Derailing History
Indian Rebellions and the
Mexican Revolution's Status Discussion

Rodolfo Uribe Iniesta*

Ivan Stephens/Cuartoscuro

M exican revolutions have isomorphisms involving the very question of their quality as true social revolutions. Clearly, structural changes have not coincided with armed conflicts as Theda Skocpol's 1979 theory on social revolutions proposes. It is also evident that in two of Mexico's three big historic revolutions, an important part of the uprising is more a resistance movement —"Indians who didn't want to change," begins John Womack's book on Zapata, and John Tutino stresses the role of crises of survival in rural areas— and their conclusions may be seen more as a way of restoring order by any means through traditional class activity. This also becomes an ideological struggle since conservative scholars tend to try to demonstrate the uselessness or simple confusion created by revolutions; contend that nothing really changed, stressing elements of continuity, and denying the popular nature, meaning, goals, and results of uprisings; and reduce mass participation to manipu-

lation by vested interests. These ideas contradict those who demonstrate the popular character of the movements, and any eventual achievement of the goals or changes sought by those popular movements (see Aguilar Camín 1982 and Knight 1989).

I propose that the explanation of these Mexican revolutions' specificity is the Indian peoples' rebellions and resistance movements. The use of "isomorphisms" as objects of

*Researcher at the UNAM Regional Center for Multidisciplinary Research (CRIM) and visiting fellow at the Australian National Centre for Latin American Studies at the Australian National University.

observation and forms of interpretation would be an implicit proposal, since I am using the concept in its direct meaning of formal similarity, but also in its conceptual usage by Carlo Ginzburg (1991) in which an isomorphism reveals a deep social regularity or particular cultural practice or characteristic though its discontinuous timing.

The Recurrent Emerging Indigenous Question

Thirty years before Guillermo Bonfil wrote *México profundo* (Deep Mexico), stating that indigenous cultural elements determine most people's real everyday life in Mexico, in a constant clash with a Western European political effort to harmonize Mexico to its own Euro-mimetic imaginary patterns, Daniel Cosío Villegas, reflecting on the centennial of the 1957 Constitution, wrote,

> What makes the Mexican situation so tragic is not the coexistence of two different civilizations as happened in ancient times with the Mayas and Aztecs, but that they coexist inside what is supposed to be one country or one nationality, and that one of them, the mestiza or Western, has the power and initiative that drives it to impose its way of life. (1955: 70)

And historian Andrés Lira, commenting on this year's celebrations stated,

> We are a complex country where descendents from both the conquerors and the conquered live together; and we are always looking to our wounds and our strength, but too much to our wounds. It would be worse not to do it, so the object of history is to think about it intelligently. (Ponce 2010: 64)

What is interesting is that the very effort of mimetizing the culture as experienced nationally with the dictates of Western European culture, called by Bonfil the "imaginary Mexico," also produces and sustains ideal indigenous peoples perfectly separated and discernible from the rest of Mexicans, and which at the same time makes criollos invisible in that they are part of the definitions of what is "the Mexican" in Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz's old mid-twentieth-century famous essays. This differentiation from indigenous peoples (that is, "*indios de pueblos indios*") works, of course, on the ideological level when any ("de-indianized") dark-brown-skinned person living in a city, dressed in a suit and tie, with

a college education and an office job, emphatically states, "I'm not Indian." But, as Bonfil shows, that turns out to be merely ideological when you look closely at the individual history and the personal and collective cultural ways of most Mexicans, no matter what color their skin. This is how in real life, *mestizaje* works as a two-way street. This effort also produces the belief that the only people who are indigenous are the ones actually living in indigenous regions, and that indigenous peoples have not changed down through history.

The "imaginary Mexican" can be easily traced in the intellectual reactions to the 1994 neo-Zapatista rebellion (see Uribe 1995), reactions that disqualified the movement questioning its real "ethnic nature" on the basis of the mixed origins of people in the rebel towns and that they have national political objectives incompatible with "ethnicity." This, by definition, should only have a regional scope and the unanimous political representation that should exist in a "community." It also was not ethnic, some said, because they were not ori-

> The very effort of mimetizing the culture as experienced nationally with the dictates of Western European culture, called by Bonfil "imaginary Mexico," also produces and sustains ideal indigenous peoples perfectly separated and discernible from the rest of Mexicans.

ented to the past in their formulations and proposals, and used the iconic Western iconic concept of "democracy."

The format that developmentalist theories and politics determined indigenous peoples should have was scientifically defended by Arturo Warman (2003). He presented the position of real indigenous separation from fake indigenous mestizos trying to keep an ideal identifiable separation between national modern development and the indigenous peoples and individuals in a historic perspective. He also denied the possibility of inter-ethnic identification and organization between different indigenous peoples.

This position came to a paradoxical conclusion because it proposed municipal autonomy as a solution as opposed to the autonomous multi-ethnic regions proposed by the self-styled indigenous rebels (both the political activists and the armed ones). Both proposals were at that time outdated by a real experiential, post-territorial, even international, continuity of indigenous peoples.

Municipal democracy was supposedly achieved by the 1910-1924 Mexican Revolution, in answer to the Zapatistas' demand for the "free municipality." Despite this, in the 1970s and 1980s, local democratic rebellions took place demanding the acceptance of municipal political options. The most important was in Juchitán, where the Zapotecs of Oaxaca's Tehuantepec Isthmus formed the Isthmus Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students (COCEI). At its height, this organization, despite its name and explicit electoral means and objectives, was an ethnic one, defending at that time regional autonomy based on a rediscovered history that included nineteenth-century resistance to Benito Juárez as governor, and recovering the Zapotec language and traditional dress, and even women's dominance in the family as symbols and forms of their organization and struggle. It was a form of institutional symbolic violence, then, when political commentators and government officials said it was not an "indigenous" movement to avoid the usual sympathetic reflex

> Indian unrest in the 1990s
> looks like a classical resistance movement,
> like those associated with the Bourbon Reforms
> and the Liberal Reform land laws.

reaction of Mexican society for "poor Indians." Intellectuals of the time defined the movement as merely electoral with no further goal than winning the municipal government for a group clearly led by a mestizo with a French surname: Leopoldo DeGyves. But later on, in the usual tapeworm-shaped ideological turn that Roger Bartra (1978) describes for ideological concepts, when the "democratic transition period" was recognized by political scientists and the federal government as a goal and what we can call the "democratic transition ideologues" surfaced, they credited only the National Action Party (PAN) 1986 resistance to electoral fraud as local electoral rebellions. The COCEI movement was relabelled as "indigenous," and, of course, any possibility that it could be both things was denied.

Local autonomy protests presented as a necessity for electoral modernity was originally promoted only as a deepening of what beginning in Miguel de la Madrid´s administration was dubbed in the Ministry of the Budget and Programing's

regional development plans merely as a "descentralization process."[1] When Carlos Salinas became president, it appeared directly as an adaptation to globalization that later would be theoretically defended and programmatically developed by the Santiago Levy team in the 2000 and onward documents that stated, for example, what would be the Puebla-Panama Plan, a global macro-regional process of integration based on the concentration of private property, specifically land, reducing government action to building communications infrastructure and promoting the relocation of the population where they could find jobs (see Levy 2004). And this coincides with the main characteristic that Zygmunt Bauman (2001) points to for globalization process: "capital ceases to pay its share for local sustainability."

The confrontation of the two versions of local autonomy would reappear in this period as cultural or environmental struggles in the Zapatista area of Chiapas; in San Salvador Atenco, State of México; La Ventosa, Oaxaca; Xochistlahuaca and La Parota, Guerrero; Tepoztlán, Morelos; and San Pedro, San Luis Potosí. It has also been present at least in the state electoral confrontations in Tabasco (1988, 1994, and 2000), San Luis Potosí, and Guerrero and in local conflicts such as in 2000 and 2008 in Morelos, and 2005 in Oaxaca.

The ethnic question reappeared in the ongoing socio-economic transformation and the concentration of land and capital intellectually directed from government offices, very much like the well-known development of José Yves Limantour's "scientists" under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. In the 1980s, this has been a process directed from the old Bank of Mexico, first by people who had studied abroad, and then, by Carlos Salinas's time, directly by Chicago University graduates. So Indian unrest in the 1990s looks like a classical resistance movement, like those associated with the Bourbon Reforms and the Liberal Reform land laws (Tutino 1998).

In our time the *"imaginary Mexican"* conceptual strategy might be working like the Catholic Church's nineteenth-century political strategy described by Emilio Rabasa and quoted by Cosío Villegas of "presenting Catholicism and liberalism as incompatible, to identify and make inseparable religious belief and the political option" (1956: 26). It presents identities as closed blocks, either as modern Mexican institutional people or indigenous people, instead of recognizing a moving continuum between indigenous people and being fully modern or Western. Bonfil considered the latter an illusion for anyone born in Mexico and the source of per-

> Mexican Revolution historians
> have been involved in the discussion
> of whether it was or was not a real social revolution,
> using definitions centered on state, political,
> and overall social structure changes.

manent frustration. In this view, it is a continuum along which each individual and groups' positions in everyday real life seem too hard to pinpoint, very much like Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. It might be better to study it with a field or systemic complex analysis, either with Pierre Bourdieu or Édgar Morin's strategies, or using the agency-territorialization and de-territorialization dynamics proposed by Gilles Deleuze, to overcome the analytical limitation of discriminatory ontological Western-related dynamics that these authors and people like Edward Said (1990) denounced at the turn of the century.

MEXICAN TIMES: INDIAN REBELLIONS

Mexican Revolution historians have been involved in the discussion of whether it was or was not a real social revolution, using Theda Skockpol's definitions based on the Russian, French, and Chinese experiences, centered on state, political, and overall social structure changes. For Theda Skockpol,

> Social Revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures…accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below. (1979: 4)

They present as differential features

> the combination of two coincidences: the coincidence of societal structural change with class upheaval; and in the coincidence of political and social transformation.

Limiting the Mexican Revolution to the insurrectional period and focusing on its immediate results and class movements, for example, Ramón Eduardo Ruiz (1984) was easily able to show that, although with massive participation of armed peasants and workers, it was a middle-class rebellion.

Based on the evident pseudo-isomorphism of a initial popular rebellion with revolutionary goals later betrayed or unfinished because the stabilization of political power finally later came from a higher class, political top-down movement like Iturbide's or Carranza's and Obregón's, and putting to one side a third revolution in the middle that did not followed this pattern, the Reform, this discussion immediately transferred the same questions to the Mexican War of Independence.

In different contemporary positions, from Guerra on, criticising early, traditional interpretations, such as Tannenbaum's, or differing from official narratives, we can see that what most changes the approach and deliberations, as though they were attractors in chaos theory, are indigenous rebellions. They are called by other names: agrarian, peasant, religious, regional, or parochial. And the problem is presented as an agrarian rebellion, a struggle to liberate the elements to form capital, a struggle between a parochial communal order and an open one, a regional rebellion like the one in the Sierra Gorda and or the Séptimo Cantón, or a clash between the Catholic Church and the state (the patrimonial question).

Tannenbaum (Knight n/d) was the first to highlight the parochial dimension as a vantage point for understanding the sense of social actors in Mexico. Later, Guerra (1993) would document the continuity of the existence of the communal medieval form in Mexican history; Luis González y González (1984) was the first to show the particular timing of what he called "the Matria" (the motherland); then, Jean Meyer (1973) highlighted the religious significance of peasant uprisings in Mexico giving all the credit to priests or Catholic followers; John Tutino (1988) showed the agrarian and peasant survival significance of most of the ninetieth-century uprisings, but at the same time that they happened mostly where there were still strong indigenous communities; Van Young (2001) showed that even in Hidalgo's original insurgent rebellion, some indigenous had their own agenda and goals; and Knight (1995) and Katz (1988 and 2006) showed that most rebellions in Mexican history happened in indigenous territories, and that they are endemic.

So, the hidden element that all these structural proposals in the literature did not foresee was the continuity of indigenous peoples and their subjectivity, expressed in different ways and in their own time determined by their basic need of maintaining their material and cultural integrity through historic changes. **VM**

Bibliography

Aguilar Camín, Héctor (1982). *Saldos de la revolución*. Editorial Nueva Imagen. Mexico City.

Bartra, Roger (1982). *El poder despótico burgués*. Editorial Era. Mexico City.

Bauman, Zygmunt (2001). *La globalización, consecuencias humanas*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico City.

Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo (1990). *México profundo*. Grijalbo. Mexico City.

Bourdieu, Pierre and Louis Waquant (1986). *Respuestas por una antropología reflexiva*. Grijalbo. Mexico City.

Cosío Villegas, Daniel (1955). *En el centenario del Congreso Constituyente del 56. Memoria de El Colegio Nacional*. vol. III, no. 10. Mexico City.

Cosío Villegas, Daniel (1959). *Historia moderna de México. La república restaurada. Vida política*. Hermes. Mexico City.

Ginzburg, Carlo (1991). *Historia nocturna*. Muchnik Editores. Barcelona.

González y González, Luis (1984). *Pueblo en vilo*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico City.

Guerra, François Xavier (1993). *México: del antiguo régimen a la revolución*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico City.

Katz, Friedrich (1988). *Revuelta, rebelión y revolución. La lucha rural en México del siglo XVI al XX*. Era. Mexico City.

Katz, Friedrich (2006). *Nuevos ensayos mexicanos*. Era. Mexico City.

Knight, Alan (1989). "Interpretaciones recientes de la revolución mexicana." *Revista Secuencia* no. 13, January-April. Instituto Mora.

Knight, Alan (1995). "Continuidades históricas en los movimientos sociales." Jane-Dale Lloyd and Laura Pérez Rosales, comps. *Paisajes rebeldes, una larga noche de rebelión indígena*. Universidad Iberoamericana. Mexico City.

Knight, Alan (n/d). "Frank Tannenbaum y la revolución mexicana." http://www.ejournal.unam.mx/ehm/ehm19/E HMO1912.pdf.

Levy, Santiago, comp. (2004). *Ensayos sobre el desarrollo socioeconómico y social de México*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico City.

Meyer, Jean (1973). *La Cristiada*. Siglo XXI. Mexico City.

Morin, Édgar (1984). *Ciencia con consciencia*. Anthropos. Barcelona.

Ponce, Armando (2010). "O'Gorman ante los centenarios," *Proceso* no. 1743, March 28.

Ruiz, Ramón Eduardo (1980). *México: la gran rebelión 1905-1924*. Era. Mexico City.

Said, Edward (1990). *Occidentalismo*. Libertarias/Prodhufi. Madrid.

Skockpol, Theda (1979). *States and Social Revolutions. A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

Tutino, John (1988). *From Insurrection to Revolution in Mexico*. Princeton University Press. Princeton.

Uribe Iniesta, Rodolfo (1998). "El cuestionamiento de los sujetos sociales como lectura de la rebelión chiapaneca," *Revista Chiapas* no. 6.

Van Young, Eric (2001). *La otra rebelión, la lucha por la independencia de México, 1810-1821*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico City.

Van Young, Eric (2004). "Réplica de aves y estatuas: Respuesta a Alan Knight." *Historia Mexicana*. vol. XLIV. no. 2. El Colegio de México. Mexico City.

Warman, Arturo (2003). *Los indios mexicanos en el umbral del milenio*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. Mexico City.

Womack, John (1987). *Zapata y la revolución mexicana*. Siglo XXI. Mexico City.

Notes

[1] The order from Minister Carlos Salinas to Vice-minister Manuel Camacho was not to make diagnostics of regional needs but to deduce what was needed in each region to achieve them based on a list of principles and goals. The principles and goals, of course, were competition, the reduction of state participation, and gradual privatization.