CONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM: OAXACA, MEXICO

by

NANCY L. NUSSER

(Under the Direction of Dr. James Hamilton)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores the experience of indigenous activists as they attempt to use the Internet and Internet-enabled alliances with global civil society to negotiate their conflicts with state and local governments in the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico. Drawing on communication and globalizations studies, as well as anthropological literature, this case study sheds light on indigenous conceptualizations of and experience with identity politics, integration into what have been described as “new social movements,” and the shifting state powers that have come with the acceleration of economic and political globalization.

Taken as a whole, the dissertation argues that indigenous activists have constructed a global activism that reflects their idiosyncratic cultural and historical context, as well as their employment of self-interested agency in the use of western communications technology and the new global resonance of their cause. In so doing, the dissertation also supports theories of an empowered and dualistic human agency capable of loosening structural restraints (Couldry, *Inside Culture*; Giddens, *The Constition of Society*).

INDEX WORDS: Latin American indigenous activism, new social movements, global communications technology, identity politics, Internet activism, structuration theory.
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by

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CONSTRUCTING INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM: OAXACA, MEXICO

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DEDICATION

Este trabajo está dedicado a Centolia, Minerva, Eduardo, Juan, Dolores, Melquiades Guadalupe, Osvaldo, y Padre Ubi. Gracias por todo.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my son Connor, who accompanied me to Mexico and made it an adventure and Dr. Jay Hamilton, whose unusual insight and intelligence made this work possible. I also would like to thank the Yadav family and Donna Eberwine and Francisco Villagran de Leon for their generous help.
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TABLE 1.1

LIST OF ACTIVISTS (ALPHABETICAL BY NAME)


Arturo—Society of Responsible Rural Production (Sociedad Productivo Rural de Responsabilidad Ilimitado).

Carmen—Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights (Centro de Derechos Indígenas Flor y Canto).

Cesar—Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon or CIPO (Consejo Indigena Popular de Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon).

Daniel (Oaxacan Human Rights Network (Red Oaxaquena de Derechos Humanos).

Edgar—Movement of Triqui Unification and Struggle, or MULT (Movimiento para la Unificación y Lucha Triqui).

Enrique—Indian Organizations for Human Rights in Oaxaca, or OIDHO (Organizaciones Indias por los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca).

Esteban—Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon or CIPO (Consejo Indigena Popular de Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon).

Francisco—Diocesan Center of the Indigenous Pastoral, or CEDIPIO (Centro Eclesial Diocesano de Pastoral Indigena de Oaxaca).

Fidelia—Indigenous Front of Binacional Organizations, or FIOB (Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales).

Hugo—All Rights for Everyone (Todo Derechos para Todos).

Isaac—Organization of Zapotec Indian People, or OPIZ (Organizacion del Pueblo Indigena Zapoteco).

Jaime—Union of Organizations of the Sierra of Juarez, or UNOSJO (Union de Organizaciones de la Sierra de Juarez).

Martin—Popular Indigenous Convergence, or CIP (Convergencia Indigena Popular).
Miguel—Nu Jii Kandii Center for Human Rights (*Centro de Derechos Humanos Nu Jii Kandii*).

Patricia—Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon or CIPO (*Consejo Indigena Popular de Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon*).

Rosalva—Bartolome Carrasco Human Rights Center, or BARCO (*Centro de Derechos Humanos, Bartolome Carrasco*).

Salvador and Flor—Community Assembly, Mazatlán Villa Flores (*Asamblea Comunitaria, Mazatlán Villa Flores*).
<table>
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<tr>
<th>LIST OF INDIGENOUS AND HUMAN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS</th>
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<tr>
<td>Centro de Derechos Humanos, Bartolome Carasco Bartolome (Bartolome Carrasco Center for Human Rights Center or BARCO).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centro de Derechos Indígenas Flor y Canto (Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centro de Derechos Humanos Nu Jii Kandii (Nu Jii Kandii Center for Human Rights).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centro Diocesano de Pastoral Indígena de Oaxaca (Diocesan Center of the Indigenous Pastoral or CEDIPIO).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consejo Indigena Popular de Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon (Popular Indigenous Council, Ricardo Flores Magon or CIPO).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergencia Indigena Popular (Popular Indigenous Convergente or CIP).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frente Indigena Oaxaqueno Binacional (Binacional Oaxacan Indigenous Front or FIOB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liga Mexicana para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca (Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights in Oaxaca).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movimiento de Unificacion y Lucha Triqui (Movement of Triqui Unification and Struggle or MULT).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizacion del Pueblo Indigena Zapoteco (Organization of the Zapotec Indian People or OPIZ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizaciones Indias por los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca (Indian Organizations for Human Rights in Oaxaca or OIDHO).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red de Informacion Indigena (Indigenous Information Network).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Red Oaxaquena de Derechos Humanos (Oaxacan Human Rights Network).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Productivo Rural con Responsabilidad Ilimitado (Society of Responsible Rural Production)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union de Organizaciones de la Sierra de Juarez, (Union of Organizations of the Sierra of Juarez or UNOSJO).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Todo Derechos para Todos (All Rights for Everyone)</td>
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**TABLE 1.3**

**LIST OF ACRONYMS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BARCO</td>
<td>Bartolome Carrasco Center for Human Rights.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDIPIO</td>
<td>Diocesan Center for the Indigenous Pastoral of Oaxaca.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COCEI</td>
<td>Worker Peasant Student Coalition of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIP</td>
<td><em>Convergencia Indigena Popular</em> (Popular Indigenous Convergence)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIPO</td>
<td><em>Consejo Indigena Popular de Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon</em> (Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon or;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPR</td>
<td>Ejército Popular Revolucionario (Popular Revolutionary Army)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EZLN</td>
<td>Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (Zapatista National Liberation Army)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIOB</td>
<td><em>Frente Indigena de Organizaciones Binacional</em> (Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INI</td>
<td><em>Instituto Nacional Indígena</em> (National Indigenous Institute)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MULT</td>
<td>Movimiento de Unificacion y Lucha Triqui (Triqui Movement of Unification and Struggle)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OIDHO</td>
<td><em>Organizaciones Indias por los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca</em> (Indian Organizations for Human Rights in Oaxaca or OIDHO);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OPIZ</td>
<td><em>Organizacion del Pueblo Indigena Zapoteco</em> (Organization of Indigenous Zapotec People, OPIZ);</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PAN</td>
<td>Partido de Accion Nacional (Party of National Action)</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRI</td>
<td><em>Partidio Revolucionario Institucional</em> (Institucional Revolutionarty Party or PRI).</td>
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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Indigenous activism in Latin America is in the throes of profound and widespread resurgence. For the last several decades, activist indigenous organizations from Mexico to South America have taken on powerful political and economic interests that have dominated their nations since the arrival of Spanish Conquerors in the 16th century (Alcida 252-256; Brysk 18-20; Cleary and Steigenga 1-24; Nash 20-27; Sieder 1-4; Stavenhagen 24-44; Van Cott 45-73; Warren 33-47, 177-193). By 2000 in Ecuador, indigenous organizations, after mobilizing supporters for protests and marches throughout the 1990s, had created a social movement capable of influencing national politics and policies. In Bolivia, indigenous activism led to the resignation of a president and propelled an Aymara Indian, Evo Morales, into the presidency in December 2005 elections (Eviatar). And in Mexico, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) provided new momentum to activist indigenous movements throughout the nation and forced a national debate on granting Indians the right to self-government (Barabas 4-11).

The resurgence is based in both political and economic conditions. In Mexico, newly active indigenous organizations have been built on post-1960s mobilization of indigenous peasants through unions, political organizations, literacy campaigns, and the Catholic Church (Barabas 2-11; Norget 154-186). Throughout the region, neo-liberal economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s further impoverished already poor Indians, fueling intensified indigenous activism and in some cases revolt (Nash 20-29, 78-92). At the same time, traditional indigenous
goals of cultural preservation and environmental protection of indigenous territories have become newly resonant, allowing Indian organizations and communities to create fresh alliances within the international community (Brysk 86-97).

New alliances have been struck between European and American environmentalists and Indians attempting to protect their lands against oil exploration. Alliances have strengthened between indigenous organizations and international human rights groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. The latter have come in part because of the indigenous community’s new access to communications technology. As the Internet continues its rapid global penetration, less developed and underdeveloped regions that are often the terrain of indigenous communities have a new connection to the world (Carmen).

These developments have had much to do with perceptions of the indigenous movement as akin to what have been described as new social movements (Melucci, “A Strange Kind of Newness”). In anthropological, communications, and globalization literature, indigenous organizations have been directly compared to new social movements or described in terms of characteristics perceived as defining new social movements (Brysk 29-54, 160; Castells, The Power of Identity 75-86; Warren and Jackson 13-29; Nash 223-254; Nelson 245-282; Oleson 181-203). This discourse often focuses on indigenous organizations’ identity, their internationalism, and their new public voice acquired through Internet communication. The latter has been particularly notable in discussion of the Zapatistas, whose leader Marcos, a poet and essayist, has deftly used the Internet to globally disseminate well-crafted messages. It is the Zapatistas’ use of language and symbols, as much as their use of the Internet, that inspired Castells’s description of the EZLN as the “first informational guerrilla movement” (The Power of Identity 82).
However, these terms, though they are deployed to describe the indigenous movement, have been formed from outside of Indian communities. Rather, informational guerrillas, Internet-enabled, transnational, and identity-based have arisen in contemporary discourse developed within the milieu of western developed nations and in reference to experience in that environment. For example, in discourse about new social movements, identity is used to describe the western experience of losing the self-definition that people took from their roles in industrial workplaces and institutions in patriarchal societies (Melucci, *Challenging Codes* 13-41, 176-204). In contrast, there is little research on the degree of correspondence of such a model to indigenous activists from their point of view. It is this gap that motivates my dissertation.

This dissertation explores the experience of indigenous activists in the context of their goals and location in global, national, and local society. It attempts to express their sense of international alliance making and their sense of affirming indigenous difference through political activism. The study does not attempt to make a systematic comparison between the experiences of new social movements and indigenous movements, since that implies that there is enough common ground to do so. Comparisons would also presume that the logic and analytical tools of western academic discourse are suitable for indigenous organizations and communities.

I came to this project with both the blessing and burden of considerable experience in the region. I spent more than 15 years in the 1980s and 1990s covering Latin America as a foreign correspondent for American media. For seven of those years, I lived in Mexico City and traveled throughout the nation covering politics, economics, civil conflict, immigration, and drug trafficking. During the research for this work, my comprehension of Mexico was in many ways more important for gaining access to and trust from people than it was to my analysis; people often behaved more openly with me after they realized I had worked in Latin America for years.
Because of prior experience, I also came to the project with deep-seated convictions formed during a period of change that has since accelerated. When I left Mexico in 1997, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) that wielded one-party control over Mexico for 70 years was beginning to unravel. By the time I returned in 2005, the PRI had lost the presidency for the first time in Mexican history, and opposition candidate Vicente Fox Quesada had taken power. As a result, I tended to see people and their environment in terms of Mexico in the late 1990s rather than in the changed Mexico of 2005.

That change also made the experience of Oaxaca’s indigenous communities difficult to contextualize. I chose Oaxaca partly because I wanted to expand the study of Internet-mediated indigenous activism to Mexican Indians outside the circle of the EZLN. I wanted to observe the experience of people who had not been living under the pressure of intense international media coverage and the political fallout that such attention creates. Once in Oaxaca, I quickly realized that indigenous activists were living and working with their own, singular political pressure—the violent repression that had emerged under the gubernatorial administration of Ulisis Ruiz Ortiz, who came to power in 2004 elections.

While democratization has been rocky in much of Mexico, Ruiz has taken the state backward to a Draconian control reminiscent of the PRI during its most repressive periods. In response to the pressure of democratic forces, among them the indigenous movement, Ruiz has cracked down on dissidents. Human rights abuse continues to rise at an alarming rate, as security forces have rounded up and detained people, often indigenous, who attempted to exert pressure through civil disobedience such as mass protests (Amnesty International; United Nations). By the fall of 2006, little more than a year after my research trip, the conflict had escalated into
street fighting in Oaxaca between riot police and demonstrators demanding Ruiz’s resignation (Lacey; New York Times Nov. 3 2006; New York Times Nov. 27, 2006).

The conflict also made the state an unusually revealing case study. Because of the intensified risks, indigenous activists in Oaxaca are if anything more reliant upon the intervention of foreign and international movements. They are more reliant upon Internet communication, because it is their only avenue, in some cases, to international allies able to give them leverage against the state government. All of the people I interviewed had turned to foreign assistance to resolve human rights violations against themselves or members or constituents of their organizations. In several cases, my interviewees had been arrested, threatened or imprisoned for months and were the subject of acciones urgentes (urgent actions), an email human rights abuse alert system used by human rights organizations worldwide.

Following this Introduction, this dissertation’s second chapter, “Literature Review,” outlines several research streams that have informed my work; my case study draws primarily from communication and globalizations studies, as well as anthropological literature on the resurgence of Latin America’s indigenous movement. The third chapter, “Theory and Methods,” outlines my theoretical approach and the interpretive methods consistent with that approach. It also discusses the usefulness of qualitative methods in overcoming some of the obstacles particular to this study.

The fourth chapter, “Indigenous Activism and New Social Movements: Modernity vs. Post-Modernity,” explains the divergent historical context of the indigenous movement and new social movements. Indigenous resistance developed out of the modern encounter between Indian populations in Latin America and western European modernity, embodied in the Spanish Conquerors. New social movements, in contrast, arise from the convergence of at least three
developments: New communications technology; the loss of traditional identities based in industrial workplaces and patriarchal society; and the evolution of capitalism into what Castells has described as global hyper capitalism driven by information technology (The Power of Identity). The fifth chapter, “Excuris in Oaxaca,” is comprised of selections from my personal journal while in Oaxaca, chosen because they make more transparent the influences on interpretation of my context and my interaction with the people in the study (Clifford 14-15; Ellis and Bochner 733-768; Janesick 379-399).

The sixth chapter, “Constructing Activism,” focuses on the limitations of relying upon technology to resolve problems that stem from structural issues of prejudice, underdevelopment, and poverty. It discusses activists’ experience of having a new global voice because of the Internet but no guarantee that they will be heard. They have new access to a technology that can help them develop new alliances in the international community and as a result gain political leverage at home. But that access doesn’t guarantee that the international community, upon hearing their message, will respond to it. The seventh chapter, “Constructing Identity,” focuses on the evolution of what has always been a politics of identity for indigenous communities. The experience of indigenous activists has little to do with western experience, because all indigenous politics are infused with affirmation of identity. In many ways, the act of political involvement for indigenous people is in itself an assertion of identity. As activists describe their projects, plans, and ideologies, it becomes difficult to differentiate identity politics from politics aimed at the broader goals of reducing indigenous poverty and marginalization. The eighth chapter, “Conclusions,” seeks to synthesize the material and propose further directions for research.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This dissertation reengages a debate concerning whether mass media can bring political, social, or economic reform to countries outside the arena of the highly developed, western democracies. It draws on work published throughout the 20th century. Primary attention is paid to recent literature regarding the effects of electronic global media on global political and economic development, as well as the emergence of new forms of social movements.

Media, Functionalism, and Social Change

In the early years of this debate, scholars sought to prove that media could bring change in the form of transition to some version of western liberal democratic society (McQuail 61-91 121-152; Neher 133-152). These literatures were marked by several watersheds, among them the early 20th century work of the Chicago School. For example, Cooley expressed in Social Organization then-contemporary hopes that mass communication could enable the formation of a humane, democratic community. Similarly, an argument running though Dewey’s Democracy and Education centered on the idea that mass media could contribute to a participatory citizens’ discourse that would enable democracy, while Park’s major work, the co-authored Introduction to the Science of Sociology, advanced the idea that media, because they disseminate knowledge, could mold political thought and action—a harbinger, it can be argued, of the subsequent focus on direct effects of mass media on public opinion.
By the mid-20th century, an effects tradition in mass communications research had emerged through the work of various scholars as the dominant paradigm. Among them were Lasswell, whose *Propaganda Technique in World War* sought to show that public opinion could be controlled through dissemination of meaningful symbols and content. Katz and Lazarsfeld’s later work, *Personal Influence in the Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communication*, employed positivist survey research to determine the direct impact of media, particularly the effects of radio and motion pictures, on a broad range of social conditions, such as susceptibility to consumer advertising (137-203).

In the post-Cold War era, this functionalist perspective was applied in the U.S. quest for global supremacy through modernization programs in developing nations throughout the world. Such programs were supported by Lerner’s *The Passing of Traditional Society*, in which he argued that development in non-western nations could be brought about through a sequential process of increased urbanization, literacy, and mass media consumption. The emergent development communications paradigm also was formed by Rostow’s *The Stages of Economic Growth*, in which he argued that nations, regardless of their culture and history, will progress through predictable stages of economic development that lead to western forms of modernization, and by Schramm’s *Mass Media and National Development*. The latter author argued that mass media would provide developing world populations with access to the West and, as a result, mobilize them to pursue its forms of agricultural and economic development.

This perspective was subsequently challenged by critiques of imperialism. Consensual or western-led programs of social change broke down in the 1960s with recognition of global inequities that made the transfer of principles and methods of western democracies ill suited if
not absurd for many poorer nations. Criticism of modernization through media programs was lodged in the context of 1970s UNESCO debates among non-aligned nations. They sought to promote awareness of the dominance of western-originating and western-dominated flows of information, as well as a reformist new world information and communications order (McQuail 178-182; Neher 143-144; Rogers 213-240; Tomlinson 15-19). Related efforts to create an alternative framework sought to alleviate western bias by taking into consideration the political and cultural realities of developing nations. However, they did not challenge the underlying functionalist assumption of positive social and political change through the application of media-based development strategies.

Taken as a whole, this body of work did not explicitly endorse themes of technological determinism developed in Innis’s The Bias of Communication and McLuhan’s Understanding Media. However, it assigned to media and media technologies considerable influence on social and political development. Generally, it argued that positive forms of development could be brought about by media, as long as they were the right kind of media—for example, a free, western press in the case of Lerner or a culturally sensitive and non-hegemonic press in the case of literature arising from the UNESCO debates.

Communication, Media, and New Social Movements

The consolidation of transnational resistance to neoliberal globalization has coincided with the rapid popularization in the 1990s and early 2000s of the Internet and its use as a political tool. Accordingly, much literature regarding media and society most recently has focused on the global-justice movement—a concept parallel to Melucci’s new social
movements–and the role that global communications, notably the Internet, has played in its development, operations, and impact.

In a diverse body of literature that spans several social science fields, there is a degree of consensus that global communications technology has been instrumental in the erosion of the industrial global order characterized by the dominance of a nation-state system of highly-developed, western liberal democracies (Castells, *The Power of Identity* 316-321, 356-364; Melucci, *Challenging Codes* 190-197; Appadurai; Giddens *Modernity and Self-Identity*). Likewise, there is some consensus that an emerging political/economic order includes new transnational social movements that resist the forces of information-driven capitalism.

This informational capitalism, made possible by global communications technology, has contributed to the decline of the nation-state in several ways (Castells, *The Power of Identity* 304-321). Because informational capitalism is characterized by financial markets based on the instant flow of capital across borders, it erodes nation-state control over domestic economic policies; national governments thus must acquiesce to fiscal and budgetary policies that keep the global market stable. Further, because informational capitalism is hypercompetitive, it does not allow nation-states to protect their populations using labor, economic, or welfare policies. As a result, informational capitalism serves to undermine the legitimacy of nation-states. These factors, Castells argues, have contributed to the emergence of global, issue- and identity based social movements that are resisting the harsh forces of informational capitalism (*The Power of Identity* 71-167).

The collective identities at the basis of contemporary social movements are not derived from traditional ties of common labor, home, race, ethnicity, and location in a patriarchal society, Melucci argues (*Challenging Codes* 13-41, 176-204). Rather the contemporary era is
characterized by an erosion of previous identities, owing in part to the homogenizing effect of global media and communications technologies. A subsequent resurgence of interest in re-establishing identities through new social movements has focused on the bonds created by common concern with global problems such as environmental and human rights protection.

As such, Melucci argues, new social movements are employing a cultural resistance to global economic and political forces through manipulation and control of symbols and content that express new shared identities. They are concerned with exerting control over the construction of meaning (Challenging Codes 225-228). They are not only focused on expression and communication, they are defined by it, Melucci argues (36).

These still-emerging social forms also arise from the role that a new imagination has come to play in contemporary forms of social life, Appadurai argues (1-21). What he describes as a globalized imagination allows people to envision migration and create new forms of civic association across national boundaries, as well as resist state-sponsored violence. These new social forms, which social scientists are still in the process of naming, are “localized transit points for mobile global forms” of civic life and association (7). Further, these social forms have arisen in the relatively powerless space that has emerged as global capitalism and the declining nation-state system negotiate the form of a new world order (16). Giddens argues similarly that economic and political globalization, as well as global media and communications technology, have connected people in a fashion that is unprecedented, so that even people and communities in isolated regions of the world cannot escape the impact of distant events. This interconnectedness forms the bedrock of new social movements of the sort Melucci and Castells describe.
Taken together, these authors argue that global media and communications technologies have altered the arrangement of political and economic powers that gave the world its order during much of the 20th century. Further, they argue that a still evolving new order—as well as the direct impact, in the case of the Internet, of global communications technologies—has engendered deep psychosocial changes throughout the world, including an increasing interconnectedness between places and their human residents and the process of loss and recreation of collective identity.

Other contemporary scholars have focused on defining the nature of these social movements. Key characteristics are outlined below.

1. There is considerable agreement that the activism of, indeed the existence of, new social movements, is enabled by an Internet-generated public space for democratic discourse and political action that past communications technologies have not provided (Langman 42-54; Bennett 17-37; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, and Rucht 1-25; Pickerell 170-193; Salter 117-144; Van Aelst and Walgrave 97-122; Wright 77-94). It has been argued that alternative media, and especially the Internet, are an inherent and necessary part of new social movements, because their activism consists of the production and dissemination of mediated and cultural forms of resistance (Atton 1-8).

2. There is likewise considerable consensus that new social movements’ supporters, causes, and protests are not circumscribed by national borders but are instead international if not global. For example, it has been argued that new social movements act on an international level, creating a global arena for activism, because the objects of their resistance are so often the forces of transnational corporations and global capitalism (Atton 11-15; Bennett 30-33).
Because international business influences domestic policies on social welfare, taxation, environment, and labor, global politics become as if not more relevant than national politics.

Other scholars have argued that contemporary resistance, owing to communications technologies, escapes nationally defined space and time to occur in borderless spatial and temporal frameworks (Bennett; de Jong, Shaw, and Stammers 1-14). Further, it has been argued that new social movements, because of Internet-mediated connectedness, naturally and easily develop transnational memberships or networks of supporters (Bennett 25-26; Garrido and Halavais 165-184; Oleson 29-52, 181-203; Van Aelst and Walgrave 97-122).

3. The activism of new social movements is viewed as a process of identity construction. While Melucci is clear in his assertion that global social movements arise from and are driven by newly created, collective, and often globally dispersed identities, it is less clear that communications technologies are instrumental in this process.

For example, it has been argued that computer-mediated communication does not build identity because its function is logistical rather than symbolic (Diani in Nip 234). Bennett acknowledges that contemporary activists use the Internet in identity-building processes but argues that it is the activist who brings an interest in identity to the arena of cyberspace, not communications technologies that engender this discourse (26-28). Others have argued that Internet-facilitated dialogue has contributed to identity-formation for widespread sympathizers of resistance causes. In particular, Zhao argues that Falun Gong, a Chinese identity organization, reflects Internet-enabled identity formation because it has evolved into a global movement with different meanings for different people, ranging from physical exercise to a new moral system (211, 209-227). Similarly, Oleson has argued that the
Zapatistas transformed a local struggle into a symbol for the struggles of many people and by doing so dissolved cultural and social divisions to create a global political identity.

In sum, there is a degree of consensus in this body of work. Organizations within the global-justice movement represent a new kind of activism that has emerged because of changes in global economic political and economic contexts. Their daily activities of communication and organization cannot take place without the Internet. These groups are driven by the force of collective identities and they are international if not global in nature.

However, there are also contradictions and gaps in the literature. For example, new social movements are described as interested in correcting socially destructive global behaviors but not in bringing about structural change or taking power. Yet they also are described as pursuing highly ambitious goals, such as global human rights and environmental protection, which could not be brought about without profound, even structural change. In other words, it seems clear the literature on new social movements is still developing and still inconclusive. Among issues relatively untouched, for example, is the integration of indigenous communities into new social movements.

*Communication, Media, and Indigenous Cultures*

A related body of work addresses indigenous strategic, even opportunistic use of western media technologies to further both Indian rights activism and cultural self-representation. In particular, Ginsberg’s study concerned the activist response of a pan-Inuit organization to commercial installation of satellite television in their North American communities without consideration of providing aboriginal content (39-57). Inuit activists fought for and won partial control of the system through the creation of an Inuit programming
production center in what Ginsberg described as a self-conscious means of cultural preservation and political mobilization.

Prins notes that American Indians have used mediated representation of their communities as exotic, essentialized others in politically strategic efforts to develop support among outsiders for preservation of indigenous cultures “as a way of life utterly distinct from that of their white opponents” (58-74, 61-62). And Morris and Meadows point out that indigenous media has become the fastest growing media sector in Australia, as numerous Aboriginal groups have appropriated western technologies, most notably radio, to meet the needs of their communities (71-88). The groups seek to preserve Aboriginal languages; gain access to an outside world where indigenous culture is highly valued; and counteract mainstream media representations of indigenous affairs. In so doing, Aboriginal communities also have reinforced the central role that access to knowledge and information has traditionally played in the social and economic organization of their societies.

Recent anthropological studies directly engage the topic of this dissertation in the context of work on the resurgence of Latin American indigenous activism. Within larger works on Indian activism since the 1970s, several authors address indigenous organizations’ new access to the Internet and their use of it as a tool in the formation of a collective identities with other Latin American indigenous organizations and in the formation of new or strengthened alliances with international civil society, notably the human rights and environmental movements within the loose coalition that is self-described as the social justice movement and conceptualized in academic literature as a new social movement (Brysk, Nash, Nelson, Warren).
Generally this body of work assumes that the Internet and Internet-enabled alliances empower the indigenous movement in its pursuit of political, cultural, and economic goals. Nelson describes “Maya-hackers” as using the Internet to broaden political power through dissemination and collection of information. Drawing on Benedict Anderson’s imagined communities, Nelson discusses the creation in cyberspace of a transnational community of Mayan activists and their supporters (245-28).

Brysk argues that indigenous movements have been propelled into resistance by intensified global economic pressures but also have taken advantage of political forces that have emerged with globalization. While Indians have been further impoverished by the neo-liberal policies of economic globalization, they also have been able to use global communications to garner support from the NGOs and institutions that have emerged as newly powerful international actors. They have, she argues, succeeded in internationalizing local conflicts to their own advantage.

Further, Brysk argues, indigenous organizations have framed their agenda in terms of identity politics, a cause that resonates in the current postmodern era, while another of their causes, environmental protection, is among global crises that tie together nations, NGOs and institutions. She argues that when global interactions based on “power, profit, and principle” coincide, as they often did in the past, then the effects of globalization are to erase the tribal village. “But when the international relations of states, markets, and civil societies are disparate, local forces have increased opportunities to construct a response. In every case, the growing influence of information and norms in each form of international relations has shifted power toward identity politics” (284-285).
Nash focuses on indigenous communities’ success in carving out space for themselves in a more rapidly globalizing world—despite forces that would seem to shrink their terrain—and their success by doing so in challenging the dominance of the New World Order. Here, she refers to Indian communities deprived of subsistence resources or excluded from commodity markets for their products and their ability to ally with global nongovernmental forces concerned with human rights and environmental damage. She relies on the example of the Chiapas’ Mayans, represented by the Zapatistas. Although waylaid by the Mexican government’s duplicitous policy of promising but not delivering on negotiated agreements, they have managed to transform the state’s political landscape by allying with global civil society, for whom indigenous causes resonate. This dynamic, she argues, reflects the ability of indigenous movements to carve out a space for their survival as culturally distinct people, despite and because of globalization. She writes:

“It is in these transnational spaces that new forms of governance are emerging, which may enable the human species to survive in a globally integrated world that permits alternative ways of survival and co-existence” (3).

“Mayans have not turned back from the course they took on that day when they demolished the statue of the conqueror of San Cristobal. They are turning to alliances with international organizations, as they experience confrontation with an increasingly repressive power. These alliances will help to open space for the development of a transnational civil society that cultivates multicultural co-existence” (254).

While these literatures do not compare indigenous movements with a model of new social movements, they write about the former in terms of the concepts that are used by analysts of new social movements—in terms of concepts such as Internet-enabled,
identity-based, and transnational. And by engaging the overtly and publicly successful indigenous movements—the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the pan-Mayan movement in Guatemala, and the Bolivian and Ecuadorean indigenous resistance into movements—they suggest the empowerment of indigenous activists through media technologies and the communication and alliances they enable. They suggest that Latin American indigenous activism acquires a new and globally resonant voice through the Internet and uses alliances with new social movements—in part because of a shared focus on identity politics—as leverage in local conflicts. In this sense, these works imply that media technologies, by giving Indian movements not only access to but membership in new social movements, have played a determinant, and democratizing, role in the development of a local political environment.

Conclusion and Summary

In sum, the literatures reviewed for this dissertation define the debate concerning the possibility of bringing or accelerating democratic reform in developing nations through media originating in or modeled on western conceptualizations of a free press. Subsequent debate called into question assumptions about the democratizing influence of western media and its appropriateness for the differing cultural and historical contexts of developing nations. More recently, that debate has been reframed in literatures that suggest that the Internet can create a new public space for democratic dialogue and activity.

Separate but related literatures argue that global communications have contributed to the rise of Internet-enabled new social movements that resist global political and economic powers and as such constitute a transnational and reformist force. Latin American indigenous
activism is discussed in the context of new social movement debate or in terms used to describe those movements. However, that literature is limited in scope and in the number of works. The literatures that addresses indigenous activists’ experiences with the Internet and with the Internet-mediated global-justice movement do not focus on it but include it in larger works about the resurgent indigenous activism in Latin America. Further, those literatures generally address most prominent indigenous movements that have successfully used the Internet and the alliances it has generates as tools of considerable empowerment.
CHAPTER 3
THEORY AND METHOD

Introduction

Literature that addresses or makes reference to the contemporary indigenous mobilization throughout Latin America employs concepts and terms that have developed within the milieu of academia in advanced western nations and outside the context of most Indian communities. Indigenous activist movements are described variously as identity-based, Internet-enabled, transnational, and in the case of Mexico’s Zapatista rebels as the world’s first informational guerrillas (Alcida 251-279; Brysk; Castells The Power of Identity 75-86; Garrido and Halavais 165-184; Nelson 245-282; Oleson 181-203; Warren and Jackson 1-2, 27).

Because of its derivation, this discourse begs the question of what such terms mean for indigenous activists. How do indigenous activists conceive of identity politics? Do they consider their activism to be newly empowered by the Internet and Internet-enabled alliances within the global justice movement? Do indigenous activists consider themselves part of transnational civil society—what Melucci describes as new social movements (“A Strange Kind of Newness” 101-130). This dissertation begins to close that gap—to relay indigenous understanding of their participation, vis a vis the Internet, in what have been described as new social movements.

This chapter reviews my theoretical and methodological approach. It outlines the usefulness of theory on the interaction between agency and structure to create a means of understanding the comments and narratives of indigenous activists. It explicates the effectiveness
of interpretive research strategies, notably lengthy but unstructured interviews, and it includes a personal journal that demonstrates the usefulness of interpretive research and narrative writing.

**Theoretical Perspective**

In order to supercede both the technological determinism as well as the voluntarism of many studies in this area, recognizing that structures and agency constitute each other is a significant advance, as Giddens' work and other similar literatures demonstrate.

In Giddens’ view, human agency is informed not only by people’s knowledge of their purpose at the start of their actions, but also by constant, daily monitoring of that purpose, the social context of their actions, and the actions of others (The Constitution of Society 1-28). People also monitor the consequences, intended and unintended, of their actions. Together, these forms of reflexivity provide people with layers of knowledge, so that understanding of themselves and others at particular points in time and space act together to shape their activities and ultimately to shape human experience.

For Giddens, this hyper reflexive human agency is dualistic (The Constitution of Society 2-4). The nature of the agency that human beings employ in daily life both reflects the conditions of their lives and reproduces them. In this, he argues that structure and agency interact and affect each other. Structure enables agency; people can only do what they have the knowledge and resources to do. However, agency also forms structure; the latter is not natural or universal but the product of human action. As Giddens writes:

Human social activities, like some self-reproducing items in nature, are recursive. That is to say, they are not brought into being by social actors but continually recreated by them via the very means whereby they express themselves as actors. In and through
their activities, agents reproduce the conditions that make these activities possible (The Constitution of Society 2).

In sum, Giddens conceives of human agency as being informed by various layers of reflexivity and able to reproduce itself and the conditions from which it arises. In this form, agency plays a powerful role. Empowered by self-knowledge and understanding of context, agency can interfere with the constraints that structure places upon human beings’ lives. Through this empowerment, agency is able to interact with structural constraints to shape existence. As Giddens writes at the end of his volume, “constraint, in other words, is shown to operate through the active involvement of the agents concerned, not as some force of which they are passive recipients” (The Constitution of Society 289).

Couldry makes a similar argument, though it is expressed in a different way. For Couldry, structural approaches to explaining human experience seek patterns and in so doing miss the impact of complex individual experience. Because such approaches seek commonalities that can be explained by structural constraints, they do not leave space for “thinking about culture in terms of the complexity, perhaps even the resistance, involved in individuals’ (apparent) accession to wider cultural forms” (Inside Culture 48). Rather, Couldry argues, human experience also must be understood in terms of the tension or interaction between individual experience and structure. Thus, he writes:

In this approach, the problem is not that individual experience is completely neglected, but that it only comes into the analysis after the key issues have already been defined at the structural levels in terms of the unities of ‘subculture’ and ‘parent culture’ and the relations between them. On this basis, individual experience is merely the place for working out wider structural patterns (Inside Culture 47).
My work applies these conceptualizations not to technologically advanced western nations but to a developing world context. It does so by exploring the implications of indigenous agency that is aware of self, social context, and consequences. In Couldry’s more empirically-based language, that agency becomes indigenous activists’ individual actions, which are informed by comprehension of their goals, their relationships with others within local, national, and global civil society, and by constantly monitoring the effectiveness of their actions.

Further, a study from this perspective explores the extent to which indigenous activists are seeking to make change through this highly informed agency and despite the structural constraints on their lives—the constraints of economic, political, and social marginalization. The question is whether they can use that agency to overcome structural constraints and in so doing loosen those restraints for themselves and those who follow in their footsteps.

In this sense, this dissertation addresses the recursive nature of the dualistic relationship between reflexive agency and structure. In other words, the concepts explicated above provide a framework for understanding indigenous activism because they create an alternative to what Giddens describes as functionalist and structuralist concepts of structure that are inflexible and external to human beings (The Constitution of Society 1-2). Giddens’ and Couldry’s concepts are foundational for my dissertation because they open an avenue for interpreting indigenous activists view of their work as an interaction between their own agency and the structural constraints on their lives; through these conceptualizations, it becomes possible to interpret indigenous activists view of themselves as both constrained and capable of escaping those constraints. On an empirical level, these conceptualizations provide a means of understanding how indigenous activists—by applying an agency that is both self-
aware and aware of social, political, and cultural context—are attempting to use this media technology to escape and alter limiting conditions of marginalization and political domination.

**Methods**

A study of indigenous construction of activism as constituted by as well as constituting its conditions requires both an engagement with the larger historical context (in order to identify the conditions in which indigenous activism has been constructed) and with the everyday cultural processes, in which indigenous activism constructs its conditions. To meet these dual requirements, this dissertation employs both traditional historical analysis and ethnographic, interpretive methods.

In particular, it draws on Couldry’s understanding of historicism as a means of balancing emphasis on the contemporary. He argues that present day cultural phenomena must be understood in terms of the history of human beings’ cultural experience. Cultural studies should employ “an awareness of the historical production of cultural surfaces with which it has to engage” ([Inside Culture 60](#)).

In interpreting indigenous activism, historicism is required to balance what appear to be striking commonalities between the current Indian movement and new social movements. However, these commonalities must be considered within the context of the differing histories of the indigenous movement and new social movements. There should be consideration, for example, that the meaning of identity for indigenous movements may have nothing in common with the meaning of that term for technologically advanced western nations. In this way, this dissertation reflects Couldry’s argument that “…there is a great danger of
exaggerating the importance of present phenomena unless we apply a historically informed sense of the material processes which form our ‘presents’ and ‘pasts’” (Inside Culture 60).

As Couldry’s work suggests, ethnographic approaches—the second method to be used in this study—also provide a means of seeing the dualism between structure and agency. Using interpretive methods, I work to gain and reflect insight into the influence of individual human agency—to see how people, motivated by their singular understanding of their goals, their identities, and their place in society—apply a self-interested use of the Internet to advance their agendas. That is to say, through an ethnographic approach to a case study, my dissertation tries to access specific points in time, space, and society that shape the ways in which agency forms structure and structure forms agency.

On an empirical level, the free-flowing conversation of unstructured interviews creates space for people to describe reflexive agency—to express the complexity of their experience (Couldry, The Place of Media Power 196-204). The narrative form, descriptive writing, and sense of place employed in this dissertation allow me to recreate the nuances of social context that are central to people’s understanding of their own agency and its impact (Giddens, The Constitution of Society 284-285). As Giddens writes, “Thus the social sciences draw upon the same sources of description (mutual knowledge) as novelists or others who write fictional accounts of human life” (285).

That is to say, if I hope to demonstrate the playing out of self- and socially-aware agency in daily life, I must not only repeat what people say but also recreate what they do. I must define people’s relationships, demonstrate their knowledge of themselves and others, and try to express the meaning of their silences—all of which call for overtly literary techniques in writing.
In similar fashion, interpretive methods accommodate approaching research as an interaction and exchange with the people being interviewed (Clifford 14-15). Ethnography accommodates the researcher who does not perceive herself as the sole or even primary agent but does her work in constant contact, communication, argument, and negotiation with the people she is researching. Her cultural product becomes not the product of what she sees or hears but a negotiation with interviewees of that vision and hearing. Through constant interaction with people—a process akin to Giddens’ reflexive monitoring and in many ways a form of the triangulation—the interviewees monitor and correct her observations and, as a result, her perception and insight (Fortner and Christians 350-361; Denzin and Lincoln 51-52).

Thus, the language, reference points, and analytical framework of the people in the study begin to pervade cultural production—not only through comments and narratives carefully isolated through quotation marks and text references—but because they have shaped the foundation of the study. In this way, research is not a linear and predictable process that begins and ends neatly at the university. Instead it is in constant flux, because of the grounding of the study in context; it is shaped by the researcher in interaction with those whom Clifford describes as “speaking subject(s),” who are not only seen but see, and who evade, argue, and probe back. (14).

Because of its formative nature, such interaction must be acknowledged in the research product, and the vehicle for this is the reflexivity and writing techniques that interpretive methods provide. The personal journal becomes a space for revealing not only the multiple, transient, and contradictory selves that influence researchers in their interviewing, interpretation, and writing (Ellis and Bochner 733-768). It also illustrates researchers in interaction with the people they hope to represent. It is a narrative of the communication,
argument, and negotiation between the researcher and the researched. It is a place to make transparent the role of Clifford’s active subjects (14).

It has been argued that power is embedded in writing because of the choice and discrimination that are inherent to the process (Crpanzano 51-53; Rosaldo 78-97). This is especially valid in my case, because of my 20 years of writing for professional media that requires a spare style, an economy of words in which the writer chooses only those details and narratives that are directly relevant to her points. However, writing is also a tool for revealing relationships of power. In the same way that literary devices allow for the recreation of nuance that illustrates the dynamism between structure and agency, they also allow for the recreation of the relationship between the researcher and the actors in her work. The give and take between the researcher and the actors—or the lack thereof—is revealed in the space for reflexive accounting and through detail and creativity in writing.

At an empirical level, these interpretive methods become the pliant nature of semi-structured or unstructured interviews, which provides space for singular and uncommon behavior; the interpretation of comments, observations, and story-telling that allow for the bubbling up of unanticipated insight (Fontana and Frey 652-672); and the literary techniques that allow for multiples voices and the revelation of relationships and interaction. Together, these interpretive methods allow for the creation of a cultural product that is a negotiation. They allow me to cede the power that I might have as the primary author of this dissertation to the people in the study.

This is not to say that research becomes what Couldry describes in Inside Culture as a product of cultural democratization simply by including the voices of the participations and allowing their language and reference points to shape dissertation (104). In choosing among
dozens of voices that emerged in fieldwork, I have chosen to shape this dissertation with the experience and logic of some participants and not others. As Murphy writes:

…just by suggesting that one will democratize an ethnographic account by giving voice to the participants of an investigation does not necessarily constitute empowerment, at least not for the participants. More precisely, regardless of an ethnographer’s fidelity to the subjects of a study, the ethnographic process still requires a great deal of selection, editing, and ultimately, a presentation that relies heavily on interpretation (216).

This, Murphy argues, is one of several reasons that cultural studies has with trepidation and skepticism embraced the use of ethnographic approaches. Still, in contrast to more positivist research approaches, ethnography at least creates an entry point, however narrow, for a multiplicity of voices and for the ceding of authorship to participants. This is a methodological argument based on my awareness of my limitations in understanding and relaying the experience of people outside of my cultural context. I believe that relaying the experience of Oaxaca’s Indians is best done through their voices not my own. However, it is also a political argument in tune with Couldry’s assertion that cultural studies should treat as equal all voices—commonplace and extraordinary, old and young, elite and popular (Inside Culture 104).

The Present Study

I chose Oaxaca as the site for my fieldwork for several reasons. The state’s indigenous organizations appear to exemplify the commonalities between the Latin American indigenous movement and new social movements. They are focused on the identity–based issues of indigenous autonomy and cultural preservation; they have come to rely on the Internet for
national and international communication; and they work with the transnational human rights and environmental movements.

However, among indigenous activist organizations in Mexico, indeed in all of Latin America, those in Oaxaca were particularly appropriate for my study. Oaxaca’s indigenous community has been politically active, in part because it is large, with about 1.5 people speaking 15 different languages and comprising about one half the state’s population (Barabas, Bartolome, and Maldonado 11). Yet Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations have not experienced intense international and national attention, as have the Zapatista guerrillas in neighboring Chiapas. At the same time, as communications technology has become increasingly available in Oaxaca, indigenous organizations have actively pursued use of the Internet to create new and stronger international ties. Most of Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations either have their own web site or have been part of the Mexico City-based online network of Latin American indigenous organizations, known as the Red de Informacion Indigena (Indigenous Information Network). Most organizations involved in political or human rights activism are part of or use the Internet-enabled human rights abuse alert system, known as urgent actions.

My research in Oaxaca allowed me to explore several questions:

1. In what key ways has the historical context of Oaxacan and Mexican political and economic development shaped the present practice of indigenous activism in Oaxaca?
2. What kinds of conceptions of the relevance of the Internet to indigenous activism inform its practice?
3. In what kinds of ways does indigenous activism in Oaxaca define the relationship of identity to the practice of activism?
4. What are the implications of a contextual grounded reassessment of indigenous activism for current conceptions and practices of new social movements?

To gather historical data, I reviewed the literature on pre- and post-Conquest history of indigenous peoples in Oaxaca. Because that material was somewhat limited, I reviewed the histories of other indigenous populations, particularly of communities in other southern Mexican states (Barabas; Barabas, Bartolome, and Maldonado; Bartolome; Blanton; Binford and Campbell; Castro; Chassen-Lopez; Higgins; Norget; Rus, Castillo, and Mattiace; Spores; Tutino).

To gather field data, I traveled with my son to Mexico in the summer of 2005. After arriving in Mexico City on June 5, we spent three days there with friends before moving on to Oaxaca City, the capital of the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. We lived at first with a family assigned to us by my son’s Spanish language school, then moved into our own small apartment near the downtown colonial district. Most of the state’s indigenous organizations have offices in the state capital, so I was able to conduct much of my research there, while my son attended classes at his school.

To interview people and organizations outside of the city, I traveled, usually with my son, to several rural towns and villages, among them Juxtlahuaca, in the western Mixteca region that has been inhabited since before the Spanish Conquest by Mixteco Indians; and Guelatao, Mitla, and Santo Domingo Tepustepé, all in central Oaxaca. The expenses for two months of research were offset by grants awarded by the Office of the Dean for the Graduate School at the University of Georgia and its Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. On our way back to the United States in late July, I also spent several days in Mexico City,
interviewing human rights organizations that I found to be involved in protecting Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations against escalating state-sponsored violence.

While in the United States, I wrote a research proposal based on my academic work in both communications studies and political science. The proposal, through which I received the grants and approval from the Institutional Research Board, proposed exploring the extent to which indigenous activists were able to use the Internet to create among themselves what Putnam has described as social capital or “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them (19).” I had scripted questions regarding the extent to which indigenous organizations used the Internet for the type of communication that enables creation of social capital (Putnam 168-180). The proposal specified that these questions were to be asked as part of semi-structured interviews that would include more general discussion of indigenous activism and the Internet.

Once in Oaxaca, I quickly realized that the questions I had scripted from within the context of western academia were inapplicable in the context of indigenous activism and indigenous communities. Indigenous activists were not using the Internet to communicate among themselves but instead used it almost exclusively to communicate with national and international organizations about human rights abuses. The creation of social capital among themselves was largely irrelevant to their experience with the Internet, but their ability to effectively use urgent actions to protect themselves and others was vital to all of them. Leaders and members of all of the 17 activist organizations interviewed described this new ability to inform the outside world of human rights abuses and solicit help as the Internet’s most important contribution to their work. As a result, it was apparent that the analytical
framework I had formed from within my western academic milieu did not fit and should be changed.

The framework that did fit was analysis of the globalization of local conflicts in globalization and new social movement literature and in anthropological work on the resurgence of indigenous activism. It seemed clear that what I was seeing in Oaxaca was glocalization, as indigenous activists sought leverage against the state through the use of the urgent action system; it was an empirical manifestation of the Internet-enabled global alliances discussed in all of those literature streams. As such, I switched gears to explore indigenous activists’ experiences—their successes, failures, and the relationships they constructed—as they used Internet-enabled global alliances to negotiate conflicts with local, state, and federal government over human rights abuses.

It was also apparent that I must adapt language and vocabulary to context. In many cases, activists had thought in depth about the topic of my study but not in the terms used at American and European universities. For example, phrases such as using the Internet to create international alliances were meaningless to many activists. However, they had thought in complex ways and at different levels about why they could or could not use the urgent active system effectively—why it did or did not help in their ultimate goal of democratization and creation of space for indigenous difference. The unstructured interviews allowed for the use of contextual vocabulary, because while I continued to ask the questions I had drafted in the United States, I added questions and topics using language that made sense to the people I was interviewing.

In this way, my adaptation of the analytical framework and the language of my study reflects what Couldry has described as the importance of context to methodological
approaches—the importance of allowing methods to take context into consideration. This adaptation also reflects what Clifford has described as attempting to close the distance between researchers and the people they study. I sought to remove that distance in order to find a contextually appropriate framework that would allow my study to be meaningful. I attempted to cede the power to frame the study to those I was studying. To do otherwise—to insist upon rigid adherence to my own framework—could have been to force the activists’ comments, observations and narratives into an inappropriate mold that could have distorted that material. It would have ignored the importance of what Assad describes as problems of translation and the inequality of language (156-160). And that, in turn would have led to misinterpretation of my research material for the academic community and rendered the study largely irrelevant to and meaningless for the people in it.

Over the course of June and July in Oaxaca City, I conducted interviews with 17 different organizations that described themselves as indigenous or as serving primarily indigenous communities and with Oaxaca-based indigenous scholars and writers. The sessions produced about 35 hours to 40 hours of taped conversations transcribed into 158 pages of handwritten and typed transcripts. The transcriptions are in Spanish because I believe that translating while transcribing can lend itself to misquotation, misunderstanding, and poor interpretation. Additionally, the names of the activists in my dissertation were changed in order to honor my agreement with the Institutional Review Board and because the violent nature of the conflict in Oaxaca has made my sources particularly vulnerable.

I began transcribing and wrote in my personal journal most every evening during the months I was in Oaxaca. These two tasks, undertaken when the material had been freshly
gathered, allowed me to make connections and see patterns that informed subsequent interviews, and thus contributed to my overall interpretation.

The unstructured or semi-structured approach to my sessions allowed for the free expression and interpretive observation that helped me make sense of the meaning of my sources’ conversations (Fontana and Frey 652-672). For example, indigenous activists often did not directly answer questions about empowerment through the Internet or about the incorporation of identity issues in their work. Rather, these answers were implied in their conversations about relationships with other local, national, and international civic organizations, and in descriptions of their work and its value. As Couldry writes, in some circumstances individual interviews provide a better means of gaining access to these and other “private forms of sense-making” (The Place of Media Power 199).

Relationships of power were also apparent in the snowball sampling that I used to find interview subjects. My first contacts were people I was able to contact from the United States: The Mexico City-based director of the Indigenous Information Network; a director and a staff member based in the Fresno, California office of Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB); and anthropologists based in El Paso, Texas, and Mexico City. These contacts provided me with a universe of groups. Once in Oaxaca, as activists began referring me to other organizations, they revealed the extent to which they found fellow activists to be credible, trustworthy, and like-minded in terms of political ideology and indigenous goals.

Throughout the summer of fieldwork, it was apparent that my material was highly contextual. Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations have been both highly active from the 1990s to the present and also repressed in the last several years, owing to the state government’s fear of another Chiapas-style conflict and because of its resistance to national democratization. In the
last several years, indigenous activists have suffered with mass detention and arrest, torture, and murder at the hands of state security forces (Amnesty International; Bartolome Carrasco Center for Human Rights; Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights; Juu Ni Kandii Center for Indigenous Rights; CEDIPIO; CIPO; CIP; FIOB; Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights; OPIZ; OIDHO; Oaxacan Human Rights Network; All Rights for Everyone).

Much of my understanding of this context came not from formal interviews but from encounters with people in buses, shops, restaurants, markets, and in offices, rather than from formal interviews. In fact, such informal exchanges were my primary means of meeting indigenous people who were not political, diplomatic, and in other ways careful in their responses, as the activists tended to be with me, presumably because of my outsider and foreigner status. In this way, too, the flexibility of interpretive methods—what Janesick describes as the choreography of qualitative research—contributed to my interpretation. The expressive flexibility that interpretive methods permit also has been vital, because it has allowed me to convey the unusual political context that is part of understanding the experience of indigenous activists in this study.

After returning to the United States, I spent two weeks transcribing the rest of the tapes. That task gave me a sense of patterns that would emerge in systematic reading of my data. I read and reread the material, searching for patterns that corresponded to my research questions. For example, to begin to interpret the role that the Internet had come to play in activism, I isolated all comments, observations, and narratives having to do with how activists used the Internet and their attitudes toward the technology and its use. To interpret indigenous activists’ experience with international alliance building and the meaning and importance of
that concept for them, I isolated all material related to discussion of urgent actions and the relationships they developed with other activists within Oaxaca, Mexico, and the global community. The interpretation formed the substance for Chapter 6: “Constructing Activism.”

In this close reading, I uncovered a theme that I had not anticipated at the start of the study—the embeddedness of identity affirmation in work that did not appear at first glance to deal with identity politics. While the activists rarely introduced into interviews or less formal conversation terms such as identity or cultural politics, both were at the basis of their work: protection of indigenous political and human rights; environmental activism aimed at protecting indigenous territories; and their struggle to return Indian villages to traditional, indigenous forms of elections and government. The ability to live successfully as Indians was the goal of virtually all of their work, and this, I realized, was a powerful form of identity politics. This struck me as a revelation because indigenous activism has been described as identity-based in various literature streams, yet the meaning of that term in the context of western academia is different from the identity affirmation embedded in activists’ work. It became clear to me that this topic, too, should be part of my dissertation; it became the substance of Chapter 7: “Constructing Identity.”

Autobiographical Context and Subjectivity

Oaxaca is relatively culturally accessible for me, because of my professional background. I lived and worked in Latin America as a foreign correspondent for 15 years, from 1982 to 1997. I spent seven of those years in Mexico as the Mexico City-based bureau chief for Cox Newspapers. I covered democratization in Central American nations as well as in Mexico, and I traveled to impoverished indigenous regions throughout southern Mexican
and in Guatemala. As a result, not only are Oaxaca’s indigenous communities familiar to me, the impact of political conflict on indigenous agricultural zones is also familiar. My previous experience has been vital not only to understanding the dynamics at play in Oaxaca but also to demonstrating credibility to sources, which turned out to be vital in both arranging interviews and gaining trust with interviewees.

However, my background also complicates the research, because I come to it with layer after layer of experience in similar circumstances with similar people. The danger is magnified because I bring assumptions that are both strongly-held, since they developed over years, but probably less applicable, given that Mexico, since I left, has undergone dramatic changes, including the end of more than 70 years of one-party PRI rule.

Meanwhile, I also have changed from a foreign correspondent, who covered enough civil conflict to become cynical, to a mother and an aspiring academic, who has had to learn to be open-minded again. There is very little about my circumstances that have remained the same, including my sense of home. By the time I left Latin America, it was more familiar to me than my own country, and the United States was somewhat foreign to me. Now, having lived through 9/11 and having watched the evolution of the Iraq war, I have developed a jaded view of the United States and, in retrospect, positive if not overly positive memories and thus perceptions of Mexico.

As a result, I felt particularly obliged to apply a critical consciousness of self (Darling-Wolf 109-124; Ellis 733-768). Throughout the summer, I felt as though I switched from one self to the other, perceiving as a journalist one moment and as an academic and mother the next. I sought to record my impressions of interviews and places, taking particular notice of when past experiences seemed to influence my perceptions of the present. I kept a journal,
which grew to 75 pages during the two months of my field research. I attempted to record Oaxacans’ conversations and observations about context as my son and I traveled throughout the state. (Emerson, Fretz and Shaw 17-38). And I made a point of recording my reactions to people and places, so that I could use this reflexivity to make sense of my encounters. Upon close reading of the journal, I realized that it signals when my interpretation is invded by previous experiences and frustrations with inaccessible people and places. As such, I have used parts of the journal—Chapter 5, entitled “Excursis in Oaxaca”—to introduce and act as a reference point for the subsequent field based chapters.
CHAPTER 4

INDIGENOUS ACTIVISM AND NEW SOCIAL MOVEMENT: MODERNITY VS. POST

MODERNITY

Introduction

Although parallels between the indigenous movement and new social movements are evident, the context of the similarities is profoundly different. New social movements have been generated by the decline of the nation state and the rise of what Castells describes as an informational economy (The Rise of the Network Society 66-150; Melucci, Challenging Codes 13-41, 176-204). In contrast, the Latin American indigenous movement, while reflecting these dynamics, is more clearly defined by the collective experience of Indians as they have interacted with Spanish and mestizo (indigenous-Spanish) forces in the 500 years since the Spanish Conquest (Nash 41-56).

This kind of contextual difference must be explicated to accurately represent indigenous mobilization in Oaxaca, Mexico. Such discussion also can shed light on the political, economic, and social factors that produce an idiosyncratic environment and, as a result, limit the extent to which knowledge can be transferred from one place to another. (Stake 438-447).

Accordingly, this chapter explores the historical context of the indigenous movement. It begins with an overview of the current indigenous mobilization, proceeds to discuss the historical roots of the commonalities, namely identity focus, resistance to economic globalization, and internationalism. It concludes by discussing the implications of this context for indigenous activism in Oaxaca.
Contemporary Indigence Resistance as New Social Movement

The development of Oaxaca’s indigenous movement has followed the trajectory of the Indian mobilization that has emerged throughout Latin America in the last several decades. Political organization of both Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations and communities began to intensify within the context of leftist organizations that emerged regionally in the wake of 1960s student protests in Mexico and globally (Binford and Campbell 1-18; Brysk 81-84; Norget 154-186).

To varying degrees, organizations such as the Worker Peasant Student Coalition of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (COCEI), Movement of Triqui Unification and Struggle (MULT), and the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca (CIPO), all of which are still active, organized the Indian community by combining leftist class-based politics with an indigenous agenda.

Key issues were and continue to be indigenous control over land and natural resources, and recognition of usos y costumbres, (uses and customs), traditional indigenous systems of local election and government. Key issues also have included agricultural subsidies and protections to ease the impact of the state’s farming crisis; development to provide poor communities with basic services such as running water, electricity, schools, and medical clinics; and protection against human rights abuses. Because of the emphasis on class-based over indigenous issues, some of the 1960s and 1970s organizations were more clearly “ethnicized peasant movements” (Brysk 81).

A handful of organizations, notably FIOB, eschewed class-based politics and left-right conflict to address purely Indian affairs, such as the massive migration into the
United States from Oaxaca’s Mixteca region. In the Mixteca, FIOB has evolved into an economic aid and human rights organization, because of the needs of the Indian population there, while in the United States, it has focused on immigration policy and practice but also on preservation of Mixteco culture within the context of adaptation to the United States.

Alongside politically- and socially-based indigenous mobilization, Oaxaca’s Catholic Church in the 1970s began to pursue development of a culturally sensitive liberation theology that would both evangelize and assist the state’s indigenous poor through self-sustaining development. The subsequent Indigenous Pastoral Center of Oaxaca (CEDIPIO) sought to train non-indigenous priests and nuns in indigenous languages, pastoral anthropology, and the myths and traditions of Indian communities, while also addressing, sometimes in confrontation with the state, extreme poverty and under-development, and human rights abuse that most often affects Indians (Norget 160-164).

By the 1990s, Norget writes, the indigenous pastoral had “motivated liberationist clergy to establish a wide variety of organizations and other social spaces from which to defend people’s rights within the larger political and social sphere. Significantly, all of these projects, whether in urban or rural locales, referred to traditional indigenous social structure and attendant customs of communal labor as their models for organizations and as identity referents for the purposes of mobilization.” (163)

Beginning with the 1960s mobilization, an emerging community of indigenous intellectuals and scholars began to promote heightened ethnic consciousness through cultural expression. Increasingly, aggrandized indigenous rights were conceived of as recognition of and space for cultural difference—the right to be ethnically and culturally
different. Many of the early activists were subsequently brought into the state bureaucracy, taking positions within the National Indigenous Institute (INI), which some critics regarded as an example of the co-opting of resistance typical of the ruling PRI (Smith 113-128). Still, by the 1990s, the new discourse had generated several indigenous media companies. The Centro Nacional de Video Indígena (National Center for Indigenous Video), which works with INI, has produced dozens of indigenous videos. Ojo de Agua (Eye of Water), a media cooperative, has likewise produced numerous indigenous videos, which, it asserts, are distributed most aggressively within indigenous milieus.

Also by the 1990s, Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations had focused on environmental issues, including preservation of indigenous territories and rejection of the use of genetically altered seeds. While environmentalism is a natural extension of indigenous control over territorial resources, Indian organizations also made a tactical decision to focus on issues that garner international support and cooperation (Oaxacan Human Rights Network; Union of Organizations of the Sierra of Juarez, or UNOSJO).

By the time the Zapatista guerrillas emerged in January of 1994, Oaxaca’s indigenous resistance was expressed through a civil society that was well developed, especially considering the political environment of Mexico, where the PRI dominated associational life as part of a tentacled system of political control (Norget 157-181). And while the Zapatistas’ initial success and broad national and international support galvanized Indian activism throughout Latin America, their energizing influence was particularly strong in the neighboring state of Oaxaca. (CIPO; OIDHO; MULT).

Oaxaca’s indigenous activists are quick to point out that they immediately and loudly voiced their support for the Zapatistas. Particularly compelling for Oaxacan Indians
was the Zapatistas’ protest of the reform of Article 27, a post-1910 Revolution amendment that prohibited foreign ownership of land and in so doing facilitated indigenous communal holdings (Higgins 102). Article 27 was reformed as part of President Carlos Salinas’s aggressive neo-liberal reforms and bid for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s (Nash 78-87). In Oaxaca, where a severe agrarian crisis has depopulated large regions as Indians moved north to survive, the reform made survival for indigenous communities even more difficult.

Oaxacan indigenous activists joined in the Zapatistas’ first international conference, titled the National Democratic Convention and held in the village of Aguas Calientes in the Chiapas highlands, and the subsequent International Meeting for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism in 1996. Both drew thousands of human rights activists, environmentalist, feminists, and WTO protestors from around the world—the loosely woven threads of Melucci new social movements (CIPO; MULT). Oaxacan indigenous support for the Zapatistas continued through the negotiations with the government for the San Andrés Accords, indigenous rights legislation that was ultimately rejected by the Mexican government in what indigenous organizations describe as yet another betrayal.

In the Zapatistas’ wake, Oaxaca’s collection of indigenous rights organizations has swelled further. The number of organization has grown to include more than fifty groups (Indigenous Information Network). Once again owing to the Zapatistas’ example, Oaxaca’s indigenous organizations in the 1990s increasingly turned outward to the international community for leverage in state and national conflict.

The seeds of this intensified internationalism were nurtured in the 1960s and 1970s mobilization, when Oaxacan indigenous-political organizations were allied with
international leftist parties and unions. However, the Zapatistas’ clever use of the Internet to develop a global network of supporters in their confrontation with the Mexican state provided Oaxacan indigenous groups with a successful prototype (Garrido and Halavais 165-184, Oleson 181-203).

At this point, most of the indigenous movement’s human rights lobbying is played out on the international stage through the urgent action system; Oaxacan’s indigenous activists and human rights groups contact more powerful international organizations, which lobby state and federal government on behalf of human rights victims (BARCO; Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights; Nu Jii Kandii Center for Human Rights; CEDIPIO; Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights; Oaxacan Human Rights Network; All Rights for Everyone).

Oaxaca’s indigenous movement has enjoyed success that has eluded the Zapatistas. In 1996, Oaxaca’s state government became the first to recognize local indigenous autonomy, including uses and customs, the traditional indigenous method of municipal election and government. The government concession, it has been argued, resulted from fears that guerrilla conflict would spread from Chiapas to Oaxaca.

The concession was somewhat symbolic, since many Indian communities already practiced an unofficial uses and customs in their towns and villages, and one of the most contentious issues, Indian control over land and resources, is not guaranteed by the state law. However, the legislation represents an advance toward achieving a series of rights that allow for the survival of the nature of indigenous life as a whole (Anaya-Munoz 414-433). It is this idea—that a broad agenda of indigenous rights, political, economic, social, and cultural, are part of the larger goal of the survival of indigenous difference—that
increasingly has become the framework for activism in the state. (Norget 163-181). In sum, Oaxaca’s contemporary indigenous mobilization appears in one sense to fit Warren and Jackson’s assessment of the region-wide movement as a “classic example of a new social movement at one level of abstraction” (27).

For example, political, environmental, and cultural indigenous organizations have come to view identity—or the right to be culturally and ethnically different—as the cornerstone of their mobilization. As the movement has progressed, human, economic, and political rights, such as recognition of uses and customs, have been conceptualized as avenues to the more holistic right to choose to express indigenous identity in daily life. Further, the contemporary indigenous struggle necessarily has rejected some facets of globalization—notably the elimination of protections against global pricing and aggressive foreign investment and privatization—because they make untenable the agrarian existence upon which indigenous communities are formed culturally, politically, economically, and socially. And finally, in the interest of staving off the encroachment of international and economic interests, indigenous communities have turned to global civil society for leverage. They have attempted to globalize their local conflicts.

The Historicism of the Indigenous Movement

However, the indigenous movement and new social movements originating in western nations have been defined by different temporal eras. For example, the indigenous movement’s focus on identity is not contemporary but historic, derived from the Conquest, when Mexico’s Indians resisted Spanish and later mestizo efforts to wipe out indigenous practice and memory through domination, Catholic evangelism, miscegenation, and
subordination of Indian culture (Higgins 41-53; Spores 130-147). Although the first Spanish priests met with willing subjects, Indians’ conversion was more often a form of strategic resistance, aimed at appeasing the priests while continuing to worship the forces of nature—Gods of wind, rain, and sun—that make up agrarian cycles (Higgins 44).

Early rebellions sought not accommodation with the Spaniards but separation, as well as a return to the autonomous pre-Colombian past that generated traditional Indian identity. When intermarriage and Catholic missionary education made returning to a purely indigenous culture impossible, Indians created synthetic practices and cultural forms—among them, farming that combined indigenous and European methods, and Spanish-indigenous religious practices—which generated new hybrid identities (Castro 46-58). As Castro writes, “…at one extreme, there was an apparent obedience and at the other violent resistance. All were variations of the same goal—to overcome the brutal chaos provoked by the Conquest, maintain a certain level of autonomy, and reconstruct their identity” (47).

Tutino argues that indigenous populations were receptive to Catholicism because it offered an explanation for the catastrophe of the Conquest, most notably the mass dying from epidemics that wiped out an estimated 80 percent of the Indian population. He describes the fusion of indigenous and European spirituality on Oaxaca’s Pacific Coast Isthmus as Zapotec Christianity—“Christian in its vision of cosmic questions of creation and salvation, and also in its claims to justify Spanish sovereignty, while insistently Zapotec in the continuing emphasis on the powers that ruled and regulated daily life in an agrarian society” (46).

Barabas, Bartolome, and Maldonado argue that dual passivity and resistance to the Spaniards were a creative defense against erosion of identity, which resulted in synthetic
though no less authentic indigenous political, cultural, and social forms. They write that the Indians, in response to military and spiritual conquest, created defense mechanisms that allowed them to adapt to new conditions and maintain their ethnicity. They did not adopt elements of the colonizing culture but interpreted them for their own context (139-141).

*Defending Against Global Capitalism*

Along with the thematic of identity, the indigenous movement’s focus on resistance to globalization, while reflecting current economics, finds precedent in the interaction between indigenous Mesoamerica and European modernity. Oaxaca’s Indians were initially receptive to Spanish forces, largely because they offered an alliance against the expansionist empire of the Aztec leader Moxtezuma (Barabas, Bartolome, and Maldonado 130-147, Higgins 24-56). Acceptance turned to rebellion, however, when it became clear that the Spaniards intended to usurp Indian land and natural resources to enrich the Spanish Crown. In response to persistent and often violent resistance, as well as concern about the survival of the tribute-paying Indian population already decimated by disease, Spanish colonists liberalized their administration to recognize indigenous communal property and the uses and customs methods of local election and government. Chassen–Lopez describes indigenous pressure that forced compromise as an example of the flexibility and negotiation within the Spanish-indigenous relationship, which allowed Indians to maintain a level of autonomy and identity. The relationship was not, she argues, one of simple and culturally annihilating dominance and submission (1-2).

In the late 19th and early 20th century, when Oaxaca’s indigenous communities felt the pressure of liberal economic reforms and avid American and European investment in
their territory, their resistance intensified. Chassen-Lopez describes the period’s land conflicts as a response to a dual economic and cultural threat, because of the role that land plays for Indian communities (301-401). According to Indian cosmovision, maintaining a respectful, nurturing relationship with one’s land is the basis of spirituality, while communal ownership guaranteed indigenous egalitarian and cooperative social order.

One conflict in particular, Chassen-Lopez argues, exemplified “extraordinary cultural agency” because it was simultaneously a defense of indigenous territory and an expression of the synthesis of Spanish and Indian political and cultural forms (518-522).

She writes that the Mixtecos were railroaded into opposing mestizo rebels because of the conflation of the 1910 Revolution with a local land conflict. The Mixtecos had been arguing since the previous century that land sold to mestizo ranchers under the 1856 privatization legislation, known as the Law de Lerdo, was territory they had owned since before the Conquest. In a confrontation that turned bloody, the Indians drew on pre-Colombian and Spanish political traditions to create a new Mixteco government, appointing as Queen a woman believed to be descended from Mixteco nobility. They organized a council of elders, sent messengers to other Mixteco villages, asking them to unite, and wrapped the disputed land titles in Mexican flags. After eleven days, the indigenous rebellion was crushed and the land was returned to the mestizo ranchers. As Chassen-Lopez writes:

In this case of ‘ethno-political resistance,’ the indigenous Mixtecos rejected the dominant mestizo culture and reaffirmed their own culture as embodied in their customs and traditions since time immemorial. Yet the new Mixteco Empire of 1911 had been invented from bits and pieces of different cultures and distinct
historical moments. Creating an alternative symbolic order, they appropriated and inverted diverse cultural symbols: Spanish colonial land titles wrapped in the flag of the Mexican nation and entrusted to a Mixteco council of elders and a Queen from an imagined and idealized pre-Colombian age. Certainly this is an example of dynamic creation of ethnicity in confrontation with the ‘other’ (522).

*The Roots of Indian Internationalism*

Nor is the internationalism of the indigenous movement solely a contemporary phenomenon. As Brysk points out, Spanish priests, although accomplice to the brutal Conquest, were also the Indians’ first foreign protector (9). In the first years after the Conquest, priests returned from Mexico to Spain with reports of atrocities against indigenous people so shocking that the Crown ordered a suspension of expeditions while the Indian issue was debated by theologians, jurists and officials (Higgins 37-56).

Among the most outspoken critics of the colonists was Fray Bartolome de Las Casas, bishop of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The debate, which turned on the question of whether Indians were barbarians without rational souls or equal under God’s gaze and, therefore, deserving of humane treatment, never produced a clear verdict. But it has been described as a rare moment of moral self-analysis by the Spanish Crown, and it was followed by the moderation of colonial rule (Higgins 38-40).

Following 19th century Independence, the plight of Indian populations throughout Latin America also became an internationally negotiated issue at least to some degree. Just after the turn of the century, the British Anti-Slavery Society forced the release of Indians who had been enslaved on large rubber plantations in Brazil and Peru by a Peruvian firm subcontracted to a British firm (Brysk 9-10).
In addition, discussion of national policies toward and treatment of indigenous communities has taken place in international forums, such as the first Inter-American Indigenous Conference held in Patzcuaro, Mexico in 1940. It was called by then Mexican President Lazaro Cardenas, who, as a self-described Indian, hoped to use his term to fold the indigenous population into his conceptualization of revolutionary nationalism (Higgins 115).

The Barbados Conference, a 1971 meeting of non-indigenous anthropologists who called for indigenous self-government of Indian communities and pledged political support for the struggle, helped inspire the current mobilization throughout Latin America. “At the same time,” Brysk writes, “Indian groups themselves were reaching across borders to form intertribal associations such as the World Council of Indigenous Peoples” (18).

Perhaps most important, indigenous communities and organizations in Oaxaca, without firm loyalty to the Mexican state because they have never received the full benefits of citizenship, conceive of themselves as international, in some cases before they conceive of themselves as national. Binford and Campbell write of the Juchitan indigenous organization known as COCEI:

[COCEI] “combined a provincial, ethnic, even xenophobic collective identity and locally focused grassroots political program with an eclectic, internationally-informed political and ideological project. Because of COCEI’s success, the Oaxacan Isthmus attracted foreign intellectuals, leftists and journalists, and the vibrant town of “Juchitan was a city with a foreign policy, a community that sought political kinship less with national and elected officials than with the revolutionary regimes of Cuba and Nicaragua” (16).
Conclusions

While new social movements originating in developed western nations are defined by current forces of globalization, the indigenous movement is more clearly forged from long-standing forces. Indians have been focused on identity and space for political, social, and cultural difference throughout the 500 years of their interaction with dominant Spanish and mestizo forces in government, economics, and society.

In creative defense of identity, Indians have built hybrid cultural forms to replace those crushed or eroded from the Conquest to the present. Indigenous resistance was aimed at defending against the destructive forces of global economic expansion in response to 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} century Spanish colonialism and 19\textsuperscript{th} and 20\textsuperscript{th} century American and European capitalism. And indigenous populations, alienated from their own nations, turned to internationalism long before the emergence of the media driven global village.

It can be argued that the difference between the contexts of the indigenous movement and new social movements is only temporal. Just as the Spanish Conquest swept away the social, political and cultural institutions that were the basis of indigenous identity so have the forces of informational capitalism disrupted the institutions—the nuclear family, membership in a patriarchal society, and industrial production—that have generated identity in the developed world during the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries.

And just as the indigenous population responded to the disruption by finding new identities in hybrid cultural forces forms created from what was left after the Conquest, today’s activists—unhinged or alienated from contemporary culture—have sought new identities in social movements that are themselves cultural hybrids. In this sense, the
indigenous example reinforces the arguments of new social movement theorists, but by providing an historical precedent not a contemporary complement.

It appears clear that indigenous resistance took the form of a developed world new social movement before the latter was conceived of as a response and defense against current social, political, and economics forces. As such, the form of the indigenous movement reflects not change or novelty but intensification and clarification at a time when democratization has opened political space for goals that were once too flammable to be openly articulated.

Such a difference has a greater implication. Insights into new social movements originating from the developed world may not, owing to contextual differences, apply to the indigenous movement, and vice versa. For example, the argument that global media have erased the limits of time and distance to create shared experience across borders and, as a result, a new empathic interconnectedness makes less sense from the point of view of indigenous populations. Global civil society, seeing images of indigenous guerillas faced off against contemporary armies, may be newly sympathetic to the David in this struggle against a figurative Goliath. The global community also may sympathize with Indian concerns about natural resources and idealize indigenous cosmovision, which seems to offer a back-to-nature alternative.

However, it is more likely that the indigenous movement has intensified its connections across borders simply because activists saw a strategic opportunity and took advantage of it—and not because they feel a greater connectedness or sympathy toward the developed world. More likely, indigenous organizations, seeing the new resonance of their
cause in the global community, consciously internationalize local conflicts to gain leverage in confrontation with the state.

In other words, the connections between indigenous movement and developed world new social movements—the fresh ability to work together—may stem not from real similarities in the vision of indigenous communities and developed world civil society but from indigenous agency and even opportunism in a changed environment.
CHAPTER 4
EXCURSIS IN OAXACA

Introduction

Clifford writes that the inherently partial nature of ethnography is widely accepted, reduced almost to the banal observation that truth is constructed. However, he also argues that once this concept is accepted and built into research, “a rigorous sense of partiality can be a source of representational tact” (7). He describes Richard Price’s First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People as an example of the good use of “self-conscious serious partiality” in so far as the author writes about the “external and self-imposed limits to the research, about individual informants, and about the construction of the final written artifact.” Elsewhere, Clifford discusses the personal journal as a means of making transparent not only what the researcher brings to her work but what her interviewees bring to it through their cooperation and/or resistance (14-15). In other words, the people in the study, through their interaction with the researcher, gain a degree of control over the cultural production, contributing not only as subjects but also as partial authors. All of these points are the goals of this chapter, which attempts to relay the influences of my biases, of my relationships and interaction with interviewees, and of the conditions under which I conducted the research.

June 9

My son and I have escaped to the Hacienda La Noria, a little hotel of stucco and brick near Oaxaca’s downtown Zocalo. At $60 a night, it is well beyond my means, but I am trying to cheer up Connor, who is miserable. On our first night, when we were in Mexico City
staying with a friend from the New York Times, he got more than 100 mosquito bites. Although the doctor said it was a freak accident and would not recur, I am not reassured, since Oaxaca is wetter and warmer than Mexico City. For the moment, though Connor is happy, splashing in the pool with Roberto, the son of the family with whom we will stay, as soon as I can tear us from the comfort of this hotel.

I’m also somewhat relaxed, since I’ve made a bit of headway. I’ve arranged an interview with Fidelia, the Oaxaca representative from the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB). I found her through a U.S. contact, Leóncio, FIOB’s web site director in Fresno, California. We are to meet in front of the Cathedral in the Zocalo at 6 PM on Monday. How naturally reporting has come back. By the time I left Mexico, I was sick of reporting and the country, but now they both seem so engaging.

June 10

Oaxaca is beautiful but hardly Mexican anymore, certainly not indigenous. When I went to the bookstore downtown, the clerk put my purchase—Marcos’s book, Words Are Our Weapon—in a beautiful little brown bag, as if I’d been to a trendy boutique in Manhattan. That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but the city is different, even more American and western.

It occurs to me that I wouldn’t have bought Marco’s book when I was a journalist, because, like many in the press corps, I didn’t take the Zapatistas seriously. Compared to the bloody 1980s Central American wars, which many of us covered, the Zapatista uprising seemed like the antics of a leftist college movement. Journalists made jokes about Marcos, the professor, sitting in the mountains smoking a pipe, sending his missives out on the Internet. Now they look prophetic. Why fight when a media war is so much more effective?

June 13
Today, I met Fidelia in front of the cathedral. She doesn’t look like a student in her twenties or early thirties, which is what I expected of an Internet activist. Instead, she looks like she’s in her late thirties, perhaps because of the grey streak in her hair. She managed to wear a jeans skirt and a blouse and still look indigenous. The skirt fit snugly, like the wraps of indigenous women, and she wore a long ponytail.

We walked to a café, and from the start, I sensed reserve, which became clear later in the interview. She said that FIOB has had bad experiences with foreign investigators: A TV crew promised but failed to send tapes of their report to the village featured in it; and a woman, who was working on a dissertation, pretended to be part of FIOB to get information.

I assured her that I would behave honestly and share all of my material. I promised to send her a copy of my dissertation, and I used the moment to tell her about the software and laptop that I plan to donate to FIOB. She brightened, explaining that she would like me to sign an agreement, which commits me to doing volunteer work for FIOB in return for the time spent helping me. I was relieved to sign it, since it makes me feel less exploitative, which is how I often felt as a journalist.

She also said that there have been a lot of human rights problems in the Mixteca, a northwestern region of Oaxaca where FIOB is based in a town called Juxtlahuaca. She described the case of a FIOB leader from Juxtlahuaca, Romualdo, who was imprisoned by state security officials on false charges. They used the Internet to send out alerts and the resulting pressure on state government was the main reason he was eventually released.

June 17

Connor is gone for the evening, sleeping at a friend’s house, so I have time read my book, A Finger in the Wound. It’s engrossing because the author writes about her experience
in Guatemala during the horrible years that I was there. Her observations resonate, because her experience was like my own, a foreigner shocked by the violence of Guatemala. Only I was a journalist and she was solidarity worker, so I had the protection of detachment. This part of Mexico reminds me so much of Central America. When I have been reading something like this book, I look up, assuming that I’m in Nicaragua, and it takes a second or two to remember where I am.

June 19

We rode for five hours in a bus to get to Juxtlahuaca, through arid but beautiful mountain terrain. I have brought along a Canadian woman I met in Oaxaca City, Sherry, who is a single mother living here with her 10-year-old son, Gabriel. I’m paying their way, because the idea is that they can hang out with Connor while I work. I should get the prize for the most expensive dissertation. Once again, I vastly underestimated the difficulty of having Connor along with me. But it was a delight, watching his amazement at this desert landscape. He wants a picture of himself in front of a cactus to show his classmates when he returns to Georgia.

We passed a military checkpoint with armed soldiers. They had stopped a bus presumably to search the passengers, and I wondered if they were still concerned about an indigenous insurgency here. The checkpoint was like those set up all over Chiapas, just after the first Zapatista uprising in January of 1994.

Connor wanted to know why soldiers with guns were stopping people. I thought briefly about trying to explain racism and the conflict between the Indians and the government, and then I went with the comforting answer—that they were making sure that no one was carrying anything dangerous.
The last miles before Juxtlahuaca were the most rugged. The driver negotiated hairpin turns, with no guardrails, and dodged gaping potholes. It was like the roads in Nicaragua 20 years ago. Since it was dark by the time we got to Juxtlahuaca, I could not tell what the town was like, except that it was bigger than I expected. A cluster of buildings, some several stories tall, arose from the middle of nowhere.

June 20

I managed to interview not only Fidelia, for a second time, but also Bernardo, second in command of FIOB in Mexico. We sat down in a small back room with a wooden desk and a fax machine. He mentioned the same case that Fidelia described: Another FIOB leader, Romualdo, was arrested on false charges then released after organizations outside of Mexico, having heard about the case through the Internet, exerted pressure on state officials.

Other than that, though, the experience of talking to him about the Internet was completely different than it was with Fidelia. She comprehended quickly, while he looked at me as though he had no idea of what I was talking about. He was impatient, as though I were asking stupid questions. Later in the interview, he confirmed my suspicion that the Internet has been left up to women, because communication is considered to be their work. I’m glad we’re returning to Oaxaca City this afternoon. The trip, though short, has been tiring.

June 23

I traveled all the way to Guelatao, a three-hour trip, to find that one of the people I had arranged to interview was in Oaxaca City, where I had just come from. The other couldn’t speak to me until 5 PM, when I was supposed to pick up Connor from his Spanish classes. Still, I was grateful to be doing this research as an academic rather than as a journalist because time is not as much of an issue. I could never have spent a day waiting for an interview. Too
little time, too many deadlines. But as an academic researcher, I could hang out in the office of the Union of Organizations of the Sierra of Juarez (UNOSJO), which is a lovely, airy place with exposed beams, clean wooden floors, and walls covered with posters celebrating indigenous traditions and languages.

When my 5 PM interview showed up, I realized that he is one of those extraordinary Mexican intellectuals, smart, educated, creative, and extremely well read. He is an indigenous writer, as well as an activist, and in an interview that drifted from one topic to the next, he talked about Mexican history, politics and culture, and world history and globalization. One of his main points was that that indigenous communities are struggling not against the Mexican government but against the global economy. In that fight, he said, they have little hope.

June 27

Well, they don’t come more frustrating than today. I woke up determined to get at least two interviews done. By early afternoon, I had scaled down my hopes to one interview, and by late afternoon, I had to settle for having set up three interviews for the next few days. I did not have these kinds of access problems when I was a journalist.

After getting nowhere on the phone, I hired a cab and started driving to the addresses of organizations on the Indigenous Information Network, the Mexico-City based web site. At one address, a middle-aged lady came to the door and said that Binugulazaa, supposedly a Zapotec group, was a magazine that used to have an office in the back of the house. Another address did not exist. From now on, I will be far more skeptical about the Internet. There is reality and there is the World Wide Web.

June 28
Today I finally had a breakthrough in the office of the Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights, which is just around the corner from where we’re living. *Under my nose the whole time.* I’ve found that the indigenous organizations and human rights organizations often are one in the same, because the victims of human rights abuses usually are Indians.

When I stumbled upon the office, its director, gave me two cell phone numbers and addresses and landlines for real offices with real people; I had gone from the Web to reality.

She also repeated what I’ve been hearing elsewhere—that the human rights situation is very grave in Oaxaca. The state government evidently is behaving like the old PRI, breaking up demonstrations and arresting people *en masse*, even though democratization has supposedly accelerated throughout Mexico. She said that one of her contacts, a Zapotec activist named Issak, was arrested in a mass detention, then held for five years on false charges of being involved with the Popular Revolutionary Army (EPR), the guerrillas who emerged in 1996 (Nusser).

June 29

This morning, I had a strange experience. I dropped by the headquarters of the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca (CIPO). The Indigenous Information Network listed the group’s number, and when I called, a woman named Patricia told me to come right over. Having been stood up repeatedly, I jumped at the chance and took a cab to the place. Stepping through the iron gate surrounding the CIPO headquarters, I came face-to-face with Patricia and several other people, clearly indigenous farmers from their *campesino* (peasant) clothes, sun-darkened skin, and their manner of moving about—like rural not urban people.

Patricia said the people were from several indigenous communities—Sol, Zapotec, and Chinanteca, her own. Then she asked me if I could help a CIPO *companion* (friend) who
was seeking asylum in Canada because of death threats in Oaxaca, and I realized why she had invited me over so quickly. This was to be a quid pro quo—they would supply an interview in exchange for the influence that they thought I might have with Canadian officials. When I told them I had no influence but could only pass along information about their circumstances to the local human rights groups, Patricia said they had already been in touch with those groups. In other words, I could do nothing for them.

I managed to get in few questions before Patricia dismissed me. She told me that she and the others at the CIPO headquarters were under a kind of house arrest. They were arrested nearly a year ago for staging a protest in downtown Oaxaca and had only recently been released. Now they were not allowed to leave the city and had to check in with authorities regularly. I was very taken aback, because the situation was so retrograde, as if we were in Central America during the years of counterinsurgency campaigns. Mexican government officials, even before the fall of the PRI, were rarely this blunt.

Then Patricia showed me the door, saying that they would have to discuss whether to give me an interview, now that it was clear that I could not help them. I didn’t argue or try to persuade. I felt ridiculous in my neat khakis with my little black computer bag over my shoulder.

July 1

The taxi driver and I spent almost two hours trying to find the office of the Indian Organizations for Human Rights in Oaxaca (OIDHO). It is located just outside of Oaxaca City in a poor neighborhood of cornfields, dirt roads, and grazing goats. We drove up and down the roads to find that the office is one room in a long, low stucco building that looks like an economy motel. A pattern is emerging: The mass organizations that are involved in
grass-roots activism in rural indigenous zones, have makeshift headquarters created from old buildings and empty lots, while the offices of the NGOs are modest but at least comfortable, with desks, computers, and filing cabinets.

Though I had arrived late, Enrique, the man that I came to interview, was still willing to talk with me. But I was expected back in Oaxaca for an interview with the leader of Oaxaca’s only indigenous party, a mestizo (indigenous-Spanish) known within the activist community as Don Edgar. After apologizing profusely, I arranged to meet Enrique the following week and headed back to Oaxaca City.

I arrived at the office of the indigenous party to find that Don Edgar had stood me up. I headed to my third interview with the leader of a small coffee producers association to find that he, too, hadn’t shown up. At the last minute, I called Isaak, the Zapotec activist who was imprisoned for five years, and he agreed to meet in a café in front of the Santo Domingo cathedral. At least the day was not a total bust.

July 5

I had an extraordinary interview yesterday with two indigenous activists, Salvador and his wife Flor, whom I contacted through Fidelia. They were nearly wild-eyed about their experiment with the Internet in their village of Mazatlán Villa Flores. Salvador, who works for the indigenous government in the village, said they have installed computers and a satellite dish, so that they can access the Internet without having to rely on the limited and unreliable phone lines in the area.

July 8

With Connor and Gabriel in tow, I traveled today by bus to Santo Domingo Tepustepéc, a Mixe village high in the mountains outside of Oaxaca City. An official from Oaxaca’s
department of education had told me in an interview that computers with Internet access had been installed there as part of an effort to reduce the extreme isolation of indigenous communities. He assured me that researching there, even with Connor, would present no problems. Take your son with you, he said. He’ll learn Mixe. He gave me the name of a schoolteacher there, who he said would help me.

After a three-hour drive, we arrived in Ayutla, little more than a mountain-top crossroads, with a handful of stucco houses. The road was lined with covered taco stands and bodegas, selling woolen jackets and blankets, because it was rainy and cold at that altitude. Here, the highway buses stop, and travelers must rely on a collection of ramshackle private vehicles for transportation further into the mountains. We took this option, since the village is about 30 miles away.

After finding a truck and cheerful Mixe driver, we set off. The road, which winds along the mountain ridge with no guardrail against a sheer drop into canyons, had turned to mud in the rain, and the fog was so thick that we could see only about ten feet in front of us. Still, it was clear that this man had driven the road a thousand times, so I wasn’t anxious, even with the boys in the back. The atmosphere delighted them. “I can’t even see a tree,” Connor shouted. Gabriel replied, “It looks haunted out there.” They decided that it was an “ice age” up there.

An hour or so later, we pulled into Santo Domingo Tepustepéc along a road that passed bare, stucco houses and a single community store before ending in front of the crumbling remains of a Spanish colonial church. Stepping out of the truck, it was clear that the boys were not going to be surrounded by chattering children ready to teach them Mixe. No one looked at us, and people ignored my greetings in Spanish. A man, evidently the only Spanish
speaker, told me that the teacher would not be back for two days. We could wait for him, spending the night on the floor of the school. By then the sky was darkening. It was getting colder, and staying there overnight seemed like a bad idea.

On the way back to Oaxaca, I wracked my brain, trying to figure out how I could report on the village. It’s clear that the research would require more than a day trip, and that the boys couldn’t accompany me. The town was too desolate. Then it dawned on me that I could leave this kind of research to people who are half my age. I felt disloyal, because I have always felt a responsibility to write about poor rural people, because they are so often ignored. Then I realized that they might not want me to write about them.

July 9

I must record what happened during my interview with Don Edgar, the mestizo leader of the Triqui Movement of Unification and Struggle (MULT), which transformed from an organization to a political party. He is a contact of Jessica, who calls him Don Edgar, an honorific usually applied to older and respected people. Since he had already stood me up once, I thought he would show up out of embarrassment, if nothing else. But when I arrived, he wasn’t at his office, a house behind a large iron gate in a working class section of town. I tried to persuade another man, second in command of the party, to let me interview him. Anxiously, he kept trying to get Don Edgar on his cell phone, and then, with much relief, noticed through the window that he had arrived.

The back door of the van slid open to reveal Don Edgar in a wheelchair, the result, I would find out later, of an assault he believes was orchestrated by state security. His aides took him out, set him on the ground, and wheeled him into the party headquarters. He was clearly the leader; people scurried to help out while the man who greeted me handed over my
card and explained that I had come for my interview. Don Edgar glanced at it, clearly unimpressed. His aides disappeared, Don Edgar told me to pull up a chair. I was just pulling out my tape recorder and explaining my study when Don Edgar erupted.

“Yes, but how can you help us?”

Taken aback, I replied that I could offer only the results of my work.

“That’s what they all say,” he burst out. And then they just disappear to write their theses.” He sputtered on about academics, who come down to Oaxaca, shove tape recorders at people, and then disappear

Irritated, since it was a Saturday and I had sacrificed a day with my son for this interview, I offered to leave, but he ignored me. We continued talking, and when I told him I worked in Mexico as a journalist for seven years, covering NAFTA, the Salinas era, and the Zapatistas, his face lit up.

“Why didn’t you tell me? That is your credential,” he said. “Not this.” He dropped my card on the table.

For the next hour, most everything he said was self-aggrandizing. The current blossoming of indigenous support for MULT was owed not to a broader resurgence of indigenous activity but to long years of hard work on the part of the party. (The Lenin poster on the wall of his office suggested how long he has been in politics.) Still, he was interesting because of his defensiveness about the “indigenous cause,” as if he, as one of the old leftists, he felt upstaged by it. He ranted on about how poverty, not indigenous rights, is the most important issue. The people in the countryside, regardless of whether or not they are indigenous, lack education, health care, running water, and electricity. Babies die in your arms. Then he went to talk about bringing back the Revolution to Mexico.
July 11

Today I returned to OIDHO, the organization whose office is surrounded by cornfields, to speak with its leader, Enrique. The only furniture in the office was a rough, wooden table, the only decoration, a Che Guevara poster. The place fit the pattern. The organizations that are led, as well as made up of indigenous people, scramble along with next to no resources.

Enrique turned out to be among the most articulate of the activists I have met here. A Zapotec and a lawyer, he talked about the development of Oaxaca’s indigenous movement from the 1980s, when a burst of activism led to period of harsh repression, until the post-Zapatista era, when the movement has grown rapidly, with new indigenous organizations cropping up all over the state. Like Don Edgar, Enrique seemed to view longevity as a badge of honor. Perhaps groups that followed the Zapatistas are considered less legitimate, since they came to the cause when it was easier and safer to do so. Or perhaps the old groups are defensive about the success of the new ones.

Enrique, like Isaak and the CIPO people, said he just got out of jail, where he was held on various security-related charges and tortured. I have rarely, while researching a single issue, interviewed so many recent political prisoners.

July 19

This work has been physically exhausting, because I move constantly, from one office to the next, from one town to the next. And I never know what the interviews will entail, which is different from when I was a journalist and rarely started reporting without a good idea of what I would get. This is better, since my mind is more open, but it is tiring.

Yesterday, for example, I thought I was going to an interview with Arturo, Fidelia’s friend. Instead, it turned into a daylong excursion. First, we went to a piece of land that Arturo
is considering buying through his organization, the Society of Responsible Rural Production. Then we drove into the mountains, from one village to the next, visiting women who have received “micro loans” through another of his projects. Our conversations while driving around in the truck were far more useful than our formal interview.

July 21

Today I had my second interview with Esteban, the leader of the Organization of the Zapotec Indian People (OPIZ) who was imprisoned and tortured. It was more productive than the first interview, though he rambles with such determination that I had to interrupt him often. We reviewed the narrative of his detention, along with dozens of other indigenous men from the Loxicha region.

For once, having Connor around was an advantage, because Isaak brought his son. The boys played in the rain in front of the beautiful Santo Domingo church while Isaak and I talked. For that moment, everything important to me was within sight.

He seemed anxious to establish that his OPIZ, too, had international ties, as if that made it more legitimate. I tried to reassure him, so he wouldn’t exaggerate. I am not looking for a particular kind of answer, which is a tremendous relief. As a journalist, I operated under such pressure to quickly come up with something publishable that I often did what I insisted the press did not do: Decided on the story, then found material to back it up.

July 26

Today I finished my last Oaxaca interview, and it was with the CIPO people. Patricia told me last night that she would have time early in the morning, so I arrived at 8 AM. Once inside, we crossed the muddy grounds of the complex to a covered area with a long wooden table and an open stove, where someone was making coffee. We sat down, and shegestured
toward an older man, Esteban, who joined us. Because he wasn’t sure of my identity, I had to go into the spiel that makes me so uncomfortable. I am just a student doing my dissertation. He seemed perfectly happy with my explanation, and it occurred to me that perhaps he doesn’t care about what I may or may not be able to do for him. Perhaps our relationship—whether he likes and trusts me—is more important.

We launched into our interview, and he confirmed what others here have said. CIPO does not have much support from the international community, nor from the human rights groups here in Oaxaca. Hallway through the interview, a tall, thin young man, obviously a foreigner, wandered over looking for breakfast. A Spaniard, he joked that he had come to Oaxaca to “hacer la revolucion” (make revolution), and once again the scenario was reminiscent of Nicaragua, when international solidarity workers arrived to support the Sandinista revolution.

Esteban indicated that we should eat, so we shared bread and coffee. Afterward, we continued our conversation. He said that the indigenous community’s goals would be achieved not in his or even his children’s lifetimes but in the lifetimes of their children. With that comment, I realized that not only did his conception of time differ from my own. He also viewed his interests as extending beyond himself and his family to future generations of the indigenous community, and in this, he could hardly be more different than me. I realized that despite 15-plus years of living and working in Latin America, I couldn’t understand Esteban’s experience of the world.
CHAPTER 5

CONSTRUCTING ACTIVISM

Introduction

In the past two decades, civil society has grown in Oaxaca, particularly after the emergence of the Zapatistas in 1994 forced international and national attention on the plight of Mexico’s indigenous people (Norget 157-165, Anaya Munoz, 422-426). In Oaxaca, dozens of organizations now describe themselves as indigenous, serve the indigenous community, or at least include indigenous in their names. Indeed, the Indigenous Information Network includes more than 50 indigenous organizations promoting Indian cultural, economic, political, and civil and human rights.

Many of the organizations fall into two categories: grass roots indigenous organizations, self-described in some cases as organizaciones de masa (mass organizations), and non-governmental human rights organizations (NGOs), which consider indigenous people to be their constituents because in Oaxaca, Indians are most often the victims of human rights abuses. ¹ This chapter focuses on two of the mass organizations, the Popular Indigenous

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¹ Centro de Derechos Humanos Bartolome Carrasco (Bartolome Carrasco Center for Human Rights); Centro de Derechos Indigenas Flor y Canto (Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights); Centro de Derecho Humanos Juu Ni Kandii (Juu Ni Kandii Center for Human Rights); Centro Diocesano de Pastoral Indígena de Oaxaca (Diocesan Center for the Indigenous Pastoral of Oaxaca); Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon (Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon); Convergencia Indígena Popular (Popular Indigenous Convergence); Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacional (Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations); Liga Mexicano por la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights); Organizacion del Pueblo Indigena Zapoteco (Organization of Zapotec Indigenous People); Organizaciones Indias por los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca (Indian Organizations for Human Rights in Oaxaca); Red de Informacion Indígena (Indigenous Information Network); Red Oaxaquena de Derechos Humanos; (Oaxacan Human Rights Network); Todo Derechos para Todos (All Rights for Everyone).
Council of Oaxaca, Ricardo Flores Magon (CIPO) and the Organization of the Zapotec Indian People, and an NGO, the Bartolome Carrasco Human Rights Center (BARCO).

To provide readers with a framework, the chapter explores activists’ conceptualizations of their organizations, their work, and their relationships with fellow activists. It focuses on their experience with the urgent action system because it is a manifestation of the topic of this dissertation—the indigenous movement and its Internet-enabled alliances with transnational social movements.

While few of the indigenous organizations in this study used the Internet for significant political work within Oaxaca, all of them used urgent actions to protect themselves and their constituents against human rights abuses. Indeed, when describing the new opportunities provided by the Internet, virtually all of the organizations interviewed spoke of the urgent actions as a new and important means of informing the world about government-sponsored abuse of indigenous people.

In this context, the Internet could be described as giving indigenous people a new global voice and the ability to create alliances with important international allies and participate in global civil society—to be a part of a new social movement, in other words. However, as I found in interviews with member and leaders of the mass organizations and NGOs, having access to global civil society and being able to participate in it on equal footing are different issues. The paragraphs below seek to explain that difference through the narratives and comments of Indian activists and people within the NGOs who work with them.

*CIPO: Leftist Politics and Indigenous Rights*
The city of Oaxaca, the capital of the state, is arranged around a colonial district of towering cathedrals, cobblestone streets, and cafes and hotels that are priced for the tourists. From there, the city widens, and generally the further one gets from the center, the poorer the neighborhood. On the edges of Oaxaca, colonial architecture is replaced by crumbling one-story stucco buildings and empty lots. It is in one of the poorer neighborhoods that CIPO’s headquarters are located.

Despite the awkwardness of my first visit to CIPO headquarters when I spoke with Patricia, I was invited back, greeted this time by Sergio, another of the organization’s leaders. He showed me to a large room with a single computer, piles of dusty newspapers along one wall, and mats, where CIPO members and guests sleep. The owner of one was a young woman, a Spaniard from the sound of her Spanish, and Sergio greeted her as *companera*, the politically charged term that Latin America leftists—at least those who consider their work revolutionary—use with like-minded friends and acquaintances.

A young, intense Zapotec man, Sergio showed little of Patricia’s reticence. Instead, after seating himself at one of a handful of chairs in the bare room, he launched into an explanation of CIPO’s history, calling it a mass organization, the phrase that describes the grassroots organizations working to organize campesinos in Oaxaca’s indigenous rural zones. CIPO arose from the indigenous activism of the 1970s, according to Sergio. In those years, leftist and student organizations, as well as the Catholic Church, began to organize and support Oaxaca’s rural population, which continues to be populated primarily by indigenous people (Anaya Munoz 422-424; Norget 157-160).

At that point, Sergio said, indigenous rights were not a primary issue. Rather, activists focused on improving the deplorable living conditions in rural villages. The aim was to bring
to villages at least basic services, such as running water, electricity, and schools and health clinics. It was in the 1980s that people began organizing around the issue of indigenous rights, focusing on autonomy and cultural preservation, a tendency that intensified particularly after the Zapatistas emerged.

The indigenous struggle continues to be defined by the expansion of U.S.-led global capitalism, Sergio continued. In Latin America, that expansion has come in the form of neoliberal reforms. Mexico is at the center of this effort and Oaxaca, in particular, has been targeted because it is richer in natural resources than any other Mexican state. As such, the indigenous movement is fighting a larger battle against capitalist expansion—fighting a battle for everyone who has been marginalized by global capitalism.

Sergio did not include the human rights NGOs in his discussion of indigenous activism, and in this he appeared to echo the views of other mass organization activists, among them, Enrique, the current director of OIDHO. Enrique, who describes himself as one of CIPO’s founders before he left to form OIDHO, works out of a single room in a low-slung building in a neighborhood of dirt roads and empty lots on the outskirts of town. Like Sergio, he made a point of his longevity in indigenous activism. A Zapotec lawyer, he started working to defend indigenous human rights in the 1980s, when “institutionalized violence” began to be directed at indigenous people. “We began to see that there were cases of torture and killings in the indigenous communities because they were fighting for their land,” he said.

The long trajectory of his and other mass organizations contrasts with that of the human rights organizations founded in the 1990s and early 2000s. They arose, he said dryly, after “la bomba” (the bomb) of the Zapatistas, when it was both safer and easier to work as an indigenous activist.
The Zocalo Arrests

It was in September of 2005, less than a year after the election of Ruiz, that CIPO members, including Patricia, were arrested for joining in a demonstration in Oaxaca’s Zocalo, the sprawling central plaza in front of the city’s largest cathedral. It was a “planton permanente,” (permanent protest), according to Patricia, a daily reminder of the increase in human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions and arrests and illegal imprisonments and torture. Protests, demonstrations, marches, and hunger strikes are a staple of Mexican politics, permitted and even supported by the federal government as a means of allowing the public to vent frustrations that might otherwise erupt into more threatening resistance. However, the Zocalo demonstration became a nuisance once the Ruiz administration decided to tear down and rebuild much of the plaza, Patricia said.

After the arrests, Esteban, an elder leader of CIPO, first contacted Oaxaca’s state human rights commission and when that failed, he turned to the network of human rights NGOs in Oaxaca. He said that because they did “only the minimum” and he could see no progress, he sought out other groups, finally taking a bus to Mexico City, where he met with members of the Sindicato de Transportistas, (Transportation Workers Union) which has been longtime ally of CIPO. He also met with Mexico City-based civil society organizations, among them SERAPAZ, which arose as part of efforts to mediate the conflict in Chiapas. He described SERAPAZ as “independent” of government rather than allied with it, as are some of Oaxaca NGOs. “We worked with them (the union and SERAPAZ), because they understood us, understood that this was an urgent situation.”
According to Patricia and Esteban, the Red Cross eventually visited the prisoners in jail. And by July of 2005, Patricia and most of the others had been released. By that time, Patricia said bitterly, she and the other prisoners had been imprisoned and abused for more than nine months “They (NGOs in Oaxaca) didn’t do anything,” Patricia said. “We were tortured, they beat us. There were a lot of violations. But nothing was done. They didn’t send anyone to see if we really had been beaten. We didn’t get any attention. We had to go knocking on a lot of doors.”

Gently correcting her, Esteban said that it was not that the local NGOs made no effort at all. However, they did not fight for CIPO. In explanation, he described another staple of Mexican politics, in which federal and state governments have neutralized opposition by supporting selected dissidents groups, often with paid offices and other financial resources, in order to create the illusion of political tolerance and democracy. Esteban said, “They don’t get deeply involved, because then they will be confronting the monster. If you are an organization that is completely independent, you do not receive anything from the state. So their hands are tied,” he said. More bluntly, Patricia said that some of the Oaxaca NGOS are not truly independent, because they receive funds from the government.

*International Alliances Are “a Palliative.”*

When I returned to the CIPO headquarters for the last time, Patricia and Esteban were concerned about another case of what they considered to be human rights abuse, this time near the rural village of Soledad. They said that the tiny community of about 25 people was in the midst of a battle with a neighboring community over access to the river. The Soledad community—allied with no political party, according to Patricia and Esteban—had been
besieged by San Cristobal, a town of more than 100 people. The aggressors had threatened to kill the smaller town’s children, and fighting appeared ready to break out.

Although Oaxacan state forces were not involved in the case, Patricia and Esteban viewed it as politically motivated because Soledad had sought the right to elect an autonomous indigenous government, while San Cristobal supported the PRI. Patricia and Esteban said they had notified the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), but their calls had been ignored.

That story sparked accounts of other recent incidents: The beating, Patricia said, of several women in the town of San Ysidro; and the death threat against Raul, the companero who fled to Canada. Nor had they received much assistant in those cases, according to Patricia and Esteban. And when the urgent actions do work, Esteban said, they are a “palliative” because they do not reflect or create real change. They do not exert pressure for the kind of profound reform that would bring government tolerance and acceptance of indigenous activism and rights. Instead, they correct abusive circumstances after the fact. He said, “The urgent actions can alleviate the problem, ease anxiety about individual companeros, but we must be clear. They (urgent actions) do not resolve the problem. [That they work in individual cases] does not indicate that there is new respect for human rights of Indians.”

In this sense, Esteban said, there has been little fundamental change for indigenous people throughout the entire 20th century. In the early part of the century, Oaxaca’s Indians, emboldened by the promises of the 1910 Revolution, intensified pressure for improvement in the conditions in which indigenous people lived, including land reform, according to Esteban. Those protests were suppressed with violence, and resistance died down.
The Zapatistas brought a new wave of indigenous activism throughout Mexico and particularly in Oaxaca, where the indigenous movement already had grown in strength (Anaya Munoz 424-425; Barabas 4-8). That pressure, too, met with state violence, Esteban said. There has been superficial change in recent years, including international attention to indigenous issues and national dialogue about autonomy and other aggrandized indigenous rights. However, the only profound change, he argued, has been within the indigenous community itself:

What is different is that before the Zapatista uprising, the communities were quiet, forgotten. When the Zapatistas emerged, the indigenous community woke up. We reject war as a solution, but we are part of the Chiapas situation because it is about all of us. The situation has changed [since the Zapatistas] because there is more [government] repression. This is the change that we have. Now our state is more aggressive. Why? Because the people have learned. They are rising up. They are making an outcry. This is our reality. The state is more aggressive, and we are losing our fear. Why? Because our companeros have learned that they can go to jail and survive. It did not make them weep.

*OPIZ—Grass Roots Political Activism and Indigenous Self-Government.*

Isaak, the young Zapotec leader of OPIZ, describes his home, a southwestern portion of Oaxaca known as Loxicha, as an isolated, rural zone of small Indian communities where many residents speak only Zapotec. Here the abuse of indigenous rights is not only physical but also manifested in the extreme poverty of indigenous communities—in the lack of basic services,
such as water, electricity, schools and medical clinics, which deny Indians the ability to live
dignified, decent lives.

In 1984, Isaak said, OPIZ formed in an effort to defeat caciquismo, a form of hybrid
local government derived from indigenous leaders, or caciques, who led small pre-Conquest
indigenous communities. After the Conquest, Spanish administrators co-opted caciques to
establish control in rural regions. (Nash 41-46; Higgins 41-42). In the 20th century, the PRI
manipulated caciquismo to exert control over myriad tiny villages and towns in rural Mexico.
Local allies of the PRI, both indigenous and mestizo, ran municipalities through patronage
and selective distribution of resources.

According to Isaak, OPIZ sought to rid Loxicha of caciquismo by replacing the PRI-
dominated party system with uses and customs. By the mid-1990s, Isaak said, OPIZ had
managed to get many of its members into municipal government, and that success sparked a
government crackdown aimed at counteracting a de facto indigenous autonomy.

By then, state and federal officials were anxious that intensified indigenous activism
throughout Oaxaca might be a harbinger of another Chiapas-style conflict (Munoz, 424-426).
In late August of 1996, state officials’ fears were realized when dozens of guerrillas from the
EPR emerged to attack municipal offices in Huatulco, a resort town of time-shares and luxury
hotels near the border between Guerrero and Oaxaca (Nusser). The assault was part of
coordinated EPR attacks in those states, as well as in the states of Tabasco, Guanajuato, and
Mexico. During the next weeks and months, state security forces in both Oaxaca and Guerrero
rounded up indigenous peasants for questioning in a counterinsurgency sweep.

In Loxicha, according to Isaak, state security forces detained 150 people, many of them
Zapotec men who had been elected through the traditional indigenous elections. It was clear
that state forces had targeted Zapotec leaders, because people who were in positions of leadership were sent to jail, while those who had nothing to do with politics were released. He said:

We had fought against caciquismo, so the government of the state decided it had to completely destroy the fabric of society in the region. They accused us of being connected to the EPR. They tortured people so that they would say that others were guilty and that they were themselves guilty. So there was no way out—no legal way out. Because prisoners had confessed under physical and psychological torture. Because there was the threat of being killed if they didn’t confess. They made us sign documents that we didn’t understand, or they made us sign blank documents so they could fill them out afterwards. That was how we got sentenced to prison terms.

Most of the 150 people detained stayed in prison at least one to two years before they were released. Seventeen of them, including Isaak, who had been accused of being commanders within the EPR or of taking part in the assault on Huatulco, were transferred to Almaloya, a high-security prison outside of Mexico City. The prisoners and their families tried to wade through a legal process that was purposely slowed by judges “who declared themselves unable to preside over the trials and turned them (cases) over to another judge,” according to Isaak. Five years after he was first detained, Isaak was released, because the state couldn’t produce enough evidence against him. By 2005, all but nine of the original prisoners were released, and Isaak continues to lobby on their behalf.

Despite his long jail term, Isaak showed little if any of the bitterness that Patricia and other CIPO members expressed. In contrast, as we sat in a café across from Oaxaca’s Santo
Domingo Cathedral, he seemed embarrassed that the international community had not made more of an outcry.

When I asked about whether human rights organizations had helped secure the Loxicha prisoners release, he said, with a defensive note in his voice, that Amnesty International had put them on its web site, declaring them political prisoners and demanding their release. He said that the prisoners were supported by three Mexican human rights NGOs—the Mexican Human Rights Network; the Christian Association Against Torture (ACAT); and the Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights.

When asked for details about the nature of intervention by the human rights organizations, it was what Isaak didn’t say that was most revealing. He did not discuss letter-writing campaigns or phone calls to Mexican state or federal official, or visits to the prisoners in jail. Rather, he described international support as an indirect pressure that resulted from the post-Zapatista attention to the plight of Mexico’s indigenous people. In particular, Isaak mentioned that President Fox’s *Partido de Accion Nacional* (Party of National Action, or PAN) “came to Oaxaca and promised to search for a mechanism to liberate the Loxicha prisoners” because it hoped to open negotiations with the Zapatistas. He continued:

> There were urgent actions from the human rights groups, local and international. They were asking for the cessation for repression of indigenous communities, an end to the illegal detentions, an end to the forced disappearances, liberty for the indigenous prisoners.” What was fundamental, though, he said, was the “action of the wives and the families” of the prisoners.

*Human Rights NGOs*
BARCO is among the most active of Oaxaca’s human rights NGOs. It is located in a middle-class section of the city, and in contrast to the mass organizations, BARCO has modest but at least serviceable offices, with tables, desks, chairs, a filing cabinet, a computer and a phone. Its director, Rosalva, a Zapotec speaker, is an efficient, articulate woman, who lends an air of western professionalism to the organization. On the day that I arrived, she was receiving two Catholic visitors from the United States, giving them a presentation on the deteriorating human rights situation in Oaxaca.

Because I had just made my first trip to CIPO headquarters and was worried about what seemed to be the activists’ dire circumstances, I immediately mentioned them to Rosalva. She responded with a sigh. Yes, we understand that their situation is serious. But they have not been abandoned.

Later in the interview, as she explained her role in the urgent action system, her frustration with the CIPO activists became clear. As BARCO’s director, she is among Oaxaca’s highly active human rights activists who form the first line of defense in the urgent action system. She receives emails from organizations, such as CIPO, which do not have their own connections to Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and other of the powerful international human rights groups. She either involves herself directly in the case, sending emails and letters to government officials demanding resolution. Or she uses her political capital with the larger international organizations, asking them to intervene.

With one assistant, she handles all of the work in her office, including the growing number of urgent actions. Pleas for help have increased, she said, because of the deterioration in the human rights situation and because access to the Internet has made it easier for all types
of organizations to send urgent actions. She is overwhelmed with urgent actions, receiving more than she can respond to.

She said she worries that the urgent action system—which is vital to her work, since human rights abuse often is resolved only under pressure from international organizations—has become ineffective because it is overused. When there were fewer urgent actions, she said, government officials paid more attention to them.

In this opinion, she was joined by others interviewed for this study, particularly the Mexico City-based group, All Rights for Everyone. Among Mexico’s most active human rights NGOs, All Rights for Everyone is run by two people, Carlos and his co-director, who spoke with me in their cramped office in Mexico City. Carlos said that the group receives urgent actions from all over Mexico but particularly from Oaxaca, because of the intensity of its conflict. The most trustworthy organizations, according to Carlos, send detailed and carefully confirmed reports of human rights groups. However, less careful groups, “send out urgent actions about almost anything—about things they don’t know about directly,” he said. “Instead, the information is coming from the newspapers, or it’s something someone said, or they say that they know it’s going on. It becomes difficult for those of us outside [the location of the reported abuse] because we can’t tell when immediately intervention is really needed and when it is not.”

Like Rosalva, Carlos said he is concerned that government officials have become immune to urgent actions. During the summer of 2005, both he and Rosalva were considering overhauling the system to standardize criteria for circumstances dire enough to require urgent actions.
BARCO and All Rights for Everyone are among a loose alliance of human rights NGOs, whose directors often know each other and have worked together. In Oaxaca, the alliance is formalized within the Oaxacan Human Rights Network, which includes four organizations, BARCO, the Mexican League for Human Rights, Flower and Song Center for Indigenous Rights; and the Nu Jii Kandii Center for Human Rights.

They share the professionalism of Rosalva’s approach, as well as connections to the Catholic Church, local, national, or international. They meet on a regular basis in the offices of the Oaxacan Human Rights Network, located in a middle-class section near the tourist district. They are the alliance that mass organization activists view as the gateway to power that can protect them and their constituents from illegal detention and arrests, imprisonment, torture, and even death.

A central figure in this network is Francisco, the mestizo former director of BARCO who left to direct the Center of the Indigenous Pastoral (CEDIPIO), which emerged when Oaxaca’s Catholic church, during a progressive era in the 1970s, made new efforts to address more rigorously the concerns of its Indian followers, which included human rights abuse (Norget 159-164).

Though he is not a member of the Oaxacan Human Rights Network, Francisco is well known by the people within it. He is the kind of person who can get the director of the state human rights commission on the phone after hours, and he appears to use alliances with the international community with great success. He said that he uses the urgent action system on behalf of human rights victims several times a month, and in some 80 percent of the cases, it works to get people out of jail or in other ways resolve crises.
Describing a recent case in which members of a rural community were taken prisoner by a rival village, he said, “The urgent actions are vital. When I heard about this case, I immediately sent out an urgent action, and later on in the very same evening, the prisoners were released.” When the system does not work, he said, it is because of the stubbornness of state officials. Francisco used the example of Las Noticias, Oaxaca’s opposition newspaper, because it was under virtual siege by government-allied thugs at the time of our interview.

The system does not work when it involves the interests of the state. Not even the office of the presidency is persuasive under those circumstances. Look at the case of Noticias, The government of the state is violating the right to work, the liberty of expression, the right to information. Flagrantly violating those rights. And the federal government, through the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), made a recommendation to the state government to ease up on Noticias. I know because I got the memo because I had been pressuring the case. And the state just denied that it was doing anything, even though it was obvious the state forces were involved.”

Conclusions

There is a divide between perceptions of the effectiveness of international alliances, and this gap seems to reflect a difference in power. People like Francisco believe that essentially the urgent action system works, and when it does not, failure is owed to the intractability of a regressive state government. Failure is the exception and success the rule. For the mass organizations, failure stems from their status as outsiders, their lack of access not only to power within government but also to power within the network of human rights organizations that are supposed to protect them.
Activists from CIPO, in particular, described their status as a problem of neglect. CIPO activists believe that they are ignored by the Oaxacan NGOs and, as a result, cut off from the international human rights groups able to assist them. Some within the mass organizations, notably CIPO leaders Esteban and Patricia, perceive divided loyalties and dishonesty within the NGOs. He remarked that the Oaxacan NGOs do not commit themselves to working on behalf of indigenous activists because they cannot afford to alienate their sources of funding within the government. OPIZ leader Isaak, though he expresses none of the bitterness of the CIPO activists, likewise describes himself and the other Loxicha prisoners as getting little assistance from the Mexican organizations that act as gateways to global civil society.

Part of the gap between the grass roots indigenous activists and those who work for the NGOs appears to rest in cultural difference. The NGOs are run by educated and worldly people, who are familiar with the professional standards of western organizations and institutions. In contrast, the mass organizations are led by people from the rural indigenous populations, and they often are unfamiliar with the professionalism that is necessary for operating well within western milieus. NGO directors, notably Carlos from TDT, complain that indigenous organizations send them unconfirmed urgent actions, drawn from rumors and innuendo. Meanwhile, some of the grass-roots activists complain that the NGOs ask too many questions and then do nothing. In Isaak’s case, his wife did not employ the Internet in her quest for his release because she did not know how to use a computer.

The loyalties of grassroots groups are relatively undivided. They are committed to their leaders and members, the communities from which those people are drawn, and in some cases to other like-minded indigenous organizations. In contrast, the NGOs necessarily must
divide their loyalties. They define their missions as protecting victims of human rights abuse, who are usually indigenous, owing to the demographics of Oaxaca. However, they also must operate within a global network of varied organizations, Catholic as well as secular humanitarian, which are guided by western notions of professionalism and responsibility. In order to be effective, they must conform to the standards, behavior, and work-place cultures of the government that they struggle against. As a result, they see the lack of professionalism in some urgent actions as a threat to their own credibility with powerful international organizations.

These are the dynamics that shape the mass organizations’ experience with Internet-enabled alliances with the international community. While their conflict is clearly played out in the international arena, they have little control over the process or the outcome. The Internet provides technological access to Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch but not the ability to leverage those organizations’ power. For the latter, the Oaxaca activists would need already established human alliances within those groups. In this, the activists are at a disadvantage that is not eased by technology. Further, though they have access to western technology, they do not have the cultural capital to use it effectively. In other words, though technology gives them an avenue to power, they are not able to use that power because of structural barriers. At another level, the activists do not see themselves as participating on an equal footing in the globalization of their local conflict. The sources of power within the global sphere are still beyond their reach.
CHAPTER 6

CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY

Introduction

Indigenous people in southern Mexico identify life in the agrarian villages that Indians have inhabited since before the Conquest as the source and carrier of their cultures and identities (Nash 31-75; Higgins 130-135). While Indian communities in cities practice Indian traditions, they are more consistently played out in the small villages and towns in the rural zones. In the small villages scattered throughout the plains and mountains of Oaxaca, people eat indigenous foods and celebrate the indigenous festivals, hybrids that reflect both Indian and Christian religious beliefs and practices.

Equally important, the practices that create the male-dominated egalitarian communalism that characterizes many indigenous societies are most consistently practiced in the villages. Land is still farmed communally; men are expected to participate in the tequío, a
form of unpaid labor for the benefit of the community, and increasingly villages are governed through uses and customs, which govern locally through councils that make consensus-based decisions.

This form of indigenous life has become increasingly untenable, however. In the 1970s, federal government focus on industrial development shifted resources from the rural zones into the cities. In the 1980s, neoliberal economic reforms altered Article 27, a constitutional amendment adopted just after the 1910 Revolution to facilitate indigenous farmers’ communal ownership of territory. The reform allowed for the privatization of collectively owned indigenous farms. Other reforms of the same period also eliminated the price controls that had sheltered small farmers from the global market (Nash 81-91).

In these decades, all of the indigenous regions of Oaxaca have been depopulated, as people, primarily men, have left for cash-paying jobs in the United States or Mexican cities (Bartolome and Barabas 40-41). By 2000, 46 percent of Oaxacan households in the state’s central valley included at least one migrant, according to Cohen and Rodriguez, of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies at the University of California, San Diego.

Accordingly, many indigenous activists, including several in this study, have focused on the simple but difficult task of making life in rural villages more viable. They are focused on the basics—expanding or at least retaining indigenous land holdings, bringing in services, such as running water and electricity, and creating opportunity through schools that might encourage young people to remain in their villages. As such, the preservation of indigenous culture and identity is embedded in their struggle, though they do not often describe their work as “identity politics.” At the same time, some activists draw on indigenous traditions—
notably autonomous local government—to improve material conditions in rural villages and by doing so reinforce those traditions.

In other words, activism aimed at the survival of indigenous rural life becomes a form of cultural preservation. Aldo Gonzales, director of the Union of Organizations of the Sierra of Juarez (UNOSJO), refers to this dynamic in an interview with the online publication Biodiversidad.

The economic situation for our communities has driven many young people to migrate, mainly to the United States, looking for money to buy things, to build their homes. This is breaking down our communities’ form of organization, as many of those young people no longer pay attention to the elders, and because when they come back from the United States they bring new technologies and no longer want to work the land like people have always worked it. They believe that technology will solve the problems, but after a few years they realize that it may not be so. I think that even though gaps have been opened through which many young people have left their communities, today people are coming back to the value of the traditional knowledge of our elders. It may have been neglected for many years, but now the need is clear for the knowledge of our communities’ elders to be recovered and put into practice.

This chapter uses the comments and narratives of activists from all over the state to illustrate this convergence between what we, as scholars and journalists from highly developed western nations, describe as identity politics and what indigenous people describe as a politics of survival.

Uses and Customs

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Salvador, a Mazateca activist, describes his hometown, Mazatlán Villa Flores, as typical of Oaxaca’s agricultural indigenous regions. Tucked into the Sierra Mazateca north of Oaxaca City, it is the municipal center for more than 70 small farming villages, most of which barely survive. Until recently, the region was so impoverished that many villages lacked basic services, such as electricity, running water, and even roads. People, especially ambitious young men hoping to advance through education, have flowed out of the region and into Mexico City or the major cities of Oaxaca.

For the last several decades, Salvador said, the towns and villages languished under the administration of the local PRI government. Elected to their posts often through fraud, local PRI officials built corrupt and inefficient government that demanded payment and bribes for the administration of basic duties, such as registering new babies. “You had to pay two cases of beer to register boys and one case for girls,” he said with a wry smile. “And even then the officials didn’t manage to do the job so that you’d find out when your children were grown that they had never been registered.”

In the early 1990s, Salvador said, regional Mazateca activists, including himself and his wife, Flor, intensified their call for indigenous autonomy. They had been galvanized by the momentum of the accelerating indigenous movement in Mexico, indeed in all of Latin America (Barabas 2-4 1996; Nash 20-27). Their immediate goal was the restoration of usos y costumbres, which Indians in the region have sought, with varying ferocity and success, since just after the Spanish Conquest.

By 1991, according to Salvador, Mazatlán had resurrected usos y costumbres in an informal fashion. In 1995 and 1997, in response to intensified pressure from the indigenous community and because of a series of relatively progressive governors, Oaxaca’s Constitution
was amended to put into practice usos y costumbres at the municipal level (Anaya Munoz). The state also passed an indigenous rights law that promised to protect a series of rights, including the tequio.

In Mazatlán Villa Flores, according to Salvador, the indigenous communities, in deference to a minority of PRI supporters, chose to blend usos y costumbres with aspects of the old party system to create a hybrid form of elections and government. Mazatlán Villa Flores now employs traditional direct and open elections, in which all male members of the community vote through a show of hands or signatures on a roster. Those elected form an asamblea comunitaria (community assembly), which makes consensus-based decisions for Mazatlán and the surrounding villages. The community assembly also takes input from padrones, elected representatives of the small communities.

Salvador and Flor are part of a non-governmental organization in the region, which negotiates with the state government on behalf of the community assembly. For example, Salvador says, once the assembly decides to pursue a development project, it is his job to find state or federal funding for it.

In July of 2005, when I interviewed the couple in a café in downtown Oaxaca City, they were staying in the state capital, because a political conflict in the town had paralyzed local government. Local PRI loyalists had taken over the municipal offices in protest of the indigenous community assembly and refused to leave. Despite the setback, both Salvador and Flor exuded optimism and were certain that within a few weeks they would be back in their town, resuming work on two major projects, a community radio station and an agricultural degree program.
As the couple chatted, it became clear that they viewed the shift of power as a kind of political and economic reform, because it put financial resources that had been lost in corruption into hands of the people they consider to be the authentic representatives of the indigenous population. Since the community assembly started governing the town, according to Salvador, development that had never been attempted has advanced at a rapid pace.

Since 1991, he said, roads have been cut and electricity installed so that all 70 villages now have both. All of the villages have schools, and all but ten of the communities now have running water. The success, Salvador said, is not only material but also cultural, since it counteracts the negative images of indigenous people embedded in Mexican society, historical and contemporary. He said:

Throughout the nation, there is a part of Mexican society, the bourgeoisie classes, which says that returning to usos y costumbres is a return to backwardness—to machismo to alcoholism. But Mazatlán shows that returning to our customs generates advance—that usos y costumbres is roads, schools, and progress.

Salvador and Flor were perhaps most enthralled by what had been accomplished since the town has had access to the Internet. The community assembly installed a satellite, because phone lines are unreliable, and several Internet-enabled computers—two in Mazatlán and two in nearby villages. The access, because it overcomes extreme isolation, has been transformative, according to the couple. The community radio station relies entirely on the Internet for its news content. Students, who have had no access to a library, now download academic materials. That access has allowed the community assembly to create an online agricultural degree program, which combines contemporary agricultural techniques with
traditional indigenous farming methods that have been passed down orally from one generation to the next.

The couple views these advances, too, in complex terms. They believe that the degree programs may stem the flow of people out of the region, because it will provide a means of getting an advanced education without moving to cities. Young people, as a result, may decide to build their lives in the villages in which they were born. The couple has thought about ways to use the technology to preserve indigenous language and oral history; specifically, Salvador hopes that once people are accustomed to using computers, they can record both indigenous languages and stories that have been passed down orally. And he views Internet-enabled communication as a means of creating a public space in which members of the community can develop indigenous perspectives on their reality. He said:

It [technology] allows us to exchange information and ideas among ourselves, communicate our analyses of the good points of usos y costumbres, the good points of the political party system, what we think about our world. By informing ourselves in this way, we can develop our own perspective—our own critique. So in this way, the technology fortifies our sense of identity as Mazatecos. It fortifies our sense of who we are.

_Culture and Agriculture_

Like Salvador, Arturo, a Zapotec activist from the colonial market town of Mitla, just outside of Oaxaca City, sees his work as a means of helping indigenous people not only improve the material conditions of their lives but also preserve or resurrect indigenous ways
of living. Arturo’s avenue, though, is a return to what he described as Indians’ traditional, symbiotic relationship with the land.

In July of 2005, Arturo was focused on a project that would allow families to start self-sustaining agricultural cooperatives on small tracts of land in indigenous regions outside of Oaxaca City. Because we met on a day when he was busy with several projects, our interviews took place in his battered pickup truck, as we drove from town to town.

Our first stop was in Mitla, where we picked up a middle-aged mestizo man, the owner of a tract of land that Arturo was considering purchasing for one of his projects. When we arrived at the property, just outside of Mitla, Arturo pulled off the side of the road, and the three of us walked the land, climbing in and out of deep ruts and forcing our way through high brush and cactus. It was so overgrown that merely walking it was difficult. Still, as we traipsed the land, Arturo pointed out its attributes. By the time we had returned to his truck, he had decided to buy it. After dropping the property owner off in Mitla, we headed for the ridges and peaks of the surrounding mountains, cloud-covered in the summer rainy season. In the three towns that we visited, we met with women who had received “micro loans” to start or sustain small businesses.

In one town, a woman ran one of the tiny comedores (eateries) inside of many of the outdoor markets in rural villages. It consisted of a picnic table and a stove for cooking. Further into the mountains, another woman, who ran a small pharmacy, had installed a computer with an Internet connection to create a rural cyber café.

On the winding drive back to Mitla and later in Arturo’s office, two airy rooms with large windows opening onto the street below, he described these projects as the kind of assistance that allows indigenous people to generate their own resources, rather than rely on
assistance from a government that has taken a paternal approach to indigenous populations since the Conquest. That approach has been reflected in the intensified government attention to indigenous issues that followed the Zapatistas’ emergence. Describing what he called paternalistic assistance, Arturo said:

There is the project of *tierra firme* (firm ground)—so that you can put down your own cement floors. And there’s another project called *Oportunidades* (Opportunities), and you get 200 pesos every few months, so you can put it into a fund for your children’s school. These are assistance programs that do not do anything to alleviate long-term poverty—to reduce marginalization. On the contrary, they destroy the customs and the traditions of villages. The government says, okay, we’ll give you money for your milk, your coffee, and your bread. But [indigenous people] want the opportunity to generate my own resources. The idea is to be self-sustaining, self-sufficient—to be able to capitalize ourselves. To be able to generate our own resources.

It is a lack of separation and independence from the Mexican government and, by extension, the global economy that has left indigenous communities in poverty, Arturo said. A downward spiral began when indigenous people abandoned subsistence farming to produce cash crops. At that point, they began to adopt abusive farming techniques, such as the overuse of land and subsequent use of fertilizer to coax crops from its depleted soil. They lost their traditional relationship with the land, in which it was viewed as a family’s patrimony, and began to see it in monetary terms instead. As Arturo said:

Now the communities see the land in terms of thousands of pesos—that if they work this land they can make a good living. So they take more and more from the land, until it doesn’t produce anymore. Then they complain that it doesn’t rain anymore, and
there’s no water, and the land doesn’t produce. Then they decide they have to go to the United States to earn so that they can buy, so they can consume. And then they leave their lands. There must be a re-evaluation of land.

Along with producing a living, redefining that relationship is the point of the cooperative that will be built on the tract outside of Mitla, he said. Alongside the coffee plants, the women will plant corns, beans, and vegetables, providing much of what their families need to eat. They would still be dependent on the global market, but at least they would be sheltered from the fluctuating prices for fertilizers and seeds, since they would grow organic coffee, which requires neither. To shelter themselves from the fickle global market for raw products, they would produce for the small but steady and high-paying market of organic coffee consumers in the United States and Europe.

As we drove the highway, I pointed out that this seemed a bit utopian, considering the force of globalization. What use are self-sustaining agricultural cooperatives against projects such as Plan Puebla-Panama, a government-backed initiative for tourism development of much of southern Mexico and Central America, including indigenous territories. Arturo answered:

You’re right, Mexico, Oaxaca—for both it is impossible to fight this without international aid. But this is the great advantage. Without help, nothing can be done—that’s certain. We can’t do anything. We need alliances. We need to share this with the international community. …But look, here [we] can take advantage of a part of globalization. The Internet—as the Zapatistas did. Because what happened with the Zapatistas is that the pressure came from the outside. This is the point—that the [indigenous] people are no longer isolated. For example, capitalism comes with its
brand, its marketing, offering us Sabritas (potato chips), offering everything it wants to sell, and the [indigenous] people say, *chingar* (fuck) this is not what I want. But the great advantage is that at the same time, another kind of information is coming—so that the people can inform themselves, and they can say, all right, ‘I will take this, what I need, but not this. I am going to determine what is of benefit to me.’ And this is the great advantage of [the new] information and communication that we have. Communication does not serve just capitalism. It also serves [social] movements that are trying to create a new consciousness.

Miguel, a leader with Aldo Gonzalez of UNOSJO, takes a similar through more politicized approach to indigenous activism in the mountains for which the organization is named. The two leaders have mobilized indigenous people in a struggle against the importation of inexpensive, genetically altered corn from the United States. They argue that the grain, once introduced into Oaxaca’s ecosystem, threatens the various strains of maize that are natural to the area and which indigenous people have cultivated and depended upon for millennia ([www.unosjo.org.mx](http://www.unosjo.org.mx)).

When I arrived in Guelatao, the town in the Sierra de Juarez mountains where UNOSJO is based, Aldo was unavailable, working in mountain communities nearby. Miguel, though, agreed to meet with me in the group’s headquarters, a simple airy building with wooden floors and high beams, tucked into the side of a mountain. Miguel views their struggle as an economic one: Indigenous community’s source of food and income must be protected. However, he also describes their activism as a struggle to exist in cultural difference and separation from Mexico and the world. When I asked him if the organization had created alliances within the community of international human rights organization, he bristled. “To
the contrary. We are interested in building from within ourselves. We are concerned with projects that reflect who we are and demonstrate the value of who we are to ourselves. We do not want to be involved in any network. We do not want to be like Americans. We want space to be Indians.”

Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB)—Immigration and Cultural Preservation

The region known as the Mixteca stretches west from Oaxaca City and encompasses the Mixteco towns of Nochitlan, Huajuapan, Tlaxicala, and, finally, Juxtlahuaca. Traveling through the dry, desolate region, it seems like the struggle to maintain rural indigenous life is being lost here. In the villages and town, there is a dearth of young- and middle-aged men, because so many have migrated to the United States, primarily southern California. Here, most everyone I met had relatives living in the United States. So empty of men is the region that even when the PRI sought to draw people to a rally in Juxtlahuaca by giving out boxes of free food and household supplies, the plaza was filled with women and elderly people.

This town, a commercial center for the surrounding villages, with a large open market at its center, is home to FIOB, one of the largest and most active of Mexico’s indigenous organizations. Despite its prominence, its Oaxaca office consists of four rooms on a muddy side street several blocks from the market. It is directed by a handful of people, among them Fidelia, whom I met through people at FIOB’s office in Fresno, California.

In an interview, Fidelia explained that much of what FIOB does revolves around solving problems that arise because of the heavy flow of people out of the Mixteca. As a result, Fidelia explained, in the Mixteca, problems are binational: U.S. immigration laws and
policies; remittances, which often are Oaxaca-based families’ sole means of income; and communication between families separated by thousands of miles, border, rivers and mountains, and increasingly vigilant border patrols, U.S. government and civilian alike.

Fidelia says she works binationally, communicating back and forth with the office in Fresno, downloading information about the most recent immigration policies and helping families get in touch with each other. She is also involved, though, in the kind of effort that consumes Arturo and Salvador—helping the people who continue to live in rural villages find a means of surviving there. Like Arturo, she is working on projects that set up and disburse small loans to women, who use them to open or improve small businesses, which can be more reliable sources of income than the small agricultural that has become so difficult to maintain. In other words, she is trying to help that last practitioners of rural indigenous life find a way to survive.

Among them are the two women sitting in the FIOB office on the day that I arrive for my interview. Nubia and Blanca, both Triqui women, came from San Juan Huastepec, about one-and-a-half hours from Juxtlahuaca by car, because their 250 chickens were dying of diarrhea and they needed help paying for a veterinarian. As we waited and chatted, it became clear that they viewed preserving and passing on indigenous culture as their responsibility.

They told me that they wear huipiles (indigenous dresses)—though they are more expensive than the cheap polyester dresses sold in most markets—because they are symbols of Triqui culture. (The elaborate hand-embroidered dresses take a year to make, according to the women). They celebrate the indigenous festivals, and they are trying to teach their children to speak Triqui, despite the young people’s resistance to learn a language that can be a source of discrimination. “My daughter doesn’t want to speak Triqui because she things it’s
ugly,” Nubia told me. The other woman chimed in. “My daughter doesn’t think it’s ugly,” she said proudly. “Yes, but she doesn’t speak it either,” Nubia retorted.

On the other side of the border, in the farming region around Fresno, the U.S.-based FIOB activists also struggle with the basic problems of survival. Rufino Dominguez, who has become a prominent activist in California, has focused his efforts on lobbying for labor and citizenship rights for Mixteco immigrants (Bacon). He also has watched Mixteco culture slip away in the environs of 21st century southern California, and he encourages resisting the erosion by recreating the traditions of Mixteco village life.

Dominguez has applauded the celebration in the United States of Mixteco village festivals and exhorted Mixtecos to continue eating village food. He stressed the importance of passing down to future generations knowledge of indigenous languages, Mixteco, Zapotec, Triqui, among them, that are the “foundation of our identity,” as well as the importance of developing within the United States a communal manner of living (14). He writes:

After being established in a particular place for a period of time, we bring food products like beef jerky, tlayudas, mole, dried fish, condiments like hierba santa, epazote, sweet potato that gives a red color to rice, chapulines (locusts) that many people scorn….

In addition [we have brought] customs and traditions, such as traditional parties, according to the saints that are revered in the hometown communities. Examples of these are [festivals in] San Miguel Cuevas or Tlacotepec, Santiago, San Juan Mixtepec, in which different ceremonial dances are presented, based on time and space of the sun, moon, stars, rain, water, and earth. [The parties] are also celebrated with dances, such the devil, the blond, and the moors…. Only the famous fireworks that make thunderous
noises in the parties of Oaxaca communities are not done, because they are prohibited in the United States.

These cultural activities have been very important for the development of the [indigenous] organizations. Without them (cultural activities), there would be no collective meeting place for families to become acquainted, get together, chat, get to know the organization and vice versa….Many people become integrated in organizations… to discover their identity, food and community environment. Later, they slowly become more involved in civic duties in different aspects of daily life. They maintain community customs, socialize with each other and educate children…. [so that they understand that] Oaxaca is multicultural and pluri-lingual (12-14).

Conclusions

With the intensification of indigenous activism throughout Latin America, emphasis has been placed on preservation of indigenous traditions and languages that in the past were sources of discrimination. Within Mexico, this focus has been particularly notable in Oaxaca, because of its ethnic diversity. At least 16 ethno linguistic indigenous groups coexist in Oaxaca, and in many isolated regions of the state, some communities rely on indigenous languages rather than on Spanish. At the same time, there has been growing concern about the exodus of indigenous people out of the agrarian villages from which indigenous culture and identity have formed. As such, there are many organizations that are devoted to preservation of culture in the form of language, oral traditions, and crafts. These include Eye of Water, which produces videos about indigenous people by indigenous people (Smith).
However, preservation of culture and identity also is embedded in the work of most indigenous activists. Work aimed at improving the material conditions in which indigenous people live is also aimed at slowing the disintegration of villages, where Indian traditions are most consistently played out in daily life and where indigenous languages are still relevant. Some activists, including Flor and Salvador, articulate this goal as improving life in villages enough to keep future generations from leaving.

At the same time, indigenous activists are turning to the indigenous traditions that form identity for solutions to the myriad problems rural communities face. Faced with an agricultural crisis stemming in part from Mexico’s integration into the global economy, some activists are trying to resurrect communal, subsistence farming that produces not cash crops but the kinds of corn that Indians cultivated centuries ago. Their solution to the pressure erected by economic globalization is to return more fully to indigenous ways of living.

Many activists are and have been focused on returning villages to indigenous government, and they view this shift of power as political and economic reform that will allow those villages to develop. Salvador, for example, views the progress in Mazatlán in multiple terms—as an avenue to material improvement and as a positive manifestation of indigenous identity for the nation and for Indians themselves. In other words, indigenous culture and identity become both a means and an end of indigenous activism, and this is true of indigenous organizations, regardless of ideology. Thus, FIOB, which appears to be largely apolitical, promotes cultural preservation in the Mixteca and the United States, as does CIPO, which appears to be leftist if not Marxist leaning.

As such, the identity basis of indigenous activism has little to do with the identity basis of new social movements, as they have been described in some theories of globalization
For new social movements, the ability to express identity in daily life is a goal, but there is no conflation with expression of that identity and survival. In fact, the identity that activists within new social movements express may be at odds with their means of living. Certainly at least some of those people within the global justice movement who identify themselves in opposition to the excesses of global capitalism are employed by that system.

Further, the identity basis of new social movements is described as a source of bonding between people who otherwise do not have strong natural bonds. Environmentalism, for example, has been described as an identity-based cause that bonds people who do not share ties based on common workplace or home. In contrast, the identity basis of indigenous movements is a source not of bonding with outsiders but of separating from them.

When Arturo talked about Internet-enabled alliances with outside organizations, he was not describing identification or union with those groups. Rather, he described a strategy that would allow indigenous people to use the benefits of globalization—Internet access and foreign markets for organic products—to carve out space so that Indians can continue to live as Indians. He described a strategy in which indigenous people can turn globalization against itself—using its benefits to escape its pressures.

Another example is Esteban, a leader for the Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca (CIPO), who believes that ties between indigenous communities and political parties, even when they support indigenous causes, undermine the indigenous community. When indigenous communities have joined forces with Mexico’s leftist political parties, he said, there were “divisions, and problems because the political parties interfere with our affairs.” Rather, he views autonomy, which is a form of separation, as the proper political goal of
indigenous people, because self-government acts as an umbrella, protecting not only a way of life but also the very nature of Indians. “For us, autonomy is everything,” he said. “With autonomy we can choose how we will live, how we will relate to others, how we will be
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSIONS

This concluding chapter, which summarizes the entire study and its implications, begins with a review of the premise upon which the dissertation is based. It continues with a truncated review of the insight on the topic found in relevant literature, notably communications, globalizations, and anthropology studies. It provides a brief review of the theoretical perspective and the methods chosen to accommodate that perspective, as well as a review of field site and logistics of the study. The bulk of the chapter is comprised of the findings for each research question, and the implications of those findings on theoretical and empirical levels form the concluding argument made by the dissertation. The chapter closes with reflections on the difficulties and drawbacks of this study, followed by recommendations for future work on this and related topics.

Study Summary

The premise for this study was an observation that the resurgence of the Latin American indigenous movement in the 1990s coincided with both new access in the region to global communications technology and with the emergence of what have been described in popular media as the global justice movement in academic literature as new social movements. That this coincidence of dynamics implied a relationship appeared to be manifested in the Zapatista guerrilla movement, which used Internet access and the new resonance of issues of identity and environmental protection to develop alliances within new social movements that were
then used in the negotiation of their local conflict with the Mexican state. Thus, the Zapatistas were described as the first informational guerrillas in Castells’ important volume, *The Power of Identity*, a concept that was reiterated in other literatures in globalization and communications studies (82). In other words, the Zapatista confrontation appeared to constitute the globalization (or glocalization as it is sometimes termed) of local issues, problems and conflicts, because the Zapatistas negotiated with Mexican the state using the leverage of international forces.

Relevant literature on this topic suggested that this transnationalization, while most evident in the case of the Zapatistas, was at play in the development of indigenous resurgence elsewhere in Latin America. Anthropological literature, while addressing the nuanced historical context of the contemporary Indian resistance, described it as a movement that was increasingly international if not transnational, empowered by the Internet and the alliances it enables, and in terms of characteristics applied to new social movements, most notably as identity-based.

Based on the premise and the relevant literature, this dissertation sought to explore the experience of indigenous people with Internet-enabled activism outside the sphere of the Zapatistas and other organizations that had already appeared in anthropological, communications, and globalizations studies. More specifically, the dissertation sought to understand the self-directed activity of indigenous activism and the ways in which it is both enabled and determined by these conceptions and the contexts in which this activity is conducted.

To address this intention, the dissertation developed a theoretical framework drawn from Giddens’ structuration theory and Couldry’s work on the complexity of and resistance in
individual and uncommon human action (Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* 1-28; Couldry *Inside Culture* 44-66). Together, these authors’ conceptualizations provided a means of viewing human behavior not as wholly constrained by structure but as an interaction between structure and empowered human agency that reproduces itself and the conditions in which it arose. The two authors also provided conceptualizations through which human behavior could be interpreted as an interaction between structure and context, both historical and cultural. In other words, the dissertation sought alternatives to views of structure as inflexible to and outside of human experience and employed instead an interpretive framework that draws explanation from the formative interaction between all three forces—structure, agency, and context.

The following research questions were posed:

1. In what key ways has the historical context of Oaxacan and Mexican political and economic development shaped the present practice of indigenous activism in Oaxaca?
2. What kinds of conceptions of the relevance of the Internet to indigenous activism inform its practice?
3. In what kinds of ways does indigenous activism in Oaxaca define the relationship of identity to the practice of activism?
4. What are the implications of a contextual grounded reassessment of indigenous activism for current conceptions and practices of new social movements?

To remain consistent with the theoretical framework, the dissertation employed traditional historical analysis in order to identify the conditions in which indigenous activism has emerged, and it employed ethnographic methods to interpret the manner in which indigenous activism constructs itself and its conditions. In particular, it draws on
understanding of historicism as a means of balancing emphasis on the contemporary and on the use of ethnographic approaches as a means of seeing and expressing the relationships between structure, agency and context. That is to say, through an ethnographic approach to a case study, the dissertation sought to access specific points in time, space, and society that shape the ways in which agency forms structure and structure forms agency.

To address these research questions consistent with the chosen perspective, I designed a case study of indigenous activists in Oaxaca, Mexico for several reasons. The various indigenous organizations in the state have been highly active for the past several decades and have availed themselves of newly accessible global communications technology to develop international alliances used as political capital at home. The Oaxaca organizations reflect other of the characteristics that indigenous activism appears to have in common with new social movements, notably focus on identity politics. Yet, Oaxaca’s indigenous movement has not received the media and academic attention garnered by the Zapatistas and other more visible regional indigenous organizations. At the same time, Oaxaca is relatively culturally accessible to me, because of the seven years that I lived and worked as a foreign correspondent in Mexico.

During the summer of 2005, I conducted seven weeks of fieldwork in Oaxaca City, in rural towns and villages scattered throughout the state, and in Mexico City. I conducted interviews with seventeen different organizations that either defined themselves as indigenous or considered themselves to serve primarily Indian communities. That resulted in the collection of about 35 hours to 40 hours of interviews transcribed into 158 pages of handwritten and typed transcripts in Spanish.
**Research Questions and Primary Findings.**

Research Question 1. In what key ways has the historical context of Oaxacan and Mexican political and economic development shaped the present practice of indigenous activism in Oaxaca?

Contemporary indigenous resurgence in Oaxaca is shaped as much by the violent modern encounter between the Indians and the Spanish Conquerors as it has been by recent and continuing dynamics and forces. The more immediate-catalyst of post-1960s organizing of indigenous peasants is presaged by resistance that began in the 16th century and continued with varying ferocity for the next 400 years. Indeed, some of the struggles have undergone little outward change. Partly owed to pressure from state indigenous activists, Oaxaca’s Constitution was altered in the mid-1990s to recognize the use at a local level of uses and customs; such recognition has been an indigenous cause since the first decades after the arrival of the Spaniards to the region.

As such, the emergence of Oaxaca’s indigenous movement, despite its commonalities with new social movements should not be explained solely by the contemporary forces that have been described as defining new social movements. Instead, an explanation or interpretation should be sought in a combination of structural forces and contextual dynamics rooted in culture and history specific to the state’s indigenous people. Indigenous activists have responded to accelerated globalization—as have new social movements—but also to the continuing struggle for economic equity that has been ongoing since the Conquest. Indigenous activists have intensified their internationalism, owing to the globalization of civil society and
civic causes, but internationalism has for centuries been a necessary response to marginalization by domestic political forces. Indigenous politics are identity based because of the disruption of identity, however that disruption has been the product of pointed assault by modern state forces not the crumbling of the framework of their society under the pressure of amorphous economic and political social forces.

As such, it can be argued that both new social movements and indigenous movements have responded to the similar dynamics of identity loss and marginalization by their local sources of economic and political power, but those dynamics were created by divergent forces: the broadest structural changes inherent to the shifting of global political and economic power as the information era has evolved and specific and contextualized forces rooted in location and history. In reductionist terms, new social movements respond to the amorphous and borderless, while indigenous resurgence responds to those forces but also the eroded but continuing power of the state.

This difference argues for the importance of seeking explanations in both structure and context and the interaction between the two. Explanations should, as Couldry suggests, consider not only human beings’ cultural present but also their cultural past, because at an empirical level, one balances the other (Inside Culture 60). The difference also speaks to the issues of constraint on the indigenous movement. In so far as contemporary indigenous activists have mobilized their resistance to not only global but also state both forces, they also are restrained by the state. Their conflicts are negotiated within the context of state whose powers are influenced and tempered but not neutralized or even much mitigated by global forces.

Research Question 2. What kinds of conceptualizations of the relevance of indigenous
activism inform its practice?

In interviews with many members of the grass roots indigenous organizations, questions about the usefulness of the Internet in their activism often sparked a kind of disconnect, as if the query were an unexpected one to which they had no ready response. In these discussions, these activists treated the Internet as trivial compared to political organization against state resistance that they considered their real work.

In conversations with activists who were engaged by discussion about the Internet as a political tool, they discussed it primarily in terms of the human relationships and political conflict embedded in their ability or inability to use it successfully. These were conversations focused not on the Internet’s communicative or transformative potential but on activists’ sense that they did not possess the human, political, and cultural capital to use the Internet to achieve their goals. They did not view the Internet as determinant because of its technological sophistication and potential; it was not, in their view, inherently empowering but empowering in so far as it was a channel for political capital.

Structure was implicit in these discussions. The mechanics of advanced communications technology were a barrier, as was the language of western professionalism, manifested in the positivist specificity of documentation that many activists were unprepared to provide. Like virtually anyone with a computer and an Internet connection, they had technological access to the power inherent in global civil society, but they could not consistently access that power, and this was clear to them. Thus, while they recognized other conflicts—such as the Zapatistas' conflict with the state in Chiapas—as globalized confrontations in a world where state powers had begun to recede, they were aware that this dynamic was not nearly as much at play in Oaxaca. As the Ruiz administration regressed to
politics reminiscent of bloody far-right regimes of the 1980s in Latin America, they realized that for them globalization had not eclipsed the state. In this, they were intensely aware of the importance of contextual factors.

There were of course exceptions—people who imagined the potential of the Internet as it is imagined in advanced western nations, notably the couple from Mazatlan, who saw the Internet as a panacea, a fix all for everything from immigration out of the region to the fading away of indigenous language. In their view of the Internet as determinant, they could be among those whom Lerner described as innovators.

However, most of the activists conceived of the Internet as a limited political tool, and this stemmed not only from structure but from agency: though several organizations had computers in their offices and cyber cafes are abundant in the city, they chose not to use it in a more expansive fashion; they did not regularly disseminate well crafted, globally resonant messages, as the Zapatistas continue to do, and the Oaxacan activists did not to engage in the sort of democracy-enhancing online dialogue in open public spaces suggested in globalization and communications literature.

Instead, their use of the Internet was utilitarian in the most specific sense. The Internet was used almost exclusively for one reason—to protect themselves, as they went about what they considered to be their serious work of promoting an array of indigenous rights, political, human, cultural and economic. Further, they were interested in using the Internet not to listen but to speak. They valued the Internet because it allowed them to expose state-sponsored human rights abuse that had been hidden and provided a means of broadcasting to the world their own version of indigenous reality and in so doing contradict the official version. They viewed the Internet as a means of correcting what they described as a false version of their
existence and as a means of gaining control over the publicly disseminated narrative of their lives.

All of this reflects what has been described as a discriminating or active engagement with western technology. The focus on correcting narratives and creating self-interested even opportunistic ties to promote an agenda that is not collective or global but indigenous and local reflect an extreme version of active engagement. In this way, this case study supports arguments for an interaction between agency and structure, in which what Giddens describes as a highly reflexive agency turns inside out assumptions about the domineering influence of western technology in underdeveloped societies (The Constitution of Society, 1-28).

Research Question 3. In what kinds of ways does indigenous activism in Oaxaca define the relationship of identity to the practice of activism?

In hours of conversation with indigenous activists, they rarely if ever introduced the phrase identity politics or even the words identity or culture. However, the concept of resurrecting, affirming, or preserving indigenous identity was imbedded at several levels in their work and in their conceptualizations of the goals of that work. When indigenous activists talked about the restoration of uses and customs, they described local autonomy as playing different roles at multiple points in time in the affirmation and preservation of tradition and the identity derived from tradition.

For the activists, restoration and recognition of uses and customs was a present-day and positive manifestation of indigenous identity to themselves and to the outside world; it was a present-day form of economic and political reform that simultaneously restored Indian authority and improved material conditions in villages; as a result of the latter, restoring uses and customs also was perceived as a means of forestalling depopulation of Indians regions
and thus preserving the physical space—rural village life—that is both the source of indigenous identity and the key to its future. In other words, for indigenous activists, restoring uses and customs is a dualistic and recursive form of identity politics, because drawing from the past, it simultaneously strengthens an assaulted indigenous identity in the present and creates the conditions for its future.

This makes the identity politics of the indigenous movement a point of difference not commonality with new social movements for several reasons. New social movements are described as coalescing around the formation of a shared, collective identity that is not attached to physical space or time; they coalesce around an identity that has formed outside of those parameters because previous identities based in location have broken down. The latter are described as having formed identities in response to global forces, so that identity itself becomes borderless, tying together people on a global basis.

As such, new social movements seek figurative space for the expression of collective identity unbounded by space while the indigenous movement seeks literal space for hybrid identity formed from past and present and that must be attached to place. This has implications for the nature and intensity of indigenous activism, because Indian identity politics, linked to the threatened and disappearing space of the rural village, are a politics not only of expression but also of improving the material conditions that will permit survival.

As a result, Oaxacan indigenous activists’ experience with alliance making outside of their own communities is utilitarian and opportunistic—as is their use of the Internet. They do not express interest in identifying with members of transnational civil movements for the sake of forming a new collective identity. They seek allies for their own physical protection and for protection of their physical space so that they can preserve an identity that exists in
separation from global civil society, indeed in separation from all but the indigenous sharers of that identity. Thus, alliance making becomes the product of Giddens’ conceptualization of a highly reflexive human agency—informed by goals that are not global but specific to indigenous communities and take into consideration the success of strategies for achieving their agendas. In so far as the Internet enables these alliances, this suggests once again employment of a highly active rather than passive engagement with western technologies.

Research Question 4. What are the implications of a contextual grounded reassessment of indigenous activism for current conceptions and practices of new social movements?

The implications of this grounded assessment for new social movements at a theoretical and empirical level are multiple. First, this case study argues against explaining the emergence of indigenous movements solely as a response to the contemporary structural forces that have given rise to new social movements. Instead, the explanation for the resurgence of indigenous activism must be found in both structure and context and the interaction between both.

Second, this case study implies that the constraints on the indigenous insurgence in Oaxaca must be understood in terms of structure and context: the mitigating influence of change in the power of state and global civil, economic and political forces but also the resistance of a landlocked and to some degree self-contained state against those forces.

And third, this study suggests that the participation of indigenous activists in global civil society should be understood in terms of interaction between structure and agency on several levels, in so far as shifting power has created new opportunities and rewards of participation but that participation is specific to contextual goals. In other words, indigenous activists are participating in civil forces defined by the shifting power at the broadest global
level, but that participation is aimed at self-interested goals defined by the specific historical, political economic, and cultural context of Oaxacan Indians. Their participation also should be understood in the context of a dualistic interaction between structure and agency because of the function of that participation as a means of altering the material and political conditions of their lives. That is to say, this case study points to the ability of Oaxacan indigenous activists to loosen the constraints on their lives by the application of highly reflexive agency in their use of the Internet and Internet-enabled alliances. While indigenous activists do not view themselves as having been wholly successful in stemming human rights abuse, creating democratic space, and protecting their territories through Internet activism, they recognize that they have moved in that direction.

A further implication of this case study is that similarities between new social movements and the indigenous movement appear to be less profound than their differences, and the explanation for this, too, can be sought through exploration of the interaction between structure and context. At an empirical level, while they share identity politics that arise from the loss of identity, there are key differences in the conditions that gave rise to that loss of identity. Those differences, rooted once again in indigenous context, are played out in fundamental differences in the nature of the indigenous movement; in the way that activists carry out identity politics, and the meaning of identity politics for them.

Taken together, these differences imply that Oaxaca’s indigenous movement cannot be a full or equal participant in new social movements. It does not share interests with new social movement at more than a superficial level. It does not seek identity within new social movements; it seeks instead to reinforce identity in difference and separation, if necessary. And it cannot expect the same outcome as people from advanced western democracies nations
because of the continued and contextual constraints of their state. This partial membership, in turn, suggests that new social movements are not thoroughly global because of exclusion derived from structure, agency, and context. At a theoretical level, this study can be interpreted as a critique of some new social movement theories, which suggest that resistance movements throughout the world can coalesce into a global force because their experiences are explained by the same global structural forces.

**Future Studies**

The primary drawback of this study was my inability to conduct exploratory research. Had I been able to do so, I would not have found myself in the position of having to reconceptualize the study from the fieldwork site. The study draws credibility from that reconceptualization, because it was based on a grounded assessment. However, because the study was reconceived during research, I was unable to fully refine my design and extend my data collection. Although my interview data was more than adequate, I would have preferred to re-interview people in the study and watch them work and interact, especially since they live in a context well outside of my own.

Future studies could broaden or contradict this study’s narrative by exploring the question of whether indigenous activists and communities elsewhere use the Internet to protect separation and difference; remain relative outsiders to global civil society, despite their new technological access to it; and conceive of the Internet and Internet-enabled alliances as a means of using the tools of globalization to keep globalization at bay.

This study would be particularly complemented by research that focused on the extent to which the experience of Oaxaca’s indigenous activists with global civil society is similar to
that of other developing world communities, which, while not Indian, are similarly marginalized. Such work would be perhaps most useful if it were undertaken by researchers outside the context of western academia—by researchers more culturally prepared to understand the experience of those being researched.

**Strengths and Implications**

The strength of this study is that it is linked to current deficiencies in the literature on the topic. Apart from literature on the Zapatistas, there are few studies that take a close look at indigenous use of online activism in Latin America. As such, this dissertation sheds light on relatively under-represented dimensions of indigenous resurgence, Internet-enabled activism, and participation of developing world resistance communities in new social movements.

On an empirical level, this case study clearly supports the value of a theoretical perspective that focuses on the mutual constitution of structure and agency, and on the necessity of grounding in historical context. More specifically, it supports notions that agents have a capability of turning structural constraints to their (limited) advantage. The case study also makes a methodological point by arguing that explanations of human action should be sought by exploring its full complexity, and that interpretive methods—because of their flexibility and insight inherent to the process—are often better suited to explaining and expressing such complexity.

Finally, this dissertation functions as a critique of some new social movement and related literatures. The case study argues against using some of the concepts basic to new social movement to explain resistance that originates outside of developed western nations. It also challenges assumptions about the global nature of new social movements by pointing out that
some resistance communities, particularly those outside of advanced western democracies, may be excluded from full participation not only because of structural constraints but also because of agency and context.
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