

Autonomy and Alterity

The Dilemmas of Mexican Anthropology

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‘Poor Mexico, so far from God, and so near to the United States’, remarked Porfirio Díaz, the dictator overthrown by the political revolution that inaugurated two decades of social upheaval in Mexico in 1910. This famous aphorism could also express one of the central dilemmas of Mexican anthropology, and one that it shares with other ‘anthropologies of the South’ (Krotz, 1997). While Mexico was initially the child of Spanish rather than North American colonialism (and the first ‘ethnographers’ of the colony were Spanish friars), its ‘indigenous’ modern anthropological schools developed in an uncomfortable relationship with North American research teams and foundation funding.

The relationship between Mexican anthropology and Northern centres of academic power remains sensitive today, even if it was substantially reconfigured by the post-revolutionary nation-building project and subsequent developments that I will discuss in the course of this article. The tensions are not restricted to the role of researchers from the United States, since France and other European countries also have a substantial financial and institutional stake in anthropological research in Mexico. The role of US scholarship and institutional power is, however, peculiarly sensitive.¹ Mexican antagonism to neocolonial attitudes on the part of North Americans is rooted in a traumatic national history. The relationship has lately become even more problematic, given the passage of new immigration legislation that implicitly discriminates against Mexican nationals and the problems posed for national sovereignty by the North American Free Trade Agreement and ‘War Against Drugs’ (Gledhill, 1998).

In the mid-nineteenth century, Mexico lost substantial amounts of national territory to its northern neighbour, ushering in a new, if somewhat contradictory and in many ways deceptive, construction of the two countries as mutually constituting ‘Anglo-Saxon’² and ‘not Anglo-Saxon’ others. From the Mexican side, the relationship tended to be an uncomfortable blend of desires to emulate suffused with a certain resentment and loathing. Mexican national identity itself remained very much ‘under construction’, as Mexican-born *criollos* (Spanish-speaking ‘whites’) faced the claims of *mestizo* middle classes for a share of power.³ The image that emerged after the Revolution of Mexico as a ‘mestizo’ nation, crystallised in the figure of the singing cowboy, Jorge Negrete, was very much an image constructed against a feeling of feminisation through North American domination (Gutmann, 1996: 228). Yet this image of *mexicanidad* as a particular rural form of life associated with a *mestizo* rancher culture of horse-riding, masculine virtues and freedom from social domination and servitude, could be read, from the point of view of Mexico’s aboriginal population, as another expression of what Florencia Mallon terms a ‘mestizo authoritarianism’ born of the social and political struggles of the previous century (Mallon, 1992). This takes us to the second constitutive historical dilemma of Mexican anthropology.

The Mexican Revolution gave birth to a precocious national anthropological project centred on the so-called ‘Indian problem’ (Deverre and

Reissner, 1980; Friedlander, 1986).⁴ The context that defined the problem was the post-revolutionary state's efforts to build a nation based on a common culture and shared nationalist sentiment. It is well expressed in the title of one of the seminal works of Mexican anthropology of the period, Manuel Gamio's *Forjando Patria* (*Forging the Motherland*) (Gamio, 1960). Mexicans who retained their identities as 'Indians' were seen as 'isolated from the national mainstream' in both economic and cultural terms. As 'backward elements', they required education before they could play their part in 'modernisation and progress', embrace the same ('universal') values as other Mexicans, and identify themselves fully (as patriots and loyal citizens) with the nation. The new official Comptean positivist project for tackling 'the Indian problem' somewhat confusingly acquired the label of *indigenismo*. This reflected the fact that its anthropological advocates, such as Gamio, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and Miguel Othón de Mendizabal, insisted that 'the Indian' had to be studied and understood before *he*⁵ could be integrated and assimilated into the mainstream of national culture and the forward march of technical, social and political progress. As people who were 'different', Indians had special needs and it was the duty of anthropologists to minimise the potentially traumatic social and cultural consequences of ending their isolation (Friedlander, 1986: 363). The official *indigenista* project was, of course, essentially a top-down, authoritarian assimilationist enterprise in which 'integration' was to be enforced through public education programmes and state-sponsored programmes for 'economic development'. The authoritarianism was perfectly captured by the celebrated remark of President Lázaro Cárdenas,⁶ architect of the great land redistribution programme of the second half of the 1930s: 'Our problem is not to preserve the Indian, nor to make Mexico Indian, but to make the Indian Mexican' (Devere and Reissner, 1980: 155).

The Rise and Partial Eclipse of Official indigenismo

By embracing, and indeed advocating, this programme, Mexican anthropologists-cum-revolutionary nationalists placed their academic discipline in an intimate relationship with the state. As early as 1917, ethnographic research in 'Indian' areas was being sponsored by a Department of Anthropology within the Ministry of Agriculture, and Cárdenas established the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in 1939 (Friedlander, *ibid.*). Although his successor transferred Indian Affairs to the Department of Education, a new government agency, the National Indigenous Institute (INI) was created in 1948, beginning its work in Chiapas. Chiapas, located on the southern frontier that separates Mexico and Guatemala, was the quintessential example of a region that still retained a high proportion of mono-lingual speakers of a native language and a majority of people professing an 'indigenous' ethnic identity. In Chiapas, INI anthropologists carved out their own spheres of influence, even if the big international reputations were to be won by the generations of anthropologists who won their spurs working for the Harvard Chiapas project in the highland municipalities of Zinacantán and San Juan Chamula.

The anthropological style of 'official indigenismo' was that of the archivist and culture historian. The goal of research was to record an indigenous world on the wane as it was engulfed by the forces of modernisation, coupled with a practical mission of education aimed at the transformation of the indigenous subject into a modern citizen. Mexico City's great National Museum still exemplifies the memorialising aims of this great assimilationist project. The lower

floor displays the glories of Mexico's aboriginal civilisations (leaving 'Indians' who created no monuments out of the historical picture) while the upper floor offers a more comprehensive panorama of Mexico's post-colonial ethnic groups. An almost literal example of the style of anthropology that Edmund Leach disparaged as 'butterfly collecting', each group is distinguished by its 'traditional' style of dress and other items of material culture, frozen in time and hopefully soon to be confined to the museum precinct. The official *indigenista* project turned national anthropology into a discipline with a substantial financial and institutional infrastructure — far stronger than that of sociology, for example. It also offered Mexican anthropological professionals a certain space to assert their autonomy against their *gringo* colleagues, who were obliged to adopt a suitably respectful pose and navigate local bureaucracies with greater circumspection than in other North American neo-colonies. Yet the deeper assimilationist purpose of official *indigenismo*, coupled with the legacy of conflict between the secularising post-revolutionary state and the Catholic Church, produced some further paradoxical concessions to Northern interests. The most striking were the facilities afforded to the researchers of the Summer Institute of Linguistics, whose research on indigenous languages was a vehicle for Protestant evangelisation of a kind that also sought to implant the values of possessive individualism and the spirit of free enterprise. Despite sporadic official action against the Institute in the wake of public protest not merely about the hidden evangelical agenda itself but about the duplicitous way in which the Institute's agents pursue it, this particular arm of North American imperialism has succeeded in sustaining its operations.

The first academic challenges to official *indigenismo* emerged in the wake of the 1968 student movement (which captured international headlines following the massacre of students in Tlatelolco by the army during the Olympic Games and subsequent purge of university departments and 'disappearances', under President Díaz Ordaz). The Mexican student movement provoked a particularly authoritarian reaction because it formed part of a conjuncture of protest that included significant groups of industrial workers and major rural mobilisations. Still controlled by the party that the military chiefs (*caudillos*) who emerged victorious from the factional struggles of the revolution had created to perpetuate and institutionalise their rule, the Mexican state had taken pre-emptive control of the political representation of the new social classes created by capitalist modernisation (Gledhill, 2000, Chapter 5). The land reform peasantry were represented by the National Peasant Confederation (CNC), while industrial workers were organised into official unions distributed between rival, but equally official, federations (principally the CTM and CROM).⁷ During the 1960s, however, the tensions of a process of capitalist development that impoverished the peasant farmers who had benefited from the land reform and failed to provide land, jobs or living wages for an ever increasing proportion of a rapidly growing economically active population were having an increasing impact. New rural mobilisations over land, coupled with efforts to organise landless rural workers, led to efforts to build independent peasant unions free of state control. At the same time, the termination of the Bracero agreement⁸ between the US and Mexican governments brought a new flood of *mestizo* migrants into Mexico City and other major urban centres. Faced with multiple threats to its hegemony, the regime responded with a neo-populist strategy, coupled with much higher levels of state intervention in the economy, implemented by President Luis Echeverría, who took office in 1970.

In the wake of the oil crisis, Mexico was able to fund a major programme of state enterprises and public sector employment with the growing revenues and foreign loans produced by the development of its petroleum industry. The country enjoyed a false boom that lasted through the Echeverría period until the final days of the José López-Portillo administration in 1982. At that point, financial collapse provoked a temporary nationalisation of the banking system before structural adjustment was imposed by the multi-national agencies and neoliberal policies of privatisation and removal of subsidies were introduced under the administration of Miguel de la Madrid (1982–1988).

Part of Echeverría's response to growing rural mobilisation was a renewed concern with 'economically marginalised groups'. This included new programmes to provide avenues for the marketing of peasant produce through government receiving centres and production subsidies, but it also included efforts to extend the supply of subsidised consumer goods to 'marginalised areas'. Indigenous peoples received special attention as archetypal denizens of such zones of marginalisation, but at first this simply reinforced the traditional official *indigenista* paradigm. Echeverría appointed the veteran anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán head of the INI (Friedlander, 1986: 363). Aguirre Beltrán's leading role helped to reassociate Echeverría with the mantle of *Cardenismo*. Yet, as the author of the concept that the conservation of Indian culture reflected the preservation of atavistic traits in isolated 'regions of refuge' (Aguirre Beltrán, 1967), he was the quintessential exponent of old ideas that were becoming increasingly inconsistent with the facts of 1970s Mexico.

Armed Indian rebels forcing the neo-populist state to concede new land reform were not simply reacting to the effects of recent patterns of capitalist development, such as the expansion of commercial cattle ranching. They were led by a new generation of leaders who were returned migrants from the metropolitan cities, schooled in the radicalism of the left urban social movements of the 1960s (Schryer, 1990). Although the point remains poorly understood by many commentators, even in Chiapas, the 'deepest' of all the 'deep Mexicos' in which indigenous cultures were seen as surviving through relative isolation, many indigenous communities were participating fully in the new styles of peasant organisation and mobilisation that came to characterise the national scene during the 1970s (Harvey, 1998). In an attempt to divide different segments of the mobilised rural population, Echeverría promoted the formation of rural producer unions for existing land reform beneficiaries. This organisational model proved attractive even to the indigenous peasant colonists of the Selva Lacandona region of Chiapas, who subsequently formed the base of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation's rebellion against the Mexican state in 1994, despite the fact that they were left in a marginal position with respect to state aid. Elsewhere in the state, mobilisation and intra-communal factional conflicts faithfully reflected divisions between leaderships embracing the productionist model and negotiation of state aid, on the one hand, and those advocating the needs of the landless and the radical land redistribution agenda that the government in Mexico City hoped to defuse, on the other. Local movements not only reflected national developments, but also networked into organisations that cross regional boundaries and followed the twists and turns of factional politics in these larger political fields.

This is not to deny that some indigenous people in Mexico still lived in relatively marginalised rural communities with poor communications in the 1970s, and that some of those people were not particularly well informed about the larger

world. It is, however, enough to problematise the kinds of assumptions that official *indigenismo* had made about the relationship between geographical marginalisation and the preservation of indigenous culture. Furthermore, being isolated in the sense of lacking roads and attention from state agencies did not necessarily indicate *any* kind of cultural isolation, since marginalised places could be extremely productive of migrants to big cities and indeed, by the 1970s, quite significant undocumented migration across the international frontier to the United States.⁹ Even so, noting the impacts of 'social change' by the 1970s begs more fundamental questions, because it is still consistent with the idea that assumptions made by the 'cultural isolation' definition of the 'Indian problem' might have been true at some earlier point in national history. In reality, almost all the assumptions that anthropologists of varying theoretical persuasions had made about the conditions that would foster reproduction of indigenous ethnicities or 'assimilation' in the form of mestizoisation have eventually been falsified by history.¹⁰ This is evident enough in the analytical failings of the first Mexican academic critics of official *indigenismo*.

The New Indigenista Paradigm

The assault on the position represented by Aguirre Beltrán's INI was mounted by a generation of anthropologists emerging from the student movement of the late 1960s. Its first manifesto was the collective work written by Arturo Warman, Margarita Nolasco, Guillermo Bonfil, Mercedes Olivera and Enrique Valencia (1970), *De eso que llaman antropología mexicana (On what they call Mexican Anthropology)*. Fired with enthusiasm for national liberation movements and the rights of minorities, this group of intellectuals saw Indians as heroic resisters of oppression and defenders of their cultural patrimony. Indians thus became active historical subjects who had defiantly sustained their traditions against the forces of modernisation rather than backward victims who had failed to modernise because they were isolated (Friedlander, 1986: 363).

Arturo Warman and his research team in Morelos state, working in the heartlands of the original rebellion of Emiliano Zapata, emphasised the resilience of 'peasant culture'. Warman highlighted the capacity of indigenous people to selectively embrace 'modernity and progress' in their own manner and according to the logic of their own needs and aspirations, be it in the field of politics or economics (Warman, 1976; 1988). The new anthropological proponents of indigenous rights advocated the training of indigenous people to be their own anthropologists and the creation of 'tribal councils' to manage and promote the cultural patrimony of each indigenous group (Friedlander, *ibid.*).

These proposals found favour under the López Portillo administration, which fostered greater celebration of cultural pluralism, though it began with a ferocious repression of militant agrarian movements, most of which, by the late 1970s, were predominantly indigenous in composition (Bartra, 1985; Rello, 1986). The state was now happy for schoolteachers from indigenous communities to promote preservation of cultural distinctiveness rather than integration and assimilation, though it was not happy for them to pursue campaigns to recover control of economic resources such as communal forests usurped by outsiders. Friedlander examines the perverse consequences of this new *indigenismo* through the case of 'The Pame', a northern Mexican population whose history remains shrouded in obscurity, leaving us knowing 'virtually nothing about [their] pre-Hispanic and colonial heritage' (Friedlander, 1986: 365). As peasants unable to

secure a livelihood from their crops, or indeed, even from the palm mats (*petates*) that they produced for Mexican markets, the contemporary Pame were obliged to migrate (and in Friedlander's view, might well go to the United States as undocumented migrants). Yet as subjects of an ethnographic film sponsored by the reformed INI, 'The Pame' were framed as the bearers of the pre-Hispanic cultural traditions of the Chichimec frontier of nomadic Indians living beyond the 'heartland of cities' of the Aztec period Valley of Mexico.

Friedlander suggests that the 'Chichimec' rain dance that figures so prominently in the film as the quintessence of continuous cultural traditions is probably a syncretic practice. It would have emerged in the colonial era as an officially tolerated form of 'folk Catholic' ritual of the kind the Church sought to expunge after the Vatican II council ordered yet another campaign to purify Latin American catholicism of its irrational and pre-Christian elements.¹¹ What 'The Pame' might thus be seen as defending is not a culture derived from the remote pre-colonial past but a specific form of colonial Catholic practice. Furthermore, Friedlander speculates, it seems most reasonable to infer that the Pame's organisation and 'discovery' of themselves as a specific indigenous group with an identity that could be made political was the result of the INI's creation of an institutional framework which made such a move pragmatically useful, for the people in general and for the schoolteacher acting as the principal 'promoter' of this cultural revival. Scrutinising the data from successive censuses, Friedlander notes an apparent explosion in the number of Pame speakers after the shift in INI policy. Her inference is that this can only reflect the benefits that changing state policy brought to those who decided to re-identify themselves as indigenous people (Friedlander, 1986: 366. See also Zárte Hernández, 1991).

Since schools received additional budgets for supporting bilingual education, it is, in fact, possible to find census returns in which speakers of indigenous languages are recorded in municipalities in which no such speakers exist. It is, however, clear that both the changing policies of national states towards cultural plurality and the growth of a global indigenous rights movement, increasingly supported by transnational as well as local NGO activity in recent years, has transformed the politicisation of ethnic identity in important ways. Indeed, it has produced ethnic identities 'on the ground' that previously only existed in the minds of anthropologists, as we will see later. For Friedlander, the problem with the effects that the reorientation of the INI was having in the 1980s was that it was not merely producing spurious anthropology and culture history. It was also feeding the commoditisation of 'the Indian' as a tourist attraction. Although it would not be appropriate here to enter the debate about the pros and cons of cultural tourism — a debate that has been substantially muddled by an entirely misconceived anthropological emphasis on cultural authenticity and cultural prostitution — it is certainly true that the Mexican state has found it much easier to work with the politics of cultural distinctiveness than with indigenous movements that make more radical demands for an improvement in the distribution of resources. In the present context, however, it will be more illuminating to explore the way official *indigenismo's* anthropological critics themselves developed an argument about the desirability of Mexicans re-identifying themselves as Indians. Though anthropologically naïve, the argument illustrates the way in which the 'Indian problem' was still tied to questions of national identity even in the work of the 'internationalist' reformers of the New Left.

The locus classicus for the argument is Guillermo Bonfil's *México Profundo (Deep Mexico)* (Bonfil, 1996 [1990]). Since the author's career was tragically cut short by his death in a car accident, it is impossible to know what role he might have played in the debates of the 1990s. It is, however, likely that his political position would have been distinct from that of his colleague Arturo Warman. Warman became head of the INI under the neo-liberal government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari and subsequently took charge of the apparatus designed to put a definitive end to the land redistribution process and allow for the eventual privatisation of the old land reform communities.¹²

Bonfil argued that the Mexican post-revolutionary state's nationalist ideology projected the image of an 'imaginary Mexico' that served to perpetuate the country's lack of truly democratic institutions and grotesque social inequalities. Not only was it difficult to think of mestizo Mexicans as biologically distinct from indigenous Mexicans — phenotypically, there were no obvious markers on which racial notions of identity could be grounded — but the idea of *mestizaje* as a process of cultural mixing was, Bonfil suggested, equally unsatisfactory because it was ideologically loaded. What the official image of the *mestizo* mainstream envisaged was a leaving of 'indigenous culture' in the past, and an embracing of the European-derived culture that was associated with 'modernity and progress'. One of the consequences of this model was that the Mexican people themselves were painted (by national elites) as the source of the country's supposed deficits of modernity — it was popular 'immaturity', for example, that presented obstacles to the achievement of full democratic life. Bonfil argued that the 'real' culture of (deep) Mexico, sustained by popular resistance to domination, was, in fact, quite evidently firmly based on indigenous foundations.

The (objective) historical process of *mestizaje* (mestizoisation) should, Bonfil suggested, be seen as a process of 'de-Indianisation'. What happened in colonial Mexico (as distinct from the Andean countries or what became Guatemala) was a reflection of the concentration of both indigenous population and European immigration in the Valley of Mexico. The intense social interaction of this core zone created conditions that militated against the preservation of separate indigenous ethnic identities and fostered the process of 'de-Indianisation'. The de-Indianised majority of mestizo peasants could thereby be presented as 'the national majority', while those who retained their indigenous identities were concentrated in regions that were peripheral to the political and demographic core of the new nation-state, predominantly in the poor states of southern Mexico. Yet Bonfil argued, if one looked at the culture of this de-Indianised collectivity, its similarities to that of communities that had preserved their indigenous identity were so much more striking than the differences. De-Indianisation was not the product of biological mixing, but a process of ethnocide in which people were persuaded, in large measure through compulsion, to deny their cultural patrimony and subscribe to the imaginary models of post-colonial elites. These elites thinly disguised their continuing racism in the more modern language of culture change, but the real problem was that so many non-elite Mexicans accepted the regime of truth their ideologies embodied:

There is an attempt to hide and ignore the Indian face of Mexico because no real connection with Mesoamerican civilisation is admitted. The clear and undeniable evidence of our Indian ancestry is a mirror in which we do not wish to see our own reflection. (Bonfil, 1996: 18)

Politically, Bonfil's critique of *mestizaje* as the foundation of a nationalist culture that disempowers lower class Mexicans has much to recommend it. He is also perceptive in stressing the way the ideology of *mestizaje* permeates popular subjectivities in ways that are disempowering. This is not only because it encourages *mestizo* Mexicans to see themselves as essentially 'different' from Mexicans who continue to identify themselves as 'Indians' — often in explicitly racial terms — but because it fosters a culture of 'self-blame'. Both 'mixture of blood' (that is, imperfect essential natures) or 'backwardness' (in terms of assimilation of European-derived culture) can be seen as incapacitating the individual. In the nineteenth century, liberal reformers theoretically had the opportunity to leave the assumptions of colonial society behind. Yet, as an aspirant national social elite drawn from the urban middle classes of provincial Mexico, even the most radical liberals sought to distance themselves for the 'deep Mexico' of the rural poor. In doing so, they replaced colonial ideologies with an internal colonial ideology of 'whitening as progress' that was internalised in their own struggles for relative social dignity by large sections of the Mexican population and perpetuated by the post-revolutionary nationalist regime (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992: 278–9).

The problem with Bonfil's perspective is, however, its romanticism and utter inadequacy as an anthropological account of culture history. The 'real' popular Mexico that he contrasts with the imaginary Mexico constructed by elites is a list of culture traits (ironically replicating the theoretical deficiencies of the Boasian cultural particularist paradigm in North American anthropology as it embraced the positive, anti-racist politics also associated with the Boasian project). We are presented with lists of what rural Mexicans eat, how they build their houses, and observations on the extent to which the Spanish spoken in *mestizo* communities incorporates words from Mesoamerican native languages. These are thin grounds indeed on which to build a model of a resistant subaltern culture that could throw off the veil of false consciousness and serve as the basis for a new grassroots popular nationalism.

In Bonfil's work, the reproduction of Indian culture is seen as the result of active cultural resistance, which should be fostered in the interests of creating a plural society in which Indians will hold a dignified place. This perspective is complemented by the idea that 'broad majority sectors of Mexican society' that do not recognise themselves as Indians nevertheless 'organise their collective life on the basis of a cultural matrix of Mesoamerican origin' (Bonfil, 1996: 174). Even at its best, this kind of anthropological critique of official *indigenismo* thus reproduced many of the assumptions and antinomies of the old paradigm. It was, however, accompanied by a number of other significant changes in the style of Mexican anthropology. One, which offered the prospects of a more subtle understanding of socio-cultural change and the reproduction of ethnic identities, was an increasing interest in detailed historical analysis of local and regional contexts, taking up the paradigm pioneered by Eric Wolf (1955; 1959) and the school of his friend and collaborator Angel Palerm within Mexico. Wolf had been an early critic of an anthropology focused on continuities between the pre-Hispanic period and the present. His theory of the 'closed corporate community' as a defensive reaction to domination and exploitation presented ethnographically observed institutions as products of the colonial and post-colonial worlds.¹³ Another was the influence of British social anthropology. This encouraged more Mexican anthropologists to turn away from the recording archiving of

decontextualised cultural traits towards the kind of ‘participant observation’ ethnography that could illuminate the dynamics of social and political processes on the ground.¹⁴ It also fitted in nicely with the post-1968 generation’s interest in grassroots activism, which many hoped to combine with fieldwork. There were, however, other difficulties to resolve, which again reflected the wider shape of Mexican politics.

Scholars such as Arturo Warman favoured a model which stressed the lack of common interests between ‘peasants’ (*campesinos*) and industrial workers, launching a debate between Marxists who adopted a Leninist view of the inevitable differentiation and ‘depeasantisation’ of the countryside and those who followed Chayanov (and in Warman’s case, Clifford Geertz) in stressing the ability of ‘peasant society’ to adapt to capitalist modernisation. As the 1970s drew on, this Mexican debate on the agrarian question produced some extremely sophisticated theorising which genuinely advanced the field relative to the state in which it had been left by European thinkers.¹⁵ It was, however, a debate in which issues of ‘ethnicity’ were downplayed. This focus might be seen as a means by which a large part of Mexican academic anthropology disentangled itself from its traditional mission of addressing the ‘Indian problem’, and moved towards a broader focus on the problems of Mexican society as a whole in which poverty and an undemocratic regime were the key issues. Although it might be argued that, despite much important work,¹⁶ urban anthropology in Mexico still remained less developed than the scale of the country’s urbanisation might have recommended in the 1970s, there was a growing focus on issues of rural-urban (and international) migration and the changing rural context produced by Mexico’s transition to ‘Newly Industrialised Country’ status. Nevertheless, a focus on ‘peasant studies’ and issues of class also corresponded to the polarity that developed between emerging indigenous rights movements and the *popular*¹⁷ position which argued that the specific problems faced by indigenous communities would best be addressed through general social reform (Hale, 1994). The generation of anthropologists that broke with the official *indigenista* position thus moved in different directions. Some espoused models of indigenous empowerment based on the recognition of an internal colonial situation, while others favoured projects that saw the scope of anthropological research as far broader than the study of the country’s indigenous populations. Both approaches had some difficulties as the indigenous rights and autonomy movement took off in the 1980s and 1990s.

The ‘Indian Problem’ Redefines Itself

In arguing that indigenous people should be trained to be ‘their own anthropologists’ the Mexican anthropological critics of official *indigenismo* ironically contributed to the processes that have made professional anthropological claims to authoritative knowledge increasingly contested over the past decade. While some indigenous community leaders and intellectuals subscribe to the *popular* position mentioned above, others see Mexican anthropologists calling on other *mestizos* to ‘re-identify with their indigenous side’ as ‘the other’ to their own identity. The anthropologist may, on occasion, be a ‘useful other’ (Warren, 1998: 20), but may also impede their own struggles for self-determination and self-representation, and certainly has no definitive right to speak for them by virtue of officially recognised academic credentials. One of my own Mexican colleagues working in Chiapas faces the ironic situation of being seen (in the politest kind of way) as a *kaxlan* (outsider) by the people that she studies — using methods that

seek to advance the paradigm of a 'shared', dialogic anthropology — while the soldiers at the checkpoints through which she must pass en route to her fieldwork site take one look at her dark complexion, Indian features and short stature and classify her as a 'local'. In this kind of context, the fair-skinned *gringo* outsider may even have a slight advantage over his or her Mexican colleague, as a possibly more useful (more powerful) *kaxlan* more readily dissociated from local structures of everyday racism, duplicity and oppression.

In seeking to empower indigenous people and other poor Mexicans, Mexican anthropologists of the 1970s often did not reflect deeply enough on their own social positioning, but the politicisation of the indigenous movement now forces all anthropologists, irrespective of nationality, to ask themselves searching questions about their role. The history of the INI demonstrates the way in which anthropologists can act as 'change agents' in ways they did not anticipate, encouraging their 'others' to objectify and theorise their culture in ways that we now see as increasingly problematic from a 'professional' theoretical and interpretative point of view. Even more 'participatory', 'shared anthropology' research paradigms can replicate some of the difficulties of earlier, more authoritative styles of ethnographic research, in the sense that community members who become close associates of outsiders may still gain status and power relative to other community members.¹⁸ But a further dilemma is that academic anthropologists are increasingly expected to deliver benefits to communities as their entry ticket to the field. This was something that the INI anthropologists, through their relationship with the state, were generally able to do, but it may be something that politically independent and 'radical' scholars are often singularly incapable of doing.

Let us begin by re-evaluating the academic difficulties posed by the increasingly contested nature of academic knowledge. I have already juxtaposed two patently unsatisfactory accounts of 'indigenous cultures'. One, the model of official *indigenismo*, saw indigenous cultures as 'survivals' produced by isolation. It was contested by a model that saw 'survival' as the result of struggles to defend and preserve culture, but as Bonfil's work shows particularly clearly, this tended to assume that preserving and defending culture was a matter of perpetuating something that originated in the pre-colonial past. Friedlander's analysis of the Pame case suggests that such a perspective at the very least failed to recognise the impact of colonial institutions on indigenous life, and the likelihood that any 'culture' a contemporary group might defend would be a post-colonial hybrid. Furthermore, in this case, what was being defended was arguably not a 'whole way of life' but a particular practice whose meaning to the people themselves was largely post-colonial. Finally, even the existence of a living 'Pame identity' seemed to be more a function of state-sponsored anthropological activity than of a sustained and autonomous grassroots struggle. 'The Pame' as they existed before that activity clearly need to be understood in terms of a larger regional social context and relationships with other social actors. Rather than talk of an enduring 'group' and the reproduction of a (bounded, coherent) 'culture', it might seem wiser to look at the set of historical relationships that gave meaning to the statement 'we are Pame' at particular moments of historical time. It is not inconceivable that some such 'groups' and identities are entirely post-colonial in origin.

Anthropologists have constructed Mexican indigenous 'cultures' on the basis of objectivising accounts of cultural practices that people who live in

particular places seem to have in common (and which differentiate them from other people). ‘Cultures’ in Mesoamerica have included linguistic criteria, so Chiapas, for example, contains Tzeltals, Tzotzils, Mames, Choles and other ‘groups’ defined by the fact that there are a variety of different dialects of the Maya language group. As in many other parts of the world, people lived in close social interaction while speaking completely mutually unintelligible languages in many parts of Mesoamerica. The Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish conquest was no exception to this rule: not only did a variety of ‘ethnic groups’ defined linguistically share the same region, but people practising a gathering and hunting mode of subsistence lived in close interaction with settled agriculturalists, who produced food as rural peasants for residents of large cities who were not farmers. Such people might provide some clues as to the status of ‘groups’ such as ‘The Pame’. Archaeologists distinguish ‘cultures’ by studying patterns of similarity and difference in material culture, though there is ample scope for debating whether these similarities denote ‘peoples’ with separate identities even in archaeology. Anthropologists studying post-colonial Mesoamerica have even fewer excuses for believing their own fictions than archaeologists. It is perfectly clear from both the historical archival record and ethnographic research that the ‘identities’ that people *use* do not necessarily correspond to anthropological constructions of ‘culture’ and ‘ethnicity’.

Even in today’s politicised climate, which encourages greater ‘ethnic inclusivity’, the Chiapaneco municipio of Zinacantán, for example, has reverted to an emphasis on its exclusive ‘Zinacanteco’ identity (Collier, 1997). Furthermore, although pan-Maya identities, or even pan-Indian identities, may make political sense in the twenty-first century for some activists and their followers, it is most unlikely that there would be circumstances under which pan-Tzotzil identities would become meaningful (though pan-Chol identities might become relevant in conflicts around the cultural heritage archaeological site of Palenque). If we look at the nineteenth century, however, we do not find indigenous people speaking the language of ‘peoples’ or ‘nations’ or even the language of ethnicity. They are firmly anchored in places or communities (defined by their possession of civil-religious institutions created under the colony but controlled by ‘indigenous authorities’ and subject to a degree of reshaping by the action of the colonial subjects classified as ‘Indians’). What they do use, in everyday reference to ‘others’ with whom they interact socially, is the colonial language of the complex classification of people into racial ‘castes’ (the *castas*).

What makes someone an ‘Indian’ in the colonial period is their membership of a legally recognised ‘community’ within the ‘Republic of Indians’ established by the Spanish Crown as a means of both Christianising the aborigines and making them direct tributaries of the imperial state. The colonial world recognised and named a large number of racial ‘mixtures’ of persons of Spanish, African or aboriginal descent, organised on the principle that ‘Indian blood’ was ultimately redeemable — the descendants of Indians could eventually become fully civilised ‘whites’ through continued intercourse with descendants of Spaniards — whereas African blood was not (Lomnitz-Adler, 1992). In practice, Black people sometimes entered ‘Indian communities’ and their progeny ceased to be recognised as Blacks (as, probably on a much greater scale, did descendants of European settlers), but ‘Indians’ could also become ‘mestizos’ simply by abandoning their communities, changing their style of dress, and speaking Spanish.

This world was deeply puzzling to outsiders. When Europeans such as Fanny Erskine Iglis, Marquesa Calderón de la Barca, visited Michoacán in 1839, they found a place with terrible roads but some agreeable country houses and a rather elegant capital city (Calderón de la Barca, 1995). Fanny was especially impressed by the elite of the indigenous town of Pátzcuaro, whom she found rather whiter than the upper classes of Mexico City. She was less impressed by some of the Indian inhabitants of the zone, whom she described as ugly and more aboriginal in appearance than many that she had encountered elsewhere. Yet she found other representatives of the Indian population more aesthetically appealing, and noted that whilst the majority were evidently poor, a few were notably rich and had contributed to the embellishment of the attractive churches which towered up over the Indians' wooden huts. Exploring provincial Mexico on horseback gave Fanny full access to the more exotic sights and smells of the countryside, but her perspective, as the Scottish-born wife of a Spanish diplomat, was that of a world in decay following the breaking of the link with Europe. As it happened, the mercantile economy of Michoacán was actually rebounding at the time of her visit from the post-Independence slump into a new phase of growth and development. Some of the small ranchers who received Fanny into their homes during her expedition were to play an increasingly important role in the commercial development of the countryside as the century unfolded and the urban middle class became increasingly politically assertive.

What did not change for the better was the condition of the majority of the Indians, many of whom were to become worse off as a result of the advance of other sectors of the population. Yet they lived in a world of complex social distinctions. Some of these were related to occupational (and therefore social standing) and some to 'race', in the sense that one might refer to another resident in the community by one of the innumerable terms for 'race mixture' that had emerged from the colonial classification. Elites would use the generic term 'Indian', but the people themselves had their own identities, mostly extremely local. The opposition between 'Indians' and 'non-Indians' only became an overriding issue when the Liberal governments of the later nineteenth century pushed for the disentanglement of the corporate landholdings of indigenous communities, and community resources and government passed into the hands of *mestizo* outsiders. Even in the nineteenth and through into the twentieth century, some communities managed to preserve their lands and institutions intact (by a variety of legal subterfuges, sometimes accompanied by anti-state rebellion in alliance with other, non-Indian forces¹⁹). Yet even these dramatic episodes of apparent struggles on the part of 'indigenous peoples' to preserve their 'cultural patrimony' need to be understood in terms of very local conditions and conflicts. Neighbouring indigenous communities reacted in quite different ways to the forces of national state formation and capitalist expansion (which was not always a local issue at all). Their different reactions were often a reflection of local conflicts between different indigenous communities and the way rival factions sought to gain leverage from external alliances with non-Indians.

These kinds of observations, which could be expanded almost ad infinitum, suggest that contemporary indigenous identities and the politics of indigenous ethnicity differ substantially from those that existed in the past. Indigenous people have indeed experienced five hundred years of racist oppression and exploitation, but the meaning they ascribed to this experience and their strategies for reacting to it have changed substantially over the centuries. Furthermore, indigenous people

are self-evidently socially differentiated and their communities internally stratified. Native aristocrats could become an exploiting class within the 'Republic of Indians' and then pass out of it into the ranks of the colonial dominant class. Village elites could lose their status position and much of their economic power to *mestizo* interlopers. In the first half of the twentieth century, their descendants could become socialist radicals subscribing to the ideology of the Second International and eschewing any politics linked to ethnicity, as in the case of the famous Michoacán peasant leader, Primo Tapia (Friedrich, 1986). Yet other indigenous community leaders could *re-emerge* as powerful mercantile elites during the same century, defending communal land tenure only as a cover for their effective appropriation of community resources as *de facto* private property for commercial cattle raising or illegal logging (Schryer, 1990; Chevalier and Buckles, 1995). Such economically modernised indigenous elites might find it highly advantageous to 'play the ethnic card' in defending their political and economic interests against rival *mestizo* local and regional elites. As indigenous leaders they have been able to mobilise support from their communities and maintain their domination over resources and labour within them, also, in some contexts, gaining central government support in regional political conflicts.²⁰ The model of isolated Indian cultures facing the onslaughts of 'modernity' and Eric Wolf's model of 'the closed corporate community' as a defensive reaction to colonial domination²¹ both predicted that indigenous identity would be lost in communities closer to urban centres and in line with the growing 'penetration' of capitalist economy. Yet this prediction does not fit the observed patterns of 'acculturation' at all well, since both indigenous identity and the defence of a conservative, 'traditional' indigenous Catholic culture have proved valuable instruments for maintaining both intra-communal hegemony and competing with other regional power seekers in the twentieth century.

In a world in which indigenous rights enjoy the support of a global network of NGOs and United Nations agencies, the stakes have become even higher. In the case of Mexico, anthropology, collaborating with the state's social programmes, but seeking to defend the Indian as an heroic if hitherto unappreciated subject of national history, has also contributed to the raising of the stakes, but in a manner that many anthropologists now find doubly embarrassing.

It is not really theoretically adequate to speak of indigenous 'cultures' as hybrids of pre-Hispanic and European culture, since this is to assume far too much uniformity on both sides of the relationship and to ignore the much more complex relations that shaped the five centuries of post-colonial history. Even if, as Stafford Poole (1995) suggests, the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe was a *criollo* invention, expressing the nascent national sentiment of an elite, it reflects mimetic appropriation of alterity that Taussig (1993) evokes in examining the cultures of the dominant in other Latin American contexts. The cultural flows of *mestizaje* did not simply pass in a single direction — particularly in the still enchanted worlds of relatively poor European immigrants mingling with Indians and the descendants of African slaves. The meaning and deployment of every cultural practice and symbol was relative to an evolving social situation. These social situations varied enormously between regions and localities, since the Spanish presence was minimal in some regions and pervasive in others. Regions differed vastly in their histories as we pass from the pre-colonial heartland of cities in Central Mexico up through the sparsely settled North — colonised by Indians on the move as well as by Europeans in the colonial period — and down to the deep South with its servile

labour systems. Even the latter were enclaves interspersed with resource poor regions where neither priests nor *conquistadores* found much to exploit. This vastly complicated historical mosaic of the 'many Mexicos' that made up the whole saw the creation of societies without historical precedent and obstinate indigenous appropriations and subversions of imposed European institutions. In every region we need to ask historically contextualised questions about why people chose to retain (particular) indigenous identities rather than 'pass' into *mestizo* society.²² And in each and every one of these diverse contexts, culture made social and political action meaningful and was given meaning by social and political action. This remains as true today as it has ever been.

The modern politics of ethnicity frequently takes the form of the invention and reification of 'tradition'. There is nothing particularly new in this, given that indigenous communities claimed that the Spanish Saints that they adopted as the focus of their confraternity rituals and had been their patrons 'from time immemorial', along with the ritual practices themselves (Gruzinski, 1990). What makes contemporary indigenous rights politics so problematic, with its demand for 'recognition' of special rights for those who have preserved a special identity as the descendants of aboriginal people colonised by others, is the fact that we now live in a world of nation states that mostly pay lip service to the desirability of greater social equality, equality of citizens before the law, and democratic forms of governance. Movements for indigenous rights and autonomy (self-determination) are accused of advocating separatism and reproducing racial ideologies of essentialised difference; they are charged with threatening the break-up of the nation; and they are said to 'divide the popular movement' and deflect attention from more general class issues. To the extent that indigenous leaderships are willing to settle for cultural rights (and resources for cultural programmes that have little impact on poverty and may even increase community socio-economic differentiation), they are often seen as playing the neo-liberal game, a reflection of their dependence on foreign NGO sponsors and the need to practice 'grantsmanship'.

Yet as Warren points out, from the perspective of Guatemala, the new indigenous movements that are constructing what might be seen (from a professional anthropological standpoint) as 'internationalised and hybridised cultures' in order to repoliticise their relations with non-Indians can still make their own points about racism. Mestizo peasants and urban workers are in practice 'complicit along with elites in the reproduction of prejudices that have destructive consequences in everyday life' (Warren, 1998: 50). This may be a legacy of history, but the solution to the problem in Mexico is surely the deconstruction of elite constructed ideologies of *mestizaje* as a national destiny based on 'whitening', not their affirmation. The response of contemporary indigenous activists and intellectuals is that they are advocating 'unity in diversity' on the basis of mutual respect and the construction of a pluri-cultural nation that is capable of achieving everyday equality and genuine social justice for all.²³

There is, however, another possible perspective on *mestizaje* itself, increasingly evident in the transnational space of the United States-Mexico borderlands. This would be to democratise hybrid identities by removing the assumption of the superiority of the European contribution without privileging the idea of being heir to a pure and romanticised indigenous cultural tradition. From this perspective, *mestizaje* is a positive cultural process that enables people to understand that they have a shared cultural history but which obliterates fixed and

essentialist identities. Within the spaces that experience the cultural flows of *mestizaje*, individuals can enjoy those distinctive 'styles' of culture that appeal to them (such as music and food). Yet they can also be brought to recognise that people creatively reinvent themselves in a way that is continuous throughout history and involves a considerable amount of mutual 'borrowing'. The problem in making 'indigenous identity' defined in terms of ability to speak indigenous languages and possession of esoteric cosmological knowledge a mark of distinction is not simply that it empowers a particular group of indigenous leaders and activists. It also leaves people who are neither indigenous by these criteria nor in elite social positions with a severe problem of defining the grounds on which they would merit social respect (Gledhill, 1997).

In practice, the new indigenous politics that seeks to construct broad notions of indigenous ethnicity (as Mayas or Zapotecs) is not accepted by all people who consider themselves indigenous. It can also take the form of asserting the superiority of one indigenous ethnic group or even sub-group of a broader ethnic category over another, as in the case of COCEI movement in Juchitán, Oaxaca (Campbell, 1993). In this latter case, an indigenous intelligentsia has proved moderately authoritarian and yet secured substantial social benefits for the popular base that it represents politically. As Lynn Stephen (1997) has noted, Oaxaca has a long history of ethnic exclusivity and fragmentation that has been extensively exploited by elites. Although there were increasingly systematic attempts to address this problem on the part of new indigenous social movements representing transmigrants living their lives across the national borders of the United States and Mexico, it is differing local and historical circumstances that determine the nature of indigenous politics in different contexts.

The Zapatista movement in Chiapas had little alternative other than to push an 'inclusive' definition of indigenous identity and seek to pursue a dialogue of 'respect for difference' with *mestizo* society and a politics of broad social movement alliances. Its own base communities were multi-ethnic communities that came together in the spontaneous peasant colonisation of an inhospitable region. With the aid of the Liberation Theology wing of the Catholic Church, and a more limited input from Maoist activists from the cities, these were 'Indians' with no option but to reinvent themselves and build new practices and institutions (Leyva Solano and Ascencio Franco, 1996). Those practices and institutions may resonate with longstanding patterns in Maya culture and society in Chiapas in significant ways (Gossen, 1999), but they are also an expression of the creative abilities of indigenous people, abilities that can readily be shown to have characterised their entire post-colonial history.

It is extremely difficult to reject the positive political contribution of indigenous activism in societies in which citizens who have maintained their separate identities as indigenous people have been subjected to human rights abuse, social deprivation and exploitation to a peculiar degree. In seeking to revalorise their traditions and culture, even in a manner that distorts the historical record, indigenous activists have opened up national debates and challenged entrenched ideologies more effectively than academic anthropologists. This raises important questions about what the future agenda for academic anthropology should be in countries like Mexico.

Towards a New Beginning?

In the case of Guatemala, indigenous people make up slightly more than 60% of the population, whereas double the absolute number of indigenous Guatemalans, 10.5 million people, make up only 12.4% of the national population of Mexico (Warren, 1998: 8). Within Mexico, which is a largely urbanised society, even rural people in general now seem to be regarded as something of an irrelevance by many sectors of the elite and urban middle class. The latter appear largely unconscious of the numbers of people still speaking indigenous languages and professing indigenous identities who live and work in Mexico's major cities.²⁴ Even less do they seem conscious of the numbers of people who now move to and fro between a variety of urban and rural places in Mexico and large cities as well as agricultural worker dormitory communities in the United States. Some Mexican anthropologists have begun to pay increasing attention to these 'transnational' indigenous networks. One of their consequences is that people who never spoke Spanish as a first language are now 'hybridising' in a transnational space that joins various socially marginalised spaces within Mexico — the Mixteca Alta of Oaxaca, migrant farmworker camps in Baja California, the urban shanty towns and slums of Tijuana — with English-speaking spaces across the border. Such people have no great incentive to strengthen their identification with a Mexican national society of which they have never been members (Besserer, 1999).

Since an increasing number of *mestizo* Mexicans are also 'living their lives across borders', it is not surprising that an increasing number of Mexican anthropologists in the post-NAFTA era are developing an interest in the implications of the 'transnationalism' paradigm for exploring questions of identity and the future of Mexican nationalism. It is, however, significant that much of the theoretical running in these developments has been made by foreign anthropologists and that some Mexican anthropologists remain rather antagonistic to the transnationalism approach, preferring to defend the achievements of an earlier stream of work within the older framework of international migration studies.²⁵ In taking such a stance of scepticism towards labelling 'migrants' 'transmigrants', such scholars perhaps reveal the continuing sensitivity of the 'national question' and nation-building project for Mexican anthropology. Yet they are also risking enclosing the anthropological study of cross-border movements within the problematic defined by US immigration policy.²⁶

The study of cross-border movements could, alternatively, link up with work by US-based Latino scholars on cultural flows of *mestizaje* (in the positive sense defined above). It could also recuperate the critical political economy tradition in Mexican anthropology and place greater emphasis on the social and political contradictions of the evolving relationship between the United States and Mexico.²⁷ Yet beyond that, it seems increasingly essential for anthropologists to address the whole range of social and cultural complexity that has so long been disguised by the construction of a *mestizo* majority versus an 'Indian' minority that is a national 'problem'. There have been anthropological studies of elite families in Mexico.²⁸ The increasing focus of Mexican anthropology on larger regional frameworks of analysis from the 1970s onwards (De la Peña, 1981) brought both specific local and regional identities within *mestizo* Mexico and divisions of class and status within such local populations into sharper focus. Amongst the innovations of the 1980s, for example, was a systematic body of work on members of provincial *ranchero* cultures who saw themselves as neither indigenous nor *mestizo* (see, for example, Barragán López, 1990). Waves of enthusiasm for studies

of urban household economic survival, issues of gender, and, increasingly, urban social movements such as Christian Base Communities, have increasingly drawn Mexican anthropologists into a fuller engagement with the changing social realities of their country. It has also drawn Mexican anthropologists away from the focus on an exoticised Indian 'other' that marked a distinction once drawn by the national anthropological establishment between 'anthropology' and 'rural sociology'.

Yet the new indigenous rights movement has not only re-problematised the issue of 'Indians' versus 'mestizos' but presented Mexican anthropologists with new dilemmas. Many have (rather bravely) chosen to solidarise with the Zapatista movement and the struggles of other indigenous groups. There is also, however, an alternative (or complementary) role for anthropologists in the context of (so far largely abortive) efforts to frame new indigenous rights and autonomy legislation. This is the familiar one of acting as gatekeepers for defining the ethnic identities of others in the context of determining who should or should not receive recognition under the law. We have already seen that the official construction of *mestizaje* left open a possibility for people to re-identify themselves as 'Indians' (in just the same way as colonial constructions of 'Indianness' left indigenous people the opportunity to redefine themselves as *mestizos* by 'passing'). There are innumerable modern examples of such re-identification actually taking place in the context of the changing value of 'Indianness' defined by changing state programmes. A number of social movements, notably the *Unión de Comuneros 'Emiliano Zapata'* in Michoacán, have made persuading poor *mestizos* to see themselves as Indians the principal goal of their mobilising rhetoric (Zárate Vidal, 1998). Long 'de-Indianised' peasants have reappeared to demand land be returned to them in the name of extinct 'indigenous communities', in towns as well as rural communities. Although these constructions of indigenous identity involve a considerable amount of creative symbolic work, and are hardly as transparent as the processes of re-identification envisaged by Bonfil, they are significant. Lynn Stephen (1997) has argued that the social impacts of neoliberalism open up unprecedented new spaces for a reconstituted popular nationalism, premised on re-identification with the Indian side of the *mestizo* on the part of large numbers of people — against their elites.

I am unconvinced that the evidence to date points in an unambiguous way towards this particular scenario. Leaving aside deeply ingrained prejudices and a sense of the positive virtues of 'non-Indianness', mass impoverishment and economic stress seem to have been rather more productive of individualising and demobilising effects, which include the search for clientelistic alternatives to the patronage of the state and its bureaucrats. The effervescence and pervasiveness of social movement participation in Mexico has often been exaggerated in academic accounts premised on the assumption of an heroic, resisting, subaltern subject. Nevertheless, the politics of culture and identity is now central to Mexican politics, and anthropology is itself as much part of the problem as a means to its analysis. In particular, the deconstruction of the old ideology of *mestizaje* and new definitions of who the Mexican 'people' are that might emerge from grassroots processes are of central importance to any project for constructing a new, more democratic and socially just Mexico, and a new, and less racist and neocolonial, relationship between Mexico and its northern neighbour. A Mexican anthropology liberated from its past service to the nation-building project should have an important role to play not simply in analysing developments but furthering such projects.

Yet anthropologists can now readily be compromised by the very opportunities the changing situation presents, through commitment to new official 'multicultural' projects or by lending legitimacy to research that is blinkered by official approaches to immigration issues north of the border. The best way of confronting the challenges of the twenty-first century is probably not, in the last analysis, to revive the illusory project of creating a 'national anthropology' that could secure 'autonomy' from Northern academic institutions and funding agencies. It is for all anthropologists, irrespective of nationality, to maintain enough critical distance from the situations that they are studying to avoid the traps that states and NGOs lay for them. If anthropology focuses on people and their sociality, it is also more likely that the longstanding problems of 'culture' will be more satisfactorily resolved.

By allowing ourselves to remain trapped in colonial definitions of 'culture' and 'alterity', anthropologists in general have found themselves faced with insuperable difficulties. Anthropology must, to an extent, remain the study of 'difference' and adopt a cross-cultural comparative framework. Yet there is a fundamental difference between an anthropology that is about people and the worlds of meaning that they construct through experience, action and social interaction — always within a framework of evolving power relations — and an anthropology that is about how reified 'cultures' themselves 'live' and 'die'. For much of its history, 'what they call Mexican anthropology', to revisit the critique of the generation of 1968, was an example of the latter kind of anthropology. The strong concern of national anthropologists for practical issues of social welfare is perhaps the side of that old project which it is still worth recuperating (in a less authoritarian and paternalist manner). The theoretical and political perspectives that informed previous eras must, however, be replaced, and that is a task for all anthropologists, wherever they may reside.

Notes

¹ This is not to imply that relationships between Mexican and foreign anthropologists working in Mexico inevitably lack cordiality. In general, quite the opposite is usually the case, and there have been many notable examples of close friendship and collaboration, such as those between Eric Wolf and Pedro Armillas and Angel Palerm. Many leading Mexican anthropologists have studied for their doctorates in the United States and Europe, though this can sometimes itself be a cause of friction within the profession in Mexico, to the extent that possession of a foreign Ph.D. is seen by some as an index of higher professional status. Until recently, few doctoral programmes in anthropology were available within Mexico, which in itself stratified the profession between the holders and non-holders of doctorates. An increasing emphasis on the need for university teachers to hold doctorates in recent years has, however, added to the pressure on individuals to validate their standing by studying abroad, and raises more uncomfortable questions about the hegemony of Northern anthropological paradigms, institutional power, and the equivalence of qualifications.

² Evidently the United States is not an ‘Anglo-Saxon’ country, even if some of its people would still like to assert that it is.

³ Although distinctions of ‘race’ remained important throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, their constructed, and to an extent malleable, nature should be emphasised at the outset. If we look, for example, at the leading peninsular Spanish and *criollo* merchant families of Valladolid, the capital of Michoacán state, at the end of the colonial era, we discover that they were quite happy to marry their daughters to relatively impoverished but enterprising entrepreneurs of ‘dark’ complexion (Chowning, 1999: 66). This blend of ‘hierarchy and status consciousness with a degree of inclusivity and mobility’ was, however, very much a matter for the ‘upper two tenths’ of urban or urban-orientated population, leaving an enormous chasm between this group and the Indian and mixed-race *castas* (castes) of the rural communities (*ibid.*).

⁴ There was, of course, an equivalent project in the United States, predating the Boasian period, and associated directly with the final stages of ‘pacification’ of the remaining centres of aboriginal resistance to the expansion of the capitalist economy. The institutions through which pioneer anthropologists articulated with the United States government at the end of the nineteenth century were the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Smithsonian Institution, and the context one of continuing violation of past treaties and the containment of the surviving tribes in increasingly marginal reservations. In the 1880s, no anthropology departments were yet established in American universities, and the work of many of the early professionals was heavily compromised by their association with the very agencies that were managing this ‘final solution’ to North America’s ‘Indian Problem’. Nevertheless, some field-workers of the Bureau of Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institution did dedicate themselves — at the cost of their careers — to the documentation of the sufferings of Native Americans, produced the first academic monographs on the ‘resistance movements of the oppressed’, and entered into direct political confrontations with the federal bureaucracy (Vincent, 1990: 52–5). The Indian Wars of the 1870s coincided with renewed border tensions between Mexico and the United States, and with an increasing pressure on the Mexican-American communities created by the incorporation of California and the Southwestern states into the USA. As Mexican-Americans were increasingly transformed into a racialised underclass, facing residential segregation and loss of their lands to white ranchers and land speculators (Menchaca, 1995), their culture history was also subjected to substantial academic debate. Lewis Henry Morgan’s disavowal of the ‘civilised’ status of the Aztecs, and American archaeologists’ efforts to dissociate the indigenous cultures of the Southwestern United States from those of Central Mexico, could all be seen as reflections of the geopolitics of this era (Patterson, 1995: 33–6). They not only challenged early efforts by the Mexican state to build indigenous civilisations into a dignifying nationalist image of the country, but spoke to the continuing territorial disputes of the late nineteenth century.

⁵ Although the masculine ‘he’ is linguistically mandatory in English given the way I have constructed this sentence, and also corresponds to the way the writers I am discussing expressed the matter in Spanish, gender is, in fact, a fundamental importance to the way ‘Indians’ have been constructed by Mexican society since the Conquest. Most of the Spanish conquerors were male, and obsessed by the status connotations of ‘purity of blood’ because of the situation in Spain, in which Jewish or Muslim ancestry was dishonorable to the Christian society of the Reconquest. The Maya princess who served as translator for Hernan Cortés, ‘La Malinche’, supposedly bore him a child,

and thus, as 'La Chingada' (the fucked one) became the mother of the *mestizo* 'race', to be contrasted symbolically with the (equally 'indigenous') Virgin of Guadalupe as a model of passive sexual purity. While the Guadalupan cult appears, in fact, to have been a product of *criollo* efforts to create a proto-nationalist ideology in the first instance (Poole, 1995), the image of La Malinche represented indigenous women as whores who deserved to be raped and disciplined by dominant men. This sexualisation and gendering of images of conquest and domination also redounds on indigenous men, who should, in turn, be sexually humiliated and feminised by those who claim domination over them, as manifest in the practices of police and security forces today (Stephen, 1999: 832).

⁶ Although Cárdenas is today warmly remembered by lower class Mexicans as a great social reformer and is the symbol of the 'popular' alternative to the subsequent course of post-revolutionary development that animates the Centre-Left opposition party founded by his son Cuauhtémoc, my own research has illustrated the authoritarian thrust of his politics in relation to the peasantry in general, rather than simply to a peculiarly infantilised 'Indian peasantry' (Gledhill, 1991). Nevertheless, as Marjorie Becker has shown, Cárdenas did learn something from his efforts to mobilise indigenous communities, displaying a degree of pragmatism that moderated the uncompromising sentiments embodied in this public statement (Becker, 1988).

⁷ The Mexican Confederation of Labour and Revolutionary Confederation of Mexican Workers. Cárdenas concluded that allowing multiple federations official recognition maximised the state's leverage over the organised working class, allowing greater flexibility in the political management of labour as capitalist development and urbanisation proceeded (Hernández Chávez, 1979). The executive branch of government exercised an effective top-down selection of the upper echelons of the leadership of these organisations, though bitter struggles to regain autonomy persisted after the Cárdenas era.

⁸ The Bracero Accords, established when the USA faced labour shortages during the Second World War, had allowed Mexicans to enter the United States legally as short-term contract workers. The main beneficiaries of the programme were not landless peasants but the holders of land in the agrarian communities created by the land reform, and the system was biased towards Spanish-speaking *mestizos*.

⁹ The 'counter agrarian reform' that followed the end of the Cárdenas presidency in 1940 left even peasants who possessed fertile land with limited prospects for cultivating it profitably, given the withdrawal of cheap credit and technical assistance. By the 1950s, there were substantial processes of migration from states with significant indigenous populations towards Mexico City, which broadened their social base and geographical range in subsequent decades. In the case of Michoacán state, international migration to the United States goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century in the case of some communities, and was often initiated by members of elite families whose social position had been eroded by *mestizo* interlopers. For further discussion, see Gledhill (1991; 1998).

¹⁰ The solution to theorising why early expectations failed to be fulfilled was in part the adoption of an historical perspective in research. The celebrated controversy between Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis provoked by the latter's restudy of the community of Tepoztlán in Morelos state was initially presented as a clash of sociological paradigms between an 'equilibrium-harmony' perspective and a model emphasising inequality and conflict. With hindsight, it became apparent that much of the difference between Redfield's Tepoztlán and Lewis's reflected historical change. Redfield himself had, however, totally failed to recognise how local circumstances had been changed radically by what were, at the time of his fieldwork, the recent events of the Mexican Revolution, constructing his model of 'folk society' on utterly ahistorical foundations (Ingham, 1986; Schryer, 1990).

¹¹ A similar reevangelisation campaign was mounted in the late nineteenth century. There is not, in fact, anything particularly 'Indian' about the incorporation of mystical and magical elements into Catholic religion. Not only is 'folk Catholicism' in this sense as typical of the Iberian peninsular itself as the New World colonies (today as in the past) but there is a quite evident interchange of such practices and beliefs across the supposed cultural boundaries of the 'indigenous' and Spanish settler worlds (Brading, 1990). This is complicated further in some parts of Mexico by the contributions of African slaves to the formation of provincial cultures and by the interfusion of popular culture in the Iberian peninsular with elements drawn from elsewhere in the Mediterranean

world as well as from the Eurasian homelands of some of the groups which colonised Spain after the fall of the Roman empire.

¹² Warman continued in cabinet office under Salinas's successor, Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000). As INI director, he revealed something of an authoritarian tendency in his dealings with independent indigenous organisations that resisted government policies (see, for example, Fox, 1994), and modified his past opinions on agrarian matters quite substantially in his subsequent roles. His incorporation into institutional politics was not, in itself, unusual, since leading Mexican intellectuals tend to remain close to power and belong to the elite clique structures that underlie all political careers. Furthermore, a very substantial number of activists who had pursued a Maoist line of working at grassroots level were persuaded to work for the social development programmes introduced by the Salinas government and in the new bureaucracy created to regularise land rights. Yet although the Salinas administration spoke a language of empowerment and participation that may have appealed ideologically to activists of this type, arguing that its mission was to remove the dead hand and corruption of the old post-revolutionary state, its record was one of persistent political manipulation of social development programmes (and, as it turned out, an unprecedented corruption and even criminalisation at the heart of government).

¹³ Subsequent research has demonstrated quite clearly that many institutions and practices regarded as 'traditional', such as the fiesta-cargo system of highland Mesoamerican communities, were not simply products of the colonial situation. They reflected radical transformations in community organisation brought about by the 19th century abolition of the corporate property held by the confraternities that had previously organised community ritual.

¹⁴ See, for example, De la Peña (1980). The disadvantages of this enthusiasm for the British model are discussed, in retrospect, by another of those who initially shared it, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler (1992).

¹⁵ See, for example, Margulis (1979) and Hewitt de Alcántara (1984).

¹⁶ Mexican urban anthropology tended to focus on questions of political economy that followed on logically from the debates about the future of rural society. Particular attention was paid to patterns of household reproduction, questions of gender and the role of the 'informal sector' in an industrial economy that was far from replicating the supposedly 'classical' development patterns of the North. This was also the focus of many scholars from abroad, representing a variety of disciplines. There was, of course, a prominent US anthropological contribution to the study of the working class households of an earlier era in the form of Oscar Lewis's celebrated series of books on the Sánchez family, the foundations for the 'culture of poverty' thesis. Studies of urban social movements, along with popular religion, healing and other topics, became more significant during the 1980s.

¹⁷ Literally 'popular', in the sense of advocating a focus on 'the people' as the lower classes, rather than on the needs and rights of specific groups of people defined by ethnic categories.

¹⁸ This often appears to be the case, for example, in indigenous video-making projects. See Flores (2000).

¹⁹ Examples of the latter case are provided by the communities of Aquila, in the Sierra de Coalcoman region of Michoacán, and San Juan Parangaricutiro, in the Meseta Purhépecha (Purnell, 1999), and in a particularly significant way, but the Indian communities of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, which paradoxically allied with Liberal elites favouring the disentanglement of community lands in their nineteenth century struggles to defend such lands (Mallon, 1995).

²⁰ A striking example is provided by the case of Juchitán in Oaxaca (Rubin, 1996).

²¹ See Wolf (1955; 1957). Wolf himself came to see 'the historical perspective embodied in his 1950s work as 'overly schematic' (Wolf, 1986: 326). It should, however, be noted that they were written against the dominant paradigm that continued to inform Mexican anthropology, a paradigm under which 'anthropologists ... tended to short-circuit four centuries of history, to draw a direct line between the pre-Columbian past and the Indian present' (ibid.). In Wolf's work, cultural practices became dynamic responses to the problems posed by specific and changing economic and political conditions. In adapting imposed colonial institutions to their own purposes, deploying witchcraft accusations, enforcing village endogamy and controlling land sales to outsiders, indigenous peasantries in Mesoamerica were presented for the first time as actors in history. The path was cleared for a new historicisation of culture and social organisation as observed ethnographically, and although Wolf conceded that he failed to discuss intra-communal differentiation adequately, he did note the existence of class divisions and conflicts between indigenous nobles and commoners even in his earliest work.

- ²² In the case of Chiapas, Robert Wasserstrom posed and answered this question as follows:
...it must be remembered that colonial society brought Spaniards and Indians together not simply as distinct ethnic groups but as members of antagonistic social classes — that ethnic relations quickly became a pretense for perpetuating inequalities and injustices of a much more familiar sort. Then, too, the options of emigration and transculturation, of *mestizaje*, which many chose to pursue, remained open in most parts of Mexico and Central America. But in Chiapas at least, a significant number of these men and women chose instead to modify their beliefs and customs and traditions in every way possible so as to avoid the one fate they evidently feared most: the loss of their right to be *naturales* ... native peoples quite reasonably rejected transculturation as a solution to those problems of inequality and exploitation which plagued them: why, they asked, should we forsake the little we have salvaged to enter the lowest levels of ladino society? (Wasserstrom 1983: 119)
- ²³ This is also the perspective adopted by the Zapatista movement in Chiapas (for further discussion, see Gledhill, 1997; Stephen, 1997; Gledhill, 2000).
- ²⁴ Although, as I noted earlier, migration from indigenous communities to Mexico City goes back many decades, it has accelerated as a result of the impacts of neoliberal 'reform' on Mexico's countryside. Early in 2000, the government of Mexico City was advertising for people able to act as interpreters of indigenous languages. What is important is that these 'urban Indians' of the 21st century, who work in occupations such as street trading, are interested in the possibilities of indigenous rights and autonomy legislation for improving their own, urban, social situations. In other words, they see maintaining their 'Indian' identities as a strategic political move.
- ²⁵ A good example of this tradition is Massey et al.(1987), a work of collaboration between a North American social demographer and a group of Mexican anthropologists.
- ²⁶ There are strong institutional incentives for doing this, since substantial amounts of North American funding has been provided for the incorporation of Mexican scholars into major research and writing projects on the problem of 'migration' as viewed from a US perspective.
- ²⁷ I have explored some of these in my own work. For a summary, see Gledhill (1998).
- ²⁸ See, for example, Lomnitz and Pérez-Lisaur (1987).

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