Indigenous Autonomy as a Strategy for Social Inclusion:
Some Paradoxes of Social Policy in Contemporary Mexico[1]

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January 2004 marked the tenth anniversary of the uprising of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Proclaiming the need for a global campaign against neoliberalism, and rapidly repudiating the charge that its intellectual authors were foreigners, the EZLN rebellion brought together an already organized indigenous grassroots leadership and leftist insurgents whose outlooks were transformed by their experience in the Selva Lacandona. The global impact of the movement was undeniable. For a new generation of anti-globalization activists in Europe and North America, the new *Zapatismo* suggested "a new way to do politics". In the words of one European solidarity activist, it "created a new language that knows how to say this world is shit, but knows how to say it with humor, joy, candor, without authoritarianism" (Hernández, 2004: 4).[2] Its national impact was also significant, not only because the rebellion reanimated a broader range of movements opposed to the neoliberal turn of the Mexican State, but also because a meeting of the Commission on the Application of the Norms of the International Labour Organization, meeting in June 1995, declared Mexico to be violating international standards with regard to the rights of rural workers and indigenous peoples and called for a rectification of the country's indigenous policy (ibid.: 2).

Nevertheless, ten years on the continuing significance of the Zapatista movement needs to be debated. The low-intensity war that followed the failure of Carlos Salinas de Gortari's initial efforts to annihilate the EZLN made a clear contribution to a sapping of its grassroots support in Chiapas outside the inner core of the insurgent

[2] Neil Harvey (1998) has also emphasised the innovative qualities of the EZLN's style of participatory democracy based on the principle of "governing by obeying" (mandar obedeciendo), together with the non-communitarian principles that underlie its concepts of "ethnic citizenship" and "autonomy".

area in which Zapatista "autonomous communities" were established. Yet even though it remains a serious problem, military and paramilitary violence was probably a less effective tool for the government than strategies based on the manipulation of social development funding, much of which derived from World Bank programs, dutifully decentralised to state and municipal authorities on an increasing scale following the shift of Bank policy announced in its 1997 World Development Report, *The State in a Changing World* (Fox, 2000). Although it is notorious that some paramilitary groups in Chiapas operated as officially recognized social development organizations under the administration of Ernesto Zedillo, the last President from the ranks of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) before its seventy year rule was broken by the election of Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN) in 2000, the undermining of the Zapatista base was mostly accomplished by the restriction of access to such programs to individuals and communities that abandoned their militancy in the EZLN.

At first sight, such tactics may appear to be no more than a renewal of "traditional" clientelistic practices on the part of a state that was receiving substantial subventions from multilateral agencies to compensate for declining public sector revenues and an incapacity, that has continued under Fox, to reform the tax system. But such an interpretation would miss ways in which current state practices increasingly correspond to a neoliberal governmentality project that pervades not simply the entire formal political field, but also much of the NGO sector.

The first reason for wanting to understand this project is that it may account for much of the apparent "progress" that has been achieved in terms of more culturally sensitive programs (such as the promotion of "traditional medicine") and the creation of new spaces for indigenous voices to be heard if not necessarily heeded. While neoliberal societies might ideally prefer to empower each and every individual as an "active citizen", the "strengthening of civil society" and "thickening of social capital" versions of current neoliberal doctrines also recommend the empowerment of associated citizens constituting "communities". Neoliberal states seek to make society more governable in an age of global austerity precisely by seeking to convince citizens that their autonomy and choice is respected, providing they accept their share

of responsibility for solving their own problems, and without, of course, generally taking any steps to level the playing field in terms of the differences in the social (and backstage political) power enjoyed by these different actors. Secondly, as Peck and Tickell point out in discussing the limitations of activist mobilization against specific "global rule centers" such as the WTO or IMF, the problem with what they term "deep neoliberalization" is its "pervasiveness as a system of diffused power":

> Contemporary politics revolve around axes the very essences of which have been neoliberalized. As such, neoliberalism is qualitatively different from 'competing' regulatory projects and experiments: it shapes the environments, contexts and frameworks within which political-economic and socio-institutional restructuring takes place (Peck and Tickell, 2000: 400)

As we will see, it is not simply the national government of Vicente Fox that is furthering the reproduction of the neoliberal rule system in Mexico today, but also supposedly "progressive" political forces at state level from which indigenous movements hope to gain greater concessions. But before I offer further illustration of that issue in the context of Michoacán state, I want to consider the long-term impact of the EZLN on the indigenous movement in and beyond Chiapas in more depth.

Chiapas: one step forward, two steps backward?

At the grassroots level, the EZLN has been able to stem defections (and even to a limited extent to recuperate lost support) by dictating the terms under which a selected group of NGOs have access to the autonomous regions that still survive, and by rigorously enforcing a policy that those who accept the "bribes" of the government must lose their rights to land, a strategy that reveals a more disciplined and authoritative side of the organization (albeit one that is consistent with established practices of indigenous community governance in Chiapas). But at the national level, it has at first sight been less successful in its efforts to force the implementation of the agenda for new indigenous rights and autonomy legislation established by the agreements reached between the EZLN and Zedillo government in San Andrés Larráinzar, despite the initial euphoria created in April 2001 by the Zapatista caravan's progress towards Mexico City and the addressing of the Congress of the Union by two female and three male indigenous *comandantes*.

The purpose of the "Zapatour" had been to reinforce support for the *Ley Sobre Derechos y Cultura Indígenas* drafted, on the foundations of the San Andrés Accords, by the Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (COCOPA), a multi-party group created by Congress to mediate in the conflict. Vicente Fox sent the COCOPA bill to Congress in December 2000 in fulfilment of his election pledges. The draft law was radically amended in the Senate at the instigation of the controversial senior *panista*, Diego Fernández de Cevallos, an implacable opponent of further concessions to indigenous peoples, and the equally controversial former governor of Puebla state, Manuel Bartlett, very much a *priísta* of the old school. Although the Chamber of Deputies only approved the amended law by a majority, the Senate had approved it unanimously, thanks to the acquiescence not only of the centrist leader of the Centre-Left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) in the Senate, Jesús Ortega, but to the votes of other *perredista* Senators associated with the left wing of the party, notably Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, son of its founder, the thrice-defeated presidential candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, and grandson of Lázaro Cárdenas del Rio, the populist reformer and Machiavellian strong-man who was President of the Republic from 1934 to 1940. In 2002 Cárdenas Batel became governor of Michoacán, having been obliged to apologise for his "error" in approving the Senate revision of the COCOPA bill during his election campaign.

The EZLN responded to the deficient federal law with new ideas for developing the autonomous regions still under its control, setting up five "Juntas de Buen Gobierno" to provide higher level of administrative integration to the communities within the Zapatista autonomous municipalities. These are associated with the *Caracoles*, successors to the original *Aguascalientes* sites that provided a meeting point between the indigenous Zapatistas and "civil society".[3] Offered as an alternative to continuing

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[3] The Aguascalientes sites were the quintessential expression of the creativity of Zapatista cultural politics. One of the aims of these original meeting sites, with their pyramids created with plastic sheeting and name recalling the betrayal of the goals of peasant revolution by Carranza and his allies, was to link the Zapatistas into wider social movement networks. Yet as a place where "Indians" dialogued with "mestizos" over history and identity, they also contributed to the possibility of a "bottom-up" reconstruction of Mexican nationalism, by questioning the equation of "Mexican" with a generic concept of *mestizaje* premised on "de-indianization" and by uniting the contemporary struggles of the EZLN with symbols drawn from popular revolutionary traditions deeply rooted in the historical

dependence on the "mal gobierno" of which the Zapatistas accuse the national, state and officially recognised municipal authorities, the new Juntas promised to attend impartially to Zapatistas and non-Zapatistas alike, concentrating both resources and organization to improve basic infrastructure, social and educational services and create new development projects for all. The new model also proposes to redistribute resources between zones to compensate for differences in levels of development and service provision.

Although Santiago Creel, Secretary of Gobernación, was quick to dismiss protests that the Juntas de Buen Gobierno were by definition anti-constitutional, subsequent reports of renewed paramilitary activity, troop movements and a direct threat, in December 2003, to assault the Caracol at Morelia with armed force on the part of the *priísta* municipal president of Altimirano (possibly acting on instructions from the PRI aspirant to the governorship of Chiapas) suggest that the EZLN's strategy for trying to proceed with the construction of indigenous autonomous regions from the ground up is being taken seriously by those local interests that stand to lose most from the success of such a project. Nevertheless, a key element in such a strategy for building "autonomy" ironically remains the capacity of the EZLN to capture external resources from the international solidarity movement (over which it seeks an ever tighter control to ensure that autonomy with respect to official state agencies does equate with "self-determination"). Furthermore, whilst the EZLN continues to seek alliances in a wider Mexican "civil society", the fact that it is obliged to attempt to build the future in a restricted region of Chiapas is a reflection of the limited practical results of its broader political strategy to date.

While the EZLN's current enclavement within a particular regional space does not rule out the possibility of the successful development of what might become a model for other regions and ethnic groups outside the state, it is important to recognise that other parts of Chiapas are now evolving along different lines, even where the EZLN rebellion was an initial catalyst for change, The EZLN remains strong in areas of colonization deep in the *selva* in which peasants either seized or colonised land over

memories of many sectors of Mexican society which would not readily identify themselves with indigenous peasants in the Mexican Deep South. See Stephen, 1997.

which their tenure remains precarious, but the rebellion also provoked land invasions in other zones. As part of the campaign to contain the Zapatista movement, many of these were subsequently legalized by the government, generally through the compulsory purchase of former *finca* lands which were handed over to peasants as *co-properties* rather than as land grants to form *ejidos*, absolving the State from its previous tutelary role with regard to agrarian administration (and also maintaining the official stance against further land redistribution and implicit hopes for full privatization of the *ejidos* contained in Salinas's amendments to Constitutional Article 27 in 1991). The results of this strategy can be a far less attractive brand of community "autonomy", as exemplified by the case of the Tojolabal community of Saltillo, which I visited in the spring of 2002.

All of the Tojolabal communities were once totally subjected to the *finqueros*, for whom they were obliged to work without pay under the system known locally as *baldío* (Gómez and Ruz, 1992). Although post-revolutionary land reform struggles began early among the Tojolabales, some of the *finqueros* possessed sufficient political clout to hang on to their properties. The Saltillo *finca* lies across the valley from that owned by former Chiapas governor General Absalón Castellanos, briefly detained by the Zapatistas in 1994. Whereas the state government was still finalizing arrangements for a peaceful transfer of the ex-governor's *finca* to local villagers in 2002, the Saltillo peasants were already in full control of the other estate, having stormed the great house and literally hacked it apart with machetes in a display of rage that reflected a history of profound humiliation as well as gross economic exploitation.[4] Such histories do not make for easy transitions: Saltillo has become a community in which only one faith (Catholicism) and only one political party (the PRD) are tolerated.

In other parts of the region whose centres are the southern city of Comitán and the town of Las Margaritas, Tojolabal communities long freed from the *finquero* yoke remain riven by socio-economic and political tensions (still sometimes expressed through witchcraft accusations), have fragmented on religious lines, and are

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[4] In this region the *finquero's* power expressed itself through sexual as well as absolute economic domination, his rights over the bodies of indigenous women serving to feminise their husbands.

increasingly seeking to resolve their livelihood problems by migration to the United States. Yet along the border between Chiapas and Guatemala in the region of Lagos de Montebello, experimental stations owned by the biotech firm Pulsar International, Mexico's Monsanto, founded by Alfonso Romo Garza, member of a long-established Monterrey elite family, pack indigenous women into plastic greenhouses that produce transgenic vegetables and fruit seeds. Although Sr. Romo, who is also a member of the World Bank's External Advisory Board for Latin America, saw his employment of 1,500 Chiapanecos as a contribution to the peace process,[5] and has also promoted the association of private investors with "small landowner-farmers",[6] the latter are clearly not the type of peasant farmers who form the Zapatista base. Indeed, since another of his investments in Chiapas (linked to his role as a leading promoter of Plan Puebla-Panama) has been the planting of 50,000 hectares of genetically engineered trees within the rainforest zone, an activity that is low in demand for labour and high in use of chemicals, Pulsar is already on a collision course with the indigenous peasants likely to be displaced by continuation of this pattern of development.[7]

The strategic discourse of the Fox government on the problems of Chiapas has, scarcely surprisingly, mirrored that of Alfonso Romo, with its emphasis on the need to create jobs within new sectors orientated to exports (alongside cultural and eco-tourist projects). Yet the generation of sufficient (and sufficiently well paid) jobs to compensate for the decline of other sources of livelihood has proved elusive, with even Plan Puebla-Panama itself failing to move forward as rapidly as hoped by Mexican business. The result is a situation in which social policy may be more culturally sensitive, but in cash terms "consists of little more than a residual approach to problems of extreme poverty", to quote one of the hypotheses advanced for discussion by the seminar organizers, though with the added twist that the politics of defeating the EZLN still dictate *whose* extreme poverty becomes a likely target for action. Indeed, June Nash has argued that, contrary to stereotype, the National Indigenous Institute office in San Cristóbal de las Casas, was far from being the

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[5] See http://www.businessweek.com/1998/43/b3601049.htm.

[6] See http://www.danforthcenter.org/about/directors/garza.htm. Pulsar directly employs 20,000 people worldwide and does business in 123 countries. It also has non-banking financial and construction interests in Mexico.

[7] See http://sandiego.indymedia.org/en/2003/11/101969.shtml. Pulsar International also has interests in packaging, the likely destination of the product of these plantations.

instrument of "an authoritarian and homogenizing scheme of ethnocide" during the 1950s and first half of the 1960s, but promoted small-scale development projects aimed at semi-subsistence farmers and allowed local communities to select what "worked for them within their own cultural design" (Nash 2001: 67). Only after that period did the priorities change to converge with a national prioritization of dam projects and agro-industrial development (ibid.: 69). In this sense, the present situation may indeed be one step forwards, two steps backward.

In an analysis of Chiapas that closely documents its continuing economic stagnation, Daniel Villafuerte has argued that the "backwardness" of the Mexican Southeast is as much a reflection of the perspectives of its business class as of the problems of productivity and declining world market prices that afflict traditional crops such as coffee and sugar. It is not that there is any lack of entrepreneurial spirit, simply that the "modernizing" neoliberal model has paradoxically produced "strong impulses towards deindustrialization" and "the return of a primary sector export model" (Villafuerte 2001: 131). Under the political and social conditions obtaining in Chiapas, such impulses strengthen an "extractive" mode of exploitation, so that "globalization produces a society ripped apart by injustices, in confrontation with itself, a society without a project, which operates under the principle of beggar my neighbour", leading to a new epoch of "development of underdevelopment" (ibid.)

Set against that context, whatever criticisms might be made with hindsight of EZLN tactics and strategy over the past decade, the organization continues to offer creative alternatives to a bleak scenario in which an increasing proportion of the population of Chiapas would face a future of becoming "desechados" in the urban and rural slums created by a model of development destructive, as Nash argues, of minimum guarantees of subsistence security and livelihood. Indeed, many of the EZLN's "failures" are simply the reflection of the social fissures that have been the inevitable consequence of Mexico's past history and recent model of development. What the movement has undoubtedly achieved over the past decade is the setting of a basic agenda for the broader indigenous movement in which the San Andrés Accords have become a fundamental point of reference. I now want to turn to consider the implications of this in a different regional context.

Michoacán: Nahuas and P'urhépechas in the struggle for a new indigenous law

The Senate's modification of the COCOPA draft law was widely denounced for making a mockery of the principles of autonomy and self-determination. Firstly, it insisted that indigenous judicial practices must be tested against overarching state and federal laws (Assies, 2001). Secondly, although the Senate bill's insistence that the law must be consistent with human rights principles and, in particular, the rights of women, was entirely consistent with the COCOPA proposals, it was framed in a way that impeded the possibility of indigenous communities achieving the kind of political and territorial organization that would permit them to enjoy a real self-determination with regard to land use and control of resources. The Senate bill rejected those COCOPA proposals that referred to ethnic units beyond the community and regional levels of organization and representation. In doing so, it not only placed tight limits on indigenous self-management, but also offered an important degree of protection to non-indigenous interests — regional, national and transnational — with regard to the shaping of the overall pattern of development of regions with large indigenous populations.

Critics immediately pointed out that the Senate amendments set aside the notion of "territory" which had been the foundation of "autonomy" as defined by the San Andrés Accords. However, supporters of the federal law argued that its lack of a precise definition of "autonomy" was actually a virtue, since the substance of the rights granted to indigenous people would of necessity have to vary according to distinct regional circumstances: all the Congress had done was create a framework that could be modified substantively by the legislatures of different states (Ramírez, 2002: 163). It clearly *is* necessary to recognise differences between regions. Although the "usos y costumbres" state legislation of Oaxaca is frequently cited as a model, the fact that Oaxaca is divided into a vast number of relatively compact municipios (Clarke, 2000) makes it a very different proposition for legislators than the Meseta Tarrasca of Michoacán, where even re-municipalization to end the problems caused by indigenous settlements being subject to mestizo *cabeceras* would not resolve all the consequences of the interdigitation of indigenous and non-indigenous *ranchos* and

landholdings in geographical space.[8] In the case of Chiapas, the possibility of a movement such as the EZLN developing in the first place was contingent on a specific regional setting in which peasant colonization brought together people from different highland communities, who left the historical baggage of the highland fiesta-cargo systems behind when they appropriated and modified for their own ends what were, in fact, forms of agrarian organisation initially introduced by the state as a means of controlling and demobilizing land reform beneficiaries (Leyva and Ascencio, 1996). While simple demographics coupled with the federal government's cynical grant of an enormous territorial reserve to the minority Lacandón Indian population (De Vos, 1995) has provided reasons for inter-communal conflict even within a relatively new peasantry, in other contexts the prospects for unity are often complicated by the legacies of much longer histories of territorial disputes.

The proportion of people maintaining an indigenous identity within a state is also a crucial variable. In the case of Michoacán, indigenous people are a small minority (3.2%), thanks to the comprehensive process of "de-indianization" that began in the colonial period and was given further impulses by the insurgency of the early 19th century, the implementation of the liberal land reform in the late 19th century and even the post-revolutionary formation of *ejidos* and genesis of a *campesino* identity linked to (subordinated) inclusion as "hijos predilectos" of the regime (Friedrich, 1986; Boyer, 2003). Although Mexico has the largest number of indigenous citizens in Latin America (10.5 million), the fact that the biggest concentrations are located in regions that were previously "peripheral" to national development is not accidental.

The fact that indigenous people are a minority in Michoacán is clearly a fundamental political fact in terms of the pragmatics of implementing a new indigenous law, compounded by the fact that the party that controls the governorship, the PRD, does not enjoy even a simple majority in the state congress. Cynics argued that delegating the creation of indigenous laws with substance to the states was simply a strategy designed to impede the formation of a strong national movement and guarantee a voice to "caciques and latifundists" (Ramírez, 2002: 163).

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[8] This pattern is a consequence of the effects of liberal land reform on a region in which haciendas were few and disentailed lands were often sold off piecemeal to mestizos who sometimes took up residence within the boundaries of the now defunct colonial communities.

Michoacán does, nevertheless, possess an extremely strong and vociferous indigenous movement that long predates the rising in Chiapas. Run by intellectuals from the majority P'urhépecha ethnic group of the central highlands, its historical importance owes as much to the role of some P'urhépecha activists in the defence of the regional hegemony of the PRI as in their contributions to opposition movements (Vásquez, 1992; Zårate, 1994). Yet symptomatic of the changed scenario created by the transformation of the Mexican State, the social impacts of neoliberal economics, and the drafting of the San Andrés Accords, was the public denunciation of the new federal law by a leading *priísta* indigenous politician, President of the State Commission for Indigenous Affairs and state deputy for the (mestizo dominated) Los Reyes district, who angrily remarked that: "The Indians are an object of discussion but never allowed to participate in it" (Ramírez, 2002: 165). Following the election victory of Lázaro Cárdenas Batel, the most radical P'urhépecha group, Organización Nación P'urhépecha (ONP) immediately produced a draft *Ley Sobre Derechos de los Pueblos Originarios de Michoacán* and initiated a round of public discussions of its proposals in the P'urhépecha communities before presenting a definitive version to the new governor in April 2002.

The ONP proposal is indeed radical. It proposes, in effect, to create a structure of indigenous self-government within the state that would parallel that of the existing state apparatus, even taking over functions currently performed by federal agencies, such as the settlement of agrarian disputes. All social development funding would be transferred to a Council of First Peoples (Consejo de Pueblos Originarios), which would be judicially recognized as a "decentralized organism of the federal and state governments" with executive powers, subject to a Congress, and with members elected by the four ethnic groups of Michoacán (p'urhépechas, nahuas, mazahuas and otomis/ñahñús). All normal functions of government administration (including vigilance of electoral matters) would be performed by a series of commissions equivalent to government departments, subject to the vigilance of an elected audit commission. What is proposed is therefore far from being a talking shop, since it could only realise its functions if it received a substantial part of the existing federal, state and municipal budgets. The other radical aspects of the ONP proposal lie in its

preamble, which not only refers to a history of dispossession that might be rectified and the achievements of the EZLN, in terms that echo the discourse of the most sophisticated sectors of the international indigenous movement, such as the Canadian, but argues explicitly that "regional self-government" is a condition for effective resistance to a neoliberal project that has brought "misery, unemployment, malnutrition and the loss of social conquests" to the Mexican people. ONP leaders also publicly warned Lázaro Cárdenas Batel that they would not be bought off with more "programas asistencialistas" that merely strengthened clientelist paternalism.

The governor's response was a reminder of the need for realism in a state dominated by non-indigenous interests that constituted a majority in the legislature. He also noted that the three other ethnic groups had not been involved in the discussion of the draft law to date, and set in train a further round of meetings (to be attended by P'urhépecha representatives but also by state functionaries) to rectify this deficiency.

This initiative brought the Nahua communities of the Michoacán coastal sierras into the dialogue for the first time.[9] Whereas the P'urhépecha communities generally have a history of strong internal socio-economic differentiation and disarticulation (albeit with some post-revolutionary recuperation) of their colonial communal territories, the Náhuatl-speaking zone has a distinct history that is unusual in national terms. Totally reconstructing their institutions in the mid-17th century after a catastrophic first century of colonization dominated by *encomenderos* based in neighbouring Colima, they achieved a considerable degree of *de facto* political, religious and even military autonomy as part of a broader post-colonial Nahua world on the periphery of colonial centres of power. Although one might imagine that geographical isolation would produce closed communities locked "in the patriarchal lifestyle imposed on them by the missionaries", to use the words of one mid-19th century commentator (Romero

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[9] Some of their leaders were already involved in the larger indigenous movement through militancy in the PRD and participation in the Indigenous Congress at Nurio during the "Zapatour", and there were also contacts between P'urhépechas and Nahuas based on sponsorship of dance groups and other cultural initiatives involving local bilingual teachers under the auspices of the National Indigenous Institute, CONACULTA and the state government. But although the principal leaders often signed declarations in their name that were widely disseminated via the Internet, ordinary members of the communities knew little about the campaign for indigenous autonomy until the end of 2002, and local visions of the Zapatista movement were somewhat ambivalent, despite the fact that the Chiapas rebellion featured very positively in the pastoral work of local nuns who remained strongly attached to a Liberation Theology agenda.

1993 [1864]: 51), militias from the communities located closest to the Colima border in fact joined mestizo insurgents from the neighbouring *congregación* of Coahuayana in the insurgent campaigns to end Spanish rule (Brand, 1960: 86). While this activism could be given other interpretations, my archival and historical research supports the idea, associated particularly with the work of Florencia Mallon (1995), that it represented a genuine desire to be included in the new nation, not in the manner in which indigenous people had been included in the colonial order as a subordinate tribute-paying caste, but on new terms, not simply as free and equal citizens, but as free self-governing communities secure in the possession of the territories that were the basis for their historical sense of possessing a unique identity and tradition.[10]

This would be particularly true of the community of Ostula, which became a religious centre for the entire area, and whose 18th century *cofradía* possessed the largest herd of cattle in the coastal region (Cochet 1991: 41, 68, n.17). Ostula's indigenous government instituted idiosyncratic ceremonies for celebrating National Independence Day long before visiting schoolteachers began to bring the modern culture of the state into the community in the 1920s. The community entered the post-revolutionary era with its civil-religious *cabildo* still functional, with a hierarchic form of organization in which real power was concentrated in the hands of eight *cabecillas* who acted as advisors to formal office holders and continued to act as the community's real rulers even after it adopted the forms of civil government prescribed by the constitution (as a *tenencia* of the mestizo-dominated municipio of Aquila, created at the start of the Mexican revolution[11]). The status of this inner elite was linked to their command of the arts of rhetorical Náhuatl and ability to project themselves as "men capable of discernment and deliberation" in communal assemblies. Although the rigidities of Ostula's institutions were resented by some, and were associated with strongly patriarchal forms of family and community organization that made gender relations considerably more hierarchic than complementary, it is to its specific forms of

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[10] Interesting enough, this is exactly how a non-indigenous *apoderado* seeking to defend his clients from the liberal *reparto* presented the sentiments expressed by the indigenous petitioners in a communal assembly to the authorities. APEM *Hijuelas*, Libro 2, fojas 19–19V.

[11] The *cabildo* continued in existence behind the scenes until the Cárdenas presidency and the *cabecilla* system until 1960, when a community revolt against an attempt to impose a *cacicazgo* on the part of its agrarian representative provoked an unprecedented crisis that discredited this form of governance. For the official historical record of this incident, see RAN, Santa Maria Ostula, Bienes Comunales, Exp. 1523, caja 2 de 2, fojas 214–216.

leadership and community organization that we must look to understand how Ostula alone managed to conserve its communal territory intact until the present day.

To boil a complex history of power struggles between socially heterogeneous actors down to its bare essentials,[12] from the 1870s onwards the Nahua communities were subject to a dual assault from non-indigenous society. An elite based in the isolated district capital in the high sierra, Coalcomán, set about implementing the reform of indigenous land tenure decreed by both the Ley Lerdo of 1856 and state legislation that increasingly closed any remaining loopholes, in the interests of big capital, including foreign capital. Their aim was to create a modern capitalist economy based on steel production as well as agribusiness and the commercial exploitation of the indigenous zone's vast communal forest reserves. Using the lever of fiscal revaluation of undivided communal lands, and morally fortified by its internalization of 19th century racial models and dreams of European immigration, this *criollo* elite was also prepared to use fraud and violence to ensure the total dispossession of the indigenous population and their expulsion from the region to swell the ranks of the agricultural proletariat of Colima and Jalisco (Sánchez, 1988).

Although the Mexican Revolution put an end to this project, the same was not true of the second threat to the survival of the indigenous communities, waves of invasions by mestizo *ranchero*s moving down towards the coast from towns of Periban and Cotija on the western uplands of the regions of Zamora and Jiquilpan, a process that accelerated in the wake of the coming of the railways and the decline of the mule trade (Cochet, 1991). The impetus to continue this advance towards the indigenous communities from the Coalcomán highlands was the class structure of ranchero society, since later and poorer immigrants could do better by pasturing their herds on indigenous lands than by working for richer *paisanos* as *medieros*. In the case of Ostula's neighbour Maquilí, some of the newcomers intermarried with the indigenous population, but these patterns of sociability simply made it easier for the mestizo families to take control of the lands of the indigenous families once Coalcomán forced a *reparto* of the remaining undivided communal pastures, saltworks and forests. Although factional struggles within Maquilí restored to power an able leader opposed

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[12] See Gledhill, 2004 in press, for a detailed analysis of these processes.

to the *reparto*, it proved impossible to continue resistance, although in this case the principal beneficiaries of the dispossession of the indigenous population were not the business associates of the Coalcomán elite but less affluent mestizo cattlemen.

With the extinction of Maquilí and the conversion of the neighbouring ex-community of Aquila into the seat of power of a mestizo minority controlling a municipio, Ostula was now in the front line, since the Mexican Revolution did not rescind the legislation that had abolished the legal personality of indigenous communities. Even communities that retained their lands were unable to petition the state to re-recognise their rights to communal tenure until changes were made to the agrarian code in 1940 (Sandoval, Esparza, Rojas and Olmedo 1999: 105). Mestizo power and impunity in the region was enhanced by Coalcomán's fierce resistance to the national state during the Cristero rebellion, which obliged Lázaro Cárdenas to broker a pacification plan which left regional power in the hands of the former *cristero* general, Gregorio Guillén. Guillén and his mestizo followers had established a base within the vast territory of the largest surviving indigenous community, Pómaro, to the south of Ostula, which the General ruled as a personal fiefdom with the cooperation of its indigenous authorities until his assassination in 1955. In the longer term, mestizo infiltration has cost Pómaro control of more than half its 75,000 hectares of officially recognized communal land, creating a legacy of strong inter-ethnic tension and a history of *caciquismo* on the part of more educated Spanish-speaking community leaders, although the community is today united in its determination to defend its remaining patrimony. Ostula's other neighbour, Coire, is also a centre of indigenous militancy today, though it too experienced a short phase of domination by mestizo *caciques* in the 1930s, which ended with a massacre and the intervention of federal troops: although the mestizos were expelled, Coire was subsequently forced to tolerate the establishment of a permanent mestizo enclave which theoretically enjoys full rights in the indigenous community, though in practice the mestizos are treated as second class citizens of this Indian republic.

After a mestizo *jefe político* in Aquila organized an invasion of Ostulan territory in 1928, the community transformed itself into an archetypal "closed corporate community" and kept mestizos out. It had already (pacifically) expelled a group of

mestizo ranchers who had achieved control over the *tenencia*. In consequence, there is only a tiny and beleaguered enclave of mestizo families located on the border with Aquila, to which the community steadfastly refuses recognition. But its posture has not simply been defensive. In 1950, Ostula recolonized the long uninhabited coastal area around the modern settlement of La Ticla in a pre-emptive move that forestalled a planned take-over by entrepreneurs from Colima with powerful political backers. This remarkable coup indicates that the community was not closed in the sense that its leaders did not move around in the wider world and gather political intelligence.[13] Shortly afterwards they embarked on the long legal process to gain official recognition and titling of their communal lands, though a violent conflict provoked by the efforts of this generation of leaders to establish a *cacicazgo* delayed the implementation of the Presidential decree until 1964. Furthermore, that decree was never executed definitively, since the Ostulans continued to insist that the boundaries determined by the engineers did not correspond to the real borders of their ancestral territory. This issue continues to unite the community across factional divides. In June 2003, several hundred Ostulans brandishing machetes occupied by force a region of their frontier long disputed with *rancheros* from Aquila and Maquilí.

This brief history helps us to understand why members of the Ostula community have been at the forefront of modern campaigns for indigenous rights and autonomy. As is so frequently the case, the leading contemporary activists are bilingual schoolteachers born in the community (affiliated to both the PRI and the PRD). Nevertheless, possession of a high degree of *de facto* autonomy in terms of control of resources and management of internal community affairs did not prevent Ostula experiencing the typical effects of closer incorporation into the political networks of state and national politics that was the necessary cost of its campaign to have its land rights guaranteed by the government. For the reasons outlined by Paul Friedrich in his classic studies of Naranja, in the P'urhépecha area (Friedrich 1986), these new entanglements produced

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[13] Their journeys to Colima, whose city fathers fined anyone who wore *manta* and spoke Náhuatl, seems to have underlain not only their own acquisition of Spanish-language fluency but their decision to force their children to speak Spanish at home, a decision that has now led to the restriction of competence in Náhuatl to a few elderly people. Ironically, this general language shift may have had the unintended consequence of impeding the subsequent establishment of *cacicazgos* by persons whose role as intermediaries was based on their command of Spanish, the pattern in Pómaro, where Náhuatl is still widely spoken.

successive bids by community agrarian authorities to transform themselves into *caciques*. Although such projects have continued to fail up to the present thanks to the underlying robustness of communal institutions that continue to be fortified by an unusually rich and inclusive system of religious service which remains the core of community identity,[14] the emergence of indigenous politics in the Aquila municipio (Michoacán's largest in spatial terms) is also entangled in relations between indigenous and non-indigenous actors.

The acquisition of political leadership roles by native bilingual teachers was associated with a reform movement at the end of the 1980s, in the wake of the disputed 1988 elections, that claimed to represent the interests of poorer *comuneros* against agrarian authorities more interested in the profits from illegal logging. The rebels scandalised traditionalists by openly seeking the physical as well as political support of the *Central Campesina Cardenista*. Although there were longstanding tensions between the community and the mestizo elites that had dominated Aquila, particularly after one of these mestizo *caciques* had tried, in 1967, to renew the campaign to liquidate the indigenous communities by courting the support of landless mestizos for a new redistribution of the region's lands to all adult family heads,[15] the changing political climate of the mid-1990s brought in a municipal president who focused strongly on the need to improve the situation of the indigenous communities. Although Ing. Mamés Eusebio Velázquez Mora's interest in attracting social development projects to his municipio was evidently not disinterested (since it vastly increased the budget that his administration controlled) and his drug-trafficking related assassination in Guadalajara in December 2002 retrospectively revealed the darker side of struggles for power in the municipal centre, tangible "material improvements" did take place in Ostula under his administration. When Ing. Mamés left office in 1998, a *priísta* schoolteacher from Ostula succeeded him, to be followed,

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[14] Another symptom of the Ostulans' desire to belong to the nation on their own terms is the ceremony that takes place at the fiesta of Santa Teresa, when the *fiscal* of the Church and other major religious officials hand over their cargos. Acting as the spokesperson of the old civil-religious *cabildo*, which is resurrected on this day as a group made up of the religious, civil and (modern) agrarian authorities, the chief *cantor* of the Church explains (using a language that resonates strongly with that of the civic traditions of the liberal state) that the ceremony was established by the *antepasados* (read *cabecillas*) in case the government in Mexico City should send investigators to learn about the unique *usos, costumbres* and *tradiciones* of the community.

[15] RAN, Santa María Ostula, Bienes Comunales, Exp. 1523-b, dos fojas, s/n.

in 2001, in an election in which all parties put forward indigenous candidates, by the then *Comisariado de Bienes Comunales* of Ostula and its most prominent activist in state and national-level indigenous politics, Martín Santos Luna of the PRD.

Behind Santos Luna's ascent lay the more Machiavellian figure of the director of the Ostula primary school, whose rise to power was related both to the ties he formed within the regional centre of the National Indigenous Institute and his political links with Mamés. Although the ONP draft law called for the abolition of the INI, it remains quite popular in Ostula, despite problems of lack of transparency in the distribution of social development funds administered by INI and SEDESOL and the failure of a number of projects. Similar lack of transparency has characterised the municipio's role in the administration of projects financed by these Regional Funds, but a more important issue is the kind of relationship that this kind of funding established between the *cabecera* and indigenous communities. While ordinary Ostulans may have feared and loathed mestizos in many contexts, this did not impede their immersion in everyday patron-client relations of a personal kind with the municipal president, who by custom sat in his office on Mondays offering "dispensas" to petitioners. The PRD has gained power in this area on a quite explicit platform of favouring the indigenous poor, its leaders promising to capture more "apoyos" for the economic and social benefit of the communities. Since Martín Santos reproduced the same style of personal, patronage-based, leadership as past municipal presidents, his inability to deliver on these promises rapidly proved politically damaging.

In the course of 2002, the authority of the elected agrarian and civic leaders of Ostula, also tied to the PRD, waned along with the fortunes of their party at municipal level. The main opposition faction, composed of PRI loyalists, was not sufficiently strong to mount a direct bid to depose these authorities, but it succeeded in incapacitating community self-government by calling on its supporters to refrain from attending communal assemblies (which are today subject to the formal rules of quorum stipulated by the agrarian law, another of the costs of trading *de facto* autonomy for *de jure* state recognition). This crisis provoked a number of strong reactions, including general condemnations of the problems caused by the introduction of party political competition into community governance, and, among some of the younger

generation, a critique of the political role of the bilingual teachers: the son of one of the leading protagonists in the struggles amongst the teachers (who had actually changed sides from the PRD to the PRI as a result of a personal quarrel with the PRD's principal leader) was one of a growing number of voices looking nostalgically at the past when the *antepasados* had managed the community in a more autocratic but effective manner. In the midst of this deepening crisis, Lázaro Cárdenas Batel convoked a consultation meeting on his new indigenous policy, held in Aquila in October 2002.

Despite their differences, all sides in the internal dispute sought to participate in this event, even though the leading roles in the meeting would inevitably fall to teachers and elected representatives from Ostula associated with the PRD. There were, in fact, two meetings, since at the first the representatives of the different Nahua communities insisted that they needed to consult with their base, preparing a 13 point questionnaire that was, in fact, discussed in a large number of settlements by groups that included both men and women (who often proved vociferous in expressing the view that they should have better access to community offices and representative roles). The state government had planned the consultation as an exercise that might dilute debates about more radical proposals for indigenous autonomy by inviting the communities to identify their priorities in terms of infrastructure and social development, along with other questions on "Indigenous Rights and Culture" that sought to investigate "uses and customs" relevant to the new indigenous law. There was also a section in the questionnaire devoted to the thorny topic of land disputes between communities and how the state government might help to resolve these. The hope in the state capital, Morelia, was quite clearly that the framing of the questions would focus minds on practical social development issues and requests for funding rather than utopian political wish-lists, thereby smoothing the way for acceptance of the governor's own proposals for an interim structure of indigenous representation in the state government, pending the ratification of a new indigenous law.

The proposed new structures for "inclusion" of indigenous voices at the heart of government could hardly have been further from the plan put forward by the ONP. There would be a council, which would consist of existing civil or agrarian elected

authorities nominated from each region, the number of representatives to be proportional to the size of each of the ethnic populations in the state. This in itself was potentially divisive, since it predictably opened up an argument about how many Nahua representatives there should be in total (since it was not proposed to have a representative from each community, which would make the size of the P'urhépecha contingent, and therefore the council as a whole, unwieldy) and how these could be chosen.[16] Yet this was a comparatively minor problem compared with the fact that the council's role would be purely advisory and the state government did not even intend to make funds available to meet the delegates' travel expenses! This not only failed to impress the teachers but produced particularly scathing comments from the community representatives who were ordinary *campesinos* occupying agrarian offices: as one of them put it: "They give us wings and then they cut them off!" Even worse, the state government also proposed to create, in each indigenous region, a new post of "link coordinator" to mediate in the channelling of social development funds. This, in fact a revival of now defunct systems that had placed responsibilities of this kind in the hands of non-indigenous "experts", was a function that could only be fulfilled by a "professional", and the state government assumed that the consultation meeting itself could decide on a nomination, pointing out the urgency of getting a candidate in place in relation to the annual budget cycle.

The debate proved long and controversial. The ONP might have been disappointed by the continuing enthusiasm of the majority of the Nahuas for the "subornos" offered by social development and anti-poverty programmes, especially the scheme originally known as PROGRESA (renamed "Oportunidades" by Vicente Fox), which *inter alia* offers bursaries for children to study outside the community.[17] But it was not disappointed by the way the assembly endorsed the San Andrés Accords and moved from debate about the inadequacy of the governor's proposals on indigenous

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[16] One possible solution to this dilemma would be to practise a rotation, though this might militate against the council's coherence.

[17] As a form of *asistencialismo* this program is targeted at women, and although in practice some were still forced to hand the money they receive over to their husbands to spend in the cantina, public denunciation of this kind of behaviour was becoming increasingly strong. I did, however, also detect some anomalies based on the exclusion of some beneficiaries in the administration of this and other programs, though these may be reduced by shifting the point of distribution from the *cabecera* to the indigenous *tenencias*, a change that would also reduce the association between receipt of funds and the personal patronage of municipal presidents.

representation to direct consideration of the ONP draft law, launched into the proceedings (to the evident confusion of the functionaries present) with a suitably theatrical flourish by Ostula's leading *perredista*, the primary school director. Official alarm deepened as he embarked on a discourse that ironically echoed that of his own critics within Ostula, condemning the political party system for dividing the indigenous communities and perpetuating a situation in which indigenous representatives were largely excluded from the upper circles of state government decision-making.

Although the meeting finally grudgingly consented to return to the communities to select candidates for the proposed new council and coordinator position, still arguing about overall numbers, it was made abundantly clear that both indigenous intellectuals and agrarian leaders favoured rapid moves towards arrangements more in accordance with the "spirit of San Andrés" and remained sceptical of the good intentions of the political class in the state.[18] In practice, internal political difficulties prevented the celebration of a third meeting at which the question of the nominations was to be resolved, and the Nahuas have continued to contest the details of these arrangements with the P'urhépechas, although the active participation of their representatives has been impeded by lack of financial assistance to attend further meetings outside the region.

Deep Neoliberalization

In theory, the Lázaro Cárdenas administration in Michoacán represents the more socially progressive wing of contemporary Mexican politics. An anthropologist by training, the governor has seen the poverty that stalks the countryside at first hand, and has cultivated the indigenous movement as a significant part of his political base. Nevertheless, the administration offers a good illustration of the "realism" currently pervading most Latin American countries. Not only is it based on some ironic

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[18] These suspicions seemed to gain further credibility when the state government announced its plans for a new indigenous university (a proposal clearly intended to appeal to and perhaps demobilise indigenous teachers). Whereas various spokespersons at the Aquila forum had stressed the need to create a "first class" institution (that would get indigenous people decent careers), what was finally offered was an open access, multi-sited facility not totally dissimilar to the *telesecundaria* and adult education facilities that the communities already saw as distinctly second, if not third, class.

political alliances — the former PRI state governor, Genovevo Figueroa, responsible for the repression of the PRD in its early days, has now joined his former enemies and is Minister of Tourism — but it is a faithful exponent of neoliberal techniques of rule, as I remarked earlier. Since it has continued to restrict support for productive activities to schemes that require not simply repayment of any loan but substantial initial investments by the beneficiary, beyond the means of all but a politically favoured few in a community such as Ostula, its support to indigenous communities has mostly taken the form of a combination of *asistencialismo* and "capacity building". In 2003, the state government announced a new "Programa de Atención a los Adultos Mayores", to be managed by the state Secretariat of Social Development and targeted at "zones of greater vulnerability and marginalization".[19] There are four subprograms. One is a new public health programme using the voluntary services of students from the University of San Nicolás, whereas the indigenous communities of the coast are asking for a fully equipped surgical hospital in their region (while doctors working in the nearest existing hospital, in mestizo Coahuayana, do not even enjoy access to the basic package of drugs prescribed by law). Another is a programme to distribute food parcels to the elderly. Two other subprograms "Sé de eso" and "Cuentáme su historia" are exercises in dignification intended to enable older people to pass on their knowledge and skills to younger workers and collect their memories and anecdotes for the public record.

It is interesting that the latter are focused on individuals rather than communities, but "community" is at the centre of the programme in other respects, since it aims to "promote the reconstitution of the social fabric of Michoacán on the basis of dynamics that empower the community organizational capacities in the population centres of the state". As a concession to indigenous sensibilities, the program also promises to permit indigenous authorities to distribute the food parcels in ways that correspond to the "normative systems" of their communities, subject, however, to external scrutiny by the state bureaucracy. The paradoxes of neoliberal social policy are only too apparent in the terms of this programme. A social fabric that has been shattered by the erosion of the environment and livelihoods under failed development

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[19] Boletín *Unidos Hacemos Equipo*, Año 1, Número 10, Agosto de 2003, Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán.

models and by the growing incapacity of the state itself to deliver services is to be patched up by drawing on the capacity of "communities" to solve their own problems. Even the state's own contributions rely increasingly on private charity and the commitment of "volunteers" drawn from the ranks of (not fully qualified) "active citizens". Yet where "communities" do demonstrate repeatedly that they actually possess a capacity for self-management, they cannot be allowed any real autonomy, especially where productive resources are concerned.

The PRD administration of Michoacán has determined that the state's future development can only rest on cultural and ecological tourism, since it has never had a significant industrial base — in reality, it would be better to say, as in the case of Chiapas, that there has been a process of "deindustrialization", albeit from a low initial base — and its agriculture, peasant and commercial, once comparatively prosperous, has no future. To this end, two million pesos (split equally between the federal and state governments) is to be invested in the construction of a tourist *hospedaje* between the communities of Ostula and Coire, which is expected to generate 30 permanent jobs and a further 75 indirectly.[20] The social justification for the investment is that the project will reduce emigration.[21] Its promoters consider that the locals have already been successfully "sensibilized" to tourism and "sensibilized" and motivated to organize themselves, leaving only an appropriate programme of training and skilling to be accomplished.

I have no way of knowing whether this project has won the approval of a communal assembly in Ostula, which has always rejected any development project in which the community was not a full partner in management in the past, but it is extremely unlikely that this kind of offering will reduce the growing interest in more radical proposals for indigenous self-determination. The proposals of the ONP in their present form are clearly not going to secure the approval of a majority in the state congress. But the interim structures offered by the state government are both unacceptable in the long term and a hostage to fortune, given the near inevitability of

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[20] Programa de Agrupamientos Empresariales, http://www.contactopyme.gob.mx/agrupamientos/
[21] There is a growing tendency for young married people to move to United States permanently, since their earnings in the lower niches of the labour market seldom allow them the luxury of return trips given the current costs and risks of an undocumented border crossing.

challenges being made to the probity of any indigenous professional who takes on the social development coordinator role in the course of normal factional politicking, which has become increasingly complicated locally now that the stand-off between the PRD and PRI has opened the way for a new grouping to emerge under the banner of the Partido del Trabajo (PT). In the absence of any moves to permit the enhancement of the existing capacity for self-government of the indigenous communities by endowing them with control of resources, it is quite likely that processes that threaten to "unravel the social fabric" of communities such as Ostula will intensify. This is not simply a question of emigration, since the coastal communities located on the paved federal highway constructed at the start of the 1980s not only control the major tourist assets in the form of the beaches, but also have access to irrigation for growing higher value crops. Their more economically successful members are beginning to see their subordination to the old civil-religious centre of the indigenous community of Ostula as increasingly irksome.

Yet fractious though they may be, these communities do still possess functioning institutions of participatory democracy that work well enough to maintain a balance between competing interests and work extremely well when it is a question of defending the community's integrity against external threats. If "capacity building" is necessary, then it could usefully take the form of strengthening the positive aspects of what still exists here. There are still economic alternatives that might focus, for example, on a return to more localized models of food supply as an antidote to the escalating risks posed by a globalized and industrialized agro-food system. And if Michoacán's future does lie in tourism, there would be a lot to be said for allowing those who are likely to prove objects of the "tourist gaze" to determine their own "sensibilities" and be at the centre of the management of such developments. Promoting the integration of indigenous communities at the regional and state levels by fostering genuinely representative organizations outside the current municipal framework and giving them control of budgets does not, *a priori*, sound any more risky than leaving decisions about tourist development to a group of professional politicians who, in at least some cases, happen to have substantial personal interests in that very sector.

Nevertheless, there is one final paradox in the way indigenous people have become the focus of social policy aimed at poverty alleviation in this region. Although the Michoacán coast is classified as a zone with the very highest rating for deprivation, a glance at the official map of relative welfare published by INEGI (**figure 1**) reveals that the zone is at the end of a veritable belt of extreme poverty extending through the southern (hot country) part of the state. Most of this larger population of poor families are *mestizos*, and many of the *mestizos* enclaved in the indigenous communities themselves do not enjoy higher levels of wellbeing than their indigenous neighbours. Yet this is a region where the legacies of a violent history are bitter, drawing the indigenous population itself into the same understandings of "race" as essential and immutable difference that once motivated their persecutors (even introducing ideas of racial difference into the quarrels between indigenous communities themselves). That both mestizos and Nahuas remain trapped in the *callejón sin salida* of thinking themselves irreducibly different by nature is another problem that ought to lie at the heart of any policy intended to repair the shattered fabric of a world that neoliberal techniques of rule largely seek only to "manage", and at a growing distance. Rebuilding the nation and a more inclusive society from the ground up will remain a challenge in this region.
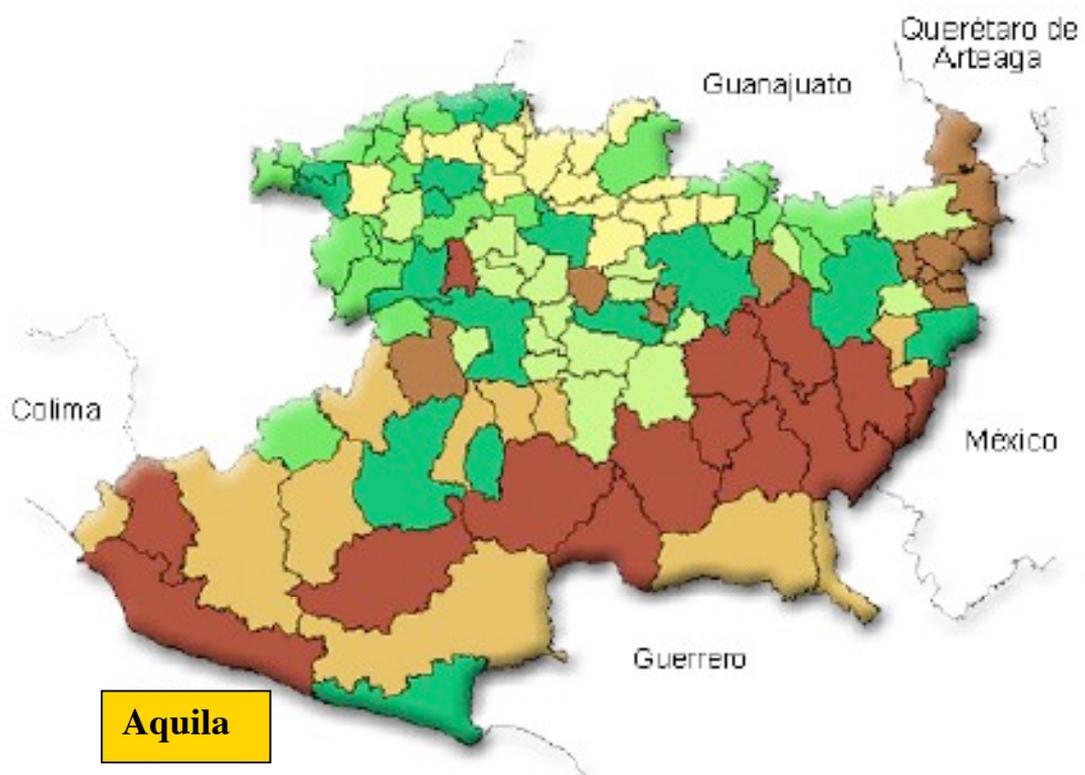
Figure 1. Levels of Welfare in Michoacán, by municipio (source: INEGI)

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