THE SECULARIZATION OF THE CARGO SYSTEM: An Example from Postrevolutionary Central Mexico*

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INTRODUCTION

The cargo system is composed of a series of ranked offices, both civil and religious, that male members of indigenous communities assume. Usually the term for each office lasts one year. Adult men who are active in village affairs pass through the various "cargos," as these offices are called, taking on civic duties one year, sponsoring important religious fiestas celebrated in the community the next, and so on. Finally, as old men, they attain the status of elders, or "principales," and have considerable authority in local decision-making (see Cancian [1967] for a concise, traditional interpretation and Smith [1977] for a more critical appraisal of the literature).

While reviewing the abundant literature on cargo systems found in indigenous Mesoamerica, I kept wondering whether the Hueyapan Indians were Indian enough.[1] If I presented my field data and joined the debate, would the village I studied be dismissed as one of those Morelos pueblos like Tepoztlan and my arguments, therefore, discounted? Where does Hueyapan stand, for example, on the cargo systems scale developed by Billie Dewalt (1975, pp. 91ff)? Never daring to assume a place among the "traditional" or the "ornate," could I count on Dewalt to rank the village in the "acephalous" category? If not, would I then lose all credibility as Hueyapan filed in behind the others in the "faded" cargo systems group?

Even if Hueyapan passed the Indian test, I would still have trouble including the pueblo in most discussions concerned with cargo systems and their elaborate civil-religious hierarchies. While disagreeing on a number of other issues, anthropologists writing on the subject almost always take it for granted that cargo systems, with varying degrees of success, help to defend indigenous pueblos from being absorbed culturally by an ever-encroaching Hispanic society. In Hueyapan, however,

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this institution does not work in opposition to, but in concert with, the outside power structure. What is more, the changes that have taken place over the years demonstrate how effectively the cargo system continues to serve the interests of a distinctly non-Indian Mexico.

The literature, it is true, clearly makes a generational/theoretical split between most anthropologists writing on the subject before the mid-1960s and those who have addressed it more recently. With few exceptions, earlier interpretations tended to be static, positing continuity from pre-Hispanic or early colonial times (Carrasco [1961] represents this position) and arguing that the cargo system functioned as a means of preventing wealth accumulation (cf. Nash 1958; Tax 1953; Wolf 1959, p. 216). Later works have been more sensitive to the forces of history, pointing out the importance of such factors as population growth (Cancian 1965) or an increase in lowland share cropping and the construction of the Pan American Highway (Wasserstrom 1978, p. 209). Some of the newer work has even suggested that civil-religious hierarchies did not begin to exist until probably the eighteenth century, demonstrating that the early colonial accounts make no clear reference to such elaborate systems.[2] Nevertheless, from the most confirmed closed corporate community-levelerist, to the most open society-class conscious-dialectical materialist, virtually everybody has agreed that the civil-religious hierarchy is an institution that maintains ethnic ties and traditions. While not forgetting such rare voices as Marvin Harris and Oscar Nuñez del Prado, most analyses have focused more on the economic/political structure—be it in relation to colonialism or not—and less on ideological questions concerned with the meaning of what is contained in that structure.[3]

I argue that it is important to analyze the cultural (i.e., ideational) content of the activities organized by the cargo system. Thus while I share a dialectical materialist orientation with many colleagues of my generation, my emphasis is on ideology, believing, as Murial Dimen-Schein put it, that "although we cannot make the world out of ideas, we can do nothing with material substance unless we understand its relation to ideas" (1977, p. xv). I suggest that, by focusing the discussion differently, we can see how a new cargo system has been emerging in postrevolutionary Central Mexico, one in which the symbolic/cultural detail has been adapted to meet the socioeconomic exigencies of the twentieth century. In communities like Hueyapan, native school teachers, trained by the federal government, have taken over the original Hispanic Catholic cargo system. Creating secular saints and ritual, they have preserved a structure in which political favors and local status are still largely determined by the success local village leaders have in representing an institution that reflects the interests of a non-Indian society.

In sum, debates about the significance of cargo systems, usually

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associated with the anthropological literature of fifteen and twenty years ago, have reemerged. With the old questions still not resolved, the focus now has shifted. Those presently writing on the subject are concerned only indirectly with such issues as: (1) Do we have clear evidence for the pre-Hispanic origins of cargo systems? or (2) Does the rotation of the responsibility for sponsoring fiestas really redistribute wealth in the pueblo? The new problem facing us, I suggest, is the following: Do indigenous peoples in rural Mexico today organize themselves to resist politically, socially, and economically by using so-called indigenous cultural forms, and does their participation in the cargo system represent this kind of ethnic resistance? Or do indigenous communities find themselves tied to a political and ritual system that, while it changes over the years, continues to reinforce both ideologically and socioeconomically the oppressive link still made in Mexico between ethnicity and class affiliation?

When pushed to the outer limits of my own position, I have to say that at this point in time—at least in central Mexico—resistance along ethnic lines does not exist and would not, if it did, be a meaningful choice for those called Indians. The postrevolutionary national government, with its confusing but positive campaign to glorify the Indian, has effectively defused the possibility of making ethnicity a good strategy for resistance. Bent on maintaining an identifiable indigenous population, for both economic and ideological reasons, I believe the government is continuing a tradition first introduced by the mendicant orders in the early colonial period, that of taking shreds and patches of indigenous customs—be they of pre-Hispanic or colonial Catholic origin—and transforming them to conform to the nationalistic symbolic system of postrevolutionary Mexico. Cargo systems, with their civil and religious responsibilities, offer a particularly clear example of this larger process.

This paper will be divided into two major sections: (1) historical background, with special attention given to the role missionaries played in the colonial period, both in the particular case of Hueyapan and in Central Mexico more generally; and (2) a comparison between the Catholic cargo system in Hueyapan and the postrevolutionary secularized one found there as well.[4] In the tradition of those working in Central Mexico, I shall rest within the geographic and historical borders of the area, conceding that what has occurred in this more restricted region does not necessarily reflect the situation in Highland Chiapas or Guatemala (Borah and Cook 1963; Ricard 1933, pp. vii–viii). Still, other anthropologists working in Central Mexico have written about civil-religious hierarchies in ways that call to mind descriptions of systems found further south (for example, Van Zantwijk 1967); clearly it is too

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simple to dismiss differences in interpretations to geography and history alone.

Hueyapan is a bilingual Nahuatl-Spanish-speaking village, located in the northeast highlands of the state of Morelos. In 1970, according to the federal government's census, there were four thousand people living in the five *barrios* and scattered *ranchos*. The villagers cultivate the usual subsistence crops—corn, beans, squash, chiles, etc. They also grow fruit for cash—mostly peaches, pears, *tejocotes* (fruit of the Mexican hawthorne) and *chirimoyas* (custard apples). Until recently, they sold or bartered on market days in the surrounding villages in Morelos and Puebla. Today, however, most of the fruit goes directly to the Manzanares Market in Mexico City. Many villagers raise sheep as well, and Hueyapan is known for its traditional woolen garments, which are handspun and then woven on backstrap looms.

HISTORY

According to the chronicles of Fray Diego Durán, Hueyapan was first settled in A.D. 902 by the people of Xochimilco (1967, 2:21). Between 1522 and 1524 it was conquered by the Spaniards (Martinez-Marín 1968, p. 28) and in 1526 it became part of the *encomienda* awarded to Pedro Sanchez Farfán. As was the fate, sooner or later, of most of the encomiendas in Central Mexico, this one fell into the hands of the colonial government and became a *corregimiento* in 1558. By 1643 the highland Morelos corregimiento was annexed to the more important one in Cuautla and, finally, in 1784, the village lost all individual status, being totally incorporated administratively into the Cuautla corregimiento (Gerhard 1970a, p. 112).

Records indicate that corregidores visited Hueyapan regularly at least until the village became totally absorbed by Cuautla (Gerhard 1970 b). Then, once government officials abandoned the area, the wealthy Santa Clara hacienda had no trouble "tricking" the villagers out of most of their land (Friedlander 1975), thereby forcing the Hueyapeños into a way of life they were to continue until the 1950s: migrating to the lowlands for several months a year to work on hacienda lands and renting small plots for themselves on which to grow food for their families. Only after chemical fertilizers were introduced to the pueblo, in the early 1950s, did the villagers settle down more permanently, cultivating the lands that the postrevolutionary government had returned to them.

Reviewing the economic history of Hueyapan, we find, then, that for most of the colonial period, the villagers were reasonably sedentary, working their lands for local encomenderos and corregidores. Once the colonial administration broke down in the area, the villagers were forced

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to become seasonal migrants and they remained so until after the Mexican Revolution. Now, in the modern period, as the Hueyapeños stay home again to grow fruit and subsistence crops, they are visited by government overseers who have come to look after the villagers' "cultural development," the same job that priests had assumed during early colonial times.[5] A large number of villagers, it is true, continue to migrate, particularly young women. However, unlike the seasonal treks made by those in preceding generations, Hueyapeños who leave the pueblo today go for good, settling down in Mexico City or Cuernavaca. The others stay in Hueyapan to farm and provide the village with a reasonably stable population.

As rural Hueyapeños tend to be more sedentary, it is possible, following Robert Wasserstrom's (1978) line of argument, that the community is actually more vital today than it was one hundred years ago. We find, for example, an extremely active cycle of fiesta celebrations for which a considerable number of villagers share the burden. The cargo system, in fact, does not just organize feasts to pay tribute to the Virgin of Guadalupe and the many saints venerated by the pueblo, but guarantees as well that the villagers commemorate Mexico's national heroes.

Before discussing the modern period in more detail, we must consider the village's religious history, relating it to certain aspects of the "spiritual conquest" of Central Mexico. The Augustinians reached Hueyapan as early as 1534 (Martinez-Marín 1968, p. 64), but systematic conversion of the villagers did not begin until 1561, when a few Dominican friars settled down in what was by then a government controlled pueblo (Paso y Troncoso 1905, 6:289). According to a 1570 pictographic map of Hueyapan, at that time there were already five chapels and one church with a convent (Boban 1891, 1:plate 25). Nobody seems to know what happened to four of the chapels, and today only the one built in honor of San Miguel still stands. Finally, in 1581, if not before, the village had been baptized Santo Domingo Hueyapan and divided into three *estancias*, each one bearing the name of a different saint (Paso y Troncoso 1905, 6:284).

The Dominicans remained in Hueyapan until 1751 when the village was secularized (Gerhard 1970b). This date neatly corresponds to the period when the pueblo was increasingly left alone, unprotected by government administrators and easy prey, therefore, for the *hacendados* of the lowlands. Still, even after the Dominicans left the village, Hueyapan clearly had resident priests from time to time, and we know of one in particular who lived there in the mid-1880s (Friedlander 1975, p. 144). What is more, Hueyapan could never have been far from a priest as there were important churches in the neighboring pueblos of Yecapistla, Ocuituco, and Zacualpan.

The history of Hueyapan, especially in early colonial times, seems

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to be representative of what occurred in many indigenous pueblos throughout Central Mexico. There are innumerable accounts indicating how the very organization of these Indian villages came under the control of the religious orders. While they found countless reasons to fight among themselves, the mendicant orders all joined together to write Charles V about the need to group Indians into villages to facilitate religious conversion and instruction (Ricard 1933, p. 69; unless otherwise indicated, the pages cited below are from this work). Thus, the Indians were settled into pueblos modelled after Spanish towns: in a central plaza a church, with spacious outside *atrios* to accommodate large numbers for prayer. Most importantly, the priests lost no time in making these indigenous communities their political domain, receiving the authority to keep out all other Europeans (p. 339). In sum, although most of the Indians' land and labor fell into the hands of encomenderos and corregidores, their homes and souls became the property of the priests.

Missionaries managed both religious and secular matters in these villages, arbitrating disputes, settling questions of succession and inheritance, caring for widows and orphans, establishing hospitals (p. 68). Christ and Catholicism could not be limited to the Church, these priests argued, but like the pagan religions of Mexico they had come to replace, Christian values had to be incorporated into every aspect of the Indians' lives (p. 339). Not only did the missionaries hold classes to teach catechism, but they helped the Indians make "honorable" use of their time, instructing them in how to set up small kitchen gardens and to cultivate fruit orchards (p. 172). They also encouraged the Indians to raise small livestock, such as European-imported sheep and goats (p. 173). In Hueyapan, as we have already seen, the villagers still raise sheep and the fruit orchards planted during colonial times are the basis of the village's economy today. Furthermore, reinforced by postrevolutionary government programs, the land in the village continues to be divided according to the system introduced by the missionaries: private, *milpa* (*ejido*), and communal (pp. 177–78).

In order to protect their interests against other colonial groups, the priests strongly opposed the Hispanicization of the Indians (p. 60). Where indigenous cultures did not do violence to Christianity, the priests left traditions alone. In particular, they wanted the Indians to preserve their native languages and not learn Spanish, for they saw knowledge of the latter to be the first step towards a "dangerous emancipation" (p. 70). Thus, despite the 1550 decree of Philip II that called for the Indians to be taught Spanish, the priests continued to work in Mexican languages, requiring all missionaries to learn Nahuatl and, where necessary, other indigenous tongues (p. 70). As Ricard explains it, the priests defended their policy by arguing:

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> . . . that to become a true Christian, the Mexican must break entirely with the past, except, and this is very important, with his language; because it is understood that to become a true Christian it is not at all necessary to become Spanish. It is permitted, even recommended, that he remain Mexican. The Church . . . does not ask her sons to betray their country nor turn against their race. (P. 338)[6]

In pueblos like Hueyapan, where there was a convent, catechism took place every Sunday and holiday. Very early in the morning, the native *alcalde* (mayor) woke up the villagers and led them to church in a procession. Marching at the head, another Indian trained for the task carried a cross and directed the people in prayer. Arriving at the church, a priest took attendance and it was no small matter to be absent without a good excuse, as the Spanish curates were severe disciplinarians. Herded into the atrio, the men separated from the women, the Indians repeated the catechism. Following these exercises, the priest gave a sermon and the Mass (pp. 117–18).

Since the missionaries were too few to handle the large numbers alone, they depended on Indians *de confianza,* whom they called *fiscales* and *mandones* (pp. 117–18) to assist with the instruction. Children too found themselves called upon to teach one another (p. 197). In sum, never allowing Indians to become priests themselves, the missionaries developed instead an elaborate substructure of religious posts. While supposedly granting certain privileges and status, these offices actually burdened the Indians with obligations, providing them with very little real power or authority. Given the extent of the control of the priests in these communities, it is hardly surprising that they combined secular and religious duties in the offices they created for their indigenous wards.

In keeping with the traditions of the peninsular Church, the priests encouraged the Indians to organize elaborate processions with crosses, saints, incense, flowers and music (pp. 217–18). Furthermore, the missionaries recognized that where there were *cofradías,* an institution brought over from Spain, processions were bigger and more impressive. Cofradías, in fact, insured a generally high spiritual level in a village as their members could be counted on to monitor others in the pueblo (pp. 220–21). Although there were few Indian cofradías in the early colonial period, many of the responsibilities assumed by these religious associations were inherited by the cargo systems which later developed throughout indigenous Mexico.[7]

In present-day Hueyapan, every month there is at least one religious fiesta. Sponsored by a *mayordomo,* the celebration involves the usual procession with flowers, incense, music, and images of the saint—both the large one that resides in the church and the little *misterio* that spends the year preceding the fiesta in the mayordomo's home. While there is no resident priest at this time in the village, most mayordomos pay for a special Mass, which the curate responsible for this part of

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Morelos conducts. The local deacon leads the villagers as well in the recitation of the Rosary, both in the church and in the mayordomo's home. Then, of course, there is always a big *mole* meal and the eating and drinking lasts for days.

The mayordomo for the Virgin of Guadalupe fiesta usually arranges to have a troop of players put on the *Moros y Cristianos*. Using the main plaza for a stage, the actors perform almost without a break for three days. Every year the play depicts how even the strongest of pagans finally submitted the Cross and converted to Christianity.

The four most important fiestas in Hueyapan are the Virgin of Guadalupe, Santo Domingo (the village's patron), Easter Week, and San Miguel (the patron of the politically most influential barrio). In addition, there are thirteen smaller, but still important, fiestas, among which are the saint days of the patrons of the other barrios. These celebrations almost all have mayordomos who sponsor processions, masses, and a mole meal. The villagers, in diminishing numbers, also participate in ten other fiestas celebrated in nearby pueblos. These festivities are of particular importance to those who still sell in the regional markets around Hueyapan. Finally, there are five or six holidays that no longer receive much formal attention either in the pueblo or in neighboring communities; still they continue to function in symbolic ways, marking an already full calendar with additional days on which respectful people pay homage to saints.

While not directly related to the cargo system, every family also has its individual saint days, innumerable in the typically large peasant household. What is more, there are baptisms, confirmations, funerals, fiestas for special house saints and, for the more privileged, marriages. All of these occasions involve *compadrazgo* relationships, recognized by the Church, expensive mole meals and, in many cases, special masses.

THE CATHOLIC CARGO SYSTEM AND THE POSTREVOLUTIONARY SECULARIZED ONE

In strategic terms, the cargo system has been effective in training the Indians to take their place in a Catholic Mexico, a country in which they were destined to remain ethnically distinct and socially powerless. If we consider that under the Spanish the Indians had to assume the burden of organizing village fiestas and managing local administrative affairs, we can see that through the cargo system the Indians have been drafted to serve as accomplices in their own oppression. The system, in fact, has proved so successful that it has been adopted by the defiantly anti-Catholic postrevolutionary government. While claiming to protect the Indians, many twentieth-century secular ideologues, like their religious predecessors of colonial times, have been providing the spiritual justifi-

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cation for a socioeconomic policy that maintains an identifiable indigenous population. To transmit the modern version of the old message, the government uses the structure of the traditional fiesta system, encouraging local political leaders, who represent the PRI platform, to take an active role in sponsoring the celebration of Mexico's major national heroes and events.

Whereas the missionaries were interested in protecting their political influence in colonial Mexico by keeping the Indians Indian, the postrevolutionary government has its reasons too for wanting to maintain a recognizable indigenous population. First of all, Indians are a great tourist attraction in a country that depends heavily on the money it makes from foreign visitors. Second, the government has a major ideological investment in glorifying Mexico's pre-Hispanic heritage and it asks the so-called indigenous people of today to participate by playing "Indian" for others.

The essential features of a cargo system, Dewalt (1975, p. 90) reminds us, are the following: (1) it involves voluntary service without remuneration; (2) holders of civil or religious offices perform most or all of the functions necessary for the running of the local government and/or church; and (3) tenure in these offices is rotated, usually annually, to other members of the community. In Hueyapan today the civil offices and the mayordomo positions do not have an explicit relationship to one another. However, it is not unusual for a villager seeking a political career in the pueblo to volunteer regularly to serve either as a mayordomo in a religious fiesta or as a *presidente de fiestas patrias* in the secular cycle. Furthermore, while there is no specified hierarchy of fiestas, to be mayordomo for the Virgin of Guadalupe or Santo Domingo is considered an important step for the politically ambitious. As for the fiestas patrias, the one an individual chooses to sponsor is usually determined by barrio residence: Independence Day (September 16) is the responsibility of San Miguel and San Jacinto; Morelos' Birthday (September 30) of San Andrés; the Mexican Revolution (November 20) of San Felipe; and the anniversary of Zapata's death (April 10) of San Bartolo.

Just as the missionaries divided the village into estancias, naming each section after a different saint, the government has given four of the five barrios of present-day Hueyapan a primary school and it has named each one after an important historical event or hero. Thus, following the original pattern, San Felipe, for example, is not only responsible for celebrating its saint's day, it is also expected to run the fiesta for the Mexican Revolution, as its school has been baptized "20 de noviembre." Then, like the priests who directed the mayordomos to lead Good Friday processions along Calvary Street, the school teachers instruct the presidentes de fiestas patrias to march down roads that also bear the names of the event being commemorated. On Zapata's fiesta, the villagers walk

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along Emiliano Zapata and 10 de abril Streets in the San Bartolo barrio and return to the plaza for an assembly program before the *Plan de Ayala* school house. Furthermore, as the mayordomos take out images of a saint, the presidentes de fiestas patrias parade with huge portraits of Hidalgo, Morelos, and Zapata, colorfully decorated with streamers in Mexico's national colors.

The mole meal sponsored by the secular and religious mayordomos resemble one another both in menu and organization.[8] The family sponsoring the fiesta assumes the greatest burden, helped by the families who will be in charge during the next two years. In addition, both secular and religious mayordomos can count on *compadres* to contribute corn and beans and to send their wives to help prepare meals for the huge crowds. For fiestas that commemorate the Mexican Revolution, the presidente de fiestas patrias can also expect a token offering from villagers in his barrio who have ejido lands and who generally acknowledge their appreciation to the land reform acts with a small contribution.

The secular calendar is even busier than the religious one. Not only are there four barrio-sponsored celebrations, but the school system—with the help of villagers—annually organizes twenty other programs on a smaller scale, paying homage to such historical heroes as Benito Juarez and events like the signing of the 1917 Constitution. Among these minor fiestas, there are Teacher's Day, Mother's Day, even Children's Day, and these too serve as occasions on which to give political speeches celebrating Mexican nationalism.

During all of these fiestas, the villagers are called on to serve and give thanks to others. From Christ to Zapata, outsiders have always been identified as their saviors, as the ones who have given them religion, education, and land. With the help of native school teachers and politically ambitious villagers, the government has adapted the original Catholic message to meet the needs of the modern nation, transmitting it by creatively utilizing the traditional cargo system. Thus, through a ritual the Hueyapeños know well, the villagers have acquired the necessary vocabulary to participate in postrevolutionary Mexico in a society that speaks often of change, but where Indians remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale.

It is not by accident that individuals lose their Indianness most easily by leaving the pueblo. The community, more than the person, is marked and the cargo system has effectively reinforced this situation. As others, like W. R. Smith (1977) would undoubtedly agree, the cargo system maintains community boundaries and provides a structure in which the villagers pay their respects to the outside power system. In the tradition of the colonial missionaries, postrevolutionary Mexico has interfered with the Hispanicization of indigenous pueblos by sending

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out government functionaries to help villagers develop their so-called Indian crafts and oblige them to represent the nation's pre-Hispanic heritage. Thus, as the missionaries created Catholic Indians, so the government is in the process of producing national ones, using many of the methods introduced by the religious orders centuries before.[9]

NOTES

1. Since most of the anthropological literature referred to here insists on the terms "Indian" and "indigenous," I feel it is necessary to do the same. I trust, however, that, given my previous publications (in particular Friedlander 1975) and the argument developed in this paper, the reader understands that I use these words critically. Not only do I question the validity of such terminology when talking about *campesinos*—especially those from Central Mexico—I firmly believe that as anthropologists we have a political responsibility to dispense with a vocabulary and mode of analysis that helps perpetuate social and economic discrimination.
2. Wasserstrom 1978. See also Rus and Wasserstrom 1980.
3. Harris 1964, pp. 25–38; Nuñez del Prado 1955. Smith's (1977) important contribution should also, in all fairness, be included in the "exception" category. He, too, argues against the position that the cargo system determines ethnic boundaries and preserves native traditions. He also agrees that this institution does not defend indigenous communities against the outside Hispanic world. However, he does suggest that the cargo system is an Indian response and he focuses more on that aspect of the problem than on the way it actually represents Hispanic interests in indigenous pueblos.
4. Most of the field data presented here are based on material collected in 1969–70. Having returned to the village every year since then, until November 1977, I can confirm that the changes that have taken place in the pueblo reinforce my original argument.
5. For an extended discussion of the "evangelical" work of the government, see Friedlander 1975, chap. 6.
6. Translated from the French by Friedlander.
7. Cofradías still exist in many indigenous villages even though cargo systems have assumed many of the responsibilities originally associated with these Spanish religious organizations.
8. For an extended discussion of food, see Friedlander 1975, pp. 96–98 and Friedlander 1978.
9. For an extended discussion of this theme, see Friedlander 1975, chaps. 5 and 6.

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