

Culture



Recuerdo De Huautla: An Odyssey of Inner Space

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The contemporary literature on social change in Latin America reflects a perception of folk and modern systems as incompatible, even antagonistic entities. Consistent with this view, change in Indian communities is seen as following one of two basic forms; towards (i) assimilation into the national political, economic and social systems, or (ii) the development of isolationist subcultures. This paper explores the process by which communities, and consequently the individuals thereof, become characterized as traditional and conservative with respect to development. The varied, often opposing views of Indian reaction to change suggest a need for reviewing the analytical categories considered to be diagnostic of traditionalism.

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The contemporary literature on social change in Latin America reflects a perception of folk and modern systems as incompatible, even antagonistic entities. Consistent with this view, change in Indian communities is seen as following one of two basic forms; towards (i) assimilation into the national political, economic and social systems, or (ii) the development of isolationist subcultures.

This paper explores the process by which communities, and consequently the individuals thereof, become characterized as traditional and conservative with respect to development. The varied, often opposing views of Indian reaction to change suggest a need for reviewing the analytical categories considered to be diagnostic of traditionalism.

La littérature contemporaine sur les changements sociaux en Amérique latine reflète une perception des systèmes folkloriques et modernes comme des entités incompatibles et antagonistes. En rapport avec cette image, les changements dans les communautés indiennes sont vus sous une de ces deux formes : vers 1) l'assimilation à l'intérieur des systèmes nationaux politiques, économiques et sociaux, ou vers 2) le développement de sous-cultures isolationnistes.

Cet article explore le processus par lequel les communautés et par conséquent les individus deviennent caractérisés comme traditionnels et conservateurs par rapport au développement. Les points de vue variés, et souvent opposés, sur les réactions des Indiens face au changement suggèrent un besoin de renouvellement des catégories analytiques comme diagnostic du traditionalisme.

The student of social change in Latin America is no doubt aware of the strong contrast drawn between folk and modern systems. Whether it be political, economic or social organization there are distinct forms associated with both the modern and Indian subcultures. For the most part, these are portrayed in the literature as functionally and operationally dissimilar.

The notion of systemic opposition has provided the framework within which the models of folk/modern (Redfield, 1956), and closed/open (Wolf & Hansen, 1972) communities have taken their meaning. Likewise, the concept of "limited good" (Foster, 1965) and the more pervasive rural/urban distinction are also founded on this principle. These, of course, can be seen as regional variants of the broader theories of dependency, modernization, and the like. Their contrast rests on the identification of either innovative and progressive forms of social relations or traditional more conservative ones.

Consistent with this view, there is considerable agreement among researchers that economic development is contingent upon the receptivity of political and social elements, and is itself a cause of change in patterned institutions. Either a community maintains its political and social order, and consequently its means of economic exploitation, or conversely they are abandoned in favour of new social roles and

political positions offered by the national infrastructure. It is not surprising therefore, that our models of social relations reflect this dichotomous opposition while at the same time masquerading as continuums of social change.

While the authors of these models caution us against ideal type considerations, the crucial features of their contrasting examples are not compatible with such an interpretation. Further, they give the appearance that the community as a whole has made a conscious decision for change or tradition. While these characterizations may be useful as heuristic devices, they are devoid of group consciousness or reality. Decisions of this kind are not characteristically group responsibilities, although censure and social conscience may actively influence individual choice.

However, considering the dichotomy dilemma, I suspect that either view would yield equally valid insights into the past and present conditions in Indian communities. There is always an element of innovation and conversely a resistant traditionalism. These are sentiments characteristic of any population regardless of regional or temporal setting. They are largely dependent on personal experience and feedback derived from daily interactions, interactions that are so variable that only the most extensive array of strategies is sufficient to cope with changing conditions. Consequently, no single perspective of development need necessarily prevail in any one community, or for that matter, any one individual.

Part of the problem seems to center on our neglect of the individual, although their importance in development and modernization has been stressed by several authors (Homans, 1961; Barth, 1963; Boissevain, 1974). Notably, Rosman (1962) has suggested that change is routed through particular status positions and that some roles acculturate at different rates. Further, Spindler (1977: 32) has noted that what appears as a social or cultural pattern is simply the predominance of a single coping strategy over a range of alternatives. Considering this analysis, culture should by no means be an absolute determinant of individual behaviour or a static model of ideal social relations. However, "the detection of change is dependent upon the assumption of order and of the persistence of many aspects of social behaviour" (Baker, 1972: 343). Thus, we are constantly revising what is, essentially, a static model of social relations. Presently these models are wrought with notions of acceptance or resistance to diffused change, and acculturation in bi- or multi-cultural environments. It is inconsistent, however, that we acknowledge the evolution of social forms culminating in our static view of "traditional culture" yet we reject such processes as being representative of

contemporary Indian society.

However limiting, it was this theoretical baggage with which I embarked upon a study of medical change processes in a number of communities in the central highlands of Mexico. My interest was in measuring the salience of these folk/modern "continuums" in the community and individual contexts. A portion of this research was carried out in the Sierra Mazateca of north-eastern Oaxaca, an area described in the literature as very much the "traditional" type. Considering the crucial criteria used to distinguish communities along these "continuums", the Mazatec region may be described as follows.

At present there are but two transportation links between the Sierra Mazateca and what could be termed the "outside". The first is small aircraft which is seldom utilized due to high costs and erratic scheduling or lack of it. The other is a rough, narrow, dirt road which meanders through the mountains, linking some of the larger communities. This route is travelled infrequently by large trucks and twice daily by local bus service. There is but one connection to any paved artery at Teotitlan del Camino, south of Tehuacan. The average journey from Teotitlan to Huautla de Jimenez, the major market community, takes between six and eight hours.

Transportation of produce is a costly matter and generally restricted to a minimum, usually coffee or tobacco as an export, and some fruit and small manufactured goods as imports (Weitlaner & Hoppe, 1967: 518). On its busier days, the market at Huautla draws only a small gathering and usually from no further than San Jose Tenango which is situated north-east of Huautla across a narrow valley. Goods are transported on the back or by pack animals, along the many footpaths that link the close-knit valleys of the region. Diversity of goods, characteristic of markets in more integrated communities, is lacking in the Sierra. Agricultural produce is limited to the dietary staples of coffee, maize, beans, chile, squash and the odd supplementary vegetable or fruit.

Apart from the minor import and export trade, the economics of the Mazatec area most closely resemble a "quasitribal system ... specialization in economic activity is not great, nor are whole communities dependent on trade relations" (Nash, 1966: 62). "Isolation, relative lack of ecological variation, a reduced political and social organization, few specialists, and household attempts at self-sufficiency account for the major contours of this sort of economy" (Nash, 1966: 64).

However, in keeping with dominant trends outside the region, many of these qualities are beginning to change. In the few small towns scattered throughout the mountains cottage industries are providing initial introductions to more diversified

economies.

As elsewhere in Mexico, markets in the Sierra are modelled after a solar system with Huautla at the center; however, the scale of the market universe is miniscule in comparison. This is partly a consequence of geography and difficulties in transportation. There is also a great deal less emphasis on cash cropping, and those who do take part in such activity do so in a supplementary capacity.

The nature of their primary export product, coffee, allows for participation in the national trade economy with the least investment of labour. Coffee trees are visited intermittently and then only when the land is inspected for loose grazing animals. For the most part, this participation in national trade has taken place without major alterations of daily routine or production.

Culturally the area is very distinctive, with unique costume and high estimates of unilingualism in Mazatec language (Villa Rojas, 1955: 29). While dress remains distinctive despite development, unilingualism has been greatly reduced by increased efforts in formal education. However, this has not reduced the importance of Mazatec language in local activity but has diversified linguistic capabilities such that many individuals are bi- or multi-lingual. In addition, the new trend in education has not ignored traditional life or language and consequently there are native scholars well versed in these aspects of Mazatec culture.

Political power is predominantly a local concern and though a few nationally-sponsored projects are present in some community centers, they are generally low key and reflective of the area's relative unimportance to the national economic system. The major political structure is that of the *mayordomia* system of civil-religious offices (Weitlaner & Hoppe, 1967: 520). The system is made up of "a series of hierarchically arranged offices (*cargos*) devoted to both political and ceremonial aspects of community life" (Cancian, 1967: 283; my parenthetical addition).

In addition to the maintenance of a strong political-religious institution there continues to be a reliance on other "traditional" forms of social relations. *Tequios* (communal labour groups) are still in evidence (Weitlaner & Hoppe, 1967: 520), and the importance of *compadrazgo* (co-parenthood) is certainly unchanged (Ravicz, 1967).

It is apparent from my brief synopsis of the literature that some of the criteria considered to be diagnostic of this "traditionalism" are i) geographic isolation; ii) poor transportation network; iii) limited trade networks; iv) distinctive material culture; v) a high rate of monolingualism; and vi) the maintenance of traditional institutions.

If anything, the popular literature is even more

intent on imparting a "traditional" character of Mazatec life. The communities are described as isolated and traditional, the people shy and conservative.

Even with my corrections of outdated material there is little change in the basic image the literature provides. Indeed my acceptance of this image proved not only to be a problem for myself, but also for many of my informants. Some, I suspect, tried to fit the image, knowing very well the misconceptions of outsiders.

However, despite these attempts to fit the mold, it was through other more personal relationships that I was exposed to a range of personalities not unlike our own society. When it came to the question of change, there was certainly no consensus. Indeed, there was not even consistency in support or opposition from particular individuals.

Interestingly, change in the Sierra is not recognized so much in the behaviour of individuals, but rather in the institutional roles these individuals assume. This, I believe, coincides with what has been the anthropologist's limited view of change. Thus, if a development debate exists among the Mazatec, it focuses on the appropriateness of changes in the form or function of these roles as perceived by local residents.

Accordingly the *mayordomia* system, with its hierarchical structure, has remained most resistant to innovative forms of political or religious office. Individuals do not assume *cargos* with the intention of innovating structures or leaving their mark, rather, they are service positions with recognized responsibilities. Here the institutional structure is a model of social roles pertaining to political and religious life. The following quotation aptly describes the limitations of such institutional structures as sources of innovation:

When thinking of models as "models of" or "models for" we are not thinking of generating forces at all; rather they are home-made analytical devices and normative ideals. Models are also representations of well known and named systems, but models are not generating systems as small-group cultures are. Models do not innovate, they only represent. (McFeat, 1979: 56)

It would appear, therefore, that institutional change is really only a symptom of more broadly based and fundamental changes taking place at other levels.

Through subsequent investigation I found similar institutional resistance in the organization of communal labour groups (*tequios*). I was told that an effort had been made to engage local work crews for road maintenance using the traditional village and *rancheria* groupings. However, this was strictly a wage labour proposition with no consideration of

reciprocal labour agreements. It was apparently unsuccessful in gaining further support or participation.

Here again we have an attempt to alter a model of social relations which requires consensus beyond the individual. Further, there are complex personal considerations of rights and responsibilities that are difficult to reorder in the face of new, initially illogical structures. Therefore, not only was innovation absent from the major institutional level (*mayordomía*), but apparently also in smaller groups (*tequios*), where it is most often expected.

However, I do not wish to suggest that institutional level change does not take place, but only that it is seldom, if ever, the source of innovation. It is also rarely the object of directed change on the part of community residents.

Of course these examples have been carefully considered to illustrate the connection between institutional and behavioural models, a connection that is obviously not all pervasive. Certainly my data on interpersonal relationships (dyads) contradict this view. Considering for the moment the relationship of *compadres*, I will attempt to illustrate this difference.

While living near Puebla some years earlier I had become *padrino*¹ to some neighbourhood children and also aware of the subtleties and expectations of co-parenthood. Indeed, the use of these relationships for influence and social climbing is well documented (Margolies, 1975: 59; Long, 1977: 50). In due course I learned that *compadrazgo* in the Sierra was a very different case, although not without responsibilities or benefits. Certainly in both instances these relationships provide the framework within which innovative behaviour is spawned. However, whereas in some communities these relationships appear to be at least partly motivated by maximization interests, these same concerns are peripheral if not absent among the Mazatec. Consequently, innovative behaviours often emerge without awareness of either dyad member.

These changed behaviours may take the form of expanding cottage industries, non-conventional exchanges, even joint ventures. Quite often it is simply the use of a particular talent, that may not have been purposefully developed, but gains some timely importance. This must certainly be a distinct form from the kind of entrepreneurial double-bind typical of the poorly integrated *Ladino*² (Margolies, 1975: 59). But ironically, it may be the simple recognition of these changed relations that marks the limits of their success.

It would appear that where relationships carry with them recognized roles and associated behavioural norms, there is some difficulty in breaking the cognitive mold created by this recognition. Though individual perceptions may differ,

innovation in modelled roles is unlikely. These may indeed change, but only following extensive and more fundamental behavioural innovations at the dyadic level. Here only is there freedom from conventional role expectations, and though some dyads are initially preoccupied with social roles and position, these considerations tend to weaken as the relationship becomes more personal.

In addition, the potential to control communication channels is equally divided between the two members (Ruesch & Bateson, 1951). This provides for increased innovative potential.

And, interestingly enough, communicators are perceived as less manipulative in interpersonal communication than in small group, public speaking or mass situations. Most scholars agree that if one has a choice in determining which communication arena to utilize when he wants to affect the attitudes and behaviours of others, he should definitely choose the interpersonal arena. In fact, communicators in the other arenas have an effectiveness relative to the closeness with which they duplicate the dyadic-communication behaviour of the interpersonal arena. (Wenburg & Wilmot, 1973: 28)

The importance of dyads in behavioural innovation is recognized in the psychological and sociological literature. Some authors even suggest that behavioural changes can lead to changes in attitudes, rather than the reverse (Insko, 1967: 348; Simons, 1971: 246). This would appear to explain the difference in success of entrepreneurs between the Sierra and other more integrated locales. Among the Mazatec, behavioural changes have not really been recognized, nor have they greatly affected attitudes. Elsewhere however, these changed behaviours are not only perceived, but they are also stereo-typed under terms like *Ladino* and generalized in application to non-Indian elements.

Once the distinction is made between the "traditional" and emergent behaviours their potential for boundary maintenance is assured. Once again the creation and/or recognition of a model of social relations limits the innovative capacity of the relationships. When we look at the institutional level we are seeing the immediate ends of innovation and not their source. Therefore, the persistence of traditional roles and relationships does not necessarily imply a conservative, tradition-bound people.

While there are no doubt differences between the Mazatec area and other regions described in the literature, these are not representative of distinct perspectives on innovation or change. The question I pose regards the reliability of these conventional folk/modern perspectives, their role in development planning, and their affect on the anthropological community. Because these very models often serve as

the constituents of our private and/or social realities, it is important that we more avidly question their foundations.

NOTES

1. The relationship of the co-parent to his counterpart's children.
2. A derogatory term of social classification used to delineate non-Indian social elements.

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