



Origins of a Maya Sustainable Development Movement

Urry (2005) argues that humans and their associated social formations are best viewed as “transitory hardenings’ in the more basic flows of massive amounts of minerals, genes, diseases, energy, information and language” (p. 7). To be consistent with the complexity theory to which Urry subscribes, these hardenings, although transitory, are not arbitrary. The human and social forms that are constructed of basic material, cultural, and energy flows arise from particular histories which cannot be arbitrarily replaced. Everything comes from somewhere—the current forms and future trajectories of human and social forms are dependent on their physical and cultural histories (Prigogine 1997; Oldridge 2003; Urry 2005). In order to best understand the ideas of “development” that have hardened amongst Latin America’s indigenous peoples, it would be helpful to look first at their situation amidst a historical sea of discursive and material flows. This is the goal of this chapter. By way of entry, I will be describing the work, position, and thought of one Maya indigenous organization called *El Centro Pluricultural para la Democracia*. Understanding *El Centro* is important because it is the primary organization in Guatemala that has explicitly tasked itself with the creation and promotion of an indigenous idea of sustainable development. This development theory is called culturally sustainable development (CSD) by the practitioners at *El Centro*. In looking at the idea of CSD, and the position of *El Centro*, we can begin to understand the logic of Maya ideas of development in Guatemala, and indigenous ideas of sustainable development in Latin America in general.

Since the idea of development that is utilized by *El Centro* is communicatively produced by its members, however, I would suggest that we must not look at the organization as an individual form, but as a Habermasian (1984, 1989) public sphere—a conglomeration of human communication in which certain ideas of the world are negotiated, argued, and combined—likely amidst certain types of power asymmetries and incomplete access to information (Durham-Peters 1993). The constituting flows that form the histories of the members of the organization come into contact at *El Centro*, and some of these are favoured, while others are shunned. Just as the organization is an actor that produces discourses which resonate with and militate against a larger discursive formation of global thought on development and progress, it has its own internal discursive negotiating process.

It may be true in many cases that the individuals that make up the organization arrived as products of similar experience with like minds to produce a cohesive idea of what development is and how to get it. But ideas are formed in this location as well. *Maria*, one of the central members of the organization, serves as a good example in this respect. She was trained as a social worker in San Carlos University in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, coming into contact with various liberal, Marxian, and anti-modern texts. She also takes with her the experience of being an urban indigenous woman in the Western Highlands. But her ideas were more fully formed by interaction with members of *El Centro*. As she explains, “here in *El Centro*, there were also many readings and documents of indigenous peoples and this also created [in me] ways of thinking about the problems that exist.”

The work to be done in this chapter, then, is to map out the constituting structures and experiences that help to generate the ideas that are expressed at *El Centro*—to locate it within the tracks of local history and culture, but also within a field of international discourse. But throughout this process, it is important to remain cognizant of internal dynamics and favoured texts as well. The model we must employ here is one in which, *first*, *El Centro* is created by multiple fields of discourse and experience. *Second*, this discourse and experience is interpreted and reformed internally through communication. And, *third*, the ideas generated within *El Centro* are exported in a number of ways as they begin to interact with the very fields of discourse and remembered experience that had worked to constitute *El Centro* in the first place. This model will be kept in mind as we discuss the importance of *Guatemalan national history, recent global*

tendencies, and the importance of *Maya cosmovision* in relation to the politics and ideas of *El Centro*. There is no space here to discuss all the nuances of Guatemalan history or Maya cosmovision. Nor will it be possible to address the multiple debates and fissures that appear in literature regarding the global tendencies that will be discussed. The goal here is to simply provide enough information to help foster the beginnings of an understanding of the situation of *El Centro* amidst all of these co-causal factors. It is hoped that this will assist in the understanding of the Maya theory of sustainable development that will be elaborated in the following chapter.

GUATEMALAN HISTORY

Following the categorization put forth by Gere and MacNeill (2008) and MacNeill (2014), the history of Guatemala will be divided into five periods in this discussion. These will be the *early colonial period* (1518–1821), the arguably postcolonial¹ period of *exclusive nationalism* (1821–1945), the *Ten Years of Spring* (1945–1954), *La Violencia* (1970s–1980s), and the *postwar period* (1990s–present). As with all historical categorizations, these periods are somewhat arbitrary. They will do, however, for the current purpose of temporally locating the work of *El Centro*. It also should be remembered that although the most current historical periods figure the largest in the felt personal experience of the members of the organization, older periods are presumed to have their own weight—albeit indirectly—on the constitution of *El Centro*.

Early Colonialism

One cannot overstate the multiple impacts of early colonization on the lives, livelihoods, and cultures of the Americas and of Europe (Galeano 1973). The most important observation about this period for our current purpose, however, is that this was the era in which the peoples of what later became called the Americas met their collective Other. Columbus first called the collective peoples of the Americas “indio,” quite famously and unwittingly in 1492 (Montejo 2005, p. 2). And especially with the invasion of Central America by Pedro de Alvarado in 1523, peoples of Maya descent, who had previously thought of themselves as *Mam*, *Tzutijil*,

¹Most members of *El Centro* would argue that Guatemala is still a colonized territory, dominated by colonial Iberian culture and by the economic power of transnational capital.

or *K'iche'* amongst others, became collectively referred to as *Indio* by the white-skinned, bearded colonizers (Galeano 1973; Fischer and Hendrickson 2003). The *native*, or *Indio*, category became at this time counterpoised with the *Spanish*, the *European*, and this categorization became, to various degrees, internalized by the old inhabitants of the *New World* (Montejo 2005). With the dual dynamics of intermarriage and a racialized political economy of status, the names attached to this binary eventually changed in popular discourse. In Guatemala, *ladino*—a genetic mix of *Spanish* and “*Indio*” blood—became the dominant category which was juxtaposed with the subservient *Indigenous* in Guatemala. This relationship was nuanced by the existence of a very small but extremely economically, culturally, and politically powerful third category of virtually pure Spanish descent (Montejo 2005; Casaus Arzú 1995).

The racialized domination and exploitation of Latin America, in general, and Guatemala in specific, has been well documented (Galeano 1973). Disease and conquest reduced the population of the Americas by up to 90% during the sixteenth century (Diamond 1997), as the content was gutted of its natural resources (Galeano 1973). In Guatemala, colonial administration was officially to follow a *two republics* model, as indigenous peoples were allowed their own form of governance alongside an imposed Spanish system (Wittman and Geisler 2005). The seeming acceptance of indigenous culture and governance structure was, however, hardly genuine. As Wittman and Geisler (2005) argue, “the colonial Guatemalan government sought to overrule local law and custom and to gain access to indigenous lands and forests early on” (p. 64). Much formerly communally held territory was expropriated in the name of the crown, and much of this, in turn, was converted to private ownership (*ibid.*). Still, more than half of the land in Guatemala remained under communal control by the beginning of the twentieth century (Davis 1997, pp. 13–15) and, as Wittman and Geisler suggest, “much current pressure for indigenous community rights in Guatemala is a continuation of the struggle to protect communal lands from long-standing expropriation, privatization, and nationalization” (p. 64).

The complexity of administrative institutions in the Western Highlands deserves a more detailed discussion. At the time of conquest, the indigenous population was divided into a number of *Parcialidades*. This was the Spanish colonial term for *chinamit* or *molab*—which were, “administrative units of 300–600 people and varying amounts of associated territory” (Hill 1989, p. 173). Each *parcialidad* was usually administered by an

“aristocratic core family assisted by a council of elders and a staff of messengers” (Ibid.). Since the time of early conquest, argue the members of *El Centro*, these *Alcaldías comunales*—communal mayorships—have become increasingly democratic to the point that their elections now involve nearly 100 percent participation rates of men, women, and children. Now, the *alcaldes comunales* (communal mayors), for example, are elected for one to two years and are unpaid for the work they do in their position. The *alcaldía communal* of each *parcialidad* was responsible for all political, juridical, and administrative functions in the community (Barrios 1988). A higher level of governance—an *amaq'* coordinated the activities of the *alcaldías* and worked to resolve disputes between *parcialidades* (Hill 1989).

Despite the official discourse of *two republics*, the colonizers sought almost immediately to replace the *parcialidades* and *alcaldías* with a Spanish-style system of municipalities (Hill 1989; Wittman and Geisler 2005). Attempts to combine *parcialidades* and move populations into townships which served as municipal centres were common. The municipal administration was, as could be expected, ultimately designed to serve the interest of ladino and Spanish elites and the colonial power (Ibid.). Many of these moves were connected with attempts to exert colonial control over territory as well as juridical control over populations (Ibid.). Largely through creative interaction with Spanish colonial law, and the increasing sympathies of some colonial administrators, the *alcaldías* managed to maintain the significance of their institution—perpetuating the relevance of the idea of *two republics* despite colonial intentions (Barrios 1988; Hill 1989). Not all *parcialidades* and *alcaldías* have survived, however, and those which have, are endowed with varying amounts of legitimacy. In some of Guatemala's 331 municipalities such as *Sacapulas* and *Totonicapan*, the *alcaldía* communal remains strong, whereas in *Tecpan*, for example, the institution is virtually non-existent (Hill 1989; Wittman and Geisler 2005). As will be discussed in detail in the following chapter, the current work of *El Centro* is an extension of conflict and negotiation between modern/colonial administrative power and communal/indigenous governance institutions.

Exclusive Nationalism

Attempts of marginalization of indigenous culture and institutions, as well as economic domination of indigenous communities, continued through

the period of *exclusive nationalism* (1821–1945). The postcolonial experience of most former colonies has tended to be typified by national projects of development that sought to institute a modern capitalist economy mediated by interventions from equally modern nation-state (Tucker 1999). Especially from the late nineteenth century onwards in Guatemala, this implied, “an exclusive nationalism ... [that] did not recognize or respect the cultural diversity of the country’s Mayan-speaking indigenous population” (Davis 2004, p. 330). Economically, the country’s almost entirely agrarian economy was typified by a structural dualism which involved the exploitation of indigenous land and labour for capitalist agricultural development based on export (Ibid.). During this period, Guatemala’s political and military elites ruled the country in tyrannical and dictatorial fashion and considered indigenous peoples to represent backwardness and superstition. Indigeneity, for the economic, cultural, and political powers in the country, was the antonym of progress, and therefore indigenous culture, language, and institutions were to be absorbed, marginalized, or otherwise eliminated (Ibid.). The attempted elimination of such elements included continued attacks on traditional social organization around the *alcaldia* communal and *parcialidad* (Barrios 1988).

Ten Years of Spring

This dynamic was systematically challenged for the first time during the *Ten Years of Spring* (1945–1954). With the ousting from office of President Ubico in 1944, constitutional and agrarian reforms were initiated in the interest of Guatemala’s indigenous peoples for the first time in history (Davis 2004). Political activism was also encouraged amongst the indigenous population, and national leadership of all ethnic groups pushed towards a more substantive multicultural democracy. The presidents presiding over this transition—Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz—were determined to address material inequalities and to open up political space for dissent and other forms of participation (Davis 2004). Public consultations were held in a process of drafting a new national constitution which:

outlawed all forms of discrimination (Article 21); called for the providing of adequate housing, sanitation and working conditions for “indigenous workers” (Article 67) ... and provided for government recognition and protection of what remained of indigenous communal lands (Article 96). (Whetten 1961, p. 66)

Both the presidents in this period attempted to carry out substantial land reforms—redistributing largely unused portions of the holdings of large landowners to indigenous populations who generally had holdings that were, on average, too small even for subsistence farming (Davis 2004; Handy 1984). These political and economic reforms stimulated a blossoming of indigenous, worker, and *campesino* political participation as “urban and rural unions abounded; congress pulsated with activity; [and] the press criticized freely” (Handy 1984, p. 123). It was in this time, Adams (2004) argues, that Guatemala’s indigenous peoples “began to recognize that social change was possible” (p. 158).

Not all groups were happy about these changes, however. These measures were perceived as a threat to both wealthy ladino landowners and foreign multinationals. The United Fruit Company (UFCO), in particular, had been given large tracts of land and government cooperation in labour force suppression by the ousted Ubico dictatorship. The company viewed the reforms during the *Ten Years of Spring* as “an assault on free enterprise” (CIA 1993, p. 16). The United States *Central Intelligence Agency* (CIA) characterized the Guatemalan government as “communist” and feared that the country would “become a central point for the dissemination of anti-US propaganda” (ibid. p. 18). Eventually, enormous countervailing pressure led by ladino elites and UFCO—with substantial support from the US government and the CIA—toppled the democratic government and rescinded its policies via a military coup which forced the resignation of Arbenz in 1954 (Davis 2004). Following this, US President Eisenhower triumphantly claimed that, “in Guatemala, the people of the region rose up and rejected the communist doctrine” (Immerman 1982, p. 178). The truth was that foreign and elite interests had conspired to oust a democratically elected centre-left government and replaced it with corporatist dictatorship (Ibid.).

The Violence

The thirty-two-year war that followed the 1954 coup—a period commonly referred to as *La Violencia*—was waged between a string of American-supported despotic military regimes and the left-wing insurgents of the *Rebel Armed Forces* (FAR) and later the *Unidad Nacional Revolucionaria Guatemalteca* (UNRG). It was the indigenous population, however, that bore the brunt of the violence (Warren 1998; Davis 2004). Caught between the opposing forces of the two European

modernizationist ideologies of capitalism and socialism, the indigenous population was often—sometimes correctly and sometimes incorrectly—associated with the socialist insurgents. As a result, during *La Violencia*, the national army inflicted severe damage on indigenous communities (Davis 2004; Warren 1998).

La Violencia was the longest and deadliest civil conflict in the Central American region. It took the lives of over 200,000 unarmed civilians, most of whom were indigenous, and most (but not all) of these lives were taken by national army troops (Treat 2002; Jonas 1996). The anti-communist military doctrine of the Guatemalan government increasingly became anti-indigenous. This is evident in the 1983 statement of one of the last despots, General Mejía Vítores, who bluntly stated, “we must get rid of the words ‘Indigenous’ and ‘Indian’” (Wilson 1999, p. 27). This was attempted systematically as the public sphere was shut down, dissent was frozen, social exclusion became a matter of policy, legislative and judicial branches became subservient to the military, and repression was used as a substitute for law (Gere and MacNeill 2008; Warren 1998, pp. 3–33; Fischer 2001).

This period corresponded to what Hale (2004) refers to as “the state ideology of *mestizaje*,” the fundamentals of which he explains;

Latin American states developed a mode of governance based on a unitary package of citizenship rights and a tendentious premise that people could enjoy these rights only by conforming to a homogenous mestizo cultural ideal. This ideal appropriated important aspects of Indian culture ... to give it “authenticity” and roots, but European stock provided the guarantee that it would be modern and forward-looking. This ideology was “progressive” in that it contested the 19th century thesis of racial degeneration and extended the promise of equity to all; its progressive glimmer, in turn, gave the political project—to assimilate Indians and marginalize those who refused—its hegemonic appeal. (p. 18)

La Violencia, with its physical and ideological attacks on Maya Guatemalans, would have a massive cultural and physical impact on Guatemala’s indigenous population. Its force would be felt in the subjectivities of Maya cultural activists in the country (Warren 1998; Gere and MacNeill 2008), and in the life experiences of members of *El Centro*. Many indigenous people in the Western Highlands had lost family and/or friends in the war (Warren 1998), and the members of *El Centro* were

no exception. This experience strongly influenced the ideas internalized by those exposed to it, as the experience of *Louisa*, a field technician at *El Centro*, illustrates:

We were refugees in Mexico from the armed conflict ... [I learned] from my own experience, my own needs and everything I've lived. I was orphaned when I was very small ... We all felt the need for education, because we all came from the same circumstance, we were experiencing a process of conflict that was very cruel and then felt the need to change, to be different to have other opportunities to grow in another environment and that our children can have a very different fate than we did ... Even when we were kids we had a lot of fear, much fear of war, and we realized how things were, we were fleeing, hiding all the time, we all wanted to do different things but if we do nothing we're not changing anything. So we needed to work, to make changes. There are many philosophers, great writers ... but they did not live what I lived. I lived a very different [life than them] and I've experienced, since early childhood unfortunately, those difficult situations. ... We were persecuted—then you see the need to create change ... We no longer wanted to offer our children the same we live—fear, terror, to be running in another country.

Postwar and Peace Negotiations

This persecution, as we have discussed, was strongly racialized in Guatemala. This meant that the terror of the war was experienced and understood collectively by indigenous Guatemalans. The relatively safe space created by the period of negotiations that preceded the signing of the *Peace Accords* on December 29, 1996, facilitated a collective reassertion of sorts. As many commentators have noted, this environment facilitated a Maya cultural “renaissance” in the form of a national social movement that sought to revalorize and revitalize indigenous culture (Warren 1998; Fischer and McKenna Brown 1996; Montejo 2005). The assertion of Maya culture against the ideology of *mestizaje*, as Hale (2004) argues, “has been the first object of indigenous resistance across the region” (p. 2). Within the political space that appeared around the time of the Peace Accords, a Maya culture that had been blunted for centuries asserted itself again just as it had during the *Ten Years of Spring*. Members of *El Centro* have been deeply involved in this movement through their active positioning within the network of Guatemalan indigenous-based

civil society. Members often cite the countering of racism and valorization of indigenous culture as fundamental goals of their project.

Indigenous involvement in postwar politics was immediate. During the Peace Accord negotiations, Maya leaders pressured for the drafting of the national *Accord on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which was signed on March 31, 1995 (Warren 1998, p. 56). The work of *El Centro*, members claim, is carried out “in accordance with” this agreement, and it is indeed evoked often in writings and workshops. The Accord, although not fully legal pending constitutional change that is yet to occur, contained a number of important concessions to indigenous peoples. As Warren (1998) outlines, it included,

Recognition of Guatemala’s indigenous people as descendents of an ancient people who speak diverse, historically related languages and share a distinctive culture and cosmology. Non-Maya Xinca and Garifuna communities were accorded equivalent status.

Recognition of the legitimacy of using indigenous languages in schools, social services, official communications, and court proceedings.

Recognition and protection of Maya spirituality and spiritual guides and the conservation of ceremonial centers and archaeological sites as indigenous heritage, which would involve Mayas in their administration.

Commitment to education reform, specifically the integrations of Maya materials and educational methods, the involvement of families in all areas of education, and the promotion of intercultural programs for all children.

Indigenous representation in administrative bodies at all levels, the regionalization of government structures, and the recognition of localized customary law and community decision-making powers in education, health, and economic development.

Recognition of communal lands and the reform of the legal system so Maya interests are adequately represented in the adjudication of land disputes. The distribution of state lands to communities with insufficient land. (p. 56)

El Centro was founded in the mid-1990s amidst these peace negotiations. Founding members took part directly in *Indigenous Accord* negotiations and indirectly as members of a network of indigenous political activism and civil society. Initially called the *Foundation for Economic, Social, and Cultural Development* (FUNDADECE), the organization was conceived by its five initiating members to serve the purpose of “specifically dealing with projects of infrastructure and production for the benefit of those who had been internally and externally displaced during the war” and was

financed by the Swiss organization *Diaconia*. Geographically, the work at this time was restricted to the Western coastal regions near *Champerico* and *Retalhuleu*. But involvement in the politics surrounding the peace process and associated Maya activism facilitated drastic change in the early organization. As *Matea* explains,

As agreements between the Guerrillas, the Government of Guatemala, and civil society were reached for the signing of the peace, we began to structure a new organizational profile. Specifically, this was because we saw that the people in the Western Highlands had a lot of weakness in participation [in politics in general and the peace process]. This, in conjunction with existing racism and exclusion was strong enough to exclude much of the Maya population. So since the signing of the Peace Accords we began to generate a process of forming a new structure.

With the new structure, came a new name—or rather two: *El Centro Pluricultural para la Democracia* and *Kemb'al Tinimit*—a *K'iche'* name which implies the weaving of the multiple cultures with which *El Centro* works. These two names—the Spanish and the *K'iche'*—were used side by side to represent the pluricultural focus of the organization. This is also evident in the name given to the four-organization social movement within which *El Centro* was encapsulated. The *Tzuk Kim Pop* Movement was named again around an indigenous metaphor for weaving—*pop*—and this was mixed with an acronym meant to stand for the main cultural groups in the highlands—*Tz'utujil Maya*, *K'iche Maya*, *Kakchiquel Maya*, *Mam Maya*, and *Mestizo* (ladino). *Tzuk Kim Pop* consisted of four main indigenous-run organizations that, in concert with *El Centro*, sought to initiate development projects. Each organization was responsible for a different ambit of this—one undertook community economic development, one multilingual education, one health, and finally *El Centro* would engage in the political sphere.² It was to be a holistic concerted effort which, at every step, centralized the idea of “culturally sustainable development.”

As is evident with its involvement in *Tzuk Kim Pop*, *El Centro* should not be thought of as a bounded, isolated organization. It is in constant communication with other groups, and this interaction impacts

²The Members of *Tzuk Kim Pop* included *El Centro Experimental Para Desarrollo de la Pequeña y Mediana Empresa Rural (CEDEPEM)*, *Asociación para la Promoción, Investigación y Educación en Salud (PIES)*, and *Proyecto Lingüístico Santa María (PLSM)*.

subjectivities and policies both within *El Centro* and within the network at large. The organization is an active participant in Guatemalan civil society and is changed and changes with this interaction. Besides the member organizations of *Tzuk Kim Pop*, multiple smaller community-level organizations, as well as community, national, and municipal governments, *El Centro* cooperates directly with the following non-governmental organizations:

National and Central American Level:

The Collective of Social Organizations

The National Forum for Decentralization in Guatemala

The Interamerican Platform for Human Rights, Democracy & Development

Dialogue for Central America

The Central American Conference for Decentralization and Development

The Guatemalan Conference for Decentralization and Development

Social Forum of the Americas

The National Council of the Peace Accords

Region of the Western Highlands:

Regional Network for Bilingual and Intercultural Education

Departmental Commission of Women

Coordinating Board for Basic Institutes of Cooperation

Organization of Indigenous Women's Development in the Basin of El Rio Samala.

Association of Farmers of the Basin of El Rio Samala.

Association of Mam Indigenous Women.

Forum of Civil Society and Commonwealth of Huehuetenango.

Council of the Peoples of the West

Roundtable of Totonicapán

Members of *El Centro* also make regular visits to small and large organizations in communities throughout the highlands, as well as those of national scope. These visits are designed to extend knowledge and a spirit of cooperation amongst organizations who work in political, economic, cultural, agricultural, health, or education-related realms. As a result of this, *El Centro* should be thought as a social subject that is situated within a vast and nebulous organic system of civil society—one which is characterized by regular flows of information which transform each of its subjects to varying degrees. *El Centro* is constantly transformed by these relationships but also helps to transform the whole of civil society. *El Centro*, therefore, can be thought of as a window through which we can see the workings of

the entire Maya indigenous rights movement as it constitutes, deliberates, and reconstitutes itself. The organization has worked as a node through which knowledge and experiences are passed by indigenous *campesinos* and *alcaldas tradicionales* to the national-level Maya movement, and vice versa.

GLOBAL CONSIDERATIONS

The culture and rights-based activism that inspired the language of the *Indigenous Accord* as well as the politics and ideas of *El Centro* must not be thought of as the product of only a unique Guatemalan historical political-cultural-economy. A number of global tendencies have emerged more recently which have had notable impact on the Guatemalan political, cultural, and economic climate as well as on the membership of *El Centro*. First, a discourse around *human and cultural rights* was gaining force globally. Second, and connected to this, there was a *global indigenous movement* which had particular force in Latin America. Third, the neoliberal policy climate of the major international donors slowly moved to a *post-neoliberal* or *post-Washington Consensus* model. Fourth, there was rise of the global environmental movement. Finally, fifth, there were global movements for gender equality. Members of *El Centro* have combined these global phenomena with critical development discourse that stems from *Marxism*, *feminism*, and *environmentalism*, and, more importantly, with their own felt sense of *Maya cosmovision*.

Rights Discourse

Indigenous activists in Guatemala, including members of *El Centro*, have been embedding their activism in the language of *human and cultural rights* for at least fifteen years (Warren 1998), and members of *El Centro* are also implicated in this tendency. When asked to depict the essence of what it is to be human, for example, members of *El Centro* insist that whatever else a human being is—it is always a citizen with “rights and responsibilities.” The instrument most evoked by Guatemalan indigenous activists (ibid.) as well members of *El Centro* is *International Labour Organization Convention 169*—regarding the collective rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. The convention includes protections for “traditional life styles,” “culture and a way of life,” “consultation and participation,” and the right to,

decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the lands they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control over their economic, social and cultural development. (p. 1)

Guatemala is one of twenty countries to have ratified the Convention (ibid.), although its interpretation within Guatemala jurisprudence and relation to the National Constitution is contested. Similar language, claims, and ambiguities hold true for the *Accord on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples* which were negotiated as part of the Peace Accords in 1995 (Ibid.).

Despite such uncertainties of implementation, Guatemalan indigenous activists, including those at *El Centro*, make heavy use of these agreements to assert their collective and cultural rights. Such activists must not be thought to be simply reacting to these human rights instruments, however. That is to say, Maya indigenous activists are not simply the opportunistic products of international convention. Indigenous Guatemalans were instrumental in the negotiation of *ILO 169* and, of course, the national peace accords (Warren 1998). Former members of *El Centro* were involved directly and indirectly in these processes as well.

Marxism and Dependency Theory

Although, they tend to distance themselves from Western modes of thought, all of the organization's members are somewhat familiar with Marxist strands of social theory, and especially variants related to Latin American dependency theory. As a result of this, and the experience of their communities, they are highly critical of capitalism and neoliberal economics. In Marxist-inflected terms, *Roberto* claims that free-market capitalism is a "hegemonic" structure that is equated often with imperialism and domination for example. He continues,

[Regarding] the theme of the neoliberal theory of development, there is a concept of development, perhaps it suggests an individualistic concept of development, but it is not a concept of development that benefits the collectivity. For example, when they talk of free markets, the free competition benefits those who have the means of production—those who have all the capital. However, this does not benefit the economically poor for example—it does not benefit the indigenous peoples.

One should not overstate the importance of Marxian political economy for members of the organization, however. Such thought is present, and, in fact, control over the “means of production” is an important element of culturally sustainable development. But there are other intellectual and cultural traditions that overshadow that of Marxism for the members of the organization. As *Juan-Carlos*, a *Ki’che’* field technician for *El Centro*, told me regarding critical Marxian theory:

I have studied some of Marx’s ideas, but I would say [that my ideas come] a bit more from the Maya—from the Maya worldview. I do not want to disparage El Senior Marx, but more of my ideas come from the Maya Cosmovision.

Global Indigenous Movement

Connected with human and cultural rights discourses, has been the powerful emergence of a global *indigenous movement* since the 1990s. Some have suggested that these movements emerged as a direct result of the development of instruments such as *ILO 169*. This, however, would overlook the immense involvement of indigenous organizations in the construction and negotiation of those very agreements (Cowan et al. 2001; Warren 1998). Yashar (2005) locates the roots of the movement in the wave of democratization that occurred globally following the end of the Cold War, and on neoliberal reform which eased corporatist restraints on assertions of indigenous autonomy while exacerbating the economic woes of indigenous communities. Whatever the foundational forces of the movement might be, Guatemalan Maya have been central to the movement. The most striking example of this would be the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Rigoberta Menchu—a *K’iche’* woman from the Western Highlands—in 1992. Menchu’s prize was symbolically significant to the global indigenous movement, especially since 1992—the 500th year anniversary of the conquest of the Americas—had been marked at the *First Continental Conference on 500 Years of Indian Resistance* in Quito, Ecuador, in July 1990, to commemorate “continual resistance” and “liberation” on the part of the continent’s indigenous peoples (IAA 1990). Members of *El Centro* are well aware of Menchu of course, and her name is evoked in numerous conversations between members. On a less notable scale, members of *El Centro* have been involved in a number of international indigenous peoples conferences and meetings and have participated

in university exchange programmes such as those offered through the Department of Indigenous Studies at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada.

The Post-Washington Consensus

The turn of global donors to a *post-neoliberal* or *post-Washington Consensus* model has been based on the *New Institutional Economics* that was discussed in Chap. 3. Key to this, now the mainstream in development thought are ideas such as social capital and human capital mixed with the privileging of free markets which are to be mediated occasionally by benevolent governments (Fine and Jomo 2006). In this context, ethnicity and culture—especially indigenous culture—have come to signify a form of social capital and a facilitating agent for the building of human capital. This is consistent with the new institutional presumption that cultural forms are the manifest result of concerted action by egoistic human actors in the presence of market failures based on public goods. As a result, donor funding strategies have come to target indigenous groups. As Hale (2004) has explained in the case of Guatemala, following the signing of the Peace Accords, “the country was soon awash in international aid, with Maya civil society as the privileged recipient” (p. 20). In Guatemala, as with much of the world, indigenous civil society and rights-based organization are a “donor driven” priority (Ibid.).

El Centro has drawn primarily from funding by the *European Union*, the *Ford Foundation*, and the *Soros Foundation*—all which target indigenous groups explicitly. Donors must be chosen carefully, however. As *Matea*, a founding member of *El Centro*, argues, at the point of project implementation, parameters of funding agreements—especially those of the EU—tend to “limit somewhat the actions” of the recipient “in accordance with their policies.” On-the-ground freedom of action is limited in such cases, she continues to explain, as “cooperation starts to generate an accumulation of policies, a mountain of meetings, of monitoring.”

This is not a benign process. The World Bank website on “Social Capital and Ethnicity” offers the following:

Ethnicity can be a powerful tool in the creation of human and social capital, but, if politicized, ethnicity can destroy capital. ... Ethnic diversity is dysfunctional when it generates conflict. (n.p.)

This line of thought emerges directly out of new institutional economics which lauds the benefits of culture-as-social capital while insisting that some cultural formations can become inefficient or destructive. The selection between the two is, of course, left to the technocrat in government or the donor agency. Hale (2004) has argued that such policies have resulted in exacerbating the problem of “Indio Permitido” (authorized Indian) in Guatemala. This implies that particular kinds of culture-based organization—those which facilitate democratic processes, cultural tourism, or community public-goods projects—are good. Those which disturb the functioning of markets, natural resource exploitation, or capitalist production through protest or attempts at territorial control are not acceptable. *El Centro* is very much caught in the politics of *Indio Permitido*. As a result, although the organization has close relations with indigenous activist groups that seek to disrupt markets and threaten political-economic power in such ways, it is careful to distance itself from such practices. As *Matea* explained to me when asked about *El Centro*’s involvement of such political acts,

We don’t organize protests. We have tried to generate the space in which [people] can dialogue, discuss, and we have facilitated processes in which there is dialogue between two sectors that may have different interests—for example, dialogues in which the national organizations of justice meet with communal authorities.

As we will see in the next chapter, *El Centro*’s involvement with more radical political activism is somewhat more blurry than this. The point for the time being, however, is that *El Centro* is articulated and constrained by a national politics of *Indio Permitido* which is reinforced by a donor climate that is informed by new institutional approaches to international development policy.

Environmentalism

Also connected with the post-Washington Consensus is the idea of environmental sustainability. Members of *El Centro* have been influenced by related discourses as is evidenced by their common use, almost verbatim, of the Brundtland Report (WECD 1987) definition of sustainable development when addressing environmental issues. The report’s claim that sustainable development “implies meeting the needs of the present without

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” has become an integral part of the mainstream development discourse of the post-Washington Consensus (Fine and Jomo 2006). When asked to define sustainable development in interviews, Brundtland Report discourse was common amongst members of *El Centro*. So too was the tendency to connect the protection of the environment with the protection of indigenous culture.

Such a depiction correlates strongly with mainstream post-Washington Consensus environmentalism, which depicts indigeneity as a form of social capital that serves to mitigate the types of market failures that lead to environmental damage. The World Bank page on “Social Capital and Environment,” for example, argues that indigeneity is a collective resource that allows communities to “address their concerns, such as land scarcity and environmental degradation” (para. 2). The Bank’s page on “Indigenous Peoples” forwards the argument that “Indigenous Peoples are distinct populations in that the land on which they live, and the natural resources on which they depend, are inextricably linked to their identities and cultures” (para. 5).

Such ideas—common in both indigenous rights and mainstream development discourse—appear often in the work of *El Centro*. “We the Indigenous peoples,” claims *El Centro* in the preamble to a document advocating for community participation in the planning of mining projects, “have our own ways of conceiving development, focused on the search for equilibrium with our ecosystem” (CPD no date1, p. 5). In a focus group I organized on this topic with members of *El Centro*, the fundamental marker of Maya culture was claimed to be “the relationship with nature and the cosmo.” In Guatemala in particular, *Matea* argues, it is only the Maya who have the cultural and organizational (social capital) resources to achieve sustainable development:

The population that at the moment has the proposals to make life sustainable in the region is the indigenous population—the Maya population. Why? Because, for example, they have norms, and they have created acts and accords that come from the communities that direct the ways to manage the forest, to manage resources like water for example.

Such statements do not provide evidence of a unidirectional causal relationship between mainstream development discourse, global indigenous movements, and *El Centro*. Given the close relations that the organization

has with both these global discourses, however, a certain complex articulation or co-resonance of these ideas might reasonably be assumed to exist. That is to say, the Maya relationship with nature has a deep and meaningful history. It may, however, be reinforced by its relation to global discourses of social capital and indigeneity. It must be allowed as well, however, that Maya belief systems have a tangible impact on these global discourses through sympathetic resonance and articulation.

Discourse on Gender Equality

A similar dynamic can be noted regarding gender equality. Members use international instruments such as the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, which emphasize gender equality, in their work. They utilize more so the national *Agreement on Identity and Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which specifically addresses the rights of indigenous women. Section *B1* of the agreement states:

It is recognized that indigenous women are particularly vulnerable and helpless, being confronted with twofold discrimination both as women and indigenous people, and also having to deal with a social situation characterized by intense poverty and exploitation. The Government undertakes to take the following measures:

- (a) Promote legislation to classify sexual harassment as a criminal offence, considering as an aggravating factor in determining the penalty for sexual offences the fact that the offence was committed against an indigenous woman;
- (b) Establish an Office for the Defense of Indigenous Women's Rights, with the participation of such women, including legal advice services and social services; and
- (c) Promote the dissemination and faithful implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

The impact of such rights discourses on the ideas of those in *El Centro* is likely given the extensive use of these instruments in workshops and information sessions. The situation of *El Centro* in a complex network of Guatemalan civil society and the resultant direct and indirect involvement of associates in the negotiation of the national agreement particularly should caution us on assuming a direct top-down causal relation here, however. Indeed, it is a common claim by Maya cultural revivalists that

gender equality and complementarity has always been integral to Maya culture (Warren 1998). This will be explored more thoroughly in the following section.

MAYA COSMOVISION

As influential as the national history and the various discourses discussed earlier have been on thought in *El Centro*, the strongest influence, according to the members interviewed, comes from Maya cosmovision itself. Internationally and nationally situated ideas surrounding development and rights, however, mix, articulate, and resonate often with deeply held cultural beliefs. The structure of Maya cosmovision facilitates the use of the concept of the “natural environment” as the central focal point of the Maya political subjects that *El Centro* is interested in nurturing. It also imbues a sense of egalitarianism, community cooperation, and gender equality. Within *El Centro*, and the communities with which it works, Maya cosmovision is fused with felt local history and international discourses to create a distinctive worldview and idea of development.

Any attempt to represent cultural meaning of perceived “Others” is bound to be laden with problems. In order to minimize this, my interpretations of *El Centro*, its work, and of Maya cosmovision were presented to a focus group composed of members of the organization. After I presented my interpretation of the cosmovision, the necessary question emerged—can Maya Cosmovision be understood and properly represented by a Western academic? The quick answer was “no.” After a short period of discussion amongst the members (myself excluded), however, it was announced by the group of field technicians, office administrators, and Maya spiritual guides that although it would take me years to truly understand the cosmovision, my current interpretation was accurate enough for the purpose at hand. What follows, then, is an approximate representation that will serve reasonably well the task at hand. To limit my own interpretive interference, I will rely heavily on direct quotations.

Upon explaining Maya cosmovision to me, *Mario*, who is a Maya spiritual guide who works with *El Centro*, made it clear that the universe is to be understood as an “indivisible whole.” Any division between concepts such as nature, human, man, woman, cosmos, or culture is simply an abstraction. The planets, sun, and moon, for example, are interconnected with menstrual cycles, harvesting schedules, and human reproduction. This interconnectivity, claimed *Mario*, is central to all aspects of the

cosmovision. This can be understood with reference to the concept of *Ajam*, which is a singularity that is interpretable as a duality. It consists of “Heart of Sky”—“an immaterial and incomprehensible energy or force and transcendent space” or a “mysterious something [that] precedes everything else” (Molesky-Poz 2006, p. 46). But also of “Heart of Earth” where “Heart of Sky ... abandons the spiritual dimension and enters [creates] the material world” (Cabrera qtd. In Molesky-Poz 2006, p. 46). “Heart of Heaven” and “Heart of Earth” are both equal and one. They are connected because they are part of a whole, one representing the masculine, and the latter the feminine—two not-separate, but complimentary categories (Ibid.).

Humans, in this conception, as part of *Ajam*, are to be “givers of praise, givers of respect, providers, and nurturers” (Ibid., p. 38). They live in dialectic with the cosmos and natural environment and consequently must both give to and receive from nature.

“In this worldview,” explains Molesky-Poz (2006),

a person connects intuitively with the Rhythms and thoughts of the universe, with ancestors, and takes on a responsibility to others. One navigates from cultural and psychological constructions in which one inhabits his or her body and experiences it, and perceptions of life, in ways very different from those shaped primarily by Western reason and rationality. (p. 74)

“To understand the relationship that the human being has with the land, nature and the cosmos,” *Roberto* suggests, “is profound.” He continues,

Perhaps you are not going to understand me ... The life of the human being in the perception of the Mayan peoples is connected with the land, nature. Conception for example. When a parent conceives a child it says: “Good, child, the fetus grows in the belly of the mother—in the body of the mother—as one lunar cycle passes, and another.” There are eight moons of conception, and it is for this reason that the human being has a relation with the moon and it is conceived by many people to be the grandmother of everybody.

Roberto offers another example:

To cut a tree down in a community, you must cut when the moon has waxed for the wood you cut to be functional, for it to be resistant, to be durable for many years. But if I am going to cut a tree down when the moon has waned, the wood will not serve me. This wood will only serve me for five or six years.

The moon, then, must be thought of as being connected to all things terrestrial and human. “It is the same with the sun,” explains *Roberto*: “with the sun began all of the ideas around the Mayan calendar, the solar calendar—all that can be had can be seen with the solar cycle.”

Members of *El Centro* explain that these types of connections—or rather oneness—should be respected in all human activity according to the cosmovision. *Roberto* offers an example:

when they say “I am going to cut down a tree”—this is for a service that is primordial, principal, and fundamental in the community or for the family. The people say that [the tree] “is a living being equal to me, therefore I must ask the permission of the tree.”

Louisa explains the central logic of this belief system:

In Mayan Cosmovision respect is the most fundamental value. I respect all that exists, whether they be people, nature, animals—all of them. ... The Mayan Cosmovision is based on fundamental values and one of them is harmony. I must live in harmony and I cannot destroy that which serves me. I have to respect, but I also have to have equilibrium between all that there is, in a horizontal system. Nothing above and nothing below, but everything in a horizontal system in which equilibrium is important. I must be good with God, good with my family, good with nature, good with my surroundings because this helps me to be tranquil ... If one applies it in their life, they can be living very much in harmony with all else.

Sofia conceptualizes this more succinctly, saying that “as indigenous, the land is us, it gives us food, and we are the land.” *Matea* does not believe that such beliefs exist in the more Euro-culture saturated *ladina* or *Mestiza* population of Guatemala. What is lacking in *Mestiza* culture, she argues, “is the theme of the trilogy that exists between the human being, the spirit, and the natural world.” This way of seeing, she argues, is part of a “distinct form of life” shared by all the different Maya communities in Guatemala. Although each of these groups “has its own cosmovision,” all share a similar “essence” that requires a “spiritual co-habitation with nature and other human beings.”

This “spiritual co-habitation” can be seen in *El Centro*’s depiction of the idea of gender equality in Maya cosmovision. Regarding this, *Roberto* explains,

The philosophy of the Mayan peoples [is] the theme of duality. The theme of complementarity in this case is the same as talking of a focus on gender equality. When we speak of complementarity of men and women, when we speak of the duality of men and women, we say, good, the sun and earth are dual. They are complimentary. The moon as well. Or when we see as well that the man has feminine aspects but also male aspects, this is part of the concept of indigenous peoples as well.

Roberto's position is nuanced by one of *El Centro's* publications:

In Maya culture there are philosophies, theories, in relation to the life of men and women, such as: the collective work, mutual help ... to look for council [from both genders] ... values that should orient personal life, family life, community life, social life and political life. Taking as the base, the principle of duality: in Maya thought, differences [in gender] are complimentary. That is to say that opposites (for example day and night, fire and water, happiness and sadness, man and woman), cannot exist without the other. (CPD no date3, no page number)

The text continues to explain that Maya women have traditionally carried out roles inside the family but also played other roles in the public realm, such as within the communal mayorship. Consistent with this, when asked if Maya culture is patriarchal, *Mario* insisted that some ancient Maya political centres were governed by women. He continues, “when we talk of Maya culture, we say that there is mother and father—mother is nature and father is heaven” (Heart of Earth; Heart of Heaven). Further, he insists that “when patriarchal tendencies emerge,” in indigenous communities, “it is nothing more than an imposition from Western culture.”

Matea's comments in this regard are telling. When asked if Maya culture is patriarchal, she offered the following:

Would you like a political position or a personal position? Because the political position that has developed is that throughout the existence of the Mayan people there has existed a process that promotes the complementarity or equality in which the human being exists. This belief system promotes equality between men and women. And they complement each other because one is masculine and the other feminine. One is the day and the other is the night. One is life and the other is death and therefore the will compliment each other in relation to all that exists.

“This is the political idea,” *Matea* continues, “but in reality I believe that there has been too much change, and not only in the Mayan culture.” When asked to account for this change, she suggests that “the catholic religion and evangelism have created the idea of the superiority of men over women and this has influenced the relations in the communities.”

Matea's comments may be thought to place the “truth” about Maya cosmovision in doubt. One might ask if the claims regarding gender equality and environmental harmony that are intrinsic to the cosmovision are nothing more than politically expedient constructions. Do Maya peoples really believe and feel such things? And if they do not, how can it be claimed that these are essential elements of Maya culture?

To ask such questions is to miss the point, however. Maya culture is interpreted and reinterpreted. It, like any culture, is forever changing. The members of *El Centro* are interpreting a Maya culture, which does contain strong elements of environmental respect and gender harmony. This interpretation is undertaken in resonance with many of the ideas regarding gender equality that have emerged internationally—such as those which are imbedded in the policy of every funding institution that *El Centro* deals with, *ILO 169*, the *Indigenous Accord*, and most international human rights instruments. This interpretation of Maya culture has been produced under the discursive force of such instruments and in collaboration with Western anthropologists as well as the global indigenous movement (Molesky-Poz 2006). Such global discourses of equity, indigeneity, and environmentalism have resonated with similar pre-Colombian sensibilities in the current culture in Maya communities. To encourage such sensibilities, and dissuade others, are part of an environmental-egalitarian ethic that has itself resonated with members of *El Centro*.

Promoting this, as we will see in the next chapter, is central to the conception and implementation of culturally sustainable development. The important thing to take from this section, however, is that the cosmovision—amidst the other things already discussed—has had an important impact on the subjectivities of the members of *El Centro*. “Let me give you an example,” says *Juan-Carlos*,

When I grew up you could never throw away an ear of corn from the time it began to grow. Corn cannot be thrown away or people will scoff. This is because in the Mayan worldview it is our food, it is our rise, it is our root. [You see] I have, not with the clarity we should have, but I have many of the

values and principles of the Mayan worldview. For example, I live with my parents, and I have been taught that when you salute them you must tip your head. For many, this might seem ridiculous, but for us this all makes sense from a Mayan worldview. It is a respect for the elderly—for those who have not studied but have a wisdom of life. That is most important. I believe that all of my ideas, concerns, hopes and all I have is based in this [fundamental respect for the wisdom of the elderly]. Thanks to that—thanks to all ... that I have been taught from the family, I am able to contribute here [at *El Centro*].

As we will see in the next chapter, the concept of culturally sustainable development is rooted substantially in such orally transferred cultural inheritances of thought. CSD, then, cannot help but be to a large extent an expression of Maya cosmology. Certainly, as *Juan-Carlos* argues, the Maya worldview “unfortunately is not given much importance” in global discourse surrounding development, equality, rights, environment, and gender. But, he argues, “many of these principles, many of these values, are right from Maya cosmology.” There is a felt resonance here between these international discourses and the orally transmitted Maya worldview.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this chapter was to situate the Maya idea of sustainable development articulated at *El Centro* vis-à-vis a long history of colonialism, a felt cultural heritage, and a number of more recent global discursive tendencies. *History* and *cosmovision* are highly important constituting factors for the thoughts, ideas, and subsequent policies of the members of the organization. So too are the global discursive tendencies of *post-neoliberalism*, the *indigenous movement*, *human and cultural rights*, *Marxism*, *feminism*, and *environmentalism*. The relationships between *El Centro* and these global discourses are not simply causal, however. They are reciprocal. That is to say that it should not be presumed that there is a one-way relationship in which these discourses interpolate the organization, or cause it to happen. This is not a simple relationship in which a number of global dependent variables exert formational pressure on an independent variable. Although it could be assumed that Maya cultural activism has been impacted more by the global indigenous movement than it has impacted that movement, for example, it should not be forgotten that the actions of *El Centro* have the power to change the

international movement as well. *El Centro* is embedded in a network of Guatemalan civil society in which all these variables are again transformed and negotiated. It is a discursive sphere through which the national Maya movement speaks to indigenous *campesinos* and *alcaldas comunales* in the creation of a sustainable development project that is rooted in Maya cosmovision.

A final thought must be added here regarding internal dynamics of the organization. All of the swirling discourses, sedimented histories, and cultural proclivities that were addressed are interpreted, discussed, and reorganized within *El Centro*. The output of this process is a policy package that seeks to achieve what we have been calling “Culturally sustainable Development.” The communicative process that creates this output must not be presumed to occur in a purely egalitarian public sphere that is devoid of power imbalances of its own. From my observations, at meetings with core members, there is a tendency for women to be less vocal, and although the organization is “pluricultural,” ladino representation is very low in most meetings and workshops. Furthermore, certain members of the organization tend to carry more persuasive weight in meetings. Beyond this, members of *El Centro* are often looked upon as experts and authorities when they organize meetings with communities, for example.

Every communicative act, Habermas (1984) has reminded us, is in danger of being infused with such power differentials. The point, for those who seek to implement democratic processes, is to mitigate these as much as possible. The structure of *El Centro* is designed in a non-hierarchical fashion. “Directors” and “coordinators” are joined at meetings and workshops by “office administrators” and “field technicians”—all who, at least officially, have equal weight attached to their utterances. The majority of the core 20 members of *El Centro* are women, and women are just as likely to hold key positions as are men. Ladinos are underrepresented but not in proportion to their small population in the Western Highlands. Furthermore, language of the ladinos—Spanish—is used as the primary language at all meetings and in all publications.³

As *Matea* claimed to me regarding gender power differentials, these structures “do not change from night to morning.” But members of the organization have made deliberate efforts to address such issues internally. Furthermore, as we will see in the following chapter, addressing many of these power issues in communities is integral to their development

³This is expedient since members do not all speak the same indigenous languages.

programme. As an observer, I am not in a position to interpret properly every nuance of internal communicative democracy, or lack thereof. Furthermore, the purpose of this work is to outline the ideas of *El Centro*, not to map internal power dynamics. Despite this, these things must be recognized here. As with any organization, there are problems regarding internal power structures, and I do respect the efforts put forth organizationally to address such issues, however. There is a tangible awareness of the potential dangers of such inequalities in the organization. As a result, there are constant attempts to mitigate them.

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