



# México Profundo

Reclaiming A Civilization

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# 1.



## A Land of Millenarian Civilization

Let us start from a basic fact: one of the few original civilizations that humanity has created throughout all its history arose and developed in what today is Mexico. This is Mesoamerican civilization, from which derives all that is "Indian" in Mexico. Mesoamerican civilization is the starting point and indeed the most profound aspect of our country.

Every schoolchild knows something about the precolonial world. The great archaeological monuments stand as national symbols. There is a circumstantial pride in a past that is somehow assumed to be glorious, but that is experienced as something dead, a matter for specialists and an irresistible attraction for tourists. Above all, it is assumed to be something apart from ourselves, something that happened long ago in the same place where we, the Mexicans, live today. The only connection is based on the fact of *them* and *us* occupying the same territory, but in different time periods.

We do not recognize a historical connection or a continuity with the past. Some believe that Mesoamerican civilization was destroyed by the European invasion; others seem to regard that event as a sort of redemption. What remains of Mesoamerican civilization is regarded as ruins, some of stone but others still living. We accept and utilize the precolonial past as the history of the national territory, but not as our own past. *They* are simply the Indians, the Indian part of Mexico.

In this way of regarding the matter one notes a rupture, accentuated by a revealing and disquieting tone of superiority. That renunciation, that denial of the past—does it really correspond to a total and irremediable historical break? Did Mesoamerican civilization really die, and are the remaining Indian populations simply fossils, condemned five hundred years ago to disappear because they have no place in the present or in the future? Upon the answers to these fundamental questions depend many other urgent questions and responses about the Mexico of today and about the Mexico that we want to build for the future.

### The Forging of a Civilization

In Mexico, as in most countries of the world, the last several thousand years have seen the origin, the disappearance, and the passing through of a great number of different societies and peoples. Here, however, unlike what occurred in many areas, there exists a cultural continuity that made possible the origin and development of a specific kind of civilization.

According to the information available, human beings have been living in Mexico for at least thirty thousand years. The earliest groups lived by hunting and gathering wild products. Some groups seem to have specialized in hunting large mammal species such as mammoths and mastodons, camels, and horses, which later disappeared. Others, depending on local conditions, hunted smaller species of game and depended more on gathering plant foods. The large game animals disappeared in Mexico approximately seven thousand years ago, perhaps because they could not survive changing climatic conditions. Of those early bands we have recovered fossil remains, stone tools, and weapons directly associated with the skeletons of the great animals they hunted. They were nomadic groups who required very large territories to survive. They lived in caves and temporary structures that were abandoned after short periods of occupation.

The reduction in available game animals and the greater dependence on gathering wild products certainly influenced a basic process: the domestication and later cultivation of plants. Mesoamerican civilization arises directly from the invention of agriculture. This was a long process, not an instantaneous transformation. Agriculture began in the semiarid watersheds and valleys of Central Mexico between about five thousand and seventy-five hundred years ago. In that period people began to domesticate beans, squashes, *huautli* [*Amaranthus paniculatus*, also called *alegría*], chiles, *miltomate* [*Physalis ixocarpa*, or tomatillo], gourds, avocados, and, of course, corn or maize. The cultivation of corn was a momentous achievement and remains linked in an inseparable way to Mesoamerican civilization. Its domestication produced the greatest morphological changes in any domesticated plant. Adaptation over time also permitted its cultivation in a wider range of climates and altitudes than any other domesticated plant of importance. One must remember that corn can grow only with human intervention, since the corn cob has no mechanism to disperse its seeds without human help. It is, in effect, a human creation, a child of Mesoamerican parents. Its parents, in turn, are children of corn, as poetically related in the *Pop Wuj*, "The Book of Events," of the Quiché Maya:

Thus they found food and it was what they employed to make the bodies of the people who were made, who were formed; the blood was liquid, the blood of the people; corn was used by Created and by Male Created . . . Later they thought about how to make our first mother and father. Of yellow corn and white corn they made the bodies, of food were made the arms and legs of the people, of our first parents. Four people were created, of pure foodstuffs were their bodies. [Chávez 1979: 65a]

Corn and agriculture in general did not immediately acquire the importance they would have later. Agriculture's inventors continued practicing gathering and hunting as primary subsistence activities and used the products of agriculture in a complementary fashion, although they constantly increased in importance. About three thousand years before Christ, the inhabitants of the small villages that have been discovered near Tehuacán obtained only about 20 percent of their food from cultivated plants; 50 percent came from gathering and the rest from hunting. Nevertheless, they already had a sedentary life; they had increased the variety of plants cultivated, and they were already raising dogs as a food source. Between 2,000 and 1,500 BC the process of sedentarization was completed and, of the products consumed, half were cultivated. This change has been explained by the fact that 440 to 550 pounds [200 to 250 kilograms] of corn can be harvested per hectare, which made it more productive as a food source than gathered products.

The first permanent villages were formed, and pottery, which had been invented about 2300 BC, was produced in them. It can be said that at this point, about 1500 BC, Mesoamerican civilization began. At this time the Olmecs, considered the bearers of Mesoamerican civilization's mother culture, were found in the hot country of southern Veracruz.

This is not the place to present a panorama, even a schematic one, of the development of this civilization from its beginnings to the sixteenth century. It was a complicated and diverse process that is understood better as archaeological and historical research proceeds. Suffice it to say that the experts have established certain chronological periods that, in their general outlines, coincide in the different Mesoamerican regions. Thus, a Preclassic or Formative period is known, which extends from about 2000 BC until approximately AD 200. Between 800 and 200 BC is the climax of Olmec culture, in which the first inscriptions on stone are found, the calendar (to be perfected by later peoples) is invented, and monumental sculptures in stone are carved whose technical quality and plastic harmony surprise us even today.

The influence of the mother culture is evident in various places. In

northern Veracruz the culture called Remojadas develops, a tradition that the Totonacs will continue later. In Oaxaca, Zapotec culture begins. In the Yucatan peninsula, apparently through Olmec influences, the basis of Maya culture is established, a culture whose unmistakable profile will appear at the end of the Preclassic. During this time in the central valleys, an intensive agriculture develops in certain places that makes use of artificial terraces, canals, reservoirs, and *chinampas* [raised garden plots built in shallow lakes]. All are made possible by the development of a form of social organization that the archaeologists have called "theocratic chiefdoms." By the end of the Preclassic the bases of Mesoamerican civilization have been established, and its various component cultures begin to crystallize.

At the beginning of the Classic period, about AD 200, Teotihuacán culture begins. It expands greatly in the following five centuries and its later influence lasts until the arrival of the Spaniards. Teotihuacán, at the moment of its greatest splendor, was perhaps the largest city in the world. Its power and influence depended on the intensive agriculture practiced in the central valleys and the tribute it received from the peoples who submitted to its hegemony. At this time the central valleys acquired importance as the political and economic axis of a vast region, a role they have maintained to the present. In some periods the region was larger than the modern boundaries of Mexico.

The power of the central valleys was originally based on optimum use of the natural environment, using Mesoamerican agricultural technology and the development of forms of social organization that permitted the control of a large and dispersed population. Without metal tools, without plows or the wheel, without draft animals, an intensive high-yield agriculture was practiced with relatively limited labor. The lakes in the Valley of Mexico were used to construct *chinampas*, which are highly productive. Great dams were constructed to prevent the passage of saltwater into the freshwater reservoirs. The lakes themselves served to transport people and merchandise between many areas in the valley. On the slopes of the mountains that encircle the valley, terraces were constructed to cultivate the land and canals were built to use the water sources. Their geographical position allowed the central valleys to become the point of convergence of products from many different climatic zones, not necessarily far distant. Different ecological niches were regularly articulated by commercial interchanges, at times imposed by military force and its corresponding political power. This relationship made possible one of the key features of Mesoamerican civilization: Central Mexico would be constantly nourished by very diverse influences, including those from beyond the northern limits of

Mesoamerica. There was continual contact with groups of hunters and gatherers from the arid lands to the north, contact that was sometimes peaceful and sometimes warlike.

But it was not only Central Mexico that developed culturally, based on its intense contacts with other regions. In fact, all the cultures of the area maintained direct or indirect contact with each other. The Toltec diaspora at the end of the tenth century AD influenced places very distant from the great cities of Tula, Teotihuacán, and Cholula. For example, it produced important changes in the Maya area from Chiapas to Honduras and Yucatan. The local cultures of the peoples located on the peripheries of the centers of greater development presented characteristics that can be related to specific cultural traits of one or the other of their larger neighbors. This happened, for example, with the Itzás, who occupied Chichén about AD 918. They were Chontales from the coast of Tabasco in whose original culture both Maya and Toltec influences can be seen.

The slow cultural advance of the first thousands of years accelerates from the moment in which agriculture becomes the principal economic base. It gives rise to collective forms of social life that, within the diversity of their particular cultural traits, maintain common elements of civilization. Intense and prolonged contact occurred between cultures with their own historically developed profiles, and between the peoples who created those cultures. Thus, different and once autonomous peoples created a unified Mesoamerican civilization. This common origin is recognized in the myths and traditions of different peoples. A fragment of the *Pop Wuj* will serve to illustrate:

What happened to our own language? What has happened to us? We are lost. Where can they have deceived us? Our language was one when we came from Tulan, one was our manner of subsistence, our origin. What has happened to us is not good, said the tribes beneath the trees, beneath the foliage. [Chávez 1979: 72a]

The definition of Mesoamerica as a cultural region with precise boundaries and characteristics was originally proposed by Paul Kirchhoff [1967]. He based the definition on the distribution of a hundred or more kinds of cultural traits, about half of which were found exclusively in Mesoamerica. Mesoamerica's remaining cultural traits were shared with other regions of the continent. The physical boundaries of this area were approximately from the Pánuco River to the Sinaloa River, passing along the Lerma River in the north; and from the mouth of the Motagua River to the Gulf of Nicoya, passing through Lake Nicaragua in the south. Kirchhoff's seminal study referred to the situation at the moment

of the European invasion, and the author himself advised that later research would show variation in the Mesoamerican frontiers during different historical periods, especially in the north.

Of course, the simple presence or absence of cultural traits of such different significance as "cultivation of corn," "use of rabbit fur to decorate textiles," "specialized markets," "hieroglyphic writing," "chinampas," and "thirteen as a ritual number" is clearly insufficient to characterize a civilization. Kirchhoff indicates as much himself. He provides other facts and reflections among which stands out an important conclusion based on linguistic information. The distribution of Mesoamerican languages indicates, on the one hand, an ancient presence in the region, and, on the other, constant contact between the peoples who spoke those different languages. "This all indicates," according to Kirchhoff, "the reality of Mesoamerica as a region whose inhabitants, both the ancient immigrants and those recently arrived, were united by a common history, and in terms of which they confronted other tribes of the continent" [1967: 4].

In effect, there is a continuity between the invention of corn cultivation by the hunting and collecting bands of the Tehuacán caves seven thousand years ago and the florescence of Teotihuacán at the beginning of the seventh century AD. In the same way there is an undeniable relationship between Teotihuacán culture and the development of the various Mesoamerican cultures up to the European invasion, independent of the fact that the different groups spoke distinct languages and identified themselves by different names. Mesoamerican civilization is not the product of the intrusion of foreign elements, unknown in the region, but, rather, of cumulative development based on local experiences. This suggests a theme that will occur throughout this book: Indian cultures have adapted to the physical conditions in which they are found, a fact that explains their diversity. At the same time, the unity that they manifest is explained by their belonging to the same level or horizon of civilization.

Another fact that stands out is that practically the entire habitable area was in fact occupied at some point in the precolonial period. This means that Mesoamerican civilization was nourished by confronting an extreme variety of different situations. There was a great variety of ecological niches in which local cultural development took place, and a variety in the cultural characteristics of the peoples who successively occupied those niches. It is only after the European invasion and the installation of the colonial regime that the country becomes "unknown territory" whose contours and secrets need to be "discovered." The viewpoint of the colonizer ignored the profound ancestral perspective of

the Indian who saw and understood this land, in the same way that it ignored the Indian's experience and memory.

Historical contacts included those with the peoples who inhabited the areas north of Mesoamerica, in so-called Arid America. It was an unstable and fluctuating frontier. Its inhabitants were not of Mesoamerican origin, but they had constant relations with the civilization to the south, and these relations were not always violent. Some Mesoamerican peoples originated as northern hunters and gatherers who migrated to and assimilated the agricultural, urban civilization of the south. Huitzilopochtli, the major god of the Aztecs, presents characteristics that distinguish him in the Mesoamerican pantheon. This is understandable, since he came from that small, nomadic group that, after long wandering, established itself finally in Tenochtitlán and became "the People of the Sun."

The distinction between Mesoamerica and the groups to the north is real and useful for understanding the general history of precolonial Mexico. However, the boundary should not be understood as a barrier that separated two radically different worlds, but, rather, as a variable limit between climatic regions. To the south these conditions, especially annual rainfall, permitted an agricultural life based on the available technology. There were differences in many aspects of life between south and north, but there was not isolation or lack of contact. The experience of the hunters and gatherers of the north is not alien to Mesoamerican civilization.

In the current geographic conformation of Mexico one notes the contrast between north and south and the central plateau and the coasts, and the preeminence of the central valleys. Although that conformation is based on geographic facts, the important features of the country are also the result of thousands of years of history, whose marks have not been erased by the last five hundred years. This is not to deny the importance of changes since the European invasion, but to point out that geographic transformations did not take place on an empty landscape. Rather, the changes Europeans introduced affected groups of people with a cultural heritage elaborated over many centuries in the same places, where local adaptations allowed different sorts of responses.

It is important to underline that thousands of years of human presence in the present-day Mexican territory produced a civilization. This fact has profound implications. For one thing, the diverse cultures that existed in the precolonial past and that, transformed, exist today as a continuation of them all have a common origin. They are the results of a unique civilizational process that gives them a unity apart from their differences and particularities. In addition, when we speak of "civiliza-

tion," we are making reference to a certain level of cultural development, in the broadest and most inclusive sense of the term. This level is complex enough to serve as a common base and principle of orientation for the historical development of all the peoples who share that civilization. It does not consist of a simple aggregate of isolated cultural traits, however complicated such an aggregate might be. Rather, it refers to a general plan for human life, which gives meaning and transcendence to human actions and which locates people in a certain manner within the natural world and the universe. It gives coherence to human plans and values. It also allows constant change in responding to the fortunes of history without denying the civilization's profound underlying meaning; rather, it applies that meaning to the circumstances at hand. Mesoamerican civilization is a large framework—stable and permanent but by no means immutable—within which various cultures are encompassed and by which various histories are made comprehensible. Nothing less than this was bequeathed to us: a civilization, created by hundreds of successive generations who, during thousands of years, worked, thought, and dreamed in this land.

The legacy of this civilizational process surrounds us on all sides. We constantly have in front of us a material vestige, a way of feeling and of doing certain things, a name, a food, a face. All of these things reiterate the dynamic continuity of what has been created here over many centuries. These objects and beings are not mute, although we stubbornly persist in not listening to them.

#### A Humanized Nature

There are hardly any virgin landscapes in Mexico. One always finds evidence of human presence, of the ancient passing of others over these lands. Thousands of abandoned habitation sites may be found, from the imposing ruins of the great cities to the barely visible vestiges of small villages beneath mounds that appear natural. Many contemporary Mexican towns have been continuously occupied since centuries before the European invasion. There are ancient canals, no longer in use. There are *chinampas*, some still productive and others converted into tourist attractions. In the mountainous zones of the central and southern part of the country, at sunrise or in late afternoon one can still see the outlines of terraces that permitted cultivation of very steep hillsides. Without too much effort one can still traverse long stretches of road over which the Maya walked a thousand years ago. There are waterworks of surprising magnitude, such as those of Tezcutzingo, near Texcoco. Hundreds of caves and springs preserve evidence of ancestral rites, some of which are still practiced regularly. Potsherds, obsidian knives, fragments of stone

or pottery figurines, testifying to the human times. Incessant hurry in spectacular fashion in constant manner.

The transformation of spaces adapted for the area the original vegetation ago. Patiently, generations to smoothing the prolific stalks of corn to altitudes of more than this is a plant invented centuries ago. Corn has been [Museo Nacional de observation will verify humans to corn in Houses in small villages properties along straight places one finds differences in human movements for corn cultivation the land, the climate, use of space within an instance, there is always form and manner of to the materials available noxious pests to be dealt which is a daily task which is an occasional prominent place in the making tortillas, they spend many hours, they gathers to eat, talk, and the boundaries that regions of the country has a relation to corn.

Along with corn, cultivated many other uses that form part of the in the fields called *milpa* the landscape in high to arrest soil erosion

or pottery figurines are dispersed over every corner of the country, testifying to the human relationship with the natural world since remote times. Incessant human activity has changed our landscape, sometimes in spectacular fashion, but more commonly in a subtle, slow, and constant manner.

The transformation of the natural world includes the creation of spaces adapted for the development of human life. In many cultivated areas the original vegetation was eliminated more than a thousand years ago. Patiently, generation after generation, cultivators have contributed to smoothing the profile of the land to facilitate the tasks of farming. The lithe stalks of corn peacefully invaded the countryside from the coasts to altitudes of more than 9,950 feet [3,000 meters] above sea level. And this is a plant invented by humans living on this land. For many centuries corn has been a controlling force in a large part of Mexico [Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares 1982]. Even the least alert observation will verify the reciprocal adaptation of corn to humans and humans to corn in any peasant village of Mesoamerican ancestry. Houses in small villages, for example, may be located on adjacent properties along straight streets, or along curved, winding paths. In other places one finds dispersed households scattered among the fields. These differences in human settlement may be a function of the local requirements for corn cultivation, depending on the conformation and slope of the land, the climate, and different ways of using the available water. The use of space within households also reveals the importance of corn. For instance, there is always a place to store the ears of corn. The storehouse's form and manner of construction vary from region to region, according to the materials available, the climatic conditions, and the kinds of noxious pests to be dealt with. There is also a space for shelling the corn, which is a daily task in which all members of the family participate and which is an occasion for intensifying domestic relations. Occupying a prominent place in the home is a hearth and *metate* [grinding stone] for making tortillas, the basic and indispensable foodstuff. Here the women spend many hours, beginning long before sunrise, and here the family gathers to eat, talk, and discuss work and daily events. Space itself, from the boundaries that mark different kinds of occupation in different regions of the country to the interior details of living quarters, ultimately has a relation to corn cultivation forged over centuries and millennia.

Along with corn, Mesoamerican civilization domesticated and cultivated many other useful plants. Beans, squash, chiles, and other products that form part of the daily diet continue to be sown together with corn in the fields called *milpas*. The maguey [agave plant] is characteristic of the landscape in high areas, where it functions to mark boundaries and to arrest soil erosion. It has, in addition, so many other useful qualities

that Father Acosta commented, "It is a tree of miracles, innumerable are the uses of this plant." The prickly pear cactus [*nopal*] frequently accompanies it, accentuating the harshness of the landscape.

The cultivation of plants with several thousand years' antiquity in the service of humankind continues in every part of the country. The list is impressive and includes some products now for general use or consumption in many parts of the world, such as tomatoes, chocolate, tobacco, avocados, and cotton. It also includes plants, such as the *alegría*, that were once of great importance but whose cultivation and use have declined, and that today are harbored only in small corners of the country.

Whether one goes to humid tropical lands, the valleys of the high plateau, the semiarid north, or the flat limestone peninsula of Yucatan, one will find a vegetation largely transformed by human hands and intelligence. It is to some degree an invented landscape. Even in the depths of the forest, the distribution and relative density of certain species is due to human intention. Here, without being cultivated, the usefulness of some species has been known for centuries, which has resulted in their protection.

The fauna has also suffered changes in adapting to human presence. Turkeys and several species of dogs were domesticated from the animal kingdom, and their survival now depends on human company. Many other animals arrived with the Europeans and were easily incorporated into rural life, since Mesoamerican civilization had the cultural space available to make those animals its own. There are also methods of hunting wild animals, of attracting them, and of driving them away that have been practiced constantly over centuries and that have affected the natural distribution of animals and altered the size of their populations.

The use of certain mineral products, such as salt, clay, building stone, and sand, is also an ancient practice that has contributed to humanizing the Mexican landscape, transforming it and making it more adequate for human life. Many settlements and roads that are still in use had their beginnings in the necessity of obtaining salt for consumption in regions where it was not found. Several decades ago, Miguel Othón de Mendizábal [1929] called attention to the great importance of the salt trade in precolonial times.

A millennial interrelationship of man with nature can be seen in all the diverse ways in which the peoples of Mexico relate to the natural world, use it, and transform it daily. We see the depth of relationship in the natural contours of Mexico, in the landscapes that we all hold in our memories as an inescapable part of our lives, in the vegetation that is so familiar it goes unperceived, and in the slopes and the forms of human occupation. In this interrelationship there have been changes, which

seem to have accelerated continuity that make place here, in these lands occupy today the same flourished in ancient world and all that is satisfactory solution multiple ways in which American civilization ship with the nature richer and more complex backward technology. Rather, the persistence knowledge that represents centuries. This knowledge ways of understanding systems of values, for daily life. This is to

### To Name Is to Create

We Mexicans who are possible of understanding. We memorize the names of caves and geographical names in those names: large extent, geographical as official designation Spanish crown and. The new names signify moment: saints and of diverse background formed in the first languages: Churubusco. The original names through the policy of although less extensive some localities continue saints, already had led at changing the place remain. They are a will be within reach relationship with it



seem to have accelerated in modern times. But there is also a profound continuity that makes us part of the civilizational process that took place here, in these lands, in this natural setting. It is not simply that we occupy today the same territory in which the original civilization flourished in ancient times. Today the relationship with the natural world and all that it implies presents a pressing problem on whose satisfactory solution the future of Mexico depends to a large degree. The multiple ways in which we Mexicans turn to elements from Meso-american civilization to establish a harmonious and beneficial relationship with the natural world that surrounds us reveal something much richer and more complex than appears at first sight. It is not that isolated, backward technologies survive and are the cause of our backwardness. Rather, the persistence of those technologies is related to a body of knowledge that represents the accumulated, systematized experience of centuries. This knowledge and experience are consistent with particular ways of understanding the natural world, and with profoundly rooted systems of values, forms of social organization, and ways of organizing daily life. This is to say, they are part of a living culture.

#### To Name Is to Create

We Mexicans who do not speak an indigenous language have lost the possibility of understanding much of the meaning of our countryside. We memorize the names of mountains and rivers, of towns and trees, of caves and geographical configurations, but we do not capture the message in those names. Here, everything geographical has a name. To a large extent, geographical names in Indian languages have been adopted as official designations. This has occurred in spite of the insistence of the Spanish crown and republican Mexico that new names be introduced. The new names signify the eternal remembrance of the symbols of the moment: saints and virgins, lands across the ocean, exalted personages of diverse background. Many indigenous names were grotesquely deformed in the first European attempts to pronounce aboriginal languages: Churubusco for Huitzilopochco, Cuernavaca for Cuauhnáhuac. The original names of many localities became the last names of saints through the policy of evangelization. Republican Mexico, more radical although less extensive in efforts at changing nomenclature, renamed some localities completely. Eminent republican figures, unlike the saints, already had last names! In spite of all the efforts of five centuries at changing the place names in our geography, many of the old names remain. They are a stubborn reserve of knowledge and testimony that will be within reach of the majority of Mexicans only when our relationship with indigenous languages changes substantially.

At the bottom of this question is the fact that to name is to understand, to create. What has a name has a meaning. If you prefer, that which has a meaning necessarily has a name. In the case of place names, their richness demonstrates the knowledge that exists of local geography. Many describe exactly the site to which they apply, and others refer to an abundance of whatever natural elements characterize the locale. But our geography is also history, and place names report this as well, telling us what happened here in terms of human affairs. Frequently, house plots, gardens, and fields have names of their own that signify some peculiar characteristic of the land, its use, or to whom it belongs. In some parts of the country there are multiple place names in two or more indigenous languages, indicating successive occupation by different peoples, or the domination of one group by another, as is frequent in areas of Nahuatl expansion. In these situations, nevertheless, when the local population preserves its original language, it also preserves its own system of place names and not the others that have been imposed, whatever their origin.

In the popular speech of Mexicans, even those who speak only Spanish, there are a great number of words of indigenous origin. Many of these words are in general use and have been adopted into other languages besides Spanish, because they refer to products that originally came from Mexico. But the phenomenon is most interesting in local regions of Mexico, where indigenous terms are used to refer to items that also have common names in Spanish.

This vast terminology gives name and meaning to the natural world that surrounds us and makes it comprehensible in the semantic context of dozens of aboriginal languages. It is conclusive proof of the ancestral appropriation of nature on the part of the peoples who created and maintained the underlying Mexican civilization. In-depth study of these vocabularies, hardly begun until the present, will provide information of singular importance about the diverse principles and codes that Mesoamerican peoples have employed to classify and understand the natural world in which they live and of which they form a part. From the research already published it is possible to infer the richness of information behind those names. A comparison of the terms designating the different parts of the corn plant, its variations and stages of development, has shown that the indigenous languages are richer than Spanish. This denotes a more detailed classification, which in turn is based on more precise knowledge of the botanical characteristics of corn. In addition, the botanical terminologies that have been studied allow a first approximation to the principles on which the classifications are made. These principles, along with what is being learned little by little about the human body and its illnesses, the animal kingdom, the soils, and the

celestial vault of the heavenly universe is understood in Mexico a more specific understanding of nature.

It is important to underline nomenclatures whose vestiges, contrary to the extent that they conserve their full significance, originated. Consequently, they express and condense the knowledge. The secular continuity of culture, the inevitable transformation of changing reality. Names are linguistic change from eras which it has been possible to

### **Disavowing the Indian Factor**

If nature, its transformation, the unavoidable presence of the about the faces of our people, continuity and the fact that traits that loudly proclaim the continuity of Mesoamerican the color of the skin or processes are quite different phenomena. If one object Mexican population, for distributed in a homogeneous frequently in certain social processes of biological redistribution of traits which that form part of our history these factors further.

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celestial vault of the heavens, will tell us about the way in which the universe is understood in Mesoamerican terms. This in turn will permit a more specific understanding of the relation between human beings and nature.

It is important to underline the fact that we are not referring to dead nomenclatures whose vestiges have lost coherence and meaning. On the contrary, to the extent that they belong to living languages, they conserve their full significance in the semantic context in which they originated. Consequently, they continue as linguistic systems that express and condense the knowledge base of Mesoamerican civilization. The secular continuity of common names, then, is a way of channeling the inevitable transformations in speech, which are a response to ever-changing reality. Names are like solid points of reference that prevent linguistic change from erasing the basic structures of thought through which it has been possible to understand the world and one's place in it.

### **Disavowing the Indian Face of Mexico**

If nature, its transformation, and its names testify at every point to the unavoidable presence of Mesoamerican civilization, what can we say about the faces of our people? One principle must be clarified. Genetic continuity and the fact that the immense majority of us have somatic traits that loudly proclaim our Indian heritage does not in itself prove the continuity of Mesoamerican civilization. Culture is not inherited like the color of the skin or the shape of the nose. Social and biological processes are quite different matters; however, they are not unconnected phenomena. If one objectively observes certain somatic traits among the Mexican population, for example, skin color, one notes that it is not distributed in a homogeneous manner. Lighter skin is encountered more frequently in certain social groups than in the rest of the population. The processes of biological reproduction that have given rise to this peculiar distribution of traits ultimately have social and cultural determinants that form part of our history right up to the present. It is worth exploring these factors further.

It is common to say that Mexico is a mestizo country both biologically and culturally. In terms of physical features, the mixture can be seen in large sectors of the population, although the intensity varies and Indian traits predominate in many groups. This can be attributed in the first place to the size of the original Indian population, which was much larger than the European, African, and other groups that participated in the racial fusion. It is well to remember that the indigenous population of Mexico has been estimated at twenty-five million at the time of the European invasion. This figure suffered a brutal decline during the first

decades of the colonial period, so that only in the present century has the country again grown to twenty-five million inhabitants.

It is evident that the Indian genetic contribution was the fundamental one in the physical makeup of the Mexican population. This is an undeniable reality. However, the predominance of Indian traits in the majority sectors of the population and their much lower frequency in the dominant classes indicates that racial fusion did not occur in a uniform fashion and that we are far from being the racial democracy that is often proclaimed. The racial differences are a basic historical fact that indicates the most profound aspect of our reality during the last five centuries. A colonial society was established whose nature made it necessary to distinguish subject populations from those who were dominant. This distinction was indispensable and included racial differences. The colonial order was based ideologically on affirmation of the superiority of the dominant society over those colonized, in all terms of comparison, including racial ones.

Racial mixture occurs, to a greater or lesser degree, in all colonial societies. It must be denied socially or, when admitted, the mestizo must be assigned an inferior position in the social hierarchy. In slave societies the child of a female slave was always a slave, whatever his or her color might be, or whatever other evidence of racial mixture he or she might exhibit. In some contemporary situations there has been an effort to quantify an individual's percentage of Indian blood to determine legally aboriginal status, as has occurred in the United States. In New Spain the colonial regime formally imposed caste distinctions based on relative amounts of Indian, African, and Spanish blood. It assigned a different rank to each caste, with corresponding rights, obligations, and prohibitions. Whatever its form or extent, racial mixture did not imply at any moment that colonial society had renounced its ideological affirmation of racial superiority. These somatic differences emphatically distinguished the dominant classes from the variegated collection of dominated peoples. This separation of colonial society, in both biological and cultural terms, continued to be a burning problem throughout the sixteenth century, and even persists today, as we will see in more detail shortly.

What is important to emphasize here are the implications of the unequal racial mixture presented by different strata of the population: the absolute dominance of Indian traits in many groups and their absence or very weak presence in others. The Indian faces of the great majority indicate the existence, throughout five centuries, of forms of social organization that made it possible for those traits to predominate biologically. These forms of social organization also permitted cultural continuity. This was the result of colonial segregation, which estab-

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lished defined social spaces in which the biological reproduction of the Indian population took place. Inevitably, it also allowed the corresponding maintenance of culture, within certain limits. This continuity has occurred within the framework of colonial domination, with all the attendant consequences. Biological mixture was frequently the product of violence, and cultural persistence had to confront or elude the most varied forms of oppression, imposition, and rejection.

From this perspective, the mestizo nature of Mexico allows less simple and evasive interpretations than those suggested in the "racial democracy" argument. A first question has to do with the mestizo. Here I will suggest only a few ideas to be developed in later sections. Much of the mestizo Mexican population, which today forms the largest part of the rural and urban non-Indian population, is very hard to distinguish in physical appearance from the members of any community that is recognized without question as indigenous. From a genetic point of view, both are the products of mixture in which Mesoamerican traits predominate. The social differences between "Indians" and "mestizos" do not follow, then, a radically different history of racial mixture. The problem can be better understood in different terms: the mestizos are the contingent of "de-Indianized" Indians. "De-Indianization" is a different process from the biological one of racial mixture. To use the term *mestizaje* in different sorts of situations—for example, "cultural *mestizaje*"—carries the risk of introducing an incorrect view. It is an inappropriate way to understand nonbiological processes, such as those that occur in the cultures of different groups in contact, within the context of colonial domination.

De-Indianization is a historical process through which populations that originally possessed a particular and distinctive identity, based upon their own culture, are forced to renounce that identity, with all the consequent changes in their social organization and culture. De-Indianization is not the result of biological mixture, but of the pressure of an ethnocide that ultimately blocks the historical continuity of a people as a culturally differentiated group. Many cultural traits may continue to be present in a de-Indianized collectivity. In fact, if one looks in detail at the cultural repertoire, the way of life, of a traditional agricultural mestizo community and compares it with what happens in an Indian community, it is easy to see that the similarities are greater than the differences. Similarities are obvious in housing, foodways, *milpa* agriculture, medical practices, and many other aspects of social life. Even in language one can find the mark of the Indian past, since the local Spanish of a "mestizo" community frequently includes a great number of words from the original Mesoamerican language.

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Indians and others are not? Before giving a detailed answer, let me mention a major achievement of the process of de-Indianization, begun almost five centuries ago. Working largely through mechanisms of compulsion, it has succeeded in convincing large parts of the Mesoamerican population to renounce their identification as members of a specific Indian collectivity. An Indian community considers itself the sole heir of a defined cultural patrimony and assumes the exclusive right to make decisions related to all its components—natural resources, forms of social organization, knowledge, symbolic systems, motivations, and so on. Separation from its cultural patrimony is the culmination of the de-Indianization process. As I have noted, it does not necessarily imply a break with cultural tradition, but it does restrict the scope in which cultural continuity is possible and makes any ongoing cultural development more difficult.

It remains to mention the problem of the correlation between physical features of European derivation and the socially and economically privileged groups. It is obvious that any explanation that involves notions of "natural" superiority or inferiority of groups with different racial characteristics must be discounted. History has undertaken the task of discounting such ideas, sometimes in a bloody and painful fashion. History itself helps us find the thread running through the tangle. Again, it was the colonial experience that organized society on the basis of hierarchical divisions. Physical features were used as social principles for ordering groups and individuals. The old structures of domination with their supporting ideologies continue in effect in many parts of our contemporary society. The privileges of the groups that inherited and continue to hold wealth and power tend to be justified as the necessary result of a natural superiority visible in physical differences. Faced with the new metropolis, which proclaims its Western, Christian, and white affiliations, neocolonialism and dependence reinforce the racist ideology of the old elites, in spite of rhetoric that disguises it. The ideals of physical beauty, discriminatory language, and the daily conduct of those elites demonstrate an underlying, unmasked racism.

This racism consists of much more than a preference for certain physical traits or skin color. Discrimination against that which is Indian, its denial as a major part of what we ourselves are, has much more to do with the rejection of Indian culture than with rejection of bronzed skin. There is an attempt to hide and ignore the Indian face of Mexico because no real connection with Mesoamerican civilization is admitted. The clear and undeniable evidence of our Indian ancestry is a mirror in which we do not wish to see our own reflection.

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# The Indian Recognized

One of the ways of avoiding the problem of Mexico's Indian identity has been to ideologically convert one sector of the national population into the repository of the remnants that, in spite of everything, admittedly remain from that foreign past. "The Indians," generically labeled, thus resolve the absurdity of a civilization declared defunct by decree. What remains of all that was? Only this: the Indians.

And, in fact, they are here. In the Indian regions of the country they are recognized through external evidence: the clothes they wear, the "dialect" they speak, the appearance of their huts, their fiestas and customs. Nevertheless, we Mexicans in general know little about "our Indians." How many are there? How many different peoples compose that diverse ethnic mosaic that the colonizers lumped under the single term "Indian," that is, those who were defeated and colonized? How many indigenous languages are spoken?

These cold facts are difficult to specify precisely, a situation that in itself is symptomatic of the problem. But the real problem lies in the fact that rejection of that which is Indian makes it impossible to understand different and alternative ways of life. Very few people care to understand what it means to be Indian, to share the life and the culture of an Indian community, suffer its troubles and delight in its pleasures. The Indian is viewed through the lens of an easy prejudice: the lazy Indian, primitive, ignorant, perhaps picturesque, but always the dead weight that keeps us from being the country we should have been.

### What It Means to Be Indian

It is not possible to give a precise figure for the number of Mexicans who consider themselves members of an indigenous group—that is, those who assume a particular ethnic identity and consider themselves collectively members of an "us" who are different from "the others." In Mexico there is no legal definition of what it means to be Indian. Such

a definition would at least provide a formal way of estimating numbers. Instead, we are all equal here—although there are also Indians.

The census data record only one piece of information, which is pertinent but by no means sufficient: the population five years old and above who speak an indigenous language. The census of 1980 recorded a total of 5,181,038 such individuals, of whom 3,699,653 also speak Spanish. These data and those from previous censuses have been criticized frequently and thrown into doubt. A "statistical ethnocide," that is, a substantial reduction in the real figures caused by insufficient and defective data collection, has even been suggested. It is well known that many people who speak an indigenous language as their maternal tongue hide and deny that fact.

These problems carry us back to the colonial situation, to prohibited identities and proscribed languages, to the final accomplishment of colonization, when the colonized finally accepted internally the inferiority that the colonizers attributed to them, renounced their own identity, and assumed another and different one. Add to this, in many cases, the attitude of "progressive" local authorities, anxious to prove at any price that here, in this village, there are no more Indians, or at least there are fewer. We have become "cultured people" [*gente de razón*].

Nevertheless, apart from purifying the census figures, the problem consists in the fact that speaking an indigenous language, although an important fact, does not mean that all the speakers and only the speakers of indigenous languages constitute the total Indian population. The problem is not of a linguistic nature, although certainly language plays a role of great importance. Rather, it is social and cultural elements that determine membership in a specific cultural group. It is useful, then, to try to characterize Indian groups or peoples and, on this basis, to try to estimate how many Indians there are in Mexico.

Indian peoples, like all others at any time or place in history, have their own particular history. Throughout that often ancient history, each generation transmits a heritage—its culture—to the next. Culture includes many diverse elements: objects and material goods considered as property, a territory and the natural resources it contains, habitations, public spaces and buildings, productive and ceremonial installations, sacred sites, the place where our dead ancestors are buried, instruments of work and of daily life—in sum, all the material repertoire that has been invented or adopted through time and that we consider ours, as belonging to the Maya or the Tarahumara or the Mixe.

Also transmitted as a part of the cultural heritage are the forms of social organization: what rights and responsibilities individuals have as members of families, communities, and cultural groups as a whole; how

to solicit the collaborative orientation, decision and inherited knowledge.

We learn how to do to interpret the nature confronting problems, values: what is right and is permitted and what of all acts and things. Codes that allow commits a particular language ideas created by the particular gestures, to have meaning for us, and of sentiments are also us to participate, to relations and collectively and each new generation imagination of those within a culture, it in

Our own culture has exclusive access. History belongs and who does universe that is the culture. Each group est to join and ways to membership. This is w look upon oneself as a by other members and as its exclusive patrimony his or her culture and norms, rights, and priority over time), all of which ship in a unique, different

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We learn how to do things, to do the kind of work that is done here, to interpret the natural world and its expressions, to find ways of confronting problems, to name things. Along with this we also receive values: what is right and wrong, what is desirable and what is not, what is permitted and what is forbidden, what should be—the relative value of all acts and things. One generation transmits to those that follow the codes that allow communication and mutual understanding. It transmits a particular language that expresses the vision of the world and the ideas created by the group throughout its history. Also transmitted are particular gestures, tones of voice, ways of looking, and attitudes that have meaning for us, and often for us alone. At a deeper level a spectrum of sentiments are also transmitted. Because they are shared, they allow us to participate, to accept, and to believe. Without them personal relations and collective effort would be impossible. All this is culture, and each new generation receives it enriched by the efforts and the imagination of those who went before. As each generation is shaped within a culture, it in turn helps enrich that culture.

Our own culture belongs to us; it is the one to which we have exclusive access. History has defined who "we" are by specifying who belongs and who does not and when one stops belonging to the social universe that is the heir, depository, and legitimate owner of our own culture. Each group establishes the limits and the norms. There are ways to join and ways to be accepted. There are also ways of losing one's membership. This is what is expressed in cultural identity. To know and look upon oneself as a member of a group, and to be recognized as such by other members and outsiders, means to form part of a society that has as its exclusive patrimony its own culture. The individual benefits from his or her culture and has decision-making rights, according to the norms, rights, and privileges one's culture establishes (and that change over time), all of which are recognized as group membership, or membership in a unique, different, specific group.

From this perspective we can better understand what it means to belong to an ethnic group. We all necessarily belong to a defined society, large or small, but one that always has boundaries, membership rules, and a store of culture that is considered exclusive and its own. The Indian does not define himself in terms of a series of external cultural traits—dress, language, customs, and so on—that make him different in the eyes of outsiders. Rather, he defines himself as belonging to an organized collectivity, a group, a society, a village that possesses a cultural heritage

formed and transmitted through history by successive generations. In relation to one's own culture, one knows and feels oneself to be Maya, Purépecha, Seri, or Huastec.

In the specific case of the Indian peoples of Mexico, there is another historical condition that is necessary for understanding their basic characteristics and current situation: for five hundred years these people have been the colonized. Colonial domination has had profound effects in every area of indigenous life. It has constrained cultural development, imposed foreign traits, dispossessed people of resources and cultural elements that form part of their historical patrimony. Colonial domination provoked various forms of resistance but always tried by any means to ensure the subjugation of those colonized. It was most effective when it was able to convince the colonized of their own inferiority. Throughout these pages there will be continual reference to the process of colonial domination. I do not wish to repeat myself unnecessarily, but, rather, to constantly and necessarily place Indian peoples in the social context within which their history has taken place from five centuries ago until the present.

The preceding reflections should make it easier to understand the difficulties of taking any census of the indigenous population and the inadequacy of the available figures. To make sense, it would be necessary to employ criteria of social group membership and not simply sum up individual characteristics.

An estimate of the Indian population of Mexico as being between eight and ten million seems reasonable. This would represent 10 to 12.5 percent of the total population. Remember that we are speaking of individuals who maintain their membership in a local group; the group identifies itself as different from others because it has a common and exclusive cultural patrimony. Not counted in this figure are other individuals and groups who have lost their sense of ethnic identity, although they conserve a way of life that is basically Mesoamerican.

How many Indian cultures exist in Mexico currently? This question cannot be answered precisely either, for reasons that are quickly noted here but that will be explained later. First, the identification of cultures in terms of the languages they speak is not sufficient. In general, it is estimated that there are fifty-six surviving Indian languages, but some scholars claim there are many more and argue in some cases that different dialects are in reality different languages. Besides, although speaking a common language is one of the principal requirements for constituting an ethnic group, it is not necessarily true that all the speakers of a language form a single ethnic unit. This means that detailed information on the number of languages spoken does not in itself resolve the problem of how many cultures exist. The basic problem is not

linguistic. Colonial domination systematically destroyed cultures which included vast knowledge on reducing indigenous

This atomization of Mesoamerican civilization to the detriment of the broad social organization before colonialism should be understood simply as diverse Indian peoples or distinct people or cultures.

In spite of the foregoing situations that are characteristic of Mexico, the Maya of the Yucatán, 700,000. They occupy (the local dialects of the Maya), and to a large extent. Thus we can speak of a culture that is different with the territories (the mountains of Tehuantepec). The representatives are not the same cultural differences whose indigenous culture whose indigenous domination.

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### **A Profile of Indigenous**

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linguistic. Colonial domination, as we will see in some detail, tried to systematically destroy the broader levels of existing social organization, which included vast populations occupying broad territories. It insisted on reducing indigenous life exclusively to the local community level.

This atomization of the original Indian peoples has affected the course of Mesoamerican civilization. It has reinforced local identity to the detriment of the broader social identities characteristic of Indian social organization before the European invasion. Thus, current identities should be understood as the result of the colonization process and not simply as diverse local communities, each of which constitutes a distinct people or culture. I will return to this point.

In spite of the foregoing comments, it is possible to identify contrasting situations that indicate the different demographic conditions characteristic of Mexico's Indian peoples. For example, it is estimated that the Maya of the Yucatan peninsula have a population of more than 700,000. They occupy a continuous territory, speak the same language (the local dialects never prevent mutual communication in Yucatec Maya), and to a large degree share the same culture and cultural matrix. Thus we can speak of the Maya people and Maya culture. The problem is different with the more than 300,000 Zapotecs. They occupy different territories (the mountains of Oaxaca, the central valleys, and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec), speak dialects of the language whose most distant representatives are mutually unintelligible and present very striking cultural differences. Here we must speak of a historical people and culture whose internal diversity has been accentuated by colonial domination.

But one must understand that many Indian peoples are of nowhere near the demographic magnitude of the Maya, the Nahuatl, the Zapotecs, the Purépecha, or the Mixtecs. About twenty ethnic groups have fewer than ten thousand members, and half of those have fewer than one thousand. These are the dramatic cases of cultures at risk of extinction, besieged by the unceasing action of ethnocidal forces.

It is easy to understand that this diversity of situations is reflected also in the characteristics that each culture has been able to maintain and elaborate. In spite of their differences, it is possible to present an outline of Indian cultures that brings to light their essential characteristics, over and above their individual differences.

### **A Profile of Indigenous Culture**

Each of the Indian cultures of Mexico has a distinctive cultural profile that is the result of a particular history whose beginnings date to remote times. At first glance, faced with this mosaic of different peoples, it

seems difficult to make valid generalizations. Nevertheless, a careful comparison of different Indian cultures discovers similarities and correspondences beyond their particular traits. This should not be surprising if one keeps in mind two basic facts. First is the existence of a common civilization in which all Mesoamerican peoples participated and which also influenced the nomadic groups to the north. This civilization is the background, the common cultural heritage, of each people. Second, the common experience of colonial domination produced similar effects, even though in some cases the definitive subjugation may have occurred centuries apart. In fact, some peoples were subjugated or "pacified" only in the first decade of this century.

The territorial distribution of the Indian population shows a greater concentration in areas that had achieved notable cultural development before the European invasion. It is not a perfect correspondence, because diverse factors have influenced the original distribution since the beginning of the colonial period. The devastating decline in population during the sixteenth century, caused by previously unknown diseases, wars, and the hard conditions of forced labor, led to the disappearance of entire peoples and the depopulation of formerly inhabited sites. The seizure of their lands and their stubborn desire to remain free drove many groups to inhospitable regions quite different from their original homelands, the sorts of areas that Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán [1967] has quite accurately called "refuge regions." Greed for land and the demand for forced labor were perennial forces, and their effects were felt with renewed intensity in the nineteenth century, altering once more the distribution of the Indian population in much of the country.

In many regions the Indian population effectively disappeared. In some cases it was expelled, in others, exterminated, as was the case with the Great Chichimeca of the arid north. Most frequently it was subjected to conditions that made continuity as a culturally different people impossible. This last process, de-Indianization, has been called "mixture" [*mestizaje*], but it really was, and is, ethnocide. We will return to it later.

Today, the population recognized as Indian is distributed unequally in the national territory. The central, southern, and southeastern regions are home to the largest groups and contain vast regions in which the Indians are the majority, particularly in comparison with the rest of the rural population. Indian communities are situated in diverse ecological zones, from the humid tropical forests to the semiarid plateaus more than 6,600 feet [2,000 meters] above sea level. Areas of steep mountain slopes, where making a living is difficult, are frequently isolated refuge regions whose only occupants are Indians. Few Indian communities are on the coasts. Mesoamerican civilization is more at home along the

rivers and lakes, in the sometimes adapted to

The colonial occupation of what was the regions interrupted the Physical space has been tion of Indian lands, purposes, the establishment of roads, and the less, in certain zones, material continuity survive within their own territories Mexico. The initial Indian region is of a rural seem similar to one another cities, although not all

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It is important to note which implies differences

rivers and lakes, in the mountains and fertile valleys, although it has sometimes adapted to semiarid conditions.

The colonial occupation of the territory, the gradual and variable growth of what was the "useful Mexico" to the colonizers, has in most regions interrupted the original contiguity of the indigenous territories. Physical space has been fragmented as a consequence of the expropriation of Indian lands, policies of dividing the land for administrative purposes, the establishment of non-Indian cities and enterprises, networks of roads, and the construction of large public projects. Nevertheless, in certain zones, for example, among the Maya of Yucatan, territorial continuity survives. Other groups, however, have become enclaves within their own territories, which are now occupied by non-Indian Mexico. The initial impression one gains from a rapid tour through any Indian region is of a rural, peasant world composed of communities that seem similar to one another. The people are different from those in the cities, although not absent in them.

The basic productive activity of the Indian communities is agriculture. There are many systems of cultivation, depending on soil types, topographic relief, the yearly rainfall, average temperatures, and, of course, the cultural traditions represented. These systems always seek the optimum utilization of the local resources and the best adaptation to the local conditions, starting from the system of knowledge, technology, social organization of work, and the preferences and values of the group. The popular image of Indian agriculture portrays it as "primitive" and of low productivity. Quite to the contrary, however, we can observe a situation that offers a varied and rich panorama.

The first general characteristic of Indian agriculture is that several different products are raised simultaneously on the same plot. The best known example is the classic *milpa*, in which corn, beans, squash, and chiles are grown together. Actually, the number of crops grown together is usually larger. In some cases, as among the Huastec of northern Veracruz, the list of things grown in the *milpa* includes root crops, tubers, cereal grains, agaves, vegetables, and fruits. In many areas of the humid tropics a system of shade-producing zones is utilized, which depends on the height of each cultivated species to best utilize the available solar energy and increase the variety of crops grown. In other areas, the diversification of cultivated crops is achieved by complementing the basic products of the *milpa* with many others, grown in small quantities on a piece of land next to the living quarters. In this case, it is usually the women who cultivate the family garden while the men work in the *milpa*.

It is important to note that the diversification of agricultural products, which implies different harvests at different seasons, plays an important

role in the diet available in indigenous communities. To evaluate the Mesoamerican diet one cannot simply quantify the calories or protein consumed in any particular day or week. Rather, one must take into account the annual cycle, in which the absence of certain nutrients in a given period is compensated by their abundance in others. The dietary cycle also includes meals during fiestas, some of which occur on obligatory, established days, and others of which occur irregularly, on the occasion of baptisms, weddings, and house construction celebrations. Finally, one must not lose sight of the fact that the indigenous diet also includes a great variety of insects and animals, available in different seasons, which provide nutrients in the annual cycle.

An agricultural system that continues in use in the lake regions of the Valley of Mexico is the cultivation of *chinampas*. The *chinampas* utilize shallow lake waters, and along their banks parcels of farmland are constructed. These parcels, the *chinampas* themselves, remain constantly damp and are systems that are highly productive for horticulture.

The tools used in Indian agriculture are usually simple and frequently manufactured in the communities themselves. For planting on steep or rocky lands, either an *espeque*, a stick with a fire-hardened point, or an *azada*, a large curved hoe, is used. On flatlands a wooden plow is used. Along with these basic instruments the machete, the sickle, a knife for husking the ears of corn, and little else are used. There are more complex Indian agricultural systems in which water is controlled by dams and canals. There are also ways of cultivating hillsides and avoiding soil erosion through the construction of rock terraces or maguey hedges.

Altogether, agricultural technology is far from "primitive," in spite of the elementary tools used. It implies putting into practice a complex variety of knowledge that is the accumulation of long-term experience. This knowledge includes knowing the characteristics of the soils, selecting compatible varieties of plants, cultivating each one according to its special requirements, following the correct calendar of activities, fighting pests, and carrying out an infinity of tasks necessary to obtain a good harvest.

Agriculture in Indian communities is intimately related to activities other than cultivating the earth. They form a complex that should be understood as a whole. Use of the natural world includes not only agriculture, but also the gathering of wild plant foods, hunting, fishing where it is possible, and the raising of domestic animals. All these tasks imply a great range of knowledge, abilities, and practices that acquire unity and coherence through a particular conception of nature and the relation of humankind to it.

In analyzing Indian cultures, it is frequently difficult to establish the boundaries between what is economic and what is social. It is also

difficult to separate what historical memory and efficacy has been proven with what we would practices and beliefs that reality to our own categories. Western origin, do not conception of the world kinds of actions seem ceremony for a good selection of seeds for the natural world, which is abilities as well as for. This unity is also present as well as observing nature in human fears and hopes.

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It is difficult to compare civilization if one does dimensions: the concept place in the cosmos. If the natural world is not seen human self-realization nature. To the contrary is recognized and the can be achieved only through the natural world. By human beings fulfill their. Thus we can see that which humans need, Western civilization. Ious adjustment to the should be achieved through physical labor. For the physical effort, empirical meaning within the M

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difficult to separate what is believed from what is known, myth from historical memory and explanation, and ritual from acts whose practical efficacy has been proven time and again for generations. Therefore, along with what we would call solid empirical knowledge, we find ritual practices and beliefs that, in our effort to adjust indigenous cultural reality to our own categories, we would call magical. Our categories, of Western origin, do not exist in these cultures. In Indian cultures, the conception of the world, of nature and humankind, makes quite different kinds of actions seem equally necessary. For example, a propitiatory ceremony for a good growing season may be as important as the proper selection of seeds for planting. There is a unity of human beings and the natural world, which is the reference point for human knowledge and abilities as well as for work, the specific way of obtaining sustenance. This unity is also present in human plans, in the capacity for imagining as well as observing nature, in the willingness to have dialogue with it, in human fears and hopes faced with forces beyond human control.

Of course, this occurs in all cultures, but in Western culture there is an effort to separate and specialize in distinct aspects of a unitary reality. The poet eulogizes the moon, but the astronomer studies it. The painter re-creates the forms and colors of the countryside while the agronomist understands soils. The mystic prays . . . There is no way, in Western logic, of unifying all these things in a common understanding, as does the Indian.

It is difficult to comprehend many characteristics of Mesoamerican civilization if one does not take into account one of its most profound dimensions: the conception of the natural world and the human being's place in the cosmos. In this civilization, unlike that of the West, the natural world is not seen as an enemy. Neither is it assumed that greater human self-realization is achieved through greater separation from nature. To the contrary, a person's condition as part of the cosmic order is recognized and the aspiration is toward permanent integration, which can be achieved only through a harmonious relationship with the rest of the natural world. By obeying the principles of the universal order, human beings fulfill themselves and meet their transcendent destiny. Thus we can see that work, the effort applied to obtain from nature that which humans need, has a different meaning from its meaning in Western civilization. It is not a punishment, but a method of harmonious adjustment to the cosmic order. A positive relationship with nature should be achieved on all levels, not just the purely material one of physical labor. For that reason it is impossible to separate ritual from physical effort, empirical knowledge from the myth that provides its full meaning within the Mesoamerican cosmic vision.

This does not mean an absence of practical considerations nor an

ignorance of benefits and advantages; rather, they are located in a different context. There is a practical logic in the distribution of work time and in the diversification of activities. However, that logic becomes evident only if one understands the ultimate objectives of productive activity and the necessities it satisfies. Indian cultures tend toward self-sufficiency. This tendency is seen at various levels: family, lineage, barrio, and community. Self-sufficiency today is never an absolute reality, but it is a general, well-defined orientation. The sheep provide manure, which fertilizes the land. Families therefore want to have sheep, even though they rarely eat them or sell them. The turkey, which is needed for the meal during the fiesta, for the rituals of marriage, for house construction, or for the banquet I may give as a *mayordomo*, is raised in the household rather than bought. And within the community are those who know how to deal with other necessities: the midwife, the bone setter, the herbalist, the blacksmith, the musician. The community is an intricate web of general knowledge, of diversified activities, and of indispensable specializations that allow life to be lived with autonomy.

The logic of self-sufficiency governs many actions. For this reason it is incorrect to look at Indian agriculture in terms of the theoretical value of raising only cotton or sunflowers or tomatoes instead of a diversified *milpa*. Such speculation also ignores exhausted soils, sharp drops in market prices, voracious intermediaries, technological and financial dependence, and many other problems that have brought to ruin an endless number of modernization and agricultural development projects.

What does the self-sufficient Indian type of economy have to offer? Above all, it offers basic security, a broader margin of subsistence in difficult years, even though one has only what is really indispensable. Various crops, together with wildplant gathering, hunting, fishing, and the raising of domestic animals, intermixed with some sort of handicraft production (pottery, textiles, basketry, and many other products), and the generalized capacity for other sorts of work such as construction and maintenance—all offer a broad spectrum of possibilities that can be altered or combined, according to the circumstances. No one of these possibilities alone, given the conditions of indigenous communities today, assures survival. Together, however, they offer an acceptable margin of security. For this multiple strategy to succeed, each activity must be on a small scale, producing what is necessary and nothing else.

This fact explains another general characteristic of the Indian economy: its low level of surplus and its low level of accumulation. These characteristics, from the point of view of those who argue for capitalist development in the national economy, have been repeatedly pointed out as scandalous limitations. The Indians do not buy, or they buy very little,

they do not generate capital question later.

Another result of an economy that both requires and provides abilities in many diverse directions is headed toward a greater autonomy. Witness the specialist who is The Indian in a traditional community to know about many different tasks. And he acquires this knowledge through living, through cooperation with himself. Exercising or broadening his skills that cannot be distinguished in a place for learning what new questions, and listens, at a deep level of profound satisfaction much of his own efforts, of solving problems attending to basic needs.

There are also effects of a community usually extended, composed of the authority of the head of the family, grandfather of the smallest child, is a division of labor between tasks inculcated in children from an early age and participation, which is an intense family home life, with ritual and celebration, often conceived more in terms of community than in terms of privacy. The problem is because their meaning and value are the basis of their own experience.

Relations within the family and consumption unit. It is obviously not its only one, but it indicates the richness and complexity of the unit, occupant of the domestic space, reproducing the culture of the community. It is her job to realize the cultural elements that are necessary. To a large extent, she speaks the language itself, and she is the center within the Mesozoic.



they do not generate capital, and they do not invest. We will analyze this question later.

Another result of an economy oriented toward self-sufficiency is that it both requires and provides the opportunity for developing individual abilities in many diverse activities. Contrast this with our own world, headed toward a greater and more fragmented specialization each day. Witness the specialist who knows more and more about less and less. The Indian in a traditional community has to know what it is necessary to know about many different things and develop abilities for many different tasks. And he or she learns differently, not in school, but through living, through contact with others, and through doing the work itself. Exercising or broadening one's abilities is the result of a process that cannot be distinguished from life itself. There is no special time or place for learning what needs to be known. One observes, practices, asks questions, and listens, at whatever time and wherever one may be. Some profound satisfaction must reside in knowing one is capable, through one's own efforts, of solving so many common daily problems and attending to basic needs.

There are also effects on the way work is organized. The family is usually extended, composed of various generations who live under the authority of the head of the family (the grandfather or the great-grandfather of the smallest ones). It functions as an economic unit. There is a division of labor between men and women, whose norms are inculcated in children from an early age. There are norms of cooperation and participation, which are generally based on reciprocity. There is an intense family home life, based on shared or complementary work, on ritual and celebration, on the sharing of domestic space. Space is conceived more in terms of continuous collective relationships than in terms of privacy. The problems and joys of work are more fully shared because their meaning and consequences are understood by everyone, on the basis of their own experiences.

Relations within the family clearly reflect its nature as a production and consumption unit. However, the family's economic function is obviously not its only one, and economic activities in themselves do not indicate the richness and the importance of domestic life. The family unit, occupant of the domestic space, is the most secure place for reproducing the culture of the Indian community. The woman's role is basic. It is her job to rear the children and pass on to her daughters all the cultural elements that will allow them to perform adequately as women. To a large extent, she is the primary link for the continuity of the language itself, and the repository of norms and values that are vital within the Mesoamerican cultural matrix. Her role is recognized so-

cially and within the family. In the communities that have preserved their own cultures to the largest degree, the woman participates more actively and on an equal footing with men, not only in domestic affairs but also in decisions affecting the community.

One of the traits frequently noted by those who study indigenous life is parents' benevolent and respectful treatment of children. Physical punishment is rarely used to correct children. Neither are children restricted from participating in family discussions. There is a broad tolerance for premarital sexual relations that even includes, in some groups, acceptance of homosexual relations during adolescence. Communication between grandparents and grandchildren has a privileged place and provides a social space for making good use of the experience of the elderly.

Between the family and the community exist other levels of social organization that also fulfill economic functions. For example, kinship relations beyond those of the extended family can be used to organize cooperation. A larger number of individuals can thus be mobilized for certain tasks that the domestic unit cannot do for itself. Cooperation may be given in the form of labor at harvest time or for the construction of a house. It may also be given in the form of cash, for a marriage celebration, for a wake and burial, or for fulfillment of ceremonial obligations attached to holding public office in the community. Cooperation is always based on reciprocity—today for you, tomorrow for me. In many cases each person keeps an exact record of what he has given to other members of the lineage and what he in turn has received from each of them.

The *barrio*, or the *paraje* in some regions, is another unit of organization that functions in some economic activities. The members of a *barrio* may have to meet their labor obligations for some public work. They sometimes have the collective responsibility of cultivating a parcel of land to cover the expenses of the church or school, the cleaning and care of the chapel, or the collaboration in some way toward the expenses of the local fiestas. When the population lives in a dispersed fashion, the center may have only a few permanent inhabitants, but it is used periodically for meetings of a ritual, commercial, or administrative nature. In these cases the maintenance and care of the public installations is organized by *paraje*, either in rotating fashion or by permanently assigning certain tasks to each of them.

A trait that deserves special mention in the social structure of Indian communities is endogamy, that is, the tendency for marriages to be between members of the same community. On occasion endogamy is an explicit norm in customary law. Whoever violates it loses communal rights and privileges. More frequently it is an implicit norm, and

compliance is achieved. Premarital marriage is a custom that maintains and controls the group. It also contributes to the well-being of the group, guaranteeing that the

Settlement patterns, already mentioned, in fields and are separate communities, with c always with gardens. There are communities that identify an inhabited cases the community. These central authorities supervising the community some of the regional adult men are obliged to work, such as the building of schools, etc. Generally, a man is the head of the lineage. Women are not among the *tequio* participants.

The occasions for fiestas spirit, an atmosphere of lineage, of a *barrio*, encourages participation. Thus, one activity is symbolic, and enters into the community's life.

The notion of self-sufficiency toward self-sufficiency obligation of doing so when time arrives. Community is a community. It is a community. It is a community. When someone does something for the community. Taken together, the abilities of the community itself, requirements of the community, of course, as does the family, lineage, etc. All this, together

compliance is achieved through social pressure. In either case endogamous marriage is a custom that contributes in an important way to the maintenance and continuity of the Indian community, insofar as it impedes the incorporation of "the others" into the social universe of the group. It also contributes to the reproduction of community culture by guaranteeing that the new couple shares it.

Settlement patterns vary. There are the dispersed communities already mentioned, in which houses are scattered among the cultivated fields and are separated by considerable distances. Others are centralized communities, with contiguous houses lining streets and paths, but always with gardens and small household *milpas* among them. And there are communities of an intermediate order, in which one can identify an inhabited center that disperses toward its margins. In all cases the community has one set of authorities who are recognized by all. These central authorities have the responsibility of organizing and supervising the communal work projects. *Tequio*, *fajina*, and *fatiga* are some of the regional names for this form of collective work, in which all adult men are obliged to participate. Such *tequios* are used for public works, such as the construction and maintenance of the roads, the building of schools, and the repair of churches and other public buildings. Generally, a married man is considered an adult, regardless of his age. Women are not excluded; they prepare the food to be distributed among the *tequio* participants.

The occasions for cooperative or collective work carry with them a fiesta spirit, an atmosphere of social sharing between the members of a lineage, of a barrio, or of the entire community. This is an element that encourages participation and reinforces the solidarity of these groups. Thus, one activity can bring together in an inseparable manner social, symbolic, and entertainment functions, as well as purely economic ones.

The notion of salary is foreign to a large part of the work oriented toward self-sufficiency. Work is not paid, it is returned; one acquires the obligation of doing for others what they did for you, when the appropriate time arrives. Communal work is an implicit obligation of being part of a community. It is a universal obligation, without distinction. "Here, sir, when someone doesn't go, he must pay someone else to work for him." Taken together, these forms of cooperative work organize the efforts and abilities of the community according to priorities that are decided by the community itself, or by its recognized authorities. The rhythms and requirements of basic agricultural tasks have to be taken into account, of course, as does the fact that the systems of social organization used—family, lineage, barrio, community—have many other functions as well. All this, together with the worldview of each Indian culture, creates a

conception of work that is necessarily different from that of capitalist societies or of Western civilization in general. We will come back to this point.

It has already been mentioned that complete self-sufficiency is never achieved today. Interchanges occur, in different forms and of different intensities. People come together in a weekly market, which may be in the barrio itself, in the center of the community, or in the mestizo city that controls the region. Even today in some zones there is direct interchange of products, or barter, without the use of money. In general, however, all things have a price and are bought and sold with money. But the people of the Indian communities do not go to the weekly market only as buyers and sellers. Basically, they go to interchange, even though the process may require a brief monetary intervention. They exchange a small quantity of their own agricultural or handicraft products for things they need that they do not produce themselves. In a later chapter we will describe how this relationship of exchange is transformed when commerce is no longer between members of Indian communities, but, rather, through the intervention of the capitalist mercantile system.

Interchange does not happen only at the weekly market. In vast regions of Mexico there is a system of annual fairs. These are visited regularly by inhabitants of very distant zones whose products are different. In this way the movement of products from the coast and the lowlands toward the high plateau is organized, and vice versa. In some cases these are huge fairs, which in the course of a week receive hundreds of thousands of visitors, including merchants, intermediaries, and primary producers. The main motive is religious: the fiesta of a venerated sacred image whose fame is regional or national. Going to the fair, however, simultaneously accomplishes various functions. One fulfills a promise to a saint or requests a divine favor. One enjoys the dances, the music, and the fireworks. One sees acquaintances who are encountered each year, exchanges news and a friendly drink with them. One visits the doctor. Things are bought and sold. In short, one lives a time-out from the normal work year's activities. Many fairs have been celebrated for centuries in the same places. Through their presence and through ceremonial activities, people from the same distant villages reconfirm particular relationships with other villages that probably predate the European invasion.

The vast movement of products assembled from diverse regions for annual interchange in the great fairs includes the circulation of goods manufactured by specialized communities. Although the cultivation of the land is the economic base of Indian communities, and although in most cases there also exist handicraft activities on a domestic scale, there are also communities that have specialized in producing certain

kinds of objects for the in which pre-Hispanic centuries and whose style, for example, there are large under large stacks of fine woven and embroidered with techniques practiced from the chopped bark suffered profound modifications introduced by the invaders innovations, but based upon *amate* [bark] paper.

In any case, the frequency does not contradict a basic self-sufficiency. Handicraft activity of the communities, interchange, which becomes production. The relative understood as a strategy broader Indian world, because one thinks of products within communities.

Property rights, adjusted to the Indian community activity. Land, because the best example. In principle, property, and mechanisms of land. These can be used to be passed to his descendants within the community and be assigned to forests and mountains, within communal property and obtain what they need. Private property are subject to be sold only to an outsider.

Land is not conceived as a deeper connection with a resource that forms part of the ancestors, in which they are various superior forces and others are malevolent spirits and reference points.

kinds of objects for the market. Some are handicrafts of long tradition, in which pre-Hispanic technology has varied little over the last five centuries and whose styles and decoration are practically the same. For example, there are large pottery bowls made without a wheel and fired under large stacks of firewood, blouses of *coyuchil* [a native cotton] woven and embroidered on a backstrap loom, wooden objects lacquered with techniques practiced before the European invasion, and paper made from the chopped bark of trees. Other handicrafts, of course, have suffered profound modifications from the technology, needs, and tastes introduced by the invaders. Some are also the result of much more recent innovations, but based upon old artistic traditions, such as the paintings on *amate* [bark] paper.

In any case, the frequent handicraft specialization of the communities does not contradict a basic orientation of the Indian economy toward self-sufficiency. Handicraft production does not replace the agricultural activity of the community, but it does reinforce the capacity for interchange, which becomes yet another resource in a system of diversified production. The relative specialization of some communities can also be understood as a strategy contributing to the self-sufficiency of the broader Indian world, beyond the local community. This holds true if one thinks of products whose principal market is other Indian communities.

Property rights, adjudication, and use of the productive resources of the Indian community also reflect the basic orientation of economic activity. Land, because of its fundamental importance, provides the best example. In principle, land is not private but, rather, communal, property, and mechanisms exist to assign to each family head parcels of land. These can be used by the same person for many years and even be passed to his descendants. However, they may also revert to the community and be assigned to others, according to established norms. The forests and mountains, which cannot be used for agriculture, are also communal property and all community members may use them to obtain what they need. In general, even plots that are recognized as private property are subject to certain limitations. For instance, they may be sold only to another member of the community, not to an outsider.

Land is not conceived of as just a marketable good. There is a much deeper connection with the land. It is an indispensable productive resource that forms part of the inherited culture. It is the land of the ancestors, in which they are now resting. There, in that defined space, various superior forces also manifest themselves. Some are positive but others are malevolent and must be propitiated. There are also sacred sites and reference points and dangers. Land is a living being that reacts

to human conduct. For that reason, the relationship with it is not purely mechanical but, rather, is symbolically established through innumerable rituals. The relationship is also expressed in myths and legends. Frequently, peoples' image of the earth itself has reference to their particular territory, which occupies the center of the universe. Among displaced communities, the collective memory of the original territory and the aspiration to recover it remain, even when the people now have other lands on which to live. Group and territory—a defined group and a specific territory—form an inseparable unit in Indian cultures. Later we will examine the fortunes of Indian territory throughout history and the problems presented today.

It is in relation to a common territory/history and territory/culture that the group that aspires to self-sufficiency defines itself. We ourselves, those of such and such a place, or of such and such a group (since land and community are synonymous here), do such and such things, or make these objects, or have these customs. The social fabric of an Indian community includes a more complicated and varied cultural web than one appreciates at first glance. The variety of occupations, specialized jobs, and specialized knowledge is surprising.

Medicine, for example, includes, on the one hand, general knowledge and practices that are used within the household for common problems. On the other hand, it includes diverse specialists who preserve ancestral traditions used to attend to more severe illnesses. In Indian cultures, many illnesses are explained by the intervention of superior forces. These forces act to punish conduct considered unacceptable because it constitutes a transgression of norms ensuring harmony between human beings and between humans and the universe. Thus treatment may include propitiatory ceremonies and rites prescribed by tradition.

There is also a profound knowledge of the therapeutic properties of herbs and other products, however, which results from their cumulative, systematic use in each particular culture. The therapeutic effect of medicinal products is also reinforced by using them within a symbolic and emotional context that has cultural meaning. A multiple therapy exists that recognizes the psychosomatic character of many ailments and attends physical problems as much as spiritual ones. The Indian doctor is a specialist who diagnoses and prescribes on the basis of natural, bodily symptoms, but who interprets them within a framework of broad symbolic significance. In consequence, he makes use of a large number of cultural elements to restore integral health or, when necessary, to adequately prepare for approaching death. Here again in the field of medicine, it is impossible to establish strict boundaries between social life and other areas of thought. Human conduct conditions health; the knowledge of the curative properties of plants forms part of the total

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conception of nature and is expressed with corresponding symbolism. What we call religion and what we call medicine are intertwined in many ways, so that the distinction is erased.

Indian communities count on other specialists to carry out necessary tasks beyond the general competence of everyone. There are people who are better than others at building houses, making agricultural implements, making ceramic or wooden objects. There are also specialists in managing the weather, who drive away storms and bring the good rains. There are singers of prayers for the dead and dance masters for the fiestas. There are musicians, storytellers, and old people who remember history. There is no room here for even a summary description of these and many other activities. The example of medicine must serve to point out that each specialty in an Indian community must be understood within the context of its culture. It is difficult and usually fruitless to isolate, to analyze, and to evaluate each activity alone, separated from the other tasks and concepts that form an integral communal life. Taken together, they create the capacity for each group's self-sufficiency. The mechanical transference of terms we customarily apply, such as "specialist" or "professional," forms an obstacle to understanding life in an indigenous community. The bone setter does not cease being a peasant farmer and he may also be a musician. This year, he may be responsible for the Virgin [as *mayordomo*], besides participating in the regular communal work projects (*tequios*) like everyone else. A brief description of communal government may help complete this picture of Indian communities.

Authority in Indian villages accompanies social prestige, which is acquired throughout life by demonstrating the capacity for community service. In the realm of public life, one gives community service by participating in a system of public posts, or *cargos*. In all groups a hierarchy of *cargos*, most of them annual, constitutes the communal government. In some cases, the fulfillment of *cargos* is voluntary, with those who aspire to them volunteering to the appropriate authorities. In other cases the *cargos* are obligatory and are filled by designation or by election. One must work up the hierarchy beginning with the lowest *cargos*. Very young men or adolescents fill the lowest posts, called *topiles* in many communities, obeying the directions of those who occupy higher ranks. Each *cargo* has defined obligations.

As one ascends the hierarchy, the public commitment increases, in terms of both the time that must be spent and the expenses required of the *cargo* holder. A *mayordomo*, for example, is responsible for the organization of the annual fiesta dedicated to one of the images that are communally venerated. He must pay the expenses of the fiesta. These will include, at a minimum, payment for musicians, religious services, food and drink for all who attend, for clothes and adornments for the

sacred image, and for rockets and fireworks. To meet these expenses, which are heavy given the low income levels, the *mayordomo* resorts to various expedients. He raises household animals, which will be consumed or sold for the fiesta. He asks for cooperation from members of his lineage, building upon expectations of reciprocity for past or future contributions. He sells his own labor, usually outside the community, for some period of time. He acquires debts and saves what he can. On these occasions the ties of solidarity within Indian communities are clear, because the prestige of the *mayordomo* is also the prestige of the family and the lineage and the *barrio*. The spending on these ritual occasions has been called sumptuary expense. The reasons for investing resources in this manner have been explained in terms of a particular economic modality, the economy of prestige. For many it seems irrational, another proof of the Indian's lack of ability, spending on useless fiestas what he could productively invest to increase his capital. But perhaps there is a better explanation.

The *cargo* system formalizes the authority of the community, which is simultaneously civil, religious, and moral. The three aspects are indissolubly linked, and authority is acquired progressively. When an individual has occupied all the *cargos* in the hierarchy, including the highest (generally called *mayordomo*), he enters the group of *principales*. In these men resides the maximum authority of the community. This means that to acquire a recognized position, one must demonstrate for years a will and a capacity for public service, along with conduct that conforms to the norms and expectations defined by the cultural group. To earn recognized, legitimate authority implies investing time and resources throughout most of one's life to fulfill functions that the community considers necessary. As one ascends in the hierarchy, one gains experience. Thus, those who have ascended through the hierarchy are those who know how public affairs should be conducted, those who can guarantee continuity and confront collective contingencies. Their advice is of proven value, and even in the area of personal life, it is evaluated in the light of a career of recognized merit.

The organization of government briefly sketched above presupposes the convergence of individual will and conduct toward joint goals. Such a convergence can be achieved only if individuals share common aspirations and values. Personal and family sacrifices must be made to carry out a community *cargo*, and the only return is public consideration. The prestige earned is manifested in ritualized deference, but it implies no material benefit of any significance. Such sacrifices indicate an orientation toward life that is difficult to comprehend from the individualistic, acquisitive perspective of modern capitalist society. Why do people behave in this way? Why is such conduct accepted and rewarded? Of

course, there are social conduct. These include negative opinions of authorities' insistence on individual, instead of *cargo*, as prescribed by gaining them. Confronting the community. To a of those who convert system of traditional

Nevertheless, social found in the fact that being recognized and group that is the excluded been inherited. To go to be able to participate the group. To be a man he accepts the collection all it implies in terms the basic norms that tion is so important their community to their rights as group

The correspondents been described so far self-sufficiency is to equalize material differences. The ties of family, have the same eternal property rights are also congruent with that tries to take care at its disposal and use a way as to guarantee task at hand. It puts that result from kin individual development reward is prestige and the development of All this is expressed transcendent vision nature, of which human which all beings must



course, there are social pressure mechanisms that help enforce proper conduct. These include falling into disrepute and suffering from the negative opinions of others, exposure to ridicule, and families' and authorities' insistence on proper behavior. Whoever accumulates as an individual, instead of spending toward the sumptuary expenses of a *cargo*, as prescribed by the group, loses prestige and authority instead of gaining them. Conflict may reach the point of forcing someone to leave the community. To a large extent, this explains what happens in the case of those who convert to Protestantism and refuse to participate in the system of traditional government.

Nevertheless, social pressure itself requires some explanation. It is found in the fact that participation is an indispensable condition for being recognized and admitted as a member of the group. And it is the group that is the exclusive repository of the cultural patrimony that has been inherited. To gain legitimate access to the cultural patrimony and to be able to participate in decisions about it, one must be a member of the group. To be a member (thus closing the circle) one must prove that he accepts the collective norms. Participation in the *cargo* system, with all it implies in terms of fundamental orientation toward life, is one of the basic norms that identifies group members. This form of organization is so important that in many cases emigrants return annually to their community to comply with their obligations in order not to lose their rights as group members.

The correspondence between different aspects of Indian life that have been described so far is apparent. The orientation of production toward self-sufficiency is congruent with the economy of prestige. Both tend to equalize material levels of life, preventing the growth of wealth differences. The ties of family and neighborhood solidarity, based on reciprocity, have the same effect, as do the ways of acquiring authority. Communal property rights and the limitations imposed on private landholding are also congruent with the system. The image outlined is of a society that tries to take care of itself through diversified use of all the resources at its disposal and under its control. It organizes work capacity in such a way as to guarantee available labor, according to the magnitude of the task at hand. It puts into play a complex web of loyalties and solidarity that result from kinship and not from the work relationship itself. Full individual development is realized through community service, and the reward is prestige and authority. It is a way of life that offers and requires the development of multiple capacities on the part of each individual. All this is expressed and justified in the realm of ideas through a transcendent vision of humankind in the universe. In this conception, nature, of which humans are a part, is governed by a cosmic order to which all beings must adapt. For this reason humans do not confront the

natural world; it is not an enemy or an object to be dominated, but rather, an immediate, encompassing reality, and human life must be in harmony with it. Work is, then, a way of relating to the natural world, and the relationship, as between humans, is reciprocal. Thus service to the community, in whatever sphere it is offered, is also recognized as work.

The same principles of universal order seem to be found in the systems for classifying the natural world. Indian classifications of the plant world, to the extent they have been studied, frequently employ terms that come from an ancestral way of conceiving the world. Frequently in botanical nomenclature certain characteristics of plants are associated with the colors of the different directions in the universe, which in turn correspond to deities linked to human destiny. The classification principles are also applied, as far as is known, to distinguish the parts, organs, and elements of the human body. The classification principles thus connect with conceptions about health and illness and with therapeutic practices and their corresponding rituals. There is much yet to be learned in this area, because research has been limited. Nevertheless, it is clear that collective representations about life, the universe, and fundamental human problems exist. They ideologically sustain and make coherent the social and cultural practices of Indian communities.

The supernatural world, in this vision of the cosmos, plays a role of primary importance. The forces beyond human control, in order to be comprehensible, are embodied in a broad repertory of symbolic beings. These include the owners of springs and hills and caves; the rulers of the rain and the lightning; the animal whose life and fortune is indissolubly linked to the life and fortune of each newborn human; the winds; and the earth itself. The relationship with the natural world is symbolized through a ceremonial intended to propitiate the supernatural entities that represent it. This is a coherent way of symbolically expressing human participation in the fundamental and indivisible unity of the universe to which we belong.

Unity with the cosmos is also expressed in another transcendent dimension: time. As opposed to the Western conception, time in Mesoamerican civilization is circular, not linear. The universe proceeds through a succession of cycles that, although not identical, pass through the same stages in an unending spiral. When one cycle ends, a similar one begins. Humans fulfill their own cycle, which is in harmony with the other cycles of the universe. This necessary harmony is expressed in the rituals of the agricultural calendar that symbolize the renewal of life, in which humans must participate. Also, as we will see later, the circular conception of time is present in conceptions of history. The liberty of the

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past, the golden age before colonial domination, is not a dead past, lost forever, but the basis of hope, because in the cycle of time that age will come again.

I want to be clear about several questions related to the selective synthesis of Indian culture that I have presented in this section. In the first place, I want to underline that it is selective. I have not presented an ethnographic summary of all the traits of Indian culture. I have selected only certain aspects that are especially pertinent for giving a vision that clarifies what I believe to be the fundamental, determining characteristics of Mesoamerican culture.

In the second place, in this synthesis I have described traits that are common to the diverse indigenous cultures of Mexico. Nevertheless, these cultures are not completely uniform. In comparing different Indian cultures notable differences will be found. The particular form in which the general traits I have mentioned occur varies a great deal, and distinctive elements will be found that give to each culture its particular profile. In my opinion, such variations, however important they may be for a complete understanding of each culture, are not enough to call into question the common scheme outlined above. Unity exists within diversity as a result of membership in a common civilization.

Finally, and most important, this panorama of Indian culture takes into account only part of the contemporary reality of Indian communities. Contemporary reality is much more complex, and it is contradictory. Traditional forms of life coexist in conflict with new ones. Coherence is cracked and broken in the presence of new ideas, new necessities, other peoples, and other objects. The spheres of self-sufficiency are reduced and all that remain are besieged bastions. Some parents prefer that their children not speak the language of their ancestors. Emigration increases.

In the face of these patent realities, of what value is the image of Indian culture presented in these pages? I discuss these and other problems that characterize the contemporary situation of Indian peoples in the second part of this book. Here my intention has been to describe the autonomous culture of the Indian peoples, that which is based on its cultural heritage and over which it exercises control and makes decisions. It is from that autonomous culture and the elements that compose it—material items, organization, knowledge, symbolic and emotional elements—that each group confronts new situations and changes in the surrounding world. Through its autonomous culture it establishes relationships with the new world, adapting to new circumstances, resisting in order to preserve its social spaces in all areas of life, appropriating foreign cultural elements that prove useful and compatible. It invents new solutions and ideas and strategies of accommodation

that allow the group to survive as a different, distinguishable collectivity, whose members have access to their own common cultural patrimony. This is only a part of contemporary reality, but within this part resides the reason for existence as Indian peoples.

## De-India

Even though the Mesoamerican national reality is the presence of that cultural aspect of different kinds, the civilization and strata of Mexico are aspects, so complex about its profound made possible its identity today.

### One or Many

In all Indian community of Mesoamerica, cultural groups are more marked. In them as variations, plurality there colonial domination, detailed attention to Indian culture, plans for integration. There does not exist homogeneous grouping, the principal of each group has a basic cultural variation,

### 3.



## De-Indianizing That Which Is Indian

Even though the dominant colonial ideology restricts the living Mesoamerican heritage to the population recognized as Indian, the national reality holds within itself a different truth. The effective presence of that which is Indian is found in almost every social and cultural aspect of the country. It is expressed in cultural traits of very different kinds, traits that undeniably have their origin in Mesoamerican civilization and that are variously distributed in the different groups and strata of Mexican society. The presence of Indian culture is, in some aspects, so commonplace and omnipresent that one rarely stops to think about its profound significance, or about the long historical process that made possible its persistence in social sectors that assume a non-Indian identity today.

#### One or Many Ways of Life?

In all Indian cultures diversity can be observed, but within the basic unity of Mesoamerican civilization. The same is not true of the different cultural groups in non-Indian Mexico. Here, the differences are much more marked. As we will see, they are not explained fully if we try to see them as variants or subcultures of the same civilization. Behind their plurality there is a history of power relationships within the scheme of colonial domination. Let me mention something that will receive more detailed attention later: the lack of unity and coherence in the non-Indian culture of Mexico is a fact that in itself calls into question the plans for integration into a national culture postulated as "superior." There does not exist a unified national culture, but, rather, a heterogeneous grouping of different and even contradictory ways of life. One of the principal causes of this heterogeneity is the different way in which each group has been historically related to Mesoamerican civilization.

A basic causal factor in cultural diversity is the land base. Geographical variation, without being an absolute determinant of cultural differ-

ences, without doubt underlies many distinguishing characteristics of regional lifeways. This is a universal phenomenon that had great importance, as we saw, in the birth and development of Mesoamerican civilization. The diversity and contrast of ecological niches, each with different natural resources, has been the permanent framework for the cultural configuration of Mexico. Its particular importance has not always been the same, because the natural world acquires significance and is transformed into a resource for human beings only through culture, and culture has varied in the course of history.

The regions of Mexico have been studied from different points of view. The country has been divided up in terms of physical geography: soil types, relief, vegetation, climate, and similar variables. Economic regions have also been delineated, according to the distribution and characteristics of production activities. Most of these studies refer to the contemporary period. Only a few isolated studies give a panorama of the historical development of certain economic regions.

Until now, there has not been a work that includes all the cultural regions of Mexico. It is clear that this task presents additional problems. It is not reliable to delineate a region by the simple presence or absence of a certain number of isolated cultural traits. It is also difficult to deal with all the historical and contemporary information that would allow construction of an image closer to reality by taking into account that cultural regions are historical phenomena that are transformed and reaccommodated by many factors. Although we do not have a systematic panorama, the existence of different regional cultures is an undeniable fact that is easily verified simply by traveling through the country with the senses alert and a willingness to talk with the people.

A northerner differs from a *jarocho* from Veracruz and from someone from the Bajío in his habits, his manners and customs, and in all the diverse aspects of his culture. One cannot generalize about northerners, however, because the rural culture of Sonora is not like that of Nuevo León, not to mention the differences between the countryside and the city, which we will discuss shortly. Different histories have created particular social spaces and ways of occupying the land. Contingents of colonists of varied origins arrived, and their initial objectives were not the same, varying as they did from mining to ranching to commerce in establishing secure frontiers. They also built different kinds of relationships with the Indian population that occupied each region before the European invasion. In some areas Indian enclaves have survived, while in others the original population was annihilated, expelled, or Indianized. A few small areas are characterized by relatively recent foreign settlements, for example, the U.S. Blacks who settled in Nacimiento, in the municipality of Músquiz, Coahuila; the French

San Rafael, Veracruz. African culture brought by Blacks certainly left a different mark on the Black population, in the particular configuration of society.

Throughout the country, a marked contrast between the lifeways of life are visibly different. This data is misleading if we consider the inhabitants as a criterion. It does not reflect reality. The rural culture and vast sectors of lifeways that reflect the rural world. Apart from parts of the Mexican culture, they embody different cultural configurations. The non-Indian sector of duality will be discussed.

Apart from the '90s, the country and urban Indian society is characterized by distinctions, that is, strata. Unlike the cultural groups or the ethnic groups or the cultural variation that should be understood in origins, the composition of different degrees, degrees of opportunities and privileges. The non-Indian Mexican culture is tied to the two fundamental European. Ideological society that harmonizes of the two primary sectors. The majority of the population is recent. In consequence, elements of Mesoamerican sectors are derived from tend to conserve and discussed in greater detail.

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San Rafael, Veracruz, or the Italians of Chipilo, Puebla. The influence of African culture brought by slaves, which has been little studied, most certainly left a different imprint in each zone, according to the size of the Black population, its relative magnitude in the local demography, and the particular conditions of the relationship with the rest of local society.

Throughout the country, and in the interior of each region, there is a marked contrast between the countryside and the cities. The urban ways of life are visibly different from the rural. Here again the use of census data is misleading and of little utility. The figure of twenty-five hundred inhabitants as a criterion for distinguishing rural from urban localities does not reflect reality. Many much larger communities have a rural culture and vast sectors of the large cities also maintain, to a large extent, lifeways that reflect recent rural origins and interrelationship with the rural world. Apart from the precise quantification of the rural and urban parts of the Mexican population, it is clear that both are present and embody different cultures, helping accentuate the cultural diversity of the non-Indian sector. The major implications of the city/countryside duality will be discussed in the third section of this chapter.

Apart from the "horizontal" cultural differences between regions of the country and urban/rural sectors, the cultural panorama of non-Indian society is complicated even more by the presence of "vertical" distinctions, that is, the hierarchical division of society into classes and strata. Unlike the cultural contrasts that result from the coexistence of ethnic groups or the consolidation of culturally distinct regions, the cultural variation that results from the division into classes and strata should be understood in terms of levels. In a society with common origins, the component groups participate in a common culture to different degrees, depending on the ruling social order that gives opportunities and privileges to certain sectors to the detriment of others. In non-Indian Mexican society, the problem of cultural levels is necessarily tied to the two fundamental origins of the population, Indian and European. Ideologically it may be maintained that we have a mestizo society that harmoniously combines the racial background and culture of the two primary sources. However, the reality is different, because the majority of the popular classes and sectors have Indian origins, often very recent. In consequence, they have been able to maintain many more elements of Mesoamerican culture. On the other hand, some upper-class sectors are derived more or less directly from the Spanish colonizers and tend to conserve non-Indian cultural forms. This problem will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 7.

Thus, the cultural panorama of non-Indian society is far from being homogeneous. The presence of that which is Indian, an underlying cause

of heterogeneity, is also different in different regions, in the countryside and in the cities, and in different social classes and strata. Let us explore the situation in general terms.

### The Peasant World

There are a large number of traditional rural communities that are not considered Indian and whose inhabitants do not claim to be so. Nevertheless, a close examination of traditional rural culture reveals a marked similarity with many aspects of Indian culture outlined in the previous chapter. This is true to such a degree that it may be stated that these communities have an Indian culture but have lost the sense of identity that goes with it.

The basic economic activity is agriculture, which to a large extent makes use of Indian techniques. Corn continues to be the principal crop, along with other products of the *milpa*, depending on local conditions. There may be greater use of the plow and of draft animals, a practice favored by the haciendas, which occupied the flatlands, easily cultivated with the plow. The haciendas generally promoted the de-Indianization process. In terms of land tenure, individual property coexists with *ejidos* and communal mountain land. In the organization of agricultural work people make use of family solidarity and the cooperation of neighbors, based on reciprocity. Wage labor in agricultural tasks is infrequent. Myths, stories, and legends in which the natural world figures as a living entity persist, as do propitiatory practices and beliefs about supernatural beings, all of which are clearly of indigenous origin. On the other hand, the vision of the cosmos that might give coherence and meaning to these ideas and practices appears fragmented, and collectively it is more weakly expressed than in Indian communities.

The "mestizo" handicrafts of traditional communities are not very different from those found in Indian communities. It is true that some have been lost, for example, the manufacture of *huipiles* [traditional women's blouses] and other items of clothing and some objects associated with ceremonial life. But artistic abilities are found in equal measure and are applied in the same way, that is, as a sheaf of cultural resources developed generally by community members. They all contribute to relative self-sufficiency in different levels of social organization. Here, as well, the economic orientation looks toward self-sufficiency, although in general terms the degree of commercial exchange may be greater than in Indian communities.

In the realm of communal organization, the municipal council [*ayuntamiento*] is stronger and has more authority than in Indian communities. Nevertheless, the *barrios* persist and have some of the

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The presence of Indian culture is clearly visible in other aspects of life in traditional peasant communities. Living quarters and food habits, for example, are adapted to similar patterns, if one compares Indian and non-Indian communities that occupy similar ecological niches. To restore health people resort to various practices that form part of the indigenous heritage. It is common to find herbalists, bone setters, and midwives whose practices are difficult to distinguish from those of their Indian counterparts.

What, then, makes traditional peasant communities different from Indian ones? A first obvious characteristic is language: the non-Indian peasant speaks only Spanish. This statement must be qualified by two frequently found features. First, many times elderly people and some families remember the original Indian language, although its use is restricted and communication is generally in Spanish. Second, the number of words of Indian origin is greater than in the standard Spanish dialect of the region. Nevertheless, it is a fact that Spanish and not an Indian language is spoken in these traditional communities. However, this fact does not explain the Indianness or non-Indianness of communities that share very similar cultures. Neither is Indianness determined by distinctive clothing, which is a result and not a cause of belonging to an Indian community.

The absence of an Indian ethnic identity has much more profound significance because it reveals that a mechanism of identification has been broken, one that allowed the designation of an "us" related to a cultural patrimony that was ours alone. Indian culture persists, to a large degree, but the group that holds it and uses it no longer identifies itself as an articulated whole in relation to which only members of the group have decision-making rights. Since that rupture, traits such as language itself and a distinctive form of clothing lose one of the important functions that made them necessary: they no longer serve as elements to identify "us," a group that corresponds to an ethnically differentiated group. For some writers this change is a result of acculturation, of close contact with another society that possesses a different culture. For others, it relates to an inescapable historical process in which caste-type relations are transformed into class relations. Along the same lines, others try to see the change as a sign of proletarianization, which is also inevitable. I prefer to speak of ethnocide and de-Indianization, concepts that I will elaborate later.

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process that has occurred in Mexico, as will be seen in what is today as mestizo, but even more recently. The predominantly Indian community is not to be abandoned of a that occurs in the realm of the dominant society Indian community.

is purely a subjective dominant society intensify distinct identity consti- objectives may include or implementing a dominant society. De- gically, the population the lifeway may continue Indian without knowing

national communities. In capitalist agriculture domi- destined for the market, agriculture is not for self- operation requires wage Indians and traditional seasonal work, and the states. The campesino, in the agricultural impre- world so different from the Indian culture flourish.

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The rural world, taken as a whole and in spite of its regional differences and different forms of agricultural production, has a strangely Indian cultural flavor. It is manifested in many aspects of life, although it varies with local circumstances. Two facts are of particular relevance. First, the rich agricultural tradition of Mesoamerican civilization represents accumulated experience and a long process of adaptation to local conditions. It is not easy to bypass successfully. That tradition, as we have seen, is a complex that includes cultivation techniques and associated knowledge within the framework of a particular conception of nature. The practice of this agricultural tradition requires a certain social environment and an intellectual and emotional perspective. It can be transformed, and in fact transforms itself constantly, but it must nevertheless maintain a certain coherence in order for the whole complex to function properly. This fact explains the persistence of many Indian traits in the rural world.

A second fact should not be overlooked. With the imposition of the colonial regime, physical space as well as society was divided into two opposite and incompatible poles. The city was the seat of colonial power and the limited geographical realm of the conquistador. The countryside, on the other hand, was the physical space of the colonized, of the Indians. This separation allowed the persistence of forms of social organization belonging to the rural Indian world, which in turn allowed the dynamic continuity of Mesoamerican cultural configurations. Between the city and the countryside relations were never those of equal to equal, but, rather, of the subjugation of the rural/Indian to the urban/Spanish. This identification persists today, in urban sectors as well as among the Indian population and in the rural peasant communities. Within this framework, to which I will return, we can better understand the defining presence of Indian culture in rural Mexico.

#### **The Indian Heritage in the Cities**

The city was the bastion of the colonial order. There the invaders established their privileged space of domination. Many cities were built over the ruins of ancient centers of Indian population, but others were constructed on sites that had not had permanent settlements before. Everything depended on the needs and interests of the colonization process. In some cases, the predominant urgency was to establish a center of power in areas occupied by a dense, sedentary population, thus assuring an ample labor force, services, and products that were indispensable for the consolidation and expansion of the colonial enterprise. In other cases, it was necessary to found towns and cities to exploit the

mines and obtain gold and silver, the desired precious metals. When the mining areas were far inland, in the territory of the nomadic and warlike groups of the north, it was critical to found cities other than the mining centers themselves. These other centers would provide greater security on the roads, for the transportation of precious minerals, food supplies, and the necessary labor force. It is a fact that the chronology of the founding of European settlements in New Spain exactly parallels the slow development of the various enterprises important to colonization: warfare, pacification, mining, European agriculture, stock raising, and both internal and external commerce. All this required the congregation of European population centers of variable size based on possibilities and needs. They were scattered centers of power in a territory that was, outside the perimeters of the cities, still indigenous.

But even in the cities there was an Indian presence. Mexico City had barrios and neighborhoods inhabited exclusively by Indians. There was spatial segregation, which expressed the nature of the colonial order. The center consisted of the city as such, that is, the Spanish city, while the Indian barrios formed the periphery. Drastic regulations existed to assure the residential separation of colonizers and colonized. The Spaniards [*peninsulares*] were prohibited from living in Indian localities, and the Indians, for their part, were obliged to live only in the urban areas assigned to them. Material vestiges of that separation remain in Mexico City and other urban centers. They include the quadrangular layout of the central Spanish city and the names of the old Indian barrios and towns that adjoined it, absorbed today by urban expansion. They also include differences in architecture, the names of many streets, and perhaps an old sentry post, which marked the boundaries of the original city. For centuries, urban Indians lived in the city, but under different living conditions from the European colonizers. They lived segregated, on the margin of many aspects of city life, because the real city was an area of colonial power, which was off-limits to Indians, to the colonized.

The organization of the urban barrios has been brutally and systematically attacked by the excessive growth of the great cities. There has also been an erratic application of administrative measures, which demonstrates the lack of any urban policy even moderately attentive to the needs of the population. Rarely have the territorial divisions within cities been based on the spatial distribution of the forms of social organization that really exist. Rather, measures have been taken for purely administrative ends. The placement of great urban structures and of transportation systems has generally followed technocratic criteria, which ignore the social and cultural fabric that makes urban life possible. Financial speculation on urban property provokes displacement and reaccommodation of the population, always to the detriment

of the poorest sectors. The when they ceased being the center of the city itself. The to be engulfed by voracious

In spite of these proces rebuild themselves. They ar term, although historically munities. In many cases the some urban zones the ori spoken, within the family a In various parts of the city, more rural than urban, org organize the fiestas for th important role in organizi Rituals and celebrations of for the Day of the Dead continue in the very hear dances and rites of ancien reference to any specific g the so-called *concheros*, from city inhabitants.

The urban markets, at country, always offer a Mesoamerican civilizati popular consumption, fo There are crayfish and p beer [*pulque*] and bean-or [*Chenopodium nattalias* leaves of the agave plant. similar to that described be found the herbalists' problem and amulets to visit markets in other pa profoundly Indian chara these traits are really c cultural heritage, the liv tion, which today has b

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of the poorest sectors. The old Indian barrios became desirable areas when they ceased being the periphery and were incorporated into the center of the city itself. The outlying towns, in turn, were and continue to be engulfed by voracious and uncontrolled urban growth.

In spite of these processes, some communities resist and others rebuild themselves. They are not Indian barrios, in the strict sense of the term, although historically they may derive from ancient Indian communities. In many cases they preserve features that prove their origin. In some urban zones the original indigenous languages continue to be spoken, within the family as well as in certain aspects of communal life. In various parts of the city, and not only in the periphery, which remains more rural than urban, organizations called *mayordomías* continue to organize the fiestas for the local saint. The extended family plays an important role in organizing cooperation within the domestic group. Rituals and celebrations of Indian origin, which include the ceremonies for the Day of the Dead and pilgrimages to the famous sanctuaries, continue in the very heart of the city. There are groups that, through dances and rites of ancient origin, exalt a generic Indian origin without reference to any specific group or region or community. An example is the so-called *concheros*, who recruit a large part of their membership from city inhabitants.

The urban markets, at least in the central and southern part of the country, always offer a great diversity of products that originated in Mesoamerican civilization. They include a rich variety of foods for popular consumption, foods that may be scorned by other urban sectors. There are crayfish and prickly pear leaves [*nopales*], fermented agave beer [*pulque*] and bean- or chickpea-filled pastries [*tlacoyos*], *huauzontles* [*Chenopodium nattalias*] and grasshoppers, prickly pear fruit and fleshy leaves of the agave plant. On the outskirts, distributed in an orderly way similar to that described by the chroniclers of the sixteenth century, can be found the herbalists' stands. They have remedies for every kind of problem and amulets to avoid danger. When one has the opportunity to visit markets in other parts of the world, one recognizes with surprise the profoundly Indian character of the urban markets of Mexico. And all these traits are really only a small sample of the cities' underlying cultural heritage, the living inheritance of their ancient Indian population, which today has been de-Indianized.

Approaching the old barrios of the city allows us to see in hazy outline a way of life that is the result of the adaptation of many Mesoamerican cultural forms, over a long time period and in conditions of subordination to the dominant culture, to an urban context. It is interesting, for example, to compare the old urban housing arrangements [*vecindades*] with the new, multifamily structures that have been built to replace

them. In the *vecindad*, the private rooms are aligned along a common patio, where communal areas for important functions are also found: bathrooms, water taps, washbasins, play areas, and work areas. All of these tend to strengthen relations between the inhabitants and generate a group spirit. This spirit is weaker in the new multifamily structures, where the effort is to provide each apartment with all the basic requirements for daily life, and where the common areas are simply parking lots, sidewalks, commercial zones, or, at the most, sports areas. In these multifamily structures, only the very young, by playing together and through easily developed group competition with youths from other buildings or units or barrios, are able to develop some sort of group spirit in relation to the place where they live.

Here we have face to face two ways of understanding and experiencing communal life. In the case of the modern multifamily structures, the privileged area is the apartment, the exclusive space of the nuclear family. In the other, the *vecindad*, the communal patio is the axis of daily life for a collection of families, many of them extended families. Behind these facts are different cultural orientations. One corresponds to individualism, which is dominant in contemporary Western civilization. The other points toward a local society in which communal ties play a greater role, as they do in Mesoamerican civilization. This situation permits the growth of cultural forms belonging to one's own group, in a daily environment broader than that offered by the nuclear family. It is not surprising that the barrios with a larger number of *vecindades* are those that manifest a more vigorous local identity and a more solid communal organization to carry out different tasks. This became evident in the events following the earthquake of September 1985.

Although many things have happened since the founding of the first colonial cities, even today there are phenomena that make evident their dominant nature. In the refuge regions the central point is a ladino city that dominates a surrounding constellation of Indian communities. Economic, political, social, and religious control resides in and is exercised from this city. It is the center of power. Those who unrightfully hold this power are not the Indians, but the ladinos, who like to call themselves "cultured people" [*gente de razón*] and who proclaim with pride their non-Indian descent from European colonizers. In these cities the presence of that which is Indian marks every aspect of life. The majority of those traveling through the streets are Indians, as are those who go to the market to sell and to the stores to buy, those who work at the most poorly paid occupations, those who fill the jails and those who, at nightfall, stumble drunkenly back to their communities.

But that which is Indian in the urban ladino. In part, traits from the regional certain beliefs and symbols. The life of the ladino is so Indian, by the necessity of an indelible "not Indian." I which is Indian is omnij want to be. Guzmán Boc mala the ladino is a fictit is negative. Being ladino i just being "not Indian." A ceases to be, since he e exercised over the Indian

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But that which is Indian is also present in the conduct and thought of the urban ladino. In part, this is because the ladino has adopted some traits from the regional Indian culture, as regards food, language, and certain beliefs and symbolic practices. But fundamentally it is because the life of the ladino is structured in terms of contrast with that of the Indian, by the necessity of permanently marking everything with an indelible "not Indian." In the small ladino world of these cities, that which is Indian is omnipresent as everything one is not and does not want to be. Guzmán Bockler [1970: 101-121] has written that in Guatemala the ladino is a fictitious being, because the essence of his identity is negative. Being ladino is not being anything specific of one's own, but just being "not Indian." Without the presence of the Indian, the ladino ceases to be, since he exists only through the colonial domination exercised over the Indian.

The accelerated growth of the large Mexican cities in the last fifty years is due principally to the arrival of Indian or mestizo immigrants from the rural zones. The dynamics of the process involve the impoverishment of the countryside and the concentration of economic activities and opportunities of all sorts in the urban zones. The migration Indianizes the city. In general, the new arrival can count on family or friends from the same village who have arrived before him. They facilitate his first contact with the city, helping him adapt and find work. Together they form a nucleus of people identified by their local culture of origin. In this small world transferred from the village they can speak their own language and re-create, as far as possible, their own practices and customs. Sometimes the group becomes larger, since it is easy to identify with people of the same region above and beyond the specific traits of each community. Then it is possible to establish a broader cultural environment that goes beyond that of daily domestic life. Tournaments of *pelota mixteca* [a ballgame of pre-Hispanic origin] can be organized, or a Mixe band to play the music of the home region. The fiestas of the homeland can be celebrated, with appropriate dishes whose special ingredients are either brought by the most recent traveler or substituted with something acceptable from the urban stores. At another level there are many organizations of "countrymen" [*paisanos*] now living in the city who try to do something for their native land. They may collect money for some public project, send books to create a library, take important local matters before central authorities, receive and help orient new arrivals to the city.

Contact and close relations with the home community are not lost. To the contrary, they are renewed on every possible occasion, since the coming and going of individuals makes it possible to share the latest

news: who died, who got married, who left, what has happened to the communal lands invaded by the cattle rancher, or the boundary conflict with the neighboring community. In addition, whenever possible one returns to the community, even if it is only once a year for the fiesta of the patron saint. And obligations are fulfilled, both those based on *compadrazgo* [godparenthood] and those that come from having accepted a ceremonial *cargo*. In this way, extensive areas of the city are inhabited by people who live there in a transitory way. Their interest and hopes are fixed on what happens many miles distant, in the village or neighborhood of which they form a part, and which gives meaning to an emigration they hope will be temporary. They are Indians who exercise their own culture insofar as the city allows. It is not uncommon for them to hide their identity and deny their place of origin and their language in their contacts with "the others." The city, after all, continues to be the center of foreign power and of discrimination. But their identity persists, disguised and clandestine, and because of that identity their membership in their original group is maintained. With it go loyalties and reciprocity, rights and obligations, the practice of and ties with a common and exclusive culture. Without that universe of ongoing relationships, based on the existence of the Indian communities, the survival of hundreds of thousands of Indian inhabitants of Mexican cities would be impossible. A very revealing fact indicates just how true this is: *Mexico City is the place with the largest number of speakers of indigenous languages in all the Americas.*

The city is also filled with Indian workers, contingents of whom come daily from nearby Indian communities. Others come from distant places and remain in the city during the time they are working. In every part of the city are found the "Marías" with their children, installed on the corners with the greatest volume of traffic, selling chewing gum and trinkets or begging from passing cars. Many men in badly fitting work clothes labor as masons or at whatever other tasks they can find. Domestic work is more stable and employs a great number of Indian women. Between them often exists a chain of relationships that allows individuals to go from their home community to the regional city and from there to the nation's capital. These networks now extend to several cities in the United States.

The situation is different for the Indian students. They are proportionately few, but their numbers increase constantly. By necessity, they must come to the city, if they can, in order to continue their secondary and higher education. This group also includes some professionals and workers of Indian origin and has been the social circle from which have recently emerged new forms of political organization based on Indian ethnic identity. Urban experiences and contact with different sorts of

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ideas, information from the broader outside world, and relationships with other Indian emigrants have all made possible the formation of political groups motivated to press the demands of the Indian communities. In another section I will deal with this theme in greater detail. Here, I simply point out this new Indian political presence is an urban phenomenon, which arises precisely in the physical space reserved historically as the seat of non-Indian colonial power.

The presence of the Indian in the cities has not passed unperceived by the dominant, privileged elites. In earlier times the Indians were referred to as the masses [*la plebe*], but today another term has become established: they are "the *nacos*." The word's connotations are undeniably negative, discriminatory, and racist. In particular, the *naco* is the de-Indianized urban inhabitant to whom are attributed tastes and attitudes that are a grotesque imitation of the cosmopolitan behavior to which the elites aspire. The behavior of the *naco* is deformed to the point of caricature by his supposed inability and lack of culture. The word "*naco*," nevertheless, also designates anything that is Indian, any trait that recalls the original ancestry of Mexican culture and society. Any fact that evidences the Indian world present in the cities is exorcised by applying to it the simple qualifier *naco*. Thus the city protects itself from its deeper reality.

#### The Bronze Race and the Beautiful People

The apparent presence of the Indian in official Mexican culture is very evident to foreign visitors, especially Latin Americans. The Revolution of 1910 has accorded to the image of the Indian a special privilege, that of serving as one of the major, official symbols of nationalism. Later we will examine the other side of the coin, government policy toward living Indians, or *indigenismo*. Here it is important to point out the ideological exaltation of the Indian, which has made his presence visible in the public sphere under State control.

Art supported by revolutionary governments, especially between 1920 and 1940, had a very nationalistic character. It was, after all, necessary to go back to our roots. The popular nature of the Revolution, much in evidence in those years, led this search for roots along the paths of history until it reached the precolonial past. Upon its return to the present, the search for roots legitimized the culture of the nation. If not all of national culture, it at least legitimized those aspects that were easily appreciated: the bucolic life of the campesino, popular handicrafts, and folklore. In music, dance, literature, and the plastic arts, the theme of the Indian provided the basic elements for shaping a vast nationalistic current under government patronage.

Hundreds of square meters of murals adorn every type of public building in many cities of the republic. Murals are in seats of government and public offices, in markets and hospitals, in schools and libraries, in factories and workplaces. In these murals, the image of the Indian is practically indispensable. Rarely is there missing some allegory about the precolonial world that frequently lays the foundation for or presides over scenes of the world of today or tomorrow. There is space to indicate the painful transition from a past that was happy and full of wisdom to the horrors of the Conquest and slavery. There is also space for some pictorial references to the dances and showy ceremonies of contemporary Indians. Brown faces with high cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes, along with the sacred political heroes, occupy the most prominent place in Mexican mural painting. The pre-Columbian codices seem to come to life again in the work of Diego Rivera, to recount history in a different way, in the terms of the Mexican Revolution. In this sense, the painters of the nationalist school play the role of a new Tlacaélel, that ancient priest who for many years occupied the position of Cihuacóatl, the gray eminence of the Aztec state. Tlacaélel ordered the ancient books destroyed in order to paint new ones that would more adequately portray the history of the glorious Mexica, the People of the Sun.

Another favored way of exalting the Indian roots of Mexico has been through museums, which exist in most State capitals and in many other cities. The best and most pristine example is the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park, a privileged section of Mexico City. The architectural conception, in all its details, reflects an ideology of exaltation of the precolonial past. Simultaneously and in a contradictory fashion, it expresses a rupture with the present. The proportions and the sobriety of the façade, the amplitude of the vestibule and the interior plaza, and the elegant magnificence of the finishes bring to mind in some ways the characteristics of Mesoamerican cities. However, they are treated in such a way that the effect also reflects the layout of Christian temples: an entrance with choir and latticework (the vestibule of the museum), a great central nave (the patio) with lateral chapels (the exhibition rooms), culminating in the front altar (the Mexica Room with the Sun Stone at its center).

All the rooms on the ground floor of the museum are dedicated to archaeology, but each has a corresponding upper area. The major exhibition room, dedicated to the Aztecs, is the only room that does not have a mezzanine, and it is also larger than the other rooms. The top floor is composed of all the mezzanine rooms and contains the ethnographic exhibits, the reference to the Indians of today. Many visitors do not go through those rooms, because of fatigue or lack of interest, both factors directly related to the layout of Museum space. The words the visitor

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The Indian presence archaeological sites, all world. It is a unique world but still a dead world. the plastic arts or of its origin that gave rise to should feel proud, which even though the logic living Indian and all that they are not ignored or poly, the contemporary connected from the glorious belong to him: an ex alchemy, that past became Indians. However, it is as a kind of premonition future. It has no real collective future.

Today, other aspects the growth of tourism, zones and the commerce is Indian is sold as a unique accent of the exotic external consumption.

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sees upon leaving, carved in the huge interior panel of the façade over the entrance doors, precisely summarize the ideological message of the museum and the broader use the State has made of the precolonial past: "In the greatness of their past people find courage and confidence to face the future. Mexican, contemplate yourself in the mirror of that greatness. Foreigner, see proof here of the unity of human destiny. Civilizations pass, but humanity will always preserve the glory of others who struggled to build those civilizations."

The Indian presence as depicted in murals, museums, sculptures, and archaeological sites, all open to the public, is treated essentially as a dead world. It is a unique world, extraordinary in many of its achievements, but still a dead world. Official discourse, translated into the language of the plastic arts or of museography, exalts that dead world as the seed of origin that gave rise to today's Mexico. It is the glorious past of which we should feel proud, which assures us a lofty historical destiny as a nation, even though the logic of that assertion may not be entirely clear. The living Indian and all that is Indian are relegated to a second floor, when they are not ignored or denied. As in the National Museum of Anthropology, the contemporary Indian occupies a segregated space, disconnected from the glorious past as well as from the present, which does not belong to him: an expendable space. Through an adroit ideological alchemy, that past became our past, that of the Mexicans who are not Indians. However, it is an inert past, a simple reference to what existed as a kind of premonition of what Mexico is today and will be in the future. It has no real connection with our contemporary reality and our collective future.

Today, other aspects receive official attention designed to stimulate the growth of tourism. These include the restoration of archaeological zones and the commercialization of indigenous handicrafts. That which is Indian is sold as a unique image, which provides a touch of local color, an accent of the exotic to attract tourists. This is an Indian Mexico for external consumption.

What is "Indianness" for the elites of the country? In what way is it present among the beautiful people? In general, no one in these strata claims any indigenous ancestors. To the contrary, the usual situation is an ostentatious claim of European lineage, of descent that has been maintained without mixture over the generations. When possible, the emblems of a more or less doubtful nobility are exhibited. There are families that still conserve a coat of arms that presides over the principal living room of the house. If a family does not proclaim noble blood, it asserts a modest origin, a fortune and a social position earned through effort and talent. Although it may not be stated baldly, these characteristics are always associated with ancestors who were not Indians, just as

their descendants are not Indians today. The Indians were the workers on grandfather's hacienda, and the Indian women were the domestic servants of that period. When there were lands worked by peons, enjoying social occasions together with them from time to time was inevitable. In some families of ancient oligarchical ancestry, there is a continuing love of horse racing, of ranch-style home cooking, of cock-fights, and of a certain religious flavor to domestic life. This is all part of being Mexican, and one can enjoy it occasionally on Sundays. Here one runs into that which is Indian, but only if one looks down. Looking straight ahead, at equals, the skin is white and the hair and eyes are light. No one speaks Náhuatl, but many speak French, and today, almost everyone speaks English.

In an anthology issue, the U.S. magazine *Town and Country* presented "The Mighty Mexicans," a parade of photographs and brief descriptions of the most powerful people in the country. This was, naturally, during the elation of the oil boom. In a cursory view of the life and tastes of this privileged sector, the Mighty Mexicans were presented in their daily surroundings, their homes and factories, their offices and their places of relaxation. Symptomatically, a group of young married socialites appear in their finest clothing and jewelry. In each photograph there is a decorative element that indicates beyond a doubt the model's Mexicanness. Beside her there is an Indian woman in an authentic *huipil*, a short, plump, smiling woman with brown skin and a grateful look on her face. Any one of these photographs represents an extreme synthesis of the colonial schizophrenia in which we live.

The middle classes of urban society have grown rapidly in the last five or six decades. They live daily within this schizophrenia. The old aristocracy looked to Europe for models of conduct and thought, but the middle classes of today have only to look to the other side of the northern border. The United States provides all the archetypes to configure middle-class aspirations. One's real origins do not matter—that not very distant past that remains buried in a provincial city, in a poor barrio, in a small town, or even in an Indian village. What matters are the small achievements of today, and their material manifestation in the consumption of electric appliances, smuggled clothing, and occasional trips to San Antonio and Disneyland. It is difficult to reconcile continually growing aspirations with limited possibilities in a situation that finally deteriorates into a crisis with no apparent resolution. The middle classes here are characterized by a profound cultural uprootedness. There is a will to renounce the life lived until very recently, and a feeble, poorly articulated will to reconstruct the current lifestyle. The household space is not organized according to necessities and tastes that are one's own. One buys or rents according to the bargains available, one furnishes

according to the advanced ranch style. The improved working-class abode has felt cushions, the colonial appliances in full view of the walls. Tradition has its place here. It remains unexpectedly, like a ghost, apparent. Where all is cracklings, happiness is replaceable. Can the corner of patriotic discourse, folklore, enjoyed also neglected from its roots, played, without any other is the *México*?

### Cultural Schism

A national society exists in a country of wide capitalist development of groups in a very unequal and heterogeneous background that distinguishes it from unity within which subcultures within. The underlying opposition dynamics of Mexico: Indian Mesoamerican.

It is not possible Mexican population were an uninterrupted the most developed urban. What here is the edge of an internal implantation of Western, traditional, a ment, but, instead, tion. The relationships harmonious. On the

according to the advertisements of the moment; one may decorate in ranch style. The important thing is that one's home not look like a poor, working-class abode. To make that point clear there are the imitation felt cushions, the color television in the center of the room, the electric appliances in full view, and the implausible, brightly colored prints on the walls. Traditional culture of whatever background has no explicit place here. It remains buried and comes into view only occasionally and unexpectedly, like a detail that calls into question everything that is apparent. Where all daily things are replaceable—coffee, sugar, pork cracklings, happiness, beauty—then, in fact, culture and life itself are replaceable. Can that which is Indian be here? Perhaps it is in some corner of patriotic discourse, in the interstices of an evening of "typical" folklore, enjoyed along with the new acquaintance from El Paso. Disconnected from its roots, the middle class dances to whatever rhythm is played, without any desire to remember or any impulse to imagine. If the other is the *México profundo*, this is the surface, the superficial Mexico.

### Cultural Schism

A national society composed of more than eighty million people, living in a country of widely varied geography, a society embarked on a project of capitalist development, which affects different regions, strata, and groups in a very unequal fashion—such a society is necessarily complex and heterogeneous from the cultural point of view. However, these inequalities and differences have, in the case of Mexico, a deeper background that conditions cultural dynamics. Mexico's background distinguishes it from societies that have an ancient and solidary cultural unity within which occur variation and inequalities that form true subcultures within a general framework. Here the pattern is different. The underlying opposition that determines the structure and cultural dynamics of Mexican society is the confrontation of two civilizations: Indian Mesoamerica and the Christian West.

It is not possible to understand the cultural characteristics of the Mexican population in terms of a spectrum of gradual variation, as if it were an uninterrupted continuum that links the most backward with the most developed, the traditional with the modern, the rural with the urban. What here we call advanced, modern, and urban is not the leading edge of an internal self-development, but, rather, the result of the implantation of Western civilization from above. What we call backward, traditional, and rural is not the beginning point of that development, but, instead, the underlying stratum of Mesoamerican civilization. The relationship between the two poles was never and is not today harmonious. On the contrary, it is a relationship that until now has been

irreconcilable because it rests on the imposition of Western civilization and the consequent subjugation of Indian civilization. There is not a simple coexistence between the poles, which would probably facilitate reciprocal cultural interchange and might result in their unification, as proclaimed in official ideology. What exists is an asymmetrical relationship of domination and subjugation in which the majority Indian population is not conceded the right to conserve and carry out its own civilizational development. If such development occurs, it is only through the incessant resistance of the Indian groups, a resistance that takes the most varied forms. In terms of the dominant ideology, Indian civilization does not exist. The civilizational confrontation is masked by the phraseology of development, in its various modalities, which converts the imposition of a foreign civilization into a natural and inevitable process of historical advancement.

The cultural diversity of Mexican society goes back ultimately to the antagonistic opposition of two civilizations. At its extreme points the contrast and opposition are evident and total. The old, aristocratic oligarchy and its modern descendants, who promote technocratic modernity, confront the Indian communities that still preserve their own identity. In the broad, intermediary sectors and groups the situation seems less clear at first glance. Traditional campesinos do not think of themselves as Indians, even though their culture is predominantly Indian. The subordinate urban groups are not culturally homogeneous. Some keep as a culture of reference that of their home communities—Indian or mestizo. Others have forged a popular urban culture of Indian inclination, but adapted and transformed through long experience of life in the city. Others find themselves in anomie, in instability, fluctuating between urban misery and middle-class self-absorption. For their part, the middle strata have not created a lifestyle of their own; they do not possess a culture they themselves developed. In general, they consume foreign cultural products offered to them by an easily controlled market. These products vary from opinions and aspirations to foods and recreation, from idiomatic phrases to a taste for best-sellers.

Cultural diversity is not a problem in itself. In fact, it constitutes tangible and intangible cultural capital of enormous potential for the country. There exist a plurality of accumulated historical experiences, which form a vast repertoire of resources to confront the most varied situations. The problem lies in the dual, asymmetrical structure that underlies that plurality. At this point it is indispensable to return to the origin of this problem, which is none other than the colonial situation from which current Mexican society is derived. This is a past whose basic, antagonistic duality has not yet been superseded. To the contrary, it is expressed in every facet of national life. It is an original sin that has not yet been redeemed.

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## PART II.



### How We Came to Be Where We Are

The profound division of Mexican society expresses the unresolved confrontation of two civilizations. It is the result of a historical process almost five hundred years old. As we analyze the current situation and search for ways to overcome the problems we face, the general framework for our reflections must be the basic characteristics of that historical process. This second part deals with that topic. The attempt is not to summarize all the events of the last five hundred years, just as it was not the intention of the previous chapters to present an ethnographic compendium. What I hope to do is stimulate new reflection about our history, a different reading that will help us to better understand how we came to be where we are today. These are propositions and not conclusions, roads to travel that can barely be made out in the distance.



## The Problem of National Culture

In the previous pages I have offered arguments that lead to the conclusion that Mexican society is composed of a variegated assortment of peoples and social groups. Each one of them possesses and practices a specific culture, which differs from that of the others. The degree of cultural divergence varies according to the cases one decides to compare. There are local variations that do not obscure the presence of a common basic culture, and there are radically different ways of life, oriented in terms of essentially different historical experiences. My argument has been that the cultural diversity of Mexico cannot be understood in terms of different cultural levels. That is, it is not a matter of expressions that differ among themselves according to the position that each group or social segment occupies, in terms of their greater or lesser access to the resources and practices of a common culture. This phenomenon—cultural differences related to social stratification—is no doubt present in the cultural dynamics of the country. However, it is not the factor that explains the cultural diversity of our society. Much deeper than such situational differences, at bottom, what explains the absence of a common Mexican culture is the presence of two civilizations that have never fused to produce a new civilizational program. Neither have they coexisted in harmony, to each other's reciprocal benefit.

To the contrary, the groups of Mesoamerican origin and the successive hegemonic groups dominant in Mexican society, with their versions of Western civilization, continue to be opposed. There has never been a process of convergence, but, rather, one of opposition. There is one simple and straightforward reason: certain social groups have illegitimately held political, economic, and ideological power from the European invasion to the present. All have been affiliated through inheritance or through circumstance with Western civilization, and within their programs for governing there has been no place for Mesoamerican civilization. The dominant position of these groups originated in the stratified order of colonial society. It has expressed itself in an ideology

that conceives of the future only in terms of development, progress, advancement, and the Revolution itself, all concepts within the mainstream of Western civilization. Cultural diversity and, specifically, the omnipresence of Mesoamerican civilization have always been interpreted within that scheme in the only way possible. They are seen as an obstacle to progress along the one true path and toward the only valid objective. The mentality inherited from the colonizers does not allow perception of or invention of any other path. Mesoamerican civilization is either dead or must die as soon as possible, because it is of undeniable inferiority and has no future of its own.

The presence of two distinct civilizations implies the existence of different historical plans for the future. We are not dealing simply with alternatives within the framework of a common civilization, proposals that might alter current reality in many ways but that do not question the ultimate objectives or the underlying values that all share as participants in the same civilizational project. We are, rather, dealing with different projects, which are built on different ways of conceiving of the world, nature, society, and humankind. They postulate different hierarchies of values. They do not have the same aspirations nor do they understand in the same way how the full realization of each human being is to be achieved. They are projects that express two unique concepts of transcendence. Throughout, attempts at cultural unification have never suggested unity through creation of a new civilization that would be the synthesis of the existing ones. Rather, unity has been attempted through the elimination of one (Mesoamerican civilization, of course) and the spread of the other.

The colonial enterprise engaged in destroying Mesoamerican civilization and stopped only where self-interest intervened. When necessary, whole peoples were destroyed. On the other hand, where the labor force of the Indians was required, they were kept socially and culturally segregated. Indirectly and in a contradictory fashion, the minimum conditions for the continuity of Mesoamerican civilization were created, in spite of the brutal decline in population during the first decades after the invasion. This decline is one of the most violent and terrible demographic catastrophes in the history of humanity. Its intrinsic nature prevented the colonial regime from posing a project of cultural fusion that might have amalgamated the Mesoamerican and the Western civilizational planes. The ideology that justified colonization was that of a redemptive crusade, thus revealing the conviction that the only path to salvation was that of Western civilization.

The Westernization of the Indian, nevertheless, turned out to be contradictory, given the stubborn necessity of maintaining a clear

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distinction between the colonizers and the colonized. If the Indians had stopped being Indians in order to be fully incorporated into Western civilization, the ideological justification for colonial domination would have ended. Segregation and difference are essential for any colonial society. Unification, on the other hand, whether by assimilation of the colonized to the dominant culture or through the perhaps improbable fusion of two civilizations, denies the root of the colonial order.

The birth and consolidation of Mexico as an independent State in the turbulent course of the nineteenth century did not produce any different plan, nothing that deviated from the basic intention of taking the country along the paths of Western civilization. The struggles between the liberals and the conservatives reflect different conceptions of how to achieve that goal, but those struggles never question it. The new nation was conceived as culturally homogeneous, following the dominant European conviction that a state is the expression of a people with a common culture and the same language and is produced by having a common history. Thus, consolidating the nation was the goal of all the groups contending for power. They understood consolidation as the slow incorporation of the great majority to the cultural model that had been adopted as the national plan.

What was the model around which the nation should unify? It was a purely Western one. It could not be otherwise, given the background of the ruling groups. Those who claimed the right to define the course to be taken by the newborn nation were the minority who inherited the orientations of Western civilization, transplanted to these lands by the ancient colonizers. Liberty, yes; greater justice and equal rights, yes; but all directed toward the transformation of Mexican society into a "modern" nation in the mold of Western civilization. The vast majority of Mexicans lived outside that mold because they belonged to a different civilization. Consolidating the nation meant, then, proposing the elimination of the real culture of almost everyone in order to impose a culture held by only a few. And the model to be imposed was not in any respect a higher level, a necessary and natural step to which the great majority would have risen had they not been prevented by the injustice and the restrictions of the colonial regime. No, it was simply a different model, a different civilization.

In the terms in which I treat the problem of national culture here, neither do the paths taken after the triumph of the Mexican Revolution signify a change of direction. Modernization and concern with "development" follow the lines of substitution of a Western cultural model, and the clearest example is now closer: the United States. In the previous chapter I discussed some considerations about the official ideological

formulation of Mexico as a mestizo country, and this point will be taken up again later. Even though the paths taken may end abruptly or lead to the edge of a precipice, the efforts of the ruling sectors continue to focus on achieving goals that correspond to the paradigms of Western civilization. Faced with disaster, one is allowed to question the strategies and the procedures being followed, but never to imagine that there might be alternatives on a global level.

The only plan that at any moment had the possibility of converting itself into a national alternative—leaving aside for a moment the permanent resistance and the incessant struggles of the Indian villages—was that formulated by Emiliano Zapata's movement. Its defense of the villages, its agrarian orientation, its affirmation of the real life patterns forged through the centuries, all gave to the Zapatista movement a special, different place within the various currents of the Mexican Revolution. No doubt there were other groups that acted from the same deep sense, but none achieved the transcendence and the national significance that the southern Revolution had in its day. Nevertheless, the Revolution defeated Emiliano Zapata more than it did Porfirio Díaz. We should not deny the importance of the agrarian articles of the 1917 Constitution or the merits of the best moments of the revolutionary governments, as in the Cárdenas period, but we must recognize that the essence of the Zapatista plan was eliminated. The only parts included in the triumphant revolutionary program were those demands that appeared compatible with the goals that in the end defined the Revolution. I say those that seemed compatible, since in the course of the years, and more so each day, there have been backward steps in the initial agrarian program. This clearly indicates that the program is less compatible with the Zapatista postulates than seemed to be the case at first. In fact, only isolated demands were incorporated, but never the underlying plan that gave the demands meaning and depth.

A first conclusion is inescapable. The ruling groups of the country, those who make or impose the most important decisions affecting all of Mexican society, have never admitted that to advance might imply liberating and encouraging the cultural capacities that really exist in the majority of the population. Never has it been suggested that development might mean precisely creating the conditions in which the diverse regional and popular Indian cultures could grow and become fruitful. These cultures make life possible for the majority of Mexicans. A colonized mentality, based on a scheme of domination from which they benefit, has kept the ruling groups from considering any cultural alternative. They rigidly promote Western schemes, through inability, for convenience's sake, through submission, or, most probably, through simple blindness to reality itself.

What has been proposed for Mexican history may be being what we are. It is the historical reality of Mexico that makes the possibility of building a substitution project. There, in this concrete, national culture consists itself will eliminate the suppression of what is the majority of Mexico stop being themselves transformation into so date through internal been subject to multi domination.

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What has been proposed as national culture at different moments in Mexican history may be understood as a permanent aspiration to stop being what we are. It has always been a cultural project that denies the historical reality of Mexican social origins. And it does not admit the possibility of building the future on the basis of reality. It is always a substitution project. The future is somewhere else, anyplace other than here, in this concrete, daily reality. Thus, the task of constructing a national culture consists of imposing a distant, foreign model, which in itself will eliminate cultural diversity and achieve unity through the suppression of what already exists. In this way of thinking about things, the majority of Mexicans have a future only on the condition that they stop being themselves. That change is conceived as a definite break, a transformation into someone else. It is never conceived as bringing up to date through internal transformation, as liberating cultures that have been subject to multiple pressures during five centuries of colonial domination.

The constitutional history of Mexico is an example that illustrates this schizophrenic posture in a striking way. In all cases it has led to the juridical construction of a fictitious state from whose norms and practices the majority of the population is excluded. If this is not the case, how do we explain evident contradictions? How do we explain the individualism and egalitarianism insisted upon by the nineteenth-century liberals, which led directly to the consolidation of the indentured servant systems on the Díaz-period haciendas? How do we explain anticlerical legislation converted into fictional dead-letter laws, followed by a tacit agreement with the Church that negates the spirit of the laws? We must admit a great dominating fiction. Otherwise, how do we explain a system of democratic elections based on the recognition of political parties as the only legitimate vehicles for electoral participation in a country in which an absolute majority of the population does not belong to any party or exercise its right to vote? One would look in vain for a single example demonstrating an intention to understand and recognize the real systems that various groups use to obtain and legitimize authority. One would look in vain for an attempt to structure a national system in which local political forms would have a place and in which, at the same time, they might encounter the stimulus and the possibilities for progressive development. There are no such examples. The country must be modern right now, made so by virtue of law, and if reality follows other paths, it is an incorrect and illegal reality.

This schizophrenic fiction, manifest in all aspects of the country's life and culture, has grave consequences, which do not seem to worry the proponents of the imaginary Mexico. In the first place, the fiction produces the marginalization of the majority, a marginalization that is

real and not imaginary. The participants in "the Mexico that ought to exist" have always been a minority, at times a ridiculously small minority. The others, all the others, remain excluded by decree. Their participation in the theoretically democratic processes is reduced, in the best of cases, to a simple external formalism. It is far from their real life and is sometimes completely fictitious. The norms that pretend to govern all orders of life are conceived as lying within a cultural matrix in which only a minority of Mexicans participate. From that governing nucleus and as a function of their interests and tendencies, various efforts have been made to integrate other sectors into the behavior the model implies. These efforts have varied over time but have always been within the mainstream of Western civilization. To be a Mexican citizen in the full sense of the term, it is not enough to have been born here and not renounced the nationality earned at birth. For the majority an additional condition remains, unexpressed in the illusions of legal terminology. It is to learn a culture different from that which frames and gives meaning to one's daily, concrete existence, because one's own culture turns out to be illegitimate within the imaginary Mexico. This is not, then, a marginalization that is expressed only in reduced access to goods and services, but, rather, a total marginalization, an exclusion from one's own way of living. Many Mexicans thus have a choice: they can live on the margin of national life, related to it only by the minimal, inevitable relations between their real world and the other, which appears as different and external; or they can live a double life, also schizophrenic, changing between worlds and cultures according to circumstances and necessities; or, finally, they can renounce their identity from birth and try to be fully accepted in the imaginary Mexico of the minority.

The notion of democracy was established two centuries ago as one of the central aspirations of Western civilization. However, upon being mechanically transplanted into a postulate of the imaginary Mexico, it converted itself into a series of mechanisms of exclusion, whose effect was to deny the existence of the population. It is a curious democracy that does not recognize the existence of the people themselves, but, rather, sets itself the task of creating them. Afterward, it would, of course, put itself at their service. It is a surprising democracy of the minority, a national program that begins by leaving out the majority groups of the country. It is a project that ends by making illegitimate the thoughts and actions of the majority of Mexicans; the people themselves wind up being the obstacle to democracy.

A second consequence is also inevitable. By making reality a blank page, one chooses not to make use of the greater part of the cultural

capital of Mexican society to recognize, appreciate, and varied cultural patrimony. The old colonial blindness with which a future culture substitute for the nonpeople to be created to substitute ought to constitute the important: ideas, know how to do it. Once more reality instead of transference.

All the capacities of the cultural patrimony of the category of uselessness, century after century path whose end has never the rules of the imaginary part of history. It was an it—the living cultures marked in red numerals of national culture, but order to take the correct innocence, without his squander what we have.

The perverse imagination reduce the useful activation: a work force to be are all the capacities themselves simultaneously in life. They cannot be use relations because it do realization of individual be found in all areas of nation ignoring the capacities or indifference to the challenge would develop those capacities.

The inevitable question find ourselves? It becomes debate over national cultural process. Its origin lies five hundred years ago. All put into effect through

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capital of Mexican society. It becomes an absolute impossibility to recognize, appreciate, and stimulate the development of the extensive and varied cultural patrimony that history has placed in Mexican hands. The old colonial blindness remains, the notion that here there is nothing with which a future can be built. If the people have to be created to substitute for the nonpeople who exist, it follows that a culture also has to be created to substitute for the existing nonculture. The elements that ought to constitute the core of the new culture are not here, and they are important: ideas, knowledge, aspirations, technology, what to do and how to do it. Once more we find the dishonest task of substituting for reality instead of transforming it.

All the capacities accumulated and refined through the centuries, all the cultural patrimony of the *México profundo*, pass without notice into the category of uselessness. It would seem as if generation after generation, century after century, our people have simply traveled a mistaken path whose end has now been reached. All of their history, according to the rules of the imaginary Mexico, was not really history at all, or even part of history. It was an aberration, something senseless. What is left of it—the living cultures that guide the lives of millions of Mexicans—is marked in red numerals. It is not only useless and foreign to the future of national culture, but also a dead weight that should be removed in order to take the correct path. The new direction starts at zero, from total innocence, without historical memory. The proposition is not even to squander what we have, but to suicidally reject it.

The perverse imaginary development scheme, for example, intends to reduce the useful activity of individuals to a single mechanical dimension: a work force to be applied indiscriminately to any task. Excluded are all the capacities that find space and conditions to develop themselves simultaneously in the communal context of indigenous and rural life. They cannot be used to advantage in this cultural model of work relations because it does not contemplate among its goals the full realization of individual and collective potential. Multiple examples can be found in all areas of national life. There is a permanent insistence on ignoring the capacities created by the *México profundo* and an absolute indifference to the challenge and the promise of a national project that would develop those capacities instead of mutilating them.

The inevitable question is, How did we get to the point at which we find ourselves? It becomes clear that the schizophrenia surrounding the debate over national culture is the current expression of a long historical process. Its origin lies in the installation of the colonial regime almost five hundred years ago. At that moment a system of cultural control was put into effect through which the decision-making capacities of the



colonized peoples were limited. Their control over various cultural elements was progressively wrenched away, as it benefited the self-interest of the colonizers in each historical period.

It should be emphasized that the system of cultural control came to include all aspects of social life. It refers to the possibility of deciding, in whatever circumstance, how to put into play the cultural elements indispensable for social action. The study of the historical process that has resulted in the current system of cultural control cannot be limited to one single aspect of social activity. For example, it cannot concern itself solely with the loss of lands and material goods, or the employment of the work force for the benefit of the colonizers and, later, of their descendants in the national period. Mechanisms of economic exploitation have played a major role in the history of domination. But the system of cultural control that made them possible is more complex, more diversified, and more inclusive. Its comprehension requires introducing other analytical criteria, beyond the purely economic.

The fact that the system of cultural control is total does not mean that all decisions are made by a single group or class. Certainly, the decisions that the dominant sector considers basic, those that in some way express their reason for being and their aspirations, will tend to concentrate within one level. But the subordinate groups also have decision-making capacities within their own cultural realm. These strongholds expand or contract as the conditions and the forces making up the system of cultural control change. From this perspective, the historical dynamic may be understood as a constant struggle of the subordinate groups to conserve and extend all the spheres of their own culture, within which they have some control over the cultural elements required for social action. Facing them is the dominant society, whose intention is to broaden and consolidate its own sphere of cultural control as it relates to needs and self-interest. This process can be seen most clearly in plural societies of colonial origin, such as Mexico, where subordinate groups have a very different culture from the dominant ones. In this situation, the struggle is for space of one's own within the system of global control. The struggle thus simultaneously expresses the confrontation of different cultures and cultural goals and the conflict over greater participation in decision making within the total system of cultural control.

These ideas, presented in schematic form, are intended to orient the reader to the theoretical perspective that underlies the following chapters. I will try to present a general vision of the major events and most important mechanisms that have configured and transformed the system of cultural control in Mexico over the last half millennium. As I have said, the effort is not to make a historical synthesis, a task that would be beyond the scope of this work. Rather, I would like to point

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toward a way of thinking about our history, one that will put the cultural reality of Mexico at the center of attention. This reality is understood as the histories of diverse peoples with ties among themselves, but who also follow their own particular cultural determinants. More than offering results, the following pages propose a future task, a collective and increasingly broad one: the analysis, with an open mind, of how we came to be where we find ourselves, in order to decide on the best way of escaping the current situation. Beyond the related problems we face, no matter how dramatic and agonizing they may be, I propose to reflect on the matter of civilization, in hopes it will permit us to overcome the schizophrenia caused by the lack of understanding between the *México profundo* and the imaginary Mexico.



## The Nation We Have Today

### The Shattering of the Illusion

It all happened very rapidly. It took only a few years, at the end of the 1970s, for the illusions and the euphoria of the oil mirage to pass. Next came the certainty that the model of development imposed on the country had now reached its end and that it had no more to offer. This was evident by December of 1982. It was necessary to stop believing in miracles, in immense treasures that appeared suddenly, assuring us the definitive solution to all our problems. An undeserved miracle it would have been, too, since it was not the result of a series of rational or steady efforts to generate the wealth the country needs, or to solve the problems that overwhelm it. Suddenly it seemed that all the mistakes, the interminable chain of absurdities, incompetence, and examples of short-sightedness, were not really so bad. In the end, they were justified by the final result: a country whose only challenge was to learn how to manage abundance. Shortly thereafter the false illusions and triumphal behavior of the imaginary Mexico came noisily crashing down. The country that remains is another one, very different from the Mexico imagined during the brief years of the most recent euphoria.

Today we must accept that Mexico is a poor country. We must acknowledge that there are large extensions of land that are not appropriate for "modern" agriculture and others that are eroded and produce less than before because they were exploited in an irrational manner. We must accept that things have reached the extreme in which our own agriculture does not produce enough basic products to feed the Mexican population even at the minimum required level. Our dependence grows because of hunger. The country that invented corn now has to import it.

Agriculture for export and for producing products for industry is unstable. In the first case, international prices and the restrictions on imports into the United States, the principal buyer, always place a question mark on the future of the market and frequently provoke acute

crises for different products. These crises have to be resolved with scarce national financial reserves, and the cost is almost always paid by Mexican consumers. Neither do crops for industrial use seem to offer a promising future, at a time when industrial growth is stagnant and many firms are closing. And it is these kinds of agriculture, it must be remembered, along with cattle raising, that have taken over the best agricultural lands, displacing the Mesoamerican products that form the subsistence base for the immense majority of the population.

We cannot be confident about our raw materials as the basis for a secure and balanced international commerce. Prices and demand forces move in ways beyond our control and always to the benefit of the buyer, in a market principally controlled by the United States. The export of manufactured products is limited because Mexican industry, with isolated exceptions, is not competitive on the international level. One attempt at a solution has been to accept *maquiladoras* [foreign-owned assembly plants along the northern border]. The country has become a *maquilador* at an alarming rate, which means that we sell only the strength of Mexican arms so that others may become rich. And we sell it very cheaply. The dollars earned by the workers (how many million a year?) alleviate the misery of their families and add to the foreign exchange reserves. But *bracerismo* [selling our labor to foreigners] cannot be the solution for the Mexican economy. If we accept it as such, we must accept the inevitable political consequence, which is to declare the country dissolved and integrate ourselves into the North American economy and society.

Our industry is not sufficiently organized to satisfy the basic demands of the national market. Many superfluous things are produced, and, on the other hand, many things that are necessary are not produced. How much is spent in Mexico to produce, promote, and consume canned food, bottled soft drinks, alcoholic beverages, and throwaway containers? What does it cost, in this poor country, to create industrial employment aimed at producing garbage? In discussing this point we cannot pass over the role played by advertising—a force that promotes models of consumption that, put simply, impoverish and hurt the consumer. Much more than necessary is spent on “food” whose nutritional components have been obtained traditionally for a much lower price. For example, compare plastic bags containing industrially produced corn products with tamales, tortillas, and *atole*. In addition, these purchases divert a significant part of the precarious family budget, which would be better applied to real family needs.

In addition, because of the twisted nature of industrial development, the quality and the prices of many national products do not compete with the contraband foreign products sold openly on every side. This

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means a restricted market for selling national products and a continuous loss of foreign exchange. This happens in a country with 1,860 miles [3,000 kilometers] of border with the United States, across which millions of people pass annually. The "informal economy" in this process acquires an overwhelming importance not reflected in statistics. It is a way for a few to get rich and for the poverty of many others to be disguised.

Within the generalized poverty, there is economic inequality, which should be intolerably scandalous. A gross and insulting sort of squandering and waste exists, along with an inability to attend to the most elemental necessities of millions of countrymen. (Is it accurate to say "countrymen"? Can those Mexicans who put their money safely in the United States really belong to the same country?) The crisis has made the rich richer and everyone else poorer. The end of the "miracle" has made evident, for anyone who ever doubted it, the profound tendency toward inequality that has been implicit in the plan for national development.

The crisis obviously produces poverty, but not an evenhanded poverty, since even within the *México profundo* the effects are not equal. In the long run, of course, it is that majority population that pays the consequences, while a minority benefits and enriches itself to disgusting excess. Those sectors of the *México profundo* that have detached themselves from Indian and traditional campesino communities, that have enrolled themselves as subordinates in the imaginary Mexico, may well be those in the worst conditions and with the fewest resources to deal with the crisis. Here unemployment is at its highest, and exclusive dependence on the money economy intensifies the effects of inflation. There is also dependence on social services, which are not increasing and are actually being reduced for the contingents of marginalized urban poor. They, who found themselves obliged to choose a life and a job within the development plans of the imaginary Mexico, are the first and the most deeply excluded and the ones who must support the requirements of the economic contraction. Those upon whose work and poverty have depended the illusions of growth are those who must now pay the costs of the collapse.

The foregoing does not mean at all that Indians and traditional campesinos are at the margin of the crisis. In everything that relates them to the imaginary Mexico, they also pay debts they never contracted. The only difference, but a very important one, is the margin of self-sufficiency provided by the orientation of their culture. It is a precarious margin, certainly, but it is a margin that does not exist, or barely survives, in the urban sectors of the *México profundo*. In spite of the common misery, here, surrounded by asphalt, there are fewer ways to confront the crisis. At least, this is true for the moment.

Every Mexican is born owing a debt. The foreign debt today is unmanageable. If it were to be paid, the country would be poorer than it was before it went into debt. The loans served to fill in potholes, not to build a new and serviceable highway. The debt makes the economic development plan, as it has been developed, unfeasible. It also places the country in a feeble position for maintaining the degree of political autonomy that had been achieved. The pressures of the International Monetary Fund threaten to channel the political economy toward the sole objective of paying the debt. Bilateral negotiations with the U.S. government, on the other hand, carry the risk that Mexico's foreign policy may be included as something to be negotiated, through the inevitable pressures of *realpolitik*. The margins of autonomy constrict as the dependence that has accumulated reveals itself, implacable in all its dimensions and facets.

Some problems that were sidestepped during the crisis appear more dramatic today. The air pollution in Mexico City and other urban industrial zones is no longer a distant and improbable danger to be avoided. It is now a daily reality whose gravity cannot be exaggerated or hidden. We must reverse many urban policies, which have happily accumulated during administration after administration, that have made Mexico City one of the worst megalopolises in the world. We must repair the damages produced by a savage capitalism, which has made uninhabitable its own lair, where so many inhabitants of the *México profundo* are obligated to remain. We must rethink and rebuild our cities, without forgetting that they are the creation and the bastion of the imaginary Mexico. Their problems are not simply deviations, anomalies that can be repaired without rejecting the project of which they are the inevitable result. The city expresses, in its own way and with its own cancer, the unresolved contradictions of Mexican society and history. Its problems cannot be truly resolved if it maintains in all areas, even ideologically, its dominant position before the rural world and its role as the center for denying the *México profundo*.

Aggression against the natural world is not limited to the urban sphere. Mountains and forests are clear-cut, rivers and shorelines are polluted, the resources of the earth and the sea are destroyed, species become extinct, and in a thousand ways the ecological niches patiently created by nature and by man over thousands of years are altered. It is a suicidal effort whose only rationality is to earn the largest possible immediate profit, at all costs and perish whatever is in the way. Under the direction of the imaginary Mexico we have become splendid creators of deserts and efficient agents for destroying life on earth, in the water, and in the air.

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encouraging prospects? There is a generalized frustration resulting from the shattering of illusions, however false these may have been. Employment opportunities close each year as eight hundred thousand Mexicans reach the age of eighteen, the symbolic dividing line between adolescence and adulthood. They have no reliable prospects, no security whatsoever that anything they may do will lead to something better in life. Open discontent is more easily seen in the middle classes and in broad sectors of the bourgeoisie. There insecurity reigns, rage against a country they wanted for their own as an inexhaustible supplier of satisfactions that would allow them a steady, eternal ascent. Now they look for someone to blame, not counting themselves among the candidates. Since the 1940s they have wanted to be more cosmopolitan than Mexican, and their uprooting is more profound when they see themselves as part of an impoverished country. It is not these people or their interests that are the best guides to find the path down which all may march.

The people of the *México profundo* are silent; they do not participate because they are denied the opportunity to do so on their own terms. They are an invisible and mute people as far as the imaginary Mexico is concerned. They are a people who endure with a patience that seems beyond limit. Here or there, sporadically, there is a cry of protest, an isolated outburst. The national political debate unravels—not in terms of its discourse, of course, but in terms of authentic participation—for lack of a constituency. The proposals of the Right reflect a nostalgia for the path already taken and a stubborn and crazy will to pursue it. The Left cannot manage to define a program that is halfway convincing. It overspecialized in criticism and now shows itself incapable of proposing a future that starts from our current reality, apart from the words that have become dull from so much overhandling. The real game of political decisions remains open for only a few, and its norms and procedures are paralyzed. It has become a parlor game, routine and predictable, more and more incapable of responding to what is really happening. Corruption continues, browsing through fields of privilege earned by a long history and by generalized acceptance as an admissible and acceptable form of conduct.

The picture is not complete, but these lines sketch the profile of the imaginary Mexico, today and in the immediate future. There do not seem to be any new miracles in sight.

What is going on here? It is certainly not a simple, fortuitous piling up of isolated problems, each independent of the other. It is not the accumulation of difficulties that overwhelms us. What immobilizes us is something much more profound: the fading away of one plan for the future and the incapacity to formulate another one that will not have the

same pitfalls. In the same way, a new plan for nationhood cannot be made up of shreds and patches. It cannot be the sum total of particular measures that, under pressure from the crisis, attempt to attenuate each of the multiple and different manifestations of the previous model's breakdown. The only option, without doubt a difficult and arduous one, but nevertheless the only possibility, is to draw from the *México profundo* the historical will to formulate and undertake our own civilizational project.

When all is said and done, what we are speaking about is civilization. It is at the level of civilization that one measures the transcendence of the problems and recognizes the capacities and potentials of a people. It is there, in the civilizational project, that the fundamental information is to be found for designing the nation we want and are able to build in each historical period. From this perspective, what broke down was the civilizational model of the imaginary Mexico, a model that had been accepted as the only one possible.

### Founding a New Hope

We were not able to construct an imaginary country and it would be insane to insist on doing so. Mexico is what it is, with this population and this history. We cannot persist in the attempt to replace it with something it is not. The task is simpler: to make it better from within, not from without. We must stop denying what it is and, to the contrary, take it for something that can be transformed and developed starting from its own potentialities. We must recognize the *México profundo*, once and for all, because without it there is no worthwhile solution.

What do we have as a basis for going forward?

We have varied natural resources, not so many nor as rich as we were led to believe by the image of the horn of plenty, but enough to permit a better quality of life for the Mexicans of today and the foreseeable future. If ours were a homogeneous society one might think that all those resources should be exploited according to a single production scheme, with a single set of goals, conceptions, and ways of working. But it is not homogeneous and, therefore, the resources mean different things and are exploited in different ways. Natural phenomena are converted into resources through culture, and here multiple cultures coexist. Each culture defines the natural resources it will exploit, the form in which it will obtain and transform them, and their final use and meaning. In addition, as we have seen, the Indian communities claim a part of those resources as exclusively their own, and they consider them inseparable from their history, culture, and patrimony. This link surely allows them to defend those resources better than if they were seen as "national"

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resources, the view taken by some sectors of the imaginary Mexico. Ultimately, the function of "national resources" seems to be to ensure personal enrichment for the few.

The diverse ways in which nature, work, and material production are understood are due to the presence of two different civilizations, Mesoamerican and Western. This diversity is not in itself an obstacle. It becomes an obstacle only when there is an attempt to impose a single economic rationality, and especially when that rationality radically denies any other. When this is not the situation, diversity in production is a resource of enormous potential, because it gives the whole society a vast arsenal of alternatives and new experiences for the management of natural resources. The different ways of understanding and working the earth, for example, become a problem and an obstacle only when all are measured with a device that is appropriate for only one of them. One such device is the market value of the crop produced per unit of area. Or, to take another example, work by artisans is judged "backward" if it is isolated from its social and cultural context and measured in terms of "productivity," defined as the largest quantity of products finished in a given period of time. Judgments of this sort result from applying a unique and exclusionary model of economics and civilization. Everything outside that model, everything that belongs to another civilizational project, is converted into an obstacle, a hindrance, and a cause of backwardness. All its potential is ignored and denied.

The same thing happens with knowledge. Mexican society has at its disposal a vast store of knowledge, the result of thousands of years of refinement and experimentation in the heart of the diverse societies of the *México profundo*. That knowledge has proven its validity to the degree that, first, it resulted in the development of Mesoamerican civilization, and, second, it has ensured the persistence of the peoples who preserved it and brought it into the present. This is knowledge about all areas of life and is necessarily tied to particular ways of understanding the world. It forms part of specific visions of the cosmos. Some of this knowledge, for example, that which allows the management of the surrounding natural world, cannot be mechanically transferred to other surroundings. It is not formulated in terms of explicit general rules. The inductive and deductive processes that generated it have made use of data from a limited universe, and those data rest upon local experiences, because of the isolation and social fragmentation imposed by colonial domination.

But their restricted validity in modern times does not imply any inherent inability of that knowledge to be developed, broadened, and deepened through systematic formulation. The problem is to reestablish the social conditions that would permit that development, conditions

that have been systematically denied since the imposition of colonial domination. Meanwhile, and in spite of the foregoing, traditional knowledge constitutes an invaluable capital for all the peoples of the *México profundo*. It could be transformed into a resource for the country as a whole if its potential validity were recognized.

Here again the deeper problem is accepting the validity of another civilization and abandoning the arrogant assumption that one's own, Western way of understanding is the only certain and true one. It is enough to imagine an average family from the Narvarte suburb of Mexico City who had to survive, with the knowledge they possess, in the desert lands of Punta Chueca, on the Nayar Mesa, or in the jungle surrounding Nahá. There live the Seri, the Huichol, and the Lacandón, each group with a store of their own knowledge, which has allowed them to survive and prosper, in spite of everything.

Above all else, to move forward the country counts on its people, on those who, in the end, constitute the totality of Mexico. But the perspective of the imaginary Mexico allows Mexicans to be seen only as individuals, not as members of communities and societies forged through history. In the plans of the imaginary Mexico, real people are transformed into "human resources," interchangeable, isolated numbers that can be subtracted here or added there. The obvious social condition of being human is ignored. We forget that individuality exists only in the context of a given society, which in turn possesses a specific culture. Since in Mexico there exist various cultures, affiliated to two distinct civilizations, real Mexicans are individuals in different factual contexts, not in a single one common to all. What we can count on to move forward is not eighty plus million undifferentiated individuals in a common social and cultural system. Rather, it is something much more important and more promising: a variegated mixture of societies, each one of which possesses its own culture. That is to say, each individual, besides being an individual, belongs to a social unit within which he or she is the bearer of particular ways of living and making history. Taken together, we have a great number of different ways of organizing work, family, and community. We have a broad range of forms of expression. We can count on multiple knowledge and skills to face similar problems. We have different senses of ultimate importance. This will be the contribution of the *México profundo* and its rejected civilization, if and when we decide to build a common future with the *México profundo* and not against it.

There is another point we should consider in these times of frustration and disillusionment. Indian peoples have resisted five centuries of colonial oppression and domination. What is the basis for their decision to survive and endure? What are the sources of their will to continue making history for themselves? On what interior strength have they

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drawn to persist for centuries in their own vision of life, under conditions incomparably more difficult than those that in a few years destroyed the development plans of the imaginary Mexico? The spiritual force behind the will to endure is indispensable for formulating a new, viable, and authentic national program. The believers in the imaginary Mexico no longer have that will. They have little conviction to continue, although some try to disguise this fact, stubbornly recovering the ruins of the shipwreck and trying to rebuild the same, useless vessel. But, on the other hand, that same will gives life to millions of Mexicans, who exercise it in the specific acts of their daily lives, confident in their beliefs and in their attachment to what is their own. The argument may sound overly abstract, but there, in the *México profundo*, we also have the indispensable reserve of confidence on which to found a new hope.

From all that has been produced within the framework of the imaginary Mexico there is also much to retrieve and to put at the service of a new national program. What is imaginary is Western. It is imaginary not because it does not exist, but because, based on it, there has been an effort to build a Mexico different from Mexican reality. Western civilization exists and is present throughout the world. My effort is not to deny it, as it has denied Mesoamerican civilization. Neither would I deny that many elements of Western civilization can and should be employed to build a better Mexico for everyone. The country already counts on social groups that know how to employ and develop aspects of Western culture that they have made their own. There exist a store of important resources needed to carry out a new national program. We have scientists and technicians, artists and intellectuals, and they control knowledge and Western skills, which are useful today, and will be in the future. The problem is whether Mexican society does or does not have the ability to appropriate those resources and use them to promote its real interests. That is, are we capable of employing the knowledge and techniques of Western civilization without at the same time adopting the civilizational project that denies our underlying reality?

The matter can be summarized as follows. Diverse ways of manipulating reality, through knowledge, techniques, material instruments, and forms of social organization, acquire meaning only in the framework of a civilizational project. Such a project defines the reality to which we aspire. Only in terms of this project can we judge the relative merits of the cultural elements with which we try to manipulate reality, with which we find them to be better or worse, adequate or useless. The West has generated cultural elements as a function of its own project, but that does not mean that these elements are useful only there. Other civilizational projects, like the one we need, can also make use of them without changing their nature. It is also an act of reclamation, since the

achievements of Western civilization were only possible thanks to the exploitation of peoples with different cultures. In the West that belongs to us, but not in that which is imposed upon us, there are also potential resources for moving forward.

Putting the situation in this perspective, Mexico counts on a vast arsenal of peoples and cultural elements and resources. They could be used to create a better and more just society, capable of offering its different members a full and higher quality of life. These are the bricks for building the new home of the Mexicans. They are the only ones that are really ours, but they are sufficient. Only the plans to attend to our immediate needs and to our infinite aspirations are lacking.

## Civili

### Substitution, Fusion

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## Civilization and Alternatives

### Substitution, Fusion, or Pluralism

In some way, we have to define and put into practice a new national program for the future. The risk of not doing so would be to accelerate internal breakdown and accentuate existing contradictions. It would encourage centrifugal forces, which detract from the very concept of an independent nation. It would tear down the national borders, which, even though seriously debilitated, still permit us to hope that dependence will not be translated into the dissolution of the country. Mexico as a country continues to be viable, because of its expanse, the size of its population, its productive potential, and, above all, the cultural resources that its people have been wise enough to conserve. It is viable, but it may not be in the future. Its viability will be threatened if the new national program is built along the margins of our national reality, ignoring the historical and civilizational processes that are still operating and that have a deep history. The national program must be defined in terms of civilization.

A first possible option would be to insist on the substitution project, which throughout this book I have called the imaginary Mexico. It is worth repeating that this project rests on the conviction that a substantial part of the reality of the country, that part which derives from Mesoamerican civilization and which forms the *México profundo*, should be replaced with a distinct reality. The other reality has presented itself in different garb in different historical periods, but it always turns out to be a version of Western civilization wearing somewhat different makeup. The model of the country we aspire to be is copied in every case from some other country recognized as advanced, according to the standards of Western civilization. In the current period, the model to imitate is of an industrialized country that assures its inhabitants higher and higher levels of consumption, especially consumption of material goods. The alternative forms of political and economic organization for

achieving this goal are presented as opposed and irreconcilable, for instance, as either capitalism or socialism. But the ultimate objectives are the same; the only argument is over which road is better or shorter. It is a single civilizational project defined on the basis of the same suppositions. History is an infinite process of rectilinear advance. Advancement consists of greater and greater control over and capacity for exploitation of the natural world, for human benefit. The benefits generated by this advance are realized and expressed in terms of more and more consumption. And through this process, the ultimate human goals are achieved. On these assumptions of Western civilization rest its scales of evaluation and its definitions. Work is a necessary evil, which should be reduced as historical advancement proceeds. Nature is an enemy to be overcome, since humans fulfill themselves to the degree they become independent of nature. Greater production and greater consumption of goods are absolute, immanent values that require no justification whatsoever.

According to this civilizational project, there is no alternative but to accept Mexico as a backward and underdeveloped country. Even worse, it will become more so each day if the distance that separates us from the developed countries of the West continues to increase, which is and has been the tendency. Every day it becomes more difficult to imagine how in the hell we will manage to become a country on the cutting edge. Naturally, it is the *México profundo*, the Indians, the campesinos, the marginalized urban masses, who embody in a self-evident manner the backwardness and underdevelopment of the country.

The reasons can be debated. For some the exploitation to which those groups have been subjected is reason enough to explain their lack of participation in "Mexico as a developing country." For others the cause is laziness, ignorance, and the lack of initiative of the people composing those sectors. The first explanation points to a fact that is certain: the systematic, brutal, and multifaceted exploitation of the *México profundo*. But a hasty conclusion is drawn, and it leaves aside a fundamental fact, the existence of a different civilization. Given the other civilization, one can question the supposition that if exploitation were diminished or eradicated, the members of these groups would immediately adopt the imaginary Mexico's Western project. This way of analyzing the situation is also Western and leads to a substitution project; it does not admit any future other than that which derives from the civilizational project of the West. The second way of understanding the problem does the same thing, but in an ingenuous and hypocritical way. It eliminates the problem of exploitation from the analysis and not only denies any future to Mesoamerican civilization, but also attributes to it the causes of the "backwardness" of those who participate in it.

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On one or the other road, or on the paths between them, one reaches the same conclusion. The plans of the imaginary Mexico must be extended, which implies the replacement of the cultures affiliated with Mesoamerican civilization.

Today, after the breakdown of the dream, reformulating the replacement project would involve many limitations and shameful adjustments. Up to now, government actions have led in one direction. Meanwhile, other promoters and beneficiaries of the imaginary Mexico are in doubt about whether to join the enterprise or to search for alternatives and personal security in some other place. The predictable worsening of the crisis in its political and economic aspects will force those who see only the project of Western replacement to define their positions.

There will be those who, within the general guidelines and objectives of the replacement project, insist that it can be converted into a national, mestizo project. This position appears to reject replacement, admitting that there are positive values in Mesoamerican civilization, which should be incorporated into the national plans. The fusion of civilizations is postulated as the way to create an authentic national culture, and thus a legitimate and viable national future. Earlier I tried to show the fallacy in what has been called Mexican "mestizo" culture, and I will not insist on the point. But it is well to remember that although the integration of two or more distinct cultures to form a new one is possible, it takes a very long time. The factors that lead to the crystallization of a new culture are not subject to the will of individuals. Rather, they result from broad social processes in which successive generations take part. The fusion of cultures and civilizations in Mexico may happen, but it certainly will not be in the foreseeable future, and it will not be the result of a decree or of the actions of one or two generations.

Ultimately, many of the initiatives and activities set in motion to reinforce the plans for a national mestizo culture are really intended to lubricate the machinery of imposition and expansion of the imaginary Mexico. The effort is to remove obstacles that are too obvious. Certain superficial concessions are made to the cultural practices of the *México profundo*, using a little local color as a cosmetic touch for the evident Western nature of the imaginary national plans. The central problem remains the inability to recognize and accept the other, which in this case is the other civilization, the Mesoamerican one. Without the prior steps of recognition and acceptance, there is no way of speaking seriously about a process of cultural fusion or *mestizaje*.

There is another alternative, derived precisely from the recognition and acceptance of Mesoamerican civilization, with all its implications. This would be a national development plan organized on the basis of

cultural pluralism. Pluralism would not be understood as an obstacle to be overcome but, rather, as the content itself of the project, that which makes it legitimate and viable. Cultural diversity would not be simply a reality recognized as the point of departure, but, instead, a central goal of the project. The attempt would be to promote development of a multicultural nation without its ceasing to be exactly that.

Of course, the challenge is not easy. I hope I have been able to show that the differences between cultures, especially those that belong to different civilizations, are profound. They are differences of orientation in values, of the sense of what is ultimately important, of the conception of the world. The specific cultural matrix is what gives meaning and significance to such explicit traits as clothing, local *costumbres*, modes of production and consumption, and aspirations. As we have seen, there are not only differences but also contradictions and oppositions between the cultures of the *México profundo* and urban Western culture. The expectations are not the same nor is there a correspondence in many important aspects of daily life. Reconciling those oppositions is the major challenge of a national plan that takes pluralism as fundamental.

An ethnically plural nation requires that all power structures that imply the domination of some groups over the others be annulled and suppressed. In the case of Mexico, this means the suppression of the colonial order, which began five hundred years ago and has not yet ended. It means liberating oppressed peoples and cultures and bringing them into the present, through democratic participation in national life. This process must take place within a democracy that not only recognizes individual rights, but also emphatically asserts the rights of historical collectivities. National unity ceases to be a mechanical unity based on uniformity and instead becomes an organic unity integrating different sectors. These sectors should not be unequal or in a hierarchical relationship. Each one of them has the real right to manage its own affairs within the state, which unifies them and in relation to which they share certain interests and goals. It is a firmer national reality because it is more promising and more real than one conceived in terms of uniformity, one that denies the existence and the rights of groups that deviate from the accepted model.

What sort of country would Mexico be if it claimed its multiethnic nature? It would be one in which all the existing cultural potential would have the opportunity to develop and test its validity, a country with a larger number of alternatives. It would be a national society that did not reject any segment of the resources created throughout its history. It would be, in short, a nation that lives as a real democracy, in accord with its richly diversified cultural makeup. It would be a nation capable, therefore, of acting on the international scene from an authentic position

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of its own. It is one thing for a country to presume itself inferior and underdeveloped, as determined by an imposed scale. It is another for a country to understand itself as different by sustaining and affirming goals derived from its own history. One could then speak of an authentic decolonialization. It would not consist of fighting to follow smoothly the path that has been imposed on us, but, rather, defining and following our own path.

### Civilization, Democracy, Decolonialization

Western civilization developed in successive centers, gaining power and influence. After a certain point in its historical development, its dynamic of expansion was always accompanied by an inability to coexist with other civilizations. The West sees itself as the bearer of *the* universal civilization. As something unique and superior, it entails the negation and exclusion of any other, different civilizational project. The ruling classes in Mexico until the present have been dependent, not only economically, but in all areas. This dependence results from affiliation with a civilization whose sources and centers of decision making and legitimacy are far distant and not under local control. This situation has produced a creole variety of the dynamic of Western expansion, always badly copied and backward in relation to the advanced countries that served as models. It has always been crude, with a tendency to understand being modern simply as being stylish. For that reason it has promoted a subsidiary and spurious modernity.

The Arabs were in Spain for seven centuries but Spain is a Western country and not an Islamic one, however many Islamic traits may be present in the cultures of the peninsula. The West burst upon Mexico five hundred years ago, and in addition, we border Western civilization's most powerful country for 1,860 miles [3,000 kilometers]. To deny the West in some global way or pretend to isolate ourselves from its presence not only would be impossible, it would be idiotic. The task is how to assimilate the inevitable and necessary Western elements in an autonomous national development plan, without incorporating others that by their nature and dynamics would deny the possibility of pluralism. How can we build and use the machines without glorifying the machinery? How can we produce the goods we need without falling prey to consumerism?

Extreme positions may argue that this is impossible. These are cultural elements that have arisen through a complex historical process, goes this argument, and they are indissolubly linked to other principles and values of the Western civilization from which they arise. This argument is valid for explaining the origin and development of those

elements, but it does not lead to the inevitable conclusion that other peoples cannot fabricate machines with a different civilizational meaning. It is not a problem of all or nothing. The question should perhaps be posed in these terms: we should learn to see the West from Mexico, instead of continuing to see Mexico from the West.

The foregoing would mean a substantial modification in the way the West is implanted in the society and culture of Mexico. Its historical condition of being a civilization of conquest contradicts any possibility of carrying forward a project based on plurality. Western civilization has been presented in this country in such a way that it is not compatible with a decision to respect and favor the development of other cultures. As a consequence, it is necessary to reassimilate the West or, more accurately, to assimilate it for the first time. It will be essential to divest from Western culture the necessary elements, separating them from the arrogant garb of their imperial past. It will be necessary to domesticate these elements and make them coexist with others of a different origin, which do not pretend to follow the basic orientation of Western civilization. The Western elements should exist among others and not be the only ones or the preponderant ones. In the final instance, they must place themselves at the service of a project that is not Western but plural, and in which Mesoamerican civilization must play the lead role.

The foregoing implies an essential renovation of democracy in its meaning and in its implementation, here and now. The Western notion of democracy, based on formal, individualistic criteria, is insufficient to guarantee the participation of an ethnically plural population. In fact, as we saw earlier, it becomes an obstacle, a mechanism that prevents the participation of groups that do not share that way of understanding democracy. Western-style democracy has functioned in Mexico to justify a structure of cultural control, limiting the development of Mesoamerican cultures. This makes necessary a critical, in-depth review of the mechanisms of representation, delegation, and exercise of power, in order to ensure that decision making respects the plural nature of Mexican society.

In a society that recognizes itself as plural and wants to be so, thinking about a national culture means abandoning the idea that it be uniform. The common elements will not be the specific cultural contents of the diverse groups that compose Mexico. The common characteristic will be, first of all, the will to respect each other and to live together in diversity. The national culture will be a larger sphere of fruitful coexistence, free to develop according to its own plans. The necessary convergences will be few, as we have seen: the decision to build and maintain an independent state, and the acceptance of the minimum norms and mechanisms required for the functioning of a multicultural state.

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Since independence, the Mexican State has taken on the heavy burden of creating a nation that it considered nonexistent because it was not expressed in one uniform society. Perhaps the excessive growth of the state apparatus is due, in part, to the effort required by this task. A State that respected the cultural autonomy of its component societies and only regulated their coexistence, that handled general matters that went beyond the internal affairs of each, would certainly be a smaller State with fewer functions, and one that was more solid and efficient.

Here again the test of truth is democracy, and what it should mean for Mexicans. A highly centralized and omnipresent power is congruent with the idea that the State's job is to create the nation. It accomplishes this by imposing a cultural model, created from above, on the rest of society. The recognition of pluralism, the acceptance of a plural model, carries with it a real decentralization of power. It means a social decentralization of decision-making power, not just administrative decentralization by territory.

### The Paths toward Pluralism

It might seem that in speaking of civilizations and civilizational projects we are handling excessively abstract concepts. They may seem to have little or nothing to do with real, concrete problems and urgently needed decisions. Needless to say, this is not the case. Rather, we are dealing with different, inseparable levels of the same reality. My insistence on the civilizational dimension of Mexico's problems is due to my belief that this aspect is precisely the one that has been absent in the debate. Its absence prevents us from putting the immediate problems and the solutions that have been proposed in a broader perspective, one in which they can acquire their true and deeper meaning. For that reason the adoption of a new civilizational project has implications for the immediate tasks facing us. Consciously or unconsciously, each day we choose options in favor of or opposed to such a project.

It is thus proper to explore briefly some of the concrete actions that would contribute to putting into effect a program of national pluralism. We should not lose sight of the fact that the program itself, with all its relevant details, by its nature must be constructed with the contributions of the societies that have developed historically in Mexico, with their different cultures. The priority is how to create the conditions for liberating these oppressed cultures. Their liberation is necessary for them to participate on equal terms, without renouncing their differences, in the design and construction of the new society.

As we have seen throughout this work, local societies on a relatively small scale—hamlets, communities, villages, and neighborhoods—are

the social systems that have made possible the continuity of the *México profundo*. It is in the heart of such groups that Mesoamerican civilization is lived daily and its cultural matrices preserved. This being the case, one can derive two complementary plans of action within a national pluralism project. On the one hand, it is necessary to recognize and reinforce the local societies as the fundamental, constituent units in State organization. On the other hand, it is necessary to generate the conditions for building or rebuilding broader levels of social organization that allow the development of local culture, starting within those same communities.

The first proposal is oriented toward reinforcing local communities and broadening their own cultural spheres. To begin with, it implies a revision of the current administrative divisions, to adjust them to the real territoriality of the communities. It was mentioned earlier that in many cases this correspondence does not exist, because administrative divisions have usually been defined and imposed by interests that have nothing to do with the historical trajectory and makeup of the communities. Municipal and *ejido* boundaries frequently carve up an original community. The barrios of the cities are ignored as the social and spatial base of city government. Their integrity is attacked by urban policies that respond to current fashion, to corruption, or to a technocratic vision derived from foreign models. The restitution of a local territoriality determined by the needs and the histories of real social systems should be one of the first steps of a national pluralism project.

Reorganizing a territorial division in accordance with the reality of the existing social systems is not the final goal. The recognition of territoriality is necessary, in the first place, to assure the local communities the physical space they require as the sphere under their direct control for carrying out communal projects. Of equal or greater importance is recognizing the territorial base of the fundamental sociopolitical units that constitute the Mexican state. A new organization of the national territory would thus express the first level of a new division of power. The local societies that have developed historically would be recognized as legitimate political units, with decision-making powers in an ever-broader spectrum of matters that concern them.

To achieve the foregoing as part of a pluralism program, it will be necessary to respect internal forms of social organization. The current scheme must be abandoned, since it admits or, rather, imposes only a single structure of local government with the same norms and procedures for all. Is there any definitive reason why communities that have elaborated and maintained other ways of assigning and legitimating local authority, using their own procedures, should be obligated to use a different system? Is it necessary, for example, that local authorities be

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ected every three years instead of being replaced annually, as happens traditionally in many communities? Is the universal, secret, direct vote (which in fact is neither practiced nor respected in most of the country) an intrinsically superior way of achieving authority, as opposed to a hierarchy of *cargos* representing service to the community?

Many of the reasons why indigenous governments have become weaker or suffered crises have to do with the external decision not to recognize them. If local and municipal budgets, for example, and the corresponding decisions about public works, education, civil justice, and other communal matters could be handled through the traditional authority systems, many of the reasons for avoiding election to an annual *cargo* would disappear. Reinforcement of the system, contrary to what might be supposed, would not mean rigidity and stagnation in the handling of community affairs. Quite to the contrary, the effective recovery of functions that colonial domination has taken away would lead to their becoming more dynamic and up to date. They have been blocked by external pressures, which allow no response except resistance and "conservatism." There are documented cases, for example, of youths assuming legitimate positions of authority when circumstances allow it, thereby modifying the *cargo* systems' tendency toward gerontocracy. This may occur without implying a break with the old system. Rather, it indicates a renovation of the capacity for self-government, according to local plans. There are also experiences, still isolated, of political struggle for recognition of local forms of government, a fact that indicates a rising consciousness about these problems.

The process will not be free from difficulties. It is easy to foresee that in many cases there will be an initial stage in which noncommunity interests will come forward. *Caciques* of different flavors and colors will try to take advantage of the new margins of local autonomy to increase their power and to augment their benefits and privileges. But the decision to return to the communities a broader and more effective control over their own affairs will at the same time unleash internal forces capable of confronting that risk. To the extent that the communities recover control over their cultures, they will have better and more powerful resources to eliminate the outside interests that have been imposed on them historically, and that are contrary to their own goals.

All the cultural processes that for five hundred years have been dedicated to the resistance and survival of the *México profundo* may now be reoriented toward the renovation and development of local cultures. This process will originate internally and not be imposed from outside. Nevertheless, the communities, at their own discretion, will be able to make use of many of the cultural elements that today belong only to the

dominant society. The communities have been prevented access to those elements by the system of domination and exclusion. Or it may be that the elements have been rejected because there was an attempt to impose them as part of the same system. The recovery of cultural control will diametrically change this situation.

The range of actions that might be undertaken on a local scale, as the communities broaden the cultural spaces under their control, is very extensive. Actions would result first of all from local initiatives. But without a doubt the process would be accelerated if a general policy of support and encouragement were put into effect. There are already meaningful experiences with such policies. Educational policy must be revised in depth with the goal of leaving in the hands of the community an ever-larger number of decisions about the content, methods, general organization, and functioning of the school system. It will be necessary to direct sufficient credit and funding to finance self-directed productive projects, without trying to subject them to the rigid econometric policies of the imaginary Mexico.

All this requires more than simply "taking into account" the opinion of the communities. It requires accepting and respecting their decisions. In this process, it must not be forgotten that the communities of the *México profundo* have been subject for centuries to colonial oppression, with all the internal consequences that oppression produces and that have been discussed throughout this book. If in fact one wants to promote a national pluralism project, the process requires resolutely intensifying actions to recover local cultures and bring them into the present. One of the key points will be broad and intensive training of new community figures capable of making use of the opportunities created by the recovery of cultural control. However, this training must not uproot them or lead them to reject their culture. The new figures, cultural promoters in the broadest sense of the term, should be trained to value their culture and from that perspective to promote the critical appropriation of foreign cultural elements. This is a process similar and complementary to that which I have suggested at a national level. Here the effort would be to see the West from the viewpoint of the community and stop seeing the community from the perspective of the West.

To this point I have placed the emphasis on the local community, the fundamental nucleus of the *México profundo* and the indispensable unit of support for a national pluralism project. But cultural revitalization of the communities is not enough to foment a civilizational process, because this involves other levels of state organization. I have mentioned several times that one of the most destructive effects of colonial domination was the reduction of the social sphere of Mesoamerican civilization to the narrow limits of the local community. The goal is not

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In reconstituting the state, in defining the recognized sociopolitical units that are a legitimate part of it, it is not enough to reorder the territory so as to make it congruent with the borders of historically defined local societies. It is necessary to go deeper, since the attempt is to repair the problems caused by colonial history. Social structures broader than the local ones must be created in order to provide the framework needed by the civilizational impulse, which lives on confined within the communities. Memory does not have to go back very far to remember that the creation and current borders of the states that constitute the federation, in the great majority of cases, have been the result of recent historical decisions and accommodations. And with some exceptions, those divisions are not based on deep historical continuity or on the real distribution of the population. There is not a Huastec state, nor a Maya one, nor an Otomí one, although all would have ancient reasons for existing. All would constitute necessary levels of social and political organization for those peoples to modernize their own particular civilizational projects.

This is not simply a problem to be resolved by redrawing state lines. It goes much beyond that. In recognizing the fundamental ethnic basis of those political units, whether states, districts, or municipal units, we would be affirming their right to organize their internal life and their participation in national affairs in their own way. They would be organized as a function of the ideas implicit in the locally dominant cultural tradition, the tradition that in turn defines and sustains that historical group. It is not, then, a simple change of names or a matter of boundaries between states. We are speaking of a decision giving the people of the *México profundo* the right to command levels of political organization broader and more complex than the local community. Such organization would allow them to qualitatively increase their capacity for reconstruction and for cultural development.

It is essential to restructure broader levels of social organization to assure the flourishing of Mesoamerican cultures. Respect for the right of local self-determination is different from respect for the right to organize at higher levels in the political structure. Many projects cannot be carried out within the limited framework of the local community, because they require participation and cultural resources that go beyond those limits. The destruction of some of Mexico's Indian peoples has reduced them to a single community. However, there are many others that include a large number of local communities, even though today they may be relatively isolated from each other. The goal is to pick up the

thread of history that was temporarily broken by colonial domination. Insofar as the situation and conditions imposed by the twenty-first century permit, the goal is to favor the reconstitution of viable sociopolitical groups.

This again has to do with the problem of our democracy, since we must guarantee these peoples effective representation in all the areas of national government decision making. There is a deep irrationality in the fact that there are two senators for each one of the many recent states, which were often created in an authoritarian way in the heat of momentary circumstances. At the same time there are millions of inhabitants of Indian communities who have no assured representation in the legislative bodies. Their representation should be as differentiated peoples with their own historical legitimacy, and not based on the fictitious "universal" individual vote.

In the current situation, the possibility of legislative and structural changes recognizing pluralism and supporting the development of local cultures and Mesoamerican civilization is very remote, since there is no authentic representation of those peoples. Their affairs and interests, when they are recognized at all, are seen only from the perspective of the West and the dominant national project. It is imperative that we break the colonial mediation. It is imperative that we let the *México profundo* speak, and that we listen to its words.

#### The Inevitable Dilemma

I have tried to show that the *México profundo*, bearer of a denied civilization, embodies the distilled product of a continuous process thousands of years old, the Mesoamerican civilizational process. During the last five centuries, barely a moment in their long trajectory, Mesoamerican peoples have lived subject to a system of brutal oppression that affects all aspects of their life and their cultures. The resources used by colonial domination have been many and have varied over time. However, stigma, violence, and rejection have been constant. In spite of this, Mesoamerican civilization is present and alive, and not only in the peoples who maintain their own identity and affirm the fact of being different. It is also present in broad majority sectors of Mexican society that do not recognize themselves as being Indian, but that organize their collective life on the basis of a cultural matrix of Mesoamerican origin. All these peoples form the *México profundo*. They have been systematically ignored and denied by the imaginary Mexico, which controls power and which assumes itself to be the bearer of the only valid plan for the country's future.

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I have tried to trace, more through revealing examples than in rigorous sequence, the chronicle of disaster and the memorial of ignominy. It is a chronicle of disaster insofar as the current breakdown of the illusions cherished by the imaginary Mexico is not simply momentary stumbling, attributable to external circumstances. Rather, it is the inevitable result of a long history of obstinacy in trying to replace the reality of Mexico with another reality, which is itself a poor imitation of Western models. It is a memorial of ignominy, as seen and understood from the other side, from the viewpoint of the peoples who have lived with daily violence, exploitation, contempt, and exclusion. The effort has been to subject these peoples to a civilizational project that is not their own and that does not accept them. The memorial of this history, barely sketched here, is the necessary counterpart to our vision of Mexico. It is the other leg, without which we cannot begin to walk on any path whatsoever.

I have tried to show that today's crisis is not only the crisis of Mexico, but the breakdown of a development model that ignores the *México profundo*. We have sufficient although not inexhaustible resources, and we have at our disposal a great diversity of cultural systems. These systems provide different ways in which resources can be converted into useful elements for making human life more plentiful, according to the aspirations for fulfillment implicit in each culture.

At the same time I have tried to show how the efforts to impose a single model lead to a failure to make use of what we already have. They provoke a schizophrenic situation in which reality marches along its own path while the national plans for the future march separately, along an imaginary path.

In summary, I have tried to show that faced with the collapse of the illusion it is necessary to look inward and determine our real strengths. We must recognize our resources and abilities in order to formulate a new national vision, an authentic and therefore viable one. We must use the available plans and materials to construct our new, common home.

The conclusion, in my opinion, cannot be other than to try to construct a pluralistic nation in which Mesoamerican civilization, embodied in a great variety of cultures, has the place it deserves, a place that allows it to view the West from Mexico. That is to say, we should understand and take advantage of the West's achievements, from the viewpoint of a civilization that is our own because it was forged here in this land, step by step, since remotest antiquity. That civilization is not dead, because it breathes in the heart of the *México profundo*. The adoption of a pluralist project, which recognizes the validity of the Mesoamerican civilizational process, will make us want to be what we really are and what we can be. We will be a country that pursues its own

objectives, that has its own goals derived from its own underlying history. In affirming our differences, to ourselves and to outsiders, we will be radically denying the would-be hegemony of the West, which rests on the supposition that difference implies inequality and that what is different is by nature inferior.

Finally, the intention of these pages has been to suggest that the problem of civilization cannot be seen as an insignificant one, as one that can be postponed given the current circumstances. I have insisted that it *is* the problem, because within it is defined the model of the society we want to create. The decisions we must inevitably make about reorienting the country constitute a choice of civilizational project beyond the immediate political debate that takes place within the boundaries of the Western vision—that of the imaginary Mexico. If in some way these pages have stimulated the reader to reflect on these problems, whether or not he or she agrees with what I have set forth, they will have fulfilled the purpose for which they were written.

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