

## ***“Indigenous Autonomy and the Public Interest: Constructing Citizens, Rights, and the Nation in Mexico”***

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Public Interest Anthropology has been concerned to understand how multiple publics within a given society strive to get their interests met, and how a definition of a common good may coalesce as a result of the process of negotiation of interests within the public sphere [civil society?]. What interests me is why the process of defining a common good--- or should I say progress toward social justice in the sense of satisfying the demands of an aggrieved group--- is sometimes glacial. I would like to suggest that a promising future focus for Public Interest Anthropology would be the examination of slow progress toward social justice, with an eye to seeing whether it's possible to transcend the disagreements about what constitutes the common good occurring at the local or national levels, and make a statement about what a global public should perhaps consider when pondering 'the common good.'

I will argue that stalemates in struggles for social justice for disadvantaged groups can occur when different publics seize upon the same set of abstract concepts, concepts that are generally agreed to represent the common good/wider public interest, and fill those notions with meanings that represent quite different goals. When that happens, the already-more-powerful public can claim to share an interest with the disadvantaged public, but, ironically, can use that claim to shared interests to suppress or ignore the disadvantaged public's demands. PIA gives us the tools that can help us notice when this is happening, especially if we hew closely to PIA's emphasis on bifocality--- that is, examining how a debate is framed by the various publics who engage in it, and then stepping back to ask questions about what ends (or whose ends) are served by the particular ways in which the issues are framed.

I come to these issues by way of my research in Mexico, which was on the involvement of the Mixe people in the pan-indigenous movement for autonomy. The autonomy movement has existed in Mexico in one form or another since the late 1980s, but it attracted little attention until the Zapatista Army of National Liberation included a demand for autonomy in the agenda they brought to the peace negotiations with the government's representatives, after their uprising in Chiapas on January 1, 1994. The product of these peace talks was an agreement that became known as the San Andrés Accords, which contained specific demands for the reform of the Constitution that would permit the legalization of autonomy. These Accords were signed on February 16, 1996. The next step was to get them approved by Congress so that they would be signed into law.

Before going further, let me insert a word about the meaning of "autonomy" and the rationale for why autonomy should be written into the Constitution, since neither are obvious. In this instance, "autonomy" does *not* imply an indigenous desire to secede from Mexico or to create independent governments. It is closer to the concept of "self-determination" in the sense of a people's being able to control their own destiny. I do not have enough time to give you much detail about the various specific demands of the autonomy movement, so let me paint it in broad strokes instead: The desire for autonomy is about the desire to be different: indigenous peoples are demanding that they be legally recognized as culturally distinct from the majority (mestizo) population, so that they will not be discriminated against for that difference. The desire for autonomy is also about the desire to be included as a full citizen in the wider society. The crucial

thing to understand is that the autonomy movement *uses the fact of indigenous cultural difference from the majority to justify their demands for the enjoyment of full rights as citizens*. Advocates of autonomy argue that granting autonomy to indigenous peoples would strengthen the nation-state, and that therefore autonomy is in the wider public interest of all Mexicans.

Let me use just one example of one the autonomy movement's demands to clarify the point. Advocates of autonomy argue that indigenous peoples should be recognized as bearers of group rights, not just individual rights. As collective legal subjects, they should be allowed to participate directly in the state's political processes and policy-making, but should be able to do so using their own cultural or political norms, rather than be forced to conform to the state's norms. (In practical terms, this means they want to be able to participate in the state's political processes by following their traditional customs, rather than having to be represented by political parties.) The rationale for this demand is that if indigenous peoples enjoyed collective rights within the nation-state, and could participate in the state's political processes and policy-making on their own terms, Mexico would become more democratic overall. In sum, the proponents of autonomy argue that it should be made legal, because a more democratic society would be good for the entire Mexican public, not just good for Indians.

The Zapatistas and others involved in the drafting of the San Andrés Accords expected that the executive branch and Congress would sign the agreement into law. Instead, the government did nothing. All of 1996 passed, until December, when the Zedillo administration issued its own counter-proposal for constitutional reform, thereby effectively rejecting the proposal for constitutional reform that was based in the San Andrés Accords. The autonomy activists took offense at this, and it was at this point that progress toward settling the question of autonomy really ground to a halt.

Curious as to why the process of incorporating the San Andrés Accords into the Constitution was proving so slow and difficult, I looked at the commentary published by conservative public intellectuals on the autonomy question in newspaper editorials at the height of the disputes over the content of the San Andrés Accords (1995-98). I noticed that the objections to autonomy fell into two broad categories. The first set of objections can be grouped under the claim that "Autonomy conflicts with the interests of the wider (non-indigenous) Mexican public." The arguments in this category include claims that legalizing autonomy would balkanize the country, rip the social fabric apart, encourage inter-ethnic strife, promote vigilantism, and prevent the rule of law. The second broad category of objections is more interesting and important, for its ability to really shut down the debate. This claim consists of the argument, "Autonomy would not be in the interests of the Indians, either."

In both categories of objections to autonomy, conservative critics use the same key concepts that the autonomy activists do: a desire for nationalism/national cohesion, economic development, and especially, the democratization of Mexico. While the indigenous activists have argued that autonomy is in the wider public interest because it would foster all of these commonly shared goals, the opponents of autonomy use the same concepts to stall forward movement on legalizing autonomy by arguing that autonomy is *not* in the wider public interest (or even in the Indians' own interest) because it would fail to produce these mutually desired outcomes (national cohesion, economic development, democracy).

Let me use the debate over whether autonomy would foster more democracy in Mexico overall to hammer home the point. As I said before, indigenous activists argue that it is in the national interest of the entire Mexican public to have a democratic society. They further argue that the way to achieve such a democratic society is to grant indigenous peoples autonomy (because

this would allow Indians greater access to the state's political system, but on their own terms, which would allow them to participate more fully as citizens). Meanwhile, critics of the autonomy movement also argue that having a more democratic society is in the national interest of the entire Mexican public --- BUT they point out that democracy is widely desired by *all* Mexicans, not just Indians. If that is so, why should special legislation be passed that would favor indigenous peoples by allowing them special means of political participation? Critics argue that the autonomy movement has its priorities backwards—that instead of promoting indigenous rights as a way to engender democracy, all of Mexico should strive to become more democratic, first, because if Mexico becomes more democratic, indigenous peoples' situation will automatically be improved, rendering their demand for special rights unnecessary.

What I find really interesting about these different positions on the question of autonomy (pro-indigenous vs. politically conservative) is that they both staked out their positions in the debate over legalizing autonomy by appealing to (or trying to manipulate??) the question of what, exactly, is supposed to be in the wider public interest or wider common good (of the nation-state as a whole.) The desire for democracy is a shared goal, but 'Democracy' has become an emblem, invoked both by activists and conservatives, to argue for radically different ways of defining citizenship rights within the nation-state. Because the same emblems are used to argue for very different goals, it has been nearly impossible to agree on what is really in the wider public interest of all Mexicans, and consequently progress toward satisfying indigenous demands for autonomy has been very slow.

This phenomenon has, I think, some broader implications for our efforts to map out a future direction for a Public Interest Anthropology. PIA already includes an explicit awareness of the fact that most societies have multiple publics, who in turn have diverse interests. With this in mind, I would like to see PIA pay increased attention to the pitched battles between publics over defining "the common good," especially as a means to understanding why and how the satisfaction of some publics' demands are ignored or thwarted. I have argued here that one way to understand slow movement toward social justice for a disadvantaged group would be to consider that each public engaged in the debate has corralled the same set of abstract notions, which supposedly represent the wider public interest, but are using those notions to promote their own agenda.

What I would really like to see, in our effort to define future directions of a Public Interest Anthropology, is an effort to balance an attention to how various publics are engaged in a contest to define 'a common good' against one of the original principles by which PIA was defined, namely the notion of 'bifocality.' I understand 'bifocality' to mean an ethnographic attention both to how the publics themselves frame the issue at hand, on the one hand, and an effort to theorize the larger structure, on the other. This latter element of bifocality could involve asking questions about the *consequences* of the way local meanings are framed by various publics, particularly in terms of the power relationships they either reveal or produce.

Let me try to take this a little further by suggesting that, in the case I've discussed here, we could accomplish the latter task of a bifocal approach by making a meta-statement about the wider implications of the localized struggles over defining a common good. We could even consider what the implications could be for a *global* public. For me, the implication of various publics' framing of the autonomy question in Mexico is that it provokes the broader question, 'Can assertions of cultural difference be invoked as a legitimate basis for claims to citizenship?' I think that the stalemate in Mexico over the satisfaction of the Accords' demands tells us that, so far, 'cultural difference' is not yet generally agreed upon as a legitimate grounds upon which to base

claims for citizenship rights. This raises a further question: "Why not?" The answer, which I think can only come through further debates among publics about the common good, is pertinent to a global public, which is to say multicultural nation-states all over the world.

