Reclaiming the Land

The Resurgence of Rural Movements in Africa, Asia and Latin America

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Indian Peasant Movements in Mexico: The Struggle for Land, Autonomy and Democracy

Armando Bartra and Gerardo Otero

> In spite of it all, Indians knew that the land was theirs, due to their history, right and also labour, which ... is what made it blossom. (Warman 1974)

The purpose of this chapter is to assess the emergence of the Indian peasant movement in Mexico at the turn of the twenty-first century. Just as indigenous peasants were the most radical group in the Revolution of 1910–20, the 1 January 1994 uprising led by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) has also represented a watershed in Mexico's political history. Most analysts of indigenous peasant movements in Latin America tend to emphasize either the class basis of rural movements (Petras and Veltmeyer 2001) or the identity politics involved in their mobilization (Esteva 1999; Alvarez et al. 1998). By contrast, we argue that in most social movements, but particularly so in the case of indigenous peasant struggles, material (land) and identity (culture) demands are inseparable.

Indigenous ethnicity and culture are simply the anchoring points of the struggle for land. Indigenous ethnicities have been reproduced for centuries in a subordinate interaction with ruling and middle groups and classes, and its reproduction has depended primarily on having access to land (Otero 2004a). When the linkage with land as the means of livelihood was severed permanently, former indigenous peoples had no choice but to assimilate to *mestizo* society after only a couple or so generations. Although assimilation has resulted in lost languages and cultural practices, Mexico has witnessed since the 1970s, and most forcefully in the 1990s, a strong resurgence of the

struggle by Indian peoples for land and autonomy to reproduce their culture. Part of this resurgence is explained by the duplicity of the Mexican government: on the one hand, new agrarian legislation in 1992 cancelled the possibility of further agrarian reform, by changing Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution, which had emerged from the Revolution (Bartra 1992, 2003a); on the other hand, the government signed the 1989 ILO Convention No. 169 on Indigenous Peoples (Hernández Navarro 1994). The latter has given legitimacy to the continued struggle for land and territory, now with the added central demand for autonomy in culture and self-governance. In a country that has been guided by liberal ideology since the nineteenth century, and that has fervently tried to establish a homogeneous, monolithic, *mestizo* (mixed-blood) national identity, indigenous struggles represent a major challenge (Hernández Navarro 1997).

This chapter traces the rise of the indigenous peasant movement in Mexico, with emphasis on the last three decades of the twentieth century. The first section offers background information on indigenous struggles for land and autonomy and the conceptual framework used to interpret them. The second section discusses the relations between the Mexican state and Indian peoples throughout the twentieth century, with emphasis on the 1970s–1980s. The third section offers an analysis of the EZLN uprising in 1994, with attention paid to how the EZLN and the broader indigenous movement in Mexico have impacted on each other. Finally, our conclusion addresses the dilemma of the indigenous movement today: will it consolidate itself as a strictly indigenous movement, or go beyond its ethnic boundaries to found its class identity as part of the peasantry, and thus establish alliances with the rest of the peasantry and other subordinate classes in Mexico?

History and Concepts

Indigenous peoples in postcolonial Mexico

If the colonial state dispossessed Indian communities and subjected most of their members to slavery and harsh working conditions, the postcolonial Mexican state attempted to eliminate Indians as a social category altogether. Upon Mexico's political independence from Spain in 1821, the ruling classes, which descended from Spaniards

and propagated a white supremacism, sought to constitute a national identity that excluded the Indian. While this white supremacism was established in the initial legislation of independent Mexico, the state moved most vigorously to deprive Indian communities of their means of livelihood several decades later, during the *Porfiriato* of 1876–1910, the period prior to the revolution. The liberal dictator Porfirio Díaz set out to unify the nation, extend the railroad network, and impose military rule from the centre. Capitalism was in full expansion at this time, but because vast tracts of land remained in the hands of indigenous communities the Díaz government changed the law to allow the process of primitive accumulation to proceed freely.

Primitive accumulation consisted in a double 'liberation' of direct producers from the means to produce their livelihood (i.e., expropriation of indigenous lands) and from any dependency relations which may have prevented them from selling their labour-power, thus creating a free proletariat for capitalist development. Importantly, at the centre of this process were the landholdings of the Roman Catholic Church, which by the mid-nineteenth century was the largest landowner, under a type of feudal ownership. This contrasted markedly with the emerging liberal ideology and represented a major fetter to capitalist development. Thus the liberal reforms in the 1857 Constitution provided the legal instruments to expropriate the Church's landholdings. And the same law, aided by further legislation in 1883 and 1884, went on to be applied to indigenous community land. Thus, after the liberal reform laws and during the *Porfiriato*, the Indian communities were deprived of 90 per cent of their land.

The immediate outcome of the liberal reforms was a transfer in land ownership from the Church and the Indian communities to existing and new *latifundistas*, large landholders in the private sector of Mexican agriculture. In the decades that followed, they satisfied their voracious appetites for land by fencing off large portions of Indian communal land, while also bonding dispossessed Indian peasants to the land through various debts that they would incur as workers to the landowner (credits for wedding feasts, goods advanced at *tiendas de raya* or hacienda stores, and so on). These debts were inherited by the peons' children, who were not able to leave their 'jobs' until all outstanding debts to the landlord were settled (López Cámara 1967; Hansen 1974).

The 1910 revolutionary movement coalesced in different ways in the various regions of Mexico. In the North, revolution was led

by the *hacendados*, large landowners who were excluded from political power during the *Porfiriato*. They formed a broad and unlikely alliance with their own peons, small farmers, ranchers and urban middle classes. In central Mexico, by contrast, the main social rift was between the expropriated indigenous communities and the *hacendados*. Specifically, in the state of Morelos, indigenous peasants had been organized to oppose the *Porfiriato* since 1908, before northern *hacendado* Francisco I. Madero had even called for the revolution's first shot (Womack 1969). Unlike the broad alliance in the north, which was led by *hacendados*, the Morelos peasantry named their leader from among their own community: Emiliano Zapata. Strictly speaking, Zapata was not a peasant since he earned his livelihood from working on a hacienda for wages, yet he was a respected member of the community. Followers of Zapata decided to ally themselves with Madero's *hacendados* because an effort to air their grievances had been repulsed at the state level.

The Zapatista alliance with Madero was short-lived. Soon after the dictator was deposed it became obvious that Madero was surrounded by similarly conservative forces, which prevented him from fulfilling his promises of land reform. Hence Zapata launched his own revolutionary call, the Plan de Ayala, in 1911. In 1912, Madero was overthrown and killed by his right-wing forces of restoration, detonating Mexico's civil war. By December 1914, the peasant armies led by Emiliano Zapata in the south and Francisco Villa in the north had the upper hand militarily, with radical agrarian reform as their main political banner. But the northern *hacendados* reconstituted their armies and eventually defeated the radical peasant armies. Politically, they co-opted the peasant banner of agrarian reform by including Article 27 in the 1917 Constitution, a paper promise of agrarian reform that was implemented only timidly until the 1930s, when more significant land redistribution was carried out by the administration of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40). After this, the revolution became institutionalized, with the so-called 'great revolutionary family' at the helm. At least with regard to the peasantry and agrarian reform, the revolution was basically over: land distribution slowed down considerably, most of the land granted to peasants thereafter was either not suitable for agriculture or if it was the state directed their productive processes, and peasants now had to deal with a whole set of state institutions that tended to co-opt their class organizations. For the rest of the twentieth century, one of the greatest challenges for rural peoples

of Mexico was to gain organizational independence from the state and autonomy from other political organizations. We now turn to a brief outline of our conceptualization of this quest.

The political-cultural theory of class formation

The central question for the theory of political-class formation may be phrased as follows: how can subordinate groups, communities or classes become hegemonic or dominant, or at least gain the ability to push for state interventions in their favour, while remaining independent? Political-class formation may be defined as the process through which direct producers and other exploited and/or oppressed social groups shape demands, form organizations to pursue them, and generate a leadership to represent them before the state and other organizations with which alliances are built. The question of how indigenous peasants are constituted into a political class could conceivably be answered from a strictly economic-class perspective or from an identity-based point of view. Nevertheless, the distinctiveness of the theory of political-class formation used here is, precisely, that both economic and cultural issues are integral parts of what constitutes classes *politically*. A politically formed class involves both material interests and cultural aspects of identity, which result from the relations of production (between exploiters and exploited) and the relations of reproduction (among the exploited), respectively.

For Indian peasants, a key component of the relations of production comprises their relations with other ethnic groups, namely with the dominant groups of *mestizos, ladinos, cholos* or whites (the names vary by country and ethnic social construction). Now, for predominantly subsistence peasants, it may well be that the key relation with the dominant groups takes place through the market, and not through production. In either case, ethnic relations within asymmetrical production or market relations will tend either to reinforce ethnic identities or to force the subordinate ethnic group into assimilation. In Laclau and Mouffe's terms (1985), the antagonism between the two subject positions constitutes their respective identities. The remarkable fact about many Indian ethnicities in Latin America is that they have resisted assimilation for about half a millennium, despite the fact that they have always occupied a subordinate position.

Political-class formation theory is clearly located in a post-Cold War era, one in which the struggle for socialism through violent

revolutionary means is essentially over, at least in the Americas. The struggle for democratic socialism must now be waged by expanding liberal-democratic structures and building a new, popular-democratic hegemonic bloc around human needs and environmental sustainability.

Political-class formation theory proposes regional cultures, state intervention and leadership types as the mediating determinations between class structural processes and political-formation outcomes. Regional cultures, in which relations among the exploited (e.g. kinship and community relations) are critical, form the basis on which direct producers articulate their demands. State intervention shapes the initial contours of the resulting character of a class organization: the state always tries to co-opt organizations, while the latter fight for their independence. Finally, leadership types and grassroots modes of participation determine both the organization's chances of remaining independent from the state and autonomous from other political organizations and the character of its alliances with other movements and organizations (Otero 1999; Otero and Jugenitz 2003). We now turn to how the 'great revolutionary family' constructed the Mexican state from 1929 until 2000, when its ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) lost the presidential election. The following sections discuss how indigenous peasants fought cooptation and became increasingly constituted into a politically formed class.

Indian Peoples and the Mexican State

The wars of the state, or the 'philanthropic ogre'

If Mexican peasants invented themselves during the revolution, they were eventually oppressed by the state during the twentieth century. But peasants also received a series of concessions from the state, which in most cases resulted in their political co-optation. Hence the Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz characterized the state as the 'philanthropic ogre': it oppresses and represses those who dissent, while rewarding loyalty. For peasants, then, the tension between co-optation and rebellion has marked their history (Bartra 1985, 2003b). The rural insurgency of the past century was made up of the wars of the ogre: attempts to break with the material and hegemonic knots of state power. In Mexico, Nietzsche's view of the state became materialized when the revolution became the

state: 'A state, is called the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly lieth it also; and this lie creepeth from its mouth: "I, the state, am the people"' (1962: 44).

Few police states of the twentieth century had the social control that the Mexican state did. This was a benevolent autocrat that restructured workers, peasants, middle classes and entrepreneurs from top to bottom. It was achieved by an implacable corporatist system articulated to the state and the PRI, the latter in charge of the system's electoral rituals. The 'civil society' organizations created from the top amounted, in fact, to a realm of politics confiscated by the state, the result being loyalty, co-optation and the assurance of electoral triumph for the ruling party. The 'sectors' of this quasi-single-party state were the political and union supports of the 'revolution made government': the workers' sector, made up of the Mexican Workers' Confederation (Confederación de Trabajadores de México) and the other large national unions (oil, electricity, railroad, phone, mining, etc.); the peasant sector, made up mainly of the National Peasant Confederation (Confederación Nacional Campesina, CNC) and the Agrarian Communities Leagues; and the popular sector, constituted by state employees, teachers, and other middle strata, organized in the Popular Organizations National Confederation (Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares, CNOP). For their part, entrepreneurs, without being formally a sector inside the ruling party, were organized into associations, confederations and chambers, and were lined up in a corporatist relation *vis-à-vis* the state.

In twentieth-century Mexico, the Leviathan was a cold monster commanded by all-powerful princes whose power lasted only six years, until the next election. The command of the president, however, was as absolute in space as it was limited in time. Philanthropic ogres, as Octavio Paz would call them, were at times prodigal or petty, but they were always providers.

Mexicans now need to liberate themselves by killing the Leviathan, even if the old patriarch is no longer scary. Despite the fact that it is surrounded by a warrior empire, multilateral organizations, draconian trade agreements, and planetary corporations, and is increasingly capable of doing less, it should be killed. Without a symbolic parricide we will never exorcize the intimate and cold monster, to put in its place a state with a human face. Notwithstanding neoliberal globalization, it is time for civil societies to construct good governments: public powers that are limited by civil society but that

are also willing to confront the large national problems, asserting what remains of sovereignty. Therefore, we need to kill the autocratic state to reconcile ourselves with a new, popular-democratic state that responds to civil society (Otero 2004b).

In a country in which civil society was created by the bureaucratic ogre in its own image, the citizen struggle for self-governance at the community and regional levels becomes an issue of the first order. If the radical state reformism under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas in the late 1930s conferred temporary legitimacy to the unions fighting for social justice, these were always anti-democratic and corporatist. But in the second half of the century, the relentless proliferation of struggles for autonomy converged, first, with the progressive loss of legitimacy of the political system, which started symbolically with the 1968 student movement, which was violently repressed; and, second, with the wearing down of union discipline, exposed by the worker, peasant and popular insurgencies of the 1960s. This new political mobilization was followed by the failings of the import-substitution, protectionist and state-centred economic model, which were dramatized by the debt and financial crises of the 1980s and 1990s. Lastly, the rupture of the PRI's 'democratic current', in 1988, signalled the definitive sclerosis of the political system's informal reproduction mechanisms, and the beginning of the end of the 'great revolutionary family'.

The war against the ogre has gone through various phases. During the 1960s and 1970s the word 'independent' became the symbol of democratic opposition: 'independent' peasant unions and confederations, 'independent' conferences of indigenous organizations, fronts for union 'independence', political parties 'independent' from the state, 'independent' magazines and journals that did not accept funding from the government; even 'independent' picture exhibitions, 'independent' films, and an 'independent' dance company. In those years, 'independence' meant simply not belonging to the PRI, marking a distance from the omnipresent Mexican state. Thus, a federation of democratic students or a peasant confederation may have proclaimed themselves 'independent', but they could still be politically subordinated to an opposition organization like the Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Mexicano, PCM) – that is, lacking 'autonomy'.

Hence, in the last quarter of the century, 'autonomy' became the rallying cry among oppositional and popular-democratic organizations.

This concept began to become generalized after 1984, when about fifty rural organizations constituted themselves into the National Union of Autonomous Regional Peasant Organizations (Unión Nacional de Organizaciones Regionales Campesinas Autónomas, UNORCA). Although initially this coordinating organization rejected the term 'independent' for the questionable reason of avoiding direct confrontation with the state – the two being virtually synonymous (Gordillo 1988) – in the coming years 'autonomy' came to be associated, as 'independence' had, with the rejection of political subservience, but more than this, with social and economic self-management of peasant and cooperative production. Thus, 'autonomous' peasants rejected the guardianship of the state and set out to 'appropriate the productive process' – self-management – while neighbourhoods and communities organized around the self-managing provision of basic services like schooling and security.

Indigenous struggles for autonomy, in the 1980s and 1990s, supplemented and further radicalized the peasant movement. First, the meaning of 'autonomy' for indigenous peoples went beyond organizational independence and socio-economic self-management to mean free self-determination; that is, self-government at the community level, according to their own norms, practices and customs (*usos y costumbres*). Second, demands for 'autonomy' invoked an autochthonous peoples' history, founding the demand in a right that precedes the current national state. In a sense, this claim is external to the hegemonic social system.

In the transition from political independence to socio-economic self-management and then to self-government, the underlying concept of autonomy sharpened its connotation of otherness, of an alternative, popular-democratic and multicultural hegemonic project. Initially, the demand for autonomy may be a non-submissive way of becoming inserted into the existing order; in its higher form, however, autonomy becomes an anti-systemic practice by which the oppressed resist by constructing alternative organizational orders. But the progression from repealing unanimous and monolithic politics towards a form of depoliticized self-management and then towards the demand for a multicultural 'world where all the worlds fit' is a process of overcoming-and-conservation of stages, so that each new stage contains and retains all the previous ones.

The fact is that the most radical autonomous experiences are not islands, and they will not survive without independent organizations

that fight here and now for the basic demands for their constituencies. Autonomous organizations also require collective self-managing operators of popular production and services in perpetual tension with the state and the market. They also need institutional parties that are capable of promoting alternative reforms and projects from an oppositional position or within the state. The peoples' struggle for autonomy is symbolic of Max Weber's view: 'Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth – that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible' (1958: 128).

First peoples: from cooptation to the struggle for autonomy

State policy of nineteenth-century Mexico attempted to exterminate Indians, statistically or physically, so as to construct a homogeneously white nation-state. In contrast, the post-revolutionary state of the twentieth century engaged in a concerted policy of integration, which assumed the abandonment of indigenous cultures in favour of adopting the dominant, *mestizo* culture. Throughout most of the twentieth century, therefore, the social and political presence of First Peoples was diluted. But they reappeared forcefully in the last decade of the century, organized around their demands for autonomy, self-governance and democracy. These demands presume that Indian peoples will have control over land and territory, while remaining an integral – and dignified – part of the Mexican nation-state.

Essentially, indigenous participation during the violent stage of the 1910–20 revolution adopted three modalities: first, in a kind of armed extension of servile labour, some Mayan Indians signed up with the landlord forces that resisted the revolution. Second, in the north, certain ethnic groups took advantage of the war conjuncture to exchange their armed support for national revolutionary forces for the promise of a solution to their ancestral local problems. Third, the Zapatistas of the central part of Mexico developed autonomous policies and a peasant programme in which their Nahuatl ethnic and linguistic condition in fact was not expressed.[3] All of these ethnicities were doubtless indigenous, but racism was too prevalent and strong for indigenous ethnicity to become a rallying point of organizing at the time.

The first revolutionary Indianism (a term to distinguish the Indian-initiated efforts in identity construction from 'Indigenism', the state's

policy of integration that pursues acculturation and assimilation) emerged at the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, when Carrillo Puerto, leader of the Socialist Party of the Southeast, introduced agrarian reform similar to the Zapatismo of Morelos, in central Mexico. He provided the former, semi-slave hacienda peons with the territorial basis for autonomy, an agricultural development based on the return to maize, dissolving their food dependency on the hacienda. Red Sundays and other cultural and educational activities promoted the recovery of the indigenous language, culture and self-esteem. Land, liberty and dignity became integrated in a sort of indigenous socialism, a Mayan utopia. This was frustrated in 1923 by the uprising of the 'Divine Caste', the landed ruling class in Yucatan, and the murder of Carrillo Puerto (Paoli and Montalvo 1977).

From the 1940s onwards, autochthonous peoples became the subjects of bureaucratic indigenism, the policy of a paternalistic state implemented through the National Indigenist Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, INI), which sought to integrate them into national society. INI wanted to rescue their culture as folklore and, at best, to address their economic, social and political needs as citizens, but overlooked their demand for identity and the rights that emanate from it. Thus, if the peasantry created by the revolution was firmly contained in the corporatist institutions of the state, twentieth-century Indians were reinvented by INI during peacetime. Their struggle to free themselves from the networks of political power has been more delayed, but in a sense more profound.

The new Indianism began to define its profile during the 1970s and 1980s, when a number of communities in central and western Mexico developed local or regional movements in defence of land, forests and water, and against *caciques* (political and economic strongmen) and municipal government, as in Oaxaca in the south. In these struggles, however, Indians did not put forward their specificity. Land remained the centre of their demands.

The agrarian reform that emerged from the revolution provided for two forms of land tenure: *ejido*, designed for land to be redistributed to *mestizo* peasants, with usufruct rights over the land but with ownership vested in the state; and agrarian communities, designed for collective use by indigenous communities that could prove a claim to land on the basis of colonial documents. In practice, however, Indian communities pushed their demands for land not so much by the historical roots of their rights, but by what was more

feasible according to the new agrarian legal structure: there were Indians who sought *ejido* land grants and *mestizos* that found some colonial archive to claim the restitution of communal lands. Thus, the first explicit neo-Zapatismo in the post-revolutionary era was organically expressed in the 'Plan de Ayala National Coordinator' (Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala, CNPA), which held its first National Meeting of Independent Indigenous Organizations in the Nahuatl community of Milpa Alta. CNPA's majority membership is indigenous: of the 21 regional organizations that comprised its founding in 1982, 7 were mestizo and 14 were integrated by 12 different indigenous ethnicities: Nahuatl, Purhépecha, Otomí, Huasteca, Mazahua, Zapoteca, Chinanteca, Triqui, Amusga, Chatina, Tzotzil and Tzeltal. Although with less weight, the coordinating organization of regional groups, UNORCA, has an important militancy for the autochthonous peoples. Nevertheless, neither of these two convergent organizations posited the ethnic question with any force.

The first Indigenous Congress held in Chiapas in 1974 was Indianist in form: communication was in the Mayan languages Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Tojolobal; it produced diagnostic studies and proposals by community and linguistic groups; and papers and conclusions were elaborated by consensus. Yet its agenda and action conclusions were basically peasant, as the major issues were land, trade, health and education.

During the early 1970s, Oaxaca state was the main producer of indigenous regional organizations: the Worker Peasant Student Coalition of the Isthmus (Coalición Obrero Campesino Estudiantil del Istmo, COCEI), constituted by Zapotecs; the Yacaltecos Organization of the Sierra de Juárez, which fought against the regional *cacique*; the Promoters' Coalition of Bilingual Indians, with membership from nearly all ethnicities in the state; the Sierra de Juárez Organization for the Defence of Natural Resources and Social Development (Odrenasij), also Zapotec; the Mixe Natural and Human Resources Defence Committee (Codremi); the Organizing and Consultation Committee for the Union of Peoples of the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca (Codeco).

These organizations started to elaborate a programmatic platform with encouragement by indigenous intellectuals, such as the Zapotec from Guelatao, Jaime Martínez Luna, and the Mixe from Tlahitoltepec, Floriberto Díaz. At the beginning of the 1980s, a joint declaration by Odrenasij, Codeco and Codremi read as follows:

> We demand absolute respect for our communitarian self-determination over our lands, over all of our natural resources, and over the forms of organization that we wish to give ourselves.... We demand respect for the expressions of our community life, our language, our spirituality.... We demand respect for and promotion of our forms of community government because it is the only guaranteed way of avoiding the centralization of political and economic power. We are opposed to have our natural resources plundered in the name of a supposed 'national development'.

In order to sharpen its specificity, however, the indigenous movement had to confront the state, which had attempted to appropriate the new ethnicism in formation since the 1970s. It also had to confront the rest of the peasant and popular movement, which was trying to subsume it by inertia or premeditation. Finally, the indigenous movement had to confront the intrusive agenda and practices of NGOs that were present from the 1980s.

Starting with the Chiapas congress of 1974, which was called by the state and Church but was notably self-managed by Indian peoples, the government promoted two organizational initiatives: first, the formation of Supreme Councils by ethnic group, and, second, in 1975, the formation of the Indian Peoples' National Council (Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indios, CNPI). The Council was supposed to be subordinate to the state, but it soon become restless: in 1976, CNPI demanded the dismantling of INI and, during the López Portillo administration (1976–82), it criticized the Agricultural and Livestock Promotion Law (Ley de Fomento Agropecuario), geared as it was to develop agrarian capitalism via joint ventures between capitalists and *ejidatarios*, using *ejido* land. When the Council called its third congress against the president's will, he tried unsuccessfully to liquidate the emancipated Frankenstein. This task was finally accomplished by his successor, President Miguel de la Madrid (1982–88) in 1985, when CNPI was transformed into the submissive Indigenous Peoples Confederation, which became an affiliate of the ruling PRI.

In a parallel process, however, numerous independent regional organizations emerged during the 1980s and the early 1990s, such as those in Oaxaca: the Northern Isthmus Zone Union of Indigenous Communities (Ucizoni), the Isthmus Region Union of Indigenous Communities (UCIRI), the 100 Years Independent Peasant Union (UCI 100 Años), and the Mixe Authorities Assembly (Asam). Several independent organizations emerged in other states: the Chiapas State Independent Physicians Organization (OMIECH) and the Chiapas

State Indigenous Representatives Organization: in Hidalgo State, the Eastern Mexico 'Emiliano Zapata' Democratic Front (FDOMEZ): and in Guerrero State, the Alto Balsas Nahua Peoples' Council (Bartra 2000, 2001).

Increasing migration, however, first to the irrigated fields of northwestern Mexico and then to the United States, turned many indigenous communities into multi-spatial and discontinuous entities that had to organize outside of their ancestral territories. The forceful struggles of Mixtec and Zapotec in Oregon, Washington and, above all, California during the second half of the 1980s led to several strong organizations, such as the Mixtec Popular Civic Committee, the 'Benito Juárez' Civic Association and the Exploited and Oppressed People's Association. On this basis, in 1991 all of these organizations decided to form the Binational Mixtec–Zapotec Front, which would expand into Baja California and eventually into their native Oaxaca. Because membership was expanded to include Mixes, Triquis and Chololtecas, the organization was renamed the Binational Oaxaqueño Indigenous Front (FIOB) (Kearney 1996, 2000).

With the rise of new organizations came massive meetings and encounters, which strengthened identities, built solidarities and developed leadership: the First Encounter of Independent Indigenous Organizations was held in Puxmecatán, Oaxaca, in 1980; the second in Cherán Atzicurin, Michoacán. This process gained force at the end of the 1980s, in the midst of the commemoration of half a millennium of imposed Indianness, when the First International Forum on Human Rights of the Indian Peoples was held in Matías Romero, Oaxaca, with about 600 participants from 96 organizations, 14 states, and 23 ethnic groups. Also participating were delegates from Guatemala, Honduras, Peru and Bolivia, and representatives from universities and NGOs. This meeting resulted in the 500 Years of Indigenous and Popular Resistance World Campaign. In March of 1990, the Second Forum was held in Xochimilco, Distrito Federal, in the midst of dissent, which did not prevent the constitution of the 500 Years Mexican Council in July, made up of 23 indigenous, peasant and popular grassroots organizations, NGOs and scholars. Finally, the Council called the celebration of the First National Assembly of Indian Peoples and Organizations, which was held in Milpa Alta, in which a new organization emerged: the Indigenous Peoples' National Front (Frente Nacional de Pueblos Indios, Frenapi).

By this time the indigenous agenda had been clearly defined:

> the right to autonomy and self-determination … the right to cultural identity … the right to land and natural resources … the right to freely determine the internal political condition of communities, in agreement with traditional forms of organization … the prevalence of traditional customary Indian right.

It is noteworthy that, in contrast with the trend of differentiation at the end of the 1980s, which caused the rupture of several indigenous organizations with the more peasant-biased CNPA, the 500 Years Mexican Council became more oriented towards a broad convergence. It also called for 'encouraging the unity of … Indian peoples with the peasant, workers and popular sectors' (Consejo Mexicano 500 Años 1991).

This convergence process coincided with the first few years of the administration of President Carlos Salinas (1988–94), which was trying to bring the independent rural movements to the corporatist fold. The executive's operators had formed the Permanent Agrarian Congress (Congreso Agrario Permanente, CAP) in 1989 to pre-empt the independent Unitary Action Agreement (Convenio de Acción Unitaria, CAU), and in 1990 the pro-government CNC called for the formation of an Indigenous Permanent Congress (CIP) on Salinas's orders. This corporatist organization was geared to challenge the independent Frenapi. Some members of Frenapi, such as the Independent Front of Indian Peoples (FIPI), affiliated with the corporatist organization, CIP, along with the Indigenist Action Section of the corporatist CNC, the Indian Peoples' National Coordinator (CNPI) and others. CIP was formally constituted in October of 1991 and, as with the peasants, Salinas offered millions in resources to this organization through the Indian Fund. This co-optation manoeuvre worked, for just as the peasant independent CAU was not able to survive the emergence of the corporatist CAP, so too Frenapi did not last long as an independent challenger organization.

This organizational co-optation measure was supplemented by a presidential reform of Constitutional Article 4, regarding Indian culture, approved in 1991 (Díaz Polanco 1992). This reform amounted to non-substantive, vague, culturalist changes. In a similarly superficial vein, the Mexican government signed the 1989 ILO Convention No. 169, which was ratified at the end of 1990 and published in January of the following year, but not implemented. A last, top-down symbolic governmental concession to the First Peoples had a mixed content: it amounted to retaining the inalienable character of communal lands in

the enabling law of Constitutional Article 27, which fundamentally changed in 1992. Nevertheless, some recourse for privatization was left in the new legislation, as these lands may be lost, for instance, if they make up the indigenous-community share in a corporation constituted in association with private capitalists (Bartra 1992, 2003b).

The significant fact, however, was that lands that had been returned or confirmed to Indian peoples were not excluded from the mechanism by which the government sought to have *ejido* lands adopt the 'free-hold' title, the step before alienation and sale. Prior to the 1992 revision of the agrarian reform law, *ejido* lands were not subject to sale; they could only be transferred to heirs. Because *ejido* and communal lands made up about half of all agricultural, livestock and forestry land in Mexico, they had become a major fetter to capitalist development (Otero 1999: ch. 3).

In order to understand the methodical Indianist bias of a clearly neoliberal government, we must remember that the 1990s started with strong ethnicist winds throughout the world. These were elaborated by multilateral organizations, such as the ILO, and expressed in constitutional reforms that were usually 'light', and limited to multicultural legislation. On occasion, however, Indian territories were acknowledged, and so were customary rights and self-government. Paradoxically, the world trend to counter-agrarian reforms, in which that of Salinas was inserted, was accompanied by a certain degree of ethnic-rights recognition. Thus, for example, the same law that countered the Bolivian agrarian reform laws of the early 1950s established a mechanism to acknowledge the territory of First Peoples. In practice, this resulted in granting title and security to the large landholders, which were now excluded from any threat of expropriation. Ultimately, the 1990s saw a clear paper concession to the 500 years of debt to Indians (Brysk 2000; Van Cott 2000).

The government has not been the only party to intervene in Indian affairs. Since the mid-1980s, the Mexican Indian movement has been the focus of diverse interest groups. First the NGOs became interested, then the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City struck, which together with the economic crisis turned Mexico into a worthy cause for major international cooperation. Church-related organizations also took up the ethnic question. Thus, Indians became the paradigm of 'vulnerable groups' and the object of assistance. In the best of cases they also became the object of solidarity and accompaniment. Projects for education, health, food and housing, and, to a lesser extent, savings, loans and production were multiplied. It is not a coincidence, then, that the Matías Romero International Forum focused on 'human rights', a popular rallying point, and that it was convened by grassroots organizations such as UCIZONI, along with NGOs such as Equipo Pueblo. Internationalism was another decisive factor at this stage, given that the Mexican process is closely linked to that of Latin America at large, dramatized by three meetings of the Continental Encounter of Indian Peoples: the first in Ecuador in 1990, the second in Guatemala a year later, and the third in Nicaragua in 1992.

The events of 12 October 1992, demonstrate both the increasing indigenous activism, as well as the prevailing confusion. Mexico City's Zocalo, or central square, was filled with contingents representing a dispersed plurality of political positions: from ritualist cultural groups to the gathering of the 500 Years Mexican Council, and to religious marchers to the Basílica of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where the Catholic Church was granted pardon for having colonized them. In Morelia, Michoacán, angry Indians brought down the statue of Vasco de Quiroga, a pro-Indian missionary who possibly did not deserve it; and in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, they brought down that of Diego de Mazariegos, a ruthless conqueror who no doubt deserved it.

This was the highest point of the neo-Indianist wave that started in the 1970s. The 500 Years Mexican Council, which in 1991 contained about 350 organizations from 23 states and had coordinating committees in Chiapas, Guerrero, Veracruz, Mexico State and Puebla, became weakened after 12 October 1992. After this critical date, the accompaniment of NGOs also dwindled. The National Encounter of Civil Society and the Indian Peoples held in August of 1993 was unremarkable. The fashion was over. However, if by October of that year there were no more Indians at the Zocalo, by January 1994 they had reappeared with balaclavas on all the television screens, on the occasion of the uprising of the Zapatista National Liberation Army (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, EZLN).

The Zapatista Indians: From Guerrilla to Democratic Fighters

The terrain had no doubt been prepared by almost twenty years of ethnic struggle to gain independence from institutional indigenism, but the Chiapas uprising transformed an assistance-worthy 'vulnerable

group' into the emblem of dignity and rebelliousness (Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos 2003; Bartra 2003c). The Zapatista programme is not particularly Indianist (work, land, housing, food, health, education, independence, liberty, democracy, justice and peace), but its constituency is indigenous and so are the strategies that it adopted when national and international mobilization opened the road to peace. In December of 1994, during the Peace with Justice and Dignity campaign that allowed the EZLN to break the army's enclosure, it published the conformation of thirty-eight autonomous 'rebel municipalities'. Months before, on 12 October, during the commemoration of the 502nd anniversary of conquest, the State Council of Indigenous and Peasant Organizations (Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas, CEOIC) and the State Assembly of the Chiapas People (Asamblea Estatal del Pueblo Chiapaneco, AEPCH) called for the formation of Multiethnic Autonomous Regions. Meanwhile, several other peasant movements were establishing independent municipalities throughout Mexico: for example, in Ocosingo, Las Margaritas, Chiapas Highlands, and Chalchihuitán (Sarmiento 1994).

To this point we are still witnessing de facto autonomies, which are mixed up with demands for land and other indigenous and peasant demands. But, in 1995, when the first Dialogue Session between the EZLN and the federal government focused on autonomy rights, and, in 1996, when it shaped a proposal for constitutional changes, the indigenous movement entered a dynamic of rearticulation that would define it for the rest of the decade.

The constitutional reform on indigenous rights and culture is usually identified with the 'Ley Cocopa', which adopted the name of the Congressional Commission for Agreement and Peace. This legal initiative synthesized the San Andrés Agreements reached between the EZLN and the government's representatives on 16 February 1996 and defined the objectives and strategies of this new phase of the indigenous movement. It both deepens the organizational segregation between autochthonous peoples and *mestizos*, which was already emerging in the 1980s, and unifies ethnic groups. In spite of the fact that there were different approaches in the gestation of this legal initiative – communalists versus regionalists – it represents a plausible common legal framework, an umbrella of constitutional rights shared by diverse and distant collectivities that could have strong discrepancies around other issues (Hernández Navarro and

Vera Herrera 1998). As two anthropologists have put it, autonomy is not the effect of a unilateral decision from ethnic or national groups, nor from the states. It is a product of a political negotiation (Díaz Polanco and López y Rivas 1994). In contrast with political negotiations between social movements and the state, however, this one does not admit gradualism: substantive constitutional rights for Indian peoples are either acknowledged or they are not.

The definition of a new autonomy platform and strategy also required a renewed articulation, an organizational process that was precipitated by the Chiapas uprising. In the beginning, the ethnic contingents acted within the plural citizen convergence that responded to the EZLN's call in August 1994, the National Democratic Convention, held just two weeks prior to the national elections. The Convention was stimulated by the participation of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, the left-of-centre candidate, and resulted in a very broad and multi-class leftist front, articulated first by state conventions and later also within sectoral structures of peasants, workers, Indians, students, women, intellectuals, and artists. With the PRI's triumph in the elections, however, the Convention lost its efficacy for the conjuncture, and the National Liberation Movement (MLN) called by the EZLN in the Third Declaration of the Lacandón Jungle did not prosper. This was the last Zapatista initiative geared to encourage a broad popular and multi-class front, because since the end of 1995 and in 1996 its social calls were primarily Indianist; yet they were not only this, for the Zapatista National Liberation Front (FZLN), the legal and political arm of the EZLN, was organized in 1996.

In April 1995, representatives of about a hundred organizations held a meeting in Mexico City, the First National Indigenous Plural Assembly for Autonomy (Asamblea Nacional Indígena Plural por la Autonomía, ANIPA), which elaborated a project for autonomy legislation. The meeting was prolonged into a second one in Vacum, Sonora, and a third at the end of August in Oaxaca. Each meeting had increasing attendance, and the ANIPA was formalized as an organization that would make a significant contribution to the construction of the San Andrés Accords a few months later. One of the key goals of ANIPA has been to create a fourth level of government, between municipalities and states: the pluri-ethnic autonomous regions (or RAPs, its Spanish acronym). A 'Council of Representatives' would be the highest body of authority in the RAPs: 'All ethnic groups (both Indian and non-Indian) would be

represented equally within this body, regardless of the demographic weight of each.' This body would be elected by direct and secret universal vote every three years, 'according to a principle of relative majority rule' (Ruiz Hernández 2000: 25).

The first convergence of autochthonous peoples expressly called by the EZLN was the First National Indigenous Forum. It was held in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, in January 1996, as part of the negotiation process with the federal government that had started a little earlier in San Andrés (Hernández and Herrera 1998; Gilbreth and Otero 2001). This forum was attended by 757 indigenous delegates, 568 observers, 248 guests and 403 journalists. Encouraged by this encounter, there were other meetings, and state and regional forums were constituted. In October of 1996, Comandanta Ramona, terminally ill with cancer, attended the constitution of the National Indigenous Congress (Congreso Nacional Indígena, CNI) in Mexico City. In 1997, when 1,111 Zapatistas left Chiapas en route to Mexico City, the CNI held its second congress. And in March of 2001, the CNI held its third congress, coinciding with the Zapatista Caravan for Indigenous Dignity of 23 comandantes and a subcomandante to Mexico City, where they attended a hearing in the plenary of the national Congress to make their case for the Cocopa legislative proposal, which had been sent to Congress by newly elected president Vicente Fox, the first opposition candidate to win the presidency after seventy-one years of PRI rule. Thus, the CNI sealed its intimate proximity with the course of Chiapas Zapatismo, and the demand for the constitutionality of the right for autonomy was tied to a peaceful solution for Chiapas.

The 'march of the colour of the earth', as the Caravan was also called, was the highest point in the phase of the indigenous movement that started in the mid-1990s, and it was articulated to the constitutional acknowledgement of autonomy. Self-government, by contrast, was an ancestral demand which was expressly pursued for at least a quarter of a century and conceptually formulated as a right during the 1980s. The peculiarity of the EZLN and the CNI movement since 1996, though, is that it has attempted to reach an agreement with the country's political forces that allows constitutional recognition. The novelty is that both Indians and Zapatistas centre their strategy on achieving a reform of the state.

This is no small goal. In a country where demands are fought for in very specific terms in the hope that the government will satisfy them, struggling for the acknowledgement of foundational rights is a big step. This is all the more so when this demand has mobilized the vast majority of indigenous organizations, which have the active support of the progressive social and political forces, with broad sympathy among the general public. Hence the exceptional possibility that a legislative process would be initiated from the bottom up was seen as viable.

The propitious conjuncture was present in two moments: during the San Andrés negotiations, at the start of the Ernesto Zedillo administration (1994–2000), and then after with the Caravan for Indigenous Dignity, at the start of the Fox administration. In both cases, when the negotiations became frustrated – in 1996 by the executive and in 2001 by the legislature, which passed a very watered-down version of the Cocopa initiative – the Indians and Zapatistas were stymied for the balance of the six-year electoral period. Thus the struggle has been markedly discontinuous and prolonged, because in order to develop a new bottom-up campaign they must wait for the 'top' conjuncture to change on its own. Furthermore, this legal route seems to have become exhausted in the eyes of the main protagonists. When Congress severely amputated the Cocopa initiative, and especially after the Supreme Court refused to fix the problem, both CNI and EZLN changed the terrain of struggle: Indians ratified their decision to exercise autonomy in practice, and the Zapatistas announced the suspension of all contact with the government. These are similar responses but with distinct perspectives. While Indian peoples wanted acknowledgement of a right, for the EZLN passage of the San Andrés accords was the major of three 'signals' from the government that they had set as conditions to restart negotiations. Thus Mexicans took steps backward on two terrains: Indian emancipation was halted and peace moved further away. Autochthonous peoples will have to continue fighting along the lines of the more limited protection of ILO Convention No. 169 (Díaz Polánco and Sánchez 2003), and Zapatistas will have to continue doing politics under conditions of exception and within the framework of 'suspended' negotiation with no end in sight. No doubt Indians and Zapatistas will continue to march together, but necessarily with diverse tactics and strategies.

The EZLN has established two key strategies. First, concerning its support bases, subject as they are to a political-military wall that threatens to be extended, the EZLN has substituted the *Aguascalientes*

(its former meeting sites with civil society) for the *Caracoles* (self-governing sites for autonomous indigenous communities), creating the Councils of Good Government and a greater autonomy vis-à-vis the political-military command. In this way, the EZLN and its support bases are prepared to resist as long as it takes for a new, more favourable conjuncture to arrive. Second, the EZLN has proclaimed its right to do politics in every realm. Thus, it reanimated the FZLN and its monthly political magazine *Rebeldía*, and during 2003 it increased its public interventions – fighting for peace, protesting against the World Trade Organization in Cancún, holding an international encounter 'in defence of humanity'. The FZLN organized the commemorations of the twentieth anniversary of the EZLN and the tenth of the uprising, which were held in many places around Mexico and in at least sixty-four cities throughout the world, in the five continents.

The most important thing, however, is the lesson that Zapatistas are taking from their recent experience and the national and global circumstances. The EZLN has had several incarnations: a voluntarily pacific army in 1994, it encouraged a democratic transition by democratic means. As Subcomandante Marcos put it: 'the Convention's proposal is to force change through the electoral route.... We are making this effort to convince people to exhaust the electoral route, that it is worth it' (Morquecho 1994). In 1995 and 1996, the EZLN was an insurgent group that sought to negotiate an extensive agenda of reforms with the federal executive power, headed by Zedillo, demanding governmental commitments to favourable public policies for Indian peoples at the San Andrés sessions: 'autonomy does not imply that the state will stop having responsibility with the new levels of organization, which will have the right to public compensation funds and others that are due to Indian peoples' (EZLN 1996). In 2001, the Zapatistas were rebels that organized the Caravan of Indigenous Dignity to demand from legislators the approval of a constitutional reform; in the words of Subcomandante Marcos in an interview with journalists (Bellinghausen 2001), 'The indigenous peoples will win. ... We will convince the deputies [members of the lower chamber of Congress] that it is the hour of Congress.'

Until 2001, the Zapatistas were a group of insurgents that – without laying down their guns – for over eight years had encouraged reforms through elections, negotiation with the executive, and appeals to the legislature. This exceptional paradox from Chiapas has finally reached the conclusion that the institutional system has been exhausted, that all political parties and the bureaucratic elite are a bunch of traitors, that the three main doors – executive, legislature, judiciary – are closed. It realizes that the system is in terminal crisis: 'The art of politics does not work any longer', wrote Subcomandante Marcos (2003).

Some of us may not share this conclusion, although the EZLN has the right to fix its own position and act accordingly. But, except for its decision to advance in de facto autonomy, the bet on the indigenous struggle has not been as clearly established. First, because indigenous mobilization is not an army but a highly pluralistic social movement; second, because for the EZLN the Cocopa legislative change was not merely a 'signal' to restart negotiations but a foundational right, a substantive part of a broader agenda for which Indian peoples have been expressly struggling for over a quarter-century. Therefore the challenge for the indigenous movement is not to take a position as a political actor but to define its strategy as a social movement. This requires taking a position *vis-à-vis* its relation with other popular sectors, its approach before other political forces, and its relation with the state and with the government. But the greatest challenge is to find and develop the mechanisms of unity at a time in which the goal that the EZLN and the Indian movement shared during the past decade – to elevate autonomy to constitutional rank – goes on stand-by. At least for the time being, it is hard for the indigenous movement alone to further a greater mobilization.

Conclusion: Beyond Ethnic Specificity

After some thirty years of Indianist politics, the EZLN uprising and its eventual dialogue with other Indian organizations, we can safely say that the Mexican Indian peasantry has become politically constituted, as defined in the political-cultural theory of class formation. This is so, even if the main demands have not been achieved, to the extent that the EZLN and the CNI have not been co-opted by the state and continue to implement autonomy, in spite of the legislative lag on indigenous rights and culture. But we must remember that this set of negotiations with the state was only one of four major themes that were to be settled: the others are economic and land issues and the reform of the state and women's rights. Clearly, these issues go

well beyond the specifically Indian demands that were put forward by the EZLN, once it began its negotiations with the state. Therefore the question is: will the EZLN conduct its future political constitution as merely an Indian organization or as one that also attends to the peasant nature of its constituency? The latter option, which can clearly incorporate the former, may open more doors for Zapatistas to become a broader movement within the general struggle for a popular-democratic and multicultural hegemonic project.

For Alain Touraine, one of the most prominent students of social movements and democracy (see Touraine 1988, 1997), the Zapatistas constitute a diverse movement with at least two currents within it. One of these would like to focus on its indigenous constituency; the other, which includes Subcomandante Marcos and his closest friends, wants to 'visit the world' or open up its spectrum of interpellation towards many other subordinate groups and classes. Touraine makes an explicit analogy between the EZLN's two currents (or factions) and early Christianity: while Peter wanted to remain strictly Jewish, Paul wanted to take the message to the world (cited in Martinez and Mergier 2001: 33).

What has interested Touraine the most about the EZLN is the manner in which it has managed to articulate the material and cultural defence of Mayan collectivities with a will to expand political and economic democracy in Mexico. 'On the one hand, the Zapatistas have supported themselves on these cultures, on the other, they do not allow themselves to become enclosed within these cultures, or in some type of "differencialism"' (cited in Martinez and Mergier 2001: 33). As Touraine puts it, the future challenge is immense: to reject both the possibility of local isolation and the dilution into a great political party, while trying to turn the indigenous movement into the ferment for the renovation of Mexican democracy (cited in Martinez and Mergier 2001: 34).

Thus, practising autonomy is important, yes. But this has as many variants as dimensions. At least with regard to economic self-management, Indians cannot seriously take it on by themselves, for it is a problem shared by millions of *mestizo* peasants and a great task that requires greater alliances and strategic visions (Bartra 2004). In their struggle as corn, vegetable or forestry-goods producers, autochthonous communities are not alone, because for each Indian peasant there are two *mestizos*, almost always as poor. Therefore the rural struggle of Indian peoples is interwoven with that of the peasantry

as a class. It has always been so, including the period of the 1970s and the 1980s, when Indians aligned themselves within peasant coordinating organizations in which their specificity was diluted. It was only in the 1990s, when they centred their demands on the constitutionality of their right for autonomy, that the indigenous and peasant roads were split – temporarily.

During the final decade of the twentieth century, the indigenous movement came of age and acquired density to the extent that it identified itself, setting up differences by its demands, campaigns, organizational structure, discourse, imaginary, symbolic systems, and procedures. Thus, Indians who used to be in ruins set up their separate organizational house. This is fine. Except that this change distanced them a little from the peasant, worker and popular family, even though in the process Indians became intimate with 'civil society', an entity that until 1992 was much moved by the 500 Years and eventually infatuated with the EZLN. But in the new home there are also fights, especially because the constitutional issue may not be resolved in the foreseeable future, and de facto autonomies are diverse and introspective, and by themselves do not favour joint mobilization. Therefore, while Indians settle their domestic grievances, they might once again visit the family, now as respectful adults, so that they renew their friendship with their peasant, worker and popular cousins. Perhaps jointly they can make it.

The pertinence of rearticulating with other popular-democratic sectors, in particular with the rural ones, emerges not only from the insufficiency of the indigenous movement and their allied forces to achieve their historical demands, but also from the reappearance of the peasant movement. As of the end of 2002, the peasant movement has been resurrected from the dead, with an imagination, combativeness, capacity for programmatic integration, and breadth of convergence that had not been seen since the early 1990s. Furthermore, Indians are themselves peasants.

Note

1. Nahuatl was the dominant language during the Aztec empire, before arrival of the Spaniards in 1519, and still survives as the indigenous language spoken by the largest number of people, close to three million. There are at least 57 other indigenous languages still spoken in Mexico today.

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Notes on Contributors

Filomeno Aguilar, Jr is Professor in the Department of History and Director of the Institute of Philippine Culture, Ateneo de Manila University. He is the editor of *Philippine Studies*. He works on the constructions of nationhood, global migrations, political culture, and social class relations. He is the author of *Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island* (1998).

Kojo Amanor is Associate Professor at the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. He has mainly published on land, agricultural, environmental and decentralization issues in Ghana and West Africa.

Igor Ampuero is a Ph.D. candidate in sociology who lives in Canada. Originally from Bolivia, he is a student of Latin American development, with special interest in Colombia. He has examined the socio-economic development of Colombia for two decades and is one of the leading figures in Canada on the country's contemporary political situation. He is currently also conducting research on the affiliations of the Colombian paramilitary with narcotics production and trafficking.

Armando Bartra is Director of the Instituto de Estudios para el Desarrollo Maya, A.C. Originally trained in philosophy, he has authored or co-authored over thirty books in fields ranging from literary essays and poetry to history and social sciences. For the