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## Postcolonial sites and markets: Indigenous organizations in Chiapas, Mexico

*Gabriela Vargas-Cetina. Tamara : Journal of Critical Postmodern Organization Science. Las Cruces: 2001. Vol. 1, Iss. 3; pg. 68, 12 pgs*

### Abstract (Article Summary)

Vargas-Cetina discusses different forms of misrecognition regarding indigenous people in Chiapas. Indigenous organizations have to adjust their everyday operations to those perceptions from which indigenous people are 'others' who live in a realm different from non-indigenous everyday life. She calls attention to the ways in which misrecognition affects the markets and the long-term viability of indigenous organizations in Chiapas.

### Full Text (7348 words)

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ABSTRACT

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This article discusses different forms of misrecognition regarding indigenous people in Chiapas. It is based on the author's extensive fieldwork with Chiapas organizations between 1995 and 1999, and questions the idea that postcolonials' participation in the geography (the writing of the world) could transform current power structures. Indigenous organizations have to adjust their everyday operations to those perceptions from which indigenous people are 'others' who live in a realm different from non-indigenous everyday life. The paper calls attention to the ways in which misrecognition affects the markets and the long-term viability of indigenous organizations in Chiapas.

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1997 a woman from San Cristobal de las Casas began a project to promote the creation of cooperatives and collectives in the municipalities of Las Margaritas and Altamirano, in the state of Chiapas. These two municipalities are part of the region where the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion (EZLN) has its widest base among the indigenous population. To get her project going, this woman sought funds from the Chiapas government and from international foundations. Soon, a minor constellation of indigenous cooperatives had sprung across the Chiapas jungle. This woman does not charge for her services as the organizations' consultant; her only income comes from the sales of crafts she makes, which she markets along with the crafts produced by the indigenous people in the cooperatives, making them pass for indigenous products.

Why do people from many countries want to work for free for indigenous people in Chiapas? Why do the indigenous communities accept this type of help? And, why is it so difficult for a nonindigenous person to sell crafts, while it is so much easier for those people seen as indigenous? Is the crafts market the only specialty market indigenous people have an advantage in? Could an indigenous organization sell, say, electrical appliances, directing them to the "indigenous" niche markets? These questions seem not to make much sense, because we already "know" the answers. However, the very fact that we have "natural" answers for them should make us stop and think hard about our preconceived notions of "indigenous peoples" and their place in the contemporary world. This paper, based on six years of research in Chiapas, between 1995 and 1999, reflects on issues concerning indigeness, the publicly imagined Chiapas, and the market as they affect actual indigenous organizations in that state of Mexico. Here I argue that there are multiple misperceptions of who or what indigenous people are, and these misperceptions, in turn, increasingly affect the everyday operations of indigenous organizations in Chiapas.

Gayatri Spivak (1999: 30) says that the only way postcolonials are ever going to stand on equal footing with those from colonial nations is through their participation in the geography, the writing of the world. I want to speak to this notion, and suggest that having the possibility of writing the world is not enough in itself. The conditions of that -or any- writing continue to be colonial environments and colonized relationships. The case of indigenous organizations in Chiapas is paradigmatic in this respect, as they have both limitations and advantages when entering the national and international markets, precisely because of their subordinate position in contemporary Mexican society.

As the mythical legend goes, Christopher Columbus arrived in the beaches of what we now call the Americas believing he had reached Asia. Because of this confusion, the people living there came to be called Indians. Subsequent explorations and discoveries led to the realization, which Columbus apparently never quite accepted (O'Gorman, 1993[1958]), that these lands were previously unknown to European geographers and to the public at large. The logical conclusion should have been that the people the Spaniards had found were not Indians at all. However, centuries of Colonial rule did not eliminate the noun Indian as a description of the original inhabitants and those considered their descendants.

Under Colonial laws Indians were wards of the Church and the Spanish Crown. Between 1810 and 1820 the troops of the Royalist and the Independentist army, both of which included Indians in their rank and file, fought over what today is the country of Mexico (Arrangoiz y Berzabal, 1974[1871]; Ferrer Munoz, 1999-2000). After 1825, Republican laws, modeled after the French legal system, put the Indians on equal legal foot with the rest of Mexicans (Ferrer Munoz, 1998). Most Indians, however, did not speak the national language and did not know their rights before national Courts and Tribunals. Even so, they were transformed into "farmers" and "peasants," along with non-Indian rural producers (Ferrer Munoz, 1999-2000).

In 1915 a Decree emitted by the Government of President Venustiano Carranza restored to indigenous communities the lands that had been expropriated from them (Zaragoza and Macias, 1980: 99). The notion of ejido, the way in which the Spanish friars had named the communal lands of some Indian groups in central Mexico, was often used to encompass the Indian communities' landholdings in the entire country. It would not be until the 1920s that the governments, emerging from the Mexican Revolution of 1910 to 1925, would recognize Indian communities' rights over the ejido lands to which they had become entitled in the Constitution of 1917 (Zaragoza and Macias, 1980: 147-153). By then, however, Indian communities were considered rural communities, different from others only in that their inhabitants spoke languages other than Spanish and were more exotic than other rural people. If the ejido was a way to give Indian communities control over their lands, it was also a way to erase them conceptually as Indians and transform them into peasants.

When it comes to contemporary indigenous people, we Mexicans engage in different forms of misrecognition. Relations between Mexicans and Mexico's native others seldom, if ever, manages to breach colonialism, as I explain below. Furthermore, the forms of colonial misrecognition, take on similar implications beyond Mexican borders. This is partly so because Mexican Spanish-speakers generally see ourselves as part of "Western culture." Non-indigenous Mexicans, most of whom live in cities, speak a language that came from Spain and practice religions from Ancient Rome (Roman Catholicism), Germany (Protestantism), and the United States (Church of the Latter-day Saints). They also attend schools and settle disputes through systems of education and law first implemented in France. As John Womack Jr. (1998) points out, Americans fantasize about Mexico, thinking that it is an exotic place, and most of its citizens are indigenous people. However, neither of these two fantasies is tenable; 71 % of Mexicans live in cities, speak Spanish as their first language, and the philosophical bases of non-indigenous Mexican's outlook on life are not so different from those underlying the thinking of Europeans or of other urban inhabitants of the Americas. The colonialist relationships established between most of Mexico and the country's indigenous peoples is, in fact, part of the wider colonial relations between an imagined "West" and the imagined "indigenous peoples" of the Americas.

Here I write as a concerned Mexican anthropologist, who sometimes catches herself moving within the conceptual categories born out of the kinds of misrecognition I am trying to describe here. My own interest in the colonial visions and modalities under which the geography of the world affects indigenous peoples stems from my work with indigenous weavers' organizations in Chiapas. These organizations have to market their products in the national and international markets with specific specialty niches in mind. These niche markets are open to them precisely because of the producers' self-representation as "indigenous persons." Right now, this niche may seem relatively advantageous for these producers; however, in the long run it only perpetuates the same colonial relations now questioned worldwide by indigenous movements, including the Zapatista indigenous movement in Chiapas.

In the remainder of this paper I describe indigenous organizations in Chiapas and their current ways to deal with international markets. After this I explore some common forms of misrecognition of indigenous people and discuss the effect of these on indigenous organizations.

## INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN CHIAPAS

1974 is generally considered the take-off year for indigenous organization in Chiapas. It was then that the state government of Chiapas and the San Cristobal Diocese organized an indigenous Congress. Current leaders of indigenous organizations say that this Congress brought Chol, Tzeltal, Tzotzil and Tojolabla speakers together for the first time, not in their usual role of peasants but as representatives and carriers of distinctive cultures and valuable languages. Many indigenous organizations sprung up after the Congress. These included a new branch of the Central Independiente de Obreros Indigenas y Campesinos (CIOAC), Alianza Campesina 10 de Abril, Bloque Campesino de Chiapas, Union de Uniones, Tierra y Libertad, Quiptik Ta Lecubetsel, Union de Trabajadores Agricolas y Campesinos, and the crafts market which later developed into the Crafters' Cooperative Sna Jolobil (Alvarez Icaza, 1998; Gutierrez Sanchez, 1998; Kovic, 1995, Vargas-Cetina, in press, Womack Jr., 1998). A member of ARIC-- Union de Uniones describes the organizational impetus generated by this Congress in the following way:

"We had an indigenous Congress in 1974 of a thousand representatives. We discussed four themes and agreed that the most important one was land tenure. Then, we were all separate individuals, so we formed this organization since 1974. [2] (Vargas-Cetina, fieldnotes 1997)

This was the first indigenous Congress to take place in Chiapas. Since 1964, a group of technicians known as promotores bilingues (bilingual promoters) had been busy among native speakers of languages other than Spanish explaining that the noun "Indian" should be replaced

with the adjective "indigenous." Nouns name things and people. Adjectives name the qualities of things and people. This change from one to the other was driven by the ideas of a group of intellectuals, most of them anthropologists, known as the Indigenistas. They worked with the Mexican government through the Institute for the Attention of indigenous People (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, generally known as INI), and their intention was to let Indians keep only those aspects of indigenous culture that would not prevent them from becoming modern citizens. INI was created by Presidential Decree in 1948 and opened its first Coordination Center in the Highlands of Chiapas, in San Cristobal de las Casas, in 1952. "Indians" had become somewhat of a bad word, but it was obvious that there were people who were different from mainstream Spanish speaking Mexicans. The Indigenistas thought that they should be driven to progress, along with the rest of Mexico. Special programs and extension projects were directed to the rural communities where Spanish was not the first language at home. The Indigenistas first thought was that indigenous languages would have to be suppressed in favor of Spanish. Craft production was one of the "good elements" of Indian cultures that should be preserved, because of the beauty and the functionality that characterized indigenous clothing and household items. The official policy of indigenous language suppression lasted until 1958 when, after years of protest by indigenous communities and by urban intellectuals, the Institute included language among the "good elements" of indigenous culture.

As the noun began to be dropped in favor of the adjective, indigenousness was expected to become a quality that one could adopt or drop at will. Given that Indians were to be turned into real Mexicans, according to the Indigenista intelligentsia, they could leave their indigenousness behind to take on qualities that would put them in other social groups if they so wanted. In the 1970s indigenous languages and cultures became more important in the minds of the anthropologists and extension agents at INI, since the President in turn, Luis Echeverria Alvarez, and his wife, Maria Esther Zuno, loved indigenous art. Language labs with individual tape recorders and headphones were set up in most INI facilities throughout the country, so that INI extension workers could learn local indigenous languages. Also, indigenous teachers were encouraged to register local customs of indigenous people including medicine, agricultural practices, languages, music, dances and local knowledge of animals and plants. The government also promoted the creation of regional dance academies, to take to other parts of Mexico and the world stylized versions of local dress and dances, which so far were found mainly in indigenous communities. As part of the new recognition of the multicultural composition of the country, the production, exhibit, and marketing of indigenous crafts was promoted nationwide (see Instituto Nacional Indigenista 2001). Indigenousness was not ignored any more and it began to be seen as something that characterized some people, but should not get in the way of the modernization of the countryside.

Following this new cultural thrust, the organizations formed after the 1974 indigenous Congress took on names reflecting more a peasant than an Indian composition sometimes using indigenous languages. Since the ejido system of collective land ownership regulated the conditions under which most agriculturists accessed land, many organizations came to have the words asociacion ejidal (ejido association) as part of their names. Indigenous craft producers organized themselves into a tianguis de artesanos (crafters' bazaar), which would later develop into other organizations including the weavers' cooperative Sna Jolobil.

Chiapas has been the laboratory of important cultural projects aimed at transforming indigenous people's lives. Since the 1950s, when INI opened its first Centro Coordinador (Coordination Center) in the Highlands of Chiapas, national and international agencies have funded many types of projects. In the 1970s UNESCO, OMS, UNICEF, and FAO funded the Socioeconomic Development Program for the Chiapas Highlands (COPRODESCH) that targeted indigenous populations in order to help them raise their living standards, make better use of their own natural resources, and put them on par with all Mexicans on their way to national development (Villafuerte Solis and Garcia Aguilar, 1994: 93). Indigenous organizations spurred by the 1974 indigenous Congress in San Cristobal put these funds to good use in a series of local programs

one of which I consider exemplary because it brought schools to remote locations and strengthened regional indigenous identity. This was the Programs de Educacion Integral para Campesinos de la Selva Lacandona (PEICASEL), run by the organization known as ARIC-Union de Uniones in the Selva region of Chiapas, between 1989 and 1998.

Through PEICASEL, created in 1989 with funds from UNESCO and the Mexican Ministry of Education (SEP), local young men and women from indigenous communities were prepared as community teachers. 60 indigenous communities, members of AIRC-Union de Uniones, participated in PEICASEL. The objectives of the program were to prepare local young men and women to teach at schools in their own communities. SEP was in charge of the continuous education of the teachers, with seminars taught in communities of the Selva region and in Tuxtla, the Capital of Chiapas. All students were expected to finish elementary school and then teach other kids in turn. They were expected to offer ideas and proposals for the creation of high schools in the region. The program also involved elders from the different communities who taught children local beliefs and knowledge about plants and animals, agriculture, and their own worldview in indigenous languages (mainly Tzeltal and Tojolabal). Between 1994 and 1997, 150 local teachers were part of the program covering 62 communities. (Vargas-Cetina, fieldnotes 1997, see also Vargas-- Cetina, 1998)

The Ministry of Popular Cultures (FONART) opened a craft collection post and store in San Cristobal de las Casas in 1974 (Morris, 1996), which in turn resulted in a new wave of indigenous organizations as crafters' cooperatives formed to sell their products to the store. IN set up an indigenous radio station in the 1980s. Political activists from other regions of Mexico and from abroad came to Chiapas to support first the indigenous Congress and later the new rural organizations (Gutierrez Sanchez, 1998). The boom of indigenous organizations that took place in Chiapas after 1974 touches all aspects of economic and political life (see Carrasco and Nahmad, eds., 1999 and Sociedad de los Trabajadores Agricolas de los Altos de Chiapas A.C., 1998).

While the wave of organization swept the Chiapas countryside, problems of different kinds began to beset the indigenous communities including the eviction of protestants in the municipality of Chamula. The Consejo de Representantes Indigenas de los Altos de Chiapas (CRIACH) is an organization that was started out in order to negotiate the return of the expelled protestants to their original communities. Today the indigenous protestants and other Indians living in urban settings have realized that their lives are now more urban than rural (Aramoni and Morquecho, 1998). CRIACH is no longer intent on regaining spaces in the countryside, but rather in securing them in the city. Local grocery markets and transport are two areas where urban indigenous people compete against non-Indians, with help from CRIACH and other new urban indigenous organizations. Many ladinos, the non-indigenous inhabitants of Chiapas, are still trying to come to terms with the fact that Indians, whom they consider filthy and uncouth, are taking over their town (Gutierrez y Gutierrez, 1996; Zulca, 1996).

The 1994 Zapatista rebellion put Chiapas, and especially the indigenous people of the state, in the international news and information serve ices including the world wide web. After the uprising Chiapas indigenous people have started to disappear behind different forms of misrepresentation obscuring the fact that they are human beings. These misrepresentations prevent them from entering a dialogue with the rest of society where they can be recognized as valid communicative subjects. Although indigenous organizations are engaged in the re-definition of indigenusness and its place in the world, the public discourse around them is shaped by existing political forces and positions. Because of this, indigenous people become hidden behind visions of otherness and difference denying them agency.

THE AVATARS OF MISRECOGNITION: INDIGENOUS ORGANIZATIONS IN THE MARKET

Anthropological research has repeatedly pointed at the ways in which indigenous people are mistreated by ladinos in San Cristobal and other Ladino settlements in Chiapas. Recent literature on the Chiapas conflict has only made ladinos more odious to the eyes of the national and international public. This constant representation of ladinos as fundamentally mean, ill-spirited people who seem to make a sport out of beating indigenous people has become a constant in media representations of Chiapas. For instance, Sergio Zermeno (1998, pgs.12-13), an intellectual from the center of Mexico, tells of how after the Zapatista uprising in January of 1994 groups of Coletos, as the inhabitants of San Cristobal call themselves, marched together on the streets. Zermeno writes (pgs. 12-13):

"This has put on one and the same side the Mexican Army, the federal and state governments, televisa, the landed caciques, the CNC, CTM, Coletos society and the ladinaje [a pejorative form to refer to the non-Indians]... on the other side we have the Zapatista Army, the great indigenous masses, the battered independent indigenous and peasant organizations, the Catholic hierarchy, the local parishes, the NGOs, the independent human rights organizations, etcetera."

What most people have not heard about is that during this time another group, who called themselves Coletos por la Paz, formed to help in the efforts to understand the conflict. This group was spearheaded by local hotel entrepreneurs and by the Organization de Barrios de San Cristobal (BACOSAN), an organization comprised of ladinos living in the different barrios (quarters) of the city. They met with researchers from several of the local research centers. They wanted to help ease the unrest we were all experiencing then, and find peaceful solutions to the armed conflict.

Zermeno also wrote:

". . .Mexicans and foreign observers have been shocked by the massacres and the dismantling of the so-called Autonomous Zapatista Municipalities (Acteal, Chenalho, Tierra y Libertad, Taniperla, etc.). Amazingly, the full force of the National and State governments seem to be engaged in a crusade where the army, the federal and state police corps and the paramilitary armies massacre a population made out mainly of indigenous, extremely poor people who made the mistake to call themselves autonomous. These people sympathize with the Zapatistas and try, in this way, to recover control over their own subsistence means and their cultural and political authorities. They are trying to build some form of collective identity in a social situation close to starvation and total desperation."

These are two examples, both taken from one of the many authors who write about Chiapas, of the misunderstanding implied in an intrinsic opposition in the relations between indigenous people and ladinos. By this representation, indigenous people in Chiapas are always good and Ladino are always bad. Conversely, the attitude adopted by Coletos por la Paz would contradict the image of the inherently bad ladinos. It is true that many of the new rebel municipalities, in Ocosingo and Las Margaritas, have appropriated small ranch lands owned by ladinos, and the expelled ranchers are more than happy to see the police acting against these self-declared autonomous land units. However, there are Coletos and other ladinos who do not agree with the violent dismantling of the autonomous municipalities. On the other hand, those of us who work or have worked in Chiapas are aware that the militias, known as paramilitary groups, are made up of indigenous youths who yield weapons and use them in some cases to terrorize the local population and murder their neighbors; they also murder ladinos, depending on the circumstances. The Acteal massacre of 1998 was carried out by indigenous people, apparently from one of these para-military groups (Garza Caligaris and Hernandez Castillo, 1998). See also Frente Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional, 2001). The first and probably most damaging forms of misrecognition of indigenous people is to attribute to them qualities of goodness and good will that seem to transcend human limits.

Through this rhetorical transformation, which takes away their humanness to transform them into quintessential representatives of the good, they are always assumed to be the patient pawns and victims of others and agency is discursively removed from them. It is because of this very misrecognition of indigenous people as agents and participants in their own lives that when the Zapatistas rose against the government in 1994, most analysts began looking for the nonindigenous instigators of the movement thinking that indigenous people could not organize and express themselves. The sudden popularity of Subcomandante Marcos, who was the most visible non-indigenous member of the Zapatistas, only pushed further into public invisibility the indigenous members of the Zapatista army. Other forms of misrecognition follow from this one, which stands as the backdrop curtain to the rest.

Another common form of misrecognition of indigenous people in Chiapas is the idea that they have to be constantly protected by the nonindigenous from other parts of Mexico and the world, because they do not really know how to defend themselves or how to market their products. Unfortunately, the unequal power structure in the Highlands of Chiapas dates from several centuries now and the ladino have always believed that they are superior in intellect and practical thinking to indigenous people. Many indigenous people, in turn, have internalized this view of their own subordination. In recent years indigenous people of Chiapas have been protected by the Catholic Church, the national government and INI, to name some of their most prominent institutional protectors. It is also frequent that indigenous children enter a relationship known in San Cristobal as "Crianzas," whereby they are raised by Colecto families as semi-adoptees. This makes many indigenous people accept the "help" of non-indigenous persons, help they will never be able to reciprocate (see Gomez Jimenez, 2001).[3]

Many cooperatives, including those I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, are managed by non-indigenous advisors who work as volunteers for years without pre-established salaries or compensation. Besides, many indigenous organizations in Chiapas are now directing their products to the "solidarity markets", where they sell not because of the quality of the items but because of the general sympathy toward indigenous people. I believe that the solidarity market is very dangerous for the long-term viability of those indigenous organizations producing mainly for the national and international markets.

Also, national and international agencies are reluctant to give monies directly to indigenous organizations, and prefer to channel the funds through non-indigenous NGOs working in indigenous communities. Through my involvement in an organization of indigenous teachers from different regions of Chiapas, I learned that unless the research center I worked for, or unless some other "respectable" institution was willing to run education programs aimed at indigenous communities, no funding would be provided to the organization itself. Furthermore, the fact that there were open internal conflicts within this organization made them less reliable in the eyes of possible funding agencies. This all happened while several non-indigenous organizations in Chiapas were receiving funding while they experienced violent internal strife, which in one case even resulted in arson and the kidnapping of the organization's accountant by members of the same organization. In-fighting among indigenous teachers and among different factions in crafts cooperatives was taken as a sign of something having gone wrong, while in non-indigenous organizations factionalism was often seen as a normal thing resulting from only-too-human competition. So, indigenous people are seen as easily deceived by non-indigenous persons, and this is why they have to be treated like children in need of protection and guidance from non-indigenous persons.

Another common form of misrecognition of indigenous people is the idea that they all have a privileged relationship with nature, beyond what any non-indigenous person could have. In the nineteenth century people thought that we could all be put on a racial scale, from inferior to superior. The inferior races, it was thought, were closer to nature than the superior ones. As June Nash and Ronald Nigh noted at the 1999 meetings of the American Anthropological Association

many indigenous people of Chiapas have a very sophisticated knowledge of their natural environs. These statements stem from these researchers' many years of work in the Chiapas countryside. However, popular literature, including magazines aimed at tourists and international volunteers, suggest that this detailed knowledge comes from the indigenous people's intrinsic qualities rather than from their everyday life and agricultural practices.

In my experience as a fieldworker I have come to understand that most agrarian societies have a highly sophisticated knowledge of the environment everywhere. In fact, as Netting (1993) has shown in his renowned work on smallholders these tend to have a more accurate knowledge of nature than, say, plantation workers or farmers who practice small-scale industrial agri-- culture. In Chiapas, organizations producing organic coffee and some craft cooperatives such as Sna Jolobil, Jolom Mayaetik and Jpas Joloviletik are taking advantage of this collective representation built around indigenous peoples as natural ecologists. The crafts cooperatives promote among their members the use of natural dyes, instead of synthetic colors, for coloring textiles. Among indigenous people in Chiapas, however, the colors of choice continue to be synthetic ones, which are vivid and resist washing longer. It is interesting that tourists like the more "natural" products while the locals like the bright, acrylic colors. Tourists trying to buy "authentic" items are buying, in terms of Baudrillard (1994[1981]), a simulacrum of the authentic, consciously produced by the locals as they cater to their own images as perceived outside. Besides, the eco-tourism market of Chiapas (which is very different to other eco-tourism markets, such as the Italian one where visitors work in exchange for food and shelter) is developing precisely on the basis of this representation of indigenous people as natural ecologists.

While there are some commercial advantages to this public image of indigenous people having a "natural" relationship with the environment, this vision also precludes the perception of these people as coeval (Fabian, 1983) with the rest of people in the world. During my involvement of several years in an indigenous photo archive in Chiapas, I often heard people say in amazement: "Look at these pictures! These indigenous women are working at computers! They went straight from the stone age to the computer age, without having to pass through the intermediate stages!" I grant that these were not scholars, but the pressure these public misrecognition puts on academia and on indigenous people themselves should not be underestimated. Indigenous organizations are not expected to undertake tasks that remove them from their "privileged" contact with nature, lest they lose their right to portray themselves as "true" representatives of their indigenous cultures.

One last form of misrecognition that I would like to examine here is the idea that indigenous societies live in harmony with themselves and others. This idea is often championed by Mexican intellectuals. For example, Gustavo Esteva, a highly public intellectual figure in Mexico, has posed, in various fora attended by this author, that if the indigenous people of Chiapas were left alone to solve their own problems and run their own businesses without the interference of Mexican laws and authorities, they would stop having internal problems altogether. This is a rather extreme formulation of a common idea, which is untenable.

I conducted field research among indigenous communities of the northern Selva region for a year, in 1999. After this fieldwork and the transcription of over 200 hours of interviews, I found (corroborating previous findings by Gemma Van der Haar and Shannan Mattiace among Tojolabal speakers, personal communication) that communities of Chol and Tzeltal speakers in that area are virtually autonomous from Mexican Courts and Tribunals. Local Justices, elders known as Principales and General Assemblies, administer justice in hundreds of indigenous communities without recourse to the national legal system. National Courts would rather have indigenous communities settle their own problems, and thus rarely accept to take on cases regarding conflicts in those communities. This, however, does not mean that these communities live in total harmony, since conflicts are permanent and often deadly.

Entire families are evicted as a result of internal conflicts. Conflicts do not necessarily end when someone has been punished, but continue between the families and individuals originally implicated and violence can spark at any moment. A quick look at the Chiapas regional newspaper Cuarto Poder or at the national paper La Jomada reveals how mistaken the idea of indigenous harmony as a natural state is. In the meantime, no one expects non-indigenous people to live in complete harmony among ourselves.

Indigenous people in Chiapas are no better or worse than others elsewhere in the rural societies of Mexico, Europe or Asia. They are not interested in behaving in ways that please nonindigenous Mexicans or Europeans, but in ways that serve their own interests. Although they see themselves as part of larger collectives, they try to improve their lives in ways they know, even if this implies some form of violence. In my experience, equality among all in indigenous communities is not always the central preoccupation, and this is particularly true regarding the situation of women. Indigenous women -and most of the members of crafters' organizations are women are frequently dispossessed of their lands and their property. As it is the case in many non-indigenous societies, they are physically assaulted by their husbands and relatives for very petty reasons, and are expected to suffer in silence.

It is true that intra-family violence exists everywhere, but what is not true is that in indigenous societies of Chiapas it happens less often than elsewhere. And yet, the rhetoric about the autonomous municipalities leaves aside the implications of caciquismo [political bossism], despotism and intra-family violence that could happen in this type of municipalities. Anthropologists have extensively documented factionalism around the world, especially in agrarian societies. Why should indigenous people be non-human in this respect? I for one am not against the formation of autonomous municipalities, per se. But, being familiar with autonomous regions in other parts of the world, such as Sardinia in Italy and the Prairie Indian Reserves in Canada, I have found that the legalization of regional autonomy does not automatically transform regional relations into relations of equality or equity. Furthermore, political autonomy does not challenge in itself existing colonial relations. Those organizations relying on the perceived injustice of the lack of indigenous autonomy and the victimization of indigenous communities by the government as their marketing platform will have a hard time when their municipalities become autonomous if their internal divisions become apparent. In nonindigenous communities no one is expected to agree automatically with what "the community" dictates, but the extreme alteration of indigenous people has resulted in the unwarranted expectation that individual motives of indigenous persons are suppressed in favor of the will of the majority. Indigenous people, as others, are part and parcel of existing power structures and their rhetorical separation from other segments of Mexican society can only obscure this fact.

A question I asked at the beginning of this article could give us an idea as to the limits of imagined indigeness: What would happen if indigenous organizations from Chiapas decided to manufacture and sell home electric appliances? If that were the case, What markets would they direct them to? Would they direct them to people who thought of indigenous people as oppressed, or to those who think they are natural ecologists, or to consumers who believe that indigenous people are always good and live in harmony among themselves and their neighbors? Home appliances are, in the collective imagination, symbols of modernity, capitalism and the opposite from nature and tradition. In recent years they have become a symbol of the damage humanity is inflicting on our planet. Indigenous people, being perceived as fundamentally good and passive, probably would not receive needed credits and financial help from donor agencies unless they were clearly organized by a non-indigenous think tank to produce environmentally-friendly items. Otherwise, since indigenous people are perceived as in close communion with nature, their objectives would be highly questioned on the basis of the damage their products would inflict on nature. Also, given that they are not expected to quarrel among themselves, indigenous people would seem unsuited for the "modern" forms of organization involving personal performance, efficiency, and interpersonal competition.

What would it take for us to understand that indigenous people are no better and no worse than other people? Why do we expect that Chiapas indigenous organizations will only engage in those activities that do not contradict the certainty of indigenous people's alterity? What is needed to take indigenous organizations out of the realm of myth and into the context of other, regular, organizations? I do not have ready answers for these pressing questions. However, it is clear to me that part of the problems Indians communities and in particular Indian organizations face have to do with forms of misrecognition such as the ones I have outlined above. Persons who have been labeled as "indigenous" disappear behind all these representations that very often obscure who they really are, how they really live and what are their actual thoughts and dreams. Indian organizations in Chiapas are actively engaged in the geography, the writing of the world. The contents of their writing, however, continue to be influenced and censured by distorted perceptions of "the Indian" and indigenous societies. Indigenous people are the ones who will have to find adequate responses to these issues, maybe with help from others but not necessarily so. However, before closing this article, I want to turn to an indigenous organization that questions public discourse around indigenous people and indigenousness, or at least goes against the grain of the misperceptions outlined above.

Mujeres en Lucha is a small weavers' cooperative with its headquarters in the municipal center of Tenejapa. The members of this organization are eighteen women from the municipalities of Tenejapa and Chamula. They all take turns looking after their store, where they sell the work of all the cooperative's members. As their clientele is mainly indigenous, they sell acrylic-colored items along with textiles made using natural dyes. They have learned organization techniques at workshops sponsored by the government and by weavers' organizations, taking what they find useful from these forms of instruction.

They do not have in-house advisors, so they close the store during the local holidays and on days when everyone is busy preparing for an important occasion such as Carnival and the Days of the Dead. Problems stemming from envy and conflicts of all kinds are constantly faced by the members of the cooperative. These are discussed in their General Assembly and in smaller groups, but they are not always solved to everyone's satisfaction. Maybe it is these types of problems that will eventually result in the cooperative breaking apart. Still, the cooperative has survived since 1982 to date, providing its members with an income that helps them support their families. I believe that this type of self-driven organization is a good example of what indigenous organizations can be in Chiapas.

The women in this organization do not try to portray themselves as intrinsically good, as needing others to help them run their organization, as natural ecologists or as people who live in harmony among themselves and with all others. They go about their business without help from outside agencies. These women do not speak Spanish, and show no particular desire to learn it. In order to enter a dialogue with them, one has to find adequate tools, in the form of learning how to speak Tzeltal or hiring a translator. They have no intention of conforming to others' ideas about what they or their organization ought to be, thus challenging common misperceptions about the place of indigenous people and indigenous organizations in the contemporary world. This organization has been portrayed as 'hostile' in the academic literature (Mosquera, 1995) precisely because it makes no attempt to cater to images of "the good indigenous people." Organizations such as this one are paving the way for a new perception of what indigenous people and indigenous organizations are, and where they are going.

#### **[Footnote]**

#### NOTES

[1] This article draws on subsequent versions of a conference paper first presented at the 1999 Meetings of the American Anthropological Association, in Chicago, and then at the Convegno di Americanistica of the University of Perugia, in Perugia, in 2000. I thank my colleagues at those conferences for their feedback. Special thanks to Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz, for his continu

**[Footnote]**

ous challenge and support. Although I have not cited his work here, Charles Taylor's ideas on the notions of the person, society and the good (Taylor 1999) were an important point of departure for this paper.

[2] "Nosotros tuvimos un congreso indigena en 1974 de mil comisariados. Fueron cuatro temas que nosotros hablamos donde acordamos primero lo que es la tenencia de la tierra. En esa época estamos individualmente. Entonces formamos esta organización desde 1974."

**[Footnote]**

[3] According to the rules of exchange, in all societies those gifts that are too large to be corresponded put the receiver in a situation of inferiority vis a vis the giver. Bourdieu (1987) poses that gifts are a very effective way to mark inequality. Furthermore, gifts that are too large and beyond the cultural context of the receivers may create situations of dependency and even social disintegration. The case of Ethiopian refugees in Somalia during the 1980s and 1990s is a good example of this (Margin 1997). It would be important to assess whether the flows of "help" that the international solidarity movements are either promoting or destroying the long-term viability of Chiapas indigenous organizations and their markets.

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