

# The Moral Force of Indigenous Politics: Critical Liberalism and the Zapatistas

*Courtney Jung*

Reviewed by BRIAN HOLE

Increasingly, researchers throughout the world are having to negotiate with indigenous groups in order to access the areas and materials they wish to study, and in many cases this involves a lack of understanding and even conflict. One likely outcome of the process described in the book under review is that these conflicts will become more numerous in the coming decades. It makes sense therefore that we as archaeologists try to understand the processes and broader trends involved, so that we are better prepared.

There has been a steady increase in protest and rebellion by indigenous groups since the Second World War, with a period of intensification from the 1970s through to the mid 1990s (Gurr, 2000: 30). According to Minority Rights Group International (Matheson, 2008: 162–167), there are currently more than 272 minority groups in seventy countries facing threats ranging from systematic violent repression to mass killing and genocide. Other estimates put the number of ethnic groups worldwide that are agitated and engaged in a struggle for their identity at around 3000 (Narang, 2002: 39). The Zapatistas are one such group from Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico, who are engaged in a struggle to improve the conditions for the Nahuatl, Maya, Zapotec, and other indigenous Mexican peoples. In 1994 this struggle culminated in a twelve-day armed uprising that gained widespread international attention and brought the issue of indigenous rights suddenly into the media spotlight. Courtney Jung's deeply insightful and thoroughly researched book explores how the Mexican indigenous movement arose and developed to this point, and what the future implications may be.

*The Moral Force of Indigenous Politics* is likely to become a widely read and influential work, as it makes use of a new approach that Jung terms 'critical liberalism' in order to gain insight into the origins and structures of indigenous political movements. Most archaeologists are now familiar with indigenous issues in North America, Australia, and New Zealand, but it is probably fair to say that they have much less of an idea as to how things stand in the remaining greater parts of the world. Jung uses Mexico 'in part because it is not familiar to the majority of theorists writing today about liberalism and multiculturalism. It may therefore retain the capacity to upend some of the assumptions and conclusions that have been drawn through inference from familiar cases' (29).

Jung begins by exploring the concept of political identity. She states that:

The intuition that lies at the core of critical liberalism is that blindness to injustices, in which even people fighting to right wrongs fail to recognize patterns of unfairness all around them, is a permanent feature of social and political life. (21)

This insight is certainly applicable in archaeology, where practitioners are often so tied up in their immediate professional contexts that they neither see clearly what the root causes of issues such as repatriation claims are, nor fully understand the consequences in the rest of the world if they do not engage with them. Jung provides a method of analysis that is practical and realistic, attempting to get to the true origins of issues:

Critical liberalism argues for establishing the legitimacy of particular claims through the language of structural injustice rather than cultural difference, contestation over consensus as a source of liberal democratic authority, and the category of membership rights as a strategic alternative to collective and individual rights. (21)

Starting from this premise, she proposes three things. First, political identity emerges as a result of the boundaries that organize access to power in the modern state system. Such social categories as class, race, gender, and culture have political salience because modern states have used these markers to police the boundaries of citizenship and national identity. Second, the markers of exclusion do not automatically become the strategies of opposition. Political activists use rights as a way of gaining access to the public sphere and forcing an opening that extends 'the political' to categories of people whose exclusion has been naturalized through existing hierarchies of power. Third, such identities are valuable because they act in turn as a condition of political agency (30).

In this, Jung is postulating a theory of indigenous identity that departs sharply from the views of other contemporary theorists such as John Rawls, who believe that such identities are essentially independent of historical, political, and social factors. She justifies this by documenting the way that these factors have created spaces into which people have been able to insert themselves by asserting indigenous identity in order to gain political voice and leverage in Mexican history.

To begin with, Jung traces the development of political identity among Mexico's indigenous population, illustrating the way that government policies have used arguments of race and class to exclude the rural poor. The colonial government of New Spain had denied Indians citizenship for almost 300 years on the basis that they were equivalent to minors, and could thus not be granted equal legal rights. Although citizenship was granted with independence they did not fare much better than either, as liberal government policies meant that 95 per cent of the rural and predominantly indigenous population were landless by the start of the twentieth century. This was one of the major causes of the 1910 revolution, which saw the rise of the peasant movement, and at this point most Indians identified as such. Laws introduced in 1915 made traditional Indian communal landholding legal again, and with lobbying from peasant bodies the land was progressively redistributed to peasant communities over the next twenty years.

Government policy specifically designed to address indigenous issues effectively began in 1940, when the National Indigenous Institute (INI) was set up in response to the Inter-American Indigenous Congress held in Mexico that year. The main aim

of the INI at this time was to attempt the assimilation of indigenous people into Mexican culture through Spanish-only education. At the same time, indigenous heritage was appropriated by Mexican nationalists who argued that all Mexicans were *Mestizos* — neither Indian nor Spanish, but one people with a double heritage. Archaeological sites such as the Aztec and Mayan pyramids became national rather than indigenous symbols, helping to legitimate the modern state (83–97).

Judith Friedlander has also written about this period in her book *Being Indian in Hueyapan*, where she describes how traditional Indian communities had become major tourist attractions by the 1960s, ‘featured as living artefacts in an archaeological garden’ (2006: ix), while atrocities committed against indigenous peoples during colonization were omitted from school textbooks which instead emphasized examples of cooperation with the invading Spaniards (2006: 144). It is not surprising that state archaeologists came to be associated with oppression of indigenous people. Friedlander gives the example of an excavation by the pro-indigenous historian Eulalia Guzmán of a tomb that she claimed contained the remains of the last Aztec emperor, Cuauhtémoc. When government archaeologists opposed this finding, many newspapers published inflammatory editorials accusing them of being anti-Mexican, one even recommending that they be shot (2006: 158).

Jung describes how the peasant identity that had become established with the revolution came to be exchanged for an indigenous one by the 1990s. Her main argument is that by this time the neo-liberal politics of the Salinas government in privatizing the economy and joining NAFTA had effectively nullified the ability of the peasant movement to make claims for land redistribution and greater equality, and so activists turned to indigenous identity in the hope that they could renew the terms of their engagement. She quotes the indigenous politician Luis Hernández Cruz:

The proletarian struggle, the workers’ struggle, is one path, but the struggle of indigenous peoples for autonomy and self-determination, that is another path. They are both about social justice, they come together, they reinforce each other . . . The struggle is something one needs to search for; one needs to find the terms of the struggle. *La luch hay que buscarla*. There is no other way but to seek it out. (9)

At the same time, indigenous political identity has become a global phenomenon, with indigenous rights defined and recognized in at least eight major international agreements, of which two have been critical to the success of national indigenous movements. Ratified in 1989, the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 169 (Concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries) was for around 18 years the main international instrument used by indigenous rights groups, whom Jung describes as clinging to it ‘like a life raft’ (189). The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples has also become extremely important. The only international agreement to have been created in close consultation with indigenous peoples, it was signed by Mexico and 142 other countries in 2007. The four countries that notably voted against it — Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United States — all argued that while non-binding, the declaration went too far in terms of independence for indigenous groups (Matheson, 2008: 85). Of special relevance to archaeology are Articles 11 and 12, which recognize the right of indigenous people to protect and develop ‘past, present and future manifestations of their

cultures', including archaeological and historical sites and artefacts, as well as to 'protect their religions and cultural sites and to control their ceremonial objects' (Xanthaki, 2007: 217).

Similar international accords that specifically protect indigenous rights in regard to archaeological heritage are finding wide acceptance in the archaeological community also, as evidenced by the following statement recently issued by the World Archaeological Congress (WAC, 2008):

The World Archaeological Congress notes its strong support for the rights of Indigenous peoples with regard to Indigenous cultural heritage. In accordance with its Code of Ethics, the Vermillion Accord, and the Tamaki-Makau-rau Accord, WAC actively supports Indigenous communities in their efforts to make and negotiate repatriation claims.

While Jung demonstrates how the Zapatista movement has played an important role in giving indigenous rights a more prominent international profile and creating more political space for indigenous activists worldwide to work within, she doesn't focus a great deal on how successful they have been in actually achieving their specific demands. At the end of the uprising the state and the rebels signed the San Andres Agreements, a series of proposals for improving the situation of Mexican indigenous peoples. A major restriction on their success has been the conservative PAN party, which has been in power since 2000. Despite indigenous affairs being talked about as a high priority, in reality other than allowing Indians the rights to develop their culture and language, the proposals have been seriously weakened so that any mention of greater autonomy is effectively gone (Friedlander, 2006: x).

In regard to archaeology, the agreements contained the following section (Ministry of the Interior, 1999):

A recommendation will be put to INAH (National Institute of Anthropology and History) that it review its regulations so as to:

- 1 Allow free admission to archaeological sites for indigenous peoples.
- 2 Provide indigenous peoples with the proper training to enable them to manage the sites themselves.
- 3 Pass on to the indigenous peoples some of the tourism earnings from these sites.
- 4 Give the indigenous peoples the opportunity to use the sites as ceremonial centers.
- 5 Protect the sites when endangered by tourism development megaprojects or ant infestation.

Unfortunately not much has changed in this area, as all archaeological sites and artefacts, including human remains, still belong to the Mexican state and are controlled by the INAH. A major change in the law in regard to ownership would thus still be required if indigenous Mexicans were to be allowed to regain control of their heritage to any extent. For this reason an act such as NAGPRA is currently impossible in Mexico (García-Bárcena, 2007: 17), despite human remains repatriation being one of the most urgent requests by indigenous groups in relation to archaeology.

Despite these setbacks for the Zapatista movement, Jung's arguments are well researched and convincing. She concludes that they 'were instrumental in linking an indigenous rights agenda to the worldwide anti-globalization movement, widening the scope of indigenous politics to include a broad array of issues and alliances that

extend indigenous identity beyond the limits of cultural protection and locate it in a particularly contemporary space' (231). Jung describes this alliance between indigenous movements and a redefined class struggle with the words 'indigenous is the new proletariat', implying the possibility of a worldwide resurgence of leftist–indigenous movements. If this is indeed a new trend, then for archaeologists this book is an excellent guide to better understanding the conflicts they are likely to find themselves embroiled in far more frequently in future.

*From Stonehenge to Las Vegas: archaeology as popular culture.* By Cornelius Holtorf. Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA, USA, 2005. x + 185 pp. \$ 24.95 softback. 0-7591-0267-8.

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