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State Projects and Indigenous Mobilization in Late Twentieth Century Mexico

Projetos Estatais e Mobilização Indígena no México no Final do Século XX

Proyectos Estatales y Movilización Indígena en México a Fines del Siglo XX

A. S. Dillingham*

REVIEW OF:

MUÑOZ, María L.O. *Stand Up and Fight: Participatory Indigenismo, Populism, and Mobilization in Mexico, 1970-1984*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016.

Latin American indigenismo, state discourses and practices centered on native peoples, has its roots in the nineteenth century as the region's elites sought to distinguish themselves from former European colonial powers. While early forms of nineteenth and twentieth century indigenista practice consisted of state celebrations of indigenous aesthetics, such as public monuments and art, by the mid-twentieth century indigenista policy fused with projects of modernization aimed at the political and economic integration of populations marked as indigenous.

Mexico was a leader in twentieth century indigenista policies. It hosted the Inter-American Indigenista Institute in Mexico City and Mexican intellectuals trained social scientists and anthropologists from throughout the Americas. Yet in the latter half of the twentieth century, individuals and social movements

began to make claims on their respective nation states on the basis of their indigeneity, that is their membership in cultures and peoples descended from pre-Hispanic populations. From the Mapuche in southern Chile, to the Mayan population of Central America, all the way to Mexico's diverse indigenous communities, the late 1960s and early the 1970s saw movements of indigenous re-vindication emerge to demand everything from agrarian reform and culturally relevant education to political autonomy.

This created a dilemma for indigenista policy and professionals who had previously been in the business of doing things in the name of indigenous peoples and their perceived interests. What was the role of indigenista policymakers and agencies if indigenous people were increasingly speaking for themselves? This historical dilemma has also become an interpretative

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dilemma for scholars of indigenismo. How do we understand indigenista projects in the second half of the twentieth century and their relationship to their target populations?

Maria Muñoz's *Stand Up and Fight: Participatory Indigenismo, Populism, and Mobilization in Mexico, 1970-1984*, appears well-positioned to tackle this question. Indeed, the author chooses as her subject 1970 to 1984, a period she terms a "golden age for indigenous organization (p. 190)." Written in clear, relatively jargon-free prose, this concise volume includes an introduction, six chapters, and a conclusion. The substantive focus is the 1975 First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples, organized by Mexican federal agencies and aimed at the empowerment of the country's indigenous population through government channels. The first four chapters provide contextual information for the Congress itself and its organizational precedents. Chapter One deals with the shifting policies of Mexican President Luis Echeverría (1970-1976). Chapter Two places the Congress in the longer history of indigenista policy in Mexico and provides a useful description of the dramatic expansion of indigenista programs during the period in question. Chapter Three and Chapter Four deal, albeit in different ways, with the organizational precedents to the 1975 Congress (regional congresses aimed at building momentum for the national congress). Chapter Four, entitled 'Campesino versus Indígena,' attempts to wrestle with an important question, the contested shift between campesino, an ostensibly class-based identity, and indigenous identities in rural Mexico.

The nominal central chapter, Chapter Five, includes an extensive description of the 1975 Congress, its official proceedings, and debates. Perhaps the most engaging element of the chapter is its treatment of the experience and demands of female delegates to the Congress (p. 136-137). Chapter Six deals with the organizational structure that emerged from the Congress, The National Council of Indigenous Peoples. Muñoz describes how this organization transformed relatively quickly into a hierarchical, corporatist structure (something some of the individuals involved had earlier opposed), increasingly ridden by infighting. This occurred during the final few decades of the Institutional Revolutionary Party's (PRI) control of the Mexican presidency.

The over-arching claim of the monograph is that despite its government-funding and institutional affiliations, the experience of the congress reflects indigenous peoples' own ideas and activity—in effect,

indigenous agency. That agency was, according to Muñoz, expressed through the activity of a group of *promotores bilingües*, indigenous brokers employed by Mexico's Department of Colonization and Agrarian Affairs. Furthermore, the 1975 Congress, according to the author, "served to create interethnic cooperation between indigenous groups who for the first time met one another on a national stage (p. 5)." While *Stand Up and Fight* offers descriptive information on the organization of the 1975 Congress and the political context surrounding it, one is left wondering whether the author's choice to write a monograph centered primarily on one government-sponsored congress unnecessarily limits the author's ability to comment on issues of broader significance.

While Muñoz references the group of *promotores bilingües*, we are given little biographical information that might flesh out who these individuals were and, more significantly, what their relationship to their home communities or broader indigenous politics might be. Indeed, Muñoz describes these *promotores* as "indigenous leaders" (p. 4) yet it is not made clear what her criterion is for indigenous leadership. Is it self-selection? Or community support? A version of this question is addressed briefly in Chapter Six through the concept of indigenous authenticity (p. 160) yet a discussion of these issues earlier in the volume would have grounded the narration of the Congress' content. For example, we learn little about Vicente Paulino López Velasco, a *promotor* referenced repeatedly and whose published work the author relies on.

In Chapter Five Muñoz offers a particularly intriguing description of an important 1974 Indigenous Congress in the southern state of Chiapas (p. 118-121). That congress, also initially backed by state officials, included the active participation of progressive elements of the Catholic Church and young left-wing militants. Some of the relationships built during the congress were fundamental to establishing what would become a guerilla insurgency, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. Muñoz' description begs the question of how to understand the seemingly divergent outcomes of the Chiapas experience and the 1975 Congress, which took place in the state of Michoacán.

Finally, if indigenismo is fundamentally a state project, *Stand Up and Fight* could have more explicitly engaged the history and historiographical debates surrounding how the PRI functioned. Indeed, key indigenista intellectuals and PRI members, such as Salomón Nahmad Sittón and Alfredo Bonfil, are

described as “the intellectual engineers of the regional congresses of the 1970s (p. 69).” As major figures in the story, why not delve into their professional careers, motivations, and relationship to other top PRI officials? Given that the events in question were connected to PRI high politics (President Echeverría himself addressed the 1975 Congress), this represents a missed opportunity.

With more concrete examples, such as the experience of the Tarahumara Supreme Council creatively detailed

in Chapter Three, the monograph might provide more insight into the nature of state projects and indigenous agency. Yet Muñoz raises up for discussion a period and historical experience previously underexplored in the scholarship and is to be commended for pushing the historiography of Mexican indigenismo beyond the mid-century.

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