

Politics and Culture of Indigenism in Mexico

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translated by Charles H. Roberts

In Mexico official "indigenism" began to take shape by the 1910s. Its development was influenced by the great social movement of the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Indigenism was the political means used by the state to attend to the development needs of culturally distinct Mexican populations.

A system of thought known as Mexican Indigenism, which brings together research and social action, has become a substantial part of the Mexican School of Anthropology. Indigenism is also fundamental to an understanding of the peculiarities of Mexican nationalism.

Mexican Indigenism has drawn from various currents at different times in the 20th century. Thus, the indigenist policy is not a finished, perfectly systematized whole. Nevertheless, it has provided a model for government policy towards indigenous peoples in other Latin American countries with large indigenous populations. Mexican Indigenism has inspired the establishment of Indian institutes in several Latin American countries, after the First Inter-American Indian Congress held in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, in 1940.

The initial postulates of indigenism have been modified in light of experience; dynamic efforts continue to shape indigenism in response to the particular developments in the indigenous world. Mexican Indigenism has gone through agrarianist, educational, and developmentalist — also known as integrationist — phases.

In the last twenty years the outlook for the indigenous peoples in Mexico and throughout Latin America has changed significantly. The indigenous movement has developed economic, political, social and cultural organizations with a strategic outlook. Indigenous peoples' growing effectiveness stems from their more decisive engagement of national societies in defense of their human rights, collective and cultural. Marginalized for over 500 years from the main decision-

making centers of government, the indigenous resistance in recent years has produced organizations that foster respect for and understanding of traditional values. These millenary cultures, with a powerful wisdom, have been able to survive in national societies in which indigenous peoples are at the bottom of the economic ladder.

This display of organizational strength has had an impact on the state institutional structures that develop indigenous policy today. The National Indigenist Institute (known as INI: Instituto Nacional Indigenista) has abandoned the theoretical and practical policy of integrationist indigenism, adapting its actions to the organizational renaissance of the indigenous peoples. No longer are indigenous initiatives supplanted by state agents who underestimate indigenous peoples' capacity to manage their own development based on their life experiences, plans and capabilities.

Thus, indigenous peoples play a more prominent role in society. Their organizational movement, which encompasses the 56 ethnic groups that live in Mexico, each with its own culture and language, has stated three main principles that must be made part of the INI's policy:

1. Indigenous peoples and communities must *participate* in planning and implementation of the INI's programs.

2. This participation should culminate in the *transfer of institutional functions and resources* to indigenous organizations and communities, and to other public institutions and social groups involved in and committed to indigenist action.

3. INI must *coordinate* all of its actions with federal, state and municipal institutions, and social organizations and with international agencies.

These general principles for governmental action by the INI are motivated by a firm resolve to break the fetters that inhibit the full and integral development of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. The indigenous peoples number 8 mil-



In the highland communities of Chiapas, textiles represent complex cultural ideas. Designs may represent the origin of human society or the identity and history of a local community. Petrona Méndez Intzin, a Tzeltal Maya weaver from Tenejapa in the highlands of Chiapas, brocades on the traditional backstrap loom of the region. Photo by Ricardo Martínez

lion in 1991, accounting for over nine percent of the Mexican population, based on projections from the 1980 National Census. No other country of the Americas has as large an indigenous population as Mexico.

The key demands raised by the indigenous communities and their organizations include equal justice and equality in civil rights and obligations, as required by law for all Mexicans. The National Commission of Justice for the Indigenous Peoples of Mexico was established by presidential initiative in April 1989. This Commission, presided over by the Director of the INI, Dr. Arturo Warman, is charged with proposing changes in the Mexican Constitution, after consultations with indigenous and other organizations involved in development and indigenous affairs. These constitutional changes will lead to recognition of indigenous cultural rights for the first time in the history of independent Mexico. This Presidential initiative was presented to the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. Article 4 of the Constitution is to be amended to recognize that Mexico is a multicultural country and that indigenous peoples have specific rights.

Members of the Ikood, Zapotec, Tzotzil, Tzeltal and Lacandon cultures, representing the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas, which have the

highest density of indigenous populations and cultures in the country, are participating this summer in the Festival of American Folklife.

This cultural exhibition will offer the public an opportunity to learn about indigenous knowledge and wisdom of the land and the environment. Now that the Western world has begun to turn its attention to the environment of the planet, the indigenous peoples of the Americas — despite having all institutional practices operate against their interests for the last 500 years — offer us their knowledge of the harmony that must be preserved between man and nature.

The hour of the earth has come; and it is time to listen to the indigenous peoples of our America. The subjugation and discrimination of recent centuries will be no more in the new millennium. The cultural resistance of indigenous peoples should find expression in a full renaissance of their indigenous abilities, for the benefit of all inhabitants of this planet.

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