# The Indigenous Quest for Cultural Rights and Political Autonomy in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

The author gives a history of the indigenous movement in Mexico over the past century. Beginning with nationalism and Mestizo hegemony, through a period of cultural homogeneity, and then the eventual evolution of the constitution and widening of the definition of 'indigenous', Guillermo de la Peña describes a truly diverse country with a variety of languages and peoples.

In his book *Los Grandes Problemas Nacionales,* published in 1909, Andrés Molina Enríquez, a lawyer and sociologist influenced by Spencerian positivism, classified the Mexican population (at the time, a total of 12.5 million people) in three broad 'socio-racial' categories: the Indians, the *Criollos* or Whites, and the *Mestizos* (people of indigenous and European descent). He saw the Indians (35% of the population) as a collectivity fragmented into thousands of small isolated villages and weakened by poverty as well as by the lasting effects of colonial exploitation. In turn, the *Criollos* (15% of the population), descendants from Spanish colonialists and European migrants, were presented as a parasitic lot of big landholders, moneylenders and speculators. In contrast, the *Mestizo* majority (50%) was the backbone of Mexican nationality: its members were productive ranchers and farmers, middle merchants, industrialists and professionals; moreover, they had actively participated in the Independence movement and then, throughout the 19th century, in all the major political movements and the liberation wars against foreign invaders. With the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz – himself a *Mestizo* – they had reached political supremacy. However, according to Molina Enríquez, a great social revolution was still needed, which would allow for the redistribution of the big landholdings (the *haciendas*), the expansion of public schooling and the full productive use of natural resources. The Indians would become owners of their land. And, freed from caste barriers, they would mix with the other groups to be transformed into educated, prosperous mestizos. National unity and progress at last would be possible.[1]

A revolution indeed broke out in Mexico in 1910. After ten years of bloody civil war the new government launched a program of agrarian reform which in the following decades effectively weakened the *hacienda* system. But the new 1917 Constitution did not even once mention the word 'Indian' or 'indigenous', although the historical rights of 'agrarian communities' over their lands were recognized. The discourse of *mestizaje* was adopted to express an ideal of nationalistic energy. José Vasconcelos, the architect of the revolutionary educational and cultural program, referred to the *mestizos* as "the cosmic race": the future of the human species, which was emerging in Mexico and Latin America.[2] In this context, a special policy – *indigenismo* – was designed to promote the 'incorporation' of the Indians into mainstream society and culture. The founder of indigenismo was Manuel Gamio, an anthropologist who had been a student of Molina Enríquez at the National Museum of Mexico and later a disciple of Franz Boas at Columbia University. As a follower of Boas – a staunch defender of cultural relativism and, at the time, one of the major figures in the anthropological world – Gamio appreciated the values of indigenous cultures, but as a positivist intellectual he also thought that these values should become a part of a comprehensive national culture, and that the Indians had to acquire a modern, scientific world view, as well as civic attitudes and feelings of loyalty towards the common fatherland.[3]

Another major figure of *indigenismo,* Moisés Sáenz – also trained at Columbia University, under John Dewey and Boas – became a major sponsor of bilingual education. In the 1930s, Sáenz persuaded President Lázaro Cárdenas to create the Autonomous Department of Indigenous Affairs, which was replaced in 1948 by the National Indigenist Institute.[4] These agencies, under the leadership of noted anthropologists, promoted research among indigenous groups and implemented sophisticated development and educational programs, always with the purpose of creating national unity and achieving modernization. In addition, the General Law of Population (passed in 1936 and reformed in 1973) explicitly recommended miscegenation as a tool of social integration.[5]

### The Persistence of Cultural Diversity

Meanwhile, the segment defined as indigenous, if taken as a percentage of the total population, had shown a decreasing tendency; but it never ceased to grow in absolute numbers. The 1921 National Census recorded 4,179,449 persons of the

Indian 'race', i.e. 29% of the people living in the Mexican Republic (14,334,780). However, the definition of race was not given; in practice, people were free to identify themselves according to the 'racial' categories established in the census questionnaire.[6] In the following censuses, race was no longer the criterion to define 'Indian-ness', but language; and only people over five years of age were counted. Thus, in the 1930 Census, the percentage of speakers of aboriginal languages was 13.6: 2,251,086 out of a total population of 16,552,722. In 1950 the percentage decreased to 9.5%, and in 1970, to 6.5, but the absolute numbers of speakers respectively increased to 2,447,609 and 3,111,415.[7]

After 1970, many social scientists and indigenous organizations criticized the language criterion as too narrow, and demanded the inclusion of other indexes such as self-identification, membership of a household where the parents are speakers of an aboriginal language, and membership of a community where traditional indigenous institutions (e.g. Councils of Elders, ritual stewardships and mandatory communal work) are standing. Critics also demanded not to leave out children under five years of age. With more flexible criteria, then, the official figures for the indigenous segment have considerably increased. The estimate for 1990 was 8,550,989, i.e. 10.52% of the national population (which amounted to 81,249,645). And for 2002, the estimate was 12,707,000, i.e. 13.03% (out of 97,483,412).[8] In spite of the discourse of *mestizaje,* Mexico remains the country with the largest Indian population in the Americas.

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However, the category 'Indian' or 'indigenous' conceals the variety of the people thus defined. Most indigenous communities present similarities, insofar as they have maintained certain institutions which reflect the manner in which the pre-hispanic world was reorganized by Spanish colonization. The community structure itself has a colonial heritage. But there are also numerous differences which derive both from pre-hispanic peculiarities and the specific historical development of regions and communities. Gamio reckoned with the existence of a dozen major languages, but nowadays linguistic research has revealed the persistence of no less than 60 languages, the most important of which (in terms of number of speakers) are Nahuatl, Yucatec Maya, Zapotec and Mixtec.[9] There is also a great diversity of religious beliefs and rituals, agricultural and medical practices, judicial norms, and everyday customs. Ethnic identities are usually defined in reference to territorial communities rather than language groups. Similarly, traditional political organization is encompassed within the community, since in colonial times the Spanish Crown dismantled larger political units. However, a number of indigenous movements and organizations have striven to define more comprehensive identities and political units – as well as to resist policies of cultural assimilation.

**Indigenous Movements and Constitutional Reforms**

Several ethnic movements emerged in the 1930s, when the Autonomous Department of Indigenous Affairs organized Regional Conferences where people could express their grievances and cultural demands. Then, in 1940, the Mexican State hosted the First Inter-American Indigenist Congress, where intellectuals, government representatives and Indian spokesmen proclaimed the radical importance of 'the indigenous question'– i.e. the fact that the aboriginal peoples of the Americas were still suffering from cultural oppression, political exclusion, and social injustice – and the need to respect 'the personality of the Indian'.[10]

But in spite of the progressive resolutions of this Congress, which proposed social reforms and multicultural policies, Mexico (as other Latin American countries) remained committed to the idea of cultural unification. In the period from 1950 to 1970 the main theoretician of *indigenismo* was Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (a medical doctor and anthropologist, initiated in social research by Gamio and trained by Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University), who devised a complex model for regional analysis and induced social and cultural change ('acculturation'). In this model the contemporary indigenous population was conceived of as living in inter-cultural regions, under the dominion of a White or *Mestizo* elite. The persistence of indigenous culture was not the result of isolation, as it had been thought, but of the asymmetrical relationships between the elite and the Indians, in the context of pre-capitalist ('feudal') production and weak government institutions. Therefore the task of the National Indigenist Institute (NII) was to establish Coordinating Centers in such regions which would convoke other government agencies to promote schooling, technical training, land distribution, market facilities, health services, and political participation, in order to break the structure of domination and achieve modernization, social integration and cultural homogeneity.[11] A key strategy would be the recruitment of young educated Indians as bilingual teachers and agents of cultural transformation.

It was precisely these educated Indians who became major critics of 'acculturation' policies as well as leaders or advisers of militant ethnic organizations. They came together at the 1974 Congress of San Cristobal Las Casas in Chiapas, in the context of national political unrest left by the 1968 student movement. This Congress was held in honor of Friar Bartolomé de las Casas, but it became the stage for denouncing the NII as authoritarian and 'ethnocidal', and ineffective in the task of eradicating poverty. This marked the emergence of a network of organizations which convened further meetings and conferences. Their intellectual influences came from civil rights and ethnic movements in the U.S. and Canada, anti-colonialist movements in Africa and Asia, and congenial Indian actors in Latin America; they also incorporated human rights and ecologist discourses from international organisms and NGOs. However, the Mexican organizations had their own agenda, which included not only the drastic restatement of indigenist policies and the recognition of the validity of Indian cultures, but also the defense of indigenous lands, the fight against unfair economic policies and unjust structures, and the democratization of the Mexican political system – in fact, throughout the eighties, certain ethnic organizations became key political actors (for instance in the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca, and Guerrero).[12]

In 1991-92, the strength of the emerging indigenous movement manifested itself at the juncture of the 500 anniversary of Columbus´s arrival in the Americas, when the comprehensive 500 Years of Resistance Front mobilized thousands of people to protest against the lasting sequels of colonialism. After 1992, a discourse of political autonomy, inspired by the recent Nicaraguan experience, was adopted by several organizations and their spokesmen. And several indigenous intellectuals from Mexico were invited to participate in discussions with the newly created UN Working Group on Indigenous Peoples.[13]

The Mexican state had gradually responded to some indigenous demands. Influenced by a group of radical anthropologists, the NII changed its vocabulary: the key word in the late 1970s and '80s was 'ethno-development', not 'acculturation'. Concomitantly, during the 1980s, in the midst of a towering economic crisis, the government was forced to abandon its nationalist-populist policies in order to favour an internationally competitive market economy. New sources of legitimacy were badly needed. Both the NII and the Ministry of Education promoted a more vigorous educational policy, reinforced bilingual programs and developed new 'inter-cultural' strategies where indigenous intellectuals would assume leading responsibilities and representative indigenous organizations would be taken into account.

Furthermore, the administration of the NII went through a process of decentralization; it became more flexible *vis-à-vis* local demands and more concerned with the defense of human rights. In 1992 the Mexican state signed the 169 Convention of the International Labor Organization, thus recognizing 'the rights of indigenous peoples' to their territories, cultures, languages, customs, norms, and forms of government. The same year, this was translated into the reformed text of Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution. For the first time Mexico was officially defined as 'a multicultural nation based originally upon its indigenous peoples', and it was stated that the law would 'protect and promote' indigenous languages, customs, and social organization; besides, in land-related matters customary norms would be taken into account. Nothing was mentioned about political authority and representation. Many Indian intellectuals were skeptical: according to them, in spite of the reforms, indigenous issues had no real priority in the national agenda.

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The armed uprising of the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in Chiapas, on precisely the same day that the newly signed North America Free Trade Agreement became effective, brought new attention to indigenous grievances, which in the following years would receive extensive media coverage. Even many people who did not sympathize with the EZLN thought that indigenous demands for cultural recognition and public representation were just. As it is known, armed confrontation ceased after eleven days, but the rebels have never signed the peace with the government. They promoted the creation of a National Indigenous Congress (NIC) which has convened three times, with the attendance of both traditional authorities and leaders of new organizations from all over the country.

In 1996 the EZLN, with NIC approval, signed the San Andrés Agreements with government representatives; these Agreements would be translated into new constitutional reforms recognizing indigenous peoples as 'subjects of public right' with full cultural entitlements and political autonomy. However, such constitutional reforms were delayed for five years – until they were sponsored by Vicente Fox, the first President of Mexico elected from the opposition in 80 years – and what finally came out of the Congress of the Union in April 2001 was unsatisfactory for the EZLN and the NIC. There are three major disappointments: indigenous peoples are defined as 'subjects of public interest'

(not 'of public right'); the recognition of an 'indigenous people' as such is subject to approval from the corresponding state legislature, and political representation is limited to the municipal boundaries. Yet the reforms provide a long, detailed list of cultural rights which are now constitutional rights, concerning language, intercultural education, customary norms, intercultural health systems, organization of production and development projects, protection of communal lands and natural resources. And it grants autonomy to choose internal forms of government and methods of election. It also allows for coalitions among peoples for development projects. Many doors are now open; but the search for more adequate constitutional amendments still continues.

### Contemporary challenges

In Mexico, as in Latin America, the issue of multiculturalism is closely intertwined with the emergence of ethnic political actors. The very concept of 'indigenous peoples' has been adopted by them to invoke the international definition of 'peoples' as those collectivities which are entitled to free self-determination. Most aboriginal movements made clear that they do not demand political independence; instead, they have chosen to exercise the right of self-determination in terms of political autonomy within the state. Such autonomy is deemed necessary to guarantee the protection and flourishing of indigenous cultures and identities within a context of sustainable, equitable development.

The 2001 amendments to the Mexican Constitution, in spite of their shortcomings, have already prompted positive actions from the federal government, such as the adoption of a National Plan for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, the creation of the National Institute for Indigenous Languages and the replacement of the NII by the Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples, which purports to function both as a space for indigenous representation and an agency for integral planning. In turn, many state governments have launched changes in their particular constitutions which would lead to the formal recognition of indigenous peoples with limited autonomy and representation.

As for the EZLN, it has promoted the creation of self-declared autonomous municipal councils and 'Assemblies for Good Rule' (*Juntas de Buen Gobierno*) in Chiapas, which until now have not been openly rejected by the government. However, the search for adequate models of multiculturalism has only begun. The first challenge is to ensure economic viability to emerging political and administrative units – in a period when the Mexican state is committed to an economic model ruled by the market. Other challenges include the negotiated adjustments of customary indigenous norms in order to make autonomy compatible with the national process of democratization and consolidation of civil liberties;[14] the extension of cultural and political rights to indigenous groups which have migrated to the cities and the United States – and which are growing fast; and the creation of links of communication, interdependence and solidarity among groups which cultivate and cherish their cultural differences.

### Notes

1 Andrés Molina Enríquez, *Los Grandes Problemas Nacionales y Otros Textos,* Mexico City: Era, 1978.

2 José Vasoncelos, *La Raza Cósmica,* Mexico City: Espasa Calpe, 1960 [1925].

3 Manuel Gamio, *Forjando Patria: Pro-Nacionalismo,* Mexico City: Porrúa, 1960 [1916].

4 Shirley Brice Heath, *Telling Tongues. The Politics of Language in Mexico,* New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1970.

5 Angélica Reyna Bernal, "El pensamiento y la política poblacionista en el México de la primera mitad del siglo XX", in *El poblamiento de México,* Mexico City: Consejo Nacional de Población, 1993, vol. IV.

6 The categories were: 'mixed', 'indigenous', 'white', 'any other' and 'foreign'.

7 Luz María Valdés and María Teresa Menéndez, *Dinámica de la Población de Habla Indígena* (1900-1980), Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1987, p. 15-17.

8 *Programa Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas,* Mexico City: Presidencia de la República / Instituto Nacional Indígenista, 2002, 2nd edition, p. 25.

9 *Ibidem,* p. 37-38.

10 *Primero Congreso Indigenista Interamericano.* Special issue of *Educación. Revista Mensual de Pedagogía y Orientación Sindical,* Mexico City, June, 1940.

11 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Regiones de Refugio. El Desarrollo de la Comunidad y el Proceso Dominical en Mestizo-América,* Mexico City: Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, 1967.

12 Guillermo de la Peña, "La Ciudadanía Etnica y la Construcción de 'los Indios' en el México Contemporáneo", *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política,* 6, December 1995, p. 116-140.

13 Consuelo Sánchez, *Los Pueblos Indígenas: del Indigenismo a la Autonomía,* Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1999, chapter 2.

14 Cfr. G. de la Peña, "Social Citizenship, Ethnic Minority Demands, Human Rights and Neoliberal Paradoxes: A Case Study in Western Mexico", in Rachel Sieder (ed.) *Multiculturalism in Latin America. Indigenous Rights, Diversity and Democracy,* London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.