

MESOAMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGY:

Between Production and Hegemony*

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- LA CASA EN BOSQUE: LAS "TROJES" DE MICHOACAN.* By Ricardo Barthelemy and Jean Meyer. (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1987. Pp. 105.)
- LOS MAZATECOS ANTE LA NACION: CONTRADICCIONES DE LA IDENTIDAD ETNICA EN EL MEXICO ACTUAL.* By Eckart Boege. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1988. Pp. 310.)
- MEXICO PROFUNDO: UNA CIVILIZACION NEGADA.* By Guillermo Bonfil Batalla. (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública and the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 1987. Pp. 254.)
- INTERVILLAGE CONFLICT IN OAXACA.* By Philip A. Dennis. (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987. Pp. 213. \$28.00.)
- THE PRINCES OF NARANJA: AN ESSAY IN ANTHROHISTORICAL METHOD.* By Paul Friedrich. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986. Pp. 305. \$29.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)
- BLOOD TIES: LIFE AND VIOLENCE IN RURAL MEXICO.* By James B. Greenberg. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1989. Pp. 282. \$35.00.)
- CHILCHOTA: UN PUEBLO AL PIE DE LA SIERRA.* By Luis Alfonso Ramírez. (Zamora: Colegio de Michoacán and the Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, 1986. Pp. 306.)
- ABTEL TA PINKA.* By Taller Tzotzil INAREMAC. (San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas: Instituto de Asesoría Antropológica para la Región Maya, A.C., 1986. Pp. 28.)

The time is ripe for anthropologists and other scholars to bring culture and human agency back into the center of analyses of indigenous and peasant Mesoamerican social systems. The polemic regarding the Mexican peasantry is over but has challenged scholars to circumvent limits of historical-structural approaches and theory. In my view, neither of the opposed perspectives in the polemic came to grips with the ways

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that peasants bring meaning into their lives as thinking actors in the contemporary world. Peasants may be viewed as disguised proletarians in contributing to the forming of new class relations in the industrial sector. But then how do analysts account for the persistence of ethnicity and regional culture except as false consciousness? Alternatively, peasants may be viewed as standing in resistance to stagnant dependent capitalism, with potential for development in their own right as a revolutionary alternative to dependent capitalism. But is it not possible that peasants' active participation in spreading rural capitalism may play a role in eroding the position of middle-level peasants in the economy?¹ Can scholars not flesh out the middle ground between our improved understanding of peasant lifeways and our heightened appreciation of hegemonic processes?

In my opinion, the everyday productive lives of indigenous and peasant peoples that *campesinistas* have highlighted provide the starting point for exploring how meaning and action are linked in this middle ground. In *México profundo: una civilización negada*, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla enunciates a mature interpretation of the manner in which Mesoamerican cultures in all their variety nonetheless partake of the distinctive system of civilization that developed around milpa agriculture. Multi-cropped, small-scale, and self-sufficient in its tendencies, milpa agriculture fostered reciprocal and collective tendencies in Mesoamericans' organization of productive life in families and communities. It also allowed them to fashion thick and multistranded understandings of life in specific landscapes. Cultural knowledge—embedded in language—shaped geography, augmented the productive capacity of nature, and articulated the values with which Mesoamerican peoples worked and continue to work and live together, sharing coherent concepts of nature and their own relation to it. Bonfil intends readers to understand the deeper underlying Mexico in terms of a long cultural legacy of daily lived experience whose bearers demonstrated the capacity to learn from life and within the Mexican nation.

Why, Bonfil asks, do contemporary Mexicans fail to grasp and appreciate this heritage and to embrace it as their own? He answers that since the conquest, México profundo has been subordinated to another project of civilization, that of the colonizers and their heirs. Colonizers could conceive of the future only within a vision of the West's mission to dominate non-Western cultures. Although colonizers would not have totally destroyed Mesoamerican civilization lest their civilizing mission be rendered moot, they could dominate it while condemning it as marginal and an obstacle to that mission. Ironically, the dominant group thus denied

1. See Roger Bartra and Gerardo Otero, "Agrarian Crisis and Social Differentiation in Mexico," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 14, no. 3 (1987):334–62.

the validity of the very system of civilization on which its own project depended. The colonizers left this schizophrenic legacy to criollos of the independence era, mestizos of the last two centuries, and heirs of the Mexican Revolution. Each group, in turn, formulated national projects in terms of what Bonfil deems an “imaginary Mexico,” in which elites continued to look to the alien West for Mexico’s identity while denying the country’s intrinsic basis in a vibrant, resistant, and adaptive México profundo.

Bonfil appeals to Mexicans to abandon the flawed enterprise of Western development—thinly disguised in the postrevolutionary ideology of *mestizaje*—in favor of a new national project that would draw on the whole of Mexico’s patrimony. He asks Mexicans to tap the diverse Mesoamerican understandings of nature, work, and day-to-day production for subsistence and sale so as to forge a decolonized and more democratic, truly autonomous Mexico where local communities can come into their own within the framework of national life.

Do peasant communities stand in so profound a resistance to capitalism as Bonfil would have us believe? I read *México profundo* last spring while undertaking fieldwork in Chiapas among the highland Maya, and I was struck with how valuable Bonfil’s conceptualization of the quotidian is for understanding the change that peasant entrepreneurs are bringing into their lives. The highland Maya are transforming milpa agriculture in the highlands by relying far more than before on purchased fertilizers and weed killers. Ironically, these practices lend new worth to formerly marginal ejido and communal property and underscore a heightened sense of the importance of local place that counterbalances the centrifugal experience of those who go out into the larger world for wage work. Could it be that peasants, drawing on facets of the capitalist development that Bonfil sees as antithetical to their way of life, are in fact revitalizing their local worlds?

Scholars need to scrutinize peasant production more carefully to understand how peasant responses to capitalism change the mundane. While a new appreciation of importance of the quotidian is invigorating the way that Mexican scholars are returning to the study of material culture, I would like to see them give greater attention to the material consequences of changing relations of production. In a vibrant photographic essay, *La casa en el bosque*, Ricardo Barthelemy and Jean Meyer bear witness to the significance of the *troje*, the traditional dwelling, for Tarascan lifeways centering on artesanal woodwork as well as agriculture. Introducing first the Tarascan countryside—farming, forest, and their volcanic backdrop—these beautifully crafted images then center the reader’s attention on the *troje* itself. Characteristically foursquare dwellings with windowless walls of horizontally fitted planks and four-slope *tejamanil* (shake) roofs, the *trojes* of the 1970s and 1980s nonetheless experiment

with new construction materials and features within the older architectural paradigm. The photographs draw the reader to the patio, through the entrance door, inside, into dwelling space and around the hearth whose heat and light draw families together and help nurture them. The photographs and the scant text accompanying them frankly cherish the troje as part of a cultural legacy of rural lifeways that have withstood the test of time. But a more forthright consideration of the troje in relation to the burgeoning place of industrial (as opposed to artesanal) timbering in the Tarascan countryside would also have been useful. One thus welcomes studies like Luis Alfonso Ramírez's *Chilchota: un pueblo al pie de la sierra* that acknowledge the diversification of small-scale industrial production in the Tarascan countryside and consider its consequences for household organization and kinship ideology.

The experience of peasants in wage work tends to be neglected in studies that take communities as units of analysis. A work written for speakers of Tzotzil, *Abtel ta pinka*, documents the historical memory of Chamulas' wage work, beginning in the 1890s, far from their homes on Soconusco coffee plantations. Period photos complement Tzotzil accounts of how finca owners recruited Chamula laborers via intermediaries who used liquor and loans to get them into debt. In addition to recounting the experience of work and the way non-Indians used municipal posts to control the organization of wage work, the authors writing for Taller Tzotzil INAREMAC consider the impact of Chamula men's distant wage work on the women and children they left at home, who had to assume the burden of agricultural work. More such studies are needed.

The role of ethnicity in the middle ground between production and hegemony deserves the kind of attention that Eckart Boege brings to Mazatec identity in *Los Mazatecos ante la nación*. To the extent that a people's cosmovision relates them to their productive world in a manner that they view as distinctive, analysis of the quotidian lends itself to the study of ethnicity. Like Bonfil, Boege perceives Mazatec identity as forged in everyday work for subsistence in a specific geographical setting. Mazatecs adapt Mesoamerican strategies of production to the requirements of production for the market but in a way that evokes and affirms a distinctive vision of the social and natural world in which they live. Their moral economy roots livelihoods in primordial reciprocities of kinship, among extended families headed by elders who exchange women and work. The Mazatecs interpret daily life within a cosmovision that seeks always to attain a small utopia in which elders assure the well-being of the community through exchanges between the sacred and the profane. Like Bonfil, Boege considers Mazatec identity to be millenarian in that it attempts to resolve the legacy of conquest and subordination, as well as the contradictions of production for the market, in terms of a harmonious vision of the past, the present, and (implicitly) the future.

Boege is at his best when exploring the Mazatec utopia in myth and ritual and in the thought and action of wise elder men and women who assure the community's ritual well-being. But in my view, he too readily accepts elders' egalitarian self-representation as inherent in the moral economy of peasants. In counterposing peasants to capitalists, utopians routinely fail to study peasant relations of production critically. How does the position of elders in Mazatec society build on inequalities of gender and age? What do the polygyny and concubinage that prominent Mazatec elders practice reveal about the subordination of women as well as younger or less successful older men? Should anthropologists not consider the egalitarianism of supposedly primordial kinship reciprocities as ideology with which elders mask the inequalities underlying their power?

Where Bonfil considers the denial and negation of Mesoamerican cultures in terms of Mexican nationals' attempt to imagine themselves as participating in the historical "civilizing" mission of Western progress, Boege gives greater and more specific emphasis to the hegemonic project of capitalism in which the logic of accumulation counterposes and displaces the economy of subsistence. That project has taken all too tangible form in the huge Papaloapan dam and development enterprises but also in the more subtle commercialization of the Mazatec countryside. Following the approach of Antonio Gramsci, Boege examines language and culture to explore how the exploited Mazatec come to consent to their own oppression. Hegemonic forces have unhinged Mazatec cosmovision by reinterpreting the past, the present, and the future so as to legitimate new power. Boege convincingly analyses the role of peasant organizations within the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in legitimating new caciques at the expense of elders. He scrutinizes the *indigenista* programs of the Mexican state in the Papaloapan region as well-intentioned efforts that were actually instruments of contradictory interests of capital. He considers how state education programs, the role of teachers and their unions, and language policy toward bilingualism stripped Mazatec language of its efficacy in the face of the Spanish-language world of new power holders. Boege also examines both Catholic and Protestant evangelizing in a similar vein. In my view, Boege's treatment of hegemony advances significantly beyond the work of Bonfil in considering how Mazatecs themselves are drawn into hegemonic projects as consenting participants.

Three recent studies by U.S. scholars of Mesoamerica also explore the middle ground of peasant conflict and politics. Philip Dennis's *Intervillage Conflict in Oaxaca* reworks and updates his *Conflictos por tierras en el Valle de Oaxaca* (1976). He focuses on corporate villages and their conflicts over land, which epitomize the state of "law within, war without" that Meyer Fortes and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown once attributed to politics in stateless societies. In this instance, Dennis interprets intervillage conflict

as enabling a weak state to exercise control over peasantries. By pitting villages against one another, the state fosters conflict that atomizes them and undercuts the possibility of peasant alliances against the state. Meanwhile, the state retains the prerogative to arbitrate disputes and with it the power to control peasantries.

In analyzing the long trajectory of conflict between Zautla and Mazaltepec, however, Dennis fails to ask the crucial questions regarding who stands to gain and who to lose in village politics. Villagers appear undifferentiated behind the façade of corporate village solidarity. Whether there are landless as well as landed villagers, and how those with land can get the landless to battle for them in the name of the pueblo are issues that remain unclear. Dennis's brief scrutiny of studies of conflict elsewhere in Oaxaca tantalizes the reader by introducing lumber companies, political bosses, and corrupt bureaucrats as players, but he does not discuss whether or how they interacted with other interested actors in Zautla and Mazaltepec. Dennis nevertheless renders comprehensible much of the ideology of village conflict: the stereotyping of villages by their purported "character" as moral "we" and evil "they"; the centrality of land and the irrelevance of most documents claiming to validate tenure; the situational ethics used to justify conflict; and the fiction that village authorities stand above violence as shrewd interlocutors with *patrones* and state politicians.

Paul Friedrich's *The Princes of Naranja* offers a rich account of factional struggles and the ascendance of several generations of caciques in the context of early- and mid-twentieth-century Mexican history.² Friedrich traces village politics through the lives of seven leaders in the context of larger Mexican politics. The municipality of Naranja quintessentially exemplified the politics of Mexico in its era and to an intense degree. The fight for land reform transcended the simple quest for land because it whetted peasant leaders' hunger for power. Friedrich argues that Naranja politics exemplified "libido dominandi"—lust for power for its own sake as ego satisfaction, a lust that he finds to be endemic in Mexican life. Consolidating and fissuring tendencies alternate as strong leaders who centralize control for a time are eventually thwarted by contenders who expand the domain of their own power outward. Contenders collude with regional and state powers, including politicians and bankers, at the expense of village autonomy.

Friedrich's finely honed political biographies and accounts of ejido

2. Friedrich's anthrohistorical method in this volume experiments with a self-reflexive treatment of his own role as a narrator of Naranja's political history. The manner in which Friedrich draws the personal and the political together in his analysis and the explicit attention he devotes to the creative process of writing are facets that address many current anthropological concerns with the nature of "writing culture." Anthropologists and historians will learn at least as much from Friedrich's method as they will about the substance of Naranja's political life.

and municipal governance bridge some of the analytical gap between political ideology and productive relations by indicating ways in which caciques built their power at the expense of others. Camilo, whose wife was one of Naranja's principal corn-trading usurers, brokered credits of the Banco Ejidal de Crédito so as to limit the availability of low-interest bank loans. Meanwhile, he used hired workers to sharecrop the ejido land of widows, minors, and disabled individuals who were too indebted to farm on their own. Is it not possible that some of those exploited were made vulnerable by having become prey to the assassinations rampant in Naranja political life? Six of the seven caciques whose histories Friedrich recounts gained control over the best private and ejido lands at the expense of poor families. They also ran stores and corn mills and raised livestock. The caciques controlled the posts of ejido governance in which corrupt incumbents pocketed much of the taxes levied from *ejidatarios*. Yet Friedrich's concentration on leaders in an analytic genre of earlier anthropological study of local-level politics fails to convey fully how subordinate villagers made their livelihoods and in what relations of production with power holders.

Greenberg's *Blood Ties* offers a more sophisticated analysis of how changing productive relations affect peasant ideology. What accounts for the endemic violence and feuds of Chatino villages? Villagers, including Greenberg's in-laws and closest confidant, argue that conflict arose because outsiders introduced coffee into communal lands, converting usufruct into long-term property rights and effectively disenfranchising large groups of native sons. Does not this view appeal to the egalitarian norms—that “native sons” should “share access” to “communal” holdings—in a manner that masks inequalitarian realities? Greenberg answers this question affirmatively by pointing out that the very villagers who articulate this view undertake lucrative trade in coffee and attempt to control local markets through credits that they broker between outside patrons and land-poor peasants.

Greenberg does not interpret egalitarianism as primordial or inherent in a peasant moral order. Rather, he argues that the ideology of egalitarianism may be a response that Chatinos make to externally induced change as new capitalist relations of production erode their subsistence strategies and place their households at risk. Not recognizing the class basis of the relations that place them at risk, peasants personalize what they come to perceive as violations of reciprocity and trust to which they would like others to adhere. Yet norms of sharing, cooperation, and other supposedly egalitarian relationships easily mask exploitative relationships. Social relations based on trust may well be unbalanced, as when delayed reciprocities allow those who can take advantage of capital to do so at the expense of those who cannot. Greenberg forces scholars to reexamine those facets of the peasant moral economy that others have

unquestioningly accepted as primordial and to consider them as responses to the impact of capitalist relations of production and exchange on relations between husband and wife, parent and child, among siblings, and among in-laws.

Throughout history, Mesoamericans have played a role in forging the middle ground between production and hegemony. I am excited by the opportunities that these studies afford for understanding how Mesoamericans continue to play this role in the contemporary world and for understanding both cultural continuity and cultural change.