Indigenous groups in Latin America: emergence of identity and prospects for self-determination

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Indigenous Groups in Latin America: Emergence of Identity and Prospects for Self-Determination

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When discussing the history and formulation of what today is called the Americas (North, Central, and South) it is almost instinctive for one to begin to conceptualize the beginning of its history stemming from the arrival of Western Europeans and their successors. A large part of this is due to the simple fact that history books and education have been written, ironically, by the very minority that established institutions in these areas; thus their very arrival becomes the reference point of their history. Yet, what is so readily forgotten, and sometimes barely acknowledged, is the rich history and civilization that existed pre-Anglo arrival in the Americas. Although some research and anthropological work has been done, the prejudices held by those conquering civilizations and the atrocities they imposed upon the native populations of the Americas may well never be known.

Out of fear of getting too enthralled in historical rhetoric and debate, for the purposes of this essay, I will assume that the extent of oppression and degradation imposed on the native populations of these regions is assumed if not fully understood. Centuries of state governments and politics have attempted to downplay the existence and equitable treatment of these people by treating their indigenous roots as barbaric and savage. What has resulted from this institutionalized racism has been societies that perceive the expression of these indigenous roots in society (i.e., customs, phenotype, arts, etc.) as backward and threatening. It can even be said that members of these societies are at a disadvantage and shunned for such expressions and have thus begun to lose contact with their indigenous roots. Loyalty and nationalism to the state has replaced any sort of primordial connection that people may have to each other.

The political and economic arenas have also been subject to European influence as infrastructures, institutions, and governments have been using stencil models that had little or no
consideration to the unique nature of these cultures. The strong presence and the military role in
government present in Central and South America along with rampant political corruption is
evidence of these inadequate structures. What has resulted is an environment of elitism and class
struggle that continues to emulate the models established historically. Not only do these models
stifle positive change but are in direct conflict with the primordial manner of governing present in
these societies pre-Anglo arrival.

The true sufferers of the aforementioned turmoil has not been the states per se but rather
the majority of the population that have little say in the official workings of the government and
the policy it creates. The mass constitutes all those of indigenous roots, mestizo backgrounds,
and the economic lower classes of society. Considered as such one can see the reality of an
ethnol class forming and growing. Consideration of Central and South America up until the last
half-decade or so as a Third World region is evidence of the violation of basic human and
humane rights to which these masses have been subjected.

The hope for future leadership for Latin America and its diverse population is to draw on
these indigenous roots of it’s past as a medium towards achieving social change through national
mobilization. By drawing on this rich history the hope is that it would serve as a common
rallying factor under which the peoples of the various states in Latin America can unify. In turn
creating a common consciousness and vision amongst the populations in which they see
themselves as one true nation historically divided. The contemporary examples of the beginning
of such a consciousness is exemplified by the political and social mobilization by various
indigenous groups in several countries. Although they are currently rallying together separated
by state, there is a recognition that the current society and value structures in which they
respectively live are unacceptable and that they are searching for change. The assumption and
expectation is that once this common consciousness is recognized then the environment and mental perceptions would be ripe for a concerted effort by all vested parties to work towards positive social change for marginalized groups and decaying political/economic structures.

**Another Fundamentalism?**

The post-Cold War national and ethnic configuration of what is now a ‘global village’ is comparable to having a neighborhood in which a new family moves in every week. The collapse of empires and the process of decolonization has resulted in a flood of ethnic groups of all sizes, religious groups, and even geographic regions all seeking equal recognition of their rights and independence. Ethnic wars between Serbs and Croats, Palestinians and Israeli’s; and religious wars between Hindu’s and Muslims, Catholics and Protestants, and the Buddhists in Tibet are only a handful of the unrest that has surfaced in the past decade. Needless to say that every nation and people, majority or minority, is affected and influenced by this turmoil, Latin America included.

In his analytical ground breaking book *Jihad vs. McWorld* Benjamin Barber discusses the interdependence of consumerism and tribalism (or fundamentalism) and how these competing ideologies are the two most powerful forces shaping our world today. In general summation, the author uses the term ‘McWorld’ to describe the growing Western ideology of consumerism, viewing all populations as potential markets, and even the suppression of individuality. In turn, the term ‘Jihad’ is utilized to describe the mobilization of various ethnic and religious factions towards a fundamentalist platform in which violence and exclusion is a norm. Barber describes
this process as “...a rabid response to colonialism and imperialism and their economic children, capitalism and modernity; it is diversity run amok, multiculturalism turned cancerous...”¹

The current proposal being argued in which the primordial indigenous ties of the various peoples of Latin America are utilized as a rallying factor and a source of unity may conjure up images of the violent movements that Barber discusses. Although said proposal denounces the use of such extreme fundamentalism the reality of such fears are undeniable. Barber explains the simple process in stating

“The phenomenon to which I apply the phrase have innocent enough
callings: identity politics and multicultural diversity can represent
strategies of a free society trying to give expression to its diversity.
What ends as Jihad may begin as a simple search for local identity,
some set of common personal attributes to hold out against the numbing
and neutering uniformities of industrial modernization and the colonizing
culture of McWorld.”²

This process then becomes shockingly familiar when considering the politicization of Native identity all over Latin America. They too represent a minority that is in sharp contrast to the growing consumerism and state power that not only threatens their livelihood off the land but their rights as citizens of their countries. Violence and exclusion are not tools of society but rather powerful weapons that although may call for attention will only serve to reinforce the very ideologies that these minority groups seek to counter.

As an alternative, or medium, between the extremes of minority oppression and violent fundamentalism I offer a conceptualization contrived by the aforementioned author called ‘civil society.’ It is described as “…recast[ing] our civic attitudes, which is possible only in a vibrant

¹ Barber, Benjamin. Jihad Vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism is Reshaping the World. P.11
² Ibid p.9
civil society where responsibilities and rights are joined together in a seamless web of
community self-government.”"³ Such a process would entail breaking away from the traditional
clashing dyad of government versus ‘the people’ and taking the bold step of reconstructing such
institutions so they represent their population in a more democratic (not in the political sense)
manner. More specifically it means for people to live “responsible, autonomously yet on
common ground, in self-determining communities somehow still open to others, with tolerance
and mutual respect yet a firm sense of their own values.” ⁴

What results from this medium is an environment where people are emphasized as
citizens and government is for the public good of all its citizens. The concept of assumed and
expected privilege is replaced with the common respect and recognition of all parties. No longer
will civic institutions such as churches, cultural groups, schools, etc. have to petition the
government to attempt to influence them for recognition; they will now form part of what
constitutes the new society to which all are citizens and all are responsible to the society.
However, Barber notes (and realistically so) that in order for there to be a “…civil society’s own
interactive representative assembly…the democratic citizen must precede the democratization of
government…an individual who has acquired a public voice and understands himself to belong
to a wider community, who sees herself as sharing goods with others.”⁵ I believe that this
realization and process has begun and can flourish stemming from the indigenous movements at
present and the one proposed here.

³ Ibid p.276
⁴ Ibid p.279
⁵ Ibid p.286
**Tribalism: Distinctions and Contributions**

Since their first encounters with aboriginal groups European settlers have followed an agenda of physical, ideological, religious, and cultural oppression with the sole purpose of domination over these groups who they considered inferior. Subsequent centuries of war, political upheavals, and class struggles have only continued to mimic these same policies who seek to deny rights to those who are culturally and ethnically different. Thus, it is somewhat logical for those living in such communities, who have been indoctrinated all their lives to think in such a manner, to struggle with the concept of Indigenous autonomy. This concept seems to run contrary to the popular belief that such groups are incompetent in such a capacity and that they represent some manifestation of a threatening force.\(^6\)

From the beginning of colonization well into the three hundred years thereafter of Spanish dominance in the region, the Indian population was subject to slavery, economic deprivation, and a complicated class system in which their ethnicity was the basic criteria for maintaining them as inferiors. When the Spanish were eventually ousted from their sphere of influence by European powers these discriminations continued not only on an ethnic basis but also on an ideological one. Hector Díaz Polanco suggests that as these new powers embarked on eliminating Spanish influence and deconstructing the class systems, the Indigenous populations that were historically oppressed were somehow excluded. The rationale was that in the name of "nation-building" all manifestations of the colonial legacy had to be eliminated from the future nation; this included Indian identities. Thus all attempts were made to exclude them from the

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\(^6\) Polanco, Hector Díaz. *Indigenous Peoples In Latin America: The Quest for Self-Determination*. p.ix
new definition of the nation as well as excluding them from benefits such as representation and education.\(^7\)

These debilitating Spanish policies, however, were never able to take full root in all indigenous populations. Is estimated that by 1570 virtually the entire Indian populations of the Caribbean were eliminated as a result of forced labor and disease. In the areas in which populations *did* survive diseases such as typhus, dysentery, measles, small pox, influenza, and even bubonic plague rampaged the population. By the beginning of the sixteen hundreds the Indian population of Mexico had dropped about 90 percent and reduced to a fifth in the Andean regions.\(^8\) These populations gradually recovered from these severe threats of genocide as interracial relations were rampant. Continual introduction of new populations such as the Portuguese in Brazil, African slaves, and varying European land owners and the persistent distribution of remaining indigenous populations all contributed to this gradual recovery.

However, these growing numbers did not come without its price as traditional indigenous lifestyle would never be the same. Many times used as a means to accessing indigenous populations, Christianity was imposed on almost all of the Indian populations and thus traditional beliefs were deemed pagan. Festivals and celebrations were outlawed and there was a church erected in almost every village across the Americas.\(^9\)

Gender and family life also had repercussions from European dominance. Many traditional communities had traditions of polygamy that was vital to the maintenance of the conceptualization and demographics of community. This had the most profound effect on those populations that connected their leadership to hereditary lines of nobility. Also, since labor such

\(^7\) Ibid p.9  
\(^9\) Ibid p.193
as planting and building were also based on gender differences and family relationship, traditional tribal lifestyle was almost impossible to continue.\textsuperscript{10}

Spanish and European influence no doubt had its impact on the political life of Indian villages and their governance. Although both societies respectively had leadership backgrounds based on hereditary lines, the colonial powers decided to use the fact to their advantage. They set up the political infrastructure in the varying villages they occupied in the form of municipal governments with councilmen, magistrates, and governors. The colonial powers sent a clear message to these populations by actually retaining some of the leaders of the traditional villages; these men were forced to govern and legislate under the new politics. Indians of the Oaxaca region in Mexico, the kurak in the Andes, and the tlatoani in Central Mexico were all unfortunate examples of these policies.\textsuperscript{11}

This discourse recounting colonial injustices serves not only to illustrate the colonial and subsequent injustices, but also to illustrate the unique and distinct culture that indigenous populations posses and wish to preserve. Although one may be inclined to accept that the common anthropological perspective that contact with contrasting cultures is inevitable, it does not and should not follow logically that such contact should result in cultural genocide. We must recognize that the survivors of these populations have, for almost three hundred years, continued to precisely preserve the remnants of their traditional cultures. Dr. Martin, a specialist on colonial social history in Latin America, notes that:

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...Spanish colonization and subsequent political and economic change never fully succeeded in eradicating indigenous peoples or their culture. Colonial subjects
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\textsuperscript{10} Ibid p.193
struggled against enormous odds to preserve functional elements of indigenous

culture and social organization... they retained elements of indigenous religious

and political tradition under the guise of outward conformity to Spanish practice.”

As an illustrative example of indigenous cultural preservation and uniqueness, we turn to

their intellectual endeavors. For centuries these populations have utilized and maintained

medical knowledge of using their biological environment. Continued urbanization and

encroachment is a major issue that threatens this practice and most importantly its continuance.

In 1988 indigenous leaders and international scientists met at the First International Congress of

Ethnobiology at which the discussion of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) was the key

issue. The Congress concluded that “…the application of these proven alternative models is vital
to the long-term sustainable development of our planet. [emphasis added]” However, the long-
term implications of said declaration have ecological and political repercussions.

In an insightful article on social movements and ecology, David Carruthers points

out that:

"The effort to conserve, defend, and revalidate the reservoir of indigenous knowledge is

inseparable from the effort to conserve, defend, and revalidate indigenous societies

themselves... The defiance of TEK stands against the drive towards homogenization,

embracing cultural diversity and the rich and varied knowledge and practice contained therein.”

The author continues to discuss the political ramifications in stating that the fact that this

knowledge resides in numerous indigenous groups, the leadership aspect of mobilizing its

11 Ibid p.194
12 Ibid p.211-212
14 Ibid
collection is profound. One must consider not only the role that indigenous communities play in distributing this knowledge but also the interactions that will subsequently occur with state and international representatives. Now that the ‘tables have turned’ and indigenous groups are seen as valuable, it inherently changes the power structure and recognition in the relationship between minority and majority.

Considering the current trend towards global decolonization and the crumbling of empires exemplified by events in Northern Ireland and the former Soviet republics, respectively, and the political mobilization of various ethnic groups, it is no surprise that indigenous groups have risen to the occasion. If these groups have struggled to maintain their culture and identity for centuries, longer than the existence of some nations, then why should their efforts be hindered now, at a key turning point for global society? The requests for autonomy are not unique and, in retrospect, seem rightly justified.

*The Emerging Vision*

In the past many leadership texts have dealt with vision as an abstraction that is ultimately created, although sometimes with collaborative efforts, by the leader in which he/she plays a deciding role in synthesizing and expressing said vision. Although some definitions may vary, the general atmosphere is that the leader has significant influence on the formulation of the vision. For the purpose of this intellectual experiment I propose perceiving vision as a conceptual creation constructed by the nation of individuals that constitute Latin America that would inherently entail a vital component of visualization. Senge describes visualization and imagery as "An effective way to focus the subconscious...The subconscious seems especially
receptive to goals in line with our deeper aspirations and values." Although the author’s work
is primarily focussed on the capitalist private sector, his insights into the effectiveness of vision
are universally applicable.

Thus, the vision for the people of Latin America becomes the eventual and gradual work
towards correcting social injustices and restructuring current socio/political structures that have
dominated the past centuries. Jair Londono, an illiterate and militant peasant involved in the
National Association of Peasant Concession Holders in Columbia, expresses this vision in his
address to the Latin American Seminar on Agrarian Reform and Colonization. “We shall
struggle for a change of structures, for the overthrow of a capitalist, oligarchical, persecuting
government. Those are the goals of a peasant movement, to achieve a government which is truly
of the people.” Even though a coup d’etat is not necessarily the suggested route for our
purposes, the sentiment he expresses and the reality of initiation of radical change by the
peasantry and the marginalized ethnoclasses of society. Although this vision seems to be a broad
statement, the purpose is intentional. After all, there are few members of the Latin American
community, or any community for that matter, that would not see the benefit of positive social
reform. The only ones who might oppose it would be the minority (not in ethnic terms) elite who
have a vested interest in the status quo.

In an enlightening piece on the politicization of Indian rights (that in large part served as
inspiration for this work), Alison Brysk outlines how “Transnational mobilization of ethnic group
or pan-indigenous identity could often overcome fragmented and even contradictory local
identities based in village, clan, or class.” The source of the tremendous possibilities of such a

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15 Senge, Peter M. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of The Learning Organization*, p.166
17 Brysk, Alison. "Turning Weakness into Strength: The Internationalization of Indian Rights" p.39
mobilization is due in large part to the fact that "...it is a social movement based on identity and consciousness rather than objective material position." In relation to the vision and visualization I'm proposing for the positive future of Latin America (explained further later), a vital component still missing is the common consciousness that would allow people to commit to this vision. However, Brysk's findings shed a light of optimism on the possibility of a growing consciousness.

Like most marginalized groups in a given society seeking redress for past injustices, indigenous groups all over Latin America have mobilized politically to petition their respective states for action. However, official government action has been shortcoming if present at all. In addition, as a result of the lack of economic and infrastructural resources such mobilizations have been for the most part fruitless and unorganized. Thus, as a reactive solution to this common dilemma, many such groups have decided to turn to international non-government organizations for support in their endeavors. Thus a paradox is created in that local groups found support and progress for their local problems through international mediums.¹⁸

For example, a large impetus to create and recognize politically mobilized Indian groups in the Americas was the when the Organization of American States (OAS) established the Inter-American Indigenous Institute in 1940. The United Nations held a caucus in 1993 in which activists and delegates formed the "Working Group on Indigenous Peoples" as a forum for these activists to state their grievances in a neutral setting. In addition, indigenous groups have and continue to receive economic support from international advocacy groups like Cultural Survival and OXFAM America, and the Inter-American Foundation. As a matter of fact, Cultural Survival has even supported the building of national Indian groups in Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru.

¹⁸ ibid
The Brazilian group Central Indígena del Oriente Boliviano (CIDOB) has received support from Cultural Survival as well as from the Inter-American Foundation, National Wildlife Federation, and other international groups and advocates. ¹⁹

Considering the necessities and conveniences of modern communications, these international groups and their local partners make every measure to inform others and spread their message. Tours are created by leaders of these groups, with financial support from international money, as a resource to inform others. Interest groups as far as Europe lobby in various countries on issues such as human rights violations. Even private organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank have gotten involved by assisting Latin American leaders create the Indigenous People’s Fund. All these efforts are supported by the distribution of facts, stories, and needs through the use of coalitions, meetings, mailings, and even e-mail. ²⁰

**The Alternatives**

Assuming that the current national situations remain status quo and further indigenous movements do not arise in Latin America, and state governments continue to pursue policies that exclude and/or endanger indigenous groups, then the future of indigenous lifestyles is in jeopardy. Considering the context in which the international systems of government find themselves: where technology and communications continue to grow, economic unions are being formed, and fundamentalism and ethnic wars raging, the time seems right for these groups to seek recognition and create a solid identity. However, counter alternatives to an autonomous, indigenous-based nation living within a civil society are, too say the least, hardly attractive.

¹⁹ Ibid p.43-44
A possible route of action to counter the deprivation and debilitating state policies would be for these indigenous groups to splinter themselves off from mainstream society and live and govern themselves independently. This suggestion is not too far from the extremism Barber discussed earlier in which the consequences is a fearsome backlash from the ruling majority. In fact, I would venture to say that contemporary times would make it virtually impossible for such a large population, lacking an independent homeland, to remain isolated in such a manner. A prime example are the Yanomami in the deep forests of Brazil who have made every effort to isolate themselves and their culture and had done so successfully for centuries. Until, however, their lands were literally invaded by expanding industrialization and they were subsequently forced, for their very survival, to deal with their new reality. The result has been a modification of their lifestyle, religion, and even their manner of governance as they send representatives to fight for the very rights that were previously unchallenged. With such profound consequences, in the best of cases, such an alternative is illogical and unsound.

On the other hand, on the other end of the spectrum, we encounter an alternative, which has been internationally accepted by anthropologists and even served as a base in the formation of North American identity, eventual integration. As a necessary stipulation for U.S. citizenship centuries ago perhaps this policy may have served a democratic purpose in the pursuit of nation-building. However, in the modern age of minority political mobilization and decolonization, this policy hardly seems to find its place.

Regardless of its present connotations it is a harsh reality that numerous state policies have focussed on using such a method as a means to promote “progress” and gain legitimacy for their government. This process usually takes the shape of “..transform[ing] of independent tribal populations into ethnic minorities within a nation, the goal being to institute ‘progressive’

\[20\] Ibid p.45
change, which ideally would be freely chosen by the population.” What results is that “Integration policies usually anticipate the eventual loss of ethnic distinctions and in practice often merge imperceptibly into assimilation policies.”

An unfortunate and vivid example of such a practice is the treatment of the Native populations in North America. In the attempt to right past injustices Native populations were given minority status as a means to “protect” them from discrimination and even given separate land where they could continue their lifestyle. Yet, the state continued its depriving policies in the form of religious intolerance and persecution, promotion of gambling and alcohol on reservations, and even violent repression by the F.B.I of groups like the American Indian Movement (A.I.M). The cultural homogeneity that these groups represent is portrayed as a threatening element to the solidarity of the state and thus all efforts are made to “normalize” them into assimilation. Thus the alternative of cultural integration/assimilation hardly becomes an attractive alternative.

This ‘middle ground’ between integrationist policies and isolationism is not without its critics. Respected anthropologist Dr. Héctor Díaz Polanco, in a noteworthy piece on indigenous self-determination, illustrates his perception of what this emerging native consciousness represents. Although he recognizes that “...integrationism, seeking to foreground national dynamics, ended up underrating plurality and reinstalling a disguised evolutionist ethnocentrism...,” which only further emphasizes the aforementioned argument, he reprimands contemporary indigenous consciousness. He argues that “ethnicism,” his description of this phenomenon, “resorts to an extreme culturalism to emphasize plurality and thereby loses touch with the national dimension.”

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22 Polanco, Hector Diaz. *Indigenous Peoples in Latin America: The Quest for Self-Determination*. p.73
that he holds no prejudice against the existence of plurality. The main argument rests on the
premise that said groups consider themselves a “Fourth World” apart from the rest of society and
construct an exclusionary faction that ignores loyalty to a national society. Yet, later in his
writings Díaz admits that:

“Dominant groups have never ignored the sociocultural complexity of national societies;
instead, they have made use of it to build their domination, spreading their hegemony
over the largest number of sectors, including, of course, the so-called ethnic groups.”23

In the same piece, the author argues that the plurality that indigenous movements represent is
detrimental to the state while simultaneously recognizing the state utilizes domination and
oppression of minorities as a means of nation-building. Unless he is prescribing submission and
assimilation as a means for cultural survival, it is difficult to take his criticisms as objective and
valid counter arguments against this emerging consciousness.

**Vision and Visualization**

One of the most powerful and enduring examples of successful vision, and appropriately
in Latin America, is the example of Pre- and Post- Castro Cuba in terms of its nationalism and
consciousness as a people. Pre-Castro contemporary Cuba was dominated by ethnocentric
structures and ideals that favored class separation and predominant racist under- and over-tones.
It was common to see the darker skinned and poorer members of Cuban society consistently
marginalized and exploited. In his quest for a free Cuba and liberation from capitalist ties, Castro
saw this incessant racism as an obstacle to strong nationalism and a strong state. In fact, such

23 Ibid p.76
racist ideology was perceived as counter revolutionary in that it promoted class differences as opposed to the socialist integrative model that formed the platform of the revolution.

What the leader envisioned was a society of Cubans that 'visualized' themselves not as darker/lighter but rather as simply Cubans invested in their strength and pride as a common people. Castro's subsequent policies to outlaw racism and improve educational programs and reform were all a part of this detailed vision of unified Cuban nationalism embedded with revolutionary zeal. Thus the vision the revolutionary leader created transcended racial boundaries and pre-Revolutionary structures by offering an ideological vision and conscious visualization under which all Cubans could rally regardless of race or class.

The vision the Cuban leader perceived was so passionate and involved that it was through his fervent speeches and authoritative and symbolic presence that he continued to keep the Cuban people invested in the revolution. A large focus was thus to get the entire population involved in some aspect of the process of nation-building in order to strengthen the consciousness of unity. Programs such as literacy campaigns, health reform, voluntary labor projects, and neighborhood involvement epitomized his attempts and served to rally support for the revolution. 24

However, considering in retrospect the effects of such campaigns, the important factor is not whether the Cuban people suffered from the revolution but rather the perceptions that the population held. The concept of "direct democracy" the revolution emphasized allotted to the population that their needs were being met and that their leaders were not that far different or accessible that their very neighbors. Thus, not only do the leaders have an involved role and concern for the people, but every individual became vested in the revolution and looked forward to hopeful times. Selbin

24 Selbin, Eric. Modern Latin American Revolutions, p.49
expresses that "This, in turn, furled people’s vision of the future. Suddenly the possibilities seemed limitless, and for many there was little question that their children would have greater opportunities and a better future than they had. Underlying all this was a pervasive sense of empowerment."²⁵

As further evidence of the possibility and the reality of mobilization amongst historically marginalized groups in Latin America, the following is an excerpt from anthropologist Zbigniew Marcin Kowalewski and his paper on cultural dependency:

"Since the middle or end of the 1960’s communities in certain rural zones of Latin America have been changing their position within, or have begun to break with, the traditional framework of political and cultural relations corresponding to the social relationships of production and dependency. These communities, constituting that sector of Latin American society which has been formed by the modes of production inherent in dependent, peripheral capitalism, are exceeding the objectively narrow limits characteristic of agents of a small mercantile production. They are using the autonomous historical initiative of the peasant to provide human elements, not only as a base, but also as a vanguard for revolutionary movements which are emerging from their midst. And they are planning the conquest of State power by the peasantry in alliance with the working class."²⁶

Again, as with the example of Castro, the concept of revolution arises. Although Castro intended for literal overthrow of State power by violent means, this consistent reference by these and various other authors deems analyzation from a more objective perspective. I believe that when one considers how a social mobilization by a large group of people, intending to make such profound changes in society the perception of a revolution is almost inevitable. However, the ‘revolution’ being proposed herein is more a revolution of popular perceptions and social values as compared to the common image of revolution as a violent means to reach a desired goal. Max

²⁵ Ibid
²⁶ Sevilla- Casas, Elias. Western Expansion and Indigenous Peoples: The Heritage of Las Casas. p. 265
Weber expresses this sentiment in stating that “…one function of leadership is to bring society to at least accept and perhaps adopt new moral principles because new conditions or newly organized groups can not be absorbed under old morality.”

Thus it seems only natural, considering such social change, that such a movement may entail violence and an unstable environment. However, recent mobilizations by various indigenous groups in Latin America defy this perceived notion of social change.

The examples of Cuba and the desire to form new values and morals are not meant to represent the role of revolution, but rather to illustrate the notion of vision and its necessary component of visualization. If a common consciousness is to be formed and utilized as an ideological basis then these are crucial building blocks for numerous indigenous populations in Latin America. Of course the dissemination of information is a dilemma but using contemporary technological and informal communication networks it is possible to keep groups informed of the plights of their indigenous brothers and sisters. In fact, such networks are the key component to beginning to conceptualize collectivity and the common factors that bind all these groups together. Afterall, how are collective solutions going to arise if communal mental images are not used as a base? Contrary to popular belief, such a mentality does not diminish the strive for self-determination and the reality of the heterogeneity of the indigenous population. In fact, it actually strengthens communal consciousness by adding credibility to the demands of these groups by showing the magnitude of past and persistent offenses.

The result of the flooding of the international scene by these local mobilizers is a sowing of a growing consciousness of commonality. Through these interactions members and leaders of these groups will recognize that their respective needs and aspirations as a people are not too far-fetched from each other. In fact, Brysk argues that “…indigenous rights activism has been more

27 Selbin, Eric. Modern Latin American Revolutions. P.80
cohesive, effective, and internationally salient than other forms of Indian political participation, in part because of the diversity of peoples such a movement aspires to represent.” Although it is naïve to assume that there would not be dilemmas in coalitions and integration of the interests of these various groups, one must understand that people naturally fear change and its unsettling nature. Thus Brysk concludes that “.a focus on self-determination rather than concrete cultural content” is necessary in these movements because “.identity is not primordial; it changes as you use it.”

**Institutional Constraints**

In the attempt to construct a solution to the self-determination and autonomy dilemmas we must analyze the present arenas in which these issues are being discussed. At the very local levels of society it is quite obvious that these issues have been discussed, debated, and intellectualized to their fullest extent. Recognition of the centuries long history of indigenous groups and the history of colonial and contemporary injustices to which they have been subjected is evidence enough. However, on the national (state) and international levels these issues vary in the degree to which they have been taken seriously and subsequently acted upon.

On the national level, state governments have only recently taken the initiative to pay lip service to the incessant demands of indigenous groups which usually come in the form of demouncing human rights violations. Mexico was one of the leaders in recognizing indigenous demands of protective rights in the social and economic sectors. One of the main reasons for this

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28 Brysk, Alison. “Turning Weakness into Strength: The Internationalization of Indian Rights." p.41
29 Ibid p.50
premature action are in large part due to the approximately 56 linguistically diverse indigenous groups residing in the country, which constitutes approximately 15% of total population. The other major reason is the international attention the region received in the early eighties due to the uprisings in the southern region of Chiapas by the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) which called for social reform.

Although most state governments have made the politically correct move towards the denunciation of human rights violations,

"...the principles of equality before the law and of nondiscrimination and proclaim, at least formally, absolute respect for individual human rights, Latin American counties rarely recognize the collective rights of ethnic groups, indigenous or otherwise. Indeed, most constitutions in the region do not recognize even the existence of indigenous populations." 31

Mexico made the bold move of constitutional reform in Article IV in 1991. Brazil is also one of the few exceptions, with one of the largest indigenous populations as well, that has made constitutional revisions (Chapter VIII of the 1988 revision) in order to include such populations. Nicaragua also made changes by granting autonomy to Atlantic Coast indigenous communities in the late eighties following civil unrest between Miskito Indians and Sandinistas. In all these cases such actions were a direct result of not only demographic presence of indigenous populations, but also largely due to the social unrest that turned to violence caused by respective groups. This reality is a harsh, paradoxical lesson to absorb during a historical context in which international and national conflicts are attempting to side step physical confrontation as a means of negotiation. If these examples were a precedent for future actions by indigenous groups then civil uprisings would seem like the best manner of attention.

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30 Carruthers, David V. "Indigenous Ecology and the Politics of Linkage in Mexican Social Movements."
32 Ibid
Even considering that "Indians in Latin America suffer the greatest disparity in income and political power relative to the dominant society of any ethnic group in the world," there are have been great obstacles to policy concerning indigenous rights. Bearing in mind the status of the region as 'Third World' only recently reconsidered, Latin American governments such as Brazil and Argentina have embarked on aggressive economic growth in order to attract international investment. Such expansion includes privatization of communal lands occupied by indigenous groups and continued environmental destruction which is unlikely going to subside in the near future.

In addition, the periphery status of most of these groups in the regions a large impetus to future interaction for self-determination. For one the cultures of these groups are so distinct from the dominant groups in their respective society that discrimination and misunderstanding impedes the way for serious consideration. The other perspective of periphery refers to the physical and geographic location of the majority of these groups that reside on the outskirts of the major social, political, and economic centers of society.

On the international level there are two main organizations to which groups can submit a redress of grievances, the United Nations (UN) and the Organization of American States (OAS). Both of which have had their respective troubles providing effective solutions, a main reason why indigenous groups have turned instead to NGO's. In the case of the OAS, regionally relevant, the structure of the organization's charter is purposefully inhibiting and ambiguous. Articles 18 and 19 specifically demand that there be no interference in the domestic affairs of the member states while at the same time another article states that members abide by human rights

34 Ibid p. 48-49
standards and support democracy. Needless to say these can be interpreted in varying degrees to which they may even be contradictory. Another example is Article 16 that allows member nations to conduct their “cultural, political, and economic life freely an naturally” while a later article calls for compliance to a “principle of universal morality.”35 The original intent of the organization was to respect the individuality of the member states, thus the decision for the “one state, one vote” criteria it abides by. The problem posed is that the OAS has little leverage over the actual enforcement of indigenous issues discussed. As a matter of fact, resolutions in the Council of foreign Ministers and the Permanent Council are non-binding.

Similarly, the U.N also has to consistently deal with the issue of jurisdiction and the complexities of intervention. Although the U.N does contain a military element to it, the repercussions of its use are more even more dangerous considering the international level the organization is at and the presence of the all-powerful Security Council.

To be fair the U.N must be accredited to making preliminary movements to respond to the growing dilemma of indigenous rights. In the late eighties the United Nations Commission on Human Rights began drafting the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. However, it was not until November 1995 that this draft was presented to the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP). In fact, the years 1995-2004 has been named “International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People” by the U.N, which has made it their goal to adopt the declaration during this time.36 However, the hindrance of indigenous groups in this political arena is the fact that they have no formal recognition and/or voting powers. Though they are granted access to Working Group meetings, at which they outnumber the delegates tenfold, these groups are mostly barred from attending meetings at the higher level Commission on Human Rights

35 Vaky, Viron P. and Heraldo Munoz. The Future of The Organization of American States. p.40
meetings where voting occurs. Regardless, at the next drafting meeting over sixty NGO’s representing various indigenous groups and human rights organizations were in attendance. A fact that illustrates points made earlier by Brysk.

Unfortunately, though the mere holding of such a meeting is refreshing, the ideological differences expressed by member states was disheartening. The major debate was in the assumptions and understanding of the definition of ‘self-determination’ that the declaration calls for. States such as the U.S., Philippines, Chile, and Argentina expressed concern over the secessionist and territorial implications that such a statement implied. On the other hand, Australia, Norway, and Nicaragua supported the idea of “internal self-determination” and chastised the ambiguous language. France and Japan were opposed to the entire idea.

Another issue was power sharing and the access to decision-making on the state level. Notes from the Working Group state that Bolivia and Nicaragua were fervent supporters while Brazil, Canada, Sweden, and Japan rejected the concept of collective representation “...distinct from their votes as citizens.”

So as not to present all prospects as horribly grim, some recognition should be given to this organization for its bold efforts it did undertake. The presence of whatever NGO’s that were there was a respective jump from previous absentia. The sheer presence of these groups and their expressed demands, if anything, at least serves to illustrate to member nations the faces behind their endeavors. As an example of this Barsh mentions the effects that American Indian members had on the U.S. delegation and its public remarks.

The Solution

What I propose instead is a sort of coalition of leadership to be composed of the leaders of the various indigenous groups that have mobilized as well as other interested parties. The responsibilities of the resulting coalition would be to provide organization to the common interests that the various groups represent as well as serve as the communal voice of all those involved. As a model for such a coalition the concept of a “vanguard party” can be utilized. In his chapter on “Social Revolutionary Leadership” Selbin describes the group in theory as “...a self-selected, self-abnegating, and disciplined revolutionary elite, which seeks to lead a mass-based transformation of society. In practice, however, the vanguard becomes an institution.”\(^{37}\) At first glance such a description may seem to differ little from what is currently defined as the role of the State. Yet, the differences are crucial.

For one, the members of said group are considered ‘elite’ in the sense that they are a finite group as compared to the numbers of the population as a whole of the entire state. They would by no means be defined in the economic and class-based sense of elitism. Also, the concept of an institution would contrast drastically to the structures and institutions currently constructed by State governments. This new institution stemming from this coalition would resemble the workings and infrastructure of an organization like The Organization of American States (OAS) or even the U.N (from which the OAS) was modeled. The benefits of such an institution would be a common ground for which all parties to resolve their interests and grievances under the pretense of equality of treatment and recognition of all parties. The author describes the ideal form of the workings of such a coalition in saying that ”...the people who constitute the vanguard

\(^{37}\) Selbin, Eric. Modern Latin American Revolutions. p.77
party, then, operate as both a catalyst and a guide for the population. These people should be
aroused to organize in pursuit of their interests, and then, with the social revolutionary leadership
as models, individuals (it is assumed) will choose 'correctly' from the options they created for
themselves.”

The working model of such a coalition, with the vanguard party as its predecessor, would
exist on a level similar to its counterpart the OAS, with member constituency drawn from all of
the Latin American states. Assuming that an international level organization would complicate
the workings and structure of the organization considering the enormous amount of its members.
The resulting organization, from now on referred to as the Inter-American Council of Indigenous
Nations (IACIN), would consist of members from all organized indigenous groups in the region
that seek to be a part of said organization and abide by its charter. The name is reflective of the
recognition that indigenous groups represent a distinct nation of peoples with a unique culture
that live in a geographically bound state that is politically defined.

In an effort to retain the aforementioned conceptualization of a ‘civil society’ the
delegates of the respective Indian nations will have a consulate, or embassy, which will reside in
the states where said groups inhabit. This consulate would be charged with communicating,
interacting, and politically participating with the existing state government. Considering the
current international trend by the O.A.S. and the U.N. to recognize these rights and subsequently
draft declarations, failure to allow due recognition by the respective states would result in
international reproach. There should be a consolidated effort by both parties to create mutually
beneficial relationship free from human rights violations and social disorder.

In order to appease the fears of the state governments in the region IACIN will work on a
dual level of self-determination so as to grant the member groups and their respective state

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38 Ibid p.79
governments adequate autonomy. Thus the organization holds a distinction between “external” and “internal” self-determination of which the first “refers to separatism or independent statehood, internal self-determination refers to more ‘meaningful participation in the political system.’” 39 IACIN promotes the proliferation of the latter ideology, one that “…entails negotiation with the equality of circumstances between a people and the state to which it is connected.” 40

The first level of self-determination is one that is rooted in the concept of the civil society in which indigenous groups in the respective states are granted a degree of internal autonomy wherein they are responsible for the administration of their own affairs. This would include cultural, religious, environmental, and even educational policy that directly affects their population. Joint issues such as land rights, government economic support, and larger environmental policies would be a result of cooperative efforts of the consulates and their states. This structure resembles the resolution of the O.A.S. on domestic jurisdiction in that specific domestic affairs are dealt with by respective consulates. However, state action and policy must also coincide with U.N. standards of human rights.

The second level involves the actual meeting of the various member nations which provides a forum for these groups to discuss and debate plans of action on issues that the entire group respects and fully understands. Since every member has equal power than there is little worry by smaller groups to feel threatened by ‘power’ members. A fitting example would be the influence that the Security Council possesses and the hegemony of the U.S in the U.N. Thus the new model somewhat resembles the structure of the O.A.S. In the proposed civil society, IACIN

would be in charge of deciding on the same issues on which the consulates decide. Although the IACIN has no jurisdiction over granting land rights it does provide the forum that provides recognition and support for the collective rights of all indigenous groups in the region.

The resulting structure of the IACIN would be modeled after the administrative structure of the O.A.S by containing: a General Assembly, The Meeting of Consultation of Foreign Ministers, The Councils, Inter-American Juridical Committee, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, General Secretariat, Specialized Conferences, and the Specialized Organizations. The branches of Specialized Organizations and the Councils will be adjusted and constructed to represent the specific needs of the organization. The only major difference would be the added branch of the Council of Defensive Reinforcement.

To alleviate the inadequacies inherent in the O.A.S. regarding enforcement behind their policies, the CDR would be in charge of providing defensive support in cases of social unrest in response to state violations of human rights mandated and outlined in U.N. and O.A.S. declarations and resolutions. Though this may be perceived as a violation of the first level of self-determination regarding autonomy, the resulting intervention of the CDR is pending upon the approval of the involved member nations and their desire for support. All member nations would be part of the CDR and thus would have a say in the workings and execution of any proposed support.

41 Vaky, Viron P. and Heraldo Munoz. The Future of The Organization of American States. Appendix A
Leadership Crisis and Prospects

Thus the duality of this leadership crisis arises. The first component is that there is no one group or person to represent these groups and people that is representative of all nations. On the other hand the groups that have stepped forward represent a form of leadership in the identity of indigenous groups unprecedented in the past centuries. Indian identity has been relatively suppressed and/or ignored throughout this entire century. We must look at leadership, considering these macro and micro levels of comparison, not only by the individuals but also as what progress these groups as a collective have had.

No vision or ideal is without challenges and thus the respective challenge becomes who is going to lead and organize this monumental social change? Brysk mentioned earlier that said challenge is finding "...leaders who are both representative of the group’s values and effective in the wider political arena."42 A paradox exists when discussing the leadership of this social mobilization in that although it is almost assumed that such change can not occur with out an organizing figure, there is a fear of falling prey to the elitist leadership structures the group is trying to escape. The idea of instilling power and authority in a figurehead to guide this social revolution of civil society and the forming of the IACIN is inconceivable. Not only would such an attempt be dangerous in terms of power dynamics, but the relentless process to find an individual that all parties agree upon as the sole representative of the entire polity would be preposterous.

42 Brysk, Alison. "Turning weakness Into Strength: The Internationalization of Indian Rights." p.51
On the other hand, on a more optimistic note, the leadership dynamics that have been created, and will continue to flourish are rich potential and symbolize new models being formed. On the local level in national affairs, we can point to the leadership and progress that grass roots organizations have had in their own communities. The empowerment that results as individuals consolidate in order to protect their environment, clean up their neighborhoods, and provide sound education is priceless. These partnerships also emphasize the necessity to cross class lines by dealing with these problems on the basis of the issues at hand, and not the money. In this process they not only form a common consciousness but the members and leaders of the organizations serve as role models to inspire future leaders.

The interaction between respective indigenous groups and NGO’s breaks ground on a paradoxical relationship discussed earlier. Organizations such as the World Council of Indigenous Affairs, Cultural Survival, International Labor Organization, World Culture of Churches, OXFAM America, Inter-American Foundation, Indian Law Resource Center, and Union of Indigenous Nations are but a handful of examples of such groups. What these groups provide is an international arena for these groups to state their grievances and move towards positive solutions. They too provide exemplary leadership by being the first organizations to respond to the calls for recognition and preservation by indigenous groups. The coalitions they make, issues discussed, and action plans implemented provide a basis for further involvement by international organizations and state governments.

Finally, the states that have stepped to the forefront and decided to take action to rectify the historical wrongs provide an important component in this leadership dynamic. Mexico, Brazil, and Nicaragua, although urged by civil unrest, have taken the first step towards bettering the environment of indigenous relations. By doing so they put themselves in the international
limelight as other states will look to them as role models and hopefully for domestic advise. Thus, like innovative companies in the private sector striving for the cutting edge, these states have set a precedent for others to emulate.

The recent emergence of politically mobilized non-government indigenous groups represent an unprecedented social force that can not be ignored. The historical context that defines the backgrounds of these groups is tainted with blatant abuse and near genocide by colonial powers as well as continued violations of basic human rights. For the past four hundred years they have been subjected to continued mistreatment in the form of social marginalization, racist prejudices, degrading state policies, and continued disregard for their cultural diversity.

It is with this historical burden in mind and in tune with contemporary ethnic definitions that indigenous groups across Latin America are demanding recognition, mutual respect, and a redress of grievances for centuries of injustice. Considering that many demands of past national movements have fallen on the deaf ears of state officials, indigenous groups have turned to international non-government organizations as a means for achieving their desired goals. The hope is that such groups will be able, through their international financial and political ties, to promote the respective goals of these groups.

The relationship between national governments and the indigenous groups that inhabit the state has grown increasingly tense as groups continue to petition for autonomy as a distinct culture and nation within these states. However, considering the social unrest and ethnic wars present in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Republics, as well as the secessionist implications of such autonomy, national governments have been reluctant in granting such policies.
The proposed model of a civil society seeks to amend the conflicts that have historically arisen as a result of domination and individualistic mentalities. Such measures would be for the purpose of promoting a positive relationship among the diverse ethnicities and cultures present throughout the Americas. The desired autonomy that indigenous groups request represents a struggle to preserve the precious knowledge, history, and religious heritages these cultures possess.

The regional governing body proposed here represents a hopeful solution to resolve the complex problems that such preservation implies. Its function, structure, and philosophy seek to transcend the obstacles that have arisen from national and international attempts to alleviate and meet the demands of indigenous groups. However, like any true solution of a dilemma of this magnitude, it will require an adjustment in mentality, ideology, and tolerance and a perpetual questioning of the morality of past events.
References


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