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Nahua farmer. Highlands of Guerrero, 2011.

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Mexico's Indigenous Peoples And Their Cultures

Inspiration and Objects of Discrimination

This article will reflect on the first peoples as a source of inspiration for artistic creation and that academic research that aims to know and reconstruct part of our past, to know who we are and how the so-called “traditional societies” are developing, as well as their role in today's world.

Official censuses state that more than ten percent of Mexico's population (approximately 15 million people) self-identify as indigenous, placing themselves in one of the 68 ethno-linguistic groups. However, this is only an estimate, a vague, imprecise reference point about a pop-

ulation that, due to racism and discrimination, and even a lack of awareness, prefers to remain invisible.

In contrast with the recognition given them from different artistic, human, social, and even scientific disciplines, in real life, being indigenous in Mexico is in most cases synonymous with exclusion, extreme poverty, forced migration, and a minimal or non-existent possibility for social mobility.

Except in a few cases, in this country, it is rare for a person to openly identify him- or herself as indigenous. This does not mean that, as a group, they are not proud of being indigenous; and in certain contexts, they will proclaim their identity, but it is not usually the case. Thinking about the whole of Mexican society, who would want to be indigenous, when that means coming from the poor-

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Who would want to be indigenous, when that means coming from the poorest municipalities, where precarious living conditions are manifested through high levels of malnutrition?

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Being indigenous in the Mexican countryside usually means surviving in a subsistence economy that forces families to seek waged work in places where what we call employment is practically non-existent. This has forced them for decades to emigrate to work as agricultural day laborers in different regions of the country and even abroad.

That domestic and international migration, mainly to the United States, has become a “tradition” for them, since in some regions, it has been going on for more than half a century and has even led to the creation of multiple indigenous settlements, such as what the Nahuas have built in the middle and high mountain regions of the state of Guerrero, in the eastern municipalities of Morelos, and in San Quintín, Baja California, where a diversity of peoples from Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Michoacán have settled several thousand miles from their hometowns. And what can we say about the Mixtec communities living in California’s Fresno Valley, or the Nahuas from Morelos in Queens, New York, just to cite a couple of examples?

Logically, migration has given rise to the creation of new identities, above all due to the birth of new generations in places different from where their parents were born. The story is so long that, both in Mexico and the United States, these new identities include not just one, but, in some cases, up to three generations.

These peoples’ social networks and capital have often led to the revitalization of their cultures, constructing community outside their land of origin, giving rise to the creation of new indigenous communities. They are always named after the place of origin, preceded by the adjective “new,” so we can find the Triqui indigenous locale of San Juan Copala in the municipality of Santiago Juchitahuaca in Oaxaca, and New San Juan Copala, in San Quintín, in the municipality of Ensenada, Baja California.

The agricultural vocation of these Mexicans and their ancestral knowledge about the countryside made the be-

ginnings of that migration rural; that is, they went from one agricultural area to another. But that has changed, and now they also move to the great cities.

Many of our families living in huge urban areas like Mexico City have among our ancestors indigenous who migrated from the countryside to the city after the Revolution or later —this is my case—, but with the passage of time, or perhaps due to some of these ancestors’ deliberate efforts to erase their identity, we do not know their origins.

If being indigenous in the Mexican countryside was already difficult, their existence in the cities has generated different difficulties, accelerating processes of cultural change and loss of identity over successive generations. Those who decided to preserve their distinctive traits, whether they are old residents of the cities or new arrivals, still face exclusion.

Despite the fact that at the time, the possibility of migrating represented an opportunity for improving their economic situation, achieving social mobility, and accessing better living conditions and a better future for their children, in the best of cases, being indigenous in the big cities means becoming part of a contingent of workers in multiple sectors where capital requires them.

Most of these Mexicans work in the informal sector: the men work as stevedores in big central markets for agricultural products, as construction workers, and in low-level, temporary jobs such as in car washes, among others. In the case of the women, jobs are even more limited and have always centered on domestic service, doing all kinds of activities, such as cleaning houses, caring for children, and many other tasks, which very often can turn into not an eight-hour-a-day, full-time job, but practically a kind of “modern” slavery.

There is no denying that in isolated cases, being indigenous, whether in the countryside or the city, takes on other characteristics. In our country, some indigenous intellectuals, artists, public officials, academics, and individuals have been taken to the public’s heart as distinguished citizens. Some are outstanding public figures who we feel proud of. However, in day-to-day social interactions, Mexican society is structured on the basis of huge asymmetries, inequalities, and a class bias also rooted in ethnic parameters, in which the poorest social strata are often made up of individuals and families of indigenous origin.

As if that were not enough, from the perspective of the rest of society (“the non-indigenous”), being indigenous can be synonymous with ugly, “black,” dirty, ignorant, and undesirable, something no one wants to be. No Mexican can deny that in our country, to insult or try to humiliate a person, one of the insults used is “Indian.” Thus, the expression “lousy Indian” is one of the best known and most widely used linguistic constructions, based on the color-ocracy, according to which the “Mesoamerican phenotype,” or just looking different, but usually having dark skin, straight black hair, dark eyes, low stature, and “unrefined” facial features, is rejected by many people, even when it is precisely Mexicans’ characteristic phenotype.

This is paired with the idea that any “slight deviation,” such as, for example, if one child has slightly lighter skin, lighter eyes, particularly green or blue, or is taller than average, is a sign of “improving the race.” This all happens in a society that prides itself on not being racist or discriminatory, precisely because, as we know, these attitudes and practices have become normalized.

In the 1990s, images of sociocultural movements, such as the one that rejected the 1992 celebrations of the fifth centennial of the “Encounter of Two Worlds” or the Zapatista National Liberation Army uprising in 1994, were seen around the world. Despite the fact that they once again put on display the miserable condition of the indigenous communities in our country, over 25 years later, the circumstances have not changed very much, and, if they have, if anything in many cases they have become worse.

These communities, despite the numerous government programs and having received all manner of aid, continue to be the most marginal in the country, and they continue to migrate. Decades ago, migrants leaving their towns looking for waged work were usually male, but for several years now, the entire family migrates, including the children; to remain is to condemn themselves to live on the very limits of survival, since they can hardly live on what they produce in the fields, by exploiting certain natural resources, or producing local crafts.

It is true that not all indigenous are poor. Those of us who have worked in the countryside for decades are even surprised at the emergence of “nouveau riche” indigenous, who parade in front of their fellows in cars, showing off lifestyles previously inconceivable. But they are a minority.

Today, the problems of the indigenous peoples have increased and become more complex. One example is the cause of migration, which may be multi-factorial and includes issues like insecurity and drug trafficking.

Ironically, the preponderantly agricultural way of life that previously allowed them to be productive when they left their communities, for several years now has been used by organized crime to force them to grow illicit crops like poppy flowers. It is more profitable for them, even when they are just one link in the chain of the transnational dynamics in this globalized world, even when they are only producers and receive a minimal part of the profits.

Despite the fact that our country’s Constitution defines ours as a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation, originally based on its indigenous peoples, in legal terms, their collective rights are not recognized. The government continues to be indebted to them, but above all, it is Mexican society in general that owes them: we live with them every day. Many of these citizens are the construction workers who build our homes, workplaces, and leisure centers; they are the domestic workers who clean our homes; they wash our cars and sell us the folk art available everywhere in the city.

So, it is paradoxical that when we want to feel proud of our past and our present, we look to the cultural wealth of these peoples, praising their artistic production, the ritual praxis of their festivities, the culinary wealth of their food, or the creativity of their mythical narratives, just to mention a few examples. For all of this, the civic, artistic, and academic communities, who have drunk so deeply from the waters of the first peoples, the inspiration for our own creations, should thank them. If we have not already done so, we should give them the credit they deserve, and in some specific cases, share the royalties. This issue of the magazine should be a tribute to these peoples of Mexico, with whom we have often related in a utilitarian way, without valuing them, respecting or recognizing their importance to our society. ■■■

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