Rewriting Zapata: Generational Conflict on the Eve of the Mexican Revolution

Author(s): Patrick J. McNamara


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Rewriting Zapata: Generational Conflict on the Eve of the Mexican Revolution

Patrick J. McNamara
University of Minnesota

In this article I challenge John Womack’s opening premise and subsequent interpretations about the origins of the 1910 Zapatista rebellion. Using newly discovered documents from Mexican archives, I argue that a 1907 proposal to move from Anenecuilco fundamentally alters Womack’s claim that these people revolted because they refused to move. The proposal to move bore the signatures of more men from Anenecuilco and Ayala than any previous or subsequent letter, including Emiliano Zapata’s. To fully understand the implications of the offer to leave Anenecuilco I analyze generational differences of opinion on liberal constitutionalism and land tenure. Ultimately, Anenecuilco faced greater internal disagreements than historians have acknowledged.

En el presente artículo pongo en cuestión la premisa inicial de John Womack, así como sus subsecuentes interpretaciones, sobre los orígenes de la revolución zapatista de 1910. Recurriendo a documentos recién descubiertos en archivos mexicanos, sostengo que una propuesta para abandonar Anenecuilco, que data de 1907, altera fundamentalmente el argumento de Womack, quien sostiene que la gente se rebeló porque se negó a desplazarse. La propuesta cuenta con más firmas de habitantes de Anenecuilco y Ayala que cualquier otro documento previo o posterior, incluida la de Emiliano Zapata. Para comprender a cabalidad las implicaciones de la oferta para abandonar Anenecuilco, analizo las diferencias de opinión generacionales en torno al constitucionalismo liberal y la tenencia de la tierra. En última instancia, Anenecuilco enfrentó muchos más desacuerdos internos de los que los historiadores han reconocido.

Key words: Anenecuilco, Porfirio Díaz, Generation, Liberalism, Mexican Revolution, Morelos, Porfiriato, Revisionism, John Womack, Emiliano Zapata, Zapatistas.
Palabras clave: Anenecuilco, Porfirio Díaz, generación, liberalismo, Morelos, porfiriato, revisionismo, Revolución mexicana, John Womack, Emiliano Zapata, zapatistas.

In 1968, John Womack, Jr., published his beautifully written *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*, a book still in print and still required reading for anyone studying the history of modern Mexico and agrarian revolts in Latin America. Womack’s first sentence elegantly states his understanding of the central issue leading to the 1910 Zapatista revolt: “This is a book about country people who did not want to move and therefore got into a revolution.” Owners of the Hacienda Hospital had taken over community fields to plant sugarcane and to force the villagers into wage labor; government officials had ignored the villagers’ request for help; and the rural folk had decided to take up arms to defend their land and sense of liberty. The motivation for the struggle, according to Womack’s opening premise, is clear and unambiguous: Zapata and his supporters fought because they had an unbreakable attachment to their ancestral lands and the community of people who worked on those lands. This idea succinctly describes how we have explained the origins of the popular revolt in southern Mexico for more than forty years. But that premise is incorrect. In 1907, Emiliano Zapata and dozens of his neighbors in Anenecuilco and Ayala offered to move from their homes as a way of settling the dispute with hacienda owners. In exchange for legal title to land roughly ten miles from Anenecuilco, Zapata and others proposed ending their battle against the hacienda by moving their families, livestock, and agricultural pursuits. They sent the proposal to President Porfirio Díaz, asking him to use his influence to arrange a settlement. Obviously, Díaz did not accept the offer and the frustration, desperation, and sense of injustice among the people of this region


2. Womack’s *Zapata* continues to be considered the most complete study of the origins and trajectory of the Zapatista movement. See, for example, Felipe Ávila Espinosa, “La historiografía del zapatismo después de John Womack,” in *Estudios sobre el zapatismo*, Laura Espejel López, ed. (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2000), 32. Forty years after *Zapata* was first published, a revised or updated edition has not been issued. Womack has stated that he thought about a new edition, “expanded, corrected, and improved,” but that other commitments kept him from working on it. See John Womack, Jr., “Los estudios del zapatismo: Lo que se ha hecho y lo que hay que hacer,” in *Estudios sobre el zapatismo*, 24–25.
grew until it found release in the revolutionary uprising led by Zapata. Thus, the offer to move did not change the longer course of the 1910 revolutionary movement masterfully retold by Womack. But Zapata and others were indeed willing to move just a few years before the revolution started, and this possibility fundamentally alters the pre-revolutionary history of the people of Anenecuilco and their leaders. In fact, if Díaz had accepted the offer to relocate Zapata and so many of his neighbors, there might not have been a rural revolt in Morelos in 1910.

This essay begins the process of rewriting Zapata. That is, I propose rewriting the image we have of Zapata before 1910 as well as rewriting Womack’s original premise and subsequent interpretation of the original motivations of the Zapatista rebellion. This revision is subtle, but it is not so complicated. As will become clear, Zapata and eighty-two of his neighbors stated unequivocally and “without malice” that they would “abandon” Anenecuilco. They made this offer in 1907, rather late in the villagers’ long struggle with the hacienda owners. And it appears they made this offer just once. When it was not accepted, Zapata and the others could state confidently that they had done everything possible to avoid an armed conflict. My revision is based on a previously unknown document found in Mexican archives, and on the work and advice of Lucino Luna, local historian and director of the Casa Zapata in Anenecuilco.

Zapata’s agrarian struggle in Morelos represents one of the most widely discussed subjects in all of Latin American history. Reconsidering this well-known story using new sources requires careful analysis. I wish I could offer more of a narrative, for I agree with Womack when he states, “the truth of the revolution in Morelos is in the feeling of it.”


4. Womack, Zapata, x.
uprising. Someone else from Anenecuilco, someone who remained in the village after the others had left, might have led an agrarian revolt, but there might not have been a revolt at all. My revision, then, is aimed as much at our understanding of Zapata’s leadership as it is at the motivation behind the larger movement. Although Samuel Brunk has lamented, “It is very hard to get him [Zapata] alone,” free from the protective, interpretive filters of his secretaries and intermediaries, the 1907 document shows Emiliano Zapata before he was “Zapata,” the revolutionary leader of 1910.5

Zapata and his followers captured the attention of politicians and writers during his lifetime and in the early years after the fighting ended. In November 1911, interim President Francisco León de la Barra promised to send more troops to Morelos to suppress those men who refused to put down their weapons. These “malcontents” have adopted a “rebellious attitude” that has “degenerated into banditry,” the President decried. Mateo Rojas Zuñiga (1913), originally from Tepoztlán, criticized the government’s attempt to relocate peasants in Morelos into what he called “concentration camps.” He recommended a more careful response, one aimed at making sure communities retained or regained lost land. Other writers were more critical of the Zapatistas. Antonio Damaso Melgarejo (1913) unfairly attacked Zapata and his followers for their cruelty. Similarly, University of Chicago anthropologist, Frederick Starr (1914) described Zapata as “a man of cruel disposition... treacherous, unreliable,” concluding, “he is the ideal bandit leader.” After the revolutionary fighting had ended, scholars began to revise their view of Zapata. Columbia University historian Frank Tannenbaum (1933) claimed Zapata had followed a higher calling to lead the “Indian” revolt. And Baltasar Dromundo (1934) argued that Zapata’s legitimate revolutionary zeal followed the failure of a 1908 delegation to recover land.6

Sustained, in-depth studies of Zapata began with Jesús Sotelo Inclán’s, Raíz y razón de Zapata (1943), which focused almost entirely on the long history of Anenecuilco. He argued that to understand


Zapata and the movement he led in 1910, one must first understand the familial roots and communal mentality within Anenecuilco. This point emerged even more forcefully in the second edition of Raíz y razón de Zapata (1970), which included an additional 252 pages of documents and analysis, much of it on the Porfiriato. They are really two entirely different books. Significantly, Sotelo Inclán published the second edition after Womack’s widely acclaimed Zapata. Sotelo Inclán stated that he originally went looking for information about Zapata, but came to appreciate the community much more: “I learned that he was not the only combatant: he had a town (pueblo) behind him and the tragedy of the town and the struggle of the town was much greater, infinitely greater than that of one man, and that’s how I explained Zapata.”

Rather than tracing the early history of Anenecuilco, Womack’s book essentially begins with Sotelo Inclán’s conclusion: Zapata’s election as town leader in 1909. Apart from Alicia Hernández Chávez’s, Anenecuilco: Memoria y vida de un pueblo (1991), which reprints many of the documents used by Sotelo Inclán, most other studies of Zapata have followed Womack’s lead, acknowledging the long history of struggle in Anenecuilco, but rarely analyzing social or political relations within the community prior to the start of the 1910 revolutionary struggle. These studies focus either on Zapata as an individual or on the agrarian revolt he led. My goal is to resituate Zapata more firmly within the Porfiriato (time) and more securely within his community (place). Like Sotelo Inclán, my interest in Anenecuilco lies not in romanticizing it as a unique place. Anenecuilco, like all communities, had its own hierarchies and divisions. My goal is to show how the people of Anenecuilco overcame those divisions, tried to avoid violence, and then determined that Zapata would best represent their interests. As will become clear, however, I begin with

9. Hernández Chávez adds her own incisive interpretation of these documents and the special influence of memory and archives within the town. She has two editions with the same title. My citations refer to the larger, slightly longer version. Alicia Hernández Chávez, Anenecuilco: Memoria y vida de un pueblo (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991). Some scholars criticized Hernández Chávez for inviting President Carlos Salinas de Gortari to write a brief prologue during the time he was revising Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution. See, for example, Ruth Arboleyda Castro, “De pueblos, identidades y marcos jurídicos. Anenecuilco Revisitado,” in Estudios sobre el zapatismo, 417.
the assumption that Zapata was not born a natural leader of his people. Despite the powerful mythology surrounding his life before 1910, Zapata had to learn from his elders the deep connection of the community to a specific place.

I argue that the 1907 offer to move from Anenecuilco revealed significant generational differences that seriously divided the community. A majority of those who signed the letter were relatively young men in their twenties and thirties, an emerging generation who did not yet have access to communal leadership or the documents protected in the town’s archive. This group talked about their frustrations with the long dispute over land, their impatience with the slow legal process, and their anxieties about the future welfare of their families. In effect, the letter spoke to distinct notions of masculinity, land rights, and communal history within the town that distinguished one generation from another. Thus, this document revealed deeper divisions within Anenecuilco, fundamental differences of opinion that had to be overcome in order for Zapata to assume leadership in 1909. To suggest Anenecuilco had internal divisions, like most communities, represents just one of the arguments I have in mind. Up to this point, most historians have emphasized the powerful cohesiveness of the community, the solidarity among young and old, and the unwavering determination to act together.  

The 1907 letter indicates that the community had to work toward the consensus they achieved when they decided to take up arms, which demonstrates a more complicated set of relations within Anenecuilco.

The spirit of this essay, if there is such a thing, is intended to invite other considerations of the 1907 proposal and the longer history leading to the agrarian revolt in Morelos. To that end, I fully acknowledge that my reading of this document and my attempt to rewrite Zapata will succeed only in dialogue with other scholars and with more people from Anenecuilco. The idea that there might not have been a revolution if Zapata and others had left Anenecuilco is pure conjecture—and perhaps not even that insightful since, of course, the revolutionary past cannot be undone. But this counter-historical reflection comes from a close reading of the 1907 letter and the likely consequences that would have followed if pressure for access to land had been relieved by relocating so many young families. I begin by situating the 1907 proposal within a larger oral and archival history of Anenecuilco. I then offer a close reading of the

10. See especially, Sotelo Inclán, Raíz; Hernández Chávez, Anenecuilco; Samuel F. Brunk, Emiliano Zapata; and Enrique Krauze, Biografía del poder: Caudillos de la Revolución mexicana (1910–1940) (Mexico: Tusquets Editores México, 1997).
1907 document, analyzing the ways in which this proposal revises other studies of Zapata and his movement. Here, I emphasize claims made about constitutional rights and land-use patterns prior to 1910 that shaped generational differences. I conclude by proposing an epistemology for writing history more broadly. Historical writing is always a conversation, but even more so when the stated purpose is to revise accepted interpretations of the past.  

**Reviewing Documents**

Beginning with documents originally written in the early seventeenth century, the villagers of Anenecuilco amassed a collection of maps, land titles, court proceedings, and letters recording their claim to land for growing food and pasturing animals. From time to time they sought more documents to corroborate their ownership of land surrounding their community, especially in the mid-nineteenth century when sugar estates expanded their holdings and encroached on property claimed by the villagers. The leaders of Anenecuilco wrote officials in Mexico City and Cuernavaca; they hired lawyers to find more documents and to interpret the meanings of old maps and court cases; and they sent their own delegations to government offices to gather new documents. When they received these papers, they read them, discussed them in town meetings, created notarized copies, and sent these copies to officials as valid evidence of their claims. In their own way, they became amateur local historians, interpreting the past based on oral traditions and written texts, archiving documents for future generations, and applying the lessons of historical inquiry to contemporary questions of economic and political rights.

Like the villagers of Anenecuilco, professional historians have read the known documents and searched for new written sources that describe the longer history of agrarian conflict in Morelos. The 

11. Although I do not claim to be “a historian who parades his or her revisionism with the polemical swagger of, say, J. C. D. Clark or the measured assurance of François Furet,” I am fully embracing the “elliptical, less contentious” revisionism described by Alan Knight in “Revisionism and Revolution: Mexico Compared to England and France,” *Past and Present* 134 (1992), 159.

analysis of these sources can get quite technical on certain points, focusing on a letter written at a specific time, a recorded memory of a town meeting, or a minor detail concerning Zapata’s life history. The most important documents passed from one generation to the next and survived the violence of the revolution under the protection of Zapata’s aide, Francisco Franco. Before his assassination in 1919, Zapata ordered Franco back to Anenecuilco with the documents, and Franco kept them secret for several decades. Franco had good reason to do so because the men who controlled the government, the Constitutionalists, had direct ties to Zapata’s assassination. Franco eventually shared the documents with Jesús Sotelo Inclán, but only after five years of numerous conversations and careful consideration. When Sotelo Inclán first read the town documents, he realized that “those papers would completely change the image I had of Zapata and reveal him to be an authentic representative of the aspirations of his people.” Sotelo Inclán took possession of the Anenecuilco papers in 1947 and kept them safe until his death in 1990.

Given the vast interest in Zapata and the immense historiography surrounding the Zapatista struggle, it is difficult to imagine that there are crucial parts of this story we do not know and documents available that might somehow alter our understanding of Anenecuilco and Zapata. The 1907 proposal to move, however, represents part of a forgotten past, a lost memory, or more likely, an inconsistent prehistory at odds with the longer narrative told by Zapata, Franco, and later scholars. No one from Anenecuilco appears to have talked about the offer to move and no other historian has written about it. As for the 1907 letter itself, there is likely just this one copy, because, significantly, the elected leaders of the community mostly refused to sign the letter, and so it did not become part of the official town archive. Still, the 1907 letter fits within a larger series of documents, and these sources shape how we should approach the offer to move from Anenecuilco.

13. Sotelo Inclán, Raíz, 7. Sotelo Inclán talked about the challenge of gaining Franco’s trust in Jesús Sotelo Inclán y sus conceptos, 16.

14. Several essays from a volume published in 2000 emphasize the need to examine other leaders of the Zapatista movement more than the origins of Anenecuilco or Zapata. See, for example, Womack’s, “Los estudios del zapatismo,” 22–30. Womack listed nine broad questions he had about other leaders and events dealing with the Zapatista movement after 1911. He did not mention any questions about the pre-1910 origins of the movement. See also Felipe Ávila Espinosa, “La historiografía del zapatismo después de John Womack,” in Estudios sobre el zapatismo, 31–55.

15. The 1907 letter is out of the loose chronological order established by the archivists of the CPD. Most of the documents are organized within the original filing.
By the time Díaz assumed the presidency, rural communities throughout Morelos had lost significant land to the expanding sugar economy. This process of alienation accelerated during the Porfiriato, according to Paul Hart, especially as industrial transportation systems and communication networks reached deeper into rural areas. According to a capitalist plan for industrial agriculture, men without access to farmland became day laborers on the sugar estates, moved to haciendas as tenant farmers and sharecroppers, or left their homes to find work as rural wage laborers. The general outlines of this process are somewhat easier to see than the specific effects on any particular town. For example, Hart notes that the number of independent communities in Morelos declined from 118 in 1876 to 105 in 1887. Still, scant documentary evidence from Anenecuilco reveals that some of these social changes had already happened in Zapata’s hometown.

Lucino Luna has reprinted a school census from 1898 that provides a glimpse into family and social life in Anenecuilco. According to this census, seventy-three children between the ages of six and twelve attended elementary school in Anenecuilco. These children came from fifty different households. Nearly the same number of girls attended school as boys. More significant, 30 percent of the households were headed by women, responsible for twenty-two of the children (see Table 1). Thus, in addition to the names of parents and children that can help identify individuals within the community, the census documents that nearly a third of the households with young children were either led by single mothers or mothers whose partners had left to find work outside of Anenecuilco. Lacking comparative data for other rural communities, it is difficult to know if 30 percent is high or low. My sense is that it is high, especially because

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18. Ibid, 151.
these were families with relatively young children. In any case, female-headed households faced greater challenges for providing enough food and income for families, unless their partners were sending money. In addition, all of the female-headed households lacked direct access to communal power. They could rely on male relatives—fathers, uncles, and brothers—but their own households lacked a specific voice at important town meetings in which only men participated.

A few of the fathers listed in the 1898 census had become leaders of the community by the end of the century. José Merino, for example, had two daughters in school, Nicolosa and Alberta. Merino became town president and eventually handed over that office to his nephew, Emiliano Zapata, in 1909. Along with Merino, Luciano Cabrera, Tomás García, Ramón Gutiérrez, Andrés Montes, Eugenio Pérez, Carmen Quintero, Avelino Salamanca, and Toribio Vidal kept alive “the spirit of resistance” in Anenecuilco. This group wrote petitions, pressured the administrators of the Hacienda Hospital, and encouraged the rest of the community to remain hopeful despite the long struggle. These names are important because they identify a generation of leaders guiding the community prior to younger men assuming those offices in 1909. These names also begin the process of carefully identifying individual actors within the community. In order to understand the proposal to relocate in 1907, we need to pay special attention to those who signed the letter and those who did not.

On July 6, 1904, a group of some thirty men from Anenecuilco and the neighboring town of Ayala, signed a letter authorizing a delegation to collect documents regarding land and water rights from state and national archives. The delegation included Andrés Montes, who was sixty-seven years old, Avelino Salamanca, active in the community since at least 1878, and Luciano Cabrera and Refugio Yanéz, 20

Table 1. Anenecuilco School Census, 1898

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Households</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guardian (male)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Source: Luna, “Padrón escolar del año del 1898 [November 18], Anenecuilcotl, 127–129.

20. Sotelo Inclán, Raíz, 442.
both from Ayala. Older men like Ramón N. Gutiérrez signed the letter, as did younger men like Bartolo Parral and Francisco Franco. In addition, elected town leaders, José Merino and Carmen Quintero endorsed the decision to collect more documents. My point is that the generational differences that emerged in 1907 were not present around a consensus issue like obtaining more documents. In addition, Anenecuilco and Ayala residents worked together to find a settlement. The goal for this group, according to Sotelo Inclán, was to find a definitive resolution to the dispute with the Hacienda Hospital. After receiving the documents, the villagers consulted with lawyers and then forwarded the letters to government authorities in Cuernavaca.

Inspired by what they had read and been told by their lawyer, Francisco Serralde, the villagers grew bolder in 1906, forming a new organization called the Junta de Defensa de Tierra del Pueblo. By this time, according to historian Alicia Hernández Chávez, the inhabitants of Anenecuilco had a new understanding of the power of the written word. Whereas a generation of town leaders in the 1850s had emphasized oral traditions, this new group sought written documents to prove their ownership of the land to hacienda owners and government officials. Armed with written proof, the villagers requested a meeting with hacienda owners in an attempt to settle the dispute. In April 1906, Morelos Governor Manuel Alarcón arranged a meeting between men of Anenecuilco and the administrator of the Hacienda Hospital. At least nineteen men attended the meeting, including twenty-six-year-old Emiliano Zapata. The villagers had shifted tactics. Face-to-face meetings rather than petitions and letters might finally resolve this dispute.

Nearly a year after meeting with representatives of the hacienda, however, nothing had changed. In February 1907, the villagers learned that President Díaz was staying in the region, taking advantage of Morelos’s climate for health reasons. A delegation from Anenecuilco traveled to the Hacienda de Tenextepango to ask Díaz for his assistance in settling their dispute with the sugar estate. Díaz did

25. The estate belonged to Díaz’s son-in-law, Ignacio de la Torre. Sotelo Inclán, Raíz, 453.
not meet personally with the villagers, but he sent word to them that he promised to discuss their concerns with Governor Alarcón and Vicente Alonso Simón, the owner of the Hacienda Hospital. The villagers still treated Díaz like a benevolent patriarch, a deus ex machina who might intervene from above and resolve their dispute. Whether they truly believed Díaz would help them, they had little choice but to act as if they did. To confront Díaz, to openly consider that he was against them, would signal the end of negotiations and a major obstacle in their legal strategy. By late 1910, they realized that Díaz was part of the problem and that he would need to be removed from office if they were to find a satisfactory resolution. But in 1907 that was not as easy to see, partly because Díaz concealed his plans for repressing the villagers.

After the delegation from Anenecuilco had interrupted his vacation, Díaz determined that events in Morelos required greater attention. He met privately with Governor Alarcón, and they discussed the potential for unrest in the state. Díaz asked Alarcón to form a new National Guard battalion and to do so secretly, without drawing attention or causing alarm. Díaz began his career in 1855 as leader of a National Guard militia in Ixtlán, Oaxaca, and he knew full well the special legal and operational advantages of a state militia as opposed to the federal army. In early May 1907, Alarcón wrote Díaz a cryptic note about their plans: “I am ready to organize the National Guard; in ten or twelve days I will be able to arm . . . a thousand men if it were necessary and you ordered me to do so[,] this letter is written by me because I understand that for now you want to proceed with the utmost discretion on this issue that occupies us and that will be the case.” On May 15, 1907, Alarcón informed the president that he was ready to go forward with the formation of a new state militia:

Being entirely in agreement with the ideas you have expressed to me personally, I have introduced before the local legislature the Decree, a copy of

28. For Díaz’s early career, see McNamara, Sons of the Sierra, pp. 28–38. As a state formed after the War of the Reform (1858–1861) and the French Intervention (1862–1867), Morelos did not have a legal code for organizing National Guard battalions. In those previous wars, villagers from the Morelos region had joined militias formed by the state of Mexico.
29. CPD Legajo 32, Documento 5849, [Manuel Alarcón] to Porfirio Díaz, [May 1907], no date.
which I am attaching to send to you, which certainly will be approved and promulgated within two days, more or less. The earlier paperwork [trámite] was indispensable, since prior authorization did not exist. I believe that the expressed [decree] has fulfilled your indications.30

Alarcón’s legislation for forming a new National Guard battalion was short and to the point:

Article 1. The Executive is authorized to create, in the case that it is considered necessary, an Infantry Battalion, National Guard, separate from the existing security forces, and is granted the funds necessary for their maintenance.

Article 2. Authorization is equally granted to use the force that is organized by virtue of this legislation, in accordance with the Federal Executive, if deemed necessary.

Article 3. The Governor will report to the Legislature, in the last regular session of the year, any use of these current authorizations.31

The plans for a new Morelos National Guard battalion were intentionally kept secret, and to my knowledge, no other historian has written about this effort in 1907. Díaz instructed Alarcón that the militia should be under the direct control of the governor, but that it also could be federalized at the request of the president. This structure created an autonomous military force, free of interference from regular military officers or the Ministry of War. A smaller militia could put down popular unrest without drawing too much attention. In addition, a state militia could conscript young men from throughout the state in order to remove them from their communities. Both of these possibilities re-created the system of state-sponsored violence carried out years earlier in Morelos by Alarcón as chief of Díaz’s mounted police force, the Rurales. In particular, the new National Guard could rely on la leva, the forced conscription of political critics and dissidents into the military, especially young men like Zapata and his neighbors from Anenecuilco.32

30. CPD Legajo 32, Documento 5847, Manuel Alarcón to Porfirio Díaz, May 15, 1907. Díaz had written Alarcón on May 7.


32. Even rumors of impending conscription roundups, according to Arturo Warman, would have led men to flee their communities and hide until the threat had passed. See Arturo Warman, ... Y Venimos a Contradecir. Los campesinos de Morelos y el estado nacional (Mexico: Ediciones de la Casa Chata, 1976), 95–100. For more accusations of murder and repression against Alarcón during his years leading the Rurales, see John H. McNeely, “Origins of the Zapata Revolt in Morelos,” The Hispanic American Historical Review, 46:2 (May 1966), 154. See also Alicia Hernández Chávez, Breve historia de Morelos (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002), 152.
Díaz’s request for a new militia came just three months after the disgruntled villagers of Anenecuilco had tried to meet with him and indicated that they would not be satisfied until they had settled their dispute with the hacienda owners. Díaz had already used the military to repress striking mineworkers in Cananea, Sonora, in 1906, and striking textile workers and their families in Río Blanco, Veracruz, in 1907, just a month before the villagers of Anenecuilco confronted Díaz in Morelos. If angry and determined rural people began to protest against local authorities and, by extension, the federal government, then Díaz would be prepared. Díaz’s request for a new militia confirmed that he expected these people of Morelos to challenge his authority, just as workers had at industrial sites. Díaz was correct, but their violent rural confrontation against his regime would not start for another three years.

Anenecuilco, May 21, 1907

While Díaz and Alarcón secretly prepared to repress discontent, a large group of men from Anenecuilco and Ayala sought a decidedly nonviolent resolution to the conflict. This group represented the largest contingent of men from the region to act together prior to the start of the 1910 Revolution. On May 21, 1907, eighty-three men signed a letter to Díaz, asking for his help in settling their dispute with the hacienda. The number of men who signed this letter was more than twice as many than those who signed any previous or subsequent letter regarding the land dispute. The sheer number of signatures attached to this document distinguishes it from all other correspondence originating from Anenecuilco and Ayala. Bartolo Parral led the 1907 offer to move, and he was the first to sign. Emiliano Zapata was the eighth person to sign.

33. The historiography on these two events is vast and well known. Regarding the strike at Río Blanco, Díaz received an “Urgent” telegram asking for more troops: “They are burning Jose Morelos’ store. The factory is still intact. There are rumors of an assault tonight. We have insufficient troops. We urge you to send more.” See CPD Legajo 32, Documento 5223, January 7, 1907.

34. Sustained use of the new Morelos National Guard was interrupted when Alarcón died on December 15, 1908, which created a more immediate political crisis. Díaz asked at least one other state governor to revise legislation so that National Guard troops could be federalized. Nicéforo Guerrero, interim governor of Guanajuato, signed Decree Number 26 on May 24, 1907, which granted the President of the Republic the authority to mobilize and command the state’s two militias. See Periódico Oficial del Estado de Guanajuato, “Decreto número 26,” Tomo LII Núm. 42, 26 de mayo de 1907, 649.
Four themes stand out in the main body of the text prior to three concluding proposals: their hope in Díaz, their hostility toward lawyers, their impatience with delays in settling the dispute, and their utter desperation. Of course, the possibility exists to consider each of these ideas and the three proposals as strategic gestures or tactics in a long and bitter legal conflict. But reading this letter separately from its stated purpose would represent a departure from the ways in which we have read and understood other documents from Anenecuilco. It would have also been a huge risk since Díaz could have accepted the offer and then assumed the issue finally settled. Perhaps the most difficult point in this regard is the letter writers’ expressions of trust in Díaz. As I mentioned previously, however, turning against Díaz would have represented an end to the legal strategy and a public assertion that the federal government would have to change in order to bring about justice. Clearly, these men were not prepared in 1907 to turn against Díaz. Rather, they addressed him “with the deepest respect,” and acknowledged that he had “saved us from the oppression of tyrants,” echoing the affiliation of an earlier era when villagers believed Díaz would help them regain their land. They closed by asking for Díaz’s “benevolent impulse to do what is right.” Although we might expect these expressions of respect from the poor and marginalized (actually Díaz heard this sort of praise more often from the wealthy and connected), not everyone wrote Díaz in these terms. In fact, by 1907, more and more rural populations were coming to the realization that Díaz had become an obstacle to their political and economic wellbeing.

Rather than expressing their anger toward Díaz, the villagers of Anenecuilco voiced intense hostility toward lawyers in their 1907 letter: “we have to lament, as ones who have given power to various attorneys, that these attorneys have worked in falsehood and deception.” The most recent lawyer hired by the villagers, Francisco Serralde, had encouraged the villagers to press forward with their case. But this group criticized all lawyers ever hired by the community.

35. Díaz had a long but infrequent history of contact with the villagers of Anenecuilco. See Archivo Porfirio Díaz, vol. 11, José Zapata et al. to Porfirio Díaz, June 14, 1874, 142–3; and Archivo Porfirio Díaz, vol. 11, Teodosio Franco to Porfirio Díaz, January 23, 1876, 143–144.

36. This strategy of addressing Díaz with reverence reflected the optimistic notion that Díaz did not fully understand what was happening under the authority of state governors and jefes políticos. Other rural populations expressed growing dissatisfaction with Díaz around this time, but only reluctantly and after clear evidence that the President endorsed abuses committed by local officials. See McNamara, Sons of the Sierra, 171–175.
Attorneys grew rich on this “interminable” dispute; they “have worked in falsehood and deception,” the villagers wrote. Their contempt for lawyers as expressed in this letter nearly equaled their anger toward the hacienda owners. Lawyers, they stated, “have only wanted to exploit our resources, and our poverty has never been able to satisfy their insatiable ambitions.” Significantly, they did not blame the entire legal system, just the individuals they considered corrupt and abusive within the system.

The men who signed the 1907 letter had grown impatient with the slow legal process and the constant pressure from hacienda owners. The dispute had gone on for too long: “One by one our forebears have succumbed, becoming parties in the dispute to which we refer.” The people of Anencuilco were simply “tired of this issue.” The villagers talked about the “humiliations” they had suffered, and their anxiety about providing for their families. The hacendado “threatens us,” they claimed, and he insulted their manhood because he interfered with their responsibility of caring for dependents. They were merely “poor laborers” who survived “by the sweat of our brow . . . in order to live in peace with our families and in our homes.” The level of frustration among the letter writers came both from the long process of negotiations and the inability to adequately provide for their families as men.

Finally, the villagers expressed a profound sense of desperation that their community was about to disappear. Significantly, their view of the community within this document describes the relationships of family and neighbor (vecino in Spanish), and not some primordial bond to a particular tract of land. They warned Díaz that they were near ruin; “we believe that very soon our people will disappear.” They would become “nomads, with no other living than the miserable day’s pay that a disinherited man earns, with no choice but to become a ragged group of wanderers.” As they turned toward three specific proposals, they asked Díaz to comprehend the seriousness of their situation: they were “a people on the verge of disappearing, of expiring in the midst of the anguish of the situation.”

The petitioners concluded their letter with three proposals. First, they repeated an offer to compare land titles with hacienda owners.

37. The desperation expressed in this letter contradicts Felipe Arturo Ávila Espinosa, Los orígenes del zapatismo, 81, who argues that historians have mistakenly claimed villagers felt threatened by the encroachment of the haciendas: “Por lo tanto, la apreciación compartida por los historiadores, de Magaña a Womack, acerca de la tendencial desaparición de los pueblos y rancherías del estado como consecuencia del avance de las haciendas que los despojaron de sus tierras ha sido equivocada.”
Second, if they could not compare documents, they asked Díaz to establish a *modus vivendi* so the villagers could continue to pasture livestock on disputed property. Finally, they proposed a radical solution:

If the second thing is not possible to accomplish for some reason, we ask and entreat that your Excellency protect us or shelter us in accord with the faculty which is conceded to you in Article 30 of the current Law of Colonization. And if you should accede to our petition in this sense, we designate in order to found a colony on an extension of land known by the following names: Chiautla, La Zavila, and La Canoa. These lands are found about three leagues to the southeast of our town. They are uninhabited deserts. They have no water for irrigation farming, nor does Señor Alonso make use of them in any way at all. We offer to pay for them at the price set by tariffs and we will abandon our town in order to move with our families and livestock to live wherever the Supreme Government designates.

That last sentence demonstrates that Emiliano Zapata and many of his neighbors were willing to move in order to avoid a violent confrontation with the hacienda and the government in power.

**Generational Conflict in Anenecuilco**

The 1907 proposal to relocate had the endorsement of more men than any other known document sent from Anenecuilco and Ayala. In fact, this letter bears the signatures of men who did not sign any other known documents.\(^{38}\) Beginning with Sotelo Inclán, historians have often listed the names of men who signed letters from Anenecuilco. Fewer historians have tried to identify the signers or the equally challenging task of identifying who did not sign certain documents. In this case, because the proposal to move represents such a fundamental departure of everything we have assumed about Zapata and the people of Anenecuilco, knowing who signed the 1907 letter and who did not sign it is the only way to understand fully the proposal’s larger implications.

Using documents reprinted in other sources and my own archival research, I have assembled a database of 258 names of men from Anenecuilco. I can identify one or more things about each of these men using records that span the years 1887 to 1911. This database has helped me identify who signed the 1907 letter and who did not sign it. I have been able to determine the approximate age of

\(^{38}\) For example, Lucino Luna told me he had never before seen his grandfather’s signature, Fidel Luna, or his great uncle’s signature, Doroteo Luna. Lucino Luna, interview, Anenecuilco, Morelos, June 11, 2002.
47 percent, or 39 of the 83 signers of the 1907 letter. Of this group, 8 percent (3 signers) were “older” men age 50 or older in 1907; 16 percent (7 signers) were men in their 40s; and 76 percent (29 signers) were “younger” men, mostly in their 20s and 30s in 1907. For those who I could identify, Santiago Medina, age 71, was the oldest man to sign the letter; and Fidel Luna, age 16, the youngest person to sign.

The generational split becomes more apparent when we examine who did not sign the letter. Most of the men who had emerged in the early 1880s as village leaders did not sign the 1907 proposal: Bárbaro Álvarez, Rosalino Apontes, Pilar Espejo, Rufino Espejo, José Merino, and Andrés Montes. The only leader from this generation who signed the 1907 letter was Carmen Quintero, someone Womack claims “had taken an active and independent part in local politics for twenty-five years.” Nor did the men who handed power to Zapata and his cohort in 1909 endorse the offer to move; José Merino, Andrés Montes, and Eugenio Pérez did not sign the 1907 letter, whereas Carmen Quintero did. No one from the Merino clan endorsed the 1907 offer to move, not even Emiliano Zapata’s cousin Rafael Merino, who was elected one of two treasurers in 1909.

Rafael Merino was not the only person nominated to lead the town in 1909 who did not endorse the offer to move. Modesto González, the first person nominated to become president did not sign the letter either. There are several possible readings from this information alone. The elders of the community, in particular, the Merino clan and other elected leaders, did not support the 1907 offer to move. Modesto González was likely the candidate of this group to lead the community, though it was probably clear that Emiliano Zapata had more support. Bartolo Parral had been the leader of the 1907 offer to move. He, too, was nominated but was not elected, in part because “he was too angry, too hotheaded, too much like Eufemio.” Emiliano’s older brother, according to Lucino Luna. Although the men of the community ultimately endorsed Zapata as town leader, the local election itself was likely more contested and

39. Lucino Luna can identify more of the signers, but I have relied on written records. Womack estimates that the population of Anenecuilco in 1910 was some 400 people.
40. The 1898 school census in Anenecuilco listed Fidel Luna’s age as seven. He was living in a household headed by his mother, Tiburcia Franco, and an older brother Ancleto. Fidel signed the letter in 1907, but Ancleto did not; because so many young men had to leave Anenecuilco, Fidel was likely considered the male head of the house in 1907. See Luna and Escarpulli Limón, Anenecuilcayotl, 127–129.
41. Womack, Zapata, 4.
42. Luna interview.
the outcome more likely the result of private negotiations than we have acknowledged previously.\textsuperscript{43}

Rafael Merino’s involvement in these issues leads to another question that has never been answered: why were two treasurers elected in 1909? There had been only one before, and I have not come across any other town councils, at any other time or in other states, where two people were elected treasurer at the same time. Lucino Luna and I talked about this question, and we could only speculate. Perhaps Rafael Merino’s election to be co-treasurer with Eduviges Sánchez, who signed the 1907 letter, represented something of a compromise with the Merino family. If the older generation still had concerns about the younger men in light of the 1907 offer to move, they might have insisted that someone they trusted also have access to the community’s finances. In any case, with the exception of Merino, everyone elected in 1909—Zapata, Francisco Franco, Eduvigis Sánchez, and José Robles had all signed the 1907 letter. Rafael Merino had been one of three co-leaders of the initial 1910 revolt along with Zapata and Pablo Torres Burgos. Torres Burgos was killed after withdrawing from the fighting in March 1911. Merino died in combat around Izúcar de Matamoros a month later. Still, if Zapata and the others had moved as they proposed, I suggest Rafael Merino would have led the revolt in 1910, and we might be writing today of Merinoistas instead of Zapatistas. Of course, there might not have been a rebellion if Díaz had accepted the offer to relocate some eighty families, which would have significantly reduced pressure for regaining land lost to the hacienda.\textsuperscript{44}

The 1907 offer to move came primarily from a younger generation of men within the community. When Lucino Luna saw the entire list of names, he exclaimed, ‘’puros chamacos, all young guys.’’\textsuperscript{45} The 1907 letter expressed concern about the ability of these young men to provide for their families. Their sense of masculinity, that is, their

\textsuperscript{43}. Brunk, \textit{Emiliano Zapata}, 19, argues that the 1909 election signaled that “A different kind of politics was now at work. The matter was too solemn for campaigning, for visiting dignitaries, or for letters to the press. There was no angling for support . . . ”

\textsuperscript{44}. My speculation implies that Merino would have survived as long as Zapata and would have been as successful leading an agrarian revolt, neither of which is obvious or even likely. In fact, Brunk, \textit{Emiliano Zapata}, argues that Zapata’s intelligence and temperament made him uniquely fitted to lead the revolt. The question of Zapata’s leadership is viewed differently by Lucino Luna, who argues that without Zapata someone else would have led the revolt. For background on Merino, see McNeely, “Origins,” 158. McNeely argues that Zapata essentially became the leader of the revolt through a process of elimination. Ibid, 167–168.

\textsuperscript{45}. Luna interview.
responsibility to act as heads of household, led them to seek a way out of an unending, frustrating, and what appeared to be futile effort to regain land lost to the hacienda. Aware of their immediate responsibilities to their growing families, these men imagined only a more difficult future. They could not afford living on the past dreams of their ancestors, hoping to win back land fenced in by the hacienda. More important than losing access to land claimed by the hacienda, this group feared losing contact with each other by becoming landless rural workers.

**Liberal Revolutionaries and Land Tenure**

The younger generation of men and women in Anenecuilco had been educated in public schools during the Porfiriato, according to a curriculum that emphasized liberal civics and liberal heroes, especially Benito Juárez. As school children, they participated in local annual celebrations of Independence Day (September 16), the Mexican victory over the French in 1862 (May 5), and the commemoration of Juárez’s death (July 18). The influence of a liberal interpretation of Mexican history included lessons about the ideals embodied in the 1857 Constitution. Accordingly, liberalism’s fundamental tenet of a written code instilled in this Porfirian generation a belief in the power and persuasiveness of signed agreements, legal land titles, and constitutional process. The young men of 1907 were different than their elders in this regard, who had learned from experience that agreements could be broken and that laws could be ignored. In effect, the offer to move represented the first generational shift within the community, a transition that began in 1907 and culminated in the coming to power of Zapata and other young men of the village in 1909.

The 1907 letter revealed the ideals, perhaps naïve, of a generation of men who had been born after the 1857 Constitution had been restored. They believed the land titles in their possession guaranteed their access to village lands. They were motivated by the legal titles, by the rule of law, and they were willing to move away from their ancestors’ lands if they could obtain clear and free title to other land. In that sense, Zapata and the others of his generation saw themselves

46. For this curriculum and patriotic celebrations in Anenecuilco, see Luna and Escarpulli Limón, *Anencuilcayotl*, 126–131. The Mexican government eventually switched the primary celebration for Juárez from the day of his death to the day of his birth, March 21.

47. Womack says about the people of Anenecuilco, “Despite years of chicanery from constituted authorities, they had never lost respect for the law...” *Zapata*, 71.
not as victims of liberal land laws, but as petitioners seeking justice within liberal politics. Specifically, Article 30 of the Laws of Colonization, as cited by the petitioners in 1907, provided a nonviolent solution for Zapata and the others in their conflict with hacienda owners. When Díaz ignored their offer to move, the younger generation could rightly argue that they had done everything in their power to avoid a confrontation. Their community’s survival was at stake after 1907; there was no turning back and no alternative other than armed defense. Clearly, Zapata and those of his generation did not fight for some “pre-political” attachment to the land, the dirt, and pastures of the village. Rather, they fought for their rights as guaranteed under the 1857 Constitution. Significantly, 1907 was also the year Mexicans celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of that constitution.

Womack also stresses the central importance of the 1857 Constitution to the Zapatista movement: “Country families in Morelos revered the 1857 Constitution.” My argument, however, differs significantly from Womack’s: the Constitution represented more than a symbol of the nation and more than a reminder of communal participation in defending that nation. The men who offered to move in 1907 understood land tenure in terms of the legal code established by the constitutional framework of 1857 and nominally in practice during the Porfiriato. Similarly, references to the 1857 Constitution in Zapata’s Plan de Ayala (1911) should be understood in light of the liberal ideals within the 1907 letter. The Plan de Ayala’s call for rebellion against Francisco Madero, as Womack argues, expressed a deep sense of historical consciousness. In the Plan’s preamble, the rebels declared that Madero had demonstrated a “profound disrespect for the fulfillment of the preexisting laws emanating from the immortal code of ‘57, written with the revolutionary blood of Ayutla.”

Even as they proposed forming a new government, the Zapatistas expressed their respect for liberal land laws:

Article 9. In order to execute the procedures regarding the properties aforementioned, the laws of disamortization and nationalization will be

48. Here I am disagreeing with François Chevalier, who argued that Zapata was a “victim” of liberal laws that sought to break up communal landholdings. See François Chevalier, “Le soulèvement de Zapata, 1911–1919” Annales 16:1 (1961),. 66–82, specifically 76.
49. For the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the 1857 Constitution, see Enrique Krauze, De héroes y mitos (Mexico City: Tusquets Editores, 2010), 127–136.
50. Womack, Zapata, 71.
51. Ibid., 400–401; I am using Womack’s translation of the Plan. Ayutla refers to the Plan of Ayutla which began the liberal rebellion against President Antonio López de Santa Anna in March 1854.
applied as they fit, for serving as norm and example can be those laws put in force by the immortal Juárez, on ecclesiastical properties, which punished the despots and conservatives who in every time have tried to impose on us the ignominious yoke of oppression and backwardness.”

For these reasons, the 1907 offer to move sheds new light on the Plan de Ayala; the two documents were linked by an emphasis on legal process and legally recognized land titles.

The Zapatista rebels of 1910–11 had tried to avoid an armed conflict by requesting legal title to land outside of Anenecuilco. Womack’s original premise fails in this regard; the villagers of Anenecuilco did not get into a revolution because they refused to move. They objected to the violation of their land rights, of legal rights, of constitutional protection and accountability. They did not have an inalienable connection to the land; they had an enlightened concept of legal rights and land titles, the very documents Zapata guarded so carefully throughout the violent years of the revolution. For these reasons, Alan Knight’s claim that “Zapatismo displayed a close kinship with rural anarchism,” and Enrique Krauze’s description of Zapata as “the born anarchist,” are inconsistent with a longer emphasis on judicial process. Zapata and the others respected the laws of the state and asked only that those laws be applied fairly. Thus, we can say Zapatismo was itself grounded in constitutionalism, perhaps even a revolutionary liberalism that relied on protecting the legal rights of all citizens.

Still, Zapata and the others who signed the 1907 letter never repeated their offer to move. If they wanted only legal title to any land, why would they have fought so fiercely and consistently for the return of ancestral lands after 1910? In addition to the insult of having their offer to move ignored by Díaz, a transformative event took place in 1909, immediately after Zapata’s election as leader of Anenecuilco. For the first time, he and Francisco Franco as town secretary, had access to the village archive. Zapata and Franco spent eight days in the archive located in the basement of the local church, coming out only to eat and sleep. They had always known of the oral traditions of

52. Ibid, 403.
the community that emphasized the primordial ties between the people and their land. After reviewing the maps, court cases, petitions, and letters documenting this connection, they learned the history of their community in a new way. Sotelo Inclán described Zapata’s reaction after reading the town documents like this: “It was as if the future caudillo drank from the deep waters of the pain of his people, and was closely connected to the destiny of his distant Indian grandfathers.” In effect, Zapata, Franco, and the signers of the 1907 letter had to learn how to see their struggle from the perspective of the many generations who had come before them. The spirit of that struggle transcended time, and Zapata came to appreciate that his responsibilities went beyond legal codes. My point is that he and the other men of his generation were not born with this understanding; they came to appreciate the community’s long struggle by seeing for themselves the written proof of the conflict that had occupied so many previous generations. Whether or not they realized it, the 1907 offer to move had represented a terrible violation of this bond. They certainly did not make a similar offer after 1909.

Zapata’s determination after 1909 to regain lost land and to remain in Anenecuilco does not mean that Womack’s premise remains essentially correct. Zapata and the others had offered to move, and they could not undo that proposal even if Díaz had ignored it in 1907. Womack does not say in his first sentence that the people had been willing to move in 1907, but two years later decided to stay. Rather, he assumes an uninterrupted commitment on the part of the people of Anenecuilco to remain in their village. My concern is that Womack’s premise contributes to the mythification of Zapata and, by extension, of the people who supported him. The history of that Zapata myth matters and is fascinating in its own regard, as Samuel Brunk’s recent study shows, but the transformation of Zapata into a preordained, unique leader of his community belies the contingency of the years before 1909 and the effort Zapata and others made to avoid an armed revolution in 1907.

Even if the people of Anenecuilco who

55. Sotelo Inclán, Raíz, 498.
56. I am qualifying Brunk’s view of Zapata as a born leader: “In 1909 Zapata was ready. Strong, angry, and charismatic, he was the kind of man who might lead a revolution.” Brunk, Emiliano Zapata, 23.
proposed moving in 1907 remained in the village, they did not get into a revolution in 1910 because they refused to move.

The 1907 proposal mentioned specific tracts of land where those who agreed to move would relocate: Chautla, La Zavila, and La Canoa. We know from a 1909 land census that families had divided some of this property for farming and used it according to custom rights. This census, reprinted in Hernández Chávez’s, *Anenecuilco*, listed tracts controlled by individuals and families for areas designated as Huajár, La Canoa, and Chautla.\(^{58}\) Comparing this census with the signers of the 1907 letter, we can identify significant inequality in terms of access to land within the community. The impact of this inequality led individuals to think differently about the importance of legal land titles. The 83 signers of the 1907 letter represented 22 percent of the farmers in the 1909 census who farmed on 20 percent of the total land listed in the census, a small fraction of the community. Younger men in Anenecuilco simply did not have equal access to land; and the older men who did have access to land did not want to alter the current arrangement.\(^{59}\)

Family access to land reveals even greater inequality than individual access. Several generations of forty-nine families farmed on the land mentioned in the 1909 census. But the land was not evenly distributed among these families. Just 10 families (or 20 percent) listed in the 1909 census controlled more than half (52 percent) of all the land mentioned. Another 20 percent controlled 22 percent of the land. The bottom 20 percent of families had access to just 4 percent of the land mentioned in the census. (See Table 2.)\(^{60}\)

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59. The issue of unequal generational access to land during periods of economic change also characterized other parts of the country. For example, Emilio Kouri, *A Pueblo Divided: Business, Property, and Community in Papantla, Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 203, argues that young Totonac men opposed the privatization of land in the 1890s in Papantla’s vanilla-growing region because they had not been part of the original distribution of land parcels in the 1870s.

60. Hernández Chávez argues that, “a good portion of residents worked for the most wealthy or in neighboring haciendas.” See *Breve historia*, 157.
In addition to generational differences of opinion on the legal process, unequal access to farmland remaining under village control indicates that Anenecuilco faced serious internal divisions. The 1907 offer to move in exchange for legal title to new land puts these divisions into context and reveals more serious implications recorded in the 1909 land census. For the most part, men who had access to more than 300 hectares did not endorse the offer to move. But men who did not have access in 1909 (and certainly did not have access in 1907) concluded that they had few, if any, remaining options within Anenecuilco itself. Although their first choice was to compare land titles with hacienda owners, they were more desperate to maintain a way of life that connected them to farming and to their friends and families. The last alternative, and one that no generation before them had ever entertained, was to move. Still, they did not propose moving as individuals; they sought a broader solution to the problem of land scarcity. Asking Díaz to grant them title to land would allow them to farm as a reorganized community of former residents of Anenecuilco.61

**Conclusion**

Womack’s opening premise, that Zapata and his neighbors refused to move and, therefore, “got into a revolution,” offers a compelling image of resolute villagers, but it is incorrect. Many other historians have echoed this idea and have tried to explain the motivation for the Zapatista revolt by describing a sacred connection between these people and the land of their ancestors. Hernández Chávez, for example, states that the people of Anenecuilco “were prepared to die

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before they would move.’’ The larger mythic representation of Zapata, according to Salvador Rueda Smithers, comes from a rural-based “popular mentality of the center-south” that situates Zapata as a “tragic hero” who died because he never gave up on his people. My analysis of the 1907 letter has tried to show, however, that professional historians have also contributed to this mythic construction of intransigence among rural populations and the revolutionary role played by Zapata. Historians have too often glossed over the years before 1910 as an uninterrupted period in which the people of Ane necuilco consistently refused to move or surrender their land. Even “Ane necuilco’s historian,” Jesús Sotelo Inclán, could not resist emphasizing a sacred bond to the land. Quoting Ecclesiastes, he wrote, “Generations come and generations go; but the land (la tierra) remains forever.” Situating the struggle for land in Morelos in biblical terms, Sotelo Inclán stated that, “these words seem to describe life in Ane necuilco.” Significantly, Lucino Luna neither mythologizes his town nor Zapata, even as he directs the museum in honor of the hero. Zapata, Luna told me several times, “was carne y hueso, flesh and bone.” Had he not led the rebellion, “someone else from Ane necuilco would have.” Zapata was also capable of making mistakes, Luna pointed out. And the 1907 offer to move “was a major miscalculation.”

While a static and homogenous view of a bond between people and the land implies a powerful sense of determination and destiny, my hope is that this essay will complicate our explanations for how Zapata and his neighbors thought about land and their relationships with each other. The fact is that we know little about Zapata before he

63. Salvador Rueda Smithers, “Emiliano Zapata,” 150.
64. For example, Antonio Díaz Soto y Gama, La Revolución agraria del Sur y Emiliano Zapata, su caudillo (Mexico: Policromía, 1960), 80, talks about 400 years of waiting for a leader.
66. Luna interview. As someone who has had access to the original documents kept in Ane necuilco, Luna’s reaction to the 1907 document and my interpretation of its possible meanings was also notably different than the responses I have received from the handful of colleagues who have read the document and/or earlier drafts of this essay. While reading the letter, out loud so as to comprehend each word, Luna jumped out of his chair and shouted, “This letter is worth its weight in gold.” Col leagues have reacted more cautiously, doubting if a single document might change anything Womack said and claiming that Womack was essentially correct since the villagers did not move. Given the importance of Womack’s work, it seems appropriate that his place in Mexican historiography is as protected as Zapata’s is in Mexican history.
became the leader of his community in 1909, and much of what we surmise about him comes to us through a revolutionary filter that looks for meaningful events that anticipate Zapata’s role in the violent upheaval that began in 1910. The 1907 letter Zapata signed does not fit with our expectations of him or his neighbors. But it does show that although ideas about property rights in Anenecuilco were bolstered by primordial references to ancestors and customs, for a generation of young men, including Emiliano Zapata, liberal notions of constitutional rights and legal titles held primary importance. I am not trying to undermine Zapata’s resolve or dedication. I only want to suggest that he and the other young men of his village had been raised and educated on liberal notions of land ownership. Only later in life, after they had assumed responsibility for leading the town, and after they had access to the town archive, did they learn the language of tradition used by generations of leaders before them. And it was that connection to the people of the past rather than an unwavering spiritual tie to the land that led them to take up arms in 1910.

I realize that my intervention will not sit well with some historians and may not ever reach a popular audience where the version of Zapata’s predestined struggle for the land of his ancestors runs particularly deep. One of the most often repeated stories of Zapata’s boyhood describes a brief conversation he had with his father. Seeing his father’s tears about the land lost to the hacienda, the young Emiliano swears to get these lands back for his people. For popular audiences, this story establishes Zapata’s unique destiny as the leader of the agrarian revolt, a role in history preordained by a higher power. Although most professional historians disregard this particular episode, in light of Zapata’s endorsement of the 1907 offer to move, the promise to his father most likely never occurred. Still, Zapata should inspire us because he tried to avoid violence, because he learned from his mistakes, and because he eventually turned to his elders for advice about leading the community. It is his humanity that is most impressive, not his saintly determination of defiance against a corrupt economic and political system.

Alicia Hernández Chávez has written that history and memory came together in Anenecuilco, not in a “cemetery” where the past was buried and fixed, but as “a living organism,” growing and changing to


68. For one version of the story see, Rueda Smithers, “Emiliano Zapata,” 138. Of course, this story resembles the ancient account of Hannibal’s oath to his father.
make sense of the present according to both written and oral traditions. Likewise, we should reanimate our own interpretations of the history of Zapata and Anenecuilco by asking new questions based on new assumptions and using new sources. In fact, Womack has encouraged scholars to continue research on Zapata and his supporters: “You all should continue working on this, making new discoveries, drawing new comparisons and contrasts, proposing and debating new interpretations!” One hundred years after the start of the 1910 Revolution, we should reopen lines of inquiry previously considered settled. This effort will require new research but also careful consideration of how we write history.

The late historical anthropologist Greg Dening argued that writing about the past should always proceed with caution because “history is metaphor of the past. History is not the past.” Too often, Dening claimed, historians write as if they are revealing a “realism” about the past, a single, true rendition of how the past happened: “All the possibilities of what might have happened are reduced to one.” Dening called instead for “returning the present to the past.” The present, as we know from our own lives, is filled with uncertainties, multiple possibilities, and contingencies that escape our awareness and defy easy explanations. We should remember, as Dening pointed out, that historians “are outsiders” to the past: “Historians always see the past from a perspective the past could never have had. They are like meteorologists predicting yesterday’s weather today. They get their certainties from consequences.”

Discovering new documents from the past is not sufficient for altering interpretations; we also need to approach the past from the perspective of those who wrote original letters or preserved those documents without knowing the consequences of their own actions. Specifically, Zapata and the others from Anenecuilco and Ayala did not know in 1907 that they would begin a violent revolt against the government in 1910 and continue fighting for another decade. They had tried to avoid that dangerous path by offering to abandon their ancestral lands in exchange for new land. The rural revolt in Mexico was not inevitable; it was carried out by men and women who could not know where it would all end or how it would be remembered one hundred years later.

72. Ibid, xv–xvi.
73. Ibid, 57–58.