RETHINKING MEXICAN INDIGENISMO

THE INI'S COORDINATING CENTER IN HIGHLAND CHIAPAS AND THE FATE OF A UTOPIAN PROJECT

Stephen E. Lewis

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Cover photo: Indigenistas with ejidatarios in Chanal explaining the benefits of a plan to exploit their forest reserves. Photographer unknown.
Fototeca Nacho López, Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas. 1963.
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To the memory of my mom, Betty Lewis,
and to Owen, who might someday appreciate
his dad's fascination with Mexico and its people.

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Introduction

IN LATE 1994, months after the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional, or EZLN) rebelled against the Mexican government and drew attention to the plight of Mexico's indigenous peoples, roughly twenty allied indigenous peasant organizations seized the Tzeltal-Tzotzil Indigenista Coordinating Center (Centro Coordinador Indigenista Tzeltal-Tzotzil, or CCI) in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas. This Coordinating Center had been opened by Mexico's National Indigenist Institute (Instituto Nacional Indigenista, or INI) in 1951, and its seizure and subsequent occupation were highly symbolic. It had been the INI's first and most important center, and its first directors included some of Mexico's most renowned *indigenistas*, as the practitioners of federal Indian policy were known. In spite of the opposition of Chiapas state governors, the state's alcohol monopoly, local ranchers, and many indigenous themselves, this particular Coordinating Center was hailed as a success at modernizing the indigenous and integrating them into the modern Mexican nation-state. The INI eventually built more than one hundred Coordinating Centers throughout the Mexican countryside. Despite the INI's work, however, most indigenous Mexicans in 1994 remained economically destitute and politically marginalized. By seizing this particular Coordinating Center at this time, the invaders made an emphatic statement—Mexico's postrevolutionary Indian policy, whatever its past merits, had failed.

The leaders who organized the take-over of this center issued a communiqué that spoke to the controversial trajectory of Indian policy in Mexico. "Rulers of the last five decades, we thank what some of you tried to preserve of our culture, and we very much lament the great failures of the development projects with our people," they wrote. "While you worked to integrate us into Western society, our roots dug deeper into the heart of our mother

earth. Therefore, all attempts to disappear us or acculturate us failed." The occupiers also thanked "all of the indigenistas who sincerely wanted to work with us. For them, there will always be a place in our hearts." But they added: "We will also not forget the racist indigenistas, because their projects to crush the Indians never triumphed." The communiqué closed on a sarcastic note. It told the Coordinating Center's employees to begin packing their bags. The peasant organizations wished them a happy holiday season "and the longest vacations of their lives," because starting in January 1995 they would occupy all of the INI's buildings in Chiapas.[1] They relinquished control of the Coordinating Center's buildings several years later, but land-starved indigenous peasants still occupy and have built shacks on the compound's experimental fields.

Why was the INI's most celebrated Coordinating Center, the hallmark of Mexico's postrevolutionary indigenismo, seized and held by the very people that it was supposed to help? If the center had been such a "success," why were Tseltals and Tsotsils[2] still living in misery more than forty years after it first opened its doors? Lastly, who were the "good" indigenistas to whom the occupiers referred, and who were the "racists?"

This book evaluates the complex trajectory of Mexican indigenismo through a close examination of the INI's pilot Coordinating Center in highland Chiapas. Historically, remote Chiapas has often been on the margins of national trends, but when it comes to Indian policy, precisely the opposite is true. The CCI in Chiapas was the first to test the INI's often innovative development programs. It was also the first to confront ferocious local opposition, which prevented the INI from accomplishing broader structural changes in Chiapas and across Mexico. The malaise that struck the INI was first felt in Chiapas, and the deepening crisis in the 1960s slowly crippled operations in Chiapas before most of the other centers had even opened.

Chiapas briefly resumed its place at the vanguard of Mexican indigenismo in the early 1970s. After a new generation of anthropologists launched a devastating critique of Mexican anthropology and indigenismo, the INI responded by opening an innovative School of Regional Development (Escuela de Desarrollo Regional, or EDR) in 1971 on the grounds of the CCI in San Cristóbal. Viewed in hindsight, this school represented the INI's last great opportunity to reclaim bragging rights as the hemisphere-wide leader in indigenista policy. But the INI fired the school's director in late 1972 after she charted a new course that would have empowered indigenous leaders and encouraged ethnic self-determination. Ultimately, the INI was made irrelevant by the indigenous

themselves, who advanced more radical agendas outside of the confines of Mexico's discredited corporatist state.

In 1994, the Chiapas highlands once again reshaped national Indian policy. When the Zapatistas briefly seized San Cristóbal and other towns and forced the federal government to negotiate autonomy and the role of indigenous cultures in contemporary Mexican society, they forced the final crisis of Mexican indigenismo. Embattled president Ernesto Zedillo (1994–2000) announced the dissolution of the INI in 1996, but the institute languished until 2003, when president Vicente Fox replaced it with the decentralized National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas, or CDI).[3]

Defining a Phenomenon

Indigenismo was a complex, often contradictory political and cultural movement. It typically celebrated an abstract notion of indigenous people and culture located securely in the past, but it also called for the modernization, assimilation, and "improvement" of living, breathing *indígenas*. Practitioners were typically non-Indians. The indigenista movement assumed its pan-American, institutional form in 1940 when delegates from nineteen countries met in Pátzcuaro, Mexico, and created the Interamerican Indigenist Institute (Instituto Indigenista Interamericano, or III). Each of the signatory countries pledged to create its own national indigenist institute and carry out the III's rather contradictory mission—to study and promote ways to improve the lives of the indigenous on the one hand, and to "uphold and defend their cultural particularities" on the other.[4] The III was formally constituted two years later and was based in Mexico City.

For the next thirty-plus years, there were nearly as many indigenismos as there were indigenistas. At one end of the spectrum, some indigenistas had no interest in indigenous languages and cultures and sought merely to "incorporate" Indians into the modern economic and political mainstream. At the other end, others not only sought to preserve indigenous languages, they also called for indigenous autonomy and self-determination. Indigenistas did not necessarily maintain fixed positions on this ideological spectrum. Mexico's Moisés Sáenz, who helped organize the Pátzcuaro conference, had been an assimilationist in the 1920s but became a pluralist in the 1930s and vigorously defended the value of indigenous languages and cultures.[5] Sáenz's vision of a politically and socially militant indigenismo failed to take root, however. For

a variety of reasons, a gradualist, "apolitical," and "scientific" indigenismo took root throughout the Americas. The claim of being apolitical was initially useful to gain legitimacy and avoid confrontations, especially in a Cold War context. And the claim of being scientific—that is, using scientific tools to solve social problems—was associated with the rising importance of applied anthropology as a discipline and implied a certain degree of clinical detachment.[6]

In the best of times, indigenistas proposed and shaped policy. But more often than not, they lacked access to power and financial resources. Rarely did indigenistas offer radical solutions. And when they did, they confronted tenacious opposition and were usually forced to back down. Indigenismo's failure to overturn exploitative political and economic systems led to projects that attempted to induce cultural change in the indigenous themselves. These met with less opposition and were easier to implement.[7] What began as a radical, antiracist critique of the status quo in the 1920s and 1930s evolved into a tool and a discourse that equated progress with acculturation to European ways and legitimized new hierarchies.[8] Indigenismo went "from being oppositional and minoritarian to dominant and hegemonic," writes Estelle Tarica. Its legacy is contradictory, owing to indigenismo's "challenge to the status quo and its enduring presence within the status quo; its assertion of both Indian difference and of interethnic affinity and affiliation; [and] its framing of an Indian object and its search for a new kind of non-Indian subject."[9] History's verdict has not been kind.

INDIGENISMO IN MEXICO

For much of the twentieth century, the fate of Mexican indigenismo was tied to the state- and nation-building aims of Mexico's central government and the development of anthropology as a discipline. The popular upheaval of the Mexican Revolution and its immediate aftermath presented an opportunity for intellectuals, politicians, artists, educators, and social reformers to forge a new nation based on new cultural ideals. This resulted in what some scholars have called the "ethnicization" or "browning" of Mexican national identity.[10]

"Mexico developed one of the earliest and most successful and internationally influential national anthropologies," writes Claudio Lomnitz. "Its political centrality within the country has been remarkable."[11] The man who charted this course was Manuel Gamio, Mexico's first professional anthropologist. Gamio believed it "axiomatic" that "anthropology, in its truest, broadest sense, should provide the basic knowledge for the performance of good government." In 1916, Gamio proposed the creation of a Department of Anthropology that

would study an entire territory and its people in order to facilitate what he called their "normal evolutionary development."[12] Anthropologists would serve as "the enlightened arm of government . . . best equipped to deal with the management of population, with forging social harmony and promoting civilization," writes Lomnitz. In fact, "the combined power of an integrative scientific method, embodied in anthropology, and its practical use by a revolutionary government was so dizzying that Gamio compared the mission of the Department of Anthropology with the Spanish conquest itself."[13]

During Mexico's immediate postrevolutionary period (1920–1940), indigenista social scientists, educators, and activists played an unprecedented role in crafting policy. As Alexander Dawson writes, "revolutionary indigenistas were united by their sympathy for the Indian and their desire to incorporate Indians into a reconstructed modern nation, in which living Indians were treated with respect and dignity, and their traditions accorded respect as the true national past."[14] They rejected the racial determinism that forever condemned the Indian to decadence. But most indigenistas were not content simply to celebrate indigenous Mexicans; they also wanted to study, modernize, educate, incorporate, and otherwise "improve" them. Rick López has commented on this glaring contradiction, concluding that "the tension between exaltation and denigration" of the indigenous was "irresolvable."[15]

Early postrevolutionary indigenismo was entrusted to Mexico's Ministry of Public Education (Secretaría de Educación Pública, or SEP). The SEP was Mexico's most important agent of social engineering at this time, but in states like Chiapas, its impact rarely lived up to the lofty rhetoric of its directors in Mexico City. The SEP's shortcomings were especially glaring in indigenous communities. SEP teachers in Chiapas were mestizos who generally spoke only Spanish and were usually steeped in anti-indigenous biases. They were unable and often unwilling to confront the structures and institutions that exploited the indigenous, like *enganche* (debt-labor contracting), recurrent epidemics, and what SEP inspector Eduardo Zarza described as "the participation of mestizos in governing indigenous pueblos, the former exploiting the latter due to their ignorance, to the point where parents pay them to keep their children out of school."[16]

SEP educators and social reformers had high hopes when Lázaro Cárdenas became president in December 1934. Cárdenas "believed that the Indian was a backward proletarian, possessed of a number of vices (alcoholism, fanaticism, isolation, etc.) and continually exploited by a variety of class enemies, but open to redemption."[17] Indigenismo became part of the president's populist political

project; his administration created the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DAAI) in 1936. For Cárdenas, the keys to "incorporating" the indigenous into the Mexican mainstream were material assistance and federal paternalism. Late in his presidency, Cárdenas helped establish key institutions that would pay dividends once Mexico recommitted to indigenismo in the 1950s, like the National School of Anthropology and History (Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, or ENAH) and the National Institute of Anthropology and History (Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, or INAH).[18]

The zenith of Cardenista indigenismo came shortly before Cárdenas left office, in April 1940, when Moisés Sáenz and the DAAI hosted the First Inter-American Conference on Indian Life in Pátzcuaro.[19] Many delegates presented research that questioned the efficacy of the incorporationist paradigm. Some defended the right of indigenous people to preserve their own languages and cultures, to choose their representatives and forms of organization. The conference closed with a statement pledging "total respect" for "the dignity and the personality of the indigenous."[20] This pluralist moment was short lived, however. Cárdenas himself insisted on "Mexicanizing the Indian," and the man who succeeded him in the presidency, Manuel Ávila Camacho, called for "national unity" and had no interest in a culturally plural Mexico. When the III was formally constituted in 1942, its director—Manuel Gamio—soft-pedaled pluralism and kept the III studiously and intentionally apolitical.[21]

The 1940s were almost a lost decade for Mexican indigenistas. President Ávila Camacho (1940–1946) gave indigenistas neither the financial resources nor the political capital needed to shape federal policy. The DAAI was purged of leftists and pluralists. Its budget was slashed, and what little remained was spent on showy assimilationist projects.[22] One of the first acts of Ávila Camacho's successor, Miguel Alemán (1946–1952), was to dissolve the practically moribund DAAI and devolve its functions onto other federal agencies. Indigenistas, some indigenous communities, and foreigners with an interest in indigenista policy loudly criticized this move, which may have motivated the Alemán administration to create the INI in 1948.[23] Eight years after hosting the Pátzcuaro conference, Mexico finally fulfilled its pledge to create a national indigenist institute.

THE INSTITUTO NACIONAL INDIGENISTA

The law that created the INI outlined a tame, deeply paternalistic agenda. The INI would research the "Indian problem," study and promote ways to "improve" indigenous populations, and coordinate the action of relevant government

agencies. The INI's director, renowned archaeologist Alfonso Caso, would report to and serve at the pleasure of the Mexican president; its council would include representatives from the Ministries of Education, Health and Welfare, the Interior (Gobernación), Agriculture, Hydraulic Resources, Communications and Public Works, and Agrarian Reform. After heated debate in the Chamber of Deputies, legislators added language that would include "representatives from the most important indigenous populations."[24]

Mexico's INI was clearly a product of its times. Its founding principles and mission drew from both Cardenista-era indigenismo and the developmentalist aims of the post-1940 Mexican state. Although indigenismo was no longer part of a populist project, the renewed commitment to indigenous people was certainly a throwback to the Cárdenas period. So too was the paternalist vision of the Indian as backward, isolated, and in need of protection. Like the SEP, the INI insisted tirelessly that the Indian "problem" was environmental and cultural, not racial. And, like the Cardenistas, the INI's founders believed that indigenous people required material and technical assistance, although the INI greatly expanded this idea and sought to promote and manage cultural change related to agriculture, education, health care, and the like.[25]

Mexican indigenismo was a nationalist project, and national integration was one of the INI's primary goals. At times, it seemed that Caso was channeling Lázaro Cárdenas:

> Our obligation is to make these millions of indigenous Mexicans feel like Mexicans; to integrate them by improving their economy, their health, and their education. . . . We need to bring to them everything that they have lacked during centuries so that they feel like . . . members of a nation, of Mexico. The flag should symbolize not only political unity, but also the purpose of achieving the social and cultural unity of all Mexicans.[26]

Caso hoped to open two new Coordinating Centers every year; in 1956, he confidently declared that a total of forty centers should be sufficient. "We hope that the *indigenous problem*, as such, will disappear in twenty years." But "this doesn't imply that indigenous cultural values will have died. To the contrary, they will continue incorporating themselves into Mexican life . . . so that Mexico becomes more Mexican."[27]

For Caso (and the INI), education in the Spanish language was essential to integrating four million indigenous Mexicans who had been "segregated from the country's progressive march."[28] Spanish-language skills were also a

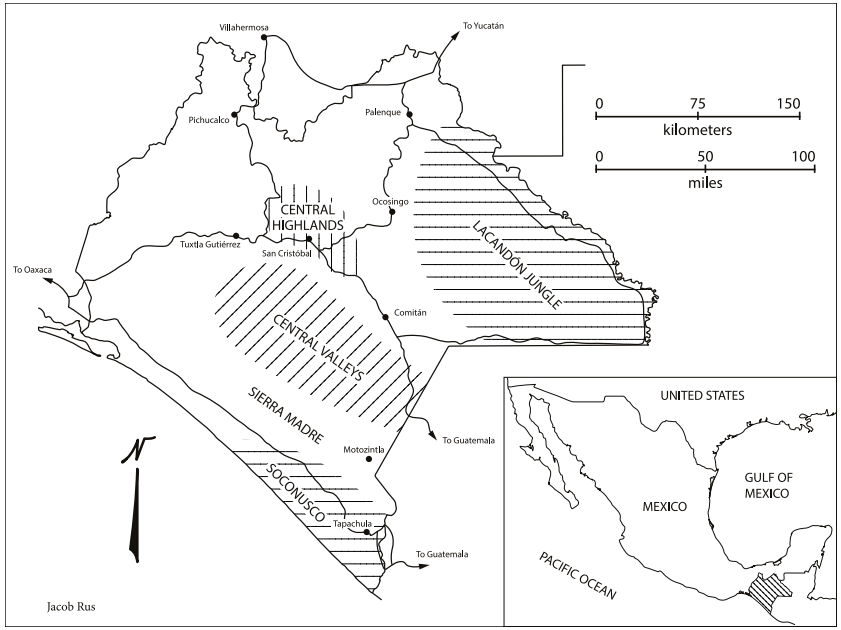
survival strategy. As Caso wrote in the first issue of *Acción Indigenista*, "It is not possible for an indigenous community to defend itself from those that attack it, nor can it develop itself like other communities in the country, if the men and women that form it cannot speak Spanish."[29] The INI's education program would employ a bilingual method to first teach literacy in the mother tongue, but only insofar as it facilitated literacy and writing skills in Spanish. This language policy was also a throwback to the Cárdenas period, for it had been endorsed at Pátzcuaro in 1940.

If the Cardenista imprint was unmistakable in the INI, so too were the priorities of a Mexican state that now privileged urban industrialization and capitalist growth. Indigenista policy would now be expected to contribute directly to Mexico's plans for industrialization, which required an expanded internal market, a larger labor force, and cheap and abundant food grown in the countryside (to feed the cities cheaply and allow for low urban wages). Mexico's political class also wanted the INI's help in relocating Indians when their homes and lands were affected by large hydroelectric projects. The INI's relatively tame approach is highlighted by Caso's pledge to address the "fundamentally *cultural* problems of the indigenous," such as the lack of communication with the outside world and the persistence of traditional farming and healing practices.[30] Rather than threaten the status quo, the INI was more likely to perpetuate it.

In short, the INI defies easy description because it reflected the commitments and ideologies of two distinct historical eras. Many prominent indigenistas were inspired by the Cardenista example. They were altruists and patriots who still believed that they could bring the Mexican Revolution to the indigenous countryside. Many felt that Mexico still owed a historical debt to this downtrodden population. This may have been what drove the oft-noted *mística* (mysticism) of 1950s-era indigenistas, "the ones who assumed and tried to wash away the shame of national society."[31] Once the mística ran up against the harsh realities of rural Mexico and once national priorities shifted, a more pragmatic indigenismo emerged that focused on assimilation, political control, and job security. The "mystics" gave way to the pragmatists; by 1970, the INI was a highly bureaucratized, rather ineffective branch of a discredited one-party state.

Why Highland Chiapas?

This book focuses on the rise and fall of the INI's work in highland Chiapas, but it also makes a more sweeping argument—that the fate of the INI's first and most important Coordinating Center had major implications for the



MAP I.1. Chiapas Regions. Courtesy of Jacob Rus.

indigenista project in the rest of Mexico. While the first nine chapters of the book zero in on the INI's programs in highland Chiapas, the last two chapters and the conclusion take a broader scope, insinuating the INI's Chiapas experience into the politics and upheavals of the late 1960s and 1970s, when Mexican indigenismo was challenged and changed forever.

On the face of it, given Chiapas's various idiosyncrasies, it was an unlikely place to hammer out national indigenista theory and practice. Chiapas is Mexico's southernmost state and was actually part of Guatemala during the colonial period. It only joined the Mexican federation in 1824. From that point forward, powerful ranchers and planters took advantage of the state's distance from Mexico City to defend the state's de facto autonomy from unwanted outside intervention. During the long dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1880; 1884–1911), a time when peasants, factory workers, and miners across Mexico were routinely and piteously exploited, Chiapas drew special attention for the excesses of indigenous debt-labor contracting and earned national notoriety as a "slave" state.[32]

Chiapas's marginalization and isolation became especially clear during the

Mexican Revolution (1910–1920). During that violent decade, Chiapas was relatively calm for the first four years. When the revolution finally came to the state, it triggered little of the popular mobilization experienced elsewhere in Mexico. When the fighting began to die down in 1920, the victors in Chiapas were not the colorful rebels celebrated in corridos and mural art and film but precisely those forces that had *resisted* revolutionary reforms and reformers. In the ensuing years, Chiapas's political class managed to blunt the federal initiatives that we tend to associate with the Mexican Revolution, like land reform. Arguably, at midcentury, Chiapas was Mexico's most idiosyncratic and least typical state.

Once the INI was established in 1948, its top priority was not Chiapas but Oaxaca, where it found itself implicated in two very complicated projects. The first involved colonizing the fertile lowlands of coastal Oaxaca (near Jamiltepec) with tens of thousands of land-starved indigenous—"excess population," in Caso's words—from Oaxaca's Mixteca Alta. The second project, equally thankless, involved a collaboration with the National Papaloapan Commission to study and relocate tens of thousands of Chinantecs, Mazatecs, and Popolocs whose homes in the Papaloapan River basin (on the border of Veracruz and Oaxaca) were about to be flooded due to construction of the Miguel Alemán Dam. The INI would relocate these populations onto fertile, irrigated lands with schools, medical clinics, markets, and roads. Caso called this "improvement of the indigenous."[33]

Caso first mentioned Chiapas at the end of his 1950 annual report, when he noted the INI Council's decision to create a "center" in the highlands.[34] The region was not unknown to researchers; Sol Tax, his Mexican collaborator Alfonso Villa Rojas, and a team from ENAH had conducted fieldwork in the highlands in the mid-1940s and commented extensively on the region's fierce ethnic divide, the persistence of caciquismo (boss politics), the grinding poverty, and the pervasive use of alcohol. According to the CCI's three-time director, Agustín Romano Delgado, the INI Council chose the Chiapas highlands precisely because it wanted "to put to the test, under the most difficult conditions," its methodologies and policies. Chiapas would be the perfect laboratory: most of the highland municipalities were at least 95 percent indigenous; each municipality had its own customs and practices, which complicated the task of guided social change; the Tseltals and the Tsotsils were among the most populous indigenous groups in Mexico and were considered to be among the most culturally conservative and resistant to change; and the exploitation and discrimination that they suffered were exceptional.[35]

Once the INI Council had settled on highland Chiapas, it then had to decide exactly where to locate its first Coordinating Center. The eventual choice of the ladino (non-Indian) market town of San Cristóbal de Las Casas was quite accidental. Paula López Caballero has recently argued that the decision was "the result of circumstances, chance . . . errors, and improvisation."[36] All members of the INI Council initially *opposed* the choice of San Cristóbal, but budget constraints settled the matter in favor of the ladino market town. Quite simply, the INI could not afford to build a fifteen-kilometer road into the indigenous hinterland. Furthermore, local authorities had made available a parcel of land on the outskirts of San Cristóbal known as La Cabaña. Setting aside their initial misgivings, members of the INI Council agreed to a *provisional* Coordinating Center at La Cabaña until roads could be built.[37]

The INI's pilot Coordinating Center opened in March 1951 and soon became its flagship. As early as 1952, Caso was referring to it as a "training center." By the end of 1953, three of Mexico's most outstanding social scientists had each taken a turn at directing the CCI: Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Julio de la Fuente, and Ricardo Pozas. Other high-caliber directors would soon follow. They took the reins of the CCI when they were still relatively young men, when the INI itself was in its formative, experimental stage. Their experiences in Chiapas in the 1950s informed their ways of thinking about indigenismo for the rest of their careers. This is especially evident in the writings of the INI's chief theoretician, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. His *Formas de gobierno indígena*, published in 1953, drew heavily from his experience as director of the CCI in 1951; his best-known work, *Regiones de refugio*, published in 1967, argued that indigenous communities (like those in the Chiapas highlands) had retreated into self-defensive shells as a result of centuries of abuse at the hands of ladinos. Because merchants, businesspeople, and politicians residing in "centers of domination" (like San Cristóbal) were directly responsible for abusing the indigenous, Aguirre argued that INI Coordinating Centers should be established in ladino market towns so that indigenistas could work with both indigenous and ladino populations.

In short, the Chiapas highlands became critical to the development of INI theory and practice due to the vagaries of timing and circumstance. Once the INI decided to build its first Coordinating Center in the Tseltal-Tsotsil region, it could hardly admit Chiapas's unique historical trajectory, its very particular experience in the Mexican Revolution, or the extreme nature of ethnic relations in the state. The "success" of the INI's pilot Coordinating Center was

probably a foregone conclusion. The indigenistas may have produced brutally honest reports and memos for internal consumption, but they took great pains to project a positive image of success to the Mexican public and beyond. Caso needed a successful indigenista project if the INI was to receive the additional funding that he began requesting in his very first reports to President Alemán. Already bogged down as a junior partner in complex colonization and relocation projects in Oaxaca, the INI was clearly pleased to be directing its own project. Failure in Chiapas was not an option; too much was as stake.

The Structure of the Book

The first three chapters of this book are grouped under the heading "The Utopian Project." Chapter 1 provides a brief historical overview of indigenous-ladino relations. It also introduces the high-profile indigenistas who took great pains to distinguish themselves from the local ladinos who lived off the exploitation of the indigenous. Chapter 2 discusses the linchpin of the INI's development programs, the bilingual indigenous cultural promoters, "change agents" who taught literacy and promoted the INI's development programs in their home communities. Chapter 3 chronicles the fate of the INI's first programs, when young social scientists imbued with the mística indigenista ran headlong into the stubborn realities of the Chiapas highlands.

The book's second section, titled "Sober Realities," begins by examining a dramatic clash between the INI and the illegal statewide alcohol monopoly controlled by Hernán and Moctezuma Pedrero. By the middle of 1955, the INI had successfully pressured the state government to curb the monopoly's most egregious abuses in indigenous communities. But these negotiations also placed limitations on INI programs and foretold a more modest indigenista agenda. Chapter 5 traces the INI's retreat on several fronts. The CCI was forced to jettison its most ambitious economic development schemes and focus instead on modernizing and assimilating indigenous populations. Key to promoting education, health care, and infrastructure was a bilingual hand-puppet troupe, the Teatro Petul. This remarkably innovative and effective tool of persuasion and negotiation is explored in chapter 6. Chapter 7 analyzes the CCI's recalibrated medical program, which generally recognized the reality of medical pluralism and emphasized preventive medicine. Chapter 8 describes the Coordinating Center's gradual decline during the "long sixties," when stagnant budgets and dwindling political support took their toll on INI programs and on the morale of its employees. Finally, chapter 9 considers the

controversial question of whether the INI fostered caciquismo in the regions where it worked.

In the book's third section, titled "Crisis, Rekindled Populism, and the Fate of Mexican Indigenismo," the INI is no longer a major protagonist of indigenous development in Chiapas. Chapters 10 and 11 tack between national debates over Mexican anthropology and Indian policy and events on the ground in Chiapas. These very public debates were punctuated by the death in 1970 of the INI's founder and director, Alfonso Caso, and with the election of president Luis Echeverría (1970–1976), a populist who envisioned using indigenismo to calm and contain the Mexican countryside. Chapter 11 chronicles the rise and dramatic fall of the School of Regional Development, the INI's daring, even desperate attempt to answer its critics. Meanwhile, the INI's former charges squared off and fought for control of their municipalities.

Since the mid-1960s, scores of scholars have faulted the INI for its limited scope, its assimilationist aims, its bureaucratic inertia, its role in propping up an authoritarian regime, and its extremely modest returns. Its most vehement critics have accused it of practicing internal colonialism and even ethnocide—the extermination of indigenous cultures.[38] Today's critics focus on how INI discourse and practice patronized, feminized, and otherwise demobilized indigenous populations.[39]

Lost in this barrage of criticism is the fact that INI programs in the 1950s and 1960s were remarkably innovative for their time; in fact, for roughly two decades, the INI was unquestionably the Western Hemisphere's leader in indigenista policy. The critiques, which are repeated today in a variety of fields, fail to recognize the diversity of the indigenista experience and generally remove it from its historical context, ignore the extent of local opposition to indigenismo, and ascribe to Mexico's central government more capacity than it ever had. This is the first book-length history in English of Mexico's INI and its emblematic Coordinating Center in Chiapas. It is one of only a handful of books to treat indigenismo as a historical subject and to use archival sources to reveal its complexity. It explores how an indigenista project that initially contemplated major structural reforms, fought local exploiters, launched inventive education programs, and negotiated health programs ended up a widely criticized, largely ineffective bureaucracy that lost the support of the very people it purported to serve.

Part 1 The Utopian Project

CHAPTER 1

Dramatis Personae

The Indigenous, Ladinos, and Indigenistas

THIS CHAPTER INTRODUCES the main protagonists of our indigenista drama. The first section explores the historical roots of Tseltal and Tsotsil communities in the highlands and introduces the institution that best epitomizes the exploitation of the indigenous by the nonindigenous in Chiapas—enganche. We then turn to the ladino. The term dates back to the colonial period, and while it is still commonly used in Guatemala, within Mexico it is unique to Chiapas. Unlike the term *mestizo*, which is a biological label used to refer to someone of mixed descent, *ladino* is a linguistic and cultural term. Although its meaning has changed over time, it generally refers to Spanish speakers who live in urban settings and adhere to mainstream Catholic cultural norms. As the stories and histories of the highland Maya make clear, the Indian's nemesis is nearly always a ladino.[1] Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán wrote that the culturally isolated indigenous people of the highlands were locked in a "perpetual, mutually reinforcing embrace" with their ladino exploiters.[2] Only the intervention of our third major protagonist, the mestizo indigenista, could break this embrace.

The Indigenous

For nearly five hundred years, the indigenous people of highland Chiapas have captured the imagination of outsiders. Since the times of Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first bishop of Chiapas (1545–1546) and noted "defender of the Indians," observers have invested the indigenous with a wide, even schizophrenic spectrum of traits. "They have been the noble savage or the bloody barbarian, the perfect Christian or the irredeemable heathen, the model ecologist or the worst destructor of the environment, the inventor of the new democracy . . . or a being without individual will, manipulated by dark forces," writes Juan

Pedro Viquiera. "Angels or demons, but never or hardly ever human beings wrapped in contradictions, in internal conflicts, rich in their human diversity."[3] Today, the indigenous highlands attract tourists from Europe, North America, and—increasingly—other Mexican states. It may surprise some to learn that Chiapas is not the state with the largest indigenous population in Mexico—Oaxaca's is numerically greater. But Chiapas does have the greatest number of people who do not speak Spanish, both in absolute terms (371,315) and as a percentage of the population (32.5 percent), and nowhere in Mexico will outsiders find a denser concentration of indigenous people, or more municipalities where the vast majority of residents are indigenous.[4]

Indeed, what attracts outsiders to the Chiapas highlands today is the presence of apparently "traditional" indigenous communities and their inhabitants, many of whom still dress in colorful, distinctive garments and speak indigenous languages. To the untrained eye, their cultural practices, their *usos y costumbres* (usages and customs), seem rooted in the very distant past and show few signs of "contamination" from the modernizing influences of contemporary Mexican society.

Twentieth-century cultural anthropologists were among those captivated by the Tseltal and Tsotsil Maya. In 1957, Evon Vogt of Harvard University established the Harvard Chiapas Project because he believed that contemporary Tsotsils, especially those residing in Zinacantán, had religious and ritual practices, settlement and social patterns, and subsistence activities that could be projected back to the time of their ancestors in the Classic period more than a thousand years ago.[5] Vogt had been trained in the late 1940s at the University of Chicago by cultural anthropologists Robert Redfield and Sol Tax. The field of anthropology was still relatively young at that time, and it took pains to distinguish itself from other fields (like history) in order to legitimate itself as a discipline.[6] This may be what gave rise to a field of study within anthropology—the "community study"—that was purposely ahistorical, even as it made daring assumptions about the lives of people who lived over a thousand years ago. Vogt took this approach to Chiapas in the late 1950s. As he described it: "Our unique anthropological task was to describe, analyze, and understand the inner workings of the 'little communities' of Zinacantán and Chamula."[7] His team would then "project the contemporary data back in time."[8]

The Harvard Chiapas project was prolific and left a lasting impression on the way that academics and the general public think about the Chiapas highlands. Critics argue that this rich body of work created the impression that indigenous culture in Chiapas is timeless and static. According to Viqueira,

cultural anthropologists applying the "community study" model "dedicated themselves to minimizing the transformations that took place during more than four centuries—ten, in the extreme case of Vogt—placing Indians at the margins of history."[9] Once the assumption was made that Zinacantán was a "closed corporate community," Harvard Project participants focused on the "inside" of Zinacantecan culture and showed little interest in *Zinacantecos*' political, economic, and historical connections to the outside world.[10]

In his 1994 memoir, Vogt defended his methodology while also making grudging concessions to his critics. "We considered it our task to go beyond the *easy work* of interviewing in Spanish the government officials and business proprietors . . . or of reading reports and documents in the provincial or state historical archives," he wrote.[11] In any event, he noted, such tasks were best left to other specialists. But given Vogt's narrowly focused, ahistorical methodology, the supposition that such communities were static and "closed" became a self-fulfilling prophecy. And the notion of timeless, traditional indigenous cultures has left a lasting impression on outsiders and even many specialists.[12]

Scholars working in historical archives have demonstrated that the cultural identities of the present-day Tseltal and Tsotsil Maya—indeed, of all people—reflect centuries of adaptation to outside forces. Archaeological evidence suggests that the highlands were probably populated by migrants from the Petén rainforest in what is today northeastern Guatemala. Sometime between the fifth and tenth centuries, Tseltal and Tsotsil developed into distinct branches of the Mayan linguistic family. At the time of the conquest, at least four powerful, plurilingual Mayan *señoríos* (lordships) in the highlands fought for control over land and trade routes. It is believed that the señorío of Zinacantán was struggling with the Aztec-led Triple Alliance of central Mexico for control over trade with the coastal territory of Soconusco. Each señorío occupied several ecological niches, from the hot, fertile lowlands of the Grijalva River valley up to the cool highlands at more than 2,200 meters.[13]

When the Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1520s, they broke apart the powerful indigenous señoríos and terminated pre-Hispanic political and territorial units in the highlands. They created instead a multitude of smaller, relatively autonomous and independent *pueblos de indios* (Indian towns), each with its own communal lands. The Spanish relocated natives from the fertile lowlands in the north and west to the highlands closer to the Spanish town of Ciudad Real (today San Cristóbal de Las Casas). Multiple sources describe Ciudad Real as a "parasitic city" that used its political, administrative, and religious powers to strip the indigenous of the fruits of their labors.[14] Spanish

friars—especially the Dominicans—also resettled indigenous populations. The practice known as *congregación* concentrated dispersed (and sometimes rival) indigenous peasants into Spanish-style towns, which facilitated the process of evangelization. Iberian institutions like the Catholic Church, religious brotherhoods or confraternities known as *cofradías*, and patron saints became part of the landscape.[15]

It's hard to miss the irony of this quick overview of early colonial history. Contrary to those who claim that pre-Hispanic cultures, settlement patterns, and traditions had been largely preserved for roughly one thousand years, the region was, in fact, altered almost beyond recognition by the Spanish, who intentionally destroyed pre-Hispanic institutions and loyalties and relocated and "congregated" populations. Zinacantán, which Vogt used to extrapolate settlement patterns and social organization dating back centuries, was no exception to this general rule. To quote Viqueira, it—like many other Mayan towns in highland Chiapas—was "a colonial creation."[16]

Church policy toward the indigenous in colonial Chiapas failed in multiple ways, with important long-term consequences. In other parts of Mesoamerica, the clergy managed to instill some of the basic tenets of the Christian faith and—in the best tradition of Bishop Las Casas—often sided with the indigenous against rapacious Spanish colonials and served as social mediators whenever trouble broke out. But Las Casas himself had a tough time in Chiapas. During his brief tenure (1545–1546), he fought unsuccessfully against local encomenderos and settlers who routinely enslaved Indians in spite of a 1542 royal decree outlawing the practice. When Las Casas denied slaveholders the sacrament of confession and refused to absolve them of their sins, they rioted and twice drew their swords on him. Cooler heads soon suggested that Las Casas abandon his bishopric.[17]

The Dominicans, Franciscans, and others who came after Las Casas generally did not share the first bishop's concern for the plight of the indigenous. Chiapas was a colonial backwater, the indigenous were the region's only "natural resource," and all colonials, including the clergy, exploited them mercilessly. The friars spent relatively little time in indigenous towns, which allowed the indigenous to take great liberties with respect to Catholic doctrine and practices. The result was a deeply syncretic worldview, a mixture of Catholic and pre-Hispanic beliefs.[18]

Church policy during the colonial period, then, played a major role in the formation of the relatively autonomous, ethnically distinct indigenous municipalities that we see in the highlands today. As Viquiera notes, "with few