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**Working Group 29:  
Mesoamerican ethnic identity and culture as part of the Mexican people's  
cultural patrimony**

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This lecture will be divided into three parts: In the first place, I wish to emphasize some current manifestations of the inherited cultural patrimony of the Mexican people, as well as the social expressions that identify it as part of the Mesoamerican culture, denoted by identifications--conscious or not--with the first ancestral culture. A comparison with the emergence of new identities due to the hegemonic role of the Western view of the contemporary world will be established. These identities might make that past, explained through posmodernity, a burden of the last modernization (the fractal), in terms of Baudrillard (1990).

The second part will describe current Mexican socioeconomic reality and its relation to our hegemonic economic-cultural reference, the United States, regarding its predominance in their relations since the 19th century, which has been reinforced since Mexico signed the Free Trade Agreement with the United States and Canada. The United States is positioned in strategic sectors such as the financial, commercial, energetic and alimentary ones. Concerning cultural industries, it comprises media and educational spaces, both formal and informal ones, influencing the Americanization of Mexican daily life.

My third reflection consists in revising the globalization, expansion of the world market and modernization trinomial as an approach conveyed in the different meetings of the Group of 8. These are perspectives generally shared by the World Bank, the IADB or the IMF in the worldwide evaluations they perform periodically, and in the assessments derived from the positioning of the new development leaders, the BRICs, (Brazil, Russia, India and China) which have established, for this hegemonic thinking, a test of the efficiency of so-called economic globalization, world-wide culture and the modernization itself of megalopolises or the so-called world-city networks as propellers of the world system.

**.ONE.** The first reflection delves on the significant importance of our Mesoamerican cultural past and what it represents today for the unequal sectors of the Mexican population, which may be grouped according to their differences in

cultural identity, rather than by their ethnic differences, since they are incorporated to totally contrary national projects, both regarding the economic and political purpose they represent, as well as their historical-cultural sense.

There is a project shared by Mexicans which integrates the vision of rescuing Deep Mexico to the past and another one which is comprised by those who collaborate with Imaginary Mexico and view the past as scarcely relevant. The latter have detached themselves from their ancestors and it makes them uncomfortable to even adopt a social negation position (in terms of Freud) and to imagine themselves as part of that history, even if it is the official version of history.

In the 90's, Bonfil Batalla stated that Mesoamerica is a vast cultural region where a civilization was established, that included several regions as far as Nicaragua. It's possible to speak of unity in the diversity of this vast cultural region. This unity involves a way of interpreting the signs of nature and the ability to name things: words and their meaning constitute the group--us--, through gestures, tones of voice, glances, attitudes and feelings, representing the sense of language and the way in which codes are transmitted.

We also know that Mesoamerican identity inferences are not found in a pure state, but related to three vital conceptions about its unity and its great diversity to understand the world: an appraisal model, a social organization of life, and a specific way to relate to nature, with a highly symbolic and religious content (Bonifaz Nuño, Rubén: 2005) to learn about nature, to appropriate it and to transform it. This is implicit in daily life relations.

On the other hand, the way to inherit knowledge, to answer the original questions of all the social community and to solve the existential problem of identity is by turning this into a cultural matrix. Agreement among members of a community about their origins allows sharing their myth of creation. Their cosmovision is organized according to the explanations of movement in nature, while the study of movement of the universe gave way to a cosmogony particularly evidenced by the way in which the great Mesoamerican constructions were built, based on a calendar influenced by the stars (Fierro, Julieta: 2001). Nowadays, watching the sky allows us to understand the monuments of Mexico's central and Mayan areas, and how they expressed the movements of the cosmos. He who can measure time, can control it. They measured time based on their astronomical observations and built their great monuments to indicate important celebrations in the calendar. For the Mexicas there were 4 paths signaled by the cardinal axes where some of the gods lived. Each path had a different color--black, red, yellow and white--with particular symbols representing them-- bird, jaguar, serpent, and the one that unified them all, the *quincunce*.

Social organization also involved the forms of existence of a nation, with territorial organization and use of natural resources. The Mesoamerican people were organized in a community and families. The organization of their rooms revealed spaces for the sacred, generally ceremonial sites, both in public and private

buildings. By interpreting their social relations and corresponding social organization we can see how public and private behaviors were established. In this sense, codes of social behavior are decisive to learn what may and may not be done. Requests of help and/or collaboration are directed to those who have knowledge and recognition because they are those to whom it is possible to ask for help, guidance and healing of the body and soul.

On the other hand, in Mesoamerican culture, astronomers and astrologers were those who had knowledge about nature, knew how to interpret it and recognize its signs: mathematicians invented the zero and made arithmetic calculations to build constructions and temples, as well as observatories and houses. They also invented two highly accurate calendars: the Aztec and the Mayan. Alternating climates and seasons were indicated by different ceremonies and rituals. Thus naming nature led to the development of language. To name is to create.

Farmers and engineers had knowledge about nature and learned to dominate it and to domesticate it. By developing intensive and terrace agriculture, they managed to sow in an 85% mountainous country, trimming its orography and avoiding landslides. They also learned how to use minerals for ornament and armament. Simultaneously, irrigation works were created, and channels, dams and the floating agriculture of *chinampa* were designed. The preservation of species was promoted.

An important contribution was growing corn, maguey and prickly pear. Corn domestication gave way to the myth of the man made from corn. The foundations for a rich and varied diet were established, along with ecological balance and the use of state of the art technology. Corn was also used to express its relations of domination and submission. Their narrations of their Flowery Wars and conquests were depicted in their stela, sculptures and pyramids.

One of the results of knowledge and control of nature was the development of forms of urban life characteristic of the great cities. This is how an urban culture emerged along with architects and merchants: those who designed the forms of urban life and those who brought communities together through commercial exchange.

Because of all of this, Mesoamerican culture is one of the originary civilizations--along with the Andean, Mesopotamic, Egyptian and Chinese ones—which developed autonomously and eventually influenced other peoples (Leon Portilla, Miguel: 2005). Mesoamerica developed a culture expressed in glyphs that were carved on the walls of ball game courts, with narrations of their governors and the events of daily life to describe the history of their peoples.

Mesoamerican culture is more than 17 centuries old. It contains a great diversity because it also displays a vast unitary identity, by sharing the same cosmovision in different regional and local cultures, expressed in art, games, leisure activities and a sense of the sacred and profane.

**TWO.** We shall now proceed to consider the emergence of new identities and how they have been changed in face of the paradigm of globalization based on a neoliberal economic model. This model implies diverse assumptions, such as the one of producing a unified world-wide system (Wallerstein, Imanuel: 1979) through the expansion of the market economy, leading to a world capitalist economy and the integration of different political systems, and comprising for the first time all the surface of the world. As a result, a “Westernization” of the world takes place, which produces a passive reception of both economic flows and hegemonic cultural patterns of consumption. We also know that the neoliberal project has stopped being only an economic and technological dynamics of competition of productivities and has become a political project directed to the construction of a new planetary order (Cordera, Rolando and Cabrera, Carlos (Cords.) 2005: 11).

What has not been so widely publicized by most information media and theoretical-technical analyses are the results of their implementation, patent in escalating inequalities that increasingly affect peoples outside the economies of the so-called Group of the Seven Most Developed Countries (G-7; which was joined by Russia to make the G-8), even conditioning marginal communities of their peripheral zones, generally constituted by ethnic minorities of immigrant workers who are living either temporarily or permanently in those countries.

So, what is important for those of us who study the social sciences is to verify the veracity of these assumptions produced in developed countries and reproduced in countries which, like Mexico, have been classified by the World Bank and the IMF as countries in intermediate development; that is, poor countries to which money can be lent, because they can pay the interests of their debts. First, I will make a brief evaluation of the social cost generated by the inclusion of Mexico in globalization and by the adoption of the neoliberal economic model, dating back to 1985 (that is to say, it has been in effect for 23 years), which will consist in reviewing only two of the effects of its economic policies: one, its effectiveness in the fight against poverty, which is also an objective of the Mexican national state and the aforementioned international financial institutions, and two, an analysis of the national income and its distribution in Mexico, with the purpose of establishing prevailing levels of inequality.

**Poverty in Mexico.** In 2004 Mexico’s population was estimated at 105, 3 million people, 20 million more than in 1990, with three-fourths living in the city and one fourth living in the country. The latter, the indigenous population--so considered because it speaks a language other than Spanish-- consisted in the year 2000 of 6,044,547 people, of which nearly 5 million are also bilingual; that is, they also speak Spanish, while only a million is monolingual. The rate of monolingualism in 1990 was 16,5% of the total population, while in 2000 it was 16,9%. The

percentage of bilingual people was 83,5 in the 90's and 83,1 in 2000. The mostly spoken indigenous languages are: Nahuatl (24%); Mayan (13,2); Mixteco (7,2%); Zapoteco (7,0%), and Tzotzil (4,9%), within a mosaic of 56 indigenous ethnic groups who still survive in Mexico and who are speakers of their own language with a culture of their own.

One of the main goals of the World Bank for the millennium is eradicating extreme poverty, constituted by those people whose income is less than 1 dollar a day, as well as decreasing the number of people who suffer hunger in the world. In its definitions of poverty, the World Bank additionally establishes a relative framework depending on the criteria of each country and its poverty rate, so it will vary from a political culture to another; poverty is then defined in relation to the cultural evolution of each people.

For CEPAL, poor people are those who earn less than 120 dollars a month in urban zones and less than 78 dollars in rural areas. According to these criteria, more than 40% of the families in Mexico are poor. According to the Secretary of Social Development, SEDESOL, there are 3 new measuring thresholds for poverty in Mexico: food, capabilities and patrimonial poverty, which are defined as follows:

1. Food poverty is comprised by people whose daily income was less than 15 and 21 pesos in 2000 in rural and urban areas, respectively.
2. Capabilities poverty is comprised by those people whose income is sufficient to cover their food needs, but who cannot cover education and health expenses. Their income was between 19 and 25 pesos daily in 2000, in rural and urban areas, respectively.
3. Patrimony poverty is comprised by those people whose income is sufficient to cover feeding, health and education expenses, but not for basic necessities such as clothing, dressing and footwear, housing, and public transportation. Their income was equivalent to 28 and 42 pesos daily in 2000, in rural and urban areas, respectively.

Following is a summary of these concepts and their profile in urban and rural areas in Mexico, as well as in a percentage relation of its total.

Evolution of Poverty in Mexico in Urban and Rural zones and Total Percentage  
2000-2002

| <i>Classification</i>           | <i>Urban:</i> |      | <i>Rural:</i> |      | <i>% in millions of people</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|---------------------------------|---------------|------|---------------|------|--------------------------------|--------------|
|                                 | 2000          | 2002 | 2000          | 2002 |                                |              |
| <b>1. Food Poverty:</b>         |               |      |               |      |                                |              |
| Homes                           | 9.8           | 8.5  | 34.1          | 28.5 | 18.6                           | 15.8         |
| People                          | 12.6          | 11.4 | 42.4          | 34.8 | 24.2                           | 20.3         |
| <b>2. Capabilities Poverty:</b> |               |      |               |      |                                |              |
| Homes                           | 16.2          | 12.2 | 41.4          | 36.5 | 25.3                           | 21.1         |
| People                          | 20.2          | 16.0 | 50.0          | 43.8 | 31.9                           | 26.5         |
| <b>3. Patrimonial poverty</b>   |               |      |               |      |                                |              |
| Homes                           | 37.4          | 35.4 | 60.7          | 59.4 | 45.9                           | 44.1         |
| People                          | 43.8          | 42.0 | 69.3          | 67.5 | 53.7                           | 51.7         |

*Source: Measurements of the Development, Mexico 2000-2002. Sedesol, June 2003.*

This chart highlights the impoverishment of the Mexican population, its basic food consumption, with a worsening in rural communities, not to mention among the indigenous population. Marginalization and extreme poverty are also a way of ethnocide against the Mexican indigenous population, along with the introduction of alternative patterns of consumption that compete very disloyally with traditional ones, particularly when comparing price increases of historical staple foods of Mexican popular diets, such as corn *tortillas* and beans. These substantial elements of traditional food culture have ended up being replaced by junk food, while the nutritional damage caused by their consumption leads to obesity and negative health consequences, such as severe degenerative diseases.

**THREE.** The confrontation and social distance imposed by the proximity and vicinity with a great world power--the United States-- and all its routes of cultural influence through its strong media and symbolic penetration, as well as through its continuous exchanges, understood as a permanent flow of people, private and public institutions as well as those that are derived from different government levels, regional, local or national, have the purpose of explaining the role that so-called cultural industries have and how they have contributed to invade, transform and finally to make traditional cultures disappear.

Today we know that the society of knowledge is very important, but we are also facing "poverty...as... a manifestation or condition of a society derived from multiple factors: lack of income, lack of mechanisms for social protection, economic policies to concentrate incomes and exclude ample segments, institutional deficiencies to provide fundamental services, and lack of quality in education, health, feeding and housing, among the most important issues".

We do not need to go any further than revising at world-wide level the reality depicted by research studies about globalized world cities (GaWC) in the project of globalization to determine the concentration and centralization achieved by world powers on the increasing and overwhelming marginalization of poverty and marginality in peripheral zones and Third and Fourth World Countries. If we live in the suburbs of knowledge, it is because wealthy countries and regions are not only those with the best productive, competitive and effectiveness indicators, but also those with the highest incomes *per capita*, in contrast to our impoverished and unequal socioeconomic reality. We also know that those which control this economy of knowledge are a tripolarity formed by the USA, Northern Europe and Japan, contributing a greater added value to the goods and services that today circulate all over the world and which are sustained on the development of science and technology, considered an economic, political and cultural priority in these societies.

The consequences of not taking into account such warnings are tangible when national governments are not interested in supporting and allocating a greater percentage of its national budget to improve the lag in science and technology and in higher education, oriented towards the investigation of innovation and competitiveness indicators. The former Rector of the National University of Mexico, Ramon de la Fuente, considers that the true importance of education, research and innovation consists in their no longer being optional but mandatory. Inequality in societies, like Mexican society and those of Latin America in general, is becoming a characteristic feature. The balance of Mexican President Fox six years ago was discouraging with respect to the budget allotted for science and technology, which was 0, 39% of the GNP in 2000 and concluded with 0, 35% in 2006.

In addition, if we observe the strategies designed by international organizations of world-wide credit, specifically the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, we see that with the sponsorship and economic support of the neoliberal model, they have established sufficient and necessary conditions to impel the hegemonic project of globalization, turning it into a necessary project.

The world has been classified by the UN in the most and least developed areas, territories or regions. International organizations have lost interest in those countries (50 altogether) considered to be the least advanced regarding great capital as a result of their high rates of marginalization and the low level of recovery of investments made there.

This makes us think that so-called global economy leaves this large number of countries aside but focuses its attention on appeals on regions of greater and lesser development. Mexico is found in this second classification, which should prompt us to investigate causes and possible solutions for a policy of integral education, that will include both basic and applied research as well as the diffusion of culture in order to produce a project so that human beings will not only value

knowledge, but forms of living and their total fulfillment as a collective of human beings in communities and society.

The tendency of globalization to expand patterns of cultural consumption tends to equalize all cultures for the sake of a single world-wide culture. Westernization of the world erases all national identity differences, corresponding to the different prevailing cultural models and producing a passive reception of hegemonic cultural patterns of consumption.

Through the incessant propaganda and diffusion made through the media about generalized consumptions of all types of cultural goods and services that are produced and distributed, there are several implicit messages such as not accepting cultural diversity as a matter of principle, such as sublimating the importance of worldwide cultural westernization, the style and form to be metropolitan; to be citizens of the world without origins nor inconvenient properties, and observing original local cultures as from a remote and already nonexistent and senseless past, synonymous of backwardness and antimodernity.

The fragmentation of social identity is thus generated in peripheral societies, to say the least, while social schizophrenic behaviors are produced within enclave properties. This is why it is so important to find alternative answers to transform injustice and inequality in the world, taking into account that historical processes fortunately do not follow a prefigured and unavoidable trend because social conquests have also been obtained that could seem utopian but which today represent new challenges to break the hegemony of neoliberal positions, at all levels of daily life.

However, we also know that tendencies towards globalization and market economy are undeniable, as well as the fact that they have penetrated different peoples and societies in the world and have produced changes that have sometimes substantially modified the way people live. In addition, and along with this tendency, multiple and varied forms of political and social resistance coexist. Therefore, I consider it explanatory to divide the analysis into four key problems: the importance of the matrix of original culture; the existence of a heterogeneous labor force; a great variety of local answers, and the struggle to vindicate cultural differences.

Globalization itself supposes neither political integration nor social equality or cultural unity. In this sense, our interest is directed to the search of those signs that make the permanence of a millenarian civilization, like the Mesoamerican one, patent in present society. This leads us to an inescapable reflection to determine how diverse forms of power direct people towards the transformation of their habits, behaviors and attitudes so that they will accept the imposition of subordination and discipline with the purpose of restricting their ambitions to the



artificial necessities created by the industry of publicity and entertainment (Chomsky, Noam: 2005:46)

This leads necessarily to the precariousness of people and even societies, pushing them towards ignoring and socially denying their original culture--the Mesoamerican culture in the case of Mexico (Perkins, Lourdes: 2006:13)--thus eliminating the possibility of building a cultural identity with its past, that is, its history. A vulnerability to western influence is then favored, in addition to increasingly deepening social and economic inequalities, as a generalized and we would even say perverse effect (Commas, Dolores: 2005: 85). Societies of countries as Mexico--termed of intermediate development—are forced to survive with a generalized endemic poverty. For over five centuries there has been a “whitened” or “Westernized” society in Mexico. The most serious effects of discrimination lead to social and particularly cultural distances with respect to rural, indigenous and agricultural communities which have become through an ethnization process ethnic minorities on their way to extinction if the cultural patrimony that gives sense and direction to a propositional resistance is silenced and forgotten owing to the mercantile subjugation caused by globalization.

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