

MODERNIZING THE STATE OR RE-ENFORCING TRADITION? INDIAN
COMMUNITIES AND POLITICAL CENTRALIZATION IN RURAL CHIAPAS, 1876-1914

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This paper is an edited version of chapter five of my book, *Producing Modernity in Mexico: Landed Power, Race and the State in Chiapas, 1876-1914*, which will be published by Oxford University Press later in 2010. It analyses political „modernization“ and state formation in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas during the Porfiriato „from below“, specifically examining how the regime consolidated power within Indian communities in order to carry out policies aimed at strengthening the national state and developing the export economy in the period before the Revolution of 1910-40. The preceding chapters of the book examine the colonial and early national history of Chiapas, the „high politics“ of Porfirian modernization, and the relationship between positivism, racial ideology and policies designed to consolidate the modern state and develop the market economy. Later chapters look at agrarian change, debt peonage and regional export development.

The Jefaturas Políticas, Forced Labour and Caciquismo

After 1892 the *jefes políticos* (district governors) were directly appointed by the governor, providing the executive with heightened administrative control throughout the state. In Chiapas, as in the rest of the republic, the powers of the *jefe político* were wide-ranging, multi-faceted and authoritarian. For example, according to a manual of the early 1890s, in Chiapas the *jefes políticos* were responsible for public order, law enforcement, issuing fines, orders of apprehension and arrest, tax collection, economic development, public works, education and health, the civil registry, public ceremonies and enforcing vagrancy legislation - “reprimanding vagrants so that they take on a profession or an honest and lucrative post”. They were also “the means of communication between the governor and subalterns”, responsible for hearing complaints about the functionaries under their administration and

simultaneously “resolving subalterns” doubts regarding the political order”.¹ In 1911 the *jefes políticos* in Chiapas were the focus of criticisms of the regime by the Catholic opposition, but after 1900 even political figures sympathetic to the goals of *científico* modernization noted the way in which the *jefe políticos*’ unchecked power had led to systematic abuses in Chiapas – against property owners as well as the poor.²

Map of the state of Chiapas, showing administrative districts c. 1910



One of the principal legislative tools at the *jefe político*’s disposal was the 1880 Regulation of Police and Good Government. This document aimed to increase state control over rural, and specifically Indian, labour through the tighter regulation of vagrancy and alcohol. Thus, alcohol could be legally sold in Indian towns only during *fiestas* and on

¹ Antonio A Moguel, (n/d), *Reseña de las atribuciones y deberes de los jefes políticos de Chiapas, Formada de acuerdo con la legislación vigente y por disposición del ejecutivo del estado*, (Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Imprenta del Gobierno).

² Archivo General Porfirio Díaz, La Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City, AGPD, Legajo XXVIII, expediente 9929, Manuel Cruz to Porfirio Díaz, June 30 1903.

haciendas with the permission of the *finquero*; domestic servants and debt peons could not leave their masters “to give themselves over to leisure or drunkenness”; and the municipal presidents and rural judges were to send a register of all those in their area of jurisdiction who lacked goods or income, along with a list of *ladino* men, to the Jefatura Política so that “jefes políticos and municipal presidents [could] ...provide a suitable profession, art, post or occupation to each depending on class and condition and to the Indians who do not have regular employment”.³

In 1897 a rural police force was established in the state, the same year in which the *jefes políticos* became responsible for overseeing contracts of indentured labour (*enganche*).⁴ The timing was not coincidental. The form now used to register indebted workers included the person’s name, their guardian if a minor, debt, position, duties, place of origin, marital status, sex, age, height, hair colour, and the shape of his or her forehead, nose, eyes and chin – information useless unless there was a police force capable of pursuing runaways.⁵ According to the new law, the owners, administrators, tenants and overseers of *fincas* over 500 hectares were to become rural police agents, who could register four subordinates from among neighbouring proprietors or settlers (*colonos*) to help enforce the law - all of whom had to be approved by the *jefe político*.⁶ Landowners were thus authorized by the state to police the countryside in accordance with their own interests, although the frequent rivalries between *finqueros*, particularly over labour, inevitably diminished the effectiveness of such control. Thus, in 1907 the state further increased its role, ordering that the *jefes políticos* should not only retain lists of the workers contracted in their districts, but should actively participate in the process itself. Labour contractors (*enganchadores*) now had to register all

³ Biblioteca Na Bolom, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, „Reglamento de policía y buen gobierno”, June 1 1880

⁴ Instituto Nacional de Arqueología e Historia (INAH), Museo de Antropología, Serie Chiapas, Roll 78, Vol. XXVIII, “Congressional decree,” 24 May 1897.

⁵ Archivo Municipal de San Cristóbal de Las Casas (AMSCLC), Presidencia Municipal, 1898, expediente 142.

⁶ INAH, Museo de Antropología, Serie Chiapas, Roll 78, Vol. XXVIII, “De la policía rural y su organización,” December 18 1897

workers directly with the *jefatura política* and contracts were to be brokered and enforced by the municipal governments in return for a fee which was added to the individual worker's debt.⁷ This was a kind of tax paid by the worker – not to insure his health or welfare, but to guarantee his recapture if he did not complete the contract.

Besides the rural police, the *jefes políticos* governed in the countryside by means of unelected municipal agents and municipal secretaries, *ladinos* who were named by the *jefes políticos* to oversee tax collection, and, increasingly after 1900, the municipal presidents. The *jefe político* usually appointed these subordinates from among one or two *ladino* families in each municipality, who were paid with a share of the profits from tax collection, alcohol monopolies and labour contracting. Indeed, according to a government circular of 1903, many of the individuals who operated as municipal agents, and committed numerous abuses in Indian towns, had no legal authority and were simply clients of the *jefe político*.⁸ As the opposition *La Voz de Chiapas* highlighted, such *caciquismo* had its roots in the patrimonial nature of centralized state authority:

“...here a jefe político ignorant and despotic; there an alcalde or municipal president inflated and cruel; over there an agent of the Jefatura as pretentious and tyrannical as he is stupid and ruffian, and still...they are caciques with no more authority than that of compadrazgo, friendship or family relationships with “those above” ...”⁹

⁷ Jan Rus, 2004, „Revoluciones contenidas: Los indígenas y la lucha por Los Altos de Chiapas, 1910-1925“ in *Mesoamérica*, 46, pp. 64-8.

⁸ AGPD, Legajo XXVIII, expediente 15736, “Circular 18, Secretaría de Gobernación de Chiapas”, 25 August 1903.

⁹ *La Voz de Chiapas*, February 12 1911.

Thus, although the municipal authorities were supposed to be chosen by and accountable to the local population, the centralization of power meant that they were appointed by and responsible to the *jefe político*.¹⁰

The local schoolteacher was frequently also the municipal secretary or municipal agent. He thus combined various overlapping administrative responsibilities with the sale of alcohol and labour contracting. For example, in 1904 the priest of Chamula, Belisario Trejo, colourfully described the town's municipal agent thus:

“...[he was] the absolute lord, owner of lives and haciendas, a thousand times worse than the famous encomenderos...he had an enormous store of alcohol in the municipal palace and almost always administered justice when drunk. He freely sent whomever he wished to prison...attended the telephone, [and] he was named schoolteacher (which in the Indian towns is synonymous with tyrant) although he never had a single pupil.”¹¹

A similar picture emerges in other municipalities. In San Ysidro Siltepec, Motozintla, the school teacher, who was also municipal secretary, telephonist, and secretary of the local court, was accused of never undertaking any teaching responsibilities.¹² In Zinacantán it was alleged that the municipal secretary frequently imposed arbitrary fines and imprisonment on the inhabitants during *fiestas* and that he and the schoolteacher abducted children, freeing them only when their parents had paid a ransom of four to five *pesos*.¹³

Much of the power of the *jefes políticos* and their subordinates stemmed from tax collection along with the authority to enforce vagrancy statutes and fine and imprison the

¹⁰ AGPD, Legajo XXVIII, expediente 15736, “Circular 20, Secretaria de Gobernación de Chiapas”, 18 November 1903.

¹¹ INAREMAC, *Boletín del Archivo histórico Diocesano San Cristóbal de Las Casas*, Vol. IV, no. 4, November 1991, p. 31.

¹² AGPD, Legajo XXX, expediente 16633, Mariano López to P. Díaz, 4 December 1905.

¹³ Archivo Histórico de Chiapas, Tuxtla Gutiérrez (AHCH), Gobernación, 1909, Vol. XI, expediente 45, 28 August 1909. In 1896 it was made obligatory for children between 6 and 12 years to attend school: INAH, Biblioteca Manuel Orozco y Berra, Archivo Chiapas, Roll 9, “Ley Reglamentaria de la Instrucción Obligatoria en el estado”, 27 November 1896.

population for a number of poorly defined misdemeanours, including disobedience, lack of respect towards authority, verbal and physical assault and drunken and scandalous behaviour.¹⁴ Most of these fines, as a government circular of 1895 noted, were never reported or handed over to the state treasury by the *jefes políticos*.¹⁵ Furthermore, in addition to the official education and head taxes, municipal transit taxes (*alcabalas*) continued to be collected by the local authorities long after their formal abolition, as did numerous other arbitrary contributions.¹⁶ For example, in 1910, the inhabitants of San Pablo in Simojovel complained to the governor about the “abuses committed daily” by the municipal secretary, Pomposo Martínez, who had succeeded his brother in the post after the latter was dismissed by the *jefe politico* for “abuse of power”:

“he is today the terror of the town; for without the least consideration and without hearing pleas or cries, he treats our poor families with cruel despotism, imposing unjust fines and taxes that we never had to pay before, such as two reales [25 centavos] for each death certificate, one real [12.5 centavos] alcabala for each pig that we sell, and under the pretext of the construction of the cabildo, he fines all those who do not go to work on it, even though he does not pay them even a single cent. After getting the poor Indians of the town drunk he arrests them and frees them only after they have paid a fine of at least two pesos.”¹⁷

It was a similar scenario in the town of Oxchuc, bordering the districts of Las Casas and Chilón. In 1898 a number of the inhabitants complained to the governor about the municipal agent, Margarito Penagos. They alleged that he had altered the tax rolls in order to overcharge the head tax, he fined the inhabitants five pesos for drunkenness and taxed them one peso for entering the town square. Even though he was not qualified to oversee the civil

¹⁴ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Tomo VII, expediente 35.

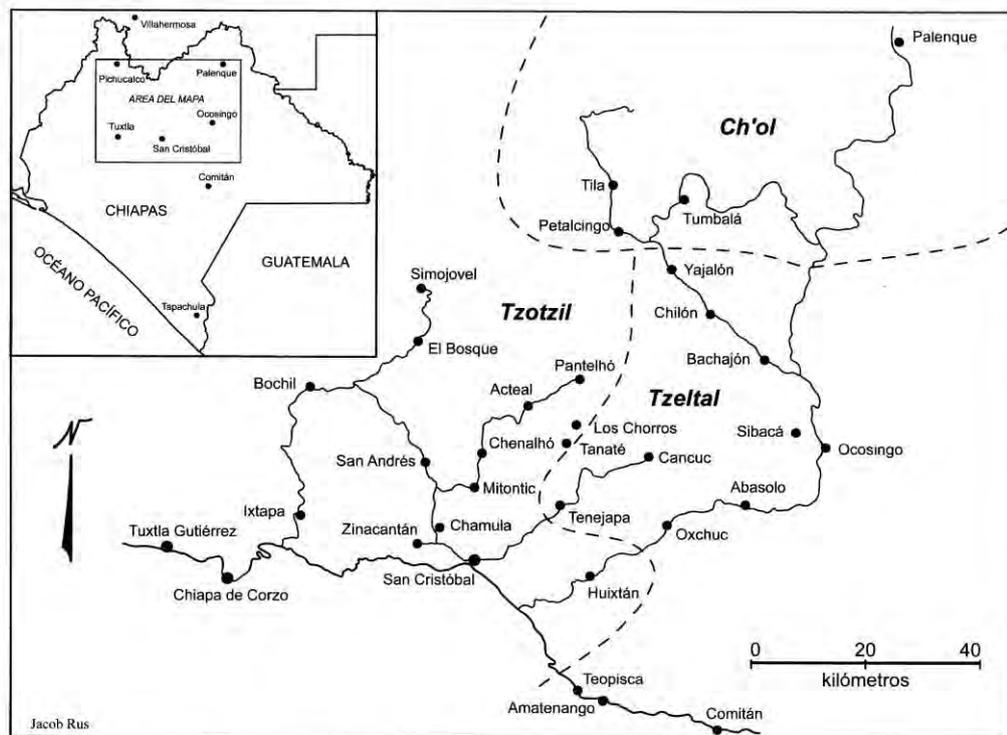
¹⁵ Secretary of Government, circular number 4, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, April 17 1895.

¹⁶ See Daniel Cosío Villegas, 1957, *Historia Moderna de México, El Porfiriato, La Vida Social* (Editorial Hermes: Mexico City), pp. 231-2.

¹⁷ AHCH, Gobernación, 1910, Vol. XIV, expediente 46.

register, he charged between one and ten pesos for each death certificate and eight and twelve pesos for a marriage certificate. He had a monopoly of the sale of alcohol and groceries and severely punished any commercial rivals. He contracted workers for local *finqueros* on a commission basis, asking twelve reales (1.5 pesos) per week for each worker and paying only six (0.75 pesos). He confiscated many peoples' lands and demanded unpaid labour on his properties. Finally, emulating the priests' traditional scams, he fined the inhabitants five pesos each for not attending saints' day celebrations.

Map of central and northern Chiapas



MAPA 3. Los Altos y el norte de Chiapas, con caminos de 2004

However, their previous complaints regarding Penagos' "greed and arbitrary actions" had led only to greater abuses. For, authorized by the *jefe político* and the district magistrate, he had

jailed fifteen of their children and siblings and undertaken “cruel attacks” against their families in retaliation for their “cry[ing] out against such injustice”.¹⁸

The abuse of power was thus systematic in Porfirian Chiapas, most notably in predominantly Indian districts such as Chamula, Las Casas, Simojovel, Palenque and Chilón, which were considered by politicians and investors as the principal source of labour for the export sector. Indeed, in 1904 the opposition newspaper *El Clavel Rojo* accused the *jefes políticos* of Chilón and neighbouring Palenque of being at the heart of a “trade in human flesh” associated with all the “horrors of slavery”¹⁹ and in 1911 the independent Catholic newspaper *La Voz de Chiapas* directly blamed the Rabasas for the “crimes” and “slavery” of the *monterías* of Chilón.²⁰ The evidence strongly suggests that *enganche* to the large coffee and rubber plantations and logging camps in Chilón and neighbouring Palenque was not just the result of *ad hoc* corruption at the municipal or even district level, but was instead a deliberate policy born of the personal, political and financial links between big investors, the federal government and *rabasistas* in Chiapas. In the case of logging, Emilio Rabasa was friendly with Policarpo Valenzuela with whom he definitively resolved the old problem of the state boundary between Chiapas and Tabasco.²¹ The general representative of the infamous merchant and logging company Casa Romano in Chiapas was the *tuxtleco*, Joaquín Peña, a friend of Ramón Rabasa, who appointed Peña *jefe político* of Las Casas in 1905.²² Another friend of the Rabasas with interests in logging was Agustín Farrera, an associate in the surveying company of Martínez de Castro.²³ In 1904 Rafael Pimental played down the “apparent” violation of individual guarantees that had precipitated an uprising in the *montería*

¹⁸ Archivo General del Poder Judicial, Ocosingo, Ramo Penal, expediente 1674, „Indígenas de Oxchuc contra el Agente Municipal, Margarito Penagos“, 1898.

¹⁹ *El Clavel Rojo*, 2 October 1904; and *La Voz de Chiapas*, 12 March 1911.

²⁰ *La Voz de Chiapas*, 19 February 1911.

²¹ Antonio García de León, 1985, *Resistencia y Utopía: Memorial de agravios y crónica de revueltas y profecías acaecidas en la provincia de Chiapas durante los últimos 500 años de su historia*, Vols. II, (Ediciones Era: Mexico City), p. 15.

²² Cuauhtémoc González Pacheco, 1983, *Capital extranjero en la Selva de Chiapas, 1863-1982*, (Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas, UNAM: Mexico City), p. 105.

²³ AGPD, Legajo XXIV, expediente 11522, A. Farrera to P. Díaz, 10 August 1899.

Tinieblas in Palenque, and assured congress that measures had been taken to guarantee that such events would not be repeated.²⁴ Eight years later, as lawyer for Casa Romano in Mexico City, his brother, the *científico* Emilio Pimental, denied the existence of slavery in the *monterías* before the Madero government.²⁵

Another clear link between *enganche* in northern Chiapas and the *rabasista* regime in Tuxtla is found in the *cacicazgo* of Abraham Suárez, *jefe político* of Chilón in 1911 and brother in law of the secretary-general of government. Suárez's principal henchmen in the Indian towns of Cancuc and Bachajón were his brother, Ramón, and his brother-in-law, Melitón Grajales.²⁶ As in Indian municipalities throughout Chiapas, these *caciques* engaged in labour contracting, land-grabbing, commercial monopolies, above all of alcohol, conscripting workers for public works and private enterprises and imposing arbitrary fines and taxes; all on the basis of a pastiche of patrimonial and civil authority.

For example, Abraham Suárez regularly forced Indian peasants and the *mozos* of rival *finqueros* to work on public works and private properties owned by himself, his friends and his clientele.²⁷ In 1909 he was accused by Indians from Bachajón of trying to force the *principales* to buy "for the good of the town" a piece of land said to be owned by the *tuxtleco* Fausto Moguel for the price of 8000 *pesos*. For their refusal, they had been threatened with prison and the army and four Indians had been detained for twenty days.²⁸ In 1910 Suárez was said to have received a gift of 10,000 *pesos* from the administrator of Casa Romano for arranging labour recruitment and control²⁹ and in 1911 he was accused of having made 2,100 *pesos* by selling Indians arrested and fined for drunkenness in the municipalities of Bachajón

²⁴ INAH, Biblioteca Orozco y Berra, Archivo Histórico de Chiapas, Roll 11 "Informe del Gobernador del Estado a La XXIII Legislatura", 16 September 1904.

²⁵ García de León, 1985, Vol. II, p. 36.

²⁶ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Vol. XI, expediente 45, 13 October 1909.

²⁷ AHCH- Fondo Documental Fernando Castañón Gamboa (FDFCG), expediente 1060, "Comunicaciones de las Presidencias Municipales de Bachajón, Cancuc, Oxchuc and San Martín", 1908; *La Voz de Chiapas*, 7 May 1911; *La Voz de Chiapas*, 14 May 1911.

²⁸ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Vol. XI, expediente 45, originarios y vecinos de Bachajón to the state governor, September 1 1909.

²⁹ *Mas Allá*, 13 November 1910.

and Cancuc to the *montería* Tinieblas, and the American owned plantations El Encanto and Agua Clara in Palenque.³⁰ In addition, Suárez controlled gambling and alcohol distribution in the district, a source of revenue and a means to generate debts that could form the basis of *enganche*.³¹

Besides increased taxes and fines, the Indians were made to pay fees for marriages and provide rations and unpaid labour, as they traditionally had for the priest. For example, according to Jan Rus, by 1907 in the town of Cancuc annual taxation had risen to 10.87 *pesos* per person, more than 40 days pay at the highest wage rate of 25 *centavos* per day.³² However, official taxes were only part of the story, as residents of the town revealed two years later, when they complained to the governor about the schoolteacher and municipal agent, Melitón Grajales:

“...the teacher, Señor Grajales, obliges us to make many payments that we do not consider just because in our town there is no cash and no progress (*adelanto*). He abuses our women, marries our underage children charging eight pesos for this, he has three houses in the maize field (*milpería*) used for the purpose of selling alcohol; he confiscates our hens, [and] our pigs, without paying us a single cent, the same with our maize and beans. We have paid eighty pesos, so he said, for his saint’s day feast and one hundred pesos for victims of [the] Monterrey [earthquake] and he continues to charge us more...to meet this quantity of exactions we have to sell our goods at extremely low prices and not only that, he dispossesses us of what is legally ours...”³³

Grajales was also accused of charging one man one hundred pesos not to marry his son against his will, as well as fining those who did not turn up for public works fifteen pesos

³⁰ *La Voz de Chiapas*, 5 February 1911.

³¹ *La Voz de Chiapas*, 21 May 1911.

³² Rus, 2004, p. 61.

³³ AHCH, Gobernación, Vol. XI, 1909, expediente 45, 13 October 1909.

even if they were ill. Forced marriages, particularly of legal minors, was a means by which priests in the colonial period had both raised their immediate income and boosted tribute lists, and it was a complaint repeatedly made against the municipal authorities during the Porfiriato.³⁴ The generation of debt through unpaid fines and civil and ecclesiastical taxes which obliged the Indians to buy dear and sell cheap had also constituted a key element of the commercial *repartimiento* of the colonial era. But, an “investigation” conducted by the *jefe político* found no reason to dismiss Grajales from his post as municipal secretary.³⁵ The residents of Cancuc, however, refused to be silenced, complaining one month later that Melitón Grajales had charged candidates for the municipal presidency eighty *pesos* each, and replaced an elected candidate with one named by himself, the same man whom he had previously placed in such a position before he was removed by Governor Rafael Pimental for abuse of authority.³⁶

Similar accusations were made by the inhabitants of Oxchuc against the municipal agent Pedro Gómez, a *ladino* from Huistán, whom they claimed was a “barbarous and bloody tyrant”.³⁷ Gómez had arrived in the town around 1908, and two years later he was taken to court for having dispossessed Indians of land and forced them to pay labour tenancy (*baldiaje*), even though they had legitimate titles.³⁸ Nevertheless, by 1914 he had become the local *cacique*, accused of implementing arbitrary fines and taxes, stealing land, taking bribes to appoint the „elected“ municipal authorities – including his brother, who was named

³⁴ Also see, for example, AHCH, Gobernación, expediente 15, Tomo IV, 1909, Correspondencia con el Tribunal Superior de Justicia, 10175, Num 493, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 26 October 1909.

³⁵ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Tomo XI, expediente 45, 15 November 1909.

³⁶ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Tomo XI, expediente 45, 20 december, 1909.

³⁷ Archivo General de Poder Judicial (AGPJ), Ocosingo, Ramo Penal, expediente 3169, „Contra Pedro Gómez por varios hechos de que le acusan varios vecinos de Oxchuc“, 1914.

³⁸ AGPJ, Ocosingo, Ramo Penal, Expediente 2771, Contra Pedro Gómez por despojo, 1910.

municipal president – and committing “continuous abuses, requisitions, threats and daily violations” particularly against anyone who dared to complain about his activities.³⁹

Inside the Communities: Modernization or the ‘Reinvention’ of Tradition

The Indian community (or *república de indios*) was historically constructed and regionally specific, built in the aftermath of conquest out of the remnants of socially and ethnically diverse populations. It was thus composed of a complex array of overlapping indigenous and Hispanic civil and religious hierarchies, practices and beliefs which existed parallel to and intersected with the Spanish institutions of the *cabildo*, the *ejido* and the Church. These ethnic institutions are the purview of modern-day anthropologists and they largely fall outside the archival record – alluded to opaquely by priests and infrequently by state officials in the nineteenth century. However, if, as this chapter argues, the „modern“ Porfirian state achieved considerable hegemony within Chiapas by penetrating the community and manipulating „traditional“ structures of power, these institutions and identities have to be drawn in to the picture, even if they remain at the margins of the analysis due to lack of empirical data for the Porfiriato.⁴⁰

Each community had its own specific organizational make-up, although one can identify a number of political, religious and kinship institutions that constituted the building blocks of community life throughout Chiapas. Many of these structures had their roots in the pre-Columbian past or the second half of the sixteenth century when the towns were founded by Spanish missionaries. Others are of more recent provenance. All changed over time, but a number persisted into the Porfiriato and beyond. For example, in the ethnographical and

³⁹ AGPJ. Ocosingo, Ramo penal, Expediente 3154, Diligencia de unos delitos documentados en contra de Pedro Gómez, 1914; AGPJ, Ocosingo Ramo Penal, expediente 3169, „Contra Pedro Gómez por varios hechos de que le acusan varios vecinos de Oxchuc“, 1914.

⁴⁰ This argument follows that developed by Jan Rus in his study of state formation in the central highlands of Chiapas between 1930 and 1960: Jan Rus, 1994, „The “Comunidad Revolucionaria Institucional”: The Subversion of Native Government in Highland Chiapas, 1936-68“ in Gilbert Joseph and Daniel Nugent (eds.), *Everyday Forms of State Formation: Revolution and the Negotiation of Rule in Modern Mexico*, (Duke University Press: Durham and London), p. 267. However, the extent of state intervention in community institutions was much greater during the revolutionary period than the Porfiriato.

historical study of the Tzeltal Maya town of Bachajón, Alain Breton pinpoints three overlapping structures of political and religious authority, which existed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. First, the constitutional town government, derived from the colonial *cabildo*; second, a „traditional“ civil-religious government of *principales*;⁴¹ and third a number of religious organizations – brotherhoods and ritual hierarchies (*mayordomías* and *capitanías*) – with varying degrees of subordination to the formal Church.⁴² The *principales* were the link between the other two hierarchies. They were themselves recruited from among the holders of the highest religious offices⁴³ and they nominated the members of the town government and the police on a yearly basis.⁴⁴

In the Tojolabal town of La Independencia, Carlos Basauri also observed in the 1920s that, despite the existence of the municipal government, it was the body of *principales* that governed the town, watching over all aspects of community life, moral and administrative, exercising judicial authority, imposing punishments and intervening even in “purely domestic matters”, such as marriages, difficult conjugal relations, and the bad behaviour of children.⁴⁵ The Indians rarely had recourse to the municipal authorities and the president was frequently a *ladino* appointed by politicians from Comitán.⁴⁶ There were, however, clear overlaps between the two structures of authority. Occasionally one of the *principales* was named municipal president, and it was not unusual for an Indian elected to a post on the town council subsequently to be named *principal*, thus allowing the body of elders “to...have certain influence in the *ayuntamiento*”.⁴⁷ Furthermore the traditional “vara de justicia” was

⁴¹ Breton, 1984, *Bachajón: organización socioterritorial de una comunidad tzeltal*, (INI, Mexico City), p. 100.

⁴² Breton, 1984, pp. 107-120.

⁴³ Breton, 1984, p. 120

⁴⁴ Breton, 1984, p. 101.

⁴⁵ Carlos Basauri, 1931, *Tojolobales, Tzeltales y Mayas: breves apuntes sobre antropología, etnografía y lingüística*, (Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, Mexico City), p. 34.

⁴⁶ Basauri, 1931, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Basauri, 1931, p. 34.

handed over to the new municipal president every time there was an election,⁴⁸ symbolically highlighting the links between constitutional and civil-religious authority.

Breton also identified three levels of kinship-based organization in Bachajón: the most basic was the lineage group (*lineaje*) (itself divided into the sub-lineage, extensive family and nuclear family), followed by the *kalpul* or *mitad*,⁴⁹ an intermediate social organization between the exogenous lineage and the endogamous *barrio*.⁵⁰ The majority of Chiapas's Indian communities were formed by the agglomeration (or *reducción*) of pre-Hispanic social groups (independent *jefaturas* or *parcialidades*) of diverse origins. These groups often retained their identity in the shape of separate neighbourhoods, known as *barrios*, organized within each community.⁵¹ The *barrios* were integrated into the *cabildo* and the civil-religious hierarchy of *principales*, sharing administrative posts and power, but they occupied separate geographical spaces within the town and were differentiated by their own internal hierarchies, rituals, dress, oral traditions and myths of origin. They were also largely endogamous and engaged in conflict with rival *barrios*.⁵² In Bachajón, the two *barrios* of San Sebastián and San Jerónimo were further divided - into *kalpules*, in the case of the former, and two geographical "halves" (*mitades*) in the latter, each headed by a male elder representative or *principal*.⁵³ In the case of land disputes, the *principal* of each *kalpul* or half was responsible for dealing with the problem, which would only later be taken to the municipal authorities if necessary.⁵⁴ However, within each *barrio*, land was the collective property of the lineages, whose members had hereditary usufruct rights.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Basauri, 1931, p. 35.

⁴⁹ Breton, 1984 p. 10.

⁵⁰ Breton, 1984, p. 139.

⁵¹ Breton, 1984, p. 9.

⁵² Breton, 1984, p. 27-31.

⁵³ Breton, 1984, p. 30.

⁵⁴ Breton, 1984, p. 92.

⁵⁵ Breton, 1984, p. 91.

The principle underlying all these interconnected hierarchies was patriarchy. The lineage regulated an individual's access to property, security and wellbeing⁵⁶ and within a lineage group land was divided equally among male heirs.⁵⁷ Indian women, therefore, were excluded from possessing and inheriting property. The choice of spouse was conditioned by lineage, *kalpul*, and *barrio* and upon marriage residence was usually patrilocal. In the *cabildo* and the civil-religious hierarchy of *principales* officeholders were men and although women did participate in religious organizations their roles were limited to specific areas of ritual and responsibility. Basauri also noted the "absolute authority" of the man in the home over women and children in La Independencia, the gendered division of labour, the concentration of resources in male hands, and the control exercised by fathers over the labour of children – whom they frequently "rented out" to *finqueros* for several years in return for a wage advance.⁵⁸

Both Greg Grandin and Elizabeth Dore argue that patriarchal power within the community and the divisions of power and wealth that this engendered were crucial for determining ethnic relations and the formation of the colonial and later national state in Guatemala and Nicaragua.⁵⁹ In Chiapas, too, the caste and class power of Indian political elites played a key role in the formation of the state and the hegemony of the Porfirian regime. Thus, *ladino* state officials utilized the patriarchal authority of the Indian *cabildo* and the *principales* as well as rivalries between lineages and *barrios* to better repress dissent, extract forced labour and taxation and enforce debt contracts.⁶⁰ At the same time, Indian

⁵⁶ Breton, 1984, p. 143.

⁵⁷ Breton, 1984, p. 93.

⁵⁸ Basauri, 1931, p. 31.

⁵⁹ Greg Grandin, 2000, *The Blood of Guatemala: A History of Race and Nation*, (Duke University Press: London and Durham), p. 5; 15; 26; 38; 41; 48-50; 74; Elizabeth Dore, 2006, *Myths of Modernity: Peonage and Patriarchy in Nicaragua*, (Duke University Press: London and Durham), pp. 36-7; 54.

⁶⁰ For example, in 1896 the *jefe político* of the district of Chamula told the *ladino* municipal agent of San Andtés, not to send him fifty men from the town to work on the public road, but fifty men from each *barrio*. Such arrangements were worked out between the municipal agent, the Indian *cabildo* and the *principales*, who represented the different *barrios*: AMSCLC, Jefeturas políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, October 3 1896.

political elites who “had to walk a fine line” between the national-ladino world, “which granted them political power”, and the Indian world, “which allowed them to exercise it”⁶¹ could use the authority invested in them either to resist their people’s exploitation and/or to increase their own power and wealth by collaborating with outsiders through trade, taxation and forced labour.⁶² Thus, political and kinship institutions were both the means through which Indian society negotiated state rule and the way in which the state was able to coerce and elicit conformity with its demands.

In the rest of this paper I will analyse a number of examples drawn from the archives which highlight the different ways in which the Porfirian state reached inside the communities to establish hegemony through the tactics of divide and rule, selective rewards, limited reform and the careful redeployment of tradition as well as the ultimate use of force.

The Indian municipal authorities and alcohol monopolies

In 1906 Mariano Franco, a trader from San Cristóbal, brought a criminal case against the Indian municipal president of Oxchuc, Martín Luna, for abuse of authority. Franco claimed that even though he had presented Luna with a permit from San Cristóbal guaranteeing him the right to sell alcohol during the period of carnival, the municipal president had confiscated his merchandise – 180 litres of cane alcohol (*aguardiente*) – and forced Franco’s porters to take it to the town hall of Oxchuc.⁶³ The case is interesting because it provides an insight in to the politics of race, the alcohol trade and the way power and authority operated in Indian towns such as Oxchuc.

Franco, a *ladino* and shoemaker by trade, was apprehended along with his sister Joaquina by the municipal authorities in a roadside hamlet in the vicinity of Oxchuc. He claimed that, after seeing his permit, the *alcaldes* expressed doubts about the legality of their

⁶¹ Grandin, 2000, p. 51.

⁶² Dore, 2006, pp. 14; 32-33; 36-9.

⁶³ AGPJ, Ocosingo Ramo Penal, Expediente 2461, Contra el presidente Municipal Martín Luna por abuso de autoridad, 1906.

actions and sought to consult the municipal agent. However, the municipal president paid them no heed. After they had confiscated his merchandise Franco took off for Tenejapa, leaving his sister to look after his personal belongings, in order to inform the *jefe político* of San Cristóbal of this “premeditated abuse”, committed by the municipal president, who knew that alcohol could legally be sold in Indian towns only during fiestas and on Sundays.

One of the witnesses for the municipal president’s defence explained that he had been collecting the head tax in the hamlet when he saw Franco dispensing alcohol to Indians. “Afraid” that they would spend all their money on liquor instead of paying their taxes, he rushed to the town to inform the municipal president so that he could “dictate orders”. He confirmed that Franco had presented them with the permit, but as none of them could read, he claimed that they could not understand what it said. Subsequently, Franco took off for Tenejapa in a rage, leaving his goods “abandoned”. In order to keep it safe they had taken the alcohol to the town. A second witness who had been “helping the *alcalde* collect the tax for development” saw some drunken Indians fighting and, when he followed the trail, he found Franco and his sister selling groceries and alcohol. He, like all the witnesses for the defence, claimed that illiteracy had prevented him from understanding the permit, and that the seizure of the merchandise had been a precautionary measure motivated by the desire to curb drunkenness and violence and ensure that Indians paid their taxes and obeyed “superior orders”.

This case is interesting for a number of reasons. First, the victim of the abuse of authority is a *ladino* and the perpetrator is an Indian, showing that power and ethnicity did not always coincide. Second, it gives us an insight in to the politics of the alcohol sector and the way in which regulation and taxation were used to prop up arbitrary power and monopoly profits. As Juan Blasco notes, the 1880 law of policing and good government which prohibited the sale of alcohol in roadside hamlets and in Indian towns on days other than

Sundays and fiestas was honoured in the breach and virtually never the observance, because almost all the municipal secretaries, traditional authorities and schoolteachers participated in the business.⁶⁴ However, the law did serve as an instrument to keep competitors out during most days of the year, necessitating alternative means only on Sundays and feast days. For example, in a similar case in 1911 Rita Bautista, an alcohol producer and trader from Tenajapa, complained to the governor that her goods had been arbitrarily confiscated at a *fiesta* in Cancuc by the municipal agent, Melitón Grajales, who, she alleged, regularly employed tricks to retain his monopoly in the town.⁶⁵ Third, it should be noted that “the tax for development” which several of the witnesses were collecting in the hamlet when they spied Franco did not officially exist. It was instead another arbitrary imposition on a rural population made to pay for a model of development which led to their increasing impoverishment. Fourth, it shows the ways in which Indians could use deference to the norms of the dominant society to defend themselves and their interests – a classic strategy of the „weapons of the weak“. Playing to *ladino* prejudices, the Indian authorities presented their illiteracy and ignorance as an excuse for refusing to accept Franco’s permit – even though they had to be familiar with such receipts in their capacity as tax collectors. Furthermore, to counter Franco’s accusations that the municipal authorities had purposefully sought to impede his commercial activities, they justified their unusually rapid and zealous enforcement of public order legislation by invoking the stereotype of the Indian man - susceptible to the vice of alcoholism and, once drunk, prone to violence, vagrancy and disrespect for authority. It was therefore better to be safe than sorry.

Finally, and crucially, the case illustrates that, far from being outside the state, the Indian authorities constituted an integral part of state power which reached deep inside the communities – constituting and constituted by a hierarchy of patronage and entrepreneurial

⁶⁴ Juan Blasco, *Aguardiente, 1900-1940*, unpublished manuscript, p. 39.

⁶⁵ AHCH, Gobernación, 1910, Tomo XIV, expediente 46, January 3 1910.

activity - from the governor to the *jefe político*, through the municipal agent, secretary or schoolteacher to the municipal authorities, civil-religious hierarchy and the Indian police, known as *mayores* or *comisionados*, who helped the members of the town government collect taxes, recruit workers and enforce the “superior orders” dictated from above. This structure, then, was highly centralist, subverting the principal of municipal autonomy through a combination of „modern“ Porfirian authoritarianism and paternalist colonial institutions; and it was highly corrupt. However, it was also a structure which depended on the co-operation of some Indians and rewarded their complicity in the exploitation of their neighbours. This aspect of state power, which is perhaps one of the most important for understanding state formation, ethnic relations and issues of hegemony and power in nineteenth-century Chiapas has been little explored in the historiography.⁶⁶ Instead, until recently much of the literature on Chiapas, and Mesoamerica in general, has tended to perceive state and society in racially dichotomous terms and to emphasize Spanish or *ladino* domination, Indian resistance, and the role of violence in maintaining social, economic and political relationships. In Chiapas coercion was undeniable, but complicity was also necessary.

Complicity, coercion and state consolidation: the ambivalence of authority

Thus, in the Porfiriato, as in the colonial era, the Indian political authorities – which included members of the municipal government, the parallel civil-religious hierarchy, and the male elders (*principales*) – were key intermediaries between the state and the Indian population that often found themselves caught between furthering their personal interests and protecting those of the community. Congruent with Porfirian centralization, municipal presidents in Indian towns were increasingly appointed by the *jefe político*. Other members of the town government often had to pay a fee to the municipal agent in order to “triumph in the

⁶⁶ The major exception is the work of Jan Rus on Chamula see Jan Rus, 1988, “Indians and the Struggle for the Control of Highland Chiapas, 1910-1925”, (INAREMAC: San Cristóbal de Las Casas); Rus, (1994); Jan Rus, (2003), „Coffee and the Re-colonization of Highland Chiapas, Mexico, 1892-1912,” in William Clarence-Smith and Steven Topik, eds., *The Global Coffee Economy in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, 1500-1989* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK), pp. 257-285; and Rus, (2004).

elections.⁶⁷ But, this policy served to co-opt as well as to coerce. For example, in 1898 a number of Indians from Oxchuc who wrote to the governor for a second time complaining about the abuses of the municipal agent, Margarito Penagos, observed that “our [previous] complaints gave rise to greater abuses... many of us were imprisoned, others persecuted *and a few flattered with the posts of municipal president and regidores* (my italics).”⁶⁸ Divide and rule, indirectly, through the creation of a favoured native elite was a classic colonial strategy. How much rivalries between *barrios* and lineages facilitated such a strategy we can only speculate.

Other anecdotes point to the role played by the community authorities in enforcing state rule. In 1904 the *jefe politico* of the district of Chamula, Manuel Trejo, explained to the governor that he collected taxes, requisitioned labour and policed the communities through the municipal presidents of the Indian towns, who made the population comply by deploying Indian police known as *mayores* or *comisionados*.⁶⁹ Seven years later *La Voz de Chiapas* remarked that the municipal presidents who, “invested with limitless power, consider themselves sultans...[that] look on the citizens as defenceless, insignificant beings”, implemented their orders by deploying native police known as „comisionados“ or „mayores“.⁷⁰ A *comisionado*, according to the newspaper, was a

“poor individual...named from above...obliged to police [the town] on certain nights during one whole year; who receives an arbitrary number of blank tax receipts which he must get rid of using his talents as best he can; who will be sent to prison if he does not keep a good watch; who will have to send to the *jefatura* the money to cover the number of head and education tax receipts he was

⁶⁷ AGPJ, Ocosingo, Ramo Penal, expediente 3154, Diligencias de unos delitos documentados en contra de Pedro Gómez, 1914.

⁶⁸ AGPJ, Ocosingo, Ramo Penal, expediente 1674, „Indígenas de Oxchuc contra el Agente Municipal, Margarito Penagos“, 1898.

⁶⁹ AMSCLC, Jefatura Política de Chamula, expediente 11, 1904.

⁷⁰ *La Voz de Chiapas*, May 14 1911

given; and in case of [a shortfall]...he will be held personally responsible for paying the outstanding balance...on pain of imprisonment...”⁷¹

These obligations were detested by many Indians, but they were imposed primarily by the native hierarchy – both the *cabildo* and the *principales* – rather than the state government and dissent was sanctioned by tradition as much as by force.

Force and the threat of force, however, ultimately had a role. For example, in 1911 it was reported that in the “almost purely Indian town” of San Bartolomé, in the district of La Libertad,⁷² the Tzotzil population “suffered...slavery”, forced to work unpaid by the political authorities all year around on municipal projects and sent to the *fincas* where they were given double tasks. Thus, the week of ostensibly community labour (*tequio*) that they were required to perform became two weeks of unpaid agricultural labour. To recruit workers the *agentes* went to the Indians’ houses and confiscated their tools so they could not work on their own land and threatened to send them to prison or conscript them into the *batallón*.⁷³ Indeed, throughout Chiapas, those who openly resisted the demands of the state were threatened with military force, imprisonment or consignment either to the National Guard or to the state security force. The latter, created by Emilio Rabasa in 1894, was referred to notoriously as the „batallón” and it apparently served as a form of chain gang labour designed to strike fear in to the hearts of those who could not or would not comply with taxation, labour laws and the multiple orders dictated by the *jefe político* and the municipal authorities, perhaps along the lines of the *zapadores* in Guatemala.⁷⁴ Thus, as Manuel Trejo, the *jefe político*, remarked about the district of Chamula, the system of governance relied on the co-operation of the

⁷¹ *La Voz de Chiapas*, Año 1, No. 3, May 2 1911.

⁷² Frederick Starr, 1908, *In Indian Mexico: A Narrative of Travel and Labour*, (Forbes and Company: Chicago), p. 49.

⁷³ *La Voz de Chiapas*, April 30 1911.

⁷⁴ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Tomo XI, expediente 45, Jefe político of Simojovel to state governor, July 7 1908; AGPD, Legajo LXX, expediente 9945, inhabitants of Cancuc to P. Díaz, April 26 1911. For more on the *zapadores* see David McCreery, 1994, *Rural Guatemala*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford), p. 190.

community authorities, but, in the last instance, if the Indians would not obey their authorities he would send in armed militia.⁷⁵

The district of Chamula: aborted reformism, labour control and the consolidation of porfirista rule

The district of Chamula, which was governed by Manuel Trejo between 1901 and 1908, was created in 1896 following the failure of the state government to reach an agreement with landlords over labour reform that would increase the supply of highland Indian workers to coffee plantations on the Pacific coast. Chamula, along with a number of other Indian municipalities, was thus removed from the district of Las Casas – and the administrative control of San Cristóbal. According to Jan Rus, the new *jefe político* appointed the municipal secretaries who collected taxes and registered and enforced labour contracts. They enlisted the help of the Indian town authorities, particularly the bi-lingual scribes, who also received a percentage of the profits from *enganche*. Indeed, frequently the municipal secretaries and their Indian intermediaries worked directly for *finqueros* on a commission basis. Furthermore, after 1904, the year in which the flow of workers down to Soconusco substantially increased, the municipal president and *regidores* of the Indian governments were also named by the municipal secretary.⁷⁶

Thus, instead of building a new administrative structure through which fiscal demands and labour contracts could be enforced, the state government sought to break the clientelist links between the Indian political authorities and rival elite factions and centralize control over the administration of the communities. Indeed, at the beginning of the Porfiriato the system of forced wage labour and community tribute was still functioning much as it had in the colonial period.⁷⁷ The *jefe político* appointed by Francisco León in 1896 was charged

⁷⁵ AMSCLC, Jefatura Política de Chamula, expediente 11, 1904.

⁷⁶ Rus, (2004), pp. 64-8.

⁷⁷ For example, between February 3 and April 16 1880 79 labourers and *cargadores* were summoned from the municipality of Chamula: AGPJ, Ramo Civil, 1880, “Comunicaciones del Jefe Político del Centro,” 1880.

with undermining these historical legacies and freeing up labour for migration to Soconusco. However, according to the records from the first six months of the *jefatura política* of Chamula, León's appointee also had a parallel reformist agenda. The records highlight the abuses to which the Indian population were subject when the communities were administered by San Cristóbal and the way in which the *jefatura* attempted to build legitimacy and undermine the hegemony of highland elites by fostering limited social reform and reining in the abuses of the *ladino* municipal agents. This programme of reform – which inevitably alienated elites associated with both the *crístóbalense* and *tuxtleco camarillas* in the highlands - was abandoned after Díaz dismissed Francisco León from the governorship at the end of 1899 following the assassination attempt made against him earlier that year.

According to the surviving district records of 1896, the *jefe político* communicated not only with the municipal presidents but also with the entire political hierarchy of the different communities, summoning the *alcaldes*, *regidores*, scribes, *mayores* and the *principales* to the *jefatura*, particularly in late July, when, according to Francisco León, highland elites, led by Miguel Utrilla, fabricated the threat of an Indian insurgency in order to establish a para-military presence and undermine the efforts of the state government to take administrative control of the region.⁷⁸ The *jefe político* also intervened in land disputes, confiscating land from *ladinos* who did not have valid titles. He defended Indians from the theft of their goods and belongings by *ladino* merchants and he made a concerted effort to regulate the abuses committed by the municipal agents and the schoolteachers. For example, he reproached the municipal agent of the towns of Magdalena and Santa Marta for having imprisoned Santos Álvarez, an Indian, for two days for a debt, which, being “purely civil in

⁷⁸ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, 1896; AGPD, Legajo LV, expediente 4140, F. León to P. Díaz, 29 July 1896; AGPD, Legajo LV, expediente 4187, M. Utrilla to P. Díaz, 29 July 1896; AGPD, Legajo XXI, expediente 13986, F. León to P. Díaz, 30 July 1896.

character”, was not within his jurisdiction;⁷⁹ and reprimanded the municipal agent of San Pedro for having sent the Indian police (*mayores*) to arrest the wife of one of Bonifacio Constantino’s peons (*mozos*), whom the *jefe político* had previously ordered was free to leave the *finca*.⁸⁰ He also chastised the municipal agent of San Andrés, who, it was alleged, had obliged Andrés Hernández to pay a fine of two *pesos* in order to retrieve his own stolen property. Because Hernández did not have the money, the municipal agent forced him to leave his son “as a pawned item” until he could pay the fine.⁸¹ Later that month, the same municipal agent was chided for having forced a number of Indians to sell a piece of land against their will and ordered to annul the sale. The *jefe político* tellingly advised him “not to support abuses but to actively correct them...regardless of who commits them...for I do not want my administration to be tarnished with a return to former times.”⁸² The previous agent of San Andrés, Manuel Flores, had usurped the school building, originally built by the town’s Indians, and rented it out to a tenant. The *jefe político* ordered him to bring his property titles for inspection or to turn the building over to the Indian authorities.⁸³ He also sought to restrict the use of unpaid community labour, promising that, after a one-off request for men to help finish a road in preparation for the governor’s visit, the Indians would be expected to contribute only to public works in their own town.⁸⁴

However, the *jefe político* seemed to spend most of his energy on a campaign to regulate labour contracts – updating and registering debt peon’s accounts and rooting out the

⁷⁹ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of Magdalena and Santa Marta, September 4, 1896.

⁸⁰ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Andrés, September 19, 1896.

⁸¹ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Andrés, September 5, 1896.

⁸² AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Andrés, September 16, 1896.

⁸³ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Andrés, September 23, 1896.

⁸⁴ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agents of San Andrés and San Pedro, September 23, 1896; and municipal agents of Magdalenas, Santa Marta, San Miguel and Santiago, October 3, 1896.

worst labour abuses, notably those committed on the properties of political rivals, such as Miguel Utrilla. For example, he informed the municipal agent of San Pedro that Agustín Hermomoses, an Indian *mozo* of Miguel Utrilla from the *finca* Progreso in San Pedro, had appeared at the *jefatura* in a terrible state after being beaten with a stick by the *mayordomo* and put in the stocks. This was, the *jefe político* opined, another of the “...acts of barbarism and inhumanity that are practiced by *ladinos* who are even more savage than the Indians. They should be punished with all the rigour that the case demands in order to destroy these abuses, typical of [such] heartless good for nothings...” For that reason he instructed the municipal agent to apprehend the *mayordomo* and send him in chains to the *jefatura* and to “...actively find out on which *fincas* the unhappy *mozos* are mistreated...[then] arrest and remit to me all the *finqueros* and *mayordomos* who commit these abuses and acts of cowardice, in the intelligence that I and the superior government of the state will be very pleased with your efforts for the good of the Indians.” The municipal agent was to ensure that Hermomoses was able to stay in the town of San Pedro or “wherever he wishes” and permitted to “work freely” without anyone harassing him. This was because “for the simple fact of being mistreated by his master he does not have the obligation to recognise his debtor.” Therefore, the *jefe político* ordered “let the Indians know this: when they are beaten and ill treated they should complain and their debt will no longer be recognised”⁸⁵

However, six weeks later, the *jefe político* was backtracking on such a radical policy which, if systematically enforced, would have undermined the whole system of debt peonage – something that the governor had been warned against by Porfirio Díaz.⁸⁶ The *jefe político* thus sent the municipal agent of San Pedro to pursue four *mozos* who had absconded from Miguel Utrilla’s *finca* claiming not to owe him anything, and to capture a number of other

⁸⁵ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Pedro Chenalhó, August 30, 1896

⁸⁶ AGPD, Legajo XXI. expediente 7303, P. Díaz to F. León, March 1896; AGPD, Legajo XXI, expediente 7356, P. Díaz to F. León, May 1896.

workers who had also failed to appear in the *jefatura* to settle their accounts. He complained that “said *mozos* under the pretext of the support given to them by this office...just seek to...become drunks and vagrants...who only serve to harm agriculture and society.” He then instructed the municipal agent to “...make them understand that this office is disposed to severely punish all those *mozos* who look for nothing more than pretexts to run away from work and send them to the *batallones*, just as I am prepared to protect all those honourable and hardworking *mozos*.”⁸⁷ Indians, then, were to be free to choose where to work, to be paid for their labour, and not forced to remain tied to abusive masters, but they were not free to choose whether or not to work.

Another abusive landlord reprimanded by the *jefatura* in 1896 was the *rabasista* Manuel Trejo, who would himself later become *jefe político* of the district. On this occasion the *mayordomo* of Trejo’s *finca* was summoned to explain why he obliged the *baldíos* to work all year around, when, as labour tenants, rather than debt peons, they were expected only to cover payment of the land they rented.⁸⁸ However, after 1901 Trejo was not subject to such unwanted bureaucratic interference in his entrepreneurial activities. According to Jan Rus, he combined his role as tax collector, landlord, and business partner of foreign investors and members of the state government to organize *enganche* in the district and speculate in the labour of the *baldíos* of Los Chorros and those of the neighbouring properties of Tanaté and Acteal. On these *fincas* the tenants’ families from the Tzotzil communities of Chenalhó, San Andrés and Mitontic, as well as the Tzeltal communities of Tenejapa and Cancuc were obliged to work up to five and a half days a week in the highlands to pay for that land, as well

⁸⁷ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Andrés, 15 October, 1896.

⁸⁸ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Pedro, 17 September, 1896

as eight weeks a year on lowland coffee *fincas* that purchased labour directly from Manuel Trejo and his associates.”⁸⁹

Mariano Monterrosa was another landlord whose abuses caught the attention of the *jefe politico* during these months. The *jefe politico* confiscated land illegally occupied by Monterrosa in San Andrés. Then a few days later he informed the municipal agent that five of Monterrosa’s *mozos* had complained to him that the landlord alleged that they still owed him money and was refusing to “give them their freedom”. They had received wage advances of between three and ten pesos two years before. As the *jefe politico* considered, it was “no longer possible” for them to still be in debt, he instructed the municipal agent to guarantee their freedom “in the knowledge that if said Monterrosa believes that he has the right to their service, you [will] tell him to come to this office with his respective books in order to settle the account of each and to see if said *mozos* owe him anything or the contrary.”⁹⁰ The next day, another of Monterrosa’s *mozos* arrived at the *jefatura* complaining that six months earlier he had borrowed thirty-five *pesos* from the landlord and now Monterrosa was planning to sell him for a higher amount to another master in Simojovel. The *jefe politico* told the municipal agent to summon Monterrosa to his office, deduct the *mozo*’s wages for the last six months from the original debt, and give him his employment certificate (‘papel de desacomodo’) so that he could look for another master. A few days later, another *mozo* complained that for “the trivial sum of nine *pesos* that he asked for many years ago”, Mariano Monterrosa had retained him on his *finca* indefinitely and against his will. Once again, the *jefe politico* ordered the municipal agent to allow the *mozo* to live and work freely in the town, along with several others who had been working for Monterrosa for between four and six years to pay debts of less than five *pesos*. He also told him to apprehend Monterrosa’s

⁸⁹ Rus, 1988, p. 10; and 2004, p. 65.

⁹⁰ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Andrés, 4 September, 1896.

overseer (*mayordomo*), about whom he received “almost daily complaints”.⁹¹ After Monterrosa had failed to fire the abusive overseer, the *jefe político* informed his *mozos* that they were free to leave the *finca* and come to work for the *jefatura* if they so desired.⁹²

Many highland landlords, including Mariano Monterrosa Miguel Utrilla, Lauro Urbina, Bonifacio Constantino, and Lauro Salazar, whose workers were registered by the *jefatura* during these months, had *fincas* in the neighbouring district of Simojovel, where, according to the *jefe político* of Chamula, “the use of stocks, shackles, and whips and the ill treatment of *mozos* abound”. However, he was unable to attend to the numerous complaints made by Indians from the district of Chamula, principally *pedranos*, because the *fincas* were not in his area of jurisdiction, and, he alleged, the *jefe político* of Simojovel deliberately ignored such abuses.⁹³ In one case, the Indian, Sebastián Pérez Malohox, accused Lauro Salazar of kidnapping his daughter, Rosa, and taking her to his *finca*, San Isidro, in Santa Caterina Pantelhó. To try to get her back, the *jefe político* ordered the municipal agent of San Pedro to hold Salazar’s *mozos* as hostages in the town, where they had been summoned to settle their accounts, until the landlord appeared and then to arrest him and remit him to the *jefatura*.⁹⁴ He considered it necessary to follow such a strategy because the authorities in Simojovel did nothing to address the apparently common crime of stealing Indian children and putting them to work on the *fincas*. In another incident, a Tzotzil man from San Pedro complained to one of the *alcaldes* of Pantelhó that his son had been stolen and taken to the

⁹¹ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Pedro, 9 September, 1896.

⁹² AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político to municipal agent of San Pedro, 21 September, 1896.

⁹³ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político of Chamula to jefe político of Simojovel, 22 September, 1896

⁹⁴ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político of Chamula to jefe político of Simojovel, 22 September, 1896

town – but instead of investigating the complaint, the *alcalde* fined the *pedrano* twenty-five pesos!⁹⁵

For exactly how long after its inception the *jefatura política* of Chamula was used by the state government to counter abuses against Indians as well as to free up labour for the coffee plantations is uncertain, but Francisco León’s reformism inevitably contributed to and ended with his downfall in 1899. Thereafter, the *porfirista* state government in Tuxtla increasingly penetrated community governments to channel Indian workers away from the properties of political rivals and towards the plantations and logging camps of allies in Soconusco, Palenque, Chilón and Pichucalco, redeploing tradition and the „traditional“ abuse of power in the name of „modernization“. According to Rus, as a consequence of such unprecedented intervention in community affairs, by 1910 indigenous people in many Indian towns in the central highlands had become profoundly alienated from both their constitutional officers and the traditional town governments alike. In Chamula in the winter and spring of 1910 to 1911 a rebel faction, associated with the Christian communities organized by Bishop Orozco y Jiménez from 1903, overthrew both sets of officials and joined with the cristobalense elite in the „Maderista“ uprising against the government in Tuxtla.⁹⁶ In the town of Chamula the involvement of Indian officials in labour contracting led to internecine conflict, but in San Andrés and San Pedro Chenalhó, where *ladinos* were seen as directly responsible for organizing *enganche*, the Indians turned on the *ladinos* and sided briefly with outside revolutionaries in 1914.⁹⁷

Huistán and camarilla politics, c.1910

The town of Huistán, which remained within the district of Las Casas after 1896 provides a contrasting but complementary picture of the relationship between ethnic and

⁹⁵ AMSCLC, Jefaturas Políticas, Partido Chamula, Presidentes Municipales, jefe político of Chamula to jefe político of Simojovel, 22 September, 1896

⁹⁶ Rus, „Coffee and the Recolonization of Highland Chiapas, Mexico“, p. 284; Rus, „Revoluciones contenidas“, 2004, pp. 64-8.

⁹⁷ Rus, „Indians and the Struggle for the Control of Highland Chiapas, 1910-1925“p. 12.

political relations and state-building in Chiapas during these years. Unlike most of the towns in the district of Chamula, Huistán underwent considerable *ladino* settlement in the nineteenth century, which altered the nature of community politics. Furthermore, commercial development was relatively developed in the municipality itself. Indeed, besides a large number of smaller properties, there were many big, valuable and populous *fincas* in Huistán⁹⁸ – on which more than half the population resided.⁹⁹ Thus, rather than the *enganche* of Indians to other districts, the main sources of complaints against the municipal authorities were forced labour and debt peonage on *fincas* within the town, along with commercial monopolies in alcohol and wheat, the latter being the principal commodity produced in Huistán.¹⁰⁰

Indeed, the district judge (*juez de lo civil*) in San Cristóbal received more complaints from debt peons (*mozos*) in Huistán concerning the abuses of *finqueros* and the public authorities than from any other municipality in the district. Frequently, the *alcaldes* were accused of conspiring to inflate or invent a debt, charging family members with the debts of workers who had died or run away, imprisoning workers and their families for the non-payment of debt and refusing to attend to those who sought justice.¹⁰¹ For example, in the period 1893 to 1894 the *ladino alcalde*, Valentín Nájera was repeatedly accused of refusing to terminate debt peons' accounts,¹⁰² and the *mozo* Pedro Álvarez alleged that Nájera imprisoned him in the local courthouse for six days without food or water in order to force him to recognize a debt of nineteen *pesos* to Valentín's sister, Petrona. According to Álvarez, he owed her only nine *pesos*, and after he had admitted under duress to the nineteen *pesos*,

⁹⁸ AMSCLC, Jefatura Política de Las Casas, expediente w/n, "Cuadro estadístico de Las Casas y Partido de Chamula", 1907. The average number of inhabitants per finca was forty, but at least eight properties had over 100 inhabitants Pedrero, „Las haciendas chiapanecas," p. 178.

⁹⁹ According to the 1910 census, 55 per cent of the population was resident on *haciendas* and *ranchos*.

¹⁰⁰ AGPJ, Ramo Civil, Las Casas, expediente 4502. "Juzgado de Primera Instancia de lo civil del Centro", 1889; "Libro de correspondencia oficial" (1894) AGPJ, Ramo Civil, Las Casas, expediente 5482, July 23 1894.

¹⁰¹ For example: "Borradores de correspondencia oficial dirigida a los juices menores" (1889), AGPJ, Ramo Civil, Las Casas, expediente 4421.

¹⁰² AGPJ, Ramo Civil, Las Casas, expediente 5482, "Libro de correspondencia oficial", 1894, October 12 1894.

the Nájeras wrote forty-nine on his account and threatened to sell him to a *finca* in Tuxtla if he did not agree.¹⁰³ Another abuse committed by members of the municipal administration was to requisition workers for their own *fincas* and pay them only six cents per day instead of the standard wage of twenty-five.¹⁰⁴

In 1909 Jesús Cancino was elected to the municipal presidency of Huistán, in what was probably a relatively free election.¹⁰⁵ His victory undermined a well-established *cacicazgo* and provoked a bitter power struggle between rival factions in the town. However, Cancino did not represent a serious challenge to the established social order.¹⁰⁶ Instead, his triumph and the ensuing controversy highlights the way that in some Indian municipalities political centralization encouraged *camarilla* politics rather than the consolidation of power through traditional community institutions.

After Cancino became municipal president a group of *huistecos* wrote to the governor accusing him of arbitrary taxation, false imprisonment and abuse of authority. Apparently Cancino had summoned fifty people to the municipal building to ask for funds to establish a brass band and threatened those who did not attend with a “large fine”. When one of them “reminded” him that such financial contributions were voluntary, Cancino beat him up, publicly insulted him and threw him in jail. He then refused to let anyone leave the municipal building until they had paid their quota, jailing the Indians for twenty-four hours and threatening to imprison or conscript into the army anyone who complained to a higher authority.¹⁰⁷ At first sight this appears to be a simple case of extortion and *caciquismo*.

¹⁰³ AGPJ, Las Casas, Ramo Civil, expediente 5084, “Al Sr Juez segundo de primera instancia del ramo penal”, 1893.

¹⁰⁴ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Vol. XI, expediente 45, jefe político of Las Casas to the state governor.

¹⁰⁵ In 1911, according to a Catholic opposition newspaper, Huistán was the only town in the district of Las Casas in which municipal elections had been relatively free in recent years: *La Voz de Chiapas*, 30 April 1911.

¹⁰⁶ For example, as *alcalde* of Huistán in 1888 he had detained the families of Indian *mozos* against their will (AGPJ, Las Casas, Ramo Civil, expediente 4386, “Borradores de correspondencia oficial a los jueces menores”, 1888); and as representative for the municipality at the Agricultural Conference of 1896 he had defied the wishes of the governor and voted in favour of debt servitude (Gobierno de Chiapas, 1896, *Documentos relativos al congreso agrícola de Chiapas* (Tuxtla Gutiérrez: Imprenta del gobierno del estado), p. 83).

¹⁰⁷ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Vol. X, expediente 45, Pueblo of Huistán to the governor, April 3 1909.

However, as Guy Thomson points out in his study of the National Guard, philharmonic corps and patriotic juntas in Mexico in the nineteenth century, wind bands could provide “an important focus to local ceremonial and public life”,¹⁰⁸ which, notwithstanding their patriotic and liberal origins, were often associated with conflicts over taxation and forced recruitment. Furthermore, Thomson writes:

“...the motivation of political and military leaders in sponsoring wind bands went beyond an appreciation of the martial importance of music, *to the desire to construct political camarilla* [my italics].”¹⁰⁹

All families were expected to contribute financially to the band and service was sometimes obligatory. At the same time, membership brought exemption from taxation, military service and *corvée* labour¹¹⁰ – the instruments used by public officials to make and maintain *camarillas* and *cacicazgos*. In Indian villages, then, “one way that organized music accommodated itself...was to reflect, perhaps even to accentuate, factional divisions”.¹¹¹ At the same time bands “also represented a tangible demonstration of the liberal commitment to „urbanity“; to the bringing of „civilization“ to the cultural wilderness of the Sierra.”¹¹² Conflicts over wind bands, then, “reveal[ed] several areas of tension arising from the new liberal order.”¹¹³

These elements were present in Huistán. After the *jefe politico* told Cancino to stop forcing people to pay for musical instruments, one of his supporters protested to the governor that the taxes Cancino had imposed were for the „progress of the town“; the *ladinos* whom he had summoned were wealthy but tightfisted; and the Indians whom he jailed were drunk and

¹⁰⁸ Guy Thomson, 1990, „Bulwarks of Patriotic Liberalism: The National Guard, Philharmonic Corp and Patriotic Juntas in Mexico, 1847-88“ in *Journal of Latin American Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, p 33.

¹⁰⁹ Thomson, 1990, p. 55.

¹¹⁰ Thomson, 1990, pp. 57-8.

¹¹¹ Thomson, 1990, p. 56.

¹¹² Thomson, 1990, p. 55.

¹¹³ Thomson, 1990, p. 60.

usually spent all their money on *fiestas*.¹¹⁴ Later the same year a large group of *huistecos*, mainly Indians, who identified themselves as “humble labourers” once again wrote to the governor in Cancino’s defence. They alleged that those who had complained about Cancino were all clients of the town’s former *caciques*, Saturnino Trujillo and Reinaldo Cruz, who, along with members of the Nájera and Morales families among others, had formed “a party political in character” whose members were guilty of committing a catalogue of crimes between 1906 and 1909 when they had occupied posts in the town government, including rape, assault, murder, attempted murder, robbery, banditry, extortion, forced labour, land theft and enforcing commercial monopolies. Cancino’s election had divested them of power. However, after seven months as municipal president, Cancino was forced to take a two month break “due to ill health” and Alfredo Trujillo, a relation of Saturnino, replaced him, returning the former *camarilla* to the reins of power. Now, the *jefe político* had extended Cancino’s period of leave against his will, indefinitely restoring the former *caciques*, who apparently had “influential friends” in the *jefatura*.¹¹⁵ The dispute regarding the brass band can be interpreted, then, as Thomson suggests, as a reflection of deeper political factionalism revolving around *camarillas* and the patrimonial use and abuse of state power in a context of liberal modernization.

Conclusions

Chamula and Huistán, two Tzotzil municipalities in the central highlands, appear to illustrate contrasting outcomes of the process of political modernization – the „re invention“ or redeployment of traditional community institutions to bolster state rule in the case of the former and the fostering of *camarilla* politics in the latter. They were however, two sides of the same coin. In Huistán „traditional“ organizations and hierarchies continued to be important in community governance, but the municipality was not considered by the state

¹¹⁴ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Vol. X, expediente 45, anonymous, n/d.

¹¹⁵ AHCH, Gobernación, 1909, Tomo XI, Expediente 45, vecinos de Huistán to the state governor, 15 October 1909.

government to be a significant source of taxation or labour. *Enganche*, then, which required a particular institutional arrangement to be successful, was secondary to debt peonage on *ladino*-owned *fincas* and squabbles between local *ladinos* and their clientele over the control of land, labour and commodities were played out in the municipal government. In Chamula *enganche* and tax collection reinforced and were reinforced by traditional political and religious hierarchies and deference to community norms. Yet, at the same time, administrative centralization deepened factionalism within the community and increased contacts between dissidents and the opposition movement based in San Cristóbal, eventually leading to the participation of rebels in the *Maderista* uprising of 1911. Thus, in both municipalities, factionalism increased under the influence of Porfirian centralization, and political divisions went far beyond the Indian-ladino dichotomy, to include cross-ethnic alliances in Huistán and intra-ethnic conflicts in Chamula. As these cases illustrate, therefore, ethnic and political relations in Porfirian Chiapas were shot through with divisions of class, community, clientele, kinship and gender as well as *camarilla* and geography upon which Porfirian state-building took place.

That process had already begun before 1876. From the 1860s secularization tended to undermine the authority of priests and to promote liberal modernization. Thus schoolteachers, municipal secretaries and municipal agents – the agents of the liberal state - retained the monopolies and caste privileges of priests, including unpaid labour, goods and services and control over community labour. At the same time, growing secularization, like land privatization, became associated with greater landlord power and the expansion of debt peonage. In short, the waning of ecclesiastical power provided state officials and *finqueros* with the opportunity to strengthen and exploit their authority as paternal mediators between Indians, the state and the market.

After 1891 this structure of power was increasingly centralized and controlled by the executive to promote the consolidation of the regime and the development of the export sector. The *jefaturas políticas*, with their wide ranging and authoritarian powers, were central to such a process, and taxation and vagrancy legislation were pillars upon which those powers rested. Consequently, state-building meant the systematic abuse of authority and the weakening of municipal and community autonomy, while economic modernization undermined the peasant economy, rewarded speculation and monopolies and encouraged the development of *enganche* and forced labour.

The Indian communities were key to the success of administrative centralization – not just as victims of ladino aggression, but also as institutions through which demands for labour and taxes could be made. Thus „traditional“ hierarchies and divisions, ethno-political organizations and community norms became tied to Porfirian state-building and regime consolidation, combining „modern“ authoritarianism with colonial paternalism. Such „colonial legacies“ were, however, not unavoidable – as the example of the short-lived period of reformism in Chamula between 1896 and 1899 illustrates – the decision to recycle such relationships in the interests of modernization was one of political expediency rather than a historical inevitability. Furthermore, the recasting or redeployment of „tradition“ was not the antithesis of modernization – it was an integral part of it.