“Multi-culturalism in (Post)Modern Mexico: Making Subjects or Subject Making? A View from Las Margaritas, Chiapas”

Shannan L. Mattiace
Allegheny College
Department of Political Science
Meadville, PA 16335
Tel: (814) 332-3349
FAX: (814) 332-2789
Email: smattiac@alleg.edu

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What does it mean to be multi-cultural? This is a timely question for observers of Latin American politics. Within the last decade, countries as diverse as Ecuador, Colombia, Guatemala, Bolivia, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru all adopted or modified constitutions to recognize the multi-cultural, multi-ethnic nature of their societies. The percentage of indigenous peoples in these countries ranges from over fifty percent in Bolivia and Guatemala to less than three percent in Colombia. While observers have questioned the 'purity' of leaders’ motives and have speculated on the probability that these changes will be implemented, it appears certain that the assimilation model—the dominant paradigm governing indigenist policies for much of the twentieth century—is gone for good. Even Mexico, a country with a long history of indigenist policy and the founding member of the Interamerican Indigenist Institute (1948), abandoned its official policy of assimilation in the 1996 San Andrés Accords that it signed with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN).

Para el gobierno Federal, la tarea histórica y la demanda actual, social y estructural, de combatir la pobreza y la marginación de los pueblos indígenas, requiere de su participación y la de la sociedad en su conjunto, como factores determinantes para impulsar el necesario establecimiento de una nueva relación entre los pueblos indígenas del país y el Estado, sus instituciones y niveles de gobierno. Esta nueva relación debe superar la tesis del integracionismo cultural para reconocer a los pueblos indígenas como nuevos sujetos de derecho, en atención a su origen histórico, a sus demandas, a la naturaleza pluricultural de la nación mexicana y a los compromisos internacionales suscritos por el Estado mexicano, en particular con el Convenio 169 de la OIT [Organización Internacional del Trabajo] (Pronunciamiento Conjunto: 1996).

Today in Mexico and throughout the Americas multi-culturalism is not a radical proposition. Along with multi-culturalism, state leaders now also claim to support limited Indian autonomy, as long as it does not threaten state sovereignty. In short, “multi-culturalism” and “autonomy” have become an integral part of official discourse in Latin America.

Let’s look for a moment at these two terms. First, what is multi-culturalism? Some observers argue that multi-culturalism is linked to the expansion of global capitalism. As capitalism expands, so too do new identity formations. According to one observer, “multi-culturalism is part of a social logic of late capitalism” (Cruz: 19). Multi-culturalism and post-industrial capitalism both work within newly expanded political economies of money and meanings; both are yoked to a deeper ideology of the marketplace (Cruz: 21).

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1 I define indigenismo as state policies designed for indigenous peoples by non-Indians. Favre provides a more elaborate definition of indigenismo as “a current of thought and of ideas that is organized and developed around the image of the Indian. It is presented as an interrogation of Indian-ness by non-Indians in function of the preoccupations and ends of the latter” (Favre cited in Chantal-Barre 1983: 30).
Also skeptical of multi-culturalism but more focused on politics, are those who examine the ways in which these policies facilitate state control of popular participation—in effect “making subjects” (Ong 1996). Stolcke (1995) argues that recently there has been a distinct shift in dominant Western European exclusionary practices whereby cultural rather than racial difference is used to establish hierarchy differences between first and second class citizens. Other authors focus on how the adoption of multi-cultural politics helps peripheral states gain status and influence allies in the international arena. Examining the Mexican case, Jane Hindley argues that multi-cultural policies have aided policy leaders in asserting Mexico’s ‘modernity’ within the current context of globalization (Hindley 1994).

Rather than focusing exclusively on the state, some observers emphasize the importance of grassroots actors who mobilize around these “new” subject identities and pressure states to recognize their claims to special rights and protection. In these arguments, it is indigenous mobilization that has pressured nation-states to make constitutional changes ‘supporting’ multi-culturalism (Van Cott 2000). These authors focus on the emergence of indigenous peoples as new political actors whose potential for mobilization forces policy makers to take them into account.

I seek a middle ground between the view that multi-cultural policies simply reflect a strategy employed by national political elites to manage citizen identities in the current context of global capitalism and the view that these policies represent a hard-won “victory” for indigenous peoples. Multi-culturalism must be situated within longer trajectories of state-indigenous relations. In the Mexican case, while indigenist policies have frequently been the result of closed-door deliberations among elites, state leaders have not been immune to grassroots pressure and mobilization. In 1975, officials from the National Peasant Confederation (CNC) and the National Indigenous Institute (INI) announced the creation of the National Council of Indigenous Peoples (CNPI) in response to growing organization and indigenous mobilization. At the same conference in which state leaders announced the creation of the CNPI, they also introduced a new organizational structure based on Consejos Supremos. Each of Mexico’s fifty-six officially recognized ethnic groups represented a Supreme Council, which channeled demands separately for each Indian ethnicity—thus stymieing the possibility for regional and national organization.3

Despite the Councils’ organizational structure, some of them—including the Tojolabal-Maya Supreme Council, of which more will be said later in the paper—were

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2 While Van Cott points to the importance of indigenous organization/mobilization to explain states’ adoption and modification of constitutional changes recognizing their countries’ multi-cultural composition, she does not argue that indigenous mobilization alone explains these changes. According to Van Cott, Latin American states in the 1990s utilized multi-cultural policies, in part, in an effort to consolidate their fragile legitimacy and to strengthen the legality of democratic institutions (Van Cott 2000: 2)

3 The Consejo Supremo structure was based on linguistic categories, which did not always correspond to the ways that indigenous communities were actually organized. For example, the Tzotzil communities of Zinacantán and San Juan Chamula have historically been rivals, although they members of the same ethnic group (as the state defines ethnic groups: linguistically).
appropriated by local leaders and used to much different ends than those originally intended. Similarly, during the 1980s, the INI’s shift from an assimilationist policy to one emphasizing participatory indigenism provided a vehicle for Indians to gain valuable organizational experience that they later used to organize independently. After providing a framework for multicultural politics in contemporary Mexico in the first section of this paper, I shift my view to Las Margaritas, Chiapas, and more specifically to La Cañada Tojolabal, an area of ‘traditional’ Tojolabal-Maya settlement, stretching from Comitán and Altamirano (see Map I).  

Ethnic politics in the Cañada Tojolabal are strikingly different from what state discourse on multi-culturalism would suggest. Here, Tojolabal demands continue to include land reform and access to credit—demands central to peasant politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Tojolabals continue to use peasant organizations like the Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Peasants (CIOAC), to make demands for land reform and as vehicles for making broader demands for Indian rights and autonomy. The shift from class to ethnic politics among the Tojolabal has been neither dramatic nor complete. This finding challenges the separation between material (read class) and cultural (read ethnicity) basis for collective action, reproduced in the literature on indigenous peoples in Mexico, much of which has been divided into these two camps. Although a wide degree of diversity occurs within both camps, ethnicity theorists have focused principally on the ‘cultural’ realm while class theorists have focused largely on ‘material’ bases to explain indigenous political practices. Ethnicity theorists have defined culture alternatively as a stable set of ascriptive characteristics, as equivalent to the local community, as indigenous resistance and survival strategies, or less frequently, as the expression of unequal power relations among social groups. In contrast, class theorists have generally elided the cultural realm. Class explanations range from those that explain peasants’ political behavior defined in relation to the means of production to more nuanced approaches that attribute Indian ‘backwardness’ to their isolation from the national economy. Still other class theorists recognize the development of autonomous ethnic consciousness but insist nonetheless that ethnicity is a local rather

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4 The Tojolabal people live in the extreme south-center of Chiapas state. They are bordered on the west by the Pan-American highway, to the north by the municipality of Altamirano, to the east by the Jataté River and the Lagunas of Montebello, and to the south by the international border with Guatemala. Tojolabals live in five municipalities within Chiapas: Comitán, Trinitaria, la Independencia, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas, the latter being the municipality with the largest Tojolabal population. Las Margaritas is divided into four main geographical regions. The first is tierra fría, the area lying between Comitán and Altamirano, which is primarily corn-producing, has the highest population density within the municipality, and is divided into ejidos and fincas. In this paper I refer to this area as the Cañada Tojolabal. The second is the montaña area, which has historically functioned as a site of internal migration and for receipt of excess population. In the 1920s, diverse groups of Tojolabals arrived in this area to seek ‘national’ lands on which to settle ejidos (that is, uninhabited land owned by the government). By the 1940s, however, the montaña region became saturated and began to send population to the Lacandón jungle. The third sub-region is heavily ladino and is located in the city of Las Margaritas. Lastly, the Lacandón jungle region encompasses part of Las Margaritas and Altamirano and is located above the Río Euseba and part of the Jataté. Beginning in the 1950s, this region began to receive Tojolabals that came in search of land to plant coffee (Martínez Lavín, n.d.: 4-5).
than a national struggle and, thus, not a vehicle for national ‘liberation’ (Diaz-Polanco 1985). This dichotomy between material and cultural politics is further reproduced in the literature on identity politics. Here, the assumption is that the goals of those engaged in identity politics (political activity around gender, racial, ethnic, or sexual ‘identities’) are focused on recognition, rather than on fulfilling material interest or on exercising civil, political, and social rights. Indian politics in the Tojolabal region, as well as in Mexico more broadly, have been concerned with both rights and recognition, which some authors have called ‘ethnic citizenship’ (de la Pena 1996; Harvey 1997).

The second term I examine critically in this paper is “autonomy,” which has been a watchword for the growing national Indian movement since 1994. Very broadly, Indian autonomy refers to indigenous control of cultural space, that is, “the capacity for decision-making and the number and quality of cultural elements necessary to carry out any self-directed social action” (Bonfil Batalla 1996: 129). While the Mexican state has attempted to limit the indigenous exercise of autonomy to local jurisdictions, such as the community or municipality, Tojolabal leaders have insisted that Indian autonomy be extended to include entire regions. Tojolabal have joined with Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol peoples to form regional pluri-ethnic autonomous areas (RAP). The centerpiece of the RAP project is the addition of another level of government between the state and municipality: the regional government. This regional government would have partial jurisdiction in political, administrative, economic, social, cultural, educational, judicial, resource-management, and environmental spheres. Its representatives would negotiate with state and municipal governments concerning areas of over-lapping jurisdiction. In the second and third sections of this essay, I examine the relationship between place and Indian identity among the Tojolabal.

**Situating Multi-culturalism within the Context of State Reform**

In 1992, President Salinas (1988-1994) unilaterally initiated changes to Article Four of the Mexican Constitution, which, in effect, recognized Mexico’s multi-cultural composition. The new Article Four stated that the Mexican state was dedicated to “protecting and promoting the development of their [indigenous peoples’] languages, cultures, uses, customs, resources, and specific forms of social organization.” While Salinas held no formal or direct consultation with indigenous leaders before he proposed these constitutional changes, by 1992 indigenous people had become an increasingly public actor in the months leading up to the 1992 counter-celebrations organized around the Quincentenary of the ‘Discovery’ of America. While popular

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5 “Autonomy” has been a long sought-after goal of both popular as well as more elite organizations within civil society during the post-revolutionary period as the state subsumed industry leaders, popular organizations, peasants, and workers into an elaborate state-corporatist system.

6 These “cultural elements,” to which Bonfil Batalla refers, include Indians’ ability to control their land and resources, to set internal rules, and to worship as they please. Today in Mexico, Indian autonomy is exercised as a matter of degree. Examples vary widely and range from an extensive exercise of regional autonomy, illustrated by the Tarahumara in northern Mexico to small-scale communal autonomy in Oaxaca. Indian peoples’ exercise of autonomy depends on levels of state violence, the strength of local elites, and local processes of resistance and acculturation.
mobilization may have been a factor in spurring these reforms, they were developed in conjunction with changes to Article 27—the constitutional article that protected the ejido from sale on the private market. Since 1917, Article 27 had committed the Mexican state to redistribute lands to poor peasants. Amending Article 27 was tantamount to abandoning the countryside just at the same moment that changes to Article Four insisted on the “protection of [indigenous peoples’] resources.” According to Hindley, the establishment of indigenous rights was effectively harnessed to the Salinas project of modernizing the Mexican state and the broader political context of ensuring neo-liberal economic restructuring and regime maintenance (Hindley, 1994: 225).

Salinas, much more than any president since Luis Echeverría (1970-76) put the ‘Indian question’ on the national agenda. Almost immediately after assuming office, Salinas named Arturo Warman, a nationally renowned anthropologist, to head the INI. Also in those first few weeks of his administration, Salinas called for the formation of a National Commission of Justice for Indigenous Peoples. Salinas’ focus, in these public, much-touted events, was on justice for indigenous peoples and not on rights (Hindley, 1994: 230). Hindley argues that this focus on justice is a hallmark of neo-liberalism. In neo-liberal discourse justice generally occupies a central position, whereas collective rights are considered an obstacle to free market (Hindley, 1994: 230).

In the amended Article Four, indigenous cultures, rather than peoples, are assigned juridical recognition. The new wording concerning the “protection of [indigenous] resources” is unclear. Are policymakers referring to natural and economic resources as well as social and cultural? According to Hindley, the reform succeeds in containing the indigenous question within the parameters of culture—reproducing the revolutionary nationalist framing of the indigenous problem as a cultural problem (Hindley, 1994: 236). Relegating indigenous political status and practice to the realm of culture has de-politicized it. This has been a common practice among Latin American policy makers as they have incorporated black and indigenous peoples into the state through the appropriation of ‘cultural’ forms. This has been particularly true in Brazil where state elites forged a modern Brazilian nation by appropriating Black music and dance. This “reification and commodification of culture,” to use Michael Hanchard’s description of Brazil’s ‘racial democracy,’ has left many contemporary black social movements without ideological direction or strategies (Hanchard, 1993: 59).

Those indigenous peoples who have best preserved their ‘culture’ are not necessarily those leading the contemporary movement for Indian rights in Mexico. Take the Tojolabal-Maya people, for example. For years, anthropologists ignored them because they viewed their culture as ‘lost’ years during the latter half of the nineteenth century when community lands were broken into large fincas. Today, Tojolabals are national leaders in the movement for regional autonomy.
Tojolabals in the Historical Record

Scholars may find it ironic that a little-known indigenous people is today a model for the regional autonomy movement in Chiapas and in Mexico. In contrast to the voluminous literature on the Maya living in the central highland region of Chiapas, scholars have paid scant attention to the Tojolabal people. Ruz has speculated that Tojolabals have not interested most anthropologists because anthropologists view them as having "lost" many traditional Indian customs such as traje (clothing), language (in some areas), and the practice of politico-religious cofradías (García, n.d.).7 Tojolabals do not put on spectacular carnivals nor are they organized into corporate structures, which have been of enduring interest to anthropologists working with other Maya groups. The presence of monolinguals in the region is quite low because of the relatively frequent contact between Tojolabals and non-Indians since the colonial period. In one of the early anthropological studies of the region, Montagú noted that the percentage of bilinguals is remarkably elevated, even taking into consideration the exaggerated census figures (Montagú, 1986 [1957]). In her travels throughout the Tojolabal region in 1957, Montagú observed that for many Tojolabals, Spanish had become the principal language. She noted that in many neighborhoods in Comitán "the people are virtually indistinguishable from the poorest ladino class" (Montagú, 1986 [1957]). Certainly the Tojolabals became much more acculturated linguistically and in terms of social structure than the Tzotzils, Tzeltals, and Chols—Chiapas' other Maya peoples.8

7 The cofradía system consists of religious brotherhoods founded to honor important patron saints (Wasserstrom, 1983: 262). It has been thoroughly studied by functionalist anthropologists, who viewed the system as a local institution fundamentally associated with maintaining the boundaries of rural communities in the face of fluctuating outside pressure toward incorporation. According to Hewitt, the civil-religious hierarchy was the repository of local political power and the mechanism through which status was defined within the community. At the same time, it acted as an important channel for the redistribution of wealth through community service, rather than its accumulation for private gain (Hewitt, 1985: 55).

8 Since anthropologists began to visit the area in the nineteenth century, scholars have engaged in heated debates concerning Tojolabal origins and numerical estimates of their population. In an article published in 1969, Roberta Montagú put the population at 40,000 or more, although she admitted that her figure is much higher than the official one. She also noted that as late as 1900 the region was considered by map-makers as unpopulated (Montagú, 1969: 226-227). Basauri, one of the earliest anthropologists to visit the region, writes that he is “sure that this tribe is no more than a fraction of the Quiche or Maya-Quiche who stayed in the region after their grand empire disappeared” (Basauri, 1940: 210). In the early 1960s, Alfonso Villa Rojas, the renowned Mexican anthropologist, put the Tojolabal population at almost 10,000 inhabitants in Comitán, La Trinitaria, Independencia, and Las Margaritas and noted that “the number of Tojolabals who can express themselves in their language is markedly decreasing as the surrounding population is mestiza and speaks Spanish” (Alfonso Villas Rojas, 1962 [1985]: 70-71). Later studies estimated the population to be between thirty-two and thirty-three thousand residing in the municipalities of Comitán, La Trinitaria, La Independencia, Altamirano, and most importantly, Las Margaritas (Martínez Lavín, n.d.; Ruz, 1993).

In an article written in 1984, Mario Humberto Ruz, Mexican anthropologist and the leading scholar on contemporary Tojolabals, noted that scholars had written only 132 pages (discounting linguistic studies) on the Tojolabal-Maya people. While this dearth of scholarly information about the Tojolabals has been partially ameliorated with the publication of the four-volume study edited by Ruz,
Scholars working on Mesoamerica have tended to study Indians residing in small, isolated village communities; there has been little work done on ladinoized Indians and mestizos. This "closed community" approach to the study of Indians has come under heavy scrutiny recently as anthropologists, in increasing numbers, have begun to study native people in larger regional and national contexts (Kearney, 1996; Wolf, 1982). Looking specifically at the Tojolabal region since the colonial period, the indigenous and growing mestizo populations developed and changed alongside one another, and to no small degree, in relation to one another. Ruz notes that by the end of the eighteenth century, Comitán had become a city of mixed castes: Toward the twilight of the colonial period, Comitán had ceased to be an indigenous village and showed off its title as a city of ladinos....The world of the Tojolabals passed onto the periphery, or Indian belt-way, that began in the marginal neighborhoods of the hundred year old Balún Canán [Comitán], alternating with the ‘castes’ in circumvented neighborhoods, and above all, in the constellation of farms and some ranches to be found in the region (Ruz, 1992: 18).

From the arrival of the Spaniards, the area around Comitán was seen as an abundant area for the planting of grains, sugar, and for the raising of cattle. Dominican priests first administered these rich lands, but by the mid-seventeenth century, Spanish landowners began to encroach upon Dominican “possessions” in the eastern part of the region. Spanish greed forced many Indians off their land to join the growing number of castas (those of mixed race, neither Indian nor Spanish) who converged upon Comitán by the end of the seventeenth century. For Tojolabals living in the Western portion of the region, it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that ladino landowners were able to force them to work as sharecroppers and indentured servants on land that had formerly been theirs (see Gómez Hernández, 1992; Ruz, 1992). Gómez Hernández and Ruz (1992) argue that Tojolabal identity—instead of being “lost”-- was recreated on the fincas during this period (1850s-1940s).

In my conversations with Tojolabals, economic subordination, race, and historical experience were often experienced as interconnected and inextricable. "Somos pobres" (we are poor) was a repeated response Tojolabal leaders gave to my conversations.
questions about the interactions between ladinos and Tojolabals in Las Margaritas or in Comitán. "Son ricos, ellos [los ladinos]: siempre han sido" (they [the ladinos] are rich; they always have been), I was told; "el Tojolabalero vende barato y compra caro" (Tojolabals sell cheaply and buy dear). Urban ladinos look disparagingly upon Tojolabal language and traditional dress, a fact that is linked— in the minds of many Tojolabals— with the economic marginalization of their communities. When I asked Tojolabals about the sources of this marginalization, past and present experiences often merged in their responses. Although forced labor on the large haciendas in the region had ended by the mid-1940s, the sons and grandsons of the mozos still talk of the time of the baldío, drawing on the stories of relatives who had worked on the fincas in the region.\footnote{Since the nineteenth century, the term “baldío” has referred to a kind of sharecropper, usually one whose lands were absorbed by the newly-formed estates and who was required to work three or four days each week for the landlord (Wasserstrom, 1983: 261). In Chiapas, the existence of the baldío became more widespread after state laws were passed in 1847 that dispossessed Indians from their lands and obliged them to live permanently on fincas as baldíos, exchanging their manual labor to landowners for permission to live and work on the land. In the Tojolabal region, the term most often used to describe the sharecroppers on the fincas was mozo baldío. Gómez and Ruz note that it is not coincidental that ex-mozos refer to the entire time period as the baldío because the work was also en balde (in vain) (Gómez and Ruz, 1992).}

Don Paulino Méndez Aguilar, founder of Nuevo Santo Tomás, an ejido in the selva-fronteriza (jungle border) region of the rain forest, was part of the first contingent of Tojolabal men who emigrated to this area in the 1960s. Although he was just a boy when the baldío ended, he described those days as "very difficult...they didn't pay us anything. They had accounts for us at the tienda de raya [company store]. We walked without shoes in the mud with nothing to cover us from the rain. We had a caporal (overseer) on the fincas and wherever we went there were patrones (bosses)” (Paulino Méndez Aguilar, interview with author, Nuevo Santo Tomás, Margaritas, September 22, 1995).

Migration from areas of traditional Tojolabal settlement to the Lacandón rain forest beginning in the 1950s and accelerating through the 1980s enhanced the possibilities for inter-ethnic organization. Community structures were re-formed and re-built in the Lacandón jungle, where Indian peoples from Chiapas and—to a lesser degree from throughout Mexico— attempted to create a new life for themselves and their families. Coffee cooperatives, ejido unions,\footnote{The ejido is a form of communal property enshrined in the 1917 Constitution (Article 27) as inalienable. Until 1992, when Article 27 was amended, rural community assemblies administered ejido land granted by the state. In the Canada Tojolabal, ejido communities range in size from thirty families to 150 (approximately 150 to 750 persons). Ejido assemblies typically elect the municipal agent and other local officials. Minor crimes are resolved within the community and region without having to go to the municipal judge in Las Margaritas, punishments are set by the communities, and most have their own jails.} and church-based organizations that formed in the jungle tended to be based on common goals rather than on discrete community identities. This trend accelerated in the 1990s with the growing presence and strength of the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapata Army of National Liberation, or EZLN) in the area. The widespread break-up of Tojolabal communities
in the nineteenth century and the extensive migration to the Lacandón jungle in the 
second half of the twentieth century have historically made Tojolabals unique among 
the Chiapan Maya—particularly in contrast to highland indigenous peoples. Today, 
however, Maya Indians throughout Chiapas are facing similar challenges as they 
construct new models of making community. Instead of being anomalous, in the 1990s 
Tojolabals have become trailblazers in the areas of regional development and 
organization.

While anthropologists paid little attention to the Tojolabal people until relatively 
recently, they have attracted increasing attention since the Zapatista uprising. There are 
two principal reasons for this: Tojolabals living in Las Margaritas comprised a 
significant portion of grassroots support (Zapatista headquarters—Guadalupe Tepeyac 
and later La Realidad—are Tojolabal communities) and the Cañada Tojolabal has been 
used by Indian activists as a role model for the creation of regional autonomous zones, 
which I discuss in some detail after a brief history of peasant politics in the region.

Rise of Regional Politics

The emergence of independent peasant organizations in the 1970s and the rise of 
regional organizations in the 1980s are crucial elements of a larger narrative concerning 
Tojolabal ethnic identity. Tojolabal ethnic identity has not been immutable over time 
but has changed in response to interactions with other indigenous and non-Indian 
groups in the area, in response to changes in land tenure and use, and in response to 
growing regionalization of peasant politics, which increasingly brought Indians into 
contact with other indigenous peoples from throughout the state and the country. While 
I argue that Tojolabal ethnic identity has shifted over time, I also identify patterns in 
identity formation. Indians’ connection with the land, for example, has been a 
significant dimension of Indian identity for centuries. Ethnic identity is more, however, 
than simply the maintenance of past legacies, albeit powerful ones. Ethnic identity is 
also a project that adapts to changing circumstances and is continually re-imagined and 
re-invented.

Authors have exhaustively demonstrated the fact that the 1970s was a period of 
upheaval and crisis in the Mexican countryside (A. Bartra, 1985; Rubio, 1987). Linked 
to this crisis was a search for new alternatives to peasant collective action. In this 
section, I will discuss the rise of independent regional organizations among the

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13 The Tojolabal custom of making pilgrimages, or romerías, to neighboring Tzeltal and Chuj-Maya holy 
places has facilitated greater openness toward other Indian ethnic groups than that seen in the highlands 
of Chiapas, for example. Although romerías are infrequent today among Tojolabal communities, they 
previously served as privileged spaces for intercommunal contact and communication (Ruz, 1994: 47). 
Ruz notes that romerías were one of the four most common mechanisms or rituals of inter-ethnic 
cooperation in the Tojolabal community, the others being loans, the barter of goods, and the Sunday 
market in Las Margaritas (Ruz, 1993: 305).

14 This idea of ethnicity as both legacy and project was sparked by Arif Dirlik’s stimulating article, “The 
Past as Legacy and Project: Postcolonial Criticism in the Perspective of Indigenous Historicism” (Dirlik, 
1996).
Tojolabal people during this decade, culminating in the formation of a Tojolabal regional government in the late 1980s.

The agricultural crisis of the 1970s engendered growing discontent among peasants with the CNC, the state’s official peasant confederation. One of the ways the administration of President Luis Echeverría attempted to deal with the crisis was through the creation of Consejos Supremos de las Etnias (Supreme Councils of Ethnic Peoples). Several authors have exhaustively detailed the organization of this congress (Díaz-Polanco, 1992; Hernández Castillo, 1996; Medina, 1977). Here I want to emphasize the fact that many regional and local Consejos Supremos became sites for government opposition and independent organization. The Consejo Supremo Tojolabal was no exception. By the early 1980s in the Tojolabal region, the Consejo Supremo Tojolabal was at the center of political conflict in Las Margaritas; a group of bi-lingual teachers controlled the Council and used it as a base from which to oppose regional caciques and to build an alternative center of political power. Although Don Francisco Alfaro, prominent member of the Confederación Nacional Campesina (National Peasant Confederation, or CNC), served as the Consejo’s first president, a dissident group of bi-lingual teachers used the Council as an institutional base with which to further radical demands for land redistribution in the municipal capital. As Burguete notes, "although the Consejo Supremo Tojolabal was a creation of the PRI [Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Party of the Institutionalized Revolution], it was in the hands of democratic teachers who imprinted on it a seal of service to those Tojolabals identified with independent political struggle. This was an important experience that illustrated the potential for Indian organization and created a certain body of demands" (Burguete, n.d.: xxxiv.). The Consejo Supremo also served as a base for the support of the Tojolabal candidate for municipal president in 1982, Alejandro Aguilar. Unlike the situation in other indigenous areas of Chiapas (e.g., the highlands) and Mexico (e.g., Oaxaca), Las Margaritas had never had an indigenous municipal president, despite the fact that the majority of its inhabitants are indigenous. Observers characterized the municipal election of 1982 as racially divisive: the majority of ladinos supported the PRI candidate, while Tojolabals rallied behind Aguilar. Ruiz claims that despite the "loss" of the election (participants in the campaign and Aguilar himself continue to insist that the election was stolen), it "was an important step that created a new consciousness and group identity, illustrating the possibilities for future Tojolabal organization and regional power" (Ruiz, interview with author, San Cristóbal de las Casas, May 4, 1996).

In 1984, the CNC, worried that the leadership of the Council had become too independent, called in the state police during an election for Council president to

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15 The CNC was formed in 1938 during the Cárdenas administration (1934-40) as a branch of the official party to channel and control peasant organization. All state credit was funneled through the CNC, through its branches on the national, state, and local levels.

16 This demand was a direct threat to the Castellanos family, powerful regional caciques and influential political actors (Absalón Castellanos Domínguez was governor of Chiapas from 1982-88). Since the creation of ejidos in Las Margaritas in the 1940s and 1950s, ejido authorities have been involved in land disputes with members of the Castellanos family.
impose its candidate. The "democratic" teachers faction subsequently split from the Council to form its own ejido union, the Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals (Union of Ejidos and Tojolabal People), which later affiliated with the Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos, (Independent Central of Agricultural Workers and Peasants, or CIOAC). This break represented the beginning of longstanding political cleavages among the Tojolabal people into three political camps: the CNCistas affiliated with the PRI, the CIOAC-Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals members, and a productivist ejido union Lucha Campesina (Peasant Struggle).

Of these three groups, both the CNC and the CIOAC were essentially agrarista with respect to their political ideology and strategy. By agrarista, I mean that the organization’s demands centered around struggles for land reform and land redistribution. Agrarista organizations differed from productivist-centered organizations such as Lucha Campesina, which focused on organizations’ access to credit and on pooling resources among organizations to achieve higher prices for their products. Lucha Campesina and had been one of the founding organizations of the Unión de Uniones Ejidales y Grupos Solidarios de Chiapas (Union of Ejidal Unions and United Peasants of Chiapas, or UU), which was formed on September 3-4, 1980. The UU united three principal ejido unions in eastern and northern Chiapas: Unión de Ejidos Quipient Ta Lecubtesel (in Tzeltal, “Applying our strength for a better future”) in Ocósingo and Tierra y Libertad (Land and Liberty) and Lucha Campesina in Las Margaritas, Altamirano, and Chilón. The consolidation brought together one hundred eighty communities from fifteen municipalities, which represented twelve thousand families (Harvey 1998: 84). For UU leaders, confrontation with the state government was viewed as counter-productive. Instead of demands centered on land reform and distribution, the UU focused on ostensibly less controversial issues, such as the marketing of products (e.g., coffee) and peasant access to credit.

The focus on productivism within the UU is largely explained by national level policy shifts. Since the beginning of the López Portillo administration (1976-1982), national state policy took a decisively productivist turn. In 1976, López Portillo, reacting against the populist policies of his predecessor, declared that there would be no further land reform. The principal goal of agricultural policy, then, shifted from one of land reform under Echeverría to one of raising production levels under President López Portillo. Organizations altered their strategies based on this new policy trend. For

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17 The CIOAC is an independent peasant union that the Mexican Communist Party helped found in 1975. In its first years, CIOAC strategy focused exclusively on the unionization of agricultural workers, while struggles for land were viewed as secondary; agricultural workers were seen as the only important revolutionary contingent in the countryside. In 1980, the CIOAC changed the focus on its strategy and decided to make land reform and land occupation a priority (Rubio, 1987: 177-78).

18 This is true of the CIOAC after 1980 when it shifted its strategy from one concentrated on the unionization of agricultural workers to one focused on land reform.

19 Harvey notes that the most important leaders of the UU were Roman Catholic catechists and intellectuals. The catechists had participated in the 1974 Congress, while the intellectuals were members of the Unión del Pueblo (Union of the People, or UP), the post-1968 Maoist organization that came to work in Chiapas in the late 1970s (Harvey, 1989: 80).
example, the CIOAC continued to focus on pending land petitions and occupations, but enlarged its scope of activity to include the formation of subsidiary organizations, such as UNCAFEXSA (National Union of Agricultural Credit, Forestry and Agro-industry of Ejidatarios and Small Property Owners), which distributed subsidized fertilizer to CIOAC members that the organization acquired through government parastatals, in this case, Fertilizantes de México (Fertilizers of Mexico, or FERTIMEX) (Eliazar Velasco Alfaro, interview author, Comitán, Chiapas, April 15, 1996).

The UU went much further than the CIOAC in adopting productivist strategies, since its founding members had united their forces for the express purpose of facilitating greater marketing power and access to larger credit lines through collective organization. The period in which UU emerged (1980) was characterized by state emphasis on productivist strategies. Thus, for the federal government, the UU did not pose as serious a threat as did organizations such as the CIOAC, for example, and many UU demands were met through institutional and legal channels. Within the union, leaders decided that it would be more effective to pursue productivist initiatives in the short term that could serve as a future lever for resolving more difficult problems of land tenure (Harvey, 1998: 85).

While the formation of the UU was not seen as a direct threat on the national level, on the state level the government's response was immediately hostile. Governor Sabines moved to strengthen the CNC in the region, which had historically been weak, by attempting to co-opt UU leaders and offering monetary incentives to encourage defection. In the Tojolabal region, reports in July, 1982, claimed that representatives of Lucha Campesina accused the regional secretary of the CNC, Aaron Gordillo Noriega, of coordinating attacks on members of the ejido “20 de noviembre” because they had refused to affiliate with the CNC. Lucha Campesina members denounced the CNC for the death of one of its members during the attack. They also accused Gordillo of fomenting division among rival peasant groups over disputed land and of advising other CNC activists on how to persuade the Tojolabal Indian authorities to give up holdings (Harvey 1989: 156). What explains state and national government leaders' differing responses? Harvey suggests that the federal government showed itself to be flexible with the UU because the UU did not openly criticize the agrarian policy of the López Portillo administration and, in fact, called on state agencies such as Instituto Mexicano de Café (Mexican Coffee Institute, or INMECAFE) to help raise production (Harvey 1989: 149). The state government, in contrast, dominated by powerful landholding interests, saw any independent peasant or worker organization as a threat and as potentially subversive.

The experience of the UU was part of a larger movement toward greater regional and national unity among independent peasant organizations, breaking the previous pattern of isolation. From 1977-1983 in the center-south region of the country (Chiapas, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Hidalgo, and Puebla), where over forty percent of all organized protests occurred during the period, twenty national and regional forums took place, and peasants formed thirteen new local organizations (Rubio, 1987). Armando Bartra claims that peasants framed this search for unity not only in terms of
independence from the state and from official peasant organizations, but as a position against the anti-agrarista politics that characterized the López Portillo administration (A. Bartra, 1985: 138). However, productivist alliances, such as the UU, also illustrated this new trend toward regional organization.  

What does this brief history of peasant organization among the Tojolabal suggest about Tojolabal identity? First, that we cannot easily separate Tojolabal 'culture' from access to territory and land. Tojolabal identity depends on the community’s ability to control its land and resources. While the state amended Article Four of the Constitution in 1992 to include protection for Indian rights, that is, Indian “culture,” it simultaneously amended Article 27, which, in effect, ended land distribution to peasants. Indians' relationship to the land and their status as peasants have been central elements of Indian identity—marking a distinction between mestizos and Indians. Scholars have pointed to centrality of land in the cosmology of Mesoamerican Indians and to the role it has played in Indians' political claims to be original inhabitants of the territory they presently occupy. While temporal migration in the region has been common since the Colonial period, most Indians, until the dramatic migration of recent years, continued to return to their communities to plant their milpas (corn and bean plots). And even despite an increasing rate of temporal migration since the 1970s, Tojolabs repeatedly emphasize that they work the land, by which they distinguish themselves from mestizos who work at other occupations in the city.

The fact that Tojolabals share many of the same demands as poor mestizo peasants yet continue to feel different from them and to perceive a distinct treatment by society shows the multiple layers of oppression and of discrimination Indians experience. Demands made by Tojolabal regional and local leaders make reference to race, material subordination, and geographic location. For example, the transportation of goods and people from the outlying areas of Las Margaritas to the municipal head and to Comitán has historically been a concern for rural Tojolabals. Before they had their own ejido unions, regional caciques provided the only public transport available. On this high-priced transport service, Tojolabals claim, they suffered from maltrato and falta de respeto (lack of respect).

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20 This argument adds a new twist to the often-stated assertion that the explosion of popular organizations during the 1970s and 1980s was based primarily on agrarian demands, which ultimately led to an indigenous revitalization movement more broadly defined (Benjamin, n.d.). While I generally agree with this argument, productivist organizations, not just agrarian ones, were important precursors to the Indian movement and the raising of Indian rights and autonomy demands.

21 Eduardo Méndez from the ejido Tabasco, Las Margaritas and member of the ejido union Tierra y Libertad, described the problem of transport for Tojolabal communities and the subsequent action that the community took: “It was in 1978 or 1979. The ejidal commissaries from each community got together because at this time we had a grave problem with transportation: ejidal trasportation, and public transportation. In these days there was a landowner who had his own bus and who worked in this region, but the people began to see that this bus was often in disrepair, left on the side of the road. And when the bus that transported the people was running, the people were badly treated, the passengers were beaten, for example. And it was at this time that the people began to see and they began to think that it would be good to form a union of ejidos and that it would be good to buy a bus through the efforts of the community. Well this is how the
The contemporary roots of Tojolabal regional government that emerged in the late 1980s within the Canada Tojolabal —of which more will be said below-- are linked to the history of independent peasant organization and politics in the region. To speak of a shift from peasant politics to ethnic, or Indian, politics is in some sense, spurious. Peasant politics have not disappeared. References to land reform and access to credit continue to be important demands within Indian organizations. The emergence of Indian politics has come from within older peasant organizations as well as from within recently formed Indian organizations, as this section illustrated.

Gobierno Tojolabal

During the mid to late 1980s, the Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals was at the forefront of the organization of a Tojolabal regional government, some of whose members, such as Margarito Ruiz, later inaugurated the Frente Independiente de Pueblos Indígenas (Independent Front of Indigenous Peoples, or FIPI). The fight for adequate transportation, to which Enrique Vásquez referred above, was taken up by the Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals when they formed in the mid-1980s. The geographic marginalization of Tojolabals —making adequate transportation crucial—reflects a racial, or ethnic, marginalization as well. Outlying Tojolabal communities are on the periphery of a peripheral state. Government services such as schools and health clinics often do not reach these communities, and when they do they are often in disrepair and grossly under-staffed. Tojolabals speak of the government as neglecting and abandoning them, and associate it with urban, mestizo areas that sharply contrast with the rural areas where they live.

In a public ceremony held in the ejido “Plan de Ayala” (Cañada Tojolabal) in 1988, leaders of the Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals declared the formation of a regional government. In effect, this declaration served to formalize activities that were already being performed by the ejido union. Typically, regional ejido unions have helped resolve disputes among members if they cannot be resolved at the community level and, in effect, sometimes serve as regional tribunals. Ejido unions unite several communities in a particular region and represent them in larger coordinating organizations, such as the CIOAC. The Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals formalized these functions by subsequently issuing identification cards to its members on which was stamped "Gobierno Tojolabal" (Tojolabal government).

union was formed. And in this way it advanced and cooperation between the people grew. The people themselves became members; they cooperated to buy a bus. And in 1980, on the 20th of April, the bus arrived” (Eduardo Méndez, interview with author, January 2, 1996, ejido Tabasco, Las Margaritas).

22 By peasant politics I am referring to organization among Indians based on a perceived class identity. Demands such as land reform and access to credit and to transportation were framed and channeled through the political system as material demands. The dominant mode of organization among Indians from the formation of the CNC in 1938 to the mid-1970s was class politics. I understand ethnic, or Indian, politics to be organization based on a common experience of racial discrimination. Indians in Mexico began to organize as Indians within the political system beginning in the 1980s. Similar demands appear within both peasant and Indian politics, yet the way the issues are framed and the basis for organization and mobilization are often quite different.
Referring to this regional government, Ruiz states that "the Indian government functioned as a parallel government in opposition to the municipal one, which was identified with the government of the rich" (Ruiz, 1990). Burguete adds that the Tojolabal regional government of the 1980s served as an ethno-peasant movement that placed the self-determination of indigenous peoples at the center of its political demands. She claims that demands for access to political power at the municipal level and increased social control over Tojolabal territory were present at the formation of the Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals (Burguete, n.d.). By the early 1990s, not much more was heard about Tojolabal regional government, although the Unión de Ejidos y Pueblos Tojolabals continued to function much as before, resolving inter-community conflicts, representing their members in the region, providing bus service to and from Comitán, and managing small development projects in coordination with the CIOAC.

Even though this experiment with Tojolabal regional government was short lived, it is often held up by Indian activists-- both in Chiapas and in the rest of Mexico-- as a concrete demonstration of the potential for regional autonomy, one of the central demands of Indian organizations since 1994. Indian autonomy has become a rallying call for the national Indian movement since the Zapatista uprising, and the regional autonomy project is one of two principal autonomy models being discussed by Indian activists throughout Mexico. Margarito Ruiz, who was closely involved in the early stages of establishing Tojolabal regional government, illustrates these linkages between it and the RAP design:

Now, in terms of time period, for us the concept of the RAP is quite old, basically because of the Tojolabal experience. We had been reflecting on the question of autonomy and how to make it a reality for a long time. In elaborating an autonomy proposal our principal reference was always the Tojolabal experience, always, always. And if you notice, the proposal that I developed when I was federal deputy in 1989 had two main lines of argument: it was regional and it was multi-ethnic. Why multi-ethnic? Because we had the Tojolabal experience that we had lived. It was multi-ethnic because there were Tojolabals living side by side with Tzeltales in Altamirano, for example....And why regional and not communal? Because of the experience of the finca and the experience of ejidos, in the Tojolabal region the concept of community does not exist. For us, the community was a concept that we could not digest conceptually (Margarito Ruiz, interview with author, San Cristóbal de las Casas, May 4, 1996).

As regional organizations proliferated during the 1980s and an incipient pan-Indian movement emerged, two main positions on Indian autonomy began to take shape. The first position (comunalista or communalist) is based on the small village community and has its strongest base of support in Oaxaca. The second is focused largely on legislative reform and regional autonomy (RAP) and draws heavily from the experiment with Tojolabal regional government in the late 1980s.

Indian Autonomy among the Tojolabals: Autonomous Multi-ethnic Regions (RAP)
The centerpiece of the RAP project is the addition of another level of government between the state and municipality: the regional government. This regional government would have partial jurisdiction in political, administrative, economic, social, cultural, educational, judicial, resource-management, and environmental spheres. Its representatives would negotiate with state and municipal governments concerning areas of overlapping jurisdiction. RAP political documents attribute the marginalization and poverty of indigenous peoples to the unequal and subordinate relations that have been imposed upon Indians. They point to the social and political exclusion that they have suffered since the Conquest to explain unequal treatment and not to socio-cultural or ethnic characteristics. They insist on the fact that isolation is not the cause of the poverty and marginalization in which they live, but lack of access to political power:

These same peoples [the indigenous] have been subject to the most severe and inhuman conditions of marginalization and poverty. For example, in municipalities with an indigenous majority, the level of illiteracy is forty-three percent, more than three times the national average; fifty-eight percent of children under five years old do not attend school and close to a third of the population between six and fourteen years of age cannot read or write....The causes of this marginalization and poverty cannot be attributed to sociocultural or ethnic characteristics of indigenous peoples, but rather to the unequal and subordinate relations that have been imposed on them, to the social and political exclusion that they have suffered during three centuries of colonial regime and that they continue to suffer since Mexico became an independent country (ANIPA, 1996).

On October 12, 1994, the Consejo Estatal de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinos (State Council for Indian and Peasant Organizations, or CEOIC), an organization formed immediately after the uprising that united two hundred eighty peasant and Indian organizations in support of a peaceful resolution of the conflict, declared seven autonomous RAPs in the state of Chiapas. After declaration of these RAPs in October, activists organized a series of regional forums throughout Chiapas to discuss the details of how these regions would function in practice. While the Tojolabal region had been the foundation for the development of the original project designed in large part by CIOAC leadership and Margarito Ruiz, the northern region, encompassing eleven municipalities including Simojovel, Bochil, and Soyaló, quickly became a focus of attention and activity. The CIOAC spearheaded a series of forums in this region in fall of 1994, which culminated in the ratification of the Constitution of the Autonomous Region of the Tzotzil, Chol, and Zoque Indian Peoples on October 17 in Soyaló. After the ratification of the region's constitution, activists took over municipal buildings, "recovered" farms and ranches, and suspended negotiations with federal and state governments (Morquecho, 1994). Diverse Indian organizations around the country publicly lauded the declaration of the autonomous northern region and pledged to support the effort. Roxana Ojeda, member of the Unión de Comuneros Emiliano Zapata (Emiliano Zapata Union of Commoners, or UCEZ) from Michoacán, publicly declared that Indian autonomy in Chiapas "is not illegal because it is recognized in
RAP proponents have attempted to transcend local identities by deliberately designing their project to be multi-ethnic, again taken from the Tojolabal experience of living side-by-side with Tzeltals in Altamirano and mestizos in the municipalities of Independencia and La Trinitaria. As Araceli Burguete put it: "Our experience was that it was possible to live together with autonomous governments that were governments for all people because we had come from an experience of political formation where Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Tojolabals, and mestizos all shared one region" (Araceli Burguete Cal y Mayor, interview with author, San Cristóbal de las Casas, April 9, 1996).

Tojolabals’ rich history of regional organization and identity co-exists in an uneasy tension with loyalties to the ejido and individual ejido communities. These ejidal loyalties are especially strong in the Cañada Tojolabal, while multi-ethnic organization has been easier in the Lacandón jungle since Tojolabals have uprooted themselves and left their communities of origin to create new ones.

Concluding Remarks

In 1974 in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Tojolabal, Tzeltal, Tzotzil, and Chol Indians came together in an historic Indian Congress and discovered that they shared common demands—particularly with respect to education, health care, and land reform legislation. Yet, significant differences remained. While Tojolabals had lost much of their traditional settlements in the late nineteenth century, highland Indians, such as the Tzotzils, lived on land that had been theirs for centuries. Beginning in the 1930s, North American and European anthropologists were drawn to these highland indigenous communities and their elaborate cofradía system and communal ‘traditions’—which for many scholars represented continuity with pre-Colombian indigenous cosmology. The few scholars who studied the Tojolabal, in contrast, argued that Tojolabals had ‘lost’ their tradition in the early break-up of communal life.

In recent years, however, the Tojolabal ‘pattern’ is becoming more typical as Indians leave their communities to work permanently or semi-permanently in urban areas. Highland indigenous peoples formerly residing in ‘closed communities’ are now subject to the same pressures Tojolabals have faced for decades. Ironically, Tojolabals—the least organized of Chiapan Maya in the recent past—have become a model for regional organization. This process is not automatic, however. Shifts in space, land use, and labor among the Tojolabal—and increasingly among other Maya peoples in Chiapas—have facilitated regional organization, but have not made it inevitable.

Tojolabal identification with local ejido communities continues to be strong. Inter-community fragmentation based on religion, political party affiliation, support for the EZLN, continuing land conflicts, and the drawing of municipal boundaries act against regional identification and organization. Nevertheless, the long history of regional organization among the Tojolabal provides a potential framework for dealing with this fragmentation. In this essay, I have highlighted how political disputes involving municipal elections, questions of how to transport products and people to market, and
the meaning and use of land are experienced by Tojolabals as ethnic issues. Potential solutions to the current fragmentation characteristic of many indigenous communities in Chiapas today, therefore, requires an Indian solution—one that encompasses the complex relationships between cultural, political, and economic subordination.
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