and the audience of alternative media. But more importantly, it will have an effect on the lives of those the alternative journalists report on.

Therefore it is critical to evaluate the effects solidarity had on the lives of those affected by the solidarity. Did it have the effect we wanted? What type of solidarity did the production of alternative information make possible? Research on alternative media and journalism can and should help us understand such questions. In the case of alternative media and solidarity with Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico in the 80s and at least for much of the 90s it is important to note that the vast majority of alternative journalists reporting to an audience in Europe and North America were not members of the societies they reported on and from. Even if we accept that alternative journalists and media empowered those engaged in the alternative media and those who received the alternative information, the most important question remains: Did the alternative media (seen in the context of the solidarity movement) play a role in empowering the" peoples" of Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas? Or rather, did the alternative media help empower the right "peoples" and organizations?

Much has changed since the early 1980s regarding the understanding of indigenous peoples. Revolutionary organizations in Mexico (EZLN), Guatemala (URNG) and Nicaragua (FSLN) have tried to come to terms with the growing confidence of indigenous peoples and indigenous organizations in the region. Leaders of revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and Guatemala have on several occasions asked for forgiveness for the many mistakes made during the civil wars. In Chiapas, Mexico a new type of revolutionary organization has

emerged, combining elements from a Cuban inspired Marxist history with elements from indigenous culture and indigenous *cosmovisión.* In Chiapas indigenous and mestizo leaders of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) have also engaged in critical self-evaluation of past experiences of cooperation and conflict between a Guevara inspired ("foco") organization and indigenous peoples.

The growing global indigenous movement also had a profound effect on social movements in the global North, instigating a process of learning and thus re-imagining of the concept and understanding of "indigenous peoples" (or "Indians") and indigenous rights, although there has been comparatively little self-critical engagement with the role played by the global solidarity movement and alternative media during the civil wars (Brysk, 2002).

The overall goal of the paper is to offer a critique of existing theories on alternative media and journalism and their usefulness as guides for future research based on the experiences from Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas. A good theory will guide research towards important issues or social problems and help us formulate research questions and design a suitable methodology. It will also give perspective to the analysis of research findings. But theories should not be taken to be more than what they are. They should be submitted to constant and critical evaluations against other forms of knowledge, experience and praxis. To some extent this paper is the outcome of my personal ongoing evaluation of existing theories in light of my own experience and knowledge as a practitioner of alternative journalism and later teacher and researcher of journalism. How well suited are they to guide research towards issues I find particularly important? Existing theories on alternative media highlights participation, alternative voices and narratives - all real aspects of alternative media experiences. My concern, however, is that they fail to guide research sufficiently towards other and for me more important aspects of alternative media and journalism.

I will present my argument from a critical realist perspective. Following Bhaskar, this means accepting the value of a multiplicity of ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies (Archer, Bhaskar, Centre for Critical Realism and International Association for Critical Realism, 1998; Bhaskar, 2010). Theories necessarily make some issues and phenomena more salient than others. Therefore, care must be taken to avoid reductionism. Further, according to Sayer, people's relation with reality is one of concern, and understanding these concerns should always be a key issue in research (Sayer, 2010, 2011). Research on alternative media must therefore include aspects of importance and concern for those engaged in it.

Paraphrasing the anthropologist Thomas Hylland Eriksen, research could start by trying to understand "what makes alternative journalists tick?" (Eriksen, 2009; Laming, 2004). As an alternative journalist engaged in solidarity movement with Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, I can attest to the importance of both participating and "giving voice to the voiceless". But while such aspects were of some importance to me and many of my friends, they

are certainly not sufficient to explain the activities. More is needed to explain alternative media and journalism in the solidarity movement with the liberation struggles. For us, I believe, solidarity activities were driven primarily by the hope of contributing to change. We wanted to help *empower* excluded and marginalized groups, as I remember it. Or at least reduce the scope for Western interference on the side of reactionary forces fighting against liberation movements. I believe this hope of contributing to a process of emancipation best can be anchored what Bhaskar calls the potential for universal solidarity (Bhaskar and Hartwig, 2010). We have, as humans, a capacity for universal empathy, but we need information, knowledge, experience, in short a learning process, to activate the potential for universal solidarity. Here, alternative media and journalism have the potential of contributing to the learning processes. But the information and knowledge must also be true. I agree with Collier that "the best way to live a morally better life is by coming to have truer ideas about life" (Collier quoted in Sayer, 2011, p. 150). Producing alternative information and alternative narratives are not sufficient. The alternative information and narratives must help us in the learning processes that might lead to "truer ideas about life".

My concern, as a researcher, then, is that many existing theories are not sufficiently capable of guiding research towards such hope and concern. And that our understanding of alternative media and journalism will be poorer for it.

In order to develop the critique of existing theories, I must first map out a history of the struggles of Mexico and Central America, although this struggle is not the main goal for this article. This first part of the article should rather be seen as an attempt at describing what is or was; an ontology which makes it possible later to criticize epistemologies. This ontology expands and elucidates my concern regarding the theories on alternative media, but more importantly, it is also as an argument for the *importance* of researching such issues. My goal in this section is not to convince the reader that my version is the only possible version; the version I will give is far from being a comprehensive account of the civil wars and the activities of the alternative media. Instead, it is my point here to demonstrate that any serious attempt to understand solidarity in the context of the civil wars in Central America must include such concerns as those I will briefly map out in later. They are real and must be dealt with. Theories that fail to guide research explicitly to ask critical questions related to these important aspects of the reality of solidarity and alternative media must themselves be subjected to critical evaluations and subsequent reformulation or refutation.

Existing literature and theoretical perspectives

According to Atton, the normative ideal of alternative journalism argues "that reporting is always bound up with values (personal, professional, institutional) and that it is therefore never possible to separate facts from values. This leads to the epistemological challenge: that different forms of knowledge may be produced, which themselves present different and multiple versions of 'reality'

from those of the mass media. These multiple versions demonstrate the social construction of news: there is no master narrative, no single interpretation of events", which, understandably, leads to questioning the "regime of objectivity" (Atton, 2009: 272). This raises two key questions that need clarification before moving on to the literature on the civil wars of the region: What is a "regime of objectivity" and how can we define "alternative journalism"?

A variety of definitions of alternative journalism and alternative media is found in the literature (Coyer, Dowmunt, and Fountain, 2007). For the sake of simplicity, this paper will start from Atton´s definition: "a range of media projects, interventions and networks that work against, or seek to develop different forms of, the dominant, expected (and broadly accepted) ways of "doing" media" (Atton, 2004: ix). This definition includes a broader range of activities outside a narrow definition of "media". Also, many definitions of alternative media and journalism underline the close and sometimes symbiotic relationship with social movements (Cox, Mattoni, Berdnikovs, and Ardizzoni, 2010). It is useful here to draw on Downing's definition of "radical media", a concept often used more or less synonymously with alternative media: Radical media aim to challenge existing powers, to represent marginalized groups, and to foster horizontal linkages among communities of interest (Downing, 2001).

The "regime of objectivity" in journalism can best be understood based on literature used to educate new generations of journalists. According to one much used textbook "objectivity" in journalism has been understood and defined in many ways (Harcup, 2009). A pragmatic view is often taken, describing "objectivity" in journalism as a ritual, something closely related to checking whether or not a story "holds". This pragmatic understanding of "objectivity" in textbooks normally emphasis the need for evaluating conflicting claims in order to uncover the "truth". Evaluating conflicting claims is part of daily routine for journalists (Harcup, 2009). This includes looking at both sides of a story, assessing conflicting claims, assessing the credibility of sources, looking for evidence, and not publishing anything believed to be untrue.

This ideal for journalism is compatible with what Goldman has called "the veritistic cause" against distortion of truth (A. Goldman, 1999, p. 186). According to Goldman, the pursuit of truth can be enhanced by "good interpersonal argumentation" in addition to "well-designed technologies and institutions of public communication" (A. Goldman, 2009). In some text books for journalism studies, in contrast, the evaluation of conflicting claims in "pursuit of truth" has moved to the background in the discussions of objectivity. For Schudson and Anderson, the main question is how "objectivity acts as both a solidarity enhancing and distinction-creating norm and as a group claim to possess a unique kind of professional knowledge" (Schudson and Anderson, 2009).

This article will in particular discuss and offer a critique of the usefulness of theories and understandings of alternative media and journalism that builds on postmodern and post structural versions of social constructionism. The critique builds on previous critiques of social movement theory and research made by

scholars writing from a critical realist perspective. Jenneth Parker has criticized the ways in which an "uncritical view of pluralism" imported from postmodernism has had an impact on progressive social movements (Parker, 2005: 251). "Postmodern uncritical pluralism is incapable of taking marginalized knowledge claims seriously precisely because it does not provide any reason to distinguish between claims — it is relativistic" (Parker, 2005: 253). Not providing reasons to distinguish between claims undermines the potential for formulating effective critiques of dominating narratives or dominating forms of knowledge. I agree with Parker that "knowledge claims are essential aspects of movement activity" and that "critique of the workings of power in knowledge requires an epistemological basis" (Parker, 2005: 258). Similarly, relativistic pluralism also makes it impossible to engage critically, distinguishing between knowledge claims made by the movements themselves.

At the same time, it is necessary to acknowledge that social constructionists are properly put on the left spectrum of politics, seeing themselves as allies of the oppressed, as demonstrated by for instance Ian Hacking (Hacking, 1999: 95). My intention here is to criticize the usefulness of postmodern or poststructuralist versions of constructionism, where analysis is easily reduced to celebrations of the alternative in "alternative voices", "alternative spaces" and "alternative narratives", leaving little or no ground for evaluation of the validity of the claims and the knowledge. This distinction between what Hacking calls grades of constructionist commitment (1999: 19) is necessary in order to be able to formulate a critique of the "alternative narratives" or understandings produced by alternative journalists, which in its turn is necessary in order to reflect on the cases where alternative knowledge and alternative narratives work to oppress marginalized groups.

Jake Lynch and others writing from the perspective of "peace journalism" have tried to formulate a philosophical basis for an alternative journalism especially relevant for this paper as it deals with journalism on conflict and war. According to Lynch, his version of "peace journalism" is grounded in critical realism (Lynch, 2008). Defining critical realism, Lynch quotes Wright's definition: "A way of describing the process of 'knowing' that acknowledges the reality of the thing known, as something other than the knower (hence 'realism'), while also acknowledging that the only access we have to this reality lies along the spiraling path of appropriate dialogue or conversation between the knower and the thing known (hence 'critical')" (Wright quoted in Lynch, 2007: 6). From a critical realist point of view all claims about natural and social reality are fallible, but not equally fallible. It is thus necessary to attempt to evaluate the validity of statements in relation to notions of causalities and social or natural ontology.

Based on the deep ecology of Arne Næss (Næss, 1966, 1973, 1999) and critical realism (Bhaskar, 2008) a number of thinkers have recently developed concepts and philosophies helpful when dealing with problems related to pluralism. According to Næss, richness and diversity of life-forms contribute to the realization of the values defined in deep ecology, and are also "values in

themselves" (Næss and Mysterud, 1999: 356). In a philosophical debate with Austrian-born philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend both agreed on the importance of learning when confronted with diversity and in particular in the form of indigenous peoples and their systems of knowledge. Feyerabend criticized the Western bureaucratic logic which he saw as incapable of understanding indigenous peoples and their systems of knowledge (Feyerabend, 1999). Anyone trying to meet and understand indigenous peoples therefore had to accept the fact that you need to be able to learn and change to be able to understand. It is not possible to meet and understand indigenous peoples based on inflexible, monolithic theories or truths. Næss, in his reply, underlined the case of the Sami in Scandinavia and concluded that the real loser from a failure to learn and understand would in the long run be the dominating culture. It would become poorer because of loss of richness and diversity of life-forms (Næss, 1999).

Both the guerrillas and the international solidarity movement in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas were, in my view, faced with a situation where they needed to learn and to change as they were confronted by indigenous peoples and their systems of knowledge. Existing concepts, understandings and theories were, of course, based on analysis of existing knowledge, which normally included very little or no knowledge of the indigenous peoples and their world views. In most cases indigenous peoples were collapsed into existing categories like "peasants" or merely seen as exploited and excluded without much capacity for having agency.

Finally, when discussing the "global solidarity movement" here, I refer to existing studies available on the Zapatista uprising and a global network of solidarity organization. When I discuss the international solidarity movement with Guatemala and Nicaragua, I mainly refer to a handful of studies that sometimes only briefly deals with the international solidarity movements, for instance Stoll, Gordon, Hale and Ekern. This is a field where more investigation is needed. While some of these studies refer to experiences as activists in or researchers of North American solidarity movements, I personally have more experience with the European solidarity movement. I must therefore be careful to avoid generalizations when I try to conclude or formulate hypotheses on the information produced by the solidarity movements.

The difficult relationship between guerrillas and indigenous peoples

The purpose of this attempt to map out the main events of the conflicts between armed organizations and indigenous groups is to describe what I believe is a general trend in this process of change: First, limitations in knowledge, understanding and categories in revolutionary organizations resulted in misunderstandings, conflict and provoked resistance from indigenous groups. Second, resistance and organization "from below", from indigenous communities, was the driving force in the process of change locally and

nationally. Third, local indigenous groups and organizations had to seek international alliances.

Fourth, revolutionary organizations had different and often pragmatic reasons for learning and changing. Fifth, this was a multifaceted process where "hardliners" (here understood as those who resisted change in politics towards and understanding of the role of indigenous peoples) where pitted against those seeking compromise or accord with indigenous groups. Sixth, as this was, in general, a process driven by resistance from "below", it is perhaps not surprising that the process of reflection and learning reached "Northern" solidarity movement only gradually and later. Seventh, a substantial section of the "Northern" solidarity movement continued to support "dogmatic" views within the revolutionary organizations, as in the case of Guatemala in the 90s when the overwhelming majority of recourses came from international supporters, thereby postponing a necessary process of learning and self-criticism.

Let us now look closer at the unfolding of the process of change in each of the three cases.

Mapping the conflict in Nicaragua

In Nicaragua a violent civil war on the Atlantic Coast between mainly Miskito and some Kriol armed groups and the Sandinista Army broke out as the initial support for the Revolution in the region smoldered and gradually became more conflictive during the first two year after the revolution (1979). The conflict with indigenous and Kriol groups was very costly both in economic and political terms for the Sandinista government, and military overstretch was a real threat as the army faced military organizations attacking from across the borders to the north and the south, as well as from the inaccessible forests and mountains in the interior of the country. The violence on the Atlantic Coast gradually came to an end when local Sandinistas took the lead in peace process, often negotiating directly with indigenous and Kriol communities and commanders. The process led to a new Nicaraguan constitution which formally acknowledged that Nicaragua was a multiethnic country and granted autonomy to the peoples living on the Atlantic Coast.

Former (and current) president, Daniel Ortega, has on various occasions asked for forgiveness for the mistakes made during the civil war against the indigenous population. The probably most criticized human rights abuses took place when the Sandinista Army "evacuated" approximately 100 Miskito and Mayangna villages along the Rio Coco River and forcefully resettled the population in a "model village" named "Tasba Pri".

We have ample support for the main lines of the conflict described above from both academic research on the conflict between Sandinistas and indigenous groups and in self-critical retrospective analysis from the Sandinista leadership. Charles Hale and Edmund Gordon are just two prominent examples of researchers who have delivered convincing arguments on how inflexible theoretical perspectives and lack of knowledge led the Sandinistas to make

numerous mistakes that contributed significantly to a downward spiral towards all out civil war on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua (Gordon, 1998; Hale, 1994). This is, in my view, amply demonstrated by the lack of attention and ignorance of these questions in the writings of leading Sandinistas before the revolution (Fonseca, 1964, 1985). Perspectives from ethnic minorities on racism in Nicaragua can be found in Hooker and Sujo (Hooker, 2001; Sujo Wilson, 1998) . Excellent examples of probing retrospective criticism and self-criticism from Sandinista leaders can be found in the work of Ramirez (Ramírez, 1999), Eduardo Cardenal (E. Cardenal, 1980), Fernando Cardenal (F. Cardenal, 2008), Cunningham (Kain et al., November 2006) and others. Criticism of the international solidarity movement and alternative media can be sought in Ekern and Gordon (Ekern, 1998, 1999).

A more detailed study of alternative journalism from Nicaragua during these years would undoubtedly uncover a somewhat more complex or multifaceted picture, including a few reports in the alternative media that were sympathetic towards indigenous resistance to Sandinista policies. Some alternative journalists and media began a process of re-thinking indigenous issues and rights before others. This should not, however, lead us to obscure the dominating tendency: The international solidarity movement took too long to respond to the calls for justice and rights from indigenous and other minority groups in Nicaragua. The most important question in relation to alternative journalism and media then becomes: Why did it take it take so long before alternative journalists and media started producing information and alternative knowledge that facilitated solidarity with the indigenous peoples of Nicaragua?

The dominant frames: an illustration

An excellent collection of propaganda and PR posters from Nicaragua and at least 24 other countries (some posters are unidentified) was published in Managua recently (Bujard and Wirper, 2009). Looking through the hundreds of posters documented here, a pattern of dominant frames and leitmotifs emerges. After losing hundreds of young and dedicated fighters during the years of revolutionary war against the dictatorship, we should not be surprised to find that a substantial portion of posters is dedicated to remembering and honoring martyrs like Carlos Fonseca, Leonel Rugama and others. As the civil war with CIA-supported troops led and dominated by former members of the National Guard broke out, it is likewise easy to understand why images of war and warfare enters other realms of society, as seen for instance in posters depicting farmers on tractors branding machineguns or villagers going about their daily business armed and vigilant. With the civil war came militarization of the society. In the struggle against US-imperialism, there is no alternative, the posters say; you have to be "with us or against us".

The same themes and narratives dominate the international posters as well. The posters are militant, celebrating armed resistance to US-imperialism or showing victims of imperialist aggression. They speak of "freedom of a people" (The

Nicaraguan people) (poster from Ireland, p326) or the survival of a people (poster from Sweden, p327). The dominant frame is US imperialism; "Blood money" (poster from England, p. 326), "US backyard" (poster from Denmark, p.327) or aimed more directly against President Ronald Reagan (poster from Iceland p. 327), just to mention a few example. In this life and death struggle against US imperialism, as it is portrayed, other questions or nuances that do not fit in with the dominant narrative become invisible. Paraphrasing Entman, some elements of the perceived reality are made more salient than others. In this "with us or against us" frame of understanding, there is little room criticizing the Sandinista government or questioning Sandinista policies regarding indigenous peoples and other ethnic minorities. The "indios" are made invisible.

A (very) brief account of the conflict between guerrilla and indigenous peoples in Guatemala

A similar account of the problems between guerrillas and indigenous peoples in Guatemala can also be told based on existing studies. I will do it only very briefly here to illustrate the main lines of argument presented earlier. A good place to begin would be the report from the UN appointed "truth commission" that investigated human rights abuses in Guatemala during the civil war (Commission for Historical Clarification (Comisión para el Esclarecimiento Histórico), 1997). According to the commission the overwhelming majority of human rights abuses were committed against indigenous population by the state security apparatus. "Only" 3 % of the investigated cases were attributed to the armed insurgents, relatively small percentage, but still, considering that the total number of human rights violations counted several hundred thousands, we must conclude that the 3 % amounted to several thousand cases of torture, forced disappearance and killings.

In the process of negotiating a peaceful settlement of the civil war and agreeing to an accord on indigenous rights, the Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) acknowledged the need for special rights and protection for the indigenous peoples (Aldana Mendoza, Quiñonez, and Cojtí, 2006; Cabrera, D., and Ediciones Nueva, 1997; Krøvel, 1999). Leaders like Rodrigo Asturias (nom de guerre "Gaspar Ilom") has later admitted that the URNG violence and abuse against civilians in periods amounted to proportions that can only be explained as a systemic problem (Kruijt, 2008). Asturias took the problem so seriously that he wrote a book about it (Ilom, 1989). Other intellectual leaders of the armed organizations also contemplated on what it meant to be a Marxist revolutionary organization in a country where the majority of the peasants and workers belonged to indigenous communities (Moran, 1982; Payeras, 1983, 1991; Payeras, Harnecker, and Simon, 1982). From the diaries and retrospective accounts of Guatemalan guerrilleros we see the profound effect the indigenous issues had on the guerrillas and the development of the war (Macías, 1997; Porras, 2009; Santa Cruz Mendoza, 2004).

In Nicaragua the conflict with indigenous peoples on the Atlantic Coast posed a serious threat of military overstretch for the Sandinista government. The war was extremely costly and virtually impossible to win because of the vast and inaccessible terrain. Also in Guatemala the conflict with the indigenous population and a growing indigenous movement undermined the political and military position of the guerrilla. Kruijt recounts a meeting between indigenous leaders and guerrilla commanders in Quetzaltenango where the indigenous leaders declined to support the guerrilla, a decision which proved to have dire consequences for the armed organizations (Kruijt, 2008). Guerrilleros have told similar stories, explaining how it gradually became more and more difficult to find new recruits. The guerrillas had to start offering small sums of money to Guatemalan refugees in Mexico to come join the guerrilla for a few months (Santa Cruz Mendoza, 2004). After a while also this trickle of new recruits came to a full stop, slowly forcing the URNG to seek a peaceful settlement.

Much have been said and written about the role of the international solidarity movement in this process. I do not agree with David Stoll in his description of two more or less equally bad and thus morally equally responsible parties (Stoll, 1993, 1999). I also find it too much of a simplicity to describe the global solidarity movement as naïve tools used by the URNG to misinform the public in Europe and North America (Hovland, 1996; Stoll, 2008). Leading intellectuals did try to re-think the role of an armed organization in a country with indigenous majority, albeit from a vanguardist position of superiority, as seen for instance in Payeras' reflections on the indigenous issue (Payeras, 1983). The educated guerrilleros had few doubts about their superiority in knowledge and moral right to lead and command the insurgency. It is also correct, as stated by Porras, that the guerrilla initially grew rapidly, probably much too fast, based on support from large segments of the indigenous highland population (Porras, 2009). The relationship between guerrilla and indigenous peoples was not always only confrontational. But Stoll and others have a strong case when criticizing the solidarity movement for being docile and providing uncritical support for the revolutionary organizations.

In retrospect, we should have asked many more critical questions. Were the armed organizations really representing "the Guatemalan people"? Which people? Were they at all capable of communicating with the indigenous peoples in such a way that they could convey the aspirations and hopes of the indigenous peoples? We know now that the guerrilla failed to capture the aspirations of the indigenous peoples. The guerrilla gradually became irrelevant as a vehicle for indigenous peoples struggling for liberation and freedom. Failing to understand indigenous peoples and indigenous issues undermined the efforts to overthrow the regime by armed means.

An alternative: Chiapas and the EZLN

The developments of Chiapas, Mexico is undoubtedly very different from both the Guatemala and Nicaraguan experience, and has already been subjected to a

large number of studies. This short analysis here is intended to illustrate that there was nothing pre-determined or deterministic about the developments in Guatemala and Nicaragua described above. It could have been different.

In a fascinating discussion on the study of history between renowned academics Adolfo Gilly and Carlo Ginzburg and the Zapatista military leader, Subcomandante Marcos, Marcos ends a letter saying: "We didn't actually propose anything. In reality, the only thing we proposed was to change the world; the rest we have improvised. We had our "squared" concepts of the world and revolutions thoroughly dented in the encounter with the indigenous reality of Chiapas" (Gilly, Subcomandante Marcos, and Ginzburg, 1995). This is a topic which Subcomandante Marcos has dwelt on on several occasions, for instance in numerous short stories where he blends indigenous and revolutionary mythology to create a new universe of narratives, combining elements of both (as the story of how Emiliano Zapata came to Chiapas and became an indigenous semi-god). It is also a popular theme with intellectuals reporting from or reflecting on the Chiapas experience (J. Berger, 1999; Regis Debray, 1996; Galeano, 1996; García Márquez, 2001; Hayden, 2002; Klein, 2001; Landau, 2002; Monsiváis, 2001; Saramago, 1999; Taibo II, 1994; Vázquez Montalbán, 1999).

The EZLN was founded by members of FLN, a Cuba inspired Marxist movement with much in common with revolutionary organizations in Guatemala and Nicaragua, but there are several reasons why the FLN and the indigenous population in Las Cañadas (in particular, but also elsewhere in Chiapas) came to form an alliance which over time grew into a new type of organization not seen in Guatemala and Nicaragua.

First, the organizational level among the indigenous peoples in Chiapas and especially in Las Cañadas was already very high when the FLN came to Chiapas. Strong, well organized regional peasant unions already had a long and impressive history of fighting local landowners and local authorities. This was to some extent a result of the work done by Maoist activists from the capital and the central regions of Mexico. The Catholic Church and bishop Samuel Ruiz had also worked ceaselessly offering education and organizational advice. The relative strength of already existing indigenous capacity for organizing was balanced by the evident weakness of the FLN. The leaders spoke of a nationwide revolutionary movement that would lead a popular uprising, but the efforts to organize outside Chiapas was a failure. That gave the indigenous members of EZLN a position of strength which in the long run transformed the power relations of the organization.

The intellectual flexibility of some of the military leaders, and in particular Subcomandante Marcos, who had earlier written a thesis on Foucault and thought at a university in Mexico City, probably also played a role in the transformation of the organization. The transformation would not have been possible without the national and international solidarity campaign that succeeded in halting the military campaigns against the Zapatistas. That created a space where the Zapatistas could experiment and develop new form of

organization and politics based on notions of indigenous tradition. Indigenous issues came to the forefront of the Zapatista discourse, especially during and after the negotiations with government representatives in San Andres in 1995 and 1996, when the Zapatistas invited hundreds of national and international to participate as advisors.

My point here is not to romanticize the Zapatistas (M. T. Berger, 2001). I have elsewhere pointed to the fact that successive neo-liberal governments have declined to fulfill their obligations in relation to Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization (Krøvel, 2009). The indigenous peoples of Chiapas remain poor and subjected to racism and systematic exclusion in spite of the global media attention and the global solidarity movement. But still, the EZLN remain faithful to its ideals and continues uncorrupted to struggle for liberation and justice. Remaining uncorrupted is in itself no mean feat.

It should be noted that there are problems, albeit of a different type, with the ways the global solidarity movement represented the Zapatistas and in particular indigenous groups in opposition to the Zapatistas. A relatively large body of literature has been discussing this phenomenon from different angles. Beginning with Nobel laureate Octavio Paz, a long list of Mexican authors have criticized not only the Zapatistas, but also what they perceive to be uncritical embracement of the armed insurgents (Paz, 1994). Paz particularly lamented what he believed was a new and postmodern form of politics, where image and images mattered more than arguments and reason. From a sympathetic perspective, Berger warned against the dangers of romancing the Zapatista struggle (M. T. Berger, 2001). A similar type of argument has been put forward by Hellman. According to Hellman, the global solidarity movement has contributed to producing a "'flattened' picture of the actors and events in Chiapas" (Hellman, 2000).

I do not want to diminish the importance of critically examining the validity and trustworthiness of the information produced by the global solidarity movement on the conflict in Chiapas. In fact, many of the same processes seen in Nicaragua and Guatemala can probably be said to be present and influencing the representation of the Zapatistas and the conflict in Chiapas, sometimes leading the global solidarity movement to overlook alternative perspectives or make indigenous organizations with alternative views less salient or invisible in contrast to the Zapatistas. Still, while some criticism has been made against the Zapatistas, it would be wildly unfair to compare the alleged mistakes by the Zapatistas with the type of human rights abuses committed by URNG or FSLN. Nonetheless, the argument remains the same: The quality of the information produced by the alternative media must be evaluated in relation to a notion of social ontology and a theory of generative mechanisms (root causes for exclusion, poverty and war, for instance), not utilitarian arguments based on imaginations of what might or might not be useful in the current political debate.

In my view the Zapatista experience first and foremost demonstrates the possibility, as Feyerabend outlined, of meeting and trying to understand

indigenous peoples not from a position of inflexible and absolute truths, but in a process of communication which will have to result in change and development, as old concepts of the world and the revolution get dented, and new understandings emerge. This was also something that deeply affected the international solidarity movement, as activists tried to combine respect for pluralism, the right to be *different*, with universal notions of freedom, liberation and rights grounded in the best of the enlightenment ideals (for more see (Krøvel, 2009). A number of media projects demonstrate this combination of universal solidarity (Bhaskar) and deep respect for indigenous autonomy. The Irish Mexico Group, for instance, combined a real willingness to learn from the indigenous peoples with colorful reporting back home. PROMEDIOS goes one step further. PROMEDIOS has for several years facilitated workshops so that representatives from indigenous communities can become the reporters themselves. Other, similar projects could also have been mentioned here, but these will suffice to illustrate my point. The solidarity with the Zapatistas demonstrates that another form of solidarity is possible.

Discussing the alternative media in the three cases

A premise for this paper has been that this process of change (coming to terms with indigenous issues and rights) was necessary and important. Based on existing literature I have discussed the chronology of events in the three cases, and concluded that the process was instigated and driven by local communities "on the ground" on the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua, in the indigenous regions of Guatemala (and refugee camps across the border with Mexico) and in the highlands and Las Cañadas of Chiapas. The movement for indigenous rights was met with significant resistance and also violence from the revolutionary organizations in Guatemala and Nicaragua and abuse from some in the international solidarity movements.

The revolutionary organizations in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas gradually came to terms with the growing self-confidence of the indigenous movement through different routes. A large segment of the solidarity movement, in contrast, was the last to undergo a process of reflection and change regarding indigenous peoples and indigenous rights. After the support from the indigenous communities dried up, up to 90 % of the funding of the guerrilla organizations in Guatemala (URNG) came from sources in the "West". This insistence on prolonging a failed strategy contributed to postponing a necessary process of change in URNG. The experience in Chiapas, in contrast, demonstrates that other possibilities existed. There, the armed insurgents (EZLN) exclusively depended on local indigenous peasants, and they did so to such an extent that it fundamentally altered the power structures in the armed organization.

The three cases forms the historical background for formulating a critique of, first, alternative media and journalism on the conflicts in Central America, and, second, existing theories on alternative media and journalism.

Alternative media and journalism did in general play an important role in informing "Western" audiences on the conflicts and made it possible to produce alternative frames of understandings. Alternative media and journalism were particularly important in Europe and North America as a resource for information because of the geographical distance between most readers (and listeners) and the region. But a failure to critically question the selected "voices" and the "narratives" these voices produced, often made alternative journalists overlook other "voices" that could have contributed towards a more truthful and reliable representation of the conflicts. In reality, this uncritical reporting resulted in a new hierarchy of "voices", some given "space", others systematically ignored.

There was, in my view, nothing deterministic about failure to engage critically with sources of information and narratives. It did not necessarily have to be that way. Many alternative journalists had deep insight into the countries and cultures after living years in the region. They were often in a better position to report fairly and truthfully than many journalists working for mainstream media. It should have been possible for alternative journalist in the alternative media to participate in constructing new understandings of indigenous peoples and indigenous rights at a much earlier stage.

Finally, I must remind the reader that these hypotheses are not the result of an empirical investigation, although it builds on experience as a researcher and alternative journalist in all three cases discussed. This is not to say that we do not need more empirical evidence. In fact, much more empirical research is needed on the role played by alternative journalists, alternative media and international solidarity during the conflicts and wars in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico. But existing theories on alternative media and journalism inform and guide research questions and methodologies. Therefore, it is necessary to have a continuing discussion on the usefulness and value of existing theories as guides for research and interpretation. Are existing theories likely to produce answers to the most urgent questions related to social movements, guerrillas and indigenous peoples in Central America and Mexico?

Alternative media in light of the indigenous experience

Trying to understand the mechanisms behind the developments discussed in this paper, I will venture out to propose three hypothesizes for future testing and analysis. First, I propose that "Western" or "Northern" journalists in the alternative media connected to the solidarity movement were employing Northern concepts and categories uncritically, in much the same way as discussed and criticized by Feyerabend and Næss. The frames of understanding and narratives were constructed on Northern theories on causes and effects of the civil war. Like so many other media narratives, the narratives produced by employing these pre-defined concepts and theories on the conflicts in the region, tended to be in black and white: the good vs. the bad, the protagonists vs. the antagonists. These theories were produced in contexts different from the

multicultural realities of Nicaragua, Guatemala and Mexico, and were not necessarily suited for the analysis and understanding of the difficult relationship between Marxist guerrillas and indigenous peoples (see for instance Régis Debray, 1978; R. Debray, 1980; Guevara and Deutschmann, 2003). Little reflection was given to the crucial question of whether or not these theories were valid outside the societies where they had been produced (Lysaker and Jacobsen, 2010).

Second, I would have to indicate that the rise of postmodern and post structural versions of social constructionism in social movements, seen in the frequent usage of arguments related to "alternative voices", "opening up spaces" and "construction of alternative narratives", augmented the problems. I agree with Jenneth Parkers that "postmodern uncritical pluralism" is "undermining progressive movements contestation of dominant knowledge" (Parker, 2005: 251). Giving "voice" to the "voiceless" was in itself too often seen as a justification or an argument for printing or representing voices or arguments not heard in mainstream media. The alternative media can of course not "give voice" to anything near all of the "voiceless". The alternative journalists have to choose (journalists as "gate keepers") which voices to give "space" and, as is common in journalism, it tends to be those that look and sound most like the journalists themselves: In this case, university students, trade unionists and leaders of guerrilla organizations. My hypothesis is that alternative journalists did not only make these "voices" and their arguments more salient than other "voices" and arguments (Entman, 1993, 2004), but that they often also adopted their theories and frames of understanding regarding indigenous peoples.

I do not believe that this was uniformly the case with all alternative media and journalism at all times during the period in question. There were, of course, conflicting views and alternative ways of reporting also within the alternative media connected to the solidarity movement. The process of coming to terms with the demands from the indigenous peoples and the growing global indigenous movement took various routes and varying amounts of time (Brysk, 2002). Nonetheless, when trying to understand why this process happened only later and slower in the solidarity movement than among those affected in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico, I believe these possible explanations to be necessary ingredients in any attempt of learning from the experience.

A third possible explanation must also be considered for future research: The conditions under which information were produced affected and framed the information produced in the alternative media in the "West" (Atton, 2009). The alternative media referred to here, catered to the needs of an audience in (Western) Europe and North America. The audience needed the information for certain purposes, for example in debates, protests etc. Certain types of information were more useful in this context than other. Some elements of the reality were more likely than other to be reported. Frames for interpreting the information were constructed so that they resonated with deeply rooted cultural meta narratives. In short, the alternative media was subjected to the same

processes as the mainstream media. The result of these processes was too often to conflate a complex reality into a mono causal explanation, where capitalism and US imperialism played the leading roles as the villain in the story. While this was undoubtedly justified, it also tended to overshadow and erase elements that did not fit the master narrative. It took long, hard and dedicated struggle from indigenous communities to challenge and change this master narrative.

Conclusions

I have tried to analyze the difficult relationship between indigenous peoples and guerrillas in Nicaragua, Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico. I have tried to show that a failure to understand and a lack of willingness to learn contributed to undermining the guerrilla and its struggle in Nicaragua and Guatemala. Similarly, I have argued that the alternative media should have asked more critical questions at an earlier stage.

Taking solidarity seriously means that we must also take seriously the issue of what effect the solidarity activities did have on the lives of the peoples we intended to support in their struggles for liberation, freedom or rights. I have here tried to argue that merely investigating this problem from the perspective of existing theories of the world and revolution will not help us much, as this form of employment of existing theories on indigenous communities and cultures was a major part of the problem in the first place. As Næss has argued, the kind of rational debate and decision-making process of the powerful industrial tradition will prevail if Northern theories or understandings of the world form the basis for the communication (Næss, 1999: 59). An alternative would be to have what Feyerabend calls an "open exchange" guided by a pragmatic philosophy: "The participants get immersed into each other´s ways of thinking, feeling, perceiving to such an extent that their ideas, perceptions, worldviews may be entirely changed" (Feyerabend in Næss 1999: 58). It could be argued that this was indeed what happened over the next 25 years of interaction between Northern social movements and indigenous peoples (ideas, perceptions, worldviews were entirely changed). The problem was that it happened too slowly to have any real effect on the type of solidarity displayed with the struggling peoples during the conflicts.

It is not necessary for my main conclusion that the reader here agrees with my version of the history of the development of social movement, guerrilla and indigenous peoples relations. My intention here is to demonstrate that a meaningful analysis of alternative media in these conflicts needs to investigate and engage critically with questions of causality on several levels, including levels of the individuals, communities, structures, economy, culture and societies. It is not enough to merely document and present alternative narratives or epistemologies. Ontology is essential in order to evaluate the quality of epistemologies (Bhaskar, 2010). I am not suggesting that we can have unquestionable, certain knowledge on issues like those I have discussed here, but all knowledge is not equally fallible.

Returning to the theory on alternative media and alternative journalism, we need to ask whether the existing theories are useful tools for deepening our understanding of alternative media and journalism. Existing theories in my view too often employ a language of "narratives", "voices" and "spaces", paying scant attention to the quality of the versions of reality that is being produced. A critical examination of alternative media and alternative journalism related to the difficult and conflicting relationship between guerrilla organizations and indigenous peoples must lead us to move beyond merely celebrating alternative journalism and alternative media for "giving voice" to the "voiceless". Alternative journalists and alternative media must engage critically with notions of social ontology and causalities in order to investigate the validity in claims and statements, also when these are made by "voices" excluded from mainstream media.

So what difference does it make? A critical reader might legitimately ask why we should criticize possible misrepresentations in the alternative media when the overwhelming problem is related to authoritarian regimes, US imperialism and a docile mainstream media. One answer is the belief that solidarity matters. Solidarity has the potential of having an effect on struggles in the global South and must therefore be taken seriously. If the key contribution of international media attention to the struggles in the global South is to be a brake on possible government repression, the information must be reliable. Nothing is more damaging to the solidarity efforts than being proved mistaken in a public debate with opponents. But there is a more fundamental reason why we should care about the quality and reliability of the information produced by the alternative media. According to Næss, we should always meet and confront an opponent by his or her strongest arguments. This is not exclusively in order to facilitate a debate on the issue at stake, but also to ensure one's own learning process. Considering the best possible counter arguments is the best way to ensure the production of robust alternative knowledge capable of serving as a basis for developing valuable solidarity activities. In my view, this should be a key issue for us who believe that solidarity matters.

Several recent contributions to the literature on alternative media try to map out the road ahead for the study of alternative media. According to Cox et al., alternative media do not develop in a void. They "continuously challenge and are challenged by the presence of local, national and transnational media corporations and commercial platforms" (Cox et al., 2010: 2). Atton specifically calls for studies on "the ways people work" and "what use the audience makes of it" (the alternative media) (Atton, 2009: 274). Downing et al. show how radical media can be used to develop identity and solidarity within social movements and local communities (Downing, 2001). These and other studies of alternative journalism and media point to the need for more research of the interplay between alternative media and a wider society.

However, none of these proposals go far enough to capture the interplay between alternative media, alternative narratives, the solidarity actions they help make possible and the results and outcomes of solidarity actions. They are

not likely to yield fruitful results on the important relation between international solidarity, the civil wars and indigenous peoples. None of them is likely to guide future research towards asking important questions on the effects alternative journalism had on indigenous communities. Nor are they likely to guide researchers towards including a wide enough selection of sources to shed light on this complex relationship. Analyses and celebration of alternative media without taking these questions into consideration are not very useful for the long term learning and development of alternative journalism and alternative media.

It is here useful to consider the advice of Norman Fairclough. In an article on the state of art in the research of organizations, he warned against the growing influence of postmodern and post structural versions of social constructionism (Fairclough, 2005). According to Fairclough, these theoretical perspectives are not likely to capture these important aspects of reality. Instead he calls for more research grounded in critical realism. I am not suggesting here that Cox, Atton and Downing are postmodern or post structural social constructionists. On the contrary, Cox et al. for instance point towards promising avenues for future research that will move research beyond post-modern perspectives in which media are a self-contained reality. I merely want to underline the importance of critical engagement with a reality far beyond the media sphere or the social movements.

Critical realism as a meta-theory could facilitate research on wide variety of issues and phenomena related to alternative media, including the value of participation, giving voice to the voiceless, producing alternative narratives and social construction of knowledge alongside investigation of causal mechanisms and notions of ontology. Critical realism as an under-laborer for research invites a multiplicity of ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. The type of research I have suggested here should certainly not be the only type of research undertaken on alternative media. A multiplicity of research questions must be investigated employing a variety of methodologies. However, taking the alternative journalists seriously also means listening to their real concerns about the world, including the hopes, dreams and concerns that drive activists to participate in solidarity with those who struggle to liberate themselves from authoritarian regimes. It remains of utmost importance to evaluate the potential outcomes in the form of solidarity activities made possible by alternative forms of journalism and media. We therefore need theories that lead us to engage much more with truth and the trustworthiness of what is being reported in the alternative media by alternative journalist; much in the same way as we question the trustworthiness of the dominating narratives of the mainstream media.

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