

“Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the History of Mexican Indigenous Politics”

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The history of Mexican aboriginal classification illustrates the ways in which political interests and power relations operate to produce such classifications as race, class, and ethnicity. Such designations, in turn, produce political frames—a set of problems and solutions—that appear to match the category. The fact that the designation of a single individual or group can shift from one category to another suggests that theorists should not rely too heavily on seemingly objective understandings of what a group is, whether it is a race, class, or ethnic group, to determine the scope and contours of justice.

During the colonial and post-colonial periods, Mexico's aboriginal population was framed as racially distinct. Their designation as *indios* had far-reaching social, economic, political, and legal implications, importantly shaping identities and the type of political claims and strategies they used to engage the state in terms of inclusion and representation.

During and after the Mexican Revolution, *indios* were re-imagined as *campesinos*. As a class, *campesinos* were an important pillar of the corporatist strategy that kept the PRI in power for more than 70 years. Class identity not only mediated access to the state, but also organized social and political life. Such identity also limited peasants to a narrow frame of patronage politics oriented toward development and redistribution.

Starting in the 1970s, the government began to focus attention on the cultural heritage of its aboriginal population, with initiatives aimed at bilingual education and other forms of cultural revaluation. But this project met with resistance from many aboriginals who persisted in organizing, and imagining themselves, as *campesinos*. It was not until the early 1990s, after neo-liberal economic reforms had fundamentally undermined the political traction of *campesino* identity and politics, that both government and aboriginals turned decisively to an ethnic political

frame, rendering the *campesino indígena*.¹ The deployment of cultural difference as a principle of legitimation places the aboriginal in yet another identity category, and invokes the politics of recognition.

The turn to an indigenous identity rooted in cultural difference is bound up with the way that Mexico, and many other countries, are trying to manage their incorporation into a neoliberal world market that does not favor them. The recent shift to a cultural frame as a way of channeling and managing the demands of the rural poor, and as a way of challenging the organization of state – society relations, is a contemporary response to the fact that many states, not only Mexico, have withdrawn their commitment to the social and economic rights that underpinned the terms of citizenship. In the breach, some countries have tried to extend collective and cultural rights.

What the history of Mexican aboriginal classification illustrates is that there is a great deal of politics that takes place prior to the formation of cultural claims and claimants. Demands for cultural group recognition arise in particular historical moments, in response to particular political configurations. They are shaped by the laws, policies, and ideological frameworks that states use to categorize their citizens, organize access to power, and define the boundaries of citizenship. States employ such markers as gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, and religion to render their populations legible, and such categories form the basis of both privilege and discrimination. Groups of human beings do not sort naturally into categories like race, class, and ethnicity. They are placed in these categories by laws and policies that render them (the categories) socially and politically relevant to the extent that they shape life chances.

Once they are made socially and politically relevant, they also become socially and politically available. The hegemonic frame determines the terms of its own opposition. Human

¹ Actually, the term *indígena* is used throughout Mexican history in a number of different ways, with various implications, and so it is not so neat a correspondence as race/*indio* and class/*campesino*. Nevertheless, the term indigenous now has global significance, which has given it a particular contemporary meaning in Mexico as well.

beings challenge the injustices that flow from the way they have been categorized and the value that has been placed on the category they inhabit. But for the most part they do so from within the frame that the state has rendered significant². They frame their demands, and mobilize their challenges, within boundaries and categories made salient by states themselves—race, class, ethnicity, and so on.

In addition, different political tropes—arguments, points of access, forms of political organization, and legitimating discourses—have been historically available to different types of groups (Jung, 2006). Racialized groups often make demands for representation and inclusion into a body politic from which they have been excluded. Classes make demands for redistribution. For people who have been rendered ethnic, read through the lens of cultural difference, political legitimacy often comes to rest on the ability to assert cultural distinctiveness, and to play back the state’s assertion that such cultural difference renders identities that are fundamentally “other.” As such, they issue in demands for political autonomy and ethnic group recognition. Race, class, and ethnicity are not only categories that confer and deny standing to particular populations. They also organize distinct political and policy spaces, implying different problems.

By extension, they seem to invite different solutions³. Although there are of course exceptions, liberal democratic states have often tried to solve the problem of “race” through assimilation, including by abolishing racial categories, miscegenation, and the formal extension of equal rights⁴. The solution to “class” has been economic development. And multiculturalism has

² This argument owes an obvious debt to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, outlined in Prison Notebooks. See Anthony Marx (1998) for an illustration of the logic specifically with respect to the category of race.

³ I use the words problem and solution advisedly here, because these are the terms in which states themselves conceive their policies toward categories of people they consider problematic from the point of view of national identity formation.

⁴ Of course liberals have also excluded on the basis of race, denying humanity, rights, and freedom to people raced as “other” (see for example, Mehta, 1990). Indeed, I show that both strategies were used in Mexico, (although the Spanish colonial government had limited liberal pretensions). Here I am talking about the strategies liberal societies

emerged as the most favored solution, among academics and policy makers alike, to the contemporary salience of “ethnic” group politics⁵. Being rendered “ethnic” not only establishes culture as the site of identity formation; it also implies a particular policy space and offers a particular set of political solutions.

Multiculturalism, however, is not a response to a timeless and universal feature of the human social condition—the fundamental human need for cultural group recognition. It is part of a contemporary political frame that shapes, even as it responds to, the formation and formulation of some political demands. By starting from the assertion that human identities are constituted by cultural attachments, and that human beings require cultural group recognition to achieve full humanity (Kymlicka, 1995; Galston, 1995; Sandel, 1982; Taylor, 1994), the multicultural solution conceals the political interests that have produced culture as a political frame, funneling so much of contemporary politics through this restrictive script.

As Judith Butler has insisted, “(if) identity is not the ground of politics but instead its effect... then the political task that emerges in the wake of this critique requires that we understand not only the interests that a given cultural identity has, but the interests and the power relations that establish that identity in its reified mode to begin with.” (Butler, 1990, 339) Understanding the “interests and power relations” that shape contemporary indigenous politics shifts the ground on which we consider state obligations toward aboriginal peoples and others who suffer the continuing impact of negative categorization. The moral force of indigenous politics rests not in cultural distinctiveness but in the way that aboriginal identities have been shaped and distorted by

have often adopted since they have been compelled to accept that universalism is incompatible with racial discrimination.

⁵ This was Will Kymlicka’s claim (he refers specifically to what he calls “liberal culturalism”) in chapter 2 (41-42) of his 2001 book, *Politics in the Vernacular*. Although his claim has been challenged, I think it is largely true, in the broad sense in which he means it. Multiculturalism may not be universally practiced, nor practiced well, but it is the solution that has the strongest traction and enjoys greatest legitimacy.

state policies that have raced, classed, and ethnicized this population, and by the persistent interactions among such categories. It is structural injustice, in its multiple and abiding manifestations, rather than cultural difference, that establishes the moral force of indigenous politics.

Race and the Indian in colonial and independent Mexico

The colonial encounter is the constitutive moment of indigenous identity. Almost everywhere, such identity was racialized. In Mexico, the colonial period lasted almost 300 years, ending with independence in 1821. Mexican colonial society was rigidly and hierarchically ordered by race, which corresponded with class, and was designated through use of the term *casta*. The Spanish authorities and the Catholic Church made it their business to classify people by race, so that all official, legal, and religious documents, like certificates of baptism, confirmation, marriage, and death as well as land ownership, the census, and other forms of population registration, included the racial designation of an individual⁶.

This rigid racial hierarchy was also accompanied by a great deal of racial mixing, through so-called miscegenation and inter-marriage. Spanish colonial authorities were anxious to distinguish themselves from Anglo American colonial projects, attempting in part to prove the superiority of Spanish colonial practices through a legend of racial inclusion and incorporation through sex, marriage, and religious communion. But far from abandoning racial classifications in the face of racial instability and boundary blurring, government and church bureaucracies redoubled their efforts at classification, multiplying racial categories to describe not only mixed races but also specific mixtures of racial ancestry.

⁶ Jackson shows for example that missionaries and census takers collapsed diverse native populations into the single corporate *indio* category, reflecting the goals of Spanish policy makers (Jackson, 2007:123)

By the eighteenth century a vast array of exotic terms had been devised to refer to the different races and their offspring. *Indio* was a person of pure or almost pure indigenous ancestry. A *mestizo* was half Spanish and half indigenous. A *coyote* was $\frac{3}{4}$ Indian and $\frac{1}{4}$ European. A *mulato* was half European and half African, and a *morisco* was $\frac{3}{4}$ European and $\frac{1}{4}$ African. A *lobo* was a mixture of Indian and Black. There were also specific racial classifications assigned to people notable primarily for their racial indeterminacy, including *tente en el aire* (hold-yourself-in-mid-air), and *no te entiendo* (I-don't-understand-you). Most racial taxonomies from the period list sixteen mixtures, but some enumerate fourteen, and others nineteen or even twenty (Katzew, 1997, 3).

The multiplication of categories was meant to remind both colonial subjects and the Spanish Crown that, despite racial mixing, Mexico was still an ordered, hierarchical society in which each group occupied a specific socioeconomic niche defined largely by race. And even more importantly, that Europeans were firmly at the top of that hierarchy. As a German traveler wrote at the time, "any white person, although he rides his horse barefoot, imagines himself to be of the nobility of the country."⁷

In his travelogue *Idea compendiosa del Reyno de Nueva España* (1774), Pedro Alonso O'Crouley offered a detailed description of the lineages of New Spain explaining, in particular, how Spanish blood could be redeemed: "It is known that neither Indian nor Negro contends in dignity and esteem with the Spaniard; nor do any of the others envy the lot of the Negro, who is the "most dispirited and despised." . . . If the mixed-blood is the offspring of a Spaniard and an Indian, the stigma disappears at the third step in descent because it is held as systematic that a Spaniard and an Indian produce a mestizo; a mestizo and a Spaniard, a castizo; and a castizo and a Spaniard, a Spaniard..." (Katzew, 1997,4) What he is outlining here is not a hopeless confusion that makes

⁷ www.gc.maricopa.edu/laberinto/fall1997/castanotes.htm#n5

race a meaningless category of identification, but instead the particular set of steps through which an Indian can achieve whiteness over the course of three generations.

The phenomenon of *casta* paintings illustrates the colonial obsession with racial classification. “The production of *casta* paintings spans the entire eighteenth century. These works portray the complex process of *mestizaje* or race mixing among the three major groups that inhabited the colony: Indian, Spanish, and Black. Most of these paintings are comprised of sixteen scenes depicted on separate canvases, although occasionally the scenes are represented on a single, compartmentalized surface.”⁸ Each scene portrays a man and woman of different races with one or two of their offspring, and is accompanied by an inscription that identifies the racial mix depicted (“*De Espanol e Indio sale Mestizo*”). The series follow a specific taxonomic progression: at the beginning are scenes portraying figures of "pure" race (Spaniards), lavishly attired or engaged in occupations that indicate their higher status. As the family groups become more racially mixed, their social status diminishes. As a genre, these paintings demonstrate the obsessive preoccupation of Mexican colonial society with racial classification and with sustaining the status of Europeans in the face of racial difference and “mixing.” (Katzew, 1997,2-5)

The Spanish colonial administration of New Spain reflected that obsession through a heterogeneous body of law called *Derecho Indiano*, which gave separate legal standing to *indios*. Under *Derecho Indiano*, the term *pueblo* had a particular juridical character, referring only to those settlements that were populated by *indios*, and distinct from a *villa*, a *ciudad*, or a *real*, which were inhabited by Spanish citizens of the Crown (Kouri, 2002: 78; Zavala and Miranda, 1954). *Pueblos* received special protection from the monarchy. They held their lands in common, and *pueblo* lands were inalienable--secured by claiming primordial title or presenting pre-conquest documents (Kouri, 2002: 79). The monarchy also created a special tribunal that heard appeals by Indians

⁸ Ibid.

against lower colonial officials, recognizing Indian laws and customs as precedent (MacLachlan and Rodriguez, 1980: 103). Indians were entitled to a *fuero*—immunity from some taxes—but they were obligated to pay a tribute.

These policies were conceptually undergirded by the legal and territorial notion of a separate *República de Indios*. Throughout the colonial period, the Spanish tried to secure the acquiescence of their native subjects by conceding some degree of autonomy. *Pueblos* were administered by native governments, but they were supervised by district level Spanish officials and non-Indian parish priests. The *Repúblicas* managed most of the internal affairs of the community, collecting tribute taxes, administering justice, policing the rural population, and regulating the economic resources of land and labor (González-Hermosillo, 2001; Israel, 1975). In exchange for this limited autonomy, the colonial government used the *Repúblicas* as an instrument to exact tribute and labor from the colonized population. Spanish supervisors held native officers responsible for the prompt collection of taxes and for the loyalty of inhabitants (Ducey, 2001: 527-28). Notwithstanding hemispheric distance, as well as important differences among colonial powers, the similarity between this form of colonial governance and colonial indirect rule in Africa is striking. British colonial powers used very similar governing tactics with their racialized subjects⁹.

As a corollary to granting indigenous “autonomy,” the colonial government also denied Indians rights in citizenship, including political rights such as the right to vote. The legal distinction between Spanish and Indians was predicated on differences of civilization, maturity, and inferiority, attributes that were indicated by racial difference.

⁹ See Mamdani (1996), for instance, on the practice of colonial indirect rule in Africa.

At independence, the legal status of the Indian was abolished. The liberal 1812 Constitution of Cádiz replaced the indigenous semi-autonomous republics with ethnically blind municipal governments--*ayuntamientos* (Ducey, 2001: 528). The post-colonial order formally erased all legal distinctions, and extended citizenship and rights to the entire population, regardless of caste or race. Prominent liberal thinkers like José María Luis Mora insisted that by law, “Indians no longer exist” (Hale, 1968: 218). The liberal project was the transformation of Indians from *hijos del pueblo*, as they had been under the *Repúblicas de Indios*, to modern citizens (Ducey, 2008, 306-07).

Indeed, in the liberal post-independence era, the impoverished and “degraded” condition of the Indian was blamed on the *Derecho Indiano* which had kept Indians from learning Spanish and prevented them from entering the “rational world” (Hale, 1968: 221). Mexican liberals insisted that the Indian condition could be overcome through nutrition, education, and miscegenation. As Justo Sierra argued: “The social problem of the Indian race is a problem of nutrition and education,”... “let them eat more beef and less chile, let them learn the useful and practical lessons of science, and the Indians will transform themselves: that is all there is to it.” (Kourí, 2002: 87) He and other important liberal thinkers supported a policy of mandatory education, and insisted that the human race could be improved through proper racial intermixing to produce whiteness. To the extent liberal thought in Mexico dealt with the vexing issue of race, it did so through the prism of “scientific” ideas about racial mixing, whitening, and the categorization of species. The Indian problem would be resolved through miscegenation and assimilation.

Notwithstanding the formal equality that independence conferred on the indigenous population, the *indio* remained a racialized citizen in the first century after independence. As

Guardino acknowledges in his book on popular political culture in Oaxaca, the post-colonial notion that all men were political equals was an ideal. Oaxacan political elites “had also been indoctrinated from their earliest youth to see indigenous people as both alien and inferior.” Therefore they constructed political rules that were designed “to both govern this alien population and make it more like themselves. It was a task,” he goes on to say, “some believed would take centuries” (Guardino, 2005; 223).

Some historians have argued that the indigenous were too ignorant, isolated, or traditional to participate in politics or to understand the ideological paradigms that shaped politics in the post-independence era¹⁰. More recently however, historians have started to uncover evidence that subalterns (indigenous as well as non-indigenous) often learned to use the post-independence discourses of citizenship, nationality, and individual liberty, and they also participated widely in elections. Guardino argues that “(t)he dramatic shifts in the way Mexico’s rulers legitimated their actions beginning with the Bourbon Reforms and continuing during the construction of republican government had important consequences for the political actions and arguments of ... indigenous peasants.” (Guardino, 2005: 17)

Michael Ducey has also shown that “(t)he decade of the 1820s witnessed an opening of the political system during which local communities explored new systems of constitutional rights, equality, and town councils” ((Ducey, 2001: 537). After the wars of Independence, local politicians quickly emerged to inform Indians of their rights. Inhabitants of the *pueblos indios*

¹⁰ Guardino refers to Francois-Xavier Guerra, Modernidad e independencias: Ensayos sobre las revoluciones hispanicas (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Economica, 1993), 108, 360; David Bushnell and Neill Macaulay, The Emergence of Latin America in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Fernando Escalante Gonzalbo, Ciudadanos Imaginarios (Mexico City: El Colegio de Mexico, 1992), 56. Deborah Yashar argues similarly that most of the rural indigenous population in Latin America was excluded from state formation projects because states had limited capacity to penetrate their remote territories and populations. “Democracy, Indigenous Movements and the Post-Liberal Challenge in Latin America, World Politics, Vol.52, No.1 (1999): 76-104

often employed their constitutional rights to refuse “Indian” burdens such as clerical taxes and traditional labor demands, and accused local officials of failing the constitution (Ducey, 2001: 534). Guardino has found evidence that in Oaxaca, Indians began to cite the constitution in disputes in district court as early as 1826, a year after it was adopted (Guardino, 232). Ducey argues that liberal efforts to transform Indians into individual property-owners did not issue only in changes of rhetorical strategy, but also transformed indigenous social life and organization (Ducey, 2008, 308)¹¹.

As racialized subjects, indigenous people in Mexico continued to suffer discrimination and exclusion after Mexican independence. They invoked the constitution to insist on inclusion and equal rights precisely because those rights were often denied them. The demand for inclusion is not universal among all subordinated groups, but it is common in particular among groups constituted through racialization. In the context of liberal constitutionalism in particular, racialized groups have often been able to mine the logical inconsistency between the promise of equal rights and the reality of discriminatory political and social practices. Race produces a distinctive political space that often frames politics in terms of inclusion and representation.

Class and the peasant in revolutionary Mexico

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 dramatically transformed the character of Mexican politics and the place of Indians within it. The revolution was fought by poor subsistence farmers, many of them indigenous or largely indigenous. But the revolution was

¹¹ Ducey (2008) makes the nuanced argument that indigenous people both resisted and appropriated, transformed and were transformed by, the liberal post-colonial administration. He shows how communities responded differently to privatization laws handed down by the liberal government—but no community was immune to the liberal reforms. For reasons of space, I ignore this struggle in this section on race, but I highlight a similar struggle that takes place when the rural poor resist the efforts of the government to make them “ethnic” in the 1970s and 1980s. The process of identity formation is always negotiated, and never entirely top-down.

fought in class, not racial or ethnic, terms. The fundamental demands of the Mexican Revolution were the sub-division of large estates and the return of communal lands to the rural poor. Both Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata championed the land rights of *campesinos*, and built popular support for the revolution by promising land to those who worked it (Katz, 1988; Womack, 1999). Zapata's *Plan de Ayala* called for the return of one third of all of Mexico's hacienda lands to the peasants, under the slogan "*Tierra y Libertad*"—land and liberty (Weinberg, 1994: 8). *Campesinos* were enshrined as the heroic figure of the revolution and the symbol of modern Mexican national identity.

The post-revolutionary government advanced a very self-conscious project of modern Mexican national identity formation in part through public art, in a movement that was known as the Mexican Mural Renaissance. Such artists as Clemente Orozco, David Siqueiros, and Diego Rivera were commissioned to paint murals depicting Mexican history, including pre-Conquest history, in schools and on official public buildings. While the national identity formation project retrieved the Indian as a symbolic icon of Mexican heritage and difference, contemporary indigenous people were depicted as peasants.

As peasants, the indigenous were explicitly incorporated into the Mexican political project as one pillar of the support base that anchored the social contract between the ruling party and the Mexican citizenry. The Agrarian Law of 1915 annulled all judicial acts that dispossessed indigenous peasants of their land, laying the foundation for subsequent agricultural legislation and for the approval of Article 27 of the Constitution, which committed the government to land redistribution: "the centres of population that are wanting of common lands... shall be provided with lands, woodlands, and waters sufficient to constitute them according to the needs of their

population; in no case shall the extension which they need fail to be granted to them..." (excerpt Article 27, Mexican Constitution).

Article 27 would become the cornerstone of the social contract between the Mexican state and the peasant, anchoring rural support for the PRI for most of the twentieth century. The dominant form of land tenure to emerge from the revolution was the *ejido*, which, at its height, shielded roughly half of the territory of Mexico from the market. Through the *ejido* system, the government allocated land in communal parcels that could neither be bought nor sold. *Ejido* land could be passed down to heirs, but if any individual or family was unable to farm his portion, or left his land, the land would pass along to another *ejido* member. The revolutionary social and political origins of *ejido* land redistribution located land tenure and access firmly in the realm of politics and state patronage (Ibarra, 1996: 52). Through the *ejido* system, the Mexican state once again significantly reconstituted rural dwelling patterns and local level governance structures (Rus, 1994).

It was also through the *ejido* system that the state channeled the scope and organization of peasant politics. For most of the twentieth century, Mexican state policy toward its peasants was primarily driven by the goal of development: land redistribution was at the center of the project, but the state also provided agricultural subsidies and inputs, credit, and health, education, and modernization programs. In 1938, the Cárdenas government formed the National Confederation of Peasants (CNC), a corporatist body designed to organize peasants into a single national hierarchical structure that would channel politics and serve as a vehicle for state patronage.

It wasn't until the 1970s that peasants began to organize independent and truly oppositional organizations, but still these took the form of peasant unions. Indigenous cultural

identity was not foregrounded as an oppositional paradigm, and indigenous languages were hardly ever the medium of communication, even in regions that were primarily inhabited by people who did not speak Spanish as their first language¹². In addition, they always took the form of “unions,” and not associations or organizations. As one activist explained, “In those days all organizations had to be named *Union de Ejidos* to have any legitimacy with the people.”

¹³ Unions, a form of organization rooted in labor, was the predominant form of Mexican associational life for most of the twentieth century.

Not surprisingly, the politics that was generated against this discursive and ideological background was focused on land. As one former peasant activist explained, “the struggle then was always for land and only land.”¹⁴ It was also for things related to land, like agricultural inputs, fair prices for agricultural products, credit, control over marketing boards, transport and storage for agricultural exports. But in retrospect, some activists have described this as the politics of small things¹⁵. The government gave away small things, handed out patronage, buying quiescence while simultaneously shutting down any more radical political impulse aimed at real transformation. Politics throughout this period, peasant politics, was about redistribution.

Such demands were rooted in a class paradigm. Luis Hernández Cruz, a former peasant activist, succinctly described the political world-view that sustained a peasant identity. “In those days (the 1970s and 1980s) (we used) the language of workers, the proletariat. But for all the activists and leaders in Mexico, in Chiapas, it was the same discourse, the system, the alternative, the socialist project, based on the example of the Soviet Union. This was the solution to poverty,

¹² Luis Hernandez Navarro, a union organizer in Chiapas during the 1980s and 1990s, tells the story that the first time he ever heard a meeting conducted in an indigenous language was in 1994, after the Zapatista uprising. (Author interview, October 2000)

¹³ Author interview with Araceli Burguete, August 2000

¹⁴ Author interview with Luis Hernandez Cruz, June 2002

¹⁵ Author interview with Margarita Gutierrez, May 2001

misery, hunger. What's more, I remain convinced that the only alternative to resolve the inequalities and injustices of the world, and in this country, is a system of socialism.”¹⁶

Ethnicity and the indigenous in the neo-liberal state

Starting in the 1970s, however, a small but influential group of so-called critical anthropologists began to condemn government policy toward indigenous peoples, arguing for cultural protection, bilingual education, and other programs that would offer cultural respect to indigenous people. They argued that the indigenous question should be seen through a cultural lens, not a class lens, that the solution was cultural recognition and revitalization, not modernization and economic development (Bonfil Batalla et al. 1970). They identified “cultural oppression” as the primary source of injustice against Mexico’s indigenous population. Under the influence of the critical anthropologists, government policy started to shift toward cultural recognition in the 1970s¹⁷.

For the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*), this cultural restoration project was part of a larger effort to buttress control and support in rural areas. The ruling party found itself seriously de-legitimated after the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre, and it was struggling in the early 1970s, under Echeverría, to rebuild its authority and support base. This only got harder in the 1980s, as neoliberal reforms undermined the corporatist structures that had linked the government with various population sectors, including peasants, through a social safety net.

In his six years in office, Echeverría increased the INI budget tenfold, and the number of INI coordinating centers rose from 12 to 70. INI was charged with demonstrating greater cultural sensitivity, and with including indigenous participation in the implementation of development

¹⁶ Author interview with Luis Hernandez Cruz, June 2002

¹⁷ See Jung, 2008, 162-169 for a more detailed account of the indigenous turn in Mexican state policy in the 1970s and 1980s.

policies. The new initiative included a number of high profile programs aimed at cultural protection and revival, including redefining the juridical status of indigenous populations through legal recognition of cultural difference, paving the way for legal pluralism. INI administrators also focused attention on the conservation of cultural patrimony through recognition of cultural practices (Jung, 2008, 164).

In 1973, the state oversaw the formation of a Consejo Supremo (Supreme Council) for each ethnic group in Mexico as a fourth sectoral pillar of party support. In 1974 the government promoted the first Indigenous Congress in Chiapas, and in 1975 the National Indigenous Institute (INI) sponsored the “First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples” in Pátzcuaro (Jung, 2008, 163-164; Postero and Zamosc, 2004, 44). In 1975, the Supreme Councils were unified in the Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas (CNPI) to represent and channel indigenous interests through the ruling party.

Although Mexico started its first experiments in bilingual education in 1939, until the 1970s the goal of bilingual education was to teach Spanish to indigenous children. In 1979, however, the Department of Education (SEP) updated its teacher training and primary school curricula to create a program of bilingual and bicultural education aimed at genuine cultural hybridity rather than merely Hispanicization. A new Project of Ethnolinguists was inaugurated with the intention of forming a fresh cohort of bilingual educators focused on cultural promotion as well as indigenous language revitalization. This new agenda forced the Ministry to open its internal hierarchies to increased numbers of educators and academics of indigenous origin (Postero and Zamosc, 2004, 45).

Nevertheless, most indigenous people resisted the cultural resurrection project of the government, often opposing indigenous language instruction (Acunzo, 1991; Leyva and Ascencio, 1996, 99), and turning to increasingly radical peasant political organization in the 1970s and 1980s.

The government-sponsored 1974 Indigenous Congress in Chiapas for example, brought together delegates from 327 communities representing the state's four major linguistic groups: Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, and Chol. But within that context, delegates organized seminars and discussion groups under the headings of land, commerce, education, and health, and produced an array of demands in these areas. The Indigenous Congress also served as the catalyst for the mobilization and organization of many of the peasant and worker unions that radicalized rural Chiapas politics in the 1980s and 1990s. Union organizers explicitly eschewed an indigenous identity, however, because being "indigenous" did not afford the political standing, access, organizational networks, and grassroots legitimacy that were available to "peasants" (Jung, 2008, 130). As recently as the late 1980s, the idea that the indigenous could be a relevant social or political category was almost completely alien.¹⁸

Gradually, however, the political and economic leverage of peasant politics was diminished through neoliberal reforms that undermined the corporatist links between the state and peasants and shrunk the political space for demands for economic redistribution, agricultural inputs, and land. Mexico's economic and financial autonomy were severely curtailed when the government was forced to turn to the IMF as a result of the 1982 debt crisis. IMF imposed austerity measures limited the state's capacity to respond to peasant demands for agricultural subsidies, price controls, and supports. Once the Mexican government entered negotiations with the United States toward the North American Free Trade Agreement, the political space of the peasant contracted to practically nothing.

At the same time, the fall of the Berlin Wall dramatically undercut the ideological purchase of a Marxist political framework, undermining the power of the class paradigm. In many parts of the world, the end of the Cold War, and the apparent victory it signaled for free market capitalism,

¹⁸ Author interviews, especially with Margarita Gutierrez, May 2001 and Araceli Burguete, August 2000

issued in profound disorientation and disarticulation. The class terms in which many political struggles had been framed and conceived appeared to disintegrate as states and markets were ideologically uncoupled.

At roughly the same time, two developments opened political and legal space for indigenous mobilization. The international legal order started to develop the concept of indigenous rights—most prominently in ILO Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which entered into force in 1991. And, as states withdrew their commitments to social and economic support, some, including Mexico and many other states in Latin America, attempted to renegotiate the terms of citizenship by extending cultural rights to their marginalized populations. In 1992, the Mexican government reformed Article 27 of the Constitution to end land redistribution. It was also in 1992 that the government amended Article 4 of the Constitution to recognize, for the first time, the multicultural character of the nation, described explicitly as the co-existence of different languages and cultures. It would be hard to imagine a clearer symbolic statement of the trade-off between redistribution and recognition, class and culture.

Luis Hernández Cruz, the former peasant activist who has emerged as a champion of indigenous rights since his election to the Chiapas state Congress in 2001, explained his own transition from peasant to indigenous identity as one in which identity followed politics. As he explained, “The proletarian struggle, the workers struggle, is one path, but the struggle of indigenous people for autonomy and self-determination, that is another path. They are both about social justice, they come together, they reinforce one another. The struggle is something one needs to search for; one needs to find the terms of struggle. *La lucha hay que buscarla*. There is no other way but to seek it out.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Author interview, June 2002

As peasants have been gradually reconceived as indigenous people, so too has the space--issues, alliances, tactics--of politics been channeled from redistribution to recognition. The 1992 constitutional reform of Article 4, which pledged to protect and promote the culture and language of indigenous peoples, inaugurated this political shift. Article 4 generated significant opposition because it was located in Chapter One of the First Section of the Constitution titled "Of Individual Guarantees." Seizing on the promise of cultural protection, indigenous rights activists demanded recognition for the collective rights of indigenous communities. The call for collective rights was produced in the familiar language of cultural difference.

1992 also marked the 500 year anniversary of the "discovery" of the Americas, which thrust the issue of the colonial conquest, and indigenous oppression, squarely into the public and political arenas. As Araceli Burguete explained, "In 1992, for the first time, Mexican society turned its gaze on the Indians. That is to say, if 1994 had happened in 1990, Mexican society would not have responded the same way (sympathetically) to the Zapatista uprising. Those four years made an enormous difference. Between 1990 and 1992 the idea of indigenous visibility was beginning to be cemented."²⁰

Ironically, it was Mexico that played an important role in catalyzing indigenous mobilization around the commemoration, by formally protesting the Spanish government's use of the term "discovery" to describe Columbus' expedition. Throughout Latin America, 1992 is commonly acknowledged as a pivotal moment in the formation of indigenous identity. By defiantly re-naming the anniversary "Five Hundred Years of Resistance to Oppression," indigenous activists located indigenous identity not only in cultural difference but also in a common history of structural injustice. Nevertheless, as Burguete admits, the gaze that society has turned on indigenous people is

²⁰ Author interview, August 2000

most often “the folkloric gaze,”²¹ which locates indigeneity in colorful costumes, exotic belief systems, threatened languages, and ancient legal and political practices. These are the attributes that Mexican multicultural reforms have attempted to protect and preserve.

In 1995, the ruling PRI legalized the use of *usos y costumbres* – traditional selection methods for local mayoral candidates -- in indigenous majority municipalities in Oaxaca. In so doing, it banned political parties from electoral participation at the local level. Analysts have demonstrated that the PRI legalized *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca to try to perpetuate the PRI's hold over Oaxaca's rural areas despite the party's electoral decline after the late 1980s. Anaya-Muñoz (2002) and Recondo (2006) have argued that, while the legalization of *usos y costumbres* had the veneer of being responsive to indigenous demands for recognition and autonomy, the Oaxaca state legislature's electoral reform was driven by a precipitous decline in the PRI vote share. Passing a law to keep indigenous municipal elections "free" from party involvement minimized opposition party incursions under the guise of promoting indigenous representational "purity" (Anaya-Muñoz 2002, 192–202; Recondo 2006, 8–18). Todd Eisenstadt has shown that one significant outcome of *usos y costumbres* has been a significant rise in post-electoral conflict (Eisenstadt, 2007). Nevertheless, the recognition of *usos y costumbres* in Oaxaca is by far the most tangible achievement of the Mexican indigenous rights movement.

By contrast, the indigenous rights movement in Chiapas, which includes the Zapatistas, has tried to extend indigenous voice beyond issues of cultural recognition. Their demands include representation and democracy, but have also focused attention on political autonomy, control over resources, and resistance to neo-liberal globalization. The limits of indigenous voice can be discerned through the politics surrounding the Plan Puebla Panamá, renamed the Mesoamerica Integration and Development Project in June 2008.

²¹ Ibid.

The Plan Puebla Panamá/Mesoamerica Project is a *maquiladora*, communication, and transportation corridor slated to run from the city of Puebla in Mexico through Central America to Colombia. At its most ambitious, plans for the corridor have included a rail-line, a network of super-highways, electricity and other energy lines, pipelines, hydroelectric dams, and six “development zones” for *maquiladora* plants and processing facilities. Projects related to agriculture focus on large scale irrigation, mono-crop tree plantations, and privatization of indigenous and communal lands. The PPP promotes a land use model characterized by large highways connecting newly urbanized industrial zones across tracts of privately controlled agricultural land. The Plan includes relocating indigenous populations to “rural cities” to better organize service provision and “achieve a more efficient form of territorial organization” and production²². By removing indigenous people from the land, rural cities will provide a ready source of labor for the PPP.

The Plan is funded by multi-lateral development bank support and private investment. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) directs the financial structure of the Plan, with credit and technical assistance from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. It is intended to promote free trade and to generate employment and sustainable development, extending NAFTA southward by providing cheap labor and opening markets in the nine states of southeastern Mexico and the eight countries of Central America²³. Although the Plan languished for almost seven years with very little progress, in March 2008 Chiapas governor Sabines announced plans for a series of infrastructure megaprojects, all part of the initial blueprint for the PPP. These include six highways, internationalizing the Palenque airport, expanding the Angel

²² http://www.ciepac.org/boletines/chiapas_en.php?id=562

²³ (<http://www.iadb.org/ppp/>).

Albino Corzo international airport, modernizing and extending the rail system, and paving a number of rural roads in and around the Montes Azules Biosphere Reserve.

The Plan Puebla Panamá has been targeted by a number of international anti-globalization activists. It is opposed by environmentalists who fear the ecological effects of industry on the Lacandón Jungle and who worry that the exploitation of primary materials and dam construction projects will lead to environmental degradation. Free trade agreements often exempt foreign companies from national environmental laws, and Mexico's rate of deforestation currently ranks second in the world. The Plan is also feared by bio-piracy activists who argue that the location of the corridor gives pharmaceutical and other companies almost complete access to medicinal plants, and to indigenous knowledge about such plants. It is also opposed by Mexican labor activists who argue that the *maquiladora* model of employment allows trans-national corporations to pay un-livable wages by exempting them from national labor laws. Social rights activists worry that all of the social and economic pathologies that have been evident on the *maquiladora* border with the United States will be reproduced and even magnified in the area of the proposed corridor. Feminists oppose *maquiladora* employment because it is particularly exploitative of women, paying unequal wages and enforcing birth control policies that abrogate women's reproductive rights²⁴.

Indigenous rights activists argue that the corridor will violate the integrity of indigenous lands, and that it is not by chance that the corridor dissects Oaxaca and Chiapas, the two states with the highest concentration of indigenous populations in Mexico, as well as Guatemala, and historically indigenous lands on down through Colombia. They argue that the proximity of the corridor to indigenous land will draw off the remaining indigenous population, ringing the death

²⁴ <http://www.globalexchange.org> accessed 3/10/2007

knell of indigenous communal life and culture. *Maquiladora* industries will exploit and extract resources that are rightfully indigenous. Under the auspices of Plan development, the Mexican government has begun to revive a scheme to build a new dam on the Guatemalan border which would flood a number of potentially important Mayan archaeological sites, drastically transform the local ecosystem, and inundate thousands of hectares of land currently under subsistence cultivation²⁵.

The Mexican government has expressed its sensitivity to these concerns by adorning the official government website of the Plan Puebla Panama with images of indigenous people in traditional costume²⁶. The website frames the initiative as one of sustainable development, with a focus on “low income farmers, Indian peoples, and Afro-Caribbean communities.” The Plan promised to “encourage their participation and social inclusion in all programs and especially those which require sound environment management and sustainable use of natural resources in their communities, as well as the strengthening of their local government institutions.”²⁷ On an official state visit to Guatemala in March 2004, President Fox insisted that Mexico “would take no action, no decision, that violated the rights of persons or communities, that interfered with tradition or custom, or that is not in agreement with what the community itself decides.”²⁸

Through much of 2007, the front page of the PPP website was dedicated to the activities of an indigenous advisory group consisting of indigenous representatives of all countries included in the Plan. This group, which has a permanent advisory role according to the PPP website, met three times in 2006—the first two times seemingly to establish and formalize its status, and the

²⁵ Carlos Mari “Peligra la Zona Maya,” *Reforma* 1/27/2003

²⁶ This was true as late as March 2007 (<http://ppp.sre.gob.mx>). The new website of the Mesoamerica Project (<http://www.planpuebla-panama.org/>) displays images of road construction and mono-crop agriculture, with no sign of the people who are the supposed beneficiaries of the plan.

²⁷ (<http://ppp.sre.gob.mx>)

²⁸ Sergio Sarmiento, “Jaque Mate/Usos y Costumbres” *Reforma*, 3/25/2004

last time, in July 2006, to convene a “participatory forum for the identification of cultural projects.” Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, part of the politics of the Plan already appears to involve limiting indigenous participation to cultural matters.

Conclusion

In different historical periods, Mexico’s aboriginal population has been read through the prisms of “race,” “class,” and “ethnicity,” with far-reaching implications for the content, boundaries, and political orientation of its’ “identity.” Such designations have been salient because the government explicitly employed such classifications to discriminate among segments of the population in the assignment of rights, access, and power. In so doing, it conferred “identities” that have formed the basis of opposition and oriented the tropes of politics. Seemingly objective facts, like dark skin and shortness of stature, poverty and engagement in subsistence cultivation, and distinctive language and cultural practices, have been rendered more and less relevant in particular periods of Mexican history. Aboriginal perceptions of who they were, how they were to be incorporated, and what constituted justice for their group, also shifted, roughly in line with changing designations.

This history has far reaching implications for normative theories of state obligation toward ethnic minorities. It is neither accurate nor normatively desirable to confer standing on people based on whether we sort them into “class,” or “race” or “ethnicity.” Liberal democratic theory in particular has a long history of thinking through the obligations of states by category. The solution to race is assimilation or colorblindness; to class it is development, and sometimes redistribution, and to ethnicity it is, at present, multiculturalism. And yet people, and groups, do not sort naturally into these categories. Sorting human beings into race, class, and ethnicity is

already a political project that slots people into particular political, legal, and policy spaces and then shapes the limits and contours of their political voice.

The history of aboriginal classification in Mexico highlights, in a way that is generalizable beyond Mexico and beyond indigenous people, the fact that such categories as “race,” “class,” and “ethnicity,” which play such an important role in mediating human identity, are state constructs, and not inherent categories of group membership²⁹. As this history demonstrates, the markers that identify a category, first as a “group,” and then as a group of a particular type, have less to do with the internal attributes of the group than they do with the particular ideological and historical moment in which the state attempts to render them legible. A normative theory of state obligation needs to be sensitive to the fact that the designation of a group, as race, class, or ethnicity, can change. Such a theory must also be sensitive to the fact that the state itself plays an important role in whether and how it changes.

²⁹ Many groups, however, may have similar histories, because the hegemonies of “race,” “class,” and “ethnicity” in particular historical periods was hardly limited to Mexico.

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