Languages of Rights
and Struggles for Moral Relations
exploring the paradoxes of popular protest in Mexico[*]

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Post-revolutionary Mexico is a society in which the possibilities of non-venal government are treated with deep scepticism by ordinary people. It is also a society in which the rule of law is seldom experienced in everyday life, particularly by the poor and relatively powerless. Yet radical popular social movements have displayed an enduring tendency to opt, sooner or later, for a position of negotiation which defines solutions to social and political problems in terms of legal and constitutional change, apparently embracing the language of rights embodied in the liberal state. In this paper, I argue that popular models of a just and well-governed society are not simply echoes of the official language of the state, but neither are they are a reflection of a completely "autonomous" subaltern political consciousness. I also argue that they are not merely utopian fantasies, but embody real political projects that continue to influence the course of Mexican history. The limits of popular political projects lie, I will suggest, not in their utopianism but in the fact that some of the most powerful arguments for legal and political reform have come from those groups in society that are least able to live by their ideals, from actors who are obliged to live by a seemingly contradictory set of moral premises in solving the problems of everyday existence. These problems are not merely mundane, as Bourdieu (1991) seems to suggest in his discussions of popular "realism". They are effects of both the conscious hegemonic strategies of elites and of capillary forms of power that structure the field of popular political mobilisation at a number of levels.

The paper is divided into a discussion of historical and contemporary issues. Constraints of time will force me to make some heroic generalisations in both areas, but I think it is essential to start any discussion of the roots of contemporary political culture before the more conventional historical watershed of the Mexican revolution of 1910. This is because I think it is particularly important to examine how the ideas of the Enlightenment, and subsequently, Liberalism, were implanted in Latin American political cultures. As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere, it is vital to appreciate that early forms of liberal doctrine did not include the doctrines of modern democracy (Gledhill, 1997). If we consider, for example, the views of even the most socially radical and egalitarian of 19th Century liberal theorists, John Stuart Mill, on the way in which rights to vote should be tied to education, it becomes clear that the lag between the formulation of liberal doctrines of "representative and responsible government" and the idea that political participation should be extended to *all* the people is very great. But it would be a mistake to assume that there was always another historical lag between the appearance of "advanced" *ideas* in Europe and their appearance in Latin America, at least by the 19th century. The important issues are much more to do with the way these ideas were read and reworked in terms of Latin American social realities.

Popular Liberalism and the Nation State in Latin America

In a review of the factors which distinguish Mexican history from that of other Latin American countries, the historian Alan Knight has highlighted the importance of what he terms "popular liberalism" in the stormy 19th century that succeeded a relatively tranquil colonial past (Knight, 1992). Even the most intransigent and "authentic" of Mexico's peasant insurrectionary movements, that led by Emiliano Zapata in the state of Morelos, was heir to this popular liberal political culture in important respects: alongside the demand for land, the *Zapatista* manifesto, the Plan de Ayala, insisted on reform of the justice system and municipal autonomy, and it did so despite the movement's antagonism to "petty bourgeois urban intellectuals" (Warman, 1988). The *Zapatistas* marched into Mexico City to drive out the faction of would-be bourgeois revolutionaries who sought to renew the longstanding project of building a strong national state. Yet they did so under banners that celebrated two *icons of nationhood*: the Virgin of Guadalupe and Benito Juárez, the liberal liberator of Mexico from the French.

At first sight this appears paradoxical. The cult of Guadalupe seems to have been a *criollo* invention (Poole, 1995). Benito Juárez had met Indian resistance to liberal reform of communal land tenure with an iron fist in his period as governor of Oaxaca state: the fact that Zapotec blood coursed in his own veins—symptomatically, as we will see—enhanced rather than moderated his enthusiasm for a forceful politics of assimilation and effacement of indigenous cultures. More recently, the historian Florencia Mallon has added important new pieces to these historical puzzles by her study of another part of Mexico which has a longstanding tradition of rebellion, the Sierra Norte de Puebla (Mallon, 1995). Here we find indigenous communities taking the paradoxical step of allying themselves with liberal elites which planned to abolish village communal land tenure. Here we find popular actors who are quite socially marginalised using a language of rights and a discourse of entitlements which invokes concepts such as "service to the nation" and the obligations of the state to the citizen. This does not, at first sight, seem to fit the model of an emergent national state imposing its hegemony from the centre onto a recalcitrant periphery, reshaping the subjectivities of its subjects by a combination of pacificatory violence and cultural revolution of the kind Corrigan and Sayer describe for English state formation (Corrigan and Sayer, 1985).

This issue has been taken up as a general issue by the anthropologist David Nugent in a discussion of the rebellion of the Peruvian province of Chachapoyas against its regional elite in the 1930s (Nugent, 1996). Chachapoyas was also a marginal region: its elites were obliged to base their wealth on exploitation of the apparatus of government rather than land-holding or commerce. The middle sectors of local society who led the revolt did so in the name of the values of "modernity", hygene, self-discipline and individual self-realisation. They demanded roads and commercial outlets. They demanded that the national state install its bureaucracy in their region. They rejected the entire system of racialised social distinctions, the system of *castas*, and replaced it with "The People" (*El Pueblo*) defined in terms of citizenship. Most importantly, they claimed this image of modernity as their own, naturalising it as an eternal component of their own past, and linking it to, of all things, the world of the Inca. Here, it appears, the "cultural revolution" associated with the political triumph of the bourgeoisie emerges in a peripheral region in which the national state is, to all intents and purposes, completely absent.

Nugent argues that this process reflects a fundamental difference between the histories of North-West Europe and Latin America: in the former, he suggests, 19th century rising bourgeoises took over centralised bureaucratic states which had already existed for centuries. At home, the new bourgeois elite used the state apparatus to discipline labour and incorporate subaltern groups into the political community in accordance with their fitness in terms of bourgeois values. In the colonies, the bourgeois state squared the circle of lack of affinity with bourgeois values among the colonised by racist exclusion—an inevitable response to formal commitment to the universalist values of the Enlightenment, given that practical denial of rights can only be justified by postulating essential differences that reduce the claims to humanity of those against whom one discriminates. So imperial Europe was obsessed with the policing of sexuality in relation to racial distinctions. In Western Europe, then, "popular sovereignty" was manipulated by elites who used an already existing "strong state" for the controlled incorporation of the masses and imposed a "national culture" that was essentially a bourgeois culture. In Latin America, no such state existed, opening up a space for popular participation in efforts to construct states and societies which would truly correspond to liberal ideals against an ancien régime that acknowledged liberal ideals in theory but denied them in practice.

In the specific context of Chachapoyas, an especially sharp social cleavage between a rapacious aristocratic elite which emphasised its "whiteness" and the rest of local society provided the ideal context for a rejection of the entire system of *castas* and the formulation of a notion of "The People" which was egalitarian in *racial* terms, though, as Nugent notes, not egalitarian in *gender* terms; local ideologies incorporated a strong essentialisation of gender difference and a strong theme of female domesticity. In the case of Mexico, however, a different form of colonial society and a different construction of the hierarchic logic of the system of *castas* generally prevented "The People" from constructing themselves in terms which did not reproduce the inferiority of "Indians". In the logic of Mexican colonial ideas about "race", Indianness was redeemable through its eventual transformation into whiteness (whereas blackness was not) (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992). For historical reasons discussed in more detail below, Mexican nationalism was built in terms of the concept of *mestizaje*, which embodied the principle that "progress" was equivalent to whitening. This political construction of the "ethnicity" of the nation and the citizen who embodied the nation in a non-trivial sense was empowering, in the sense that it partly valorised the indigenous past and the indigenous side of the Mexican majority. But it also was disempowering, since the indigenous side became an incapacity to be transcended in the individual, and a continuing axis of discrimination and difference between individuals and, more importantly, *communities* that continued to construct themselves (mutually) on the basis of principles of difference.[†] The role of the post-revolutionary state in constructing Mexican nationalism has made the hegemonic centre model that Nugent criticises seem more appropriate for Mexico, at least for the 20th century. Even in the 1920s, when that state remained relatively weak, the hegemonising *intent* of its programmes of mass socialist (i.e. secular) education was apparent enough,

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[†] I offer a fuller discussion of these issues in Gledhill, 1995: Chapter 3. The principles of difference used in these constructions were not exclusively ethnic, though ethnic constructions linked to race generally entered into the way they were coded. They were, however, also situational, regional principles of social classification being modified in subtle ways in accordance with the precise configuration of local society, thereby varying from one zone to another.

and provoked a major popular movement of opposition in the form of the *Cristero* rebellion.[‡] But this would not be a wholly satisfactory reading, even for Mexico, since the roots of Mexican liberalism and nationalism are provincial. In the mid-19th century, even some marginalised regions inhabited by indigenous people, start talking what looks like the languages of both liberalism and the imagined national community, even if it is a community of *difference* rather than a community of *sameness*.

What I want to explore in more depth in the next section is what exactly these people were talking about and imagining. I will argue that they were not talking a language which linked ideas about citizenship and political freedom to capitalist social property relations and that any dialogue between masses and elites broke down instantly and turned to violence when that linkage was introduced. Nevertheless, the fact that a dialogue took place at all does, I think, reflect important differences between Latin American and European history.

In the second edition of his classic text on the origins of modern nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1991) emphasises the pioneering contribution of Latin American *criollo* elites. Yet the Enlightment "package" proved troubling to figures like Simón Bolívar, wrestling with his own dark complexion and the question of slavery. In most places, the ideas and the practice of everyday social relations remained in tension. As I noted earlier, there was an extended lapse of time between formal declarations of nation-hood, formal adoption of liberal constitutions and the actual construction of effective national states—well into the next century in most countries. During that period, a space was created for ideas which were ultimately derived from Europe to enter political life in battles against elites that proclaimed values that they dishonoured in practice; but they were given distinct local resonances that reflected differences in social structures and histories. In the case of Mexico, the struggles did not result in a liberal state, but a post-revolutionary regime that was a hybrid of liberal principles and hierarchic and organicist principles.

What was peculiar about Mexico was, first, the intense social interaction which characterised the relations between colonisers and colonised in the demographic centre of the country; second, the weight of regions where indigenous identities had largely *ceased* to be significant by the later 19th century in the *national* politics of the pre-revolutionary period; and third, that the national state became strong enough to evoke strong *multi-class* coalitions against it in many regions without being strong enough to annihilate them. It was ironically the post-revolutionary state itself that laid the basis for the emergence of a new politics based on indigenous identities, a politics which has now become central to the current political crisis in the country.

The irony lies in the fact that the ethnic politics of that state was initially profoundly assimilationist, based on the premise that a *mestizo* nation would be constructed by the bringing of education and material improvements to the indigenous communities. It was assumed that the latter would rapidly cease to maintain distinctive cultural practices, forms of government and religious observance that differentiated them from the mainstream of the nation. In practice, the material improvements were not delivered: indigenous people have continued to be at the bottom of the ladder in terms of every possible indicator of health, social welfare and economic development. They have also suffered

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[‡] Although the *Cristiada* is sometimes represented as merely the result of clerical reaction, I would support Jean Meyer's classic reading of it as a genuinely popular movement in which the Catholic hierarchy played a very limited role, though I would be less eager to endorse his view that it represented the response of "the people" to a "Leviathan" state, given that we are still in a period of contested regime formation.

more than any other group from systematic violations of basic civil and human rights—arbitrary arrest, lack of due process, incarceration without trial, lack of legal protection, etc. But the revolutionary constitution did not complete the original liberal project of effacing them entirely: although it did not restore the full legal recognition of indigenous communities as legal persons, it did recognise communal tenure of land and other specific rights that might be claimed by persons living in indigenous communities. Neoliberal reform of other aspects of the constitution did not touch these principles, since the neoliberal transition coincided with the emergence of a global indigenous rights discourse: the government signed up for U.N. Agreement 169, although it did not fully implement its provisions with the first modification of Constitutional Article 4, which recognised Mexico for the first time officially as a "multi-cultural society" (Hindley, 1994).

This has left indigenous identity politics with a substantial space in which to press demands on the contemporary Mexican state. The conduit for the development of these demands has been the negotiations between the government and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the state of Chiapas. A major stumbling block of the negotiations has been the Zapatistas' insistence that rights should be vested in collectivities rather than individuals to be bureaucratically defined as bearers of "indigenous identity". The government has now conceded, on paper at least, that indigenous people should have control over the resources located in their territories and that they should be granted "political autonomy" in the sense of rights to elect their political representatives by communal consensus rather than individual secret ballot. Thus far, the agreements exist merely on paper, and the state continues down a trajectory of militarisation that makes it necessary to question the purpose of the negotiation process. Nevertheless, the Zapatista uprising of January 1994 did change the political landscape, and the fact that the movement escaped annihilation has enabled it to articulate a broader programme for building popular sovereignty and work on constructing a broader coalition of social movements that embraces diverse social forces. These include the *El Barzón* debtors' movement, which originally represented the grievances of commercial farmers facing foreclosure in the western state of Jalisco, and has now become a movement of national, and urban as well as rural, scope. They also include civic and human rights movements, the independent teachers' movement, and a very large number of other peasant and indigenous organisations. I will discuss the implications of these developments in more depth later, but I should point out at the outset that it is very easy to give a misleading impression of the current effervescence of social movement activity in Mexico. There is a substantial amount of mobilisation but less mobilisation than one might expect in a country in which living standards have collapsed so dramatically for such a large proportion of the population, especially given the political dimensions of the present crisis.

Mexico not only possesses the world's longest serving ruling party, but has seen its political class almost entirely unmasked as the perpetrators of political murder as well as a corruption of staggering proportions. Yet there is still little sign of an Eastern European style collapse, and little evidence to suggest that even if the present ruling party, the PRI, goes, it will be replaced by political structures that will embody the kinds of projects the radical social movements are pressing for. Although many commentators appear to envisage Latin America as a potential participant in an "end of history" in which liberal democracy will prevail, and there is no doubt that the ideals of liberal democracy

are present in the political cultures of the region, we do, I suggest, need to look at the factors which might make other scenarios more plausible rather carefully.

19ᵗʰ Century Liberalism and Popular Politics: From Form to Content

I will begin by attempting a closer dissection of popular movements in the century from the 1810 Insurgency to the 1910 revolution in Mexico. This is a period marked, throughout Latin America, by civil wars between Liberals and Conservatives. The latter factions were seeking to maintain colonial structures.[§] That meant preserving the power of the Catholic Church, preserving the colonial status hierarchy by merging the *criollo* elite with any peninsular elements willing to make common cause with the nation, and attempting to rebuild a strong state, to be run by the existing oligarchy, which means a praetorian oligarchy in the old colonial centre in the Mexican case. The Liberals are, in principle, federalists, and peripheral elites often felt antagonism towards the Mexico City oligarchy, but the driving force of liberalism comes from provincial towns, and from strata below the level of the landed elite. Liberalism in Mexico covers many shades of opinion, but develops a Jacobin wing quite early, and there are obvious continuities in terms of social origin and political outlook between the Jacobin leaderships of the 19ᵗʰ century and the *caudillos* who emerged at the head of the victorious faction in the Mexican revolution of 1910–1921.

The 19ᵗʰ century state in Mexico was in permanent fiscal crisis, since social and economic power was heavily decentralised, and social and economic power bought military power. It also governed a society which was profoundly regionalised and segmented, with the deep southern states of Chiapas, the Yucatan and Campeche scarcely integrated into the nation at all. Nevertheless, there was a substantial difference between Central Mexico and the "Deep South", where elites labelled indigenous efforts to rescue their religious life from secular priests and rebuild community autonomy "caste war", and ruthlessly reorganised indigenous life through violence to force labour into the coastal plantations (Rus, 1983). The closed corporate community model did not fit large parts of the centre, although many indigenous communities had been utterly annihilated in western Mexico during the Insurgency and some of those that survived rapidly mestizoised. The picture is more complex and varied by micro-region than I can describe here, but the overall effect was to establish a substantial social and ideological interchange between indigenous and non-indigenous community leaderships. Under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, which brought the country "order and progress" from 1876 onwards, social changes took place which displaced old indigenous community elites and laid the basis for new agrarian conflicts.

Paul Friedrich's classic study of the Michoacán village of Naranja (Friedrich 1977) exemplifies a more general kind of change in community politics: as the village loses its lands to the local *hacienda* through the complicity of *mestizo* village political bosses, the children of the old elite become a new generation of radical political leaders. They are, however, leaders who have been educated, and who identify themselves with Jacobin liberalism, which eventually transforms itself into anarcho-syndicalism through the transmutation of the old

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[§] In some contexts, families divided between liberal and conservative factions according to entirely local rivalries, but the generalisations offered here do reflect significant structural patterns.

Liberal party after 1910. In the case of Naranja, the radical local leadership is talking the language of the socialist international by the 1920s, but it has also adopted what could be termed the same "mestizo authoritarian" posture as the Michoacán-born revolutionary *caudillo* Lázaro Cárdenas, who was to give definitive shape to the post-revolutionary state in the next decade. Conventional ideological labels derived from European experience do not capture the content of either the ideologies nor the hegemonic practices involved in mobilising popular coalitions in a very satisfactory manner.

The social changes which created the new indigenous leaderships were, principally, the direct and indirect result of the liberal reform laws. The privatisation of communal land changed the economic basis of village leadership and allowed new actors to capture posts in community government which were levers to promote further change; in some cases at least, it was a new leadership that emerged as the local supporters of the reform which became the new village economic elite, since they were able to manipulate the legal process to the personal advantage of themselves and their clients. The implementation of the laws was not, however, really possible until the stronger Porfirian state could suppress local resistance, and the effects of the liberal reform were not uniform at the micro-level. Some villages lost most of their lands to *haciendas*, generally through the intermediation of new village elites, but others simply became internally differentiated and riven by factional conflicts. But what is interesting about Florencia Mallon's work on the Northern Sierra of Puebla is the way the indigenous communities allied with the liberals despite the threat they posed to communal land tenure.

In the Puebla case, peasant communities could ally themselves with liberals because the leaders that achieved hegemony over their communities constructed their own 'discourse of entitlement': they produced an alternative interpretation of Liberal land law which was the antithesis of "possessive individualism"; they articulated the communities' rights to resources and political participation as their recompense for sacrifice and defence of the nation. They did so, I suspect, by re-presenting the community itself to its members as a quasi-individual, a collective subject of freedom, juxtaposing the community's freedoms to local practices of elite domination (by secular priests,** merchants and non-Indian landowners) and by assuring its members that the interests of all would be protected. Within this discourse, the liberal nation could become the guarantee of respect for *collective* entitlements, and its discourse of freedom a charter for asserting *autonomy*.

This is, I think, a good illustration of the principle that the 19th century created a common language for talking about politics, but that it was one which some of the actors to continue to read the economic implications of liberalism in "moral economy" terms and to construct their own ideas about justice and reciprocity in the political sphere. (In this sense, we need to treat the label "popular liberalism" with circumspection.) We discover, in other words, a series of propositions within popular discourses which seem to be about "rights" and "duties", cast in terms of notions of "reciprocities" and "mutual obligations". However, as EP. Thompson (1993) has pointed out in relation to his own analysis of the negotiations between rioting crowds and elites in 17th Century England, this language of rights is "mostly our own" in terms of interpretation. What the crowd in England was negotiating about was the maintenance of a paternalist model of the food market and a protective state against the new kind of market

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** For an historical account of these processes by an anthropologist, see David Frye's work on the town of Mexquitic in San Luis Potosí (Frye, 1996).

morality expressed in Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*. The Mexican colonial state had also maintained a protectionist ideology, especially in regard to Indians, but it had repeatedly failed to deliver. The popular passions unleashed in the Insurgency reflected the legacy of the Bajío famine of 1786, which left 15% of the rural population dead from starvation: not only had the state failed to deliver protection, but local elites had displaced peasants from their lands to make way for a new class of commercial speculators (Tutino, 1986). This was merely the start of a cycle of social unrest that had touched many other regions by the end of the century.

How the enemy was defined was, however, a question of the nature of local elites. In regions where commercialisation was not the principle motor of change, alliance with liberals made sense, not merely in tactical terms, but in terms of some of the core values of liberal political discourse. Communities wanted respite from the arbitrary despotisms of elites which constantly violated the security of subaltern persons by theatrical displays of *machista* violence and respected no one's property other than their own. They wanted an end to what were still essentially tributary regimes based on control of public or clerical offices. They therefore seized on a language of rights which was already built formally into the 19th century nation-state constitutions, and which had counter-hegemonic force under the specific conditions in which they lived. Yet they could scarcely buy the whole package. Even in 17th century England, there was a similar failure of consensus. Like the ideologists of the bourgeoisie, the Levellers defined freedom as proprietorship of the person and non-subjugation to the will of others. Yet they dissented from the view that enabling men to make the most of their individual capabilities justified massive inequalities of wealth, retaining a Christian social ethic premised on relative equality and "communitive Happinesse" (Macpherson, 1962: 266).

The contradiction between liberal constitutions that proclaimed the formal equality of citizens before the law and the practices of social life was resolved in most of Latin America by justifying permanent denial of equality in terms of incapacities essentialised in differences of race or naturalised gender differences. Yet as far as men were concerned, social autonomy in the sense of freedom from domination by others remained a core value of the so-called *ranchero* cultures of the *sierras*. The idea of liberty as freedom from domination also underlies the notion of "popular sovereignty" embedded in the perduring idea of the "free municipality", the idea that the national state should possess those powers that local communities are willing to assign to it, for national defense or other purposes. The ideal of the free *municipio* united otherwise socially disparate movements at the time of the Revolution, ranging from the original *Zapatistas* in Morelos to the *rancheros* of the Altos de Jalisco, who later became key actors in the Cristero rebellion against the post-revolutionary state. But even the popular liberal political cultures of regional societies which appeared to have greatest affinity with "bourgeois" notions of possessive individuals parted company from liberalism when liberalism brought capitalist social property relations and proletarianisation. This seems a likely sticking point for "The People" in Chachapoyas also, since their version of liberalism was strikingly reminiscent of these Mexican *ranchero* ideologies.[††] It also conditioned the kinds of state interventions such populations were willing to accept in their lives, as Daniel Nugent has shown in his study of the struggles between the

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[††] Nugent notes, for example, that the leaders of Chachapoyas offered a discourse on the meaning of Independence Day which defined the meaning of independence as "to not have to be beholden to anyone, so that no one can dominate us, so that no one can command us" (op.cit.: 36)

"revolutionary" *pueblo* of Namiquipa, Chihuahua, and the post-revolutionary state (Nugent, 1993).

Alliances like the one forged in Puebla were built on a temporary coincidence of distinct projects and aspirations, without any ultimate consensus on the kind of social and political order to be achieved. The end of such alliances—between indigenous rebels and liberal or populist *mestizo* nationalists, for example—have, however, either been an eventual attempt by the superordinate groups to annihilate their erstwhile allies, or more subtle means of neutralisation of their project, through the partial elimination, partial cooptation of leaderships, limited material concessions, and destruction of collective solidarity by promotion of factionalism.

The basis for this strategy has always been the ability of elites to organise and dominate a larger "popular" base which saw its *social destiny* as distinct: during the 1910–1921 revolution the sindicalist urban working class fought in the armies which defeated the peasant armies of Villa and Zapata, while the majority of the population accepted the general desirability of social pacification and could also, largely, be convinced by a populist-nationalist rhetoric which reworked liberalism into a hierarchic frame. The post-revolutionary national state reorganised the previously regionalised social movements into top-down corporate structures of representation, through the National Peasant Confederation, the Confederation of Mexican Workers and the Confederation of Popular Organisations, which included the residual part of "The People". Under this scheme, the citizen-worker and citizen-peasant would each have their place in the new order, whilst the citizen-capitalist was an unmarked term assimilated to the "popular".

In practice, Mexico did not become a fully functional corporatist state, since the centre was unable to bring all regional powers under control, and was reliant on the system of political intermediation known as *caciquismo. Caciquismo* was a form of cultural as well as political brokerage (De la Peña, 1986), even where the national state's bureaucratic apparatus and the corporate organisations played a significant role in organising social and political life. Nevertheless, this new form of state organisation was sufficient to establish a new hegemony, in which the figure of the president could embody the nation and its dignified institutions. Mexicans were under few illusions about the true nature of their national leaders, who made little effort to conceal the personal fortunes they acquired while in office: the key issue was the separation of the public persona of the president from his private life: during the six years in while he occupied the highest office of state, popular disbelief was partially suspended in a process of fetishisation which was essential for Mexicans to continue to believe in themselves and their country, though it continued to manifest itself in various kinds of popular satiric discourse whose significance I discuss later on. Under the post-revolutionary hegemony, the state apparatus became the focus of negotiation as new popular movements emerged and tried to establish their independence from the "official" popular organisations. By and large, they failed to remain independent, since the state could make some concessions without violating its basic pact with private capital and their leaderships proved cooptable in the fullness of time. But the "system" remained flexible and inclusive enough to accommodate shifts of orientation when social mobilisation reached dangerous levels, the most notable of which was the neo-populist phase associated with the administration of President Echeverría in the period 1970–1976.

The hegemony established by the Mexican political class under the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was memorably described by Mario

Vargas Llosa as "the perfect dictatorship". Yet no dictatorship is actually perfect, even a totalitarian one, and scholarly fascination with the concept of the PRI-state as an apparatus of power has obscured as much as it has revealed. It has distracted attention from the recomposition of social elites as a factor in Mexican politics and from the crucial issue of why a long history of popular militancy failed to produce genuine political reform. It has also biased us towards a state-centred analysis which has left the analysis of power relations and popular political culture in Mexico surprisingly incomplete (Rubin, 1996). One absence, which I cannot tackle adequately here, is the role of the "Right" in Mexican politics: the *cristeros* were succeeded by the *sinarquistas* and these violent movements subsequently gave way to a more institutional form of right-wing politics: this is an important factor in explaining why the main electoral challenge to the PRI regime is still coming from the National Action Party (PAN) rather than the Centre-Left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), even though the latter has just made some major electoral gains after a period of decline, under a new leadership.[‡‡] What I will attempt to do is the explore the elements of popular political culture that are presently both enabling and disabling opposition to the PRI regime and its neoliberal policies.

Political Strategy, Morality and Hegemony

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is frequently reduced by anthropologists to a matter of cultures and ideologies of domination, thereby expunging from it both its emphasis on the exercise of intellectual and moral leadership by political actors within historical blocs or class coalitions and the important distinction Gramsci made between hegemony and domination (Roseberry, 1994; Kurtz, 1996). Even in the period of its consolidation, the post-revolutionary state in Mexico was engaged in a constant struggle for hegemony against other forces, both national, in the form of the Catholic Church and its allies, and regional. In Chiapas, in the 1930s, the socially progressive president Lázaro Cárdenas tried to establish the national state's authority over the planter elite of Chiapas by

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[‡‡] The new national leader of the PRD, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, gained national prominence as a leader in Tabasco state, campaigning against the election of PRI governor Roberto Madrazo Pintado, whose electoral expenses exceeded those spent by Clinton in the campaign against Bush, and were allegedly partly funded through money laundered by the fugitive financier and friend of the Salinas brothers, Carlos Cabal Peniche. López Obrador gained considerable credit in "rebel Mexico" for his support for the protests of Chontal Indians in Tabasco against the environmental damage caused by the state oil company PEMEX, discussed later in the paper, which placed him in a good position to heal the breach between the PRD and the coalition of social movements allied with the EZLN in Chiapas. His predecessor was a former *priísta* machine politician who had actually run the party organisation in a period when presidential corruption had been particularly notorious, and López Obrador had a cleaner and more genuinely "popular" image, though this has not prevented him from being criticised as a person who would probably have stuck with the PRI had his personal ambitions not been blocked by the clique around Madrazo. The discourse of selflessness versus self-interest is integral to the discussion of political leadership in Mexico. When *subcomandante* Marcos decided to make peace with the PRD, he wrote to its principal figure, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, pointedly praising him as a true statesman and patriot who put service to country and principle before personal ambition. Marcos had previously accused Cárdenas of being an egotistical *caudillo*. On the occasion of Cárdenas's first meeting with the rebels, Marcos described the PRD as: "repeating within itself all the vices which poisoned from birth the force now in power ... palace intrigues, agreements made by cliques, lies and the worst manner of settling accounts, betrayal" (*Latin American Weekly Report*, 94-20: 230)

backing a new generation of leaders in indigenous communities, bilingual teachers and other younger men who were eager to challenge the authority of existing village elders. This move turned sectors of the Chiapaneco peasantry into more reliable state clients, and enabled many of them to become subsistence corn farmers rather than migrant plantation workers, but it led to only a temporary and partial reconfiguration of ethnicised class and political relations in the region.

In the longer term this intervention by the national state created a new generation of village bosses (*caciques*) and led to a reconfiguration of regional class alliances (Rus, 1994). Indigenous peasants fought these bosses through a strong "objectification" of "the community" and "the communal". This was not a simple matter of cultural continuities, or primordial attachments to "uses and customs" sanctified by "tradition", but reflected an attempt to reactivate "the community" and its practices in active struggles to reorder social life and advance the interests of the poor and marginalised. Nevertheless, the discourse of "community", "tradition" and even "indigenous autonomy" has also been manipulated by *caciques* against their opponents (Collier, 1994). Where it has proved most effective as a discourse of emancipation is in the *Zapatista* base communities of the Selva Lacandona, which is a zone of peasant colonisation which has brought together people from a variety of different ethnic groups who mostly shared a common history of work as *peones* on the *fincas* of the highlands (Leyva Solano, 1995). In neighbouring Oaxaca state, we also find some contexts where long established practices of election of communal officials by "uses and customs" mask *caciquismo*, along with others, such as the Mazateco community of Mazatlán Villa de Flores, where the *caciques* are the advocates of "democratic modernisation". In Mazatlán, a communal assembly dominated by opposition sentiment is defying attempts to impose "modern" electoral procedures by an armed group of *priísta* bosses composed of former municipal presidents and teachers, backed by the state government and judicial police.[§§] To unravel the meaning of these varying local situations, we need to look at the practical politics, alliances and relations of force behind the discourses.

The rebellion led by the Zapatista Army of National Liberation is simply a final public and more directly political expression of a much longer process of resistance in Chiapas: it has involved a diversity of peasant tactics and a diversity of actors, including liberation theology, Maoist intellectuals and new generations of Indian community leaders. The EZLN does not enjoy an uncontested "intellectual and moral leadership" of the whole peasant movement in Chiapas, much less in the country as a whole. It has, indeed, constantly been faced with the tactical problem of how to counter the tactics behind the state's interest in dialogue with it: turning the broad national programme of the EZLN into what other organisations see as a solution to the specific social and agrarian problems of Chiapas.[***] Although the neoliberal elite faction currently controlling the state

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[§§] The *priísta* position is that its opponents are *zapatistas* and *perredistas*, a fact denied by the majority which opposes them. In January 1996, the attempt of the *priístas* to impose election by secret ballot by force led to the arrest of the former opposition municipal president after they killed a Mazateco man. Despite intimidation and violence, the communal assembly proceeded, in February, to elect a new municipal president by "uses and customs", and the *municipio* remained in a state of "armed peace" (*La Jornada*, March 18th, 1996). Mazatlán Villa de Flores is the birthplace of the father of the Flores Magón brothers, the anarcho-sindicalists who took over the leadership of the Mexican *Liberal* party after the failure of Madero's political revolution against the Díaz dictatorship.

[***] That it has had at least some success in this tactic of division is evidenced by the following statement from a peasant leader in Oaxaca: "Why are there workshops in Chiapas, they're

apparatus in Mexico has abandoned the principal bases of the older post-revolutionary hegemony by dismantling much of the old corporatist and state clientalist apparatus of political control, it has not forgotten how to play the politics of division it has been practising so adeptly for the last seventy years. Its principal problem is simply that has failed miserably to achieve an alternative basis for hegemony because of the catastrophic failure of neoliberal economic policies and has had to plug the gathering number of gaps in the power structure with military coercion. Nevertheless, it does seem important to note that even a political regime that is unravelling can still do quite a lot to fragment popular coalitions simply by exploiting the fact that these coalitions must look to the state for satisfaction of the kinds of demands the Zapatistas are pursuing: constitutional recognition of indigenous claims to control of resources and special political arrangements.

Before looking more closely at that, it will be worthwhile asking some more penetrating questions about popular political culture. Why, in the first place, is Emiliano Zapata such a powerful mobilising symbol in popular struggles in Mexico? This is an almost perfect illustration of the *ambivalence* of the dialogues which take place in hegemonic processes. The state in Mexico made much of Zapata as an official symbol and still does in an era when the land reform is being dismantled, in the discourse of the many former left-wing organisers whom the previous president recruited to staff the new bureaucracy he created to carry out the land title certification processes and run his famous *Solidaridad* social programmes. Zapata figures in many public rituals. For *some* peasant communities, the ruling party does still seem to stand for Zapata. It was the national state's officials who supported their land claims against other villages, regional bosses and landlords (Stephen, 1994; 1997, in press). So their loyalty to the ruling party is based on a sense that it fulfilled at least part of the revolutionary bargain. Many communities did not, however, feel satisfied with the land reform, including many communities in Zapata's home region, Morelos, and they feel even less satisfied with the state today because it is seen as having abandoned the peasant farmer. Even the continuing political support of loyal communities now seems to be quite precariously balanced on the pragmatic issue of whether the government will keep the cheques flowing and help people continue farming: it is possible to vote for the ruling party and still feel sympathy for the *Zapatistas* in Chiapas on the grounds that people there need land and the state should do something about it. So any public invocation of Zapata as a national symbol may be accompanied by what James Scott (1990) calls a "hidden transcript". This presents Zapata as an authentic *peasant hero*, a *selfless* leader who was *betrayed and murdered* by the elite which won power through the revolution on the backs of the peasant armies (Powell, 1996).

Zapata was not himself an indigenous peasant, and, indeed, projected himself as as a cowboy, a *mestizo* image of a man who was not afraid to stand up to the *hacendado* and might be employed by him in a position of confidence, as Zapata actually was. He reinforced this image of *machista* independence coupled with paternalism by fathering children throughout the villages of Morelos.[†††] Yet Zapata is seen by Indians as someone who fought for Indians and indeed, *sacrificed* himself for them: in some contexts he has even been merged into

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listened to, they get responses... and they [the government] pay no attention to us, the people of Oaxaca, who are even more poverty-stricken than the people of Chiapas" (*Proceso*, 27th May, 1996, my translation).

[†††] As Matthew Gutmann has pointed out in a recent study, the relationship between fatherhood and Mexican images of the *macho* has been ignored by most anthropological scholarship. See Gutmann (1996).

indigenous cosmologies (Stephen, 1997, in press). This hidden transcript is seldom far below the surface, and it clearly *contests* the official account of the way the regime embodies the Zapatista project for social justice. Most of the time the two transcripts can coexist: both politicians and peasants can go away from a ceremony feeling that they have reaffirmed *shared values*, although they are actually celebrating very *different* values (Lomnitz-Adler, op.cit.). But the peasant image of Zapata embodies a higher *morality* which pits the people against the state in a powerful and universalising way: it attacks the good faith of elites and dignifies peasants not just as people who have suffered but as people who have fought for their rights and dignity. The subaltern audience has not been conned by the state's shouting ideology at it, which is why Zapata has become the focal symbol for a new and now quite widespread dissidence that is making rural Mexico increasingly ungovernable and forcing the regime to resort to coercion and militarisation as its hegemony cracks with the loss of its universalising content—the transition to plutocracy and the unmediated pursuit of the "economic-corporate interest" of a transnational capitalist class.

Yet, the upsurge of popular movement activity of diverse kinds in the past two years is not the only process producing ungovernability: regional bosses seem to be resurgent, though the economic bases of their power are often no longer local, but strongly integrated into the national and transnational circuits of capital accumulation whose development has shaped the reconfiguration of the state. As one of the country's leading banks noted in a survey of the political consequences of 1996, it is as if each elite faction was taking what it could carry from a rapidly sinking ship (*La Jornada*, 1st December, 1996). Carlos Salinas, the previous president and architect of the neoliberal reform, now resident in Ireland, has lost his dignified mask in an open public debate about his personal participation in corruption and murder. Mexicans may now cease to suspend their disbelief in the figure of the president incarnating the nation and its collective institutions. As the institutions and the national sentiment associated with them become less meaningful, the full ideological failure of neoliberalism in Mexico may become apparent.

Yet the price of ideological failure need not be a war of movement based on a consensus that the faction controlling the apparatus of the national state is the country's principal problem. Mexicans, like Eastern Europeans, have long elaborated a satiric popular political culture which makes a joke of the corruption of their elites (whilst recognizing their power, and their ruthlessness). Some, including, it appears, the leaders of the EZLN, take this as indicating the viability of a strategy of making no direct attempt to capture the state through political means. But it might equally well be symptomatic of tendencies towards "displacement" of resistance. The EZLN hopes to build the momentum of a coalition of popular movements to the point where the old regime will collapse under the weight of popular protest and more democratic actors can take the stage. Yet there are important problems with such a scenario.

An implicit analogy with Eastern Europe could be a poor guide to action. The Eastern European elites were not only different in structure to those of Latin America, but the communist state was clearly becoming a fetter for many actors who had prospered under it. Free enterprise has, after all, been good for many former aparatchiks, and others have maintained or regained political power wearing new masks. Mexico's elites need the power they have and are certainly in no position to concede popular economic demands. There are, of course, major differences between former communist countries, in terms of the outcomes of "reform" to date and the extent to which social costs have been balanced by some political gains. Russians do not seem impressed by

democracy, taking the view that governments need to be fed, the sole virtue of Yeltsin being that he and his people have had the main meal already, whereas incomers would be hungrier. This thinking, at least, would also make sense to most people in Latin America, and it saps their democratic vocation. If we look at the pattern in the region as a whole, political participation is falling in "democratic" countries like Chile, in the face of growing socio-economic polarisation, and the currently most "popular" alternatives are authoritarianism, as in Peru and Bolivia, or neo-populism, as manifested by Bucaram's election in Ecuador.

Mexico is, however, as I have stressed, a country with a long and dignified popular liberal tradition. Yet it is also a country with other traditions. One is a tradition of clientalism. Since neither the law nor official rules work for most people, and especially for poor people, individuals have sought solutions in patronage relations. As Roberto DaMatta has argued, in Latin America, formal equality under the law actually perpetuates inequalities: the law is for ''individuals,'' the marginalised and powerless. Individualism is a disempowering and unwelcome condition. Those who remain "persons," by virtue of the social connections they can mobilise, routinely circumvent legal sanctions, demanding recognition of their personhood from the agents of law enforcement with the stock phrase of authoritarian rituals: ''Do you know who you're taking to!'' (DaMatta, 1991: 180–81). Under the post-revolutionary state, clientalistic practices were used quite strategically to spin a web of complicities which compromised everyone, including organisations opposing the regime. They also came to constitute an alternative *moral* discourse of personal obligations which have quite powerful political effects: the union boss may be a *cacique* whose rule is eternal because the membership is never allowed a genuinely free vote, but when he "helps" the individual with a personal problem, this becomes an index of good faith (Powell, op.cit.). After all, people tend to conclude, all leaders are the same.

This is the lesson learned from countless past struggles which ended in the cooptation of once independent leaderships. Participants in popular movements are generally suspicious not merely that leaders may "sell out", but that they are *already* tied personally to the "enemy". The PRI regime has been extraordinarily adept in the use of *agents provocateurs* and in the most subtle forms of political black propaganda, but it is also quite literally the case that opposition figures can have profound social ties with their opponents. Furthermore, the logic of political "dirty war" is that the opposition tends to replicate the tactics of the regime, something which became increasingly evident in the behaviour of the Centre-Left opposition after 1990 (Gledhill, 1995). All this context and experience does not inhibit social mobilisation, because the stakes involved are high, and people see the possibility of gaining something of practical value. But it does encourage realism and a willingness to compromise: the idea of other ways of doing things, other moralities, other forms of social justice and political freedom is there, but "The People", who articulate these ideas most strongly, and are frequently willing to die in their name, are also most inclined to consider them as ideals which can be dreamed but are never likely to be attained. Furthermore, they are often now dreamed in an authoritarian form rather than a democratic form, as a moral order to be imposed by the *caudillo* on a white horse, a "general" like Lázaro Cárdenas.

There are other images: people sometimes dream of the slaughter of their elites, who are often popularly represented still as "Spaniards" or even other, more exotic, Europeans. But violence no longer has the appeal it once had, as popular reactions to the appearance of the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR),

an armed movement which resembles the *foquista* guerillas of the 1960s, demonstrate. Although many of the more radical peasant movements have supported, in principle, the right of citizens to take up arms against an oppressive state, they have also tended to distance themselves from such a strategy as "not our way of thinking". This is partly the legacy of the revolution, but also another consequence of the Mexican elite's own skilful deployment of violence.

Mexico is frequently represented as a country where violence is a last resort, but this view neglects to consider the cumulative, capillary, effects of the absence of a genuine rule of law: the fact that the police, for example, routinely engage in acts of torture and murder and that no redress is available in the courts unless one is particularly well connected (in which case the policemen in question will be transferred elsewhere). Impunity is a big political issue in Mexico, and again something that people regard as a moral scandal. Yet impunity can be enormously "productive" in a Foucaultian sense. The "official versions" of acts of political murder seem designed to be unconvincing, reinforcing the message that real power is, indeed, untouchable. In this kind of context, many people decide that violence is produced by "political parties" and that it is better not to do anything that might invite its visitation on oneself, particularly if this is a matter of supporting the cause of people with whom one might feel sympathy but little common social identity.

That returns us to the question of basic social divisions, which are the products of a long history, the legacy of a long elite manipulation of ethnic difference and the construction of national identity as *mestizaje* (Bonfil, 1990; Díaz-Polanco, 1992). To consider the continuing force of these underlying divisions and segmentations, let me take the example of a campaign by Chontal Indian villages in Tabasco state for compensation for environmental damage perpetrated by the state oil company PEMEX. The Chontales' entirely reasonable demands were met by one of the trump cards of Mexican political discourse: "The Indians want to take advantage of the resources of the nation." Given that the government was actively seeking to privatise PEMEX, the argument was supremely cynical, but it also proved quite effective in reducing public sympathy for the Chontal cause (and outrage at the repression meted out). Indigenous people are charged with seeking special privileges at the expense of other Mexicans who cannot play the identity card within a system of classification which makes them "non-ethnic" *mestizo* "Mexicans" and thereby doubly disempowers them: the neoliberal state only recognizes their identities as citizens (rather than their other more specific social or regional identities), whilst the ideology of *mestizaje* also shapes their subjectivities and practices (reproducing the historical baggage of an association between progress and "whitening" and a divided and disorientated self which is principally dignified—economic position aside—by membership of the nation). These cultural-ideological elements of hegemony do still work in practice even for an elite whose legitimacy has now reached minimalist levels.

Nevertheless, there is some space for more optimistic scenarios. Lynn Stephen (1996) has argued that the contemporary indigenous rights struggle could be the basis for a redefined Mexican nationalism, built from the bottom-up rather than by state propaganda and public education. She argues that not only can indigenous rights issues be successfully linked to a broader movement for grassroots democratisation, but that the catastrophic economic consequences of neoliberalism will encourage *mestizo* Mexicans to re-evaluate the "Indian" side of their own identities. It is certainly true that *mestizos* today are increasingly re-identifying with their Indian side through new forms of cultural politics,

especially poor urban mestizos in the United States and Mexico City. But there is still a long way to go, not only because the ideology of *mestizaje* is deeply sedimented in the practice of everyday life, especially in rural areas, but because much of the new cultural politics is still relatively exclusivist, with the groups involved seeing little merit in forging broader alliances: even the leaderships of the newer pan-Indian movements are still forced to contest the intellectual and moral leadership of the groups they are striving to represent. There are, however, some genuinely encouraging developments even in regions which do have a long history of ethnic exclusivity and division between different indigenous groups, such as Oaxaca.[‡‡‡] One important factor is international migration. Historically, migration was a safety-valve that reduced pressures on land and reduced rural poverty. But today migrants are playing a more political role, building new organisations that span national boundaries: they form community associations in Mexico, which have sometimes challenged local bosses, and they also work to improve the rights of migrant workers in the USA. These transnational indigenous organisations tend to be more ethnically *inclusive*: for example, the Oaxacan Mixtec-Zapotec Binational Indigenous Front not only brings Mixtecs and Zapotecs together, but is also working to bring in other groups like Triques and Mixes, overcoming past divisions (Stephen, op.cit.; Kearney, 1996). These new transnational indigenous organisations are capable of putting considerable pressure on governments and exploiting the media effectively. They also have the backing of local and transnational Human Rights and development NGOs.

Even so, caution still seems necessary. Solidarity is not a universal condition amongst transmigrants. The continuing downward pressures on the real wages and working conditions of Mexican workers in the US have also provoked tendencies to fragmentation, conflict and individual competition among some migrant groups which inhibit the growth of the kind of mutual solidarity that a common experience of discrimination can foster (Gledhill, 1995). Nor do politically mobilised transmigrants necessarily stand aloof from relationships with the PRI regime (Smith, forthcoming). The development of new transnational popular organisations, and the undoubted growth of resistance to neoliberalism by more conventional urban and rural social movements, together with the increasing deployment of military force, might be seen as signs of a regime decomposition which could enable popular liberalism to finally have its day as a path to radical change. Yet deep economic misery, and mounting personal insecurity linked to a spectacular growth of crime, *constrain* social movements as much as they provide a theoretical basis for the forging of broad multi-class alliances against neoliberal economic policies, political corruption and impunity. In the face of what is still a well policed state (and elites which control private forces) insurrectionary strategies seem unrealistic and counter-productive, whilst open, democratic ones are ineffective without an overwhelming unity of popular purpose and stronger class alliances than yet seem on the cards with most of the ruined middle class turning to the Catholic Right.

[‡‡‡] In the case of Chiapas, few indigenous people want to create separate enclaves for people from different ethnic groups. Because the Zapatista base communities were formed by colonisation, and brought people of different Maya groups together (Leyva, op.cit.), the fact that the population of Las Cañadas is itself ethnically mixed has already broken down many of the barriers not only between different Maya groups but between Mayas and poor *mestizos*. So the Zapatista conception of "indigenous autonomy" envisages the creation of multi-ethnic regions with more power devolved to local government (Stephen, 1996).

Mexico thus exemplifies the general limits of a politics of rights and identities which serves largely to increase segmentation as people allow their identities to be "fixed" in negotiation with the state over how they may increment their entitlements. This is the final trap set for "The People" by the logic of liberalism itself: a proliferation of "rights" that further depoliticises the fundamental structures of social inequality. Yet there is probably little option today but to pursue an emancipatory politics of "difference", such as that embedded in demands for special rights for indigenous communities. The challenge is to minimise the potentially divisive quality of such a politics and prevent their neutralization by the representatives of state power. Some figures of the old Left, such as Eric Hobsbaum, have argued that Left politics should reconfigure itself around the Enlightenment focus on the citizen and the nation (Hobsbaum, 1996). Yet this seems neither sociologically possible, nor, indeed, desirable in a world where an increasing number of people are residents in countries where they lack rights of citizenship and where inequalities between nations are so profound.

We may, however, still be able to learn something from the neglected history of the popular politics of rights in 19th century Mexico. There was some common ground in the notions of social justice, freedom and morality that enabled the convergence of otherwise disparate popular movements—their shared antipathy to capitalist social property relations and insistence that the state should derive its powers from below. It may still be possible to devise a politics of difference that prevents categories being fixed by the taxonomic processes of the state and goes beyond the separate scrabblings of increasingly fragmented movements to rescue what they may from an unbendingly inegalitarian order—in other words, to forge something more than a *coalition of minorities*.

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