

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE RACIALIZED MARGINS; TERRITORIAL AND ANTI-RACIST STRUGGLES OF INDIGENOUS AND AFRO-DESCENDANT PEOPLES IN MESOAMERICA

Presentation for the “Exchange between indigenous and community organizations of Mesoamerica” BUILD Project of Ford Foundation and CCARC

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STRUGGLES FOR TERRITORY, AUTONOMY AND INTERSECTIONAL JUSTICE: LEARNING FROM INDIGENOUS AND BLACK PEOPLES OF CENTRAL AMERICA

I want to start by offering my gratitude for this invitation: to the Indigenous organizations of Mesoamerica participating in this exchange, the Build Program and CCARC, as well as friends and colleagues of many decades. My special thanks go to Silvel Elias for facilitating this exchange and to Doña Paulina Par for her inspiring introductory words.

We always try to begin our proceedings at UC Santa Barbara with a recognition of the Indigenous people of the territory where the city of Santa Barbara, and the University are located. This territory is the ancestral homeland of the Chumash Native American people, who still live here, but in very limited spaces¹. The Chumash live in constant struggle to recover their territory, to secure the basis for their livelihood and lifeways, and to assert their presence—both at the University of California, Santa Barbara and in the broader surrounding area. In this sense, we can affirm a shared struggle that connects the place from which I speak, and your distinctive realities in Central America.

FINDING A SCHOOL IN CENTRAL AMERICA

I arrived in Nicaragua in 1981—40 years ago—with the desire to support, participate in, and contribute to the Sandinista Revolution. I soon met Galio Gurdían who, after he managed to overcome his skepticism of this young gringo neophyte anthropologist, gave me a job at the Center for Research and Documentation of the Atlantic Coast (CIDCA), the organization he directed. I worked there for a good part of the decade. I do not offer this historical note simply to marvel at the years that have passed, and certainly not to indulge in revolutionary nostalgia. Political conditions at that time on the Atlantic Coast—known today as the Autonomous Region of the North Caribbean Coast (RACCN) and the Autonomous

¹ The Chumash are an Amerindian people, who historically inhabited the coastal regions of central and southern California, in what is now Santa Barbara, San Luis Obispo, Ventura and Los Angeles, from Morro Bay in the North to Malibu in the South. They also occupied three of the Channel Islands: Santa Cruz, Santa Rosa, and San Miguel. Currently more than 4 thousand Chumash live in the Santa Inés Reserve. <https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chumash>

Region of the South Caribbean Coast (RACCS)—were already so fraught with tensions between the Sandinista government and Indigenous and Black peoples, that I learned from early on always to think the Revolution together with the word “contradiction.” Instead, my historical note is meant to suggest that these contradictions, which we confronted throughout the 1980s, are directly relevant to the topic of this workshop, and to the BUILD project. Three principal insights from that era come to mind, insights that took root despite, and in some respects because of those contradictions.

First, revolutionary struggles in Central America were guided by a profound analysis of structural-historical oppression and marginalization; an analysis that adamantly rejected the dominant idea circulating at that time, and still circulates today, which explains the social suffering of oppressed people as their own fault: that is, people are marginalized and impoverished because they lack something (discipline, intelligence, orientation towards the future, etc.). To join the Revolution meant rejecting that dominant idea, and opening one’s mind to a radically different analysis, starting with a deep confidence in people’s collective potential to remake their social worlds for the better.

Second, the revolutionary movements of that era were much more than vanguard-led actions; they were also grassroots mobilizations with multifaceted goals and motivations. They were heterogeneous struggles against historical inequalities. In Guatemala and Nicaragua, the two countries that I know best, we can think of this as revolutions within revolutions. I remember when I began to learn this from the Miskitu people with whom I lived and worked in Nicaragua; when I asked them why they had risen up against the Sandinista government, their response often came in a single powerful phrase: “Wan tasbaya dukiara” (“... We are in struggle for our land”). That same struggle continues to this day, in diverse forms and junctures, throughout the Americas.

Third, the Central American revolutionary movements—despite their contradictions— were animated by utopian horizons, that is, by inspiring notions of how our societies could be transformed according to shared emancipatory principles—radically different relations of production, governance, and of human interaction that we could build together.

What I learned from that decade of involvements with the Nicaraguan Revolution became a touchstone for the next three decades of my career as an anthropologist—as a teacher, as a practitioner of what we came to call “activist research.” We learned something deep and enduring from the experience of believing in and fighting for those utopian horizons—quite apart from the question of whether they were realized (they were not), or whether their contents require critical scrutiny and revision (they do). By extension, I will conclude suggesting that the idea of utopian horizons is crucial to our discussion today.

Unfortunately, the analytical backdrop of the summary document—that of structural - historical marginalization—has not changed much since the revolutionary decade of the 1980s. In many ways it has worsened. Regarding the second point—the heterogeneity of movements against oppression—I perceive hopeful signs of change, not greater homogeneity but rather, increased mutual understanding, and I will return to this issue.

The third major lesson from the 1980s—the mobilizing force of utopian horizons—continues as central to my thinking, and I will conclude this presentation with reflections along these lines. I firmly believe that Indigenous and Afro-descendant thought and practice provide inspiration not only for their own struggles, but for the aspirations of the broader societies in which they are located. The fundamental difference here is not the content of those visions —on the contrary, these are marked by profound continuities—but rather, the fact that other sectors of society have begun to recognize, and draw inspiration from these visions: as Paulina said, to face the deep and increasingly urgent problems that our societies face, and to think beyond superficial reforms and palliatives.

My journeys in Central America took me first to Nicaragua in 1981, and then to Guatemala, the Moskitia of Honduras, and other countries in Central America and southern Mexico. Although my residence and place of employment was primarily the US from the 1990s to 2017, the main focus of my efforts to practice and advance socially and politically committed academic work was in Central America. The subsequent decision to redirect those energies back to my country of origin was not happenstance. I took this decision at the moment when a particularly noxious government, one that embodied all that is most threatening in our global context, came to power. In response I decided to devote my energies —grounded in the same revolutionary vision and principles — to conditions here. As a result, since 2017 I have had relatively little involvement in Central America, except in what I can glean from afar and I want to learn from you. I hope the reflections that follow will be useful, not so much in understanding the current situation, but for thinking about future and long-term perspectives.

At the end of the revolutionary decade, I began to work principally in Guatemala. The first half of the 1990s in Guatemala was a short period of slight hope that had not existed since the so-called “Guatemalan Spring” of 1944-1954. It was the time of the Peace Accords; talk of a new national project was in the air. I was involved in an intercultural dialogue effort initiated by Ladino intellectuals and activists who wanted to better understand their counterparts in the Mayan movement. It was a moment of effervescence of the contemporary Mayan movement, which had emerged from the ashes of the stateperpe-



trated genocide of the 1980s. The Guatemalan State, pushed forward and incentivized by multilateral development institutions, had initiated what we began to recognize as a regime of multicultural rights, with the creation of the Academy of Mayan Languages, bilingual education programs, the recognition of distinctive identities, and other actions, which I am sure you have well in mind.

My analytical contribution at that time was to study the nation-state itself, and the middle- and lower-class Ladinos, guided by this central question: To what extent are Maya peoples able to exercise newly achieved multicultural rights to generate deep and lasting changes for the better in their lives? In other words: given the advance of multicultural rights — from national policies to international conventions such as the ILO Convention 169 — what repercussions did these transformations have on Guatemala’s racialized power structures? My principal analytical contribution was to insist on a caveat, noting that multiculturalism should be considered both as an opportunity and a threat. I argued that the threat of multicultural regimes was their ability to enact new technologies of governance, without making substantive changes in underlying political and economic relations. The key insight that catalyzed this analysis came from the Mayan intellectuals. In particular, I remember learning from a conversation with Demetrio Cojti, who at the time was serving as Vice Minister of Education. We analyzed, from his experience working inside the state, the extent to which state relations with Mayas had changed. At one point in the conversation, he offered a deceptively simple reflection, which went right to the heart of the matter: “Before, the state simply told us “No,” now it says, “yes, but ...”. It is a “yes,” full of conditions and constraints that limit the scope of the rights obtained, and grinds down their more expansive promises. My contribution was to emphasize the risk of endorsing multiculturalism without anticipating and responding fully to the conditionality that this “yes, but” imposes. My analysis was not intended to deny the many strategic opportunities that multicultural rights offered—to the contrary, I argued for the need to take advantage of those fissures, those openings; but I suggested that these opportunities could best be seized with full cognizance of the accompanying limitations.

Using this same analytical framework, I would like to address both the threats and the promising fissures and that emerge from a critical reading of the documents you generated through previous conversations. These reflections address four specific topics:

1) The pandemic; 2) international aid; 3) the Pact of Corrupt, and 4) the horizons of struggle. My reflections do not offer conclusions but rather questions and provocations that I hope will generate further debate and discussion.

THE PANDEMIC

Doña Paulina Par summed it up very well in her initial invocation. We all know that the pandemic has affected everyone, but that it has not affected everyone in the same way. Pre-existing conditions of inequality have created very different patterns of social suffering and difficulty in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the United States, Indigenous peoples, Black and Latino communities have suffered much more, and that unequal impact was absolutely predictable for the reasons that we already know. Nation

states are lousy public health managers, especially when they take advantage of crises like the pandemic to further their own political and private interests—a lamentably frequent problem.

However, these same conditions have generated fissures, which in turn open up opportunities. The documents you provided contain a striking conclusion, which in turn coincides with what I have observed in Oaxaca, Mexico: in response to the pandemic, principles of struggle that Indigenous peoples have affirmed for centuries, have been recuperated and strengthened. These principles include: defense of the territory, greater priority on food sovereignty, practices of collective self-care beginning with protection of your own resources, recuperation and use of community-based public health measures. Taken as a whole, these principles constitute a compelling vision of autonomy, and as such, offer strategic pathways for the future. It is absolutely crucial that we take an inventory of these innovative practices, making sure they remain vibrant when the worst of the current crisis is over.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AID

A few months ago, in a meeting with PRISMA, I noticed that from Central America there was great expectation and hope in light of the change of administration in the United States. I of course share those hopes, but combined with a large dose of skepticism. The ongoing crisis on the border between Mexico and the United States, the highly polarized political landscape in the US, and the lack of historical consciousness of most politicians with regard to Central America, all contribute to my assessment. With the exception of a small minority on the left of the Democratic Party, there is very little inclination to identify the root causes of distress in Central American societies, or to take necessary remedial action. The new administration offers a more humanitarian vision and will follow policies in line with that vision. However, I see little capacity or political will to change their basic stance toward the region with anything approaching the depth that is required. An additional serious problem is that for most private funding sources, with certain exceptions such as the Ford Foundation, interest in the Central American region has decreased considerably.

Regarding the fissures, the waves of northward migration have generated a reluctant recognition of the need to address the roots of the crisis, especially with regard to economic policies. Even if political will is generally lacking, the forces behind this deeper analysis have some potential to effect change. At the same time, I believe that the fundamental opportunity at this juncture is to radically reorient the purpose and objective of international aid programs. This reorientation would be based on the argument that the economic and political autonomy is more essential than ever; and that national governments are neither capable of administering cooperation funds in this way, nor reliable in their promises to do so. A much more fundamental change in mindset is required. International aid to Central America must be accompanied by a forthright acknowledgement of the historic debt that the northern governments have not even begun to pay. This acknowledgement comes with the premise that international aid is not apt to provide lasting solutions, but rather, at best tactical openings. Even with a new administration in Washington, fundamental solutions will have to emerge from the leadership and agency of the peoples and communities who they are intended to benefit.

THE PACT OF CORRUPT

The threat here is enormous. In many realms of Central American life, the rule of law has collapsed; multicultural rights are in retreat, even at the level of discourse. Repression of activists, dissidents and defenders of Mother Earth is on the rise; as is an economic model which, as doña Paulina said, brings exploitation, desolation and death to the majority of peoples. The governments that come and go, in close political alliance with the powerful narco-economic sector, have lost what little capacity they had to convince—that is, to govern in the classic sense that combines an appeal to a social compact, sealed with the ever-present threat of coercion. We are entering an era of governance that rests directly and primarily to the monopoly of violence enjoyed by the state apparatus and its closelyallied private sector elites.

There is an emerging framework, a product of the acute conditions of this pact of corrupt and the collapse of neoliberal multiculturalism, which represents a shift from cultural, ethnic and racial identities as the exclusive basis of politics, towards an approach to identity as the basis for coalitional mobilizations that bridge cultural-racial difference. The essential condition for this shift would be the emergence of an anti-racist praxis among dominant (Mestizo and Ladino) sectors — anti-racist in Ibram Kendi’s sense: it is not enough to affirm the principle of racial equality, insisting that an individual, an insitution, a government is “not racist”. Being anti-racist requires active and constant commitment to eliminate structural-historical inequalities between peoples, through both ideological and institutional change. An anti-racist stance along these lines could provide the basis for formulating alliances for mutual benefit between Mayas and Ladinos in Guatemala, and parallel coalitions elsewhere in Central America. When I started my research in the 90s, I sought out these alliances and found very few that were truly horizontal and anti-racist.

Could it be that an anti-racist consciousness now is growing, and giving rise to new forms of mobilization, with shared elements that allow a convergence of political views, affirming identities, and then going further to propose collective transformations? This is a question to investigate. The claim to be “non-racist” was central to the discourse of multiculturalism: We all want equality, etc. To the extent that we are now seeing intersectional anti-racist politics, as your document suggests, politics with firm commitments and accountable actions, perhaps this will lay the basis for a new revolutionary epoch for the 21st century.

HORIZONS OF STRUGGLE

The threat here is the tendency to resort to familiar positions that no long ignite the collective political imagination, if they ever did. I found the document instructive and compelling in general, but I am going to quote and criticize one passage that illustrates this tendency to fall back on the familiar. The authors insist that we must...



“...learn to fight for the rule of law that leads to a new equitable, inclusive social compact that reflects the multinational, multicultural and multilingual nature of the region”

This sounds good, but the phrasing belongs to the past. Such a statement, does not embody a full appreciation of the Pact of the Corrupt nor the need to formulate militantly anti-racist coalitions. Above all, appealing to a multicultural rule of law evokes disappointment and unfulfilled promises so powerfully that it almost certainly lacks the potential to ignite radical political imaginations in ways that our current conditions demand. We have to go further.

Meetings like this contribute to the fissures from which opportunities arise: they promote and empower new leadership. Leaders of the younger generations raise their collective voices with new ideas that go beyond existing forms of thought, proposing analysis that forces us to rethink our collective aspirations in radically new ways, imagining different futures. The base document mentions that these new horizons of struggle, beyond the daily defense of the territory, are still emergent, requiring additional dialogue. I agree. This is a collective task, a process far beyond what any given individual actor might contribute. We must think about how to create conditions for these new horizons of struggle to emerge, starting with the defense of territory, going on to affirm economic and political autonomy, and from there inspiring us to transcend the limits of the familiar, and reimagine what it means to live in society with one another.

CONCLUSION

Indigenous and Black struggles have always been opposed to the Nation State, and before that to the colonial regime. However, in contemporary times they have also existed in tension, many times, with progressive forces on the left. The great hope of the current conjuncture is the possibility that societies as a whole, endorse and learn from those visions that have been nurtured for years, for centuries, on the margins and racialized borders. These struggles offer pools of experience, ideas, and alternative horizons that can guide us all. That will mean using existing tools, but also flatly rejecting the temptation to return to normalcy. The normal before the pandemic was neither desirable nor acceptable, as the document bluntly states. We must make the most of the information and communication technologies that facilitate encounters like this one, and other tools that are part of the dominant society but that we can increasingly appropriate and revert according to alternative and radically different political horizons.



