

A comparative critical analysis of processes of racialisation amongst black and indigenous groups in Mexico

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Introduction and background

Mexico is a country in which; race, racialisation and ethnicity have been issues that have had a key role in shaping the country we see today. It was with the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors led by Hernán Cortés in 1519 that the history of Mexico, and those who resided in it, was dramatically changed forever. The Spanish quickly settled and took control of the area, which was part of what was then known as “New Spain”. During this time miscegenation between Spanish settlers and indigenous or Indian peoples was common. From roughly the same time period Black African people started to appear in Mexico these were generally brought over by the Spanish to work as slaves. Today, the majority of Mexicans embrace this miscegenation between these three ethnic groups as the foundation of their national identity; this mixed race is known as Mestizo (Villarreal 2010 p.654). Despite this dominant Mestizo ideology, the other ethnic identities do still exist. However the phenotypic characteristics that once distinguished the groups are now less clear, over time cultural markers have come to replace the physical ones from previous years. The theory of racial mixing becoming the national self identity, also known as mestizaje, is reflective of much of Latin America and thus was dubbed by Goldberg (2009) as *Racial Latinamericanisation*. This is a theory that will be explored in relation to Mexico throughout this essay.

Before continuing it is important to define some key terms that will be used throughout the essay. Although there is no official definition for indigenous groups, the Working Group on Indigenous Peoples have published a few key indicators to define them; first, they must be the group who have had claim over the land from furthest back in time, they must voluntarily self identify themselves as culturally distinctive along with outside identification as a distinct group and finally they must have a past current experience of subjection, marginalization, dispossession, exclusion or discrimination. In this analysis indigenous peoples may be referred to as Indians, which comes from the term used in Mexico of Indios (Nutini 1997 p.228). For the purposes of this essay, the discussion of “black people in Mexico” will refer to people of Afro-Mexican descent. Racialisation is a dynamic process which structures and shapes the way relationships and ideas surrounding race come to be accepted into social life, whether this is on an individual (such as in thought), or a national scale (such as in government, or relationships within governments) (Law 2010 p.59)

This essay will provide a brief historical outline of both black and Indian people and will go on to examine how the ethnic identities of these two groups have changed from colonial times to the modern day. For example, how indigenous groups have moved from being wholly based on genetic difference to a cultural difference today. The change in black people’s position in society will also be examined from being slaves to being assimilated into the population to today being disregarded and ignored as an ethnic group. As well as looking at the historical changes in each ethnic group’s position, an analysis of the extent of political mobilisation for each group will be undertaken. For indigenous groups this will include an analysis of the Zapatista movement. This analysis will then feed into an examination of the modern Mexican state’s differing relationships to both indigenous groups and black groups, not just in governmental policy terms but also in terms of the popular collective image that is transmitted throughout the country. Following on from this an analysis of the racial hierarchy will take place; once again it will be important to look at this historically to see the changing shape of Mexico’s racial profile. Another key point to address will be the relationship between class and ethnicity in Mexico, with a key focus on the impact that class can have on

a person's perceived race. A key theme that will be addressed throughout this essay will be the dynamic and fluid properties that ethnicity has had in Mexico.

Indigenous groups

A brief history and recent changes

Initially during the colonisation of what is now known as Mexico in 1521, a clear ethnic boundary was in place. This was created and maintained by the Spanish settlers. It placed Europeans on one side and Indians on the other, this clear divide was common in many Latin American countries at this time as an effort for the Spanish conquerors to distinguish themselves from the people they encountered. To homogenise all indigenous people that were encountered as one made it easier for the Europeans to justify the inferior position that was afforded to indigenous people (Stephen 1996 p. 19), this was also easy to do due to the physical differences between the groups. The prejudice towards indigenous people grew and by the nineteenth century it had gained a new strength. While Mexico was exporting raw materials it was also importing scientific racism that was prevalent in Europe and USA was imported which helped to justify the marginalisation of indigenous groups. Western Europeans were seen as being at the top of the evolutionary scale, a point proven they would argue by their unmatched success economically as well as in technology and science. In contrast people of Latin America and African were seen as backwards, who lived in less "advanced" countries due to their inadequate racial profile. Mexicans associated whiteness with modernity and success; they hence set about whitening their population (Gerado 2011 p.173). This was done through diluting the indigenous gene through miscegenation; this led to a large number of mixed or Mestizo people being born. The colonial state established an estate system that gave specific rights and duties to people depending on their position on the race scale. Indians forced to provide labour and were regarded as minors, wards of the crown as such they were forbidden to carry firearms or ride horses. In cities they had to live in designated quarters, while in villages they were forbidden from living near to the central area. There were also restrictions on the types of clothes that could be worn by Indians and Mestizos (Gabbert 2001 p.465). These laws are an example of a historic racialisation process at work; which in this case reinforces the argument that the Spanish saw Indians as inferior people who did not have the capacity to rule over themselves.

With the prevalence of miscegenation the genetic makeup of Mexico began to reflect mestizaje more and more. However that is not to say that indigenous groups have disappeared, although they may now be harder to distinguish phenotypically. This is because, since the middle of the seventeenth century, categories that initially relied on physical differences acquired cultural connotations (Nutini 1997 p.229). In the modern era any genetic difference between Indians and Mestizos are negligible, and any distinguishing features are cultural (Crawford 1975 pp.40-43). A key indicator of this is in the Mexican census; the method for distinguishing indigenous groups is by what languages the individual can speak, rather than allowing people to self identify as indigenous, this indicator is just one cultural indicator and does not have any genetic basis. Here, it is clear to see that the state distinguishes Indians on a purely cultural and purely language based distinction rather than any account of ancestry. However there are people who argue that this method of counting indigenous peoples is grossly inadequate and amounts to "statistical ethnocide", due to the large underestimations that occur (Knight 1990 p.74). Therefore there are some indigenous spokespeople who advocate a more inclusive definition of what it is to be indigenous. The estimate for the percentage of indigenous people in Mexico today can range from 30 per cent (CIA 2012) down to 7.1 per cent (Villarreal 2010 p.655) depending on the method used to measure, this explains why using a term as extreme as "statistical ethnocide" is applicable here.

The dynamic version of ethnicity in Mexico has meant that indigenous groups have in recent years been able to reclaim and adapt their indigenous identity and use it for their own gain. For example, people in a Zapotec area named Teotitlan Del Valle; a poor community whose people are traditionally involved in wool and textile production, project an image to outsiders of community solidarity, with a historic claim for producing the goods they do. This idea of a

continuing cultural tradition has been embraced, because being able to sell the products to tourists or importers is tied to the idea that the goods are authentic, at least in the eye of the customer. Behind closed doors this view of a unified community is not entirely true, with community divides between merchants and manufacturers. Despite this both groups would repeat the view of community solidarity. This is an example of exploiting one's own ethnic identity to gain further control of a product, which can in turn be sold on for bigger profits (Stephen 1996 pp. 20-21).

There have also been changes in the way that language is used between ethnic groups. Until the end of the colonial period there was little difference in language between many rural Mestizos and rural Indians, in 1813 the Maya language was the most common amongst Mestizo people; even many of the Mexican elite commonly used the Mayan language (Baeza 1845, cited in Gabbert 2001 p.468). As late as 1839 it was possible to find villages of Mestizo people who spoke no Spanish, conversing only in Mayan (Gabbert 2001 p.469). It was only following the revolution in the early twentieth century that Spanish became the main language for the majority of people in Mexico. The revolution also spelled the end of white people being the centre of Mexican nationality and a move towards the homogenous Mestizo race. This was based on the view that the Indians should become Mexicanised, rather than any view that the Mexican culture should be preserved (Gabbert 2001 p.473). The use of Mayan across all sections of society indicates that the modern definition of what it means to be an indigenous person would not have been remotely applicable just over 100 years ago. During this time there was a cultural distinction between Indian and Mestizos was still there, however it was not solely based on language spoken like today's method used by the Mexican government.

The political mobilisation of indigenous groups and the state's role today

In 1992 Mexico amended its constitution to recognise that it wasn't a monocultural state, and that indigenous people were a part of the nation. This was as a response to the gradual leaning towards political organisation around indigenous identity and away from peasant politics (Jung 2008 p.147); although, this was limited at first, with the cultural recognition unaccompanied by new economic or social rights (Poynton 1997 p.67). This was the first time that the state of Mexico had officially acknowledged that the true ethnic profile of Mexico stretched beyond the mestizaje ideology.

However in 1994 the IMF were pushing through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which would herald a change in the Mexican constitution that would take away the rights of indigenous people over their land. This change would also give more power to USA based multinational companies and financial institutions (Chomsky 2004 p13). On the day of NAFTA coming into force the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, led by a masked man known as Subcomandante Marcos, proclaimed a revolution against the government. At the heart of their ideology is the war against the enforcement of neoliberal economics. They argue that agreements such as NAFTA endanger the livelihood of indigenous communities worldwide, and in order to be heard, it is only through arming themselves that those indigenous cultures can be maintained, and the stigmatisation of Indians can be halted (Poynton 1997 p.67). The early days of this revolution involved gaining control of communities in the southern Mexico state of Chiapas as well as attacks on army bases (Collier 1999 p.2). However despite starting out as a reasonably small scale armed conflict has since turned into a much larger scale, peaceful mass movement (Klein 2004 p.18). They now have influence in government and as such are able to put the EZLN agenda at the heart of debate in the National Congress; this has moved the struggle from a small area in isolated Chiapas to the centre of the country. The Zapatista uprising has led to much more empowerment for indigenous struggles all over Mexico with the government also keen to give money to regions with large indigenous populations; in part this is to appease the EZLN, but also to prevent any similar rebellions occurring in other states. This additional funding has for example meant that the teaching of Mayan in schools has begun in regular schools, and in Yucatan some Spanish speakers have also begun to learn the language due

to the likelihood it will grow in importance in future years (Gabbert 2001 p.478). Due to the increased channelling of funds, from the state and development NGOs, towards indigenous populations a new process has begun to be observed known as Indianisation. Because of the cultural nature of ethnicity in Mexico people who are applying for loans or grants will wear traditional Indian clothes (Gabbert 2001 p.477). This will make them more likely to receive credit. This is again an example of exploiting one's ethnic identity for economic gain. The integrationist approach that was once a cornerstone of the Mexico's cultural and social policies for indigenous groups has been replaced. The view now is that indigenous cultures need to be respected, and should be active in national debates (De Vidas and Hoffman 2011 p.1). Brass (1991) argues that the role of the state in protecting ethnic groups, in this case indigenous groups, cannot be understated. They can give extra representation in government as well as apply protection of languages and customs. The reason behind this is a complex struggle for power, in which governments have to side with and appease groups that are high in number or influence. This can only be done for groups that are recognised by the state (Brass 1991 p.271), which as we have discussed, only occurred in Mexico in 1992. After the Zapatista rebellion, Brass's theory is pertinent with regards to indigenous groups. The growing media and public interest generated by the rebellion meant that the government had to listen to and publicly recognise the EZLN.

Backed by the state, indigenous groups have clearly grown in political power during the last few decades. As well as having influence on the political power of ethnic groups, the state also has a role to play in creating the country's collective image of certain ethnic groups; this could be through the media for example. The collective image that is present in Mexico can take a number of forms; either they are seen as the historical Indian with direct links to the pre-colonial era such as the image the Zapotec, Teotitlan Del Valle region tried to promote which was discussed earlier. Indians can also be perceived as poor and marginalised or even as people in need of help. This negative viewpoint is not one that has occurred since the ideology of mestizaje was expanded, even before this there was often a negative perception of Indian people. Friedlander (1975) found that these negative outside perceptions of Indian people were often internalized, based entirely on cultural practices, as they looked no different from Mestizos in the area.

One thing that can certainly be gleaned from our examination of indigenous groups is that what it means to be an Indigenous in Mexico has changed dramatically since the early colonial times, when the term was first applied to the groups who had been living in what we now call Mexico for thousands of years. The term has transformed from describing genetically distinguishable traits, to culturally distinguishable traits, through to the reclaiming of the term by indigenous people in the last few decades. This change throughout history, with political mobilisation and state involvement will now be compared and contrasted with that of Black people in Mexico.

Afro-Mexican groups

A brief history and recent changes

Throughout history the population of black people in Mexico has been decimated in a number of ways. Initially through life shortening enslavement and after the abolition of slavery the destruction of the population continued to ensure the continuation of racial control enjoyed by lighter skinned people.

Black people arrived in Mexico at the same time as the European settlers, taking part in the conquest and remaining throughout the colonial period (Vaughn 2012b). From very early on in the colonial period, black people were brought over from Africa to work as slaves. By 1570, Mexico City was home to the largest African population in the Americas, outnumbering even the people of European descent. By 1640 the number of Africans imported into New Spain had reached 275,000. By the end of the seventeenth century the population of free black people outnumbered the number of slaves (Bennett 2009 p.5). The position of slaves in Latin America was different to their position in the USA, they were often paid a small amount and were encouraged to work towards their own freedom (Goldberg 2009 p.201), and also once

free there were not as many obstacles to incorporating as in other countries. Additionally like the indigenous people, miscegenation was common, particularly because the majority of slaves who were imported into Mexico were male. This led to a large number of families with a black father and an indigenous or Mestizo mother (Gerado 2011 p.173). This openness to racial mixing is something that contrasts heavily with the policies in other countries. Despite this initially rosy picture, Latin American slavery was no better than slavery in other places. There was still violence directed against the Afro-Mexicans and the issues of scientific racism that affected indigenous people were also applied to black people, possibly with even more assertion. Initially black people were easily identifiable by their physical appearance, the ability to distinguish physically also provided debate on the possibility of enslaving the indigenous population, and this is something that did occur (Goldberg 2009 p.203).

The miscegenation with black people provided a third input to what is today seen as the Mestizo race. However some theorists argue that black people were completely absorbed into the Mestizo race leaving no distinct black ethnic group (Beltran 1940, cited in Nutini 1997 p.229). This disregard of black people in Mexico is a theme that will continue to rear its ugly head throughout this analysis.

Today in Mexico, the number of black people is unknown because, like indigenous groups, the different indicators used for collecting data provide different results. The number could total anything from a few thousand to over a million, the discrepancy would be because measures such as phenotype, cultural practices or ancestry would all provide different results (de Vidas and Hoffman 2011 p.5), however Goldberg (2009) estimates that the figure is about 3 per cent of the total population. The vast majority of Afro-Mexicans live in one of two regions, either in Veracruz on the east coast or in Costa Chica on the west coast. The biggest populations are found in Costa Chica where 30,000 to 40,000 blacks live. However these people do not have the same sense of history that Mexican Indians have. They generally do not see themselves as descendants of slaves and they do not retain any African languages. Additionally many mestizo Mexicans would tell you that there are no blacks in Mexico. There are only a few remnants of African culture that remain amongst Afro-Mexicans, such as the Danza de los Diablos (The devils dance), which anthropologists have managed to link back in origin to Africa, although the participants in the dance do not hold on to this link (Graves 2004).

In Veracruz, Sue (2009) completed an ethnographic study on ideas of skin colour, and found an overwhelming preference for lighter skin as well as a belief among darker skinned people that they should marry someone lighter in order to "clean the race", which is a colloquial term used commonly in this area. Due to Mexico's policy of mestizaje many Mexicans do not think about these issues in race terms and do not believe that racism can exist. How can it if everyone is mixed? Instead they often focus on colour only; this they see as descriptive only rather than racist. However to describe cleaning the race in any other country would be described purely and simply as racist. Despite the argument that Mexico is only concerned with culturally distinguishable ethnic groups, this popular view continues that lighter skin is preferential to both black skin and that of indigenous people. This is often played out in the media, with TV roles reserved to lighter skinned people. This standard of European physical appearance is something that is often seen in countries that were at one time colonised by European countries (Nutini 1997 p.231).

The (lack of) political mobilisation in Afro-Mexican groups and the state's role today

The Mexican government along with the rest of Mexican society ignores the existence of black ethnic groups. Since independence in 1821 the census has included no reference to race, and although Indians can still be identified through language the same cannot be said for black people (de Vidas and Hoffman 2011 p.5). This removal of race from official records was meant to stop racism, except now rather than being overt the very existence of black people in Mexico is hidden away. This is an example of racialisation at a governmental level; clearly by not counting black people in the census they are rejecting and ignoring them as a category. With this message transmitted from the very top of society it is easy to imagine how easily these ideas can filter down. This can manifest itself in unusual forms of racism

such as instances of police officers pulling over black people and forcing them to sing the national anthem because black people are not believed to be Mexican (Graves 2004). If Afro-Mexican culture was embraced and protected in the same way as some have tried to implement with indigenous culture then at least there would be enough awareness to stop some instances like this from occurring. As things are, however, the lack of official records means that these positive programs could not be implemented.

With reference to an idea of a collective view of black people in Mexico, it is first worth noting that it is unlikely that there is enough thought around the subject to create a public collective image. That being said if one were to exist, which it probably only does in certain areas, it is one of bothersome, poor people who are most likely foreign (de Vidas and Hoffman p.10). Unlike Indigenous groups there is no opposing view that celebrates the rich history of these people; again this is probably partly due to the lack of knowledge of black people in Mexico. One of the few groups that aim to change this is called *Mexico Negro*, which aims to challenge many of these negative associations against black people; however without much funding or public support they have been largely unsuccessful. One key thing they aim for is the introduction of racial categories in the census, however this failed in 2010 and it will be a few years until this can be attempted again (Graves 2004) This they argue would help to improve the economic power of black Mexicans who are overwhelmingly poor; using techniques of economic empowerment such as those used by indigenous groups could then be a possibility. Unlike Indian groups, Afro-Mexicans seem to have little control over their ethnic identity, and hence have little ability to create their own processes of racialisation; this is not to say that indigenous groups do not experience discrimination, because they most certainly do. However at least there are movements and groups that successfully campaign and raise awareness for the Indian ethnicity, and thus go some way to influencing the racialisation process of their own ethnicity, this is a lot more than black Mexicans experience. Another key reflection of Afro-Mexicans position in society is the lack of literature on the subject. Especially when compared with the amount available on indigenous groups. A reason for this may be that view in some circles that there are no black people in Mexico, or not enough to warrant large amounts of literature. Although this is incorrect as if we take Goldberg's (2009) estimation of 3 per cent of society it gives us a figure well into the millions; surely a group size worthy of study.

Comparison and analysis of black and indigenous groups

Although both indigenous and black groups have been examined separately it is important to analyse them side by side also. Firstly a brief discussion of the two group's relationship with each other will be undertaken. As stated earlier in the early days of colonialism, indigenous peoples and black people often developed relationships, however in recent years the social interaction between these two groups has decreased. Despite no overt antagonism, there are negative stereotypes abounding on both sides, one possible issue causing this could be the language barrier. (Vaughn 2012a).

Many Mexicans would argue that there is no racial hierarchy in their country, partly because of the belief shared by many that there are no races in Mexico. However the discussion throughout this essay has highlighted the ethnic and racial divisions that do exist in the country, and therefore it is possible to crudely plot an existing racial hierarchy. Though to provide context, an examination of the historical racial hierarchy must take first place. In early colonial times the top of the racial hierarchy was reserved for European settlers, with some positions of influence being held by non-enslaved black people and some mestizos. However throughout the course of Mexican history the idea of Europeans in Mexico has fallen away. Now the dominant ideology in Mexico would say that the mestizo race exists across the whole of the country, as we know this is not the true picture. Today the top of the social hierarchy is held by the lighter skinned mestizos, almost all of the aristocracy are pale skinned (Nutini 1997 p.231), and below them is the rest of the Mestizo race, ordered loosely with lighter skinned people being towards the top of the social scale and darker towards the bottom. Below them are indigenous groups who generally are poor peasants, although empowerment movements have provided some opportunity for upward mobility. Afro-

Mexicans generally come in below the mestizos and the indigenous people; this is in part due to Indigenous people having historic claims over the country. Although extremely reductionist this gives a brief idea of the racial hierarchy that exists in Mexico. As illustrated throughout this essay nothing is clear cut with race in Mexico, one way that this hierarchy can be circumvented is with class.

In Mexico, as in much of the world, ethnicity and class are inextricably linked. This has been seen both historically and in the modern day. Those of a higher class are more likely to have European phenotypes, therefore the lower class a person is, the darker they tend to become (Nutini 1997 p.232). Due to ethnicity in Mexico being distinguished culturally, and people generally looking phenotypically similar, it is possible for people to move up the class scale and hence alter their perceived ethnicity. This can be done through either accumulated wealth or through cultural adaptation and has been described as a process of whitening (Nutini 1997 p.233). This also took place in colonial times with people of mixed heritage in any amounts able to move up and down the social ladder depending on their cultural practices (Gabbert 2001 p.467); often the most influential factor that helped someone move their class and perceived ethnicity was wealth. This highlights the highly flexible notions of race and ethnicity that exist in Mexico.

One key similarity between black and indigenous groups surrounds the issue of self reporting ones ethnicity. Groups of people that would be defined by others as Indians have been known to reject this term, in part to do with the negative connotations that it brings. An example of this was during a government run development project in Yucatán. Here the local people embraced the help and assistance that they were receiving but refused to be identified as Indian and had the term scratched from the project proposal (Gabbert 2001 p.462). There have also been problems with black people self reporting as either black or Afro-Mexican. This could relate to the discussion about the distinction between colour and race that many Mexicans have. For example, even if someone is aware that they and their family have darker skin they may not identify as black because even though they know they have darker skin than most people they still may not see themselves as "black". The lack of self identifying could be because of not knowing their own ancestry or could be related to the negative connotations that exist towards black people in Mexico. Whatever the cause for non self identifying, a key point this raises is the power that is held by the dominant mestizo ideology.

The recent positive policies centred on indigenous people that have begun to be put in place by the Mexican government have helped to empower them in a number of ways. They have increased their representativeness at the higher levels of society, as well as helping to reclaim land. Critically though these movements have created a more positive image of the culture which can then be reclaimed and used by Indian people. If similar movements with black people, such as *Mexico Negro*, managed to gain more attention, then a similar empowerment story could possibly still happen for Afro-Mexicans. However Villarreal (2010) argues that a movement like the Zapatistas occurring for darker skinned people in Mexico is highly unlikely and thus does not hold out hope for this to happen in contemporary Mexico (p.672).

Conclusion

The key theme that has been apparent throughout this analysis has been the changing nature of race and ethnicity in Mexico as well as in the processes of racialisation that structure such notions. The public collective image of what it means to be an indigenous person has changed from a phenotypically different person to a culturally distinguishable person. This focus on culture as a distinguishing factor is a key part of the Mexican attitude to race and has been a key theme throughout this essay. This focus on culture is what has made examining blacks in Mexico so difficult. In part this is because black people in Mexico have lost so much of their culture therefore there are minimal differences between them and mestizos from similar poor regions. The analysis of class highlighted the flexibility that ethnicity has in Mexico, showing that by changing culturally it is also possible to change people's racial perceptions. This would only happen in a country that is so focused on

culture rather than appearance; in the USA for example racial divisions are much more pronounced.

Mexico has changed dramatically since colonial times however many more changes must take place if negative processes of racialisation are to be curbed. The idea of mestizaje as an anti-racist ideology is so engrained in society that it could actually be argued it is doing more harm than good. It stops anti-racist reforms and policies from being put forward and until there is flexibility with the idea of mestizaje in society, the negative processes of racialisation will continue.

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