

XII WORLD CONGRESS OF RURAL SOCIOLOGY
ENVISIONING A PROSPEROUS RURAL FUTURE IN A GLOBALIZING WORLD
6-11 JULY, 2008
Goyang ,Korea 2008.

Working Group 29

Modernity and Ethnicity in Mexican Rural Society

Joaquín Careaga

National University Autonomous of Mexico.

Facultad de Estudios Superiores Acatlán. Programa de Investigación.

jcareaga@unam.mx

INTRODUCTION

Cultures generated by societies are the groundwork for identity. In as much as there is not a definite division between culture and identity, the latter acts as one of the parameters that define the subject who, because of continuous social interaction, forms part of a group with which he identifies himself and is identified as participant in cultural patterns such as language, religion, customs, celebrations, life conceptions, traditions, and ancestral origins, among others. This is what constitutes social identity and the social imaginary collective among groups.

Differences within the group are defined by the social class and ethnic group, which establish codes that imply rules, attitudes, and even discriminatory practices, leading to categorizations, stereotypes, and prejudices towards others. There is a clear power relation among those self-designated as the best. This feeling of superiority is registered by subordinate members of the group and is extrapolated to other groups to which they confer negative qualities, identified as exponents of another culture which they underestimate and even deny.

Physical appearance and ancestral origin are usually fundamental criteria to differentiate the groups from which ethnicism and racism are derived as predominant issues in the differentiation and categorization process. When pigmentation differences are obvious, the dominant group claims its superiority based on the color of the skin, establishing the inferiority of others based on those differences of color with those in power. Therefore, people with different physical characteristics are deemed inferior and even incapable of development processes and cultural and technological evolution.

SUBMISSION OF MESOAMERICANS BY THE SPANISH CONQUERORS

The Spanish Conquest which subjugated the Mesoamerican peoples immediately described them as primitive, satanic and inferior, not only because they had different cultural codes but also because of their physical characteristics. The conquest and the eventual colonization (300 years) had as goal destroying the cultures of the defeated peoples, and imposing the Castilian language and Catholicism to do away with the native languages and the meaning of the symbols developed by the Mesoamericans to interpret them. Neither conquerors nor colonizers ever considered the opinion and the interpretation of the vanquished people; they were ignominiously ignored.

Mesoamerican cultures were thus interpreted with Western culture parameters, involving a historical aberration due to having forced a different reality on a dissimilar one.

THE CONTINUATION OF SUBMISSION IN INDEPENDENT MEXICO: 1821-1910

Mexico's political independence (1821) in no way meant the concurrence of the actors who constituted "Mexican" society in 1821. The consummation of independence was monopolized by Creoles (descendants of Spaniards who had neither indigenous nor mestizo blood), who were land owners, hierarchs, the highest ranking army officers, and holders of the most important government positions. Even so, they were a minority compared to the immense majority of indigenous and mestizo people.

For the victorious Creoles, the Indian race belonged to a subculture, a culture evidently inferior to the European one. This is why Creoles rejected the concept of inclusion, using the economic, social, political and cultural hindrance of the Indians as explanation. The Creoles who held the economic, political and cultural power considered that differences between systems of beliefs and totally different cultures were unsolvable. Their inability to destroy the Indian population's traditions and customs through the brutal imposition of a language and religion which were alien to them made native idolatrous expressions, in the eyes of the dominating Creoles, not worthy of a culture.

In such a context, it was considered that the solution fell to European immigrants who would constitute a human barrier through *mestizaje*, leading to a genetic hybridization that would be the basis for a new Mexican, with the fundamental principles of Western culture and a predominantly European appearance. I must emphasize that those in power in 19th-century Mexico blamed the difficulty to promote the modernization and development of Mexican society as a whole on the indigenous population, whom they considered biological and culturally inferior. They were said to be the reason for the impossibility of consolidating the factors of true progress.

During the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1876-1911), a program of European immigration was similarly developed, based on the population model of the United States and Argentina. The program was never massively carried out. Thus the indigenous population not only diminished but continued representing a majority. Its presence and culture practices continued to be held responsible for the backwardness of Mexican society in general.

Indeed, throughout Diaz' extended dictatorship, the elite considered Indians as individuals who would only identify themselves with the legitimate culture (the culture of the dominating groups) by learning the Spanish language, which would also contribute to the development of the national spirit and the sense of being Mexican. The hindrance lied in the fact that the indigenous population in 1910 totaled 11 million, spread out in 108 groups with their respective languages, making the teaching of Spanish a difficult cultural barrier to overcome.

REVOLUTIONARY NATIONALISM: 1921-1982

As a result of the revolutionary movement (1910-1920), and with the appearance of non-Creole leaders, the discourse regarding *mestizaje* was introduced as a foundation for progress and social equality, concepts which did not go beyond ideological fiction since the new group in power followed the lines of excluding Indians. Although it is true that it did not resort to practices of physical extermination (genocide) as in Colonial times, destructive ethnic (ethnocide) strategies were adopted by the Mexican state as of 1921, when the revolutionary-nationalist state began to develop, based on apparent social equality which in practice did not include respect to the indigenous peoples, but the painful imposition of the new dominant culture.

During this period, a nationalist state was consolidated and, without openly abjuring the Indians, it tried to nullify them by integrating them through violent forms to the dominant culture and always in devalued conditions of manual labor. The Indians were thus “civilized” when they became bricklayers, dockers and servants of urban society during the 60 years of revolutionary nationalism, which in essence did not attempt seriously to incorporate the Indians nor safeguard and respect their cultures. On the contrary, Indians were forced to learn by means of violent forms imposed by the same dominant society that actually denied them opportunities to be considered Mexican.

MEXICAN SOCIETY TODAY

Since 1983, Mexico has been incorporated to *neoliberalism* whose fundamentals, efficiency and competition, do not include in any way the approximately 15 million Indians who struggle to obtain their citizenship status through diverse modalities, without giving up their culture.

The case of Mexico is particularly unique because the great majority of its population that is part of the dominant mestizo culture is not significantly physically different from the indigenous population, probably because, in words of Anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, Mexico experienced a biological *mestizaje* rather than a cultural one. This is why the exclusion, marginalization and racism by the dominant group against Indians and their culture are despicable, as such rejection implies negating a fundamental part of a society whose origins are essentially grounded in Mesoamerican cultures, patent in the reproduction of diverse cultural manifestations in the daily life of contemporary Mexico.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there have been margins of tolerance to the indigenous peoples in early-21st century Mexico, this has not meant an improvement in their life standards. And when this has been so, it has not implied renouncing their culture with the intention of integrating them to a *Mexicanity* that does not respect the origins of their identity. Racism has supposedly been eliminated and is no longer clouded by notions of folklore, the picturesque or paternalism, subterfuges that attempt to disguise the racism that the escalating urban population conceals and that is closely linked to politically conservative groups. This is why it does not suffice to only promote tolerance; what must be abolished is the racist perception of the dominant mestizo culture.

The process which has attempted to constitute a “national identity” is actually in accordance to ideological circumstances. The open and latent racism expressed by most of Mexico’s urban population is linked to its forgotten or rejected ethnic-racial origin, regardless of the social segment one may belong to. Racism is not necessarily related to social class, skin color or political ideology but rather to a combination of these different variables, which undoubtedly hinder actual possibilities to determine the essential manifestations of racism. Deciphering these indicators could contribute to the better understanding of a diverse society whose wealth lies in its origins; a wealth that still today favors the exclusion and the overwhelming inequality that thwarts the boost for the true development of the economic, political and social structures of contemporary Mexican society.

References.

- Bonfil Batalla,Guillermo (1989) *El México Profundo.Una Civilización Negada*. CONACULTA/ Grijalbo, México
- Careaga, Joaquín (2007) *El Mexicano en el Laberinto de la Soledad* . Facultad de Estudios Superiores Acatlán,UNAM, México
- Flores Cano, Enrique (1989) *Memoria Mexicana*. FCE. México.
- Gómez Izquierdo ,José Jorge(Coordinador) (2005) *Los Caminos del Racismo en México*. Plaza y Váldez editores, México.
- Touraine, Alain (1995) *Producción de la Sociedad*. Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales UNAM. México.
- Villegas,Abelardo (1988) *La Filosofía de lo Mexicano* UNAM. México