BEYOND IDENTITY?

Analytic Crosscurrents in Contemporary Mayanist Social Science

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TECPAN GUATEMALA: A MODERN MAYA TOWN IN GLOBAL AND LOCAL CONTEXT. By Edward F. Fischer and Carol Hendrickson. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003. Pp. 164. $65.00 cloth, $18.95 paper.)

COMMUNITIES IN GLOBALIZATION: THE INVISIBLE MAYAN NAHUAL. By Juan Pablo Pérez Sáinz and Katherine E. Andradé-Tickhoff. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003. Pp. 167. $24.95 paper.)

MAYAN VISIONS: THE QUEST FOR AUTONOMY IN AN AGE OF GLOBALIZATION. By June C. Nash. (New York: Routledge, 2001. Pp. 303. $23.95 paper)

THE MAYA OF MORGANTON: WORK AND COMMUNITY IN THE NUEVO NEW SOUTH. By Leon Fink. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003. Pp.254. $34.95 cloth, $17.95 paper.)

The rise and fall of conceptual frameworks in the social sciences is a phenomenon that becomes more apparent the longer one works in the academy. Considered by some a kind of fashion show, the prominence and subsequent decline of certain concepts derives much more from their ability, sharp or blunt as the case may be, to describe and represent social realities. The use of particular analytic concepts and frameworks in the social sciences is also inextricably bound up with larger historical events and moments. In the twentieth century, for example, social scientific frameworks cannot be separated from the upheavals of technological innovation, from the history of labor conflicts, from the struggle against fascism and the Cold War that followed, or from the rising tide of civil and human rights movements in the last half of that century.

These four new volumes about communities, social movements, economic and political transformations, and cultural dynamics among the Mayan peoples of Chiapas and Guatemala present an opportunity to

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discuss the utility and the limits of contemporary conceptual frameworks. *Globalization*, an omnipresent conceptual framework at the present time, is in these volumes both analytically descriptive and historically relevant, notwithstanding differences among many scholars over the social, cultural, and political implications of global economic integration. As I read these books, I became less sure about the utility of the *identity discourse*, another extremely important analytic framework that has unfolded in the last couple of decades of social science research and writing, particularly in anthropology.

My anxieties about the identity discourse, which predate this review, stem from what I understand as three parallel historical processes that have commonly been conflated. The first process is the multi-stranded, complex, and locally specific manner in which capitalist economies have organized social stratification and hierarchies around axes of race, class and gender. These axes, themselves complex ideological systems frequently pre-capitalist in their origins, are conjugated in ways that time and time again privilege certain raced and gendered persons and disenfranchise others in local and global capitalist economies. The second process is the post-WW II civil and human rights movements in the United States and elsewhere, which led to the organization of many groups and communities around cultural, racial, ethnic, gender, religious, sexual and other identities. In the last three decades of the century, the emergence of such social movements, which hinge upon elaborations, rediscoveries and assertions of these forms of identity, coincided with the decline of class-based movements and of class as a powerful form of social solidarity. The third process, coalescing at the same historical moment as the second, developed as anthropologists and other scholars emphasized several vectors of identity—most frequently race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—as analytic devices, theorizing such identities as social constructions and specifying how such constructions mobilize essentialist tropes and discourses.

The undeniable historical importance of the first two processes has, I would argue, helped to make possible a slippage such that the scholarly discourse of identity, the outcome of the third process, is now automatically assumed to provide relevant analytic categories and parameters. Anthropologists in particular summon and engage parameters of racial, ethnic, and gender identity in any and every ethnographic situation they encounter, even if the manifestations of social solidarities they observe diverge from the scholarly expectation that these parameters are always germane. Recognizing that a discourse of identity *as an analytic tool* has become routinized does *not* mean ignoring or minimizing identity discourses among the people with whom social scientists work, much less diverting our attention from the ways capitalist economies conjugate race, class and gender to structure inequality. However, unprivileging the

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normative parameters of the identity discourse may open up our understanding of ethnographic situations to other analytic possibilities. At the very least it may be time to ask ourselves what we are missing by always making use of the same analytic categories.

I utilize this review to probe these issues, as well as to highlight what is new and noteworthy in contemporary Mayanist social science. Besides globalization and identity, other conceptual frameworks are central to the work of the authors considered, which is unsurprising given that among the four volumes, two were written by anthropologists, one by sociologists, and one by an historian. As I myself am an anthropologist, my review is positioned by the ways concepts I will discuss have unfolded in my own discipline; but I am not necessarily favorably predisposed toward the anthropologists among these authors. Moreover, while I have worked extensively in Central America, I am not a Mayanist, and thus my review offers something of an outsider's perspective on debates within this very particular sub-field.

It is practically an obligation, I think, for anthropologists to critically ponder those places in the world where our research and writing have been especially implicated in the construction of identities among the peoples with whom we work, and "the Maya world " is definitely one of those places. The area of Mesoamerica in which contemporary Guatemala and Chiapas are situated has been and remains characterized by great linguistic diversity. Before contact with Europeans, many periods of urbanization, technological and agricultural intensification, and demographic upheaval had occurred. In this milieu, the classification of languages as "Mayan," of archaeological time periods as pre-Classic, Classic or post-Classic "Mayan," of contemporary weaving and clothing as "Mayan," etc., has had longstanding valence in many anthropological literatures. Those literatures have over time shaped the ways non-anthropologists and non-scholars in Mexico and Guatemala have viewed and understood diverse peoples, and have contributed to the ways the peoples within and among indigenous communities have understood the Mayan world view and understand themselves. This is not to say that discussions, internalizations and naturalizations of "Mayan culture," "Mayan history," and "Mayan identity," not to mention "Mayan activism" or "Mayan political movements," are any more or less constructed than any other identity discourses, or any more or less affected by the perceptions and interventions of outsiders. It is, however, perhaps more obvious in this case how anthropologists were specifically involved in the making of discourses of identity, culture and history, and why anthropologists remain so interested in continuing to elaborate and unfold this discursive field.

Edward F. Fischer and Carol Hendrickson's *Tecpán Guatemala: A Modern Maya Town in Global and Local Contexts* is written to be

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accessible to an undergraduate audience, but nevertheless offers a lucid and up-to-date example of new ideas in Mayanist anthropology. They have focused upon one community, Tecpán, where Mayan people speak the Kaqchikel language, and in so doing conform most closely to the discursive conventions in the Mayanist literature in anthropology. But the authors are also at pains to divorce themselves from the anthropological conventions such a focus has historically entailed. Consequently, they critique the iconic "closed corporate community" studies of Mesoamerica pioneered in the 1960s by Eric Wolf, by showing that Tecpán is neither closed not corporate. Instead, the town has been transformed by the violent upheavals of the Guatemalan civil conflict that raged between 1979 and 1986, as well as by the tides of free trade and of new globalized agricultural and industrial export economies. Viewing Mayan identity as historically dynamic and contingent rather than defined by a set of age-old traditions or essential customs and traits, the authors contextualize local economic, political and cultural changes within the larger national pan-Mayan movement that has come together in Guatemala, particularly since the signing of accords that (supposedly) ended the civil conflict. At the heart of their analysis lie paradoxes: for example, as between a pan-Mayan activism that has for the first time in the country's history created bonds of solidarity across linguistic and community boundaries, at the same time that local manifestations of that activism manifest as an emphasis upon particular languages and presentations of self such as in Tecpán. Fischer and Hendrickson do not try to drain such phenomena of their paradoxical qualities.

Their discussion of the multi-faceted role of religion in the village elaborates Mayan traditional beliefs, Catholicism, and Protestantism, and the relationships between them, with a subtle and even-handed treatment. It has been common in Latin Americanist anthropology to understand Catholicism as politically and theologically diverse, and Fischer and Hendrickson show that in Tecpán, contemporary Catholic worship spans both traditional and innovative practices. It has been less common to treat Protestantism in such a manner, and in Guatemala in particular, many anthropologists and activists alike expressed tremendous concern over the past two decades about Protestant churches as agents of assimilation and government control. Fischer and Hendrickson stress that conversion to Protestant religions has not necessarily sponsored de-Indianization, but instead has been utilized by Mayan communities as means to reinforce solidarity and safety in the face of violence. They also do not discount the ways that Mayan individuals and communities have sought and found spiritual power and meaning in Protestant worship and theology, and they stress that like Catholicism, Protestantism is permeable to traditional beliefs. Because traditional practices and beliefs

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are not codified or textualized, they are vastly diverse in and of themselves and in the ways they combine with Christian religions. The authors' portrayal of Mayan, and specifically Kaqchikel, concepts of self in traditional belief is illuminating, enriching an analysis of religion in Tecpán that strongly suggested that Mayan identity could not be boiled down to either an ethnic or a racial parameter.

Two other facets of this book also provide fuel for a much less standardized approach to identity in the context of analyzing the effects of globalization upon Tecpán. Hendrickson has previously written about *traje*, or indigenous clothing, and in this book summarizes much of her findings about and approach to this central aspect of Mayan presentation of self, particularly for Mayan women. Again, complex and paradoxical factors are drawn together to create a multi-dimensional effect. Women do wear the unique, locally produced, hand-loomed traje that identifies the villages or towns where they live much more than men do, underscoring women's central role in representing local Mayanness, and in transmitting Mayan heritage to children and grandchildren. But the expense of producing and buying hand-loomed traje obliges women to wear mass-produced, machine made traje that does not signify their communities. Although weaving has been for a very long time a principal facet of women's gender-role, economic changes mean that fewer girls are learning to weave. Some poorer women even wear t-shirts, yet other women who have succeeded professionally collect traje from many communities and wear different pieces in a cosmopolitan appreciation of textile aesthetics. Moreover, while most men have worn less and less traje over the last few decades, the revival of traditional Mayan beliefs has led men who are learning and practicing shamanism, or revitalizing the traditional Catholic *cofradías* to wear traje much more than was common several decades ago. All of these developments render *traje*'s gendered nature quite complex.

Fischer and Hendrickson's treatment of economic changes in Tecpán also emphasizes complexity and dynamic change. Rather than sounding the alarm over the introduction of so-called "non-traditional crops" as a threat to traditional *milpa* (corn) agriculture, they show that Tecpaneco farmers embraced the market, and the possibility of enrichment through participation in a globalized agricultural system, without necessarily discarding their older subsistence agriculture entirely. Tecpaneco farmers evaluated the advantages and disadvantages of the new crops (such as broccoli), and lately there seems to be a shift back to *milpa* agriculture as farmer choose less risk, less competition and less use of pesticides on the lands they have worked for centuries and continue to prize in the twenty-first century. This exercise of agency on the part of Tecpaneco farmers underscores the need for anthropologists and other social scientists to leave aside rigid criteria for defining "indigenous practices" or

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"indigenous values." Critical perspectives on economic change and indigenous identity in another Kaqchikel community are also explored in Juan Pablo Pérez Sáinz and Katharine E. Andradé-Tickhoff's book *Communities in Globalization*. Written by two sociologists, this book is certainly relevant to this discussion, but is also very much directed toward evaluating analytic discourses specific to their discipline. In addition, the authors' discussion focuses on three case studies in Central America only one of which lies in the Mayan region. In that light, let us consider the broader scope of these authors' argument and their case studies as the context for their treatment of the Kaqchikel community of San Pedro Sacatepéquez, Guatemala.

Pérez Sáinz and Andradé-Tickhoff explicitly address the concept of globalization to arrive at an explicit approach, which is implicit in the volume by Fischer and Hendrickson. In both books, the compression of distance and time brought about by the globalization of production, finance, and marketing across national economies is acknowledged to have simultaneously revitalized local communities. For Fischer and Hendrickson, the characteristics of community in Tecpán are unique and historically specific, but Pérez Sáinz and Andradé-Tickhoff are interested in a broader conceptualization of community as "socioterritory." This concept enables them to discuss the resurgence of locality in Central America, without recourse to either the Wolfian closed corporate community, or the stereotype of agrarian rurality, both of which have characterized the study of Mesoamerican communities for sociologists and anthropologists alike. Their use of this concept is part and parcel of their concern to critically evaluate two current concepts in the sociology of economic development, namely "clusters" and "upgrading." Both concepts, they find, are far too economistic, and limit analysis to the relationships between corporate firms in a given industry and the role of the state in promoting institutions to support development.

Pérez Sáinz and Andradé-Tickhoff describe their three case-study communities—Las Palmas in El Salvador, La Fortuna in Costa Rica, and San Pedro Sacatepéquez, Guatemala—as socioterritories where economic transformations have displaced subsistence agriculture as the primary means by which Central Americans earn their livelihoods. In each of these communities, the authors find vastly improved employment opportunities for local citizens through the advent of globalized industries; in La Fortuna, the industry is tourism geared towards visitors from the United States and Europe, in Las Palmas, it is handicraft production for a global market, and in San Pedro Sacatepéquez, the industry is textile *maquilas*. Their discussion of development in these three socioterritories consistently emphasizes two findings. First, the authors note that even with the resurgence of locality in the globalized economy, the nation, and the policies of nation-building still count. The

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contrast between Costa Rican state formation and institutionality, and the wreckage of both during the Guatemalan civil conflict is particularly profound, and the differences between Salvadoran and Guatemalan post-conflict states are also pointedly described. But more important still, the authors emphasize the effects of cultural factors and *identity* in comparing how development has played out in their three case studies. This emphasis is marked, not very surprisingly, with respect to San Pedro Sacatepéquez, the only indigenous community among the three. I am not implying that the authors are reductive or caricaturing in their recourse to identity; indeed, they consider identity as "community capital," or a set of values and ethics that organize and motivate behavior around economic as much as ritual sorts of activities. Thus the authors link the development of maquila industries in San Pedro Sacatepéquez to longstanding marketing traditions in this Kaqchikel town. But, there is less sense of cultural factors and of identity as dynamic and multidimensional, and much more a taken-for-granted assumption that cultural identity composes a set of given resources that can affect the course of development for better or for worse. My critique is a guarded one because there is much to recommend in this book. The authors conclude that cohesive communities have a far greater chance to benefit from global capitalism, and that an orientation to collective interests through strong community capital, i.e., strong local identities, is the means to greater equity under regimes of globalized development. Their approach offers a bridge between sociological analysis and familiar features of anthropological ethnography, but I would not want the price for this benefit to be a reification of identity as an a priori factor or set of factors.

June Nash's *Mayan Visions* offers a far more pessimistic, even dire, view of the effects of globalization upon the Mayan communities and peoples of Mesoamerica. In the past two decades, Nash has offered some of the most innovative, insightful and articulate analysis of class struggle in Latin America; her understanding of the transection of class consciousness, indigenous identity and nationalist revolution in Bolivia is still considered a landmark in anthropology. In many ways, *Mayan Visions* extends that analysis into the age of accelerated economic globalization as it is unfolding in Chiapas, where she has also conducted research for decades. Nash understands globalization as a response to systemic crisis in capitalism, a theme in late-twentieth-century Marxist analysis, which has led to the domination of finance capital over other sectors. Finance capital's decisive influence, particularly following the end of the USSR and the demise of the Soviet economic and political bloc, has ushered in a period of extensive and intensive corporate monopoly-building, which means—as many have noted—that most economic globalization occurs *within* a few monstrously large corporations,

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rather than across or among a spectrum of corporate entities. Under such circumstances, nation-states have lost much of their ability to practically control the course of their economic planning, and instead compete with one another to create the most favorable conditions for finance capital and for the charmed circle of globalized corporations to continue to expand. Local agricultural subsistence economies, Nash observes, are among the first sectors to be sacrificed on the altar of this kind of global economy. Such an economy, she writes, demands "rationalization" of agricultural production under standardized so-called "neoliberal" production, pricing and distribution regimes that inevitably mean the doom of local, culturally and agriculturally distinctive forms of production, which are characteristic of the Mayan peoples of Chiapas in Nash's current purview.

The intent of Nash's book, in the context of this broad historical and spatial phenomenon, is two-fold: on the one hand, to describe and understand the Zapatista movement's response to neoliberal globalization, and the program of economic, political and cultural autonomy for Chiapas Mayas pursued by the EZLN (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*), and, on the other hand, to offer a critical evaluation of the decades-long development of anthropological analysis of Mayan culture and history in Chiapas. These two projects are intertwined throughout the book, so that many anthropological concepts from the long historical engagement of this discipline with Mayan peoples are trimmed and tailored to new times and new problematics. Nash extensively reviews the Wolfian closed corporate community, the legacy of Mexican anthropologists who worked within the PRI-sponsored *indigenista* ideological framework, feminist approaches, Wallersteinian world-systems analysis, and postmodernist critiques of essentialism within anthropology, tossing out what she considers chaff and carefully selecting useful conceptual grain. Her caution with respect to the discourse of identity is particularly well taken. Nash argues that the agency of social actors such as "women," "indigenous peoples," or "the Maya," especially as expressed in new social forces such as the EZLN, cannot be comprehensively understood solely within the terms of identity, but must be framed by macroeconomic and political analysis (Marxist, in Nash's case). Indigenous identity is thus for Nash a creative and even more historically dynamic phenomenon than for Fischer and Hendrickson. Thus Nash's quite extraordinary historical summary never neglects to highlight how the economic reforms of the Mexican Revolution enabled the intensification of Indian identities after 1910, how important locality has remained among Chiapas' indigenous communities, the divisive role played by recent religious pluralism within and between indigenous communities and the simultaneous convergence

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between religious-inspired activism and discourses of human rights within Zapatista ideology, and the key importance of women and their leadership within the Zapatista communities. Through her historical exegesis, she offers a lucid and useful summation of the EZLN's struggle for autonomy and what that concept means for them.

In many if not most ways, then, Nash's book offers a potent antidote to the flaws and failings of the identity discourse in anthropology, and perhaps across the social sciences. The broad sweep of her historical and analytic overview could perhaps overwhelm some readers. More worrisome, for my part, is the persistent blurring between Nash's drive to understand where the Zapatistas came from historically and what their political program means, her unabashed advocacy on behalf of the EZLN, and her view that the EZLN represents the cutting edge in both political and anthropological terms. I actually do not disagree with her. But this kind of slippage can cause readers to wonder whether Nash has pointed the same probing critique toward the Zapatistas that she applied to all the other discourses she queried in her book. As I have suggested, analytic categories, particularly discourses of identity, may be particularly vulnerable to reification by political exigency.

If Nash's book casts a very wide net upon the history and contemporary politics of Mayans, Leon Fink writes about very specific Mayan groups in very bracketed historical circumstances. His book, *The Maya of Morganton: Work and Community in the Nuevo New South*, is not even set in Mesoamerica, but in an immigrant Mayan community in Morganton, North Carolina. Fink (like me) is not a Mayanist, but rather a labor historian who almost by accident was drawn into doing a great deal of research about Mayan peoples and history by a series of events he wanted to explain. Whereas organized labor and large-scale labor struggles had been dwindling in North Carolina and the rest of the South for decades, in 1997 a major labor conflict erupted in Morganton's poultry industry, a notoriously non-unionized industry, led mostly by Guatemalan Mayans. Fink considers the Mayans' presence in North Carolina emblematic of one facet of the globalization of labor. As he researched the recent history of Guatemala and its Mayan peoples, he came to wonder how the experience of civil conflict and armed resistance to the Guatemalan state that had both buffeted and enlisted Mayan communities and individuals might have shaped the labor protests in which Mayan immigrants had become such prominent participants. More specifically, he asked:

> How is it that a group of workers 'on the run' from outside authority, people who claimed not only no political allegiance but also no awareness of the formal political conflicts going on around them [in the United States], would have the temerity to stand up to their bosses on a specific grievance? (52)

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To address this question, Fink outlines several specific histories: the post-World War II history of the poultry industry in North Carolina and the South; the recent history of the specific communities-of-origin of Morganton's Mayan immigrants; and the chain of events that led to and included the labor conflicts of the late 1990s. This is an ethnographically rich book and Fink is a subtle thinker. I want to draw attention to the way he has deftly handled the identities of the Mayan workers, which I found exemplary. The earliest Mayan immigrants to Morganton were Q'anjob'al speakers, refugees from a region that experienced particularly extreme violence during the Guatemalan civil war. On the whole, the Q'anjob'al did not react to the appalling conditions in the poultry industry by organizing, but instead gradually shifted toward less-taxing jobs in the area's furniture plants. The next wave of Mayans came from Aguacatán, a town with a distinctive linguistic profile and a longstanding conflict over community ethnicity caused by the merger of two communities in the late nineteenth century. As in Tecpán, Aguacatán had also experienced late-twentieth-century fissures between Protestants and Catholics, which in the latter case were linked to significant economic modernization. Aguacatecos did not suffer from the same brutality as occurred in the Q'anjob'al villages during the civil war, and Fink suggests that Aguacatecos migration from their town to the United States was spurred on as much by a search of economic opportunities as by flight from warfare.

Fink critically reviews both local and scholarly discourse on tradition and community among Mayan peoples, and he argues that the Aguacatecos were more active in labor organizing precisely because their solidarity was the consequence of recent political and economic struggles rather than the legacy of ancient traditions. While the Aguacatecos of the 1990s, like other Mayans in Morganton, became very concerned to teach their language and transmit distinctive customs and practices to their children, Fink's analysis suggested to me that he saw the Aguacatecos' activism on the whole as representing something like a class-in-the-making. The very possibility that *class* might be an analytic, not to mention a political, concept with some relevance was a tantalizing one. On the other hand, however, ethnic divisions between Aguacatecos and the Chalchitecos, the latter the descendants of the community that had merged with Aguacatán in the 1800s, emphasized that there could be no simple closure around any of these identities. The fact that Fink highlighted rather than downplayed these disjunctures and open-ended processes made this book an especially satisfying read.

Each one of these volumes offers varying degrees of encouragement to the hope that social science need not remain mired in circulating a priori, reifying categories and discursive maneuvers with respect to identity. I think that when anthropologists, historians, and sociologists

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are tempted to formulate sweeping historical or regional overviews, we may be in most danger of engaging with categories that do not adequately represent the contingencies and specificities that are summoned by such terms as "community," "tradition," and, of course, "identity." Yet, broader perspectives are often exactly what we need, if globalization and its effects are at all to be critically understood. While the scholarly discourse of identity is not likely to fade away in the near future, innovative work like the books I have reviewed here will likely continue to underscore its limitations and to suggest the outlines of new frameworks.

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