

THE RECONQUEST

by Ambrose Evans-Pritchard

Guatemala is the only country in Central America with a large Indian population. The Indians, mostly of Mayan ancestry, are probably a majority, although it is hard to know for sure since there is much debate over who is, and who is not, an *indigena*. Once a family of Indians moves to the city, they can turn themselves into *ladinos* (as *mestizos* are called in much of Central America) after a couple of generations if they learn to think and behave like *ladinos*—that is, if they speak only Spanish and abandon their Indian culture. I recall meeting a Guatemalan army lieutenant with unmistakable Mayan features who spoke in a detached way about the Indian conscripts in his platoon, as if they were of a different species. He considered himself a *ladino*, and so, therefore, did everybody else.

By 1960 the rate of assimilation was so high that anthropologists began to despair, fearing that Mayan culture would gradually disappear during the next 30 years or so. In certain parts of Guatemala, this has happened. But the great surprise is that the Indians have generally held their ground, and in the well-documented case of San Antonio Aguascalientes, the *ladinos* themselves are finding it useful to become bilingual, learning Cakchiquel so as not to be marginalized in a *pueblo* where the Indians increasingly play a dominant civic and economic role. It is no longer far-fetched to imagine the Maya doing what the Japanese have done: mastering the machinery of a modern economy without giving up their

distinctive character and customs.

The extent of this Indian renaissance was brought home to me on a recent visit to Aguacatan, a remote farming community whose inhabitants are about 80 percent Aguacatec Indian and 20 percent *ladinos*. The first shock was the number of television aerials on the adobe cottages dotted all over the rich green valley. The second was the sight of young Indians racing past on ten-speed mountain bicycles, imports from Taiwan that sell for about \$175 each. The central plaza of the *pueblo* was alive with commerce and movement. Aguacatec women walked along busily, dressed in blue and green headdresses with baubles falling down behind their ears. Beneath their outlandish Indian costume, or *traje* as it is known, many were wearing stout leather shoes—a concession to convenience. Among the crowd there were a number of *ladinos*. A few were chatting politely to the Indians; most were just minding their own business.

Until recently, Aguacatecos were terrified of *ladinos*. "It was awful," said Dimitrio Rodriguez, a soft-spoken, bespectacled Indian, as we sat drinking Pepsi on his verandah. "My father can remember being seized by *ladinos* as he was walking down the road. They whipped him and sent him off as a beast of burden to fetch goods from Huehuetenango [a day's walk away]."

Forced labor was abolished after the revolution of 1944, but the *ladinos* continued to control the power structure of Aguacatan, and a form of apartheid persisted. Indians were not allowed to use the sidewalks, for instance, and they had to step

aside in shops if a *ladino* were waiting to be served. The first time *ladinos* ever met socially with Aguacatecos in a private home was in 1972, when an American anthropologist, Douglas Brintnall, invited both to the birthday party of his young son.

Today Aguacatan is a different world. Dimitrio's brother is the top administrative officer in the local government and is considering a run for mayor. His cousin is a Catholic priest, the first Aguacateco ever to be ordained. And last year Dimitrio himself finished his medical training at the University of San Carlos and returned home to become Aguacatan's first Indian physician.

Dimitrio's family lives in an imposing farmhouse perched above terraces of elaborately irrigated garlic. It was this unlikely crop that lifted his parents out of poverty during the 1950s and '60s, and which has since transformed the whole economy of Aguacatan. The difference in yield between garlic and the Mayan staple of maize is staggering. An acre of land currently yields about \$140 worth of maize, or \$2,600 of garlic. Overwhelmingly, the Indians have been the quickest to seize the opportunity, and many have accumulated enough capital to buy back land lost to *ladino* creditors during the last century. The five largest garlic growers are all Indian.

The *ladinos* have stuck to their tradi-



The garlic industry allowed the Indians of Aguacatan, and of other parts of Guatemala, to stage their own economic "miracle." Two leaders of the Aguacatan Agricultural Association (left), one Indian and one ladino, stand in front of their cooperative building. An Indian woman (below) removes garlic stalks with pruning scissors.



tional role as traders. For a while they made fat profits buying garlic from the Indians and selling it in Guatemala City. But during the 1980s, the Indians not only caught up but leapt ahead in the sophistication of their marketing. When I visited Humberto Herrera, president of an association of 500 Aguacateco smallholders, he seemed interested that I was English and began chatting about London. To my aston-

ishment, he said he had just returned from a trip promoting garlic in Covent Garden. His association has built its own packing plant on the outskirts of Aguacatan, from which it exports directly to the United States, England, and Panama, without any dealings through *ladino* middlemen.

The influence of *ladinos* in most of Guatemala's Indian towns depends, to a great extent, on a monopoly of access to the outside world. In Aguacatan they have clearly lost this, in every sense. The most sophisticated man I met in the *pueblo* was Pedro Castro, an Indian who runs the local branch of Habitat For Humanity. He has been to the United States six times, giving talks on behalf of the organization. On one visit, he had had a private meeting with Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, who are closely involved with Habitat's mission of building houses for the poor throughout the world. "They seemed like very nice people," he said nonchalantly. Castro is an Indian nationalist, and although fluently bilingual, he insists on speaking to his fellow Indians in a pure form of Aguacateco, without Spanish adulteration.

In *The Revolt Against the Dead*, a brilliant study of Aguacatan based on fieldwork done in the early 1970s, Douglas Brintnall writes that it was an American Maryknoll priest with *indigenista* sympathies who got Indian education off the ground. Seeing that the municipal school was dominated by *ladinos*, this priest started a bilingual parish school for the Aguacatecos. Although it charges higher fees, it has been a huge success. Indeed, the standard is so much higher that some ambitious *ladinos* have enrolled their children in the parish school.

It was not inevitable that the Indians would respond to the new opportunities with such impressive energy. First they had

to escape from one of the paralyzing deformities of their own culture, notably the *cofradía*, a religious fraternity imported from Spain. Deformity is perhaps too harsh a word, for many historians would argue that this exotic institution kept Mayan traditions alive after the great wrecking attempt of the Spanish conquest. Certainly, the Indians transformed the *cofradía* into something uniquely Mayan, a sort of theocratic council of elders that ran village life. Although Catholic on the outside, it was strongly pre-Columbian on the inside.

The beauty of the *cofradía* was its leveling effect. A rich Indian would usually rise to a senior post in the hierarchy, and the higher he rose, the more he was expected to spend on lavish Christian religious festivals. A sort of wealth tax prevented the emergence of an hereditary Indian aristocracy. But it was an unproductive tax. Almost the entire savings of the *pueblo* were spent on ceremony, and much of it went to ritual drinking. There was no capital accumulation for investment, ensuring a primitive static economy. Moreover, the *cofradías* tended to be reactionary. In 1962 the elders of a neighboring community sent out a machete gang to destroy the new school. According to Ricardo Falla, a Jesuit priest working in the area, the *cofradía* said that the school only taught the children "to rob, become lazy, learn bad prayers and bad language, and to lose respect for their fathers and mothers."

The *ladinos* did not participate in the *cofradía*, but they have long understood how it kept the Indians down, and have often been the most vigilant guardians of Indian *costumbre* (custom). In Aguacatan, for instance, they even used their judicial power, illegally, to enforce obedience to the traditionalist hierarchy. By the 1950s, some

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Indians were waking up to the subtle oppression of the *cofradía*. In 1955 Dimitrio's uncle became the first Aguacateco from a respected family to abandon *costumbre* and convert to Catholicism (without considering himself any less Indian). He set off an avalanche. Over the next generation the flower of Aguacatec youth, those destined for leadership of the *cofradía*, rebelled against the religion of their fathers.

The *cofradía* has withered. At last, the Aguacatecos are investing in their future, saving money and educating their children. To what degree these changes have occurred in the rest of Guatemala is an open and highly debated question. The Marxist guerrilla uprising of the early 1980s has left a political mosaic in the Indian highlands. In some villages the Catholics, or catechists as they are called, became identified with the guerrillas. This identification tended to occur wherever radical priests and nuns had been active. (It is believed that three liberation theology priests joined the Guerrilla Army of the Poor.) Army repression

made Catholicism dangerous in these communities, allowing the *cofradía* to enjoy a small revival. Most of the refugees, however, sought safety in one of the Pentecostal churches that have sprung up all over Guatemala. These *evangélicos* have the same ethic of thrift and hard work as their fellow converts in the Catholic Church, and they seem to be transforming their villages in a similar way.

It is tempting to think that the Maya are at last emancipating themselves. They are such long-suffering people, so elegant, dignified, and loyal. Foreigners are forever romanticizing them, projecting their own ideologies onto the inscrutable Indian culture. The Left likes to imagine the Maya as proto-socialists, and the Right (I confess my bias), as budding entrepreneurs. On the whole they have both been disappointed. But the social revolution has run so deep over the last generation that I predict, with caution, that nothing can hold back the Maya any longer.

BACKGROUND BOOKS

LATIN AMERICA'S INDIAN QUESTION

Christopher Columbus's famous confusion led the European invaders of the Americas to refer to the inhabitants of the New World indiscriminately as Indians. Similar uncertainty has bedeviled all discussions of the Indians ever since. We can only guess how many Indians there were in the Americas when the Europeans arrived—between 35 and 40 million is one reasonable estimate. Nor can we establish how many Indians there are living in the Americas today. This is largely because of the centuries' old debate over how to define an Indian, and who does the defining.

In colonial times, relations with and policies concerning the Indians were important items on the agendas of the colonizing powers. In the 19th century, however, the Indians became either physically or socially marginal to the newly independent nations of the western hemisphere. Indians at the frontiers were considered savages to be exterminated or, at best, rounded up and confined in remote places, where they would not interfere with "progress." Meanwhile, in Central America and the Andean countries, where the new republics depended on a large Indian labor force, systematic attempts were made to compel the Indians to give up their identity and become assimilated into the national mainstream. At various times and places, the very category of "Indian" was formally abolished. Even in the absence of such formal prohibitions, the matter of who should be considered Indian remains undecided in many countries. Over the years, Indians have been defined, variously, as people of a certain racial stock, as people who can speak only an Indian language, as people who live in Indian communities, as people who maintain Indian customs in mixed communities, or as people who combine a number of these characteristics and sometimes others as well. Since the criteria are applied differently in different places and even differently by different people writing about the same place, both the definition and total numbers of "Indians" in the Americas today are uncertain.

One thing is clear: The European invasion of the Americas was a demographic disaster for

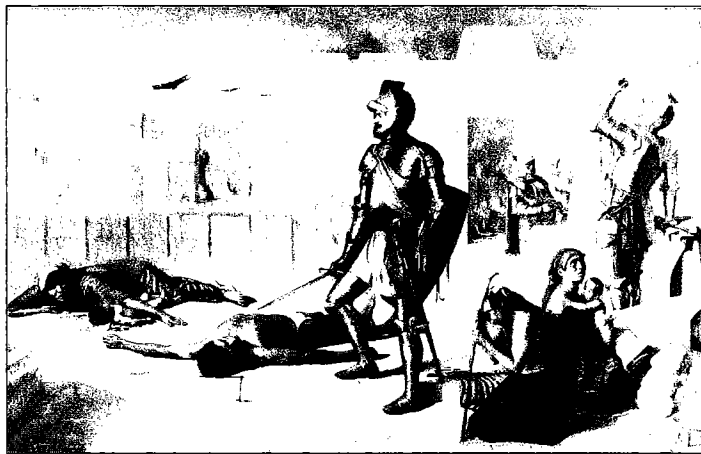
the Indians. They perished from warfare and harsh treatment but in much larger numbers from disease and famine. The biological, social, and cultural consequences of the European invasion are well described in Alfred Crosby's **The Columbian Exchange** (Greenwood Press, 1972). He points out that the conquest proved a shock to Indian society "... such as only H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* can suggest to us." Crosby, who teaches American studies at the University of Texas, documents the tremendous biological and demographic transformations that took place when the two worlds met; he tells how the diseases of the Old World cut a swathe through the populations of the New, causing the Indians to experience a "spectacular period of mortality."

Those that survived the ravages of disease, famine, warfare, and maltreatment found themselves in a different world, one organized to meet the demands of their European overlords. A whole array of institutions was introduced to enable the colonists and their sovereigns to control the human and natural resources of the Americas. These differed from one region to another, according to the traditions of the invading nations and the nature of the Indian societies they encountered. The latter varied from the large Aztec and Inca polities to unstratified societies that lived by hunting and gathering. Eric Wolf, professor of anthropology at Herbert Lehman College, presents a broad historical overview of the impact of colonialism on native peoples in **Europe and the People without History** (Univ. of Calif., 1982). His book gives an excellent account of the nature of pre-conquest societies in the Americas and of their transformation during colonial times.

Meanwhile, the encounter with the Indians forced Europeans to rethink their views of the world and its inhabitants. The famous debates between the Dominican Las Casas and 16th-century Spanish theologian Sepúlveda are carefully analyzed in historian Lewis Hanke's **Aristotle and the American Indians** (Ind. Univ., 1959). The rights of the Indians were at issue, and these depended partly on how Indians

were defined. Were they human? If so, what kind of humans were they? Were they savages, cannibals, heretics, or in other ways beyond the pale? If not, what were they, and how should they be treated?

Much has been written about the impact of the Indians on European thought. Anthony Pagden, an English scholar, treats the subject at length in **The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology** (Cambridge Univ., 1982). In **The Conquest of America:**



The Question of the Other (English trans., Harper & Row, 1984), Tzvetan Todorov, a French literary theorist, offers a strongly philosophical reading of the change in Europeans' views of themselves as a result of their encounter with the Indians. Todorov's discussion of both Indian and European attitudes contrasts dramatically with that of Eduardo Galeano, a Uruguayan writer who set out to retell the history of the New World since the conquest in his epic trilogy, **Memory of Fire**. In **Genesis** (1985), **Faces and Masks** (1987), and **Century of the Wind** (1988; all English trans., Pantheon), he constructs out of excerpts and vignettes a vivid collage that makes the reader feel the horror as well as the grandiose drama of the history of the Americas.

Horror is a recurrent theme in the Indians' view of the conquest, and it is eloquently recorded in the Mayan chronicles of **Chilam Balam**, written soon after the Spaniards had seized control of Mexico. Nathan Wachtel caught this sense of shock and horror in his pioneering book, **The Vision of the Vanquished** (English trans., Barnes & Noble, 1977). "The Indians," he wrote, "seem to have been struck numb, unable to make sense of events, as if their mental universe had been suddenly shattered." Wachtel does not stop there, however, but takes his story up to the present in order to show how the Indians, particularly those in the Andes, succeeded in defending and perpetuating their own values in the face of powerful and determined efforts to eradicate them.

This remarkable tenacity, after the initial shock and through the continuing horror, is the subject of other recent studies, including Nancy Farriss's **Maya Society under Colonial Rule: The Collective Enterprise of Survival** (Princeton Univ., 1984) and Karen Spalding's **Huaro-chiri: An Andean Society under Inca and Spanish Rule** (Stanford Univ., 1984). Nor was Indian resistance merely ideological. During the three centuries of colonial rule, periodic rebellions broke out, and in some parts of the Americas the Indians were never conquered. The rebellions often achieved temporary or local success, but precisely because they were local or at most regional affairs, they were always suppressed as soon as the power of the state could be concentrated and brought to bear against them. Two excellent studies of such rebellions, in the Andes and Central America, respectively, have recently appeared: **Resistance, Rebellion and Consciousness in the Andean Peasant World, 18th to 20th Centuries**, edited by historian Steve Stern (Univ. of Wisc., 1987) and **Riot, Rebellion and Revolution: Rural Social Conflict in Mexico**, edited by historian Friedrich Katz (Princeton Univ., 1988). These volumes are unusual because they deal with the 19th and 20th centuries, and with the Indian-peasant continuum. They emphasize, as Stern puts it, that an "ethnic component is built into the oppressions, patterns of adaptation and resistance, sense of grievance, and aspirations that will loom large in the explanation and analysis of revolt."

There is a striking contrast between the

wealth of materials referring to Indians in colonial times and the dearth of similar treatments for the 19th century. As the newly independent countries of Latin America turned their attention to modernization and nation-building, they saw no place for Indians in either agenda. The Indian question thus came to be seen as an anachronism, and it was assumed that the Indians of the past would soon become the *campesinos* of the future.

In the 20th century, scholars tended to deal with national questions (which did not include the Indians) or to publish studies of Indian peoples or communities (in which the subjects were only tenuously related to national affairs). The most important exceptions came from Peru and Mexico, where traditions of *indigenismo*, or concern for the nations' Indian heritage, became part of the national discourse. Peruvian writers such as José Carlos Mariategui, Haya de la Torre, and Hildebrando Castro Pozo incorporated a somewhat romantic view of the Indian into their political analyses, while in Mexico Manuel Gamio, Moises Saenz, and others dealt with the Indian question from a Mexican perspective. It was in Mexico, after the revolution of 1910–20, that the most serious attempt was made to put *indigenismo* into practice. But the traditional theses of Mexican *indigenismo*, namely that anthropology in the service of the revolutionary state should assist Indians to blend into the national melting pot, are now much criticized.

As the 20th century draws to a close, first-rate books dealing with the Indians' place in their own countries are relatively rare. Even the problems of Peru, rent as it is with violent conflicts, are regularly written with only passing mention of the peculiar circumstances of its large Indian population. The same could be said of most of the countries of the Americas, with the exception of Guatemala and Brazil.

The slaughter of Indians by the Guatemalan authorities in recent years has been described

and analyzed in **Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis**, edited by Robert Carmack (Univ. of Okla., 1988). The contributors to this volume show that the problems of Guatemala, often represented to North Americans as resulting from the conflict between communism and capitalism, are in fact rooted in the relations between Indians and the non-Indian elites.

Meanwhile the mistreatment of Indians in the Amazonian regions of Brazil, carried out in the name of development, is getting some attention in the world press. Yet international concern seems to focus more on the destruction of the rain forest than on the rights of the Indians, and there is no good general study showing why the Indian question has become such a sensitive political issue.

Until recently the Indians of Central and South America were treated as if they were invisible, except by specialists whose works were regarded as having little national significance. That is changing now that the Indians themselves are asserting their right to maintain their own cultures. However, the Indian demand for cultural pluralism is rarely taken seriously. Throughout the Americas, indigenous peoples continue to be caught in the crossfires of national politics. This has led to a growing realization among scholars that the situation of the Indians cannot be studied except in relation to each nation's larger political agenda. At the same time, it is also becoming clear that the nations of the Americas cannot be fully understood without taking their treatment of the Indians into account. Fresh studies informed by these ideas are now in progress. They give us hope that the quincentennial of Columbus's first landfall in the New World may be celebrated by the emergence of a more balanced vision of the shaping of the Americas.

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