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## **Anthropology in Social Analysis and its Role in the Efforts to Eliminate Exploitation and Poverty in Traditional Ethnic, Minority, and Peasant Groups in the Context of Global Society.**

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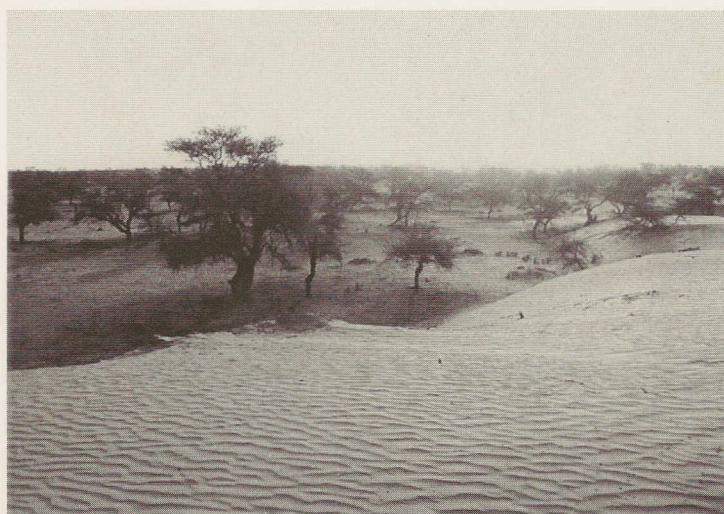
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# Exploitation and Overexploitation in Societies Past and Present

Brigitta Benzing, Bernd Herrmann (Eds.)



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Salomón Nahmad

**Anthropology in Social Analysis  
and its Role in the Efforts to Eliminate Exploitation and Poverty  
in Traditional Ethnic, Minority, and Peasant Groups  
in the Context of Global Society**

**Abstract**

*Applied Anthropology must generate proposals, with new concepts and definitions of development and sustainability, that incorporate anthropological knowledge and tools, so that the advances from all branches of the Anthropological Sciences can reach, and contribute to, the development projects of these vulnerable populations intended by themselves, as well as those planned by governments, the associations of civil society, and international organizations.*

**Introduction**

The accelerated national development in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands a reflection upon and a proposal for sustainable social development in the context of cultural diversity. Applied Anthropology has an essential role to play in efforts to guarantee that the millions of poor peasants and indigenous population of the world, as members of societies, can maintain their own cultures and social organization and their own political and cultural institutions. They are actively excluded and don't benefit from these national development processes in ways that foster their own distinctive paths of economic, political, cultural, and social development. In order to fulfill this role, Applied Anthropology must generate proposals, with new concepts and definitions of development and sustainability that incorporate anthropological knowledge and tools. The advances from all branches of the Anthropological Sciences can reach vulnerable populations as well as governments, the associations of civil society, and international organizations.

**History at large**

The installation of the colonial system 500 years ago meant not just a military invasion and an economic restructuring of the indigenous economies, but above all an overturning of the juridical, administrative and political order which had been developed on a continental scale, and



which had incorporated national, cultural and linguistic diversity to a marked degree, organized in states, chiefdoms, tribal groups and sometimes in complex geopolitical units. The rules concerning the appointment of their own governments, judicial officials, priests and military officials was smashed by the new western model which, in Latin America, was the Spanish or Portuguese version.

After the initial contact with Spaniards a new form of life project was generated which tried to exclude or destroy the earlier experience of the original villages of Mexico. From this moment on the indigenous world was progressively impoverished, and compelled to exchange its own projects of evolutionary development for projects of resistance to an alien project.

Neither the contributions nor the heritage of these civilizations have disappeared; quite the contrary, they are very much alive as a hidden, subterranean social and cultural world where practices that are apparently western have, in fact, deep roots in this ancient heritage.

Any policy which tries to favor the interests of the indigenous peoples has to be based in the real situation, and not in the kinds of utopian plans which the Mexican government has been promoting for the past two decades. Every project should be closely inspected to make sure that it has beneficiaries other than local leaders or a regional elite. One has to recognize the kinds of pressures that indigenous communities have to deal with, and not derogate their long-suffering efforts to overcome their problems. The ethnic groups of Mexico and Latin America already have trained and qualified personnel, and projects should include them and their wisdom. Planners should take into account other examples of community-driven development projects, which will be different in the various groups and countries. These policies should be scrutinized to see how they fit with a national plan for development, and plans should include specific goals both short and long term.

Actually indigenous peoples have lost control over and access to their own natural resources, and even over their own labor power. This has led directly to the transfer of a large part of their production and labor power to others, which is precisely why there exists the global phenomenon of widespread, extreme poverty. The loss of their best lands, the erosion of their soil, the loss of irrigation resources, the overexploitation of the forest reserves, and the use of their best lands for the production of products aimed at the national and international markets has led to the undernourishment of the indigenous populations, as well as to the loss of the self-sustaining productive system which had endured for hundreds of years.

### **The situation in Mexico**

The indigenous regions of Mexico, in great part, have been undergoing a slow process of impoverishment to become the poorest of Mexico's poor. Even although the statistical information and

poverty indices are highly aggregated and do not distinguish between indigenous people and others, it is easy to infer the conditions under which they live by looking at the poverty indicators in such areas as: Oaxaca, Chiapas Guerrero, Hidalgo, Yucatan etc. where the World Bank and the Inter-American Bank have initiated special projects to attend the terrible deterioration of subsistence agriculture in thousands of indigenous households. In these states the greatest poverty is to be found in the rural zones, and in these zones the indigenous communities are the ones that display the highest indexes of poverty, consistent with the very low amount of public and private investment. People leave the rural areas and move to the city in the hope of being incorporated into the productive system of the country. This worsens the human problems of the city, not only in Mexico but also in many of the cities of the United States.

The conditions of poverty arise because people do not have access to land, or they own lands of the most inferior sort, working conditions on the commercial farms and plantations are backward and unjust. The processes of agrarian reform are only partly finished, and now with the constitutional reform the country is entering upon a retrograde period during which secure tenancy of the land is going to be jeopardized by having to pass through the bureaucratic agrarian management and the agrarian courts. Violence in the indigenous regions was a constant in the past decade, and this new reform is going to increase it and complicate land tenancy so as to divide up the ejidos into private lots and to create commercial associations with outside investors. The crisis conditions of the past decade have smoothed the transfer of thousands of hectares of the best community lands to agribusiness. For the indigenous communities and for the peasants the present period is even worse than the period of the crisis of the 1980s.

Now the poverty of these regions is being accompanied by the destruction of the environment which is being affected by industrial development projects, or modernization projects, which have changed the natural habitat as well as the mode of production and quality of life.

In general, the indigenous communities have very little access to education, health services, and sanitation, housing and public health. They are under the control of professionals, technicians or bureaucrats belonging to the dominant society.

The forms of government of the communities which are currently designated as "Indian" (as in colonial terminology) sought to redefine their juridical order in the colonial context by naming their own authorities and governments in order to maintain the same kind of community control and governance as they had before. After 500 years of colonial domination, and all over the continent, the constructed political categories that appeared to be those of the colonial regime preserved shreds of their original autonomy. At the time of Independence, a new version of domination was created by the native born Mexicans, who had every intention of continuing the colonial project of their fathers for the indigenous peoples, keeping them in forms of economic servitude, under racial discrimination while negating their culture and their languages.



## **Democratization**

Democracy and the philosophy of western governance hold that only the individual is a proper social subject, and pays little attention to collective identities which predominate in the ethnic communities, and are embedded in their forms of governance and administration. It is limited because it only permits the expression of civil rights by the vote, and then denies the vote to those who do not belong to the political class. A member of the political class had to speak the language of the conquistadors, and later, read and write it.

The many native languages on this continent are denied their place, just as the cultures, politics and democratic practices of the original inhabitants are swept aside and denied recognition. Western democratic ideas have bypassed the indigenous community in the sense that the right of collective voting as a community has been denied to the indigenous people, except if it can be manipulated by the official parties. The Communities have been forbidden to designate their own candidates to the legislatures and the judiciary, and most of all to the executive positions on all levels. They have been denied the right to form their own political parties with platforms that are appropriate to their political and social demands and to present election candidates that will represent them. In no country have they been permitted to mobilize themselves and direct their own electoral campaigns, while their needs have been systematically overlooked in the campaigns of the national parties. In academic or intellectual circles when the talk turns to democracy, the topic of the role of ethnic groups and their rights hardly ever arises.

The indigenous groups were beaten down in the colonization process, but they have not given up their historical claim to their human and community rights. In the last twenty years their voices have been heard through the rebellion of zapatistas in Chiapas or in academic and political forums which have slowly opened up tiny spaces for listening to them in a truly democratic fashion. The new international realities which have abounded in recent years, the voices of the original ethnic groups of this planet have been quoted in the headlines of the daily papers of the world, just as they have in Mexico. Democracy as it is presented is rigid, closed and conservative, and refuses to begin a theoretical discussion on a truly democratic society which includes all the indigenous groups. The discourse avoids any confrontation with the indigenous peoples, and fears the breakup of the imaginary national project, which Mexico has constructed over the past 200 year and which has so little to do with "the real Mexico".

The prediction of the anthropologists and sociologists about ethnic and minorities' wars have turned out to be true, although they take the form of violence against the indigenous communities. There is neither political force nor sufficient will to terminate these reactions of inequality and injustice which the dominant groups exercise over millions of inhabitants, the inheritors of the ancient cultures of the continent. It is not just that there is no protection for the human rights

of these groups, there is no intention of redistributing resources in their favor either. There is no real democracy nor even a democratic project if the indigenous groups are not included, and the whole national project is not reordered.

### **Incorporation to the global market**

The new system of production has changed the patterns of dietary consumption in rural Mexico. The penetration of industrial foods, usually in the form of junk foods, has taken place to the furthest corners of the Republic. As a result a worrying deterioration of the diet has occurred.

It is worth noting that hundreds of thousands of indigenous families working the common lands of their communities managed for years to be self-sufficient in food production within their villages. But in the last decade, in general, communities have lost self-sufficiency, and have turned to the market place for food purchases. There are now indigenous regions where, because of the absence of any incentives, nutritional levels have fallen because families have not been able to produce subsistence foods, in spite of the availability of land.

If Mexico were to regain self-sufficiency in food by incorporating the peasants and indigenous peoples into the milpa (traditional) system once again, billions of pesos would be saved in food imports. At the same time the peasants would be converted into consumers better able to participate in the national economy and in defending that part of the environment which has historically provided the society with a great variety of products to complement the basic diet.

The fact is that the three countries, the United States, Canada and Mexico, are all engaged in a policy of NAFTA treaty. What people of good will ought to do is set aside the censuses and other statistical data that show the integration of the Indian peoples, and recognize their inclusion and existence as a distinct entity. The white populations in Mexico have always wanted to show that there were few Indians here, despite the abundant evidence of Indian faces, and Indian images. For example, recently, the official parties of Mexico's elites, the Creole inheritors of our colonial tradition, declared that for the neoliberal "modernizers" the indigenous communities are hindrances from the past that ought to disappear. But at the same time the official line is a multicultural society, born originally in its many villages and ethnic communities protected by the law, with a government that supposedly promotes the development of their languages, cultures, customs, resources and unique forms of organization, that they can decide for themselves about their life-styles, and that the communities have the resources to attain this goal.



### **National and international emigration**

The emigration to Mexico City or to the United States which has been observed in the indigenous communities increases each year, as does the rate at which the young men of the communities give up agriculture, leaving it to the responsibility of the women, old folks and the children.

One can see in the principal cities where the banks and telegraph offices are located, the lining up of women and old people trying to cash money orders which the members of their families have sent them from outside. And when the emigrants return to their villages, they bring clothing, electric gadgets, toys etc. which are of importance to the peasants who stayed at home. U.S. airlines are filled with villagers going to and coming from their jobs abroad.

We estimate that the number of indigenous women in the economically active age amounts to 3 million. The majority of them are engaged in agriculture, and they receive no credit for the domestic work they put in. As producer and as reproducer the work of women is invisible and devalued in Mexico, and doubly so if the woman is indigenous. In Mexico the majority of the domestic servants in the cities are indigenous people who work under difficult working conditions. They are supporting their own communities and, at the same time, reducing the number of people at home who have to be supported during periods of crisis.

Regional development schemes usually do not include women's contributions or their prospective development neither in the way they are thought out nor in practice.

The system of subsistence production has enlarged its productive networks through emigration, and through market production for the urban areas. This permitted significant changes in cultural patterns, but it also has continued to support population growth, which in turn produces a greater demand for goods bought in the market, and promotes the articulation of the village with the industrial outside.

### **Ethno-development and applied anthropology**

Ethno-development has been defined by an expert group invited by UNESCO in San José, Costa Rica: "The expansion and consolidation of local culture through the strengthening of the autonomous capacity for decision making of a culturally differentiated group in order to guide their own development in the exercise of self-determination, in what every way this be defined, so long as it implies social equity and self-empowerment". This particularly means the development of decision making power in the area of self-initiating development.

The idea of modifying the integrationist project and of generating a model of self-development was not supported by governmental regimes which have continued in the shop worn model of increasing injustice and control of the indigenous communities by the political elites. The im-

increasing injustice and control of the indigenous communities by the political elites. The implementation of the reform of the economic neoliberal model is going to lead to the transfer of better quality land to the agribusiness and to commercial contract farmers and leave only the worst lands in the hands of the poor peasants. This reform is supposedly generated to transfer urban capital to the rural areas, as well as to promote international investments in the countryside, but I frankly think that it is yet another way of more aggressively exploiting the peasant, and at the same times it decapitalizes the rural zones.

The different regions of Mexico demonstrate how the dominating system of centralized planning does not promote the autonomous participation of the beneficiaries. Their active participation must be at the fundamental base of rural and indigenous development projects, whereas such non-participative focuses have filled the rural zones with modern debris (that today constitute an archaeology) supposedly destined to change and elevate the quality of life of peasants and indigenous peoples. It is imperative that the government agencies and technocracies that design these policies progress from a paternal type of politics to one in which the beneficiaries of the programs actively participate.

The participation in one's own autonomous project must remain realistic, avoiding the interference of foreign interests to the project and, furthermore, avoiding the dependence and redirecting of the bureaucracies in charge of the development. The evaluation and monitoring must take a collective form and avoid the favoring of privileged social classes. Those social actors that are to benefit from the project must be the actual recipients of the programmers aimed to help them in order to achieve efficiency, equality and justice.

In Mexico, the work of Applied Anthropology, and even more its results, have not been able to channel the potential of the communities to eliminate all forms of discrimination, exclusion and poverty of close to 60 million Mexicans that live outside the boundaries of economic, cultural and social transformations. The new generations of anthropologists will have to continue building specialized theoretical bases to modify the anthropological praxis within an updated context that points to the politics of development, which includes the participation and the appropriation of the beneficiaries of projects. The enormous quantities of badly-spent money and the developmental work of thousands of active men of which no advantage has been taken, has generated great discouragement and a loss of faith towards the government institutions and, occasionally, towards anthropologists.

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