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**ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO:
THE RETURN OF THE ACTOR**

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3. Migration, Spatial Change and the Globalisation of Cultures
4. International Politics and Culture

**ETHNIC MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY MEXICO:
THE RETURN OF THE ACTOR ¹**

Gunther Dietz ²

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In the course of the past decades, and particularly since the mid-eighties, an "ethnic revival" (Smith 1981) has been recorded in almost all parts of the world. Former supra- and plurinational entities as well as apparently consolidated nation-states tend to dissociate into locally and regionally based social groups defining themselves in ethnic terms, i.e. appealing to a culturally defined, supra-familial collective identity. These ethnic groups regularly come into conflict with national and supranational authorities when they dare to enforce political autonomy, instead of contenting themselves with limited particular linguistic and cultural rights. The contemporary re-emergence of a politically motivated ethnicity in the midst of a globalized economy challenges the social sciences; for most of "classical" theorizing in sociology and political science until lately has been trying to reduce ethnic ascriptions either to simple "survivals" of pre-modern development stages or to merely defensive reactions against current "modernization shocks".

¹ A preliminary version of this paper has been presented at the conference "Alternative Futures and Popular Protest", Manchester Metropolitan University, March 1999; cf. the conference proceedings "Fifth International Conference on Alternative Futures and Popular Protest: a selection of papers from the conference", edited by Colin Barker & Mike Tyldesley, Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

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Now, as ethnic conflicts do not seem reducible any more to "underdeveloped" regions of the world or to solely transitory readjustments, the question of the rise, transformations, and the future perspectives of ethnicity has to be re-addressed. In my opinion, such a theoretical appraisal of ethnicity will only be constructive if it is based on sound empirical case studies which include a historical dimension of the phenomenon and which enable transculturally and transregionally generalizable conclusions. In Latin America, the persistence of ethnically differentiated populations expresses the continuity of a form of resistance that refers back to the beginnings of the process of European expansion. During the Spanish invasion and colonization of the Americas, the autochthonous social structures are reduced to an exclusively local level by their compulsory integration into a bipolar caste-like system which only distinguishes between Europeans and so-called "Indians", between a rural *república de indios* and an urban-based *república de españoles*. Due to the establishment of this colonial system, in the course of which entire populations are relocated, the *comunidad indígena*, the indigenous village community, becomes the central point of reference for its residents' "identity politics".

However, in the course particularly of the second half of the twentieth century, the ongoing privatization of its communal land tenure and the rapid monetarization of its subsistence-oriented economy threaten the territorial and social foundations of the indigenous community. As a reaction to these tendencies, new ethnic forms of organization have been emerging in different Latin American countries and regions for the last twenty years. Beyond national differences and variations, their common goal consists not only in defending the political structure of the community - the sovereignty of the village assembly,

the consensus principle, the rotation of public communal positions, and the reciprocity of rights and duties -, but in extending it towards a supra-local level.

Thereby, in their struggle for decolonizing local and regional politics and for regaining territorial, cultural, and political self-determination, the new indigenous movements, which - more or less successfully - are flourishing across Latin America, seem to exhibit three key aspects of what may be called the contemporary reshaping of the "phenomenology of modernity":

- the above-mentioned process of re-ethnization of identities, a process which is not confined to revivalist movements invoking a pre-colonial past, but which also includes contemporary phenomena of ethnogenesis through the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm 1992) amidst post-traditional societies;
- a parallel process of unlocking once relatively self-confined traditional cultures in the course of market globalization; as the case of the new indigenous movements will illustrate, these contemporary hybrid cultures are not victimizable as simple epiphenomena of a globalized economy, but constitute vital resources for emerging new social actors;
- and a common tendency to create and conquer new intermediate social and political spaces, which are now articulated between the inaccessibly national or global and the all-too-isolated local level; the territorial dimension of the new ethnic identities is reflected in regionalist movements which often ambiguously oscillate between segregation from and federalization of the nation-state.

The confluence of these key features of the contemporary "face" of modernization endows the Latin American indigenous movements with an exploratory potential for the study of the intertwinings of ethnicity, cultural hybridity, and regionalism. My choice of the Mexican case is not only due to the overwhelming presence indigenous movements have acquired here during the last two decades. Moreover, in the current situation of political transition from authoritarian rule, Mexico offers further important insights into the contribution ethnic movements may provide for democratization and political participation. The armed uprising that of one of these new indigenous organizations, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, has carried out in southern Mexico in 1994, illustrates the political consequences of the interface of two different factors of sociocultural change which are simultaneously taking place in the indigenous regions of Mexico:

- On the one hand, the long-term failure of *indigenismo*, the official politics of integrating the indigenous population into the nation-state, is becoming increasingly evident; although the educational and economic development programs of several Mexican government institutions have succeeded in "opening" the communities to cultural innovations, this policy has not led its inhabitants to give up their differential identity. Instead, the marginalized position of indigenous regions gained in the national and international markets after "opening" their traditional economies has fostered the political emancipation of the community from its formerly corporatist links to the nation-state's institutions.
- On the other hand, the new "indigenous intellectuals", an elite of professionals once intentionally assimilated to western culture by *indigenismo* programs, are far from acting as a loyal enclave of modernized young "culture brokers" inside their

communities; after the failure of *indigenismo*, and in the age of the neoliberal retreat of the public sector, the new intelligentsia is deprived of its professional opportunities and abandons its clientelistic ties, thus "deserting" from the nation-state's tutelage and rediscovering the community of origin as a new arena for social and political action.

FROM OLD TO NEW INDIGENOUS MOVEMENTS

On the local, regional and national levels, indigenous organizations are emerging - frequently as merely guild-like associations promoted by the nascent "indigenous intellectual elite": bilingual teachers educated by the governmental indigenist institutions to serve as official counterpart and "acculturation agent" of the nation-state in the indigenous regions. These new actors, however, who are bilingual and culturally hybrid, nowadays start to "emancipate" from their institutional tutelage and turn into politically influential representatives of whole regions, establishing themselves as an innovative political factor (Urban & Sherzer 1994, Santana 1995).

The process of "emancipation" undergone by the agents of acculturation and their return as a new social actor (Touraine 1988) constitute a turning point in the history of indigenous movements in Mexico. Two different forms of organization have been prevailing in nearly every indigenous region until the eighties. On the one hand, the bilingual teachers, trained in the context of *indigenismo* politics, and the indigenous civil servants who gained positions inside the indigenist institutions create their own pressure groups such as the *Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas* (CNPI) and the *Alianza de Profesionales Indígenas Bilingües, A.C.* (APIBAC). Even though these lobby groups of emerging indigenous intellectuals achieve considerable influence mainly inside the Mexican government's

educational and cultural politics, their representativity in their own communities of origin remains very limited (Mejía Piñeros & Sarmiento Silva 1991).

On the other hand, and apart from these lobby associations, regional and national peasant organizations arise as a response to the gradual retreat of the state from the rural areas. Forged around leaders of urban origin, these *campesino* organizations specialize in the canalization of claims for agrarian reform and agricultural development (Reitmeier 1990). Despite their often revolutionary programme, in their day-to-day practice these organizations heavily depend on the benevolence of the governmental institutions, because if their mass mobilizations fail in their claims, the peasant leaders will quickly lose their mainly indigenous members.

Throughout the eighties, and particularly since the beginning of the nineties, both types of organizations have been undergoing a serious crisis. For both of them, the official recognition of *indigenismo's* failure as a means of ethnically homogenizing the rural populations as well as the retreat of the neoliberal state from its agrarian reform and agricultural politics means that they lose their institutional counterpart. Consistently, they also have to face an increasing questioning of their legitimacy and *raison d'être* by their grassroots membership. In this context, the teacher associations as well as the "classical" peasant organizations will be marginalized by the emergence of a new organizational type: since the end of the eighties, "alliances of convenience" and "coalitions" of different indigenous communities have appeared, who declare themselves as "sovereign" *vis-à-vis* governmental institutions, who claim recognition for their customary law - the local

costumbre - and who combine their political struggles aimed at communal and regional autonomy with self-managed development projects.³

THE FAILURE OF INDIGENISMO

The development projects carried out in indigenous regions since the thirties form part of the governmental policy of *indigenismo*.⁴ This strategy of "mexicanizing the indio" (Lázaro Cárdenas) is implemented by the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI), which pursues two mutually interwoven aims:

- the social and cultural integration of the indigenous population into Mexican society by means of a "planned acculturation" aimed at achieving ethnic homogeneity, on the one hand;
- and the "modernization" of the local and regional indigenous economy through its forced opening towards national and international markets, on the other hand.

In many Mexican regions, *indigenismo* has failed in both respects. Instead of promoting *métissage* through free access to education, the educational policies have profoundly divided the local population into two different groups. Thanks to their own financial resources or to funds obtained from INI, a small minority actually succeeds in attending an intermediate or even a high school in the provincial cities located outside the indigenous

³ A detailed analysis of of the Mexican indigenous organizations which includes their historical and political frame is offered in Dietz (1996).

⁴ The following sketch of *indigenismo* politics summarizes the findings of a case study carried out in one of the core-regions of Mexican integration politics, the Purhépecha region of Michoacán; cf. Dietz (1995).

region; this privileged group hardly ever returns to their villages. On the other hand, the huge majority of the regional population, who only finish or leave primary school, remain in the village and go on practicing their traditional peasant and craftsman activities: what they have learnt at school is not suitable at all for their daily life in the village. Therefore, whereas some beneficiaries are individually "acculturated" and emigrate to the large urban sprawls, thus deepening the problem of rural exodus, most of *indigenismo's* constituency acquire certain skills which are important when dealing with *mestizo* society - such as reading and writing as well as basic calculus -; nevertheless, the access to these skills does not influence their ethnic identity.

Indigenismo also fails in its economic policies aimed at "opening" the villages in an attempt to "proletarianize" the indigenous peasant units. Without exception, each of the "cooperatives" and production-schools established in the regions end up collapsing as a result of the local population's unwillingness to participate. Some of these production-schools are transformed by their former directors into private enterprises, who employ very few impoverished peasants as occasional unskilled workers. In the agricultural as well as in the handicraft sector, the peasant family enterprise remains as the prevailing type of labour organization.

The infrastructural integration of the regions, pursued by the construction of roads, electrification and the proliferation of artesian wells for drinking water has not succeeded, either. Instead of promoting the establishment of private enterprises from outside the regions, the improvement of traffic has caused two highly negative side-effects:

- the rapid deforestation of the communal woods, unleashed by the national timber industry's high demands of ever more raw materials;

- and the flooding of the local markets by large amounts of cheap, industrially produced commodities, which increasingly marginalize the region's own craft and agricultural products.

THE BILINGUAL TEACHERS AS NEW CULTURAL INTERMEDIARIES

Since the beginning of *indigenismo*, the Mexican nation-state has realized the necessity of relying on a specifically trained group of "culture promoters" and bilingual teachers who originate from the indigenous region and who will be in charge of carrying out the different literacy campaigns.⁵ These "promoters" of national mestizo culture will fulfill a double task: the bilingual teacher is not only appointed for nursery and primary education, but he will also have to accomplish diverse out-of-school activities in the domain of adult education and community development (Aguirre Beltrán 1992).

Already during the seventies, however, the failure of the bilingual teachers in accomplishing both tasks becomes evident. In the school context, the allegedly bilingual character of the nursery and primary education frequently turns out to be fictitious. The indigenous language is hardly ever really taught or used at school; this is a result of the complete absence of appropriate didactic materials, but it is also a consequence of the parents' - and often even the teachers' - resistance or lack of interest towards the indigenous language. The main reason for the general absence of the indigenous language from school, however, consists in the shortcomings of the bilingual teachers' training; as their language

⁵ The following sections are based on an ethnographic study of the emergence and establishment of the bilingual teachers as new social actors in the mentioned Purhépecha region; cf. Dietz (1999).

is only conceived of as a temporary and rather mechanical tool for achieving final hispanization, the young and unexperienced teachers cannot cope with locally and regionally rather different and complex situations of bilingualism and diglossia.

On the other hand, the teachers' contribution to community development also proves highly unsatisfactory for the *indigenismo* institutions. With an average age of sixteen to twenty-two, a short and superficial training and an own instruction level which rarely reaches that of secondary school, the teachers frequently raise the local populations' and particularly the traditional village authorities' active resistance. As most of the young teachers are not employed in their home villages, but in distant communities belonging to a different dialect zone or even to a different indigenous language, the newly arrived teacher or "culture promotor" is perceived as just one more intruder sent by the *indigenismo* agencies.

As an official reaction to the bleak scenery of failures and to the increasing criticism expressed by the communities as well as by the teachers who feel dissatisfied with their role as agents of acculturation, in 1979 the Ministry of Education reorganized its activities in indigenous regions updating its teacher-training and primary school curricula. Starting from this reform, an intimate and fruitful collaboration emerges between the Ministry and the above-mentioned bilingual teachers' lobby organization, APIBAC. The upshot of this convergence of interests is an alternative programme of "bilingual and bicultural education", elaborated by several teachers committed to abolishing the instrumental use of bilingualism to hispanize the children by developing a genuinely bicultural curriculum (Gabriel Hernández 1981). As this process of "biculturalizing" all subjects taught in nursery and primary schools in indigenous regions requires an active and permanent participation of highly prepared bicultural actors, at the beginning of the eighties the Ministry is forced to

open its internal hierarchies to an increasing number of teachers and academics of indigenous origin.

Even if the official introduction of the bilingual and bicultural type of education proposed by APIBAC is rightly considered to be a crucial achievement of the newly emerged "indigenous intellectuals" working inside the Ministry of Education, its real functioning *in situ*, as empirically analyzed in the Purhépecha region (Dietz 1999), still reflects the same shortcomings as its monocultural *mestizo* predecessor: a brief, superficial and inadequate training of the bilingual teachers, a lack of didactic materials and infrastructural support, a clientelistic politics of allocating the teachers to regions and communities which only reflects the interests of the Mexican teachers' monopolistic trade union dominated by the state party and, as a result of these factors, an increasingly controversial role for the bilingual teachers plays inside their communities.

In this context, the indigenous teacher, facing a diversity of highly complex and heterogeneous tasks, in his daily work is actually reduced to "a transmitter of some basic knowledge of national education, a handbook technician of the indigenous language and a manager of material services for the community".⁶ Overburdened with such different functions of educational, cultural and economic intermediation, many of the interviewed bilingual teachers additionally perceive a profound conflict of loyalty: as open confrontations between the *indigenismo* institutions and their local beneficiaries spread across the region, in the course of his daily work as a kind of cultural translator and hybridizer, the bilingual teacher ends up mediating between two antagonistic parties.

⁶ Calvo Pontón & Donnadiou Aguado (1992:172); the translation is mine.

THE COMMUNALIST TURN

The obvious failure of *indigenismo*'s aim of ethnical homogenization and economic modernization forced the administration of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) to definitively abandon the integrationist approach towards the indigenous population of Mexico. The Mexican nation-state, after the oil crisis subjected to rigid structural adjustment politics and deeply indebted to the neoliberal paradigm, focusses its economic politics on the promotion of the "productive" sectors and regions. Consequently, from now on the indigenous population scarcely obtains a minimal measure of social assistance, a policy no longer aimed at fostering real participation or economic integration, but whose only goal consists in limiting the explosive and subversive force of rural poverty.

In this global context of a generalized retreat of the state, the new indigenous intellectual elite loses its slowly conquered spheres of influence inside the governmental politics of *indigenismo* and its educational and cultural programmes. As the *indigenismo* approach itself is increasingly marginalized by the global course of the neoliberally oriented Mexican politics, a growing number of bilingual teachers, "culture promoters", civil servants and trade unionists, politically and ideologically start to desert the *mestizo* project of the nation-state, whose ideology of *métissage* they had always publically defended as a general framework of their *indigenismo* projects. Thus, throughout the eighties a new group of indigenous dissidents arose, who cancelled their loyalty to the official national project and who consciously reintegrated into their communities of origin.

Despite the tensions created by the intrusion of external agents of development inside the indigenous community in the course of the former *indigenismo* programmes, until now the communal structure has successfully been maintained as the central point of reference of

their inhabitants' daily life.⁷ The nuclear family still constitutes the main unit of production, while the village community remains the central level of organization that shapes its inhabitants' principal economic, social, religious and political activities. Due to one's social status as a *comunero*, as a member of the community, acquired by birth or by marriage, the individual not only gains access to communal lands, but also becomes an integral part of the social and political unit of the community. According to customary law, the totality of the *comuneros* determine the village's political life: the communal assembly, in which traditionally only married males enjoy the right to speak and/or to vote, distributes the *cargos*, the local positions. Nowadays, these ranks and posts, which frequently imply important amounts of personal spending, comprise both the still surviving *cargos* of the civil-religious hierarchy intimately associated with the cult of the local patron saint, and the new administrative positions, introduced in the course of the twentieth century by the nation-state, but re-appropriated by the local *cargo* "logic".

The communal assembly, the local authorities designated by the assembly as well as the "council of elders", a locally important institution of consultation and arbitration formed by those senior villagers who already have passed through each rank in the *cargo* hierarchy - all these communal institutions are now rediscovered, revitalized and refunctionalized by the former "lost generation" of the indigenous intellectuals who desert from *indigenismo* politics. Instead of continuing to struggle for posts, influence and recognition in the urban world, the educational elite returns from "high politics", and even those bilingual teachers who never completely left their villages, but who always have been committed to *mestizo*

⁷ The following summary of the community's internal structure is based on my own ethnographic data, gathered in the Purhépecha region (Dietz 1999).

associations and movements such as trade unions, political parties, lobbies and interest groups, now try to reintegrate themselves into the daily routine of local politics. Thus, many teachers and civil servants who for a long time have been abandoning or postponing their rights and duties as *comuneros*, once again start to participate in communal assemblies and to collaborate with their peasant neighbours holding local *cargos*, thereby expecting to strengthen their communities against the external political and institutional agents and, at the same time, to overcome the tensions and divisions provoked by these agents inside the villages.

The activities carried out by this newly "recommunalized" indigenous intelligentsia take two different forms. In some villages, the young teachers succeed in occupying the main *cargos*, whereas the elder peasant *comuneros* withdraw to the "council of elders"; the subsequent divergences and tensions between both groups are dealt with in the communal assembly, where the older generation still enjoys considerable reputation and influence. In the large majority of indigenous villages, however, these initial confrontations result in an inter-generational division of work: while the traditional authorities, who are often recognized by their local neighbours as "natural leaders", maintain the control over the intralocal, domestic affairs, the younger teachers, civil servants and students are invited to take advantage of their larger experiences in dealing with governmental institutions and bureaucratic administrations, dedicating themselves to the village's external relations. Thus, new informal *cargos* emerge to complement the older ones without necessarily defying their customary status inside the community.

Once the division of work between internal and external *cargos* is settled by defining and recognizing each one's competence, in practice the holders of the new and the old ranks and

positions tend to collaborate intimately in their common goal to strengthen the community domestically and to regain its independence from outside agents. In order to achieve this goal, in many villages formerly central traditions of local life are recovered: the *faena* - compulsory collective work, particularly used in public works on behalf of the village as a whole -, the redistribution of economic surplus by celebrating and financing communal *fiestas* and, finally, the customary principle of always respecting the equal participation of the different *barrios*⁸ in any community affair - inside the communal assembly as well as in the distribution of local *cargos*.

These attempts to recapture and revitalize ancient traditions, are complemented by introducing completely new elements of a "western" origin. For example, a few years ago the teachers - many of whom are women or unmarried young men, thus lacking *comunero* status - start struggling for enlarging the very concept of the *comunero*. Nowadays, nearly every indigenous community has succeeded in extending the rights and duties of political participation to the female and unmarried population of the village.

Another internal transformation process initiated by the younger teachers affects the decision-making mechanism prevailing in the communal assembly sessions. The customary principle of consensus, which in many villages successfully avoids intralocal polarizations along minority and majority votes and softens confrontations between "winners" and "losers", has the obvious disadvantage of all too frequently turning the assembly sessions into lengthy, tedious and unattractive events. Consequently, the teachers carry through an

⁸ These *barrios* are intralocal residence units into which most of the indigenous villages are divided and whose members share a common, sublocal identity and - apart from the local patron saint - worship an own *barrio* saint.

internal reform, according to which all minor issues are decided by the principle of voting and majority decisions, nearly always taken by acclamation. Nevertheless, all communal assemblies keep the principle of consensus for those decisions which affect central aspects of community life and whose enforcement - for example, against reluctant external agents - thus will also require the participation of the whole village.

THE STRUGGLE FOR LOCAL SELF-DETERMINATION

Throughout the eighties, several indigenous communities abandoned their passive role as mere recipients of externally conceived development projects. As resistance against governmental measures which are only of benefit to a tiny minority of the local population or to external intermediaries grew in many villages, the local authorities felt the necessity of defining their communities' real priorities, of specifying their own project proposals and of elaborating the details of how to carry them out and to finance them. In order to be able to cope with such a bureaucratic endeavour, the communal assemblies as well as their local authorities once again turned to the younger returnees.

Thus, in nearly every village the indigenous intelligentsia was entrusted with the task of writing down each of the development priorities fixed in the local assembly and of defining the specific measures to be taken. As these project proposals specify not only the requested external resources, but also the resources contributed by the community itself through collective *faenas*, the assembly and the elected authorities had to approve the whole project drafts before turning them to external development agencies.

As a result of this cyclic process, the community started to closely and permanently participate in the global procedure of elaborating "its own" project. The success or failure of such a self-managed project depends on the intense and often difficult and tense collaboration which necessarily has to evolve between the communal *cargos*, the council of elders, the young teachers and/or agronomists. All these different local actors start to realize that the elaboration of their own projects is a much more laborious task than the habitual attitude of "waiting for the expert from the capital". Nevertheless, a variety of different experiences made with craft, forestry, educational and cultural projects in several Purhépecha villages⁹ show that the community's intimate participation in the elaboration of a project will decisively increase its eagerness to carry it out, even though the whole village needs to turn up in the state capital to exercise pressure on the relevant institution.

THE RISE OF ETHNO-REGIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

As the state and its development agencies are not willing to recognize the community as an independent agent of development, the village is forced to strengthen its negotiating position *vis-à-vis* its governmental counterparts. Thus, since the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties, in different Mexican regions the communities are undertaking a process of regionalizing their level of organization in order to overcome their normal

⁹ These self-managed projects of community development are analyzed by Dietz (1997),

political isolation.¹⁰ The starting point for the emergence of a regional convergence of the communities' interests once again is formed by the local intellectuals, commissioned by their respective local assemblies to externally represent their villages and their projects. Bilingual teachers, agronomists, forestry experts and "culture promoters" from different neighbouring villages start to regain old contacts inside trade unions, political parties and government institutions. Together with some experienced local authorities, due to their success in negotiating with external agencies regionally recognized as "natural leaders", the returnees build up an informal network of relations which at the beginning are purely personal, but which later on lead into the establishment of a "coalition" of the different communities' shared interests. Along the periodic assemblies held on a regional level, the local authorities and their respective external affairs representatives join the nascent network, exchange their main problems and claims, and discuss possible solutions.

These regional assemblies, held by turn in different villages, proceed in a ritualized and diplomatic, although often tense way. Above all in the central plateau region, ancient conflicts over the boundaries of communal lands persist, conflicts which originate from colonial land titles that contain mutually overlapping boundary demarcations. Consequently, during the regional sessions the generation of younger teachers tries to emphasize the region's common features beyond local particularities, whereas the older *cargos* tend to highlight their localism and their differences from neighbouring villages. As a compromise, in this first phase of the regional network, the assemblies limit themselves to

¹⁰ The following analysis of the rise and consolidation of an ethno-regional movement is based on the mentioned ethnographic data as well as on unpublished archive records of the emerging indigenous organizations.

formulating shared preoccupations and claims *vis-à-vis* the external agents - government bureaucracies, development agencies and non-governmental organizations.

In 1991 and 1992, the coincidence of three different factors accelerated the "ethnic revival" in many indigenous regions of Mexico:

- In the first place, the local population's interest and participation in elections,, which has shifted from the national to the municipal sphere since the obviously fraudulent 1988 presidential election, is generally perceived as disappointing; despite the returnees' insistence on the necessity of voting and expressing dissidence through polls, an increasing number of their peasant neighbours are deeply concerned about the resulting internal polarization of the community. As a consequence of the spread of violence after the following municipal elections, the indigenous peasants massively abandoned party politics as a channel of participation.
- On the other hand, the returned indigenous intellectuals will actively participated in the controversial debate which arose even before 1992 in the context of the Quincentennial festivities on the multiethnic composition of Mexico and its indigenous peoples' right to claim an "ethnic and cultural difference". Highly aware of their public impact on a national and even continental level (Hale 1994), these intellectuals painstakingly elaborated a new ethno-regional discourse aimed at overcoming the traditionally localist limits of the indigenous identity horizon.
- It is, however, not this new elite discourse, but a third political factor which has succeeded in mobilizing even the traditionalist councils of elders beyond the

ancient, paralyzing conflicts between communities over land: the decision taken by the Salinas de Gortari administration to modify the Mexican Constitution's article 27, thereby canceling the agrarian reform process and promoting the individualization and privatization of communal land tenure.

NACIÓN PURHÉPECHA, AS AN EXAMPLE

In the studied region, even before this constitutional reform took effect, at the end of 1991 the external affairs representatives of the Purhépecha villages summoned a massively attended regional assembly of all communities, where the decision was taken to defend by all means the communal land tenure against the state's intrusion into the communities' customary sovereignty. The resulting manifesto, the *Decreto de la Nación Purhépecha*, signed by the local authorities of the whole region, was retrospectively interpreted as the founding moment of a new, ethno-regional organization, called *Ireta P'orhecha / Nación Purhépecha*. This new type of organization arose from an informal coalition of communities that declare themselves to be sovereign *vis-à-vis* a nation-state which dares to defy the customary essence of the community's self-definition. As for the regional organization the communal sovereignty remains inviolable, *Nación Purhépecha* still is considered to be merely an intercommunal alliance, which is not allowed to create centralized agencies beyond the regional assembly of local representatives and its ad-hoc commissions of delegations appointed by the assembly. The rotating and decentralized type of organization was chosen to avoid the consolidation of internal hierarchies and executive staff, too easily exposed to bribe or repression taken by government institutions, as past experiences with formerly independent peasant and indigenous organizations have shown.

Besides, the permanent rotation of ranks and assembly locations aims at promoting and strengthening a comprehensive Purhépecha identity that overcomes the limits of the still strong communal identities.

The regional organization suffers from the same problem as its member communities: it lacks an officially recognized legal status. Accordingly, its range of activities comprises two different spheres. On the one hand, it continues to function as a regional catalyst of local problems and claims. The assemblies held every week or fortnight in different villages gather a large variety of local claims - the enlargement of a primary school, the drilling of a well for drinking water, the extension of electricity, the recognition of communal boundaries etc. - and present them as a common catalogue to the institutions concerned with each of the claims.

The obvious advantage of this procedure consists in the collective capacity of a whole region and not only in a single community reacting against the usual governmental and bureaucratic negligence or unwillingness to solve the local problems. In order to put pressure on the responsible agencies, the measures of the regional assembly include massive "visits" of the concerned institution's headquarters, press conferences and rallies in the state capital Morelia, as well as blockades of vital roads surrounding the Purhépecha region. It is owing to this explicitly political practice that the younger bilingual teachers have succeeded in stimulating a new attitude among their neighbours: instead of submissively asking the government to help them, now they start claiming rights they have as Mexican citizens *vis-à-vis* "their" nation-state. The formerly "poor indians" are becoming self-conscious citizens struggling for their legitimate minimal demands.

Apart from jointly requesting governmental development initiatives, in the last few years a new terrain of collective action has emerged. As the majority of agencies tend to retreat from rural development or limit their activities to the distribution of financial resources without carrying out any project of their own, *Nación Purhépecha* is forced by its member communities to expand its range of actions to the elaboration of projects and the search for financial support. The communal assemblies and authorities prefer to pass on these new tasks to the regional assembly and its specialized commissions in order to take advantage of the range of the required professional and technical know-how existing in the region as a whole and not only in their own village. Thus, the regional organization is transformed into a new and influential agent of development, currently carrying out projects such as the establishment of a supralocal craft training and trading centre, the creation of a bilingual and bicultural highschool for agroforestry and the promotion and recovery of family-based subsistence maize agriculture.¹¹

TOWARDS REGIONAL AUTONOMY

Apart from their economic and social impact, these regional pioneer projects, which are jointly self-managed by representatives of different indigenous villages, are above all politically important. Since the emerging regional organizations no longer confine themselves to the articulation of specific demands directed towards the state, the coalitions of communities are implementing their own development projects, thus emerging as an innovative political factor in the whole of Mexico. Consequently, the government first tries

¹¹ These projects are detailed in Dietz (1997).

to counteract the potentially new power focus. However, as its possibilities of recovering the initiative in rural development are limited by the prevailing neoliberal strategy, after massive mobilizations carried out throughout 1993 and 1994 in different regions the state governments finally have been forced to recognize the ethno-regional organizations at least as an informal, but legitimate counterpart and negotiator on behalf of the local population.

Currently, the regional coalitions are striving for official recognition by the state agencies and for a legal status which would not only entitle them to obtain governmental as well as non-governmental financial support for their projects, but also would imply access to the few, but important channels of participation inside *indigenismo* agencies and other state-run institutions. In the long run, this process of consolidation is supposed to result in the establishment of a new, intermediate level of regional administration, situated above the municipal government and below the state. This regional council of self-administration would, however, require a constitutional reform, as the political project of autonomy aims at explicitly legalizing two de facto already existing actors:

- the indigenous community, on the one hand, whose customary structure still is not constitutionally recognized, but remains subject to the - mostly mestizo-controlled - municipal government;
- and the supra-municipal level of a regional assembly of communities, on the other hand.

Since 1992, these regional coalitions have emerged in different indigenous zones of Mexico. Nevertheless, the subsequent debate on regional territorial autonomy and on the necessary constitutional reforms was definitely enforced by the appearance of an armed movement in Chiapas in 1994, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN).

According to the position of *Nación Purhépecha* as well as of other regional coalitions, the regional autonomy also adopted by the EZLN as one of its core claims would not mean a territorial segregation, but a redefinition of the Mexican nation-state and its relation towards the indigenous communities. In several of the local regional assemblies attended in the Purhépecha region, nearly all local authorities warned their younger fellows, the external affairs representatives, that autonomy necessarily starts on the communal level and that a future process of regionalizing local autonomy must not exempt the nation-state from its development obligations in the indigenous regions.

A HYBRID SOCIAL ACTOR

The regionally conceived self-managed projects implemented both by the villages and by their ethno-regional organizations emerge in the political context of the ongoing debates on the status of the indigenous community and on regional autonomy. Even if an evaluation of these projects and their viability still seems premature, their political impact is already evident. The "alliance of interests" forged between the reintegrated indigenous intellectuals, originally promoted by *indigenismo* institutions, on the one hand, and the traditional local authorities, which have always been marginalized by the same institutions, on the other hand, has already succeeded in revitalizing and re-inventing the community. In this process, the bilingual teachers' main contribution consists in recovering communal traditions of reciprocity, self-management and local sovereignty. Nevertheless, the same actors, trained in a culturally distant, urban world, but refunctionalized by their peasant neighbours, have also consciously promoted exogeneous cultural innovations of local life in the village. As a result, these "cultural translators" are decolonizing themselves, abandoning the

integrationist approach of *indigenismo*, but at the same time they are taking advantage of their hybrid cultural legacy,¹² thus subverting the nation-state's original project. The "modernized", hybrid product of this re-encounter between bilingual teachers and subsistence peasants is the contemporary indigenous community, a new political subject which is decisively speeding up the democratization of the Mexican countryside, still deeply shaped by the clientelistic and authoritarian structures of the dominant political hierarchies.

The transition from local to regional activities and mobilizations, which is currently taking place, constitutes an important turning-point, as the innovative political and developmental practices initiated on the regional level will overcome the historical isolation of the indigenous community. In this context, new organizations such as *Nación Purhépecha* are achieving a double integration of "tradition" and "modernity": on the one hand, by reducing ancient intercommunal conflicts over boundaries and consciously promoting an ethno-regional identity beyond the local particularities, the regional organization manages to integrate the rural population on a regional level. Moreover, on the other hand, the village coalition's political activities, particularly its insistence on the nation-state's accountability and responsibility towards its indigenous citizens and its struggle for establishing regional councils of self-government, succeeds in strengthening the local population's participation in national affairs as Mexican citizens. Hence, it is paradoxically an independent and overtly dissident ethno-regional organization that just achieves what *indigenismo* supposedly has been aiming at during the last fifty years of exogeneous development: an equal participation and integration of the indigenous communities and their inhabitants not

¹² For the notion of cultural hybridity, cf. García Canclini (1989) and Bhabha (1994).

only into the nation-state, now itself redefined as a pluricultural hybrid, but likewise into the multiethnic Mexican society.

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