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CAMPESINO VERSUS *INDÍGENA*

Regional Indigenous Congresses and the Struggle for the Countryside

IN THE EARLY MORNING of November 12, 1980, campesinos (or people identifying themselves to the state as campesinos) squatted illegally on 1,100 hectares of land belonging to Yaqui ethnic peoples about six kilometers from the town of Cócorit, Sonora. This illegal occupation upset indigenous community members. But instead of resorting to a violent settling of scores (*ajuste de cuentas*), Yaqui governor Celestino Hernández Pérez and 200 Yaqui met with state government officials, Secretariat of Agrarian Reform representative Wilfrido Villegas Arredondo, and campesino leaders represented by Crisoforo Soto Pérez.¹

As might be imagined, the collective reaction by the Yaqui to the land invasion was one of discontent. Yet Yaqui leaders were willing to come to an agreement with the squatting campesinos. Hernández Pérez consented to accommodate 30 of the 180 invading campesinos, as the Yaqui considered these individuals to be “authentic” indigenous peoples. Hernández Pérez asked that campesino leaders evacuate the lands by the morning of November 14. In exchange, the 30 so-called authentic *indígenas* would be allotted land from the 1,100 hectares illegally taken by the campesinos. However, the remaining invaders (deemed campesinos), the Yaqui leader argued, lacked a legitimate reason for squatting on land that belonged to the Yaqui.²

On a broader level, the land conflict between Sonoran campesinos and Yaqui peoples shows that rural Mexico was not, ideologically or politically, populated

solely by campesinos. The realities of rural politics had changed over the course of forty years. Now indígenas, defined in ethnic and not simply class-based terms, garnered a greater hold over ownership of Mexico's rural identity. In addition, it is clear that, although campesinos invaded Yaqui land, Yaqui leaders commanded a great deal of influence, as government officials responded quickly to the demands made by the Yaqui to resolve the matter. That is, indigenous peoples were agents capable of compelling a negotiation process in which they dictated the terms of that negotiation, even if not always successfully. Finally, the language, although subtle, regarding identity and debates over its "authenticity" reveals a complicated discourse where indigenous political identity continued to be accepted, rejected, adopted, and adapted as it was deemed necessary for a number of people, including both indigenous community members and those peoples within the campesino category, who also had a lot at stake. By the 1970s the political use of indigenous, rather than campesino, identity had a great deal of legitimacy and utility when people were making claims for land and other rights, although the political uses varied from region to region.

The shift from campesino to indigenous identity can be traced to the emergence of indigenous organizations and mobilizations during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In particular, a process occurring within the auspices of the federal and some state governments reflected the increasing tensions between indigenous and campesino organizations, each claiming "authentic" identities when making political and material demands. In this chapter I trace the shift in the elaboration and redefinition of political rural and national identities during the 1970s through the multiple ways indigenous regional congresses in 1975 were received by federal and local government officials, leaders and members of agrarian leagues, DAAC bilingual promoters, and other indigenous leaders pushing for the recognition and protection of indigenous rights.

While regional indigenous congresses were supposed to serve merely as preparation for the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples, they foreshadowed the rise of indigenous political mobilization in the face of government interests, campesino resentment, and confrontations with campesinos and helped give shape to constructions and deconstructions of indígena authenticity. Beyond the national political and social implications of a series of indigenous congresses, this process revealed the conflicts and contradictions that emerged when an ethnic identity challenged the monopoly of a class-based one in rural Mexico. Nor was this process confined to Mexico. In her work, Jan Hoffman French examines the ways northeastern Brazilians of mixed heritage

used the language of indigeneity as a tool to make demands for land and political autonomy from the Brazilian government during the 1970s.³ The claims by Xocó peoples pertaining to indigenous identity shaped a type of political subjectivity during which time, for a number of reasons, it became a powerful weapon in the struggles over material and political benefits. A similar process occurred during the regional indigenous congresses of the 1970s in Mexico. Whereas, at official levels, rural identities were constructed and understood primarily as campesino, at these congresses rural identities were simultaneously and/or tactically campesino, indigenous, and Mexican, depending on context, the needs of indigenous peoples, and the reactions of campesinos. President Echeverría welcomed the opportunity to “gather with direct and authentic representatives of every indigenous group and community in our country,” and he claimed, during the meeting at the INI in September 1971, to welcome the prospect of hearing, “from their own [indigenous peoples’] lips, the various problems that they face and with altruistic intentions from me and my collaborators, it would be a singular advantage to directly hear from them in order to get a broader panorama of their problems and improve our action plans.”⁴ This populist rhetoric shaped the field of force in which participatory indigenismo was performed. While those who defined themselves as indígenas found it useful, for those who did not—mainly those identifying as campesinos—participatory indigenismo threatened material and political resources.

THE POLITICS OF RURAL IDENTITIES

In the 1970s and early 1980s indigenous peoples tried to capitalize on the political favor the populist presidents Echeverría and López Portillo seemed to show by challenging the power of a campesino political identity. During the regional indigenous congresses in 1975, the DAAC bilingual promoters gathered support for a national indigenous organization. The possible emergence of a national indigenous organization and the fluidity of these two dominant rural identities led to debates, challenges, and confrontations between bilingual promoters who identified as indigenous and campesino. These battles reveal the complicated ways people deployed campesino and indígena identities to compete for funds and for social and political capital within the context of participatory indigenismo. An officially sanctioned national indigenous organization threatened to replace local campesino leagues as the legitimate representatives

of rural indigenous peoples. In these complex ways the history of the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples had major implications in the constructions of campesino and indigenous rural identities in 1970s and 1980s Mexico.⁵

The advantages of adopting campesino political identities became evident in the early part of the twentieth century when campesinos were recognized politically and incorporated into the official party apparatus, then the Party of the Mexican Revolution (Partido de la Revolución Mexicana, or PRM), through the National Campesino Confederation.⁶ On August 28, 1938, more than three million campesinos, delegates, state governors, and members of the Federal Chamber of Deputies attended the inauguration of the CNC, the major goal of which was to establish rural representation in the PRM.⁷ This new structure formally married not only campesinos, *en carne y hueso*, to the federal government but also incorporated the figure of the campesino within Revolutionary iconography. In this regard campesinos enjoyed a privileged position within the self-proclaimed Revolutionary regime. Over time, an incomplete fusion of indigenous and campesino political identities occurred, as some indigenous peoples did not always identify as campesinos and some campesinos did not always identify as indigenous. Still, a class-based identity came to overtake an ethnic-based identity in politics and political rhetoric. Therefore, it is not surprising to imagine that, from 1940 to 1970, indigenous identities were muted within the discourse of the modern nation, with communities and individuals having either chosen to be or forcibly been incorporated into a campesino political identity. Thus, campesinos emerged to hold a privileged political position within the official party.⁸ Over time, however, this changed. Armando Bartra has argued that, by the 1980s, the campesino as a rural identity was disappearing. For Bartra, this was a shame, as he viewed campesinos to be the backbone of rural production and bemoaned the shift from a public and academic focus on campesinos to indígenas. It appears that campesinos were losing their distinctive political role as one of the iconographic pillars of the Mexican Revolution, with indigenous peoples challenging them for the political monopoly over rural identities. Yet Gabriela Soto Laveaga argues that campesinos continued to hold a valued place in rural Mexico, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the tuber barbasco enjoyed a coveted position in southern Mexico as it was harvested for its chemical properties and used for the production of contraceptives.⁹ In addition, the ability of campesinos to produce agriculturally and feed the nation had come into question by the early 1970s. Their prescribed role as producers, characterized by their lack of access to credit and government

support in order to compete with large agro-industrial producers, was often critiqued.¹⁰ Indigenous leaders recognized this as an opportunity to regain their political footing within government circles; they pushed for recognition and asserted the value of an ethnic political identity over a class-based one. Such political identities had long coexisted in a tension-laden and contested space, but by the early 1970s the political winds had shifted, and a critical transition took place whereby a campesino political identity was openly challenged by the political rise of indígena identities in rural Mexico.¹¹

Dr. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán publicly announced the organization of the regional indigenous congresses and the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples at the INI meeting in 1971.¹² But the planning process proceeded slowly. The unexpected death in January 1973 of Alfredo Bonfil, who had been moving along the organizational planning under the auspices of the CNC, proved to be disastrous for the future of the regional congresses.¹³ Bonfil's avid support for the regional congresses might seem strange at first glance, since he represented campesino interests. However, the close relationship of the Bonfil brothers led them both to view the CNC, not as threatened by such a development, but as an established institution with regional and local branches (agrarian leagues) that could, in fact, facilitate the organizational process of the indigenous congresses. But according to Salomón Nahmad Sittón, not all CNC officials were open to the regional congresses, and neither were campesino leagues, many of which had leaders and members who were acutely aware of what was at stake politically and economically.¹⁴

With Alfredo Bonfil's death in 1973, the idea of the regional congresses was abandoned. Celestino Salcedo Monteón, the new CNC secretary general, deemed the indigenous congresses unnecessary; as far as he was concerned, the Secretariat of Indigenist Action within the CNC already catered to its indigenous members. It is important to consider the political implications for the CNC if the organization supported the congresses. Doing so would almost certainly undermine its own monopoly over political representation in the countryside and, in the process, its ability to act as a broker between communities and government officials—the emerging favor that indigenous communities carried with the president and other government officials was not lost on CNC officials. They feared that local campesinos would be competing with indigenous peoples for limited material and monetary resources. This threat of diminishing funds and the loss of political influence was real. Although the CNC formed part of the official party, there were no guarantees for keeping it afloat once

it no longer served a practical, economic, and political purpose. And with the emerging political influence of indigenous peoples, its position within the party was made vulnerable. As a result, CNC leaders managed to stall the regional congresses for almost two years.

DAAC bilingual promoters fought back as they made every effort to rescue the regional congresses in late 1974. However, that the indigenous congresses were rescued did not mean that the continual struggles with CNC officials were things of the past. Vicente Paulino López Velasco and Samuel Díaz Holguín led the group of more than thirty indigenous bilingual promoters in 1974.¹⁵ While they were well aware that they served as official cultural and political intermediaries and translators, they also viewed their position as one of advantage, giving them the opportunity to guide official agendas and curry some favor for themselves and maybe even their communities while also collecting a salary. But it was clear to them that it would not be an easy path: "We were advised that the task would be difficult as we would have to be prophets in our own land."¹⁶ These two groups, CNC midlevel officials and the DAAC indigenous bilingual promoters, faced off throughout the course of the regional indigenous congresses as they battled over the right to define popular rural identities either as campesino or indigenous and, through them, to gain access to government political favor and funding.

Following the 1972 Tarahumara congress and the death of Alfredo Bonfil, the insistence on holding the regional indigenous congresses came from the bilingual promoters. By the end of 1973 additional bilingual promoters had been integrated into the project. This wave of recruits included leaders of autonomous indigenous groups who had initially been suspicious of the early organization efforts. Benigno Machuca Trinidad, leader of the Organization of Chontal Peoples, and Saúl Valencia, the leader of the Revolutionary Vanguard of Mixteco Peoples, as well as Macedonio Aldaz from the Union of Coffee Growers of Mixe Peoples and the leader of the Huave, Malaquíás Enríquez, all joined the DAAC as indigenous bilingual promoters.¹⁷ Incidentally, all four of the named organizations were located in the southern state of Oaxaca. And while the suspicions held by some of these leaders may not have disappeared altogether, their roles as bilingual promoters not only provided them with some income but also allowed them access to the political process and created a formidable core of indigenous leaders within a federal agency.¹⁸ In addition, this new group lent some credibility to what DAAC bilingual promoters were trying to do among other indigenous organizations, that is, to create alliances and

collaboration. With the participation of originally independent indigenous organization leaders in the DAAC project, communities initially suspicious of the congresses may have been persuaded, in a measured way, to be more open to the possibility of a national indigenous organization.

In addition to integrating leaders of independent organizations, the DAAC bilingual promoters continued to tap into their connection with the president. For example, when the regional and national indigenous congresses were in danger of being forgotten, they approached Echeverría. In 1974, President Echeverría was attending a meeting of the National Fund for the Financing of State Companies (Fondo Nacional de Financiamiento Estatal, or FONAFE) in Mexico City when López Velasco managed to break through the presidential and security entourage to address him directly. As was by now a well-known characteristic of his populist political style, Echeverría stopped for a moment and allowed López Velasco and José Pacheco Loya, DAAC director of communal property, to address him, giving them his full attention. López Velasco reiterated the importance of federal support for the National Indigenous Congress and reminded Echeverría that it was already late in his sexenio and that the regional congresses needed to be held soon in order for the elusive national indigenous congress to take place.¹⁹ Echeverría turned to the DAAC director, Augusto Gómez Villanueva, and ordered him to increase the project's budget as well as the number of indigenous bilingual promoters to carry out the congresses.

Although I suspect that both Gómez Villanueva and Pacheco Loya may have arranged it, this impromptu meeting between López Velasco, DAAC officials, and the president seems innocent enough. However, it reflected the layers of conflict involved not only in the planning of the regional congresses but also during the actual congresses themselves. It served to create a field of force where indigenous, campesino, and midlevel government officials all struggled for control of the congresses and over rural political identity.²⁰ Even when DAAC bilingual promoters tried to wrestle away organization of the regional indigenous congresses from the CNC in late 1974, Echeverría delegated the organization of the regional congresses to the CNC. On the one hand, it could simply have been because that task was initially given to the CNC in 1971 under the guidance of a sympathetic Alfredo Bonfil, and the president may have assumed in 1974 that the CNC was still the institution to see the project through. On the other hand, it is also quite possible that Echeverría keenly understood the struggles between campesino and indigenous sectors and viewed this as an

opportunity to pit them against each other in a political tug-of-war while he attended to other matters.

The responsibility for carrying out the organization of the regional indigenous congresses under the CNC was delegated to Amelia Holguín de Butrón of the Secretariat of Indigenist Action. She was given the responsibility of presiding over the process of creating indigenous Supreme Councils during the regional congresses and also was the CNC liaison for the DAAC bilingual promoters.²¹ But neither the CNC secretary general, Salcedo Monteón, nor Holguín de Butrón displayed enthusiasm or a particular interest in making sure the regional indigenous congresses were carried out after 1973. Here President Echeverría revealed that he did not truly understand what was happening in rural Mexico—or that perhaps he understood all too well. He placed the lifeline of the indigenous regional congresses in the hands of the very midlevel bureaucrats whose interests would be best served if the congresses did not take place. This reality also reveals the view from federal officials that the CNC remained the only official pipeline between the countryside and the national government. In spite of the progress made by indigenous leaders in terms of gaining favor within government circles, in late 1974, campesino organizations and political identities still held an upper hand.

Problems between Holguín de Butrón and the bilingual promoters surfaced almost immediately in 1974. The two had a great deal of trouble interacting and communicating with each other, since their organizational interests were incompatible. In the face of this hostile working environment and in order to publicly present an autonomous image and forge a stronger alliance, the bilingual promoters formed the National Council for Consensus and Agrarian Planning in Indigenous Communities (CNAPACI). With CNC affiliation they would be able to petition the president from a position of political legitimacy and have access to the local and regional agrarian leagues. In addition, in spite of challenges, the CNC remained the official representative of rural Mexico in the eyes of federal government officials.

The bilingual promoters moved quickly to better situate themselves and create legitimacy for their involvement in the congresses. In September 1974, the now thirty-six bilingual promoters drafted a letter to Celestino Salcedo Monteón, CNC secretary general, claiming they had a right to take a leading role in organizing the regional congresses. Holguín Butrón and Salcedo Monteón denied the petition outright. While the motivations for this denial are unknown, it is possible that both the CNC secretary general and the SIA director saw

it as a power play meant to influence the regional indigenous congresses and in turn challenge the monopoly of campesino political authority in the countryside. After several meetings with Salcedo Monteón and with the conditions of participation set, the bilingual promoters were finally granted access to the regional congresses in January 1975, albeit still in a secondary role.²²

THE REGIONAL INDIGENOUS CONGRESSES

While indigenous organization was far from a new phenomenon in the 1970s, the reality that the CNC had lost some public and official favor created an opportunity for indigenous organizations and communities to challenge the corporate organization and in this context renegotiate their political place in a fluid field of force. For the DAAC bilingual promoters, this reality validated the need to create an independent indigenous organization separate from the CNC, since, according to them, the CNC was not protecting the interests of its indigenous members. Tensions between indigenous peoples participating in the regional congresses and CNC and campesino representatives, apparent even before the launch of the first regional congresses, only deepened as the bilingual promoters continued their work across the country. This struggle allowed for bilingual promoters to argue for new ways to make demands among indigenous communities.

Once the role of the DAAC bilingual promoters was settled, the push to carry the regional congresses forward took place at a frantic pace. The central organizing institutions (the CNC, SRA, and INI) had to rely on local and regional campesino and agrarian organizations and goodwill to carry out the massive project. The rush to carry out the regional congresses resulted in confrontations between local and national officials, as local organizers were given a great deal of power in whether and how the preparations were carried out. In some places directors of the Indigenist Coordinating Centers (CCIs) took the lead in organizing local communities, while in others leaders of local agrarian leagues or CNC or SRA officials were charged with that responsibility. As a result, a number of problems emerged.

The convocations for the regional congresses were sent out in late February 1975. The inaugural Cucapah Regional Congress was held on March 7, 1975, in La Enramada in the municipality of Mexicali, Baja California. The congressional tour continued on to Santa Catarina in Ensenada the following day.



FIGURE 2. Geographical locations of the regional indigenous congresses, March–July 1975.

After the first batch of regional congresses—which appear to have been well attended, given the small population of ethnic communities in the region—the common concerns that emerged were ethnic extinction, destruction of crops, and the trespassing of outsiders on indigenous ejidal lands. Migration to the United States meant that for the Kiliwa of La Parra and Paipai of Santa Catarina only thirty families remained in their communities. In La Huerta, still within the Ensenada municipality, Cochimi general Bernardo Aldama Machado denounced the destruction of ejido crops by the cattle grazing practices of neighboring mestizo ranchers.²³ Cucapah, Kiliwa, and Paipai delegates blamed local agrarian officials, whose lack of familiarity with land reform laws led to layering new ejidos meant for nonindigenous families with existing ones, most of them belonging to indigenous communities. They also accused the CNC of neglect, since the campesino confederation had little knowledge of the needs of indigenous communities and at times deliberately intervened against their interests. These concerns, particularly the indigenous versus nonindigenous conflicts surrounding access to and control of land, presaged the obstacles that DAAC bilingual promoters would face when attempting to carry

forward the regional congresses and also create support for a national indigenous congress.

Conflicts relating to land access were not new during the 1970s. The populist effort by President Echeverría with regard to land redistribution clearly had its own problems. The dual distribution of the land in the form of ejidos for both indigenous and nonindigenous created direct competition for land, natural resources, and the credit that was increasingly unavailable to small-scale farmers and ejidatarios, indígena and nonindígena alike.²⁴ Conflicts over land were shaped by class- and ethnic-based identities during much of the twentieth century. Campesino as well as indigenous communities shaped their political identities in part on the basis of the realities and promises of land redistribution. The Baja California ethnic groups were among the many communities affected by land conflicts. During their regional congresses these communities made demands for agricultural credit, technical training, schooling, health centers and clinics, roads, and improved communication tools.²⁵ As such not only did these conflicts take place within a field of force shaped by popular pressure for land reform and the actions of state officials in response, but they also helped determine the very contours of the field through a contestation over the terms through which such demands were being made and heard. Campesinos too tried to shape a shifting field of force to their favor, unwilling to give up decades of official political favor in a matter of years.

This reality was reflected not only in Baja California but in other regional indigenous congresses as well. For example, the second of two Mayo Regional Congresses was held on March 14, 1975, in Los Mochis, Sinaloa (serving the communities of El Fuerte and Choix). The Secretariat of Agrarian Reform sent personnel to spread the word and coordinate the indigenous congress in this region, but they discovered that an existing organization, the Defense of the Rights of the Sinaloa Mayo, had already mobilized local campesinos under the leadership of Marcelino Valenzuela Buitimea, a man of political and economic influence in the region. Although it was billed as an indigenous congress, a number of mestizo campesinos attended the event as well. Mestizo ejidatarios insisted that, because of the CNC's existence, an indigenous congress and proposed Supreme Council were not necessary. They argued that indigenous peoples were already represented in local agrarian leagues and through the Secretariat of Indigenist Action within the CNC. Along with the bilingual promoters, local indigenous peoples claimed that local agrarian leagues did not adequately understand the unique situations indigenous communities faced.

However, members of the Defense of the Rights of the Sinaloa Mayo soundly objected to such assertions and refused to budge from their position. This organization emerged as a formidable obstacle in creating a Mayo Supreme Council in the region.²⁶

A similar situation arose in Querétaro about a week after the gathering in Los Mochis. At the Otomí congress, held in Cadereyta de Montes on March 22, the local Communal Agrarian League and SRA representatives carried out much of the organizing. Here, significant disagreements over the creation of a Supreme Council emerged as well. According to López Velasco, congress organizers within the agrarian league were wary of a separate indigenous organization and argued that if any organization was to arise from the gathering it should be called the Regional Campesino Committee, de-emphasizing an indigenous identity. Although INI, SRA, BANRURAL, and CNC representatives were in attendance, the CNC representatives did nothing to counter this line of argument, and a Supreme Council was not created.²⁷

The debates at these two congresses reveal the heated nature of the campesino/indigenous identity conflict; the confused reactions López Velasco writes about suggest that the bilingual promoters may have miscalculated potential support for the indigenous regional congresses in these regions. Despite the hopes for solidarity that indigenous bilingual promoters intended to foment, they continually faced situations seemingly beyond their control, and they often failed to understand the regional and local political and historical nuances.

In addition, bilingual promoters were also faced with Amelia Holguín's attempts to undermine their efforts. For example, in Hopelchén, Campeche, INI and agrarian league representatives took the lead in organizing the indigenous congress held on April 12, 1975. State Governor Rafael Rodríguez Barrera and other regional government officials were present for the proceedings. Shortly after the arrival of the official entourage, local agrarian league representatives informed them that they had received orders from Holguín to prevent the regional congress from taking place.²⁸ According to López Velasco, he and his colleagues took it upon themselves to explain the significance of organizing on a local and national level in order to remind the federal government of its obligation to the indigenous sector of society, and Felipe Ku Pech was elected the president of the Maya del Camino Real Supreme Council.²⁹ Of course his description could be self-serving, and we can question whether the Campeche Maya saw this process and the Supreme Council as legitimate or even useful to

them. It is clear that there were serious doubts about both the process taking place and the credibility of government officials traveling around the country overseeing the regional indigenous congresses, including the role of bilingual promoters themselves. Perhaps Holguín's alleged phone call caused enough doubt over the intentions of the DAAC bilingual promoters for local delegates to question the utility of a national indigenous congress.

On April 13 the group traveled on to Mérida. Although the Yucatán Maya congress was held, a hostile attitude toward the official troupe was unmistakable. It is unclear what exactly happened in Mérida and what went wrong for the official entourage. Without further documentation, we do not know if Holguín made one of her phone calls to sabotage the organization of the congresses, but her attempts to undermine the organization of other congresses imply that it is entirely possible. The most probable explanation lay in the mistrust Maya peoples had of federal government officials and outsiders in general. That mistrust also probably fueled their skepticism over the usefulness of a Supreme Council or what could be gained from attending a national indigenous congress and belonging to a national indigenous organization that on the surface appeared to be led by government officials. From national congress documents we know that neither the Campeche nor the Yucatán Maya attended the national event in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán; in his memoirs López Velasco wrote that this was a deflating defeat for the bilingual promoters.³⁰ The other way to conceive of this outcome is that Maya peoples of this region rejected the role of a Supreme Council to protect the social and political systems they had in place. It would also be fair to surmise that the Maya leaders were trying to shape their own field of force in local and regional terms, one that joining the bilingual promoter efforts at that time might undermine. However, the Mérida Maya were represented in the CNPI after 1975 by Carlos Guzmán Dorantes as leader of the Maya Communities. In the 1980s a Maya Supreme Council became a reality by state decree, with thirteen delegates named to the council to serve three-year terms. Thus, the Maya Supreme Council in the state of Yucatán is viewed as a tool of the state, not a legitimate indigenous-led organization.³¹

The bilingual promoters, however disappointed at their failure in Mérida, continued their prescribed route to Quintana Roo. They went on to Carrillo Puerto, where Federal Deputy Sebastián Uc Yam welcomed the group. Uc Yam played a key role in the organization process of the regional indigenous congress, as did local INI officials and agrarian league members. Bilingual promoters

were barred from sitting with the government officials on the theater stage. In his memoirs López Velasco argues that both he and Galdino Perfecto Carmona were intentionally marginalized and were not allowed to participate in the congress proceedings. Once again, the entire proceedings were carried out in the Yucatec Maya language. López Velasco approached the principal elder, who handed him the microphone.³² While López Velasco spoke, the main elder stood by his side so that audience members would not interrupt. With Uc Yam translating, the bilingual promoter insisted on the importance of creating a unified position through the collaboration of all indigenous groups. At the end of the event Uc Yam was appointed president of the Supreme Council. As people were streaming out, López Velasco was informed by the local agrarian league representative that they had received a phone call from Amelia Holguín warning them of the bilingual promoters and their intentions.³³ This in part explains the icy reception the bilingual promoters received. Still, it is doubtful that the Maya general and his captains seriously entertained the idea of establishing a Supreme Council structure, because it was externally proposed and government backed, potentially threatening the already established form of government in the region and weakening their own power and influence as leaders.

Upon their return to Mexico City from this latest round of regional congresses, the bilingual promoters checked in with the Secretariat of Agrarian Reform and informed officials of their progress. They gathered with other bilingual promoters Marcos Sandoval, Francisco Hernández Morales, Pedro de Haro Sánchez, Espiridión López Ontiveros, and Samuel Díaz Holguín, who at this point was also working with the CNC. The experience in the Yucatán made bilingual promoters revisit strategies for approaching indigenous communities and fostering adequate lines of communication, as they believed that their inability to properly communicate with leaders in the Yucatán congresses created uncertainty and suspicion over their role. López Velasco expressed their frustrations: "From [the Maya] we learned a great deal in regards to our [political] formation . . . the lessons we learned were different from any information workshop in how to carry out the regional congresses."³⁴ The situations in Mérida and Quintana Roo revealed the distrust and suspicion over federal government institutions, officials, and programs held by many Maya leaders and peoples. It exposed the challenges that bilingual promoters did not expect but certainly faced. One lesson, possibly the most important one, was that they simply did not understand the local fields of force in play during these

processes. For many communities there was much at stake if they supported a national indigenous organization, and the possible gains did not always outweigh the potential losses. The second lesson was perhaps directly tied to the campesino versus indígena conflict, wherein local agrarian organizations and CNC representatives worked to undermine the efforts of the official government entourage and the bilingual promoters.

In some places the divide between campesino and indigenous identities was displayed in more direct ways. One example played out during the Mixe regional congress held May 12 in Ayutla, Oaxaca. Mixe hostility toward bilingual promoters was already apparent when the congress began at 10 a.m. Disagreements between local CNC representatives and local indigenous leaders escalated into physical altercations, with the bilingual promoters caught in between. The main source of discord involved a feud between the Mixe and the CNC's Amelia Holguín. The Mixe held the local CNC chapter responsible for their deplorable living conditions and charged that CNC representatives were present at the regional congress only to secure votes in upcoming elections, yet did not always fulfill their obligations as their representatives. The CNC representatives resented the accusations and denied any self-serving intentions. López Velasco used the conflict to his advantage by telling the attendees that the existence of a national indigenous organization would make the CNC representatives expendable in their communities, that they would be represented by an organization that cared about their concerns. It appears that the Mixe were open to the possibility, and after order was restored, Santiago Gutiérrez Toribio was elected president of their Supreme Council.³⁵

The dispute in Ayutla revealed the conflicts that existed between some indigenous peoples and CNC representatives. Mixe leaders had reason to be concerned over the involvement of the CNC. Previous experiences between Mixe peoples and federal officials from a number of agencies had largely been negative, and resentment and suspicion had grown over CNC motivations and government intentions behind the regional indigenous congresses. Because bilingual promoters were attached to the official government delegation, it was difficult for them to convince Mixe leaders that they were not representing CNC interests and that a national indigenous organization was realistic. But López Velasco and his colleagues had a great deal to lose if they failed to persuade the Mixe of the legitimacy of the congresses, especially after the setbacks in the Yucatán a month earlier. Their ability to do that was in part tied to being able to point to the ethnic groups that were on board with the proposition,

even if the groups were somewhat measured in their support. It certainly did not hurt the cause of the bilingual promoters that one of the local leaders, Gutiérrez Toribio, was also one of the original DAAC bilingual promoters who did his best to open the dialogue and encourage support for the proposition of a national indigenous organization. Still, when the Mixe presented their declarations in Pátzcuaro that October, the delegation represented themselves as campesinos Mixe, marrying both ethnic and class-based identities:

Comrades, We, the Mixe campesinos have committed ourselves to fight for our demands, and in making them public we hope that you discuss them and that it leads to the emergence of a democratic organization that accelerates the revolutionary and agrarian promises that can lead to the transformation of the Mexican campesino.³⁶

What is intriguing about this case is that it demonstrates that bilingual promoters as cultural brokers were constantly reshaping the political usefulness of campesino and indígena identities, as were other indigenous peoples. In fusing both ethnic and class-based rural identities, the Mixe were covering their bases, especially as they continually tapped into the language of Revolutionary promises and into the democratic process that Echeverría's populist program argued was already a reality.

In what was probably the most extreme and violent example of the campesino/indigenous divide, the Mazahua regional congress turned out to be rather complicated even to put on, let alone to result in the establishment of a Supreme Council. When official congress organizers arrived in San Felipe del Progreso in the state of Mexico on July 26, Mexico State Deputy Javier Barrios González, who also happened to be the secretary general of the state's Communal Agrarian League, informed them that he had canceled the congress. He argued that the CNC's National Executive Committee had never agreed to the regional indigenous congresses and that he was authorized to deny CNC support for the congresses in general and to suspend the Mazahua congress in particular.³⁷ He threatened López Velasco with police action to break up the congress should it be convened.³⁸

Disheartened, bilingual promoters returned to Mexico City to file a report with the SRA as well as to regroup. On July 29 the group returned to San Felipe del Progreso, determined to hold the Mazahua regional congress in spite of the earlier threats. Eighty-seven ejidal commissioners and Mazahua

representatives heeded the call for the regional congress. But, true to Barrios González's word, police officers and goons physically broke up the gathering. Julio Garduño and Tomás Esquivel, also members of the local agrarian league, led the violent interruption. López Velasco tried to establish calm, but the confrontation turned into a shoving match, and the group was forced to leave. The bilingual promoters excused themselves with the Mazahua leaders, expressing their sorrow before leaving. Interestingly enough, two months later it was Tomás Esquivel who attended the national congress in Pátzcuaro, claiming to be the Mazahua Supreme Council president. While the politics of ethnic identity continued to be contested by a number of groups, these circumstances provided opportunities for indigenous leaders and some government officials, but for local power brokers like Garduño and Esquivel it also, not unusually, created spaces to make gains.³⁹

These confrontations reveal a great deal about the conflicts that by the 1970s had emerged between indigenous and campesino identities in rural Mexico. The fusion of identities in the countryside had served government officials well since the 1940s, but thirty years later the situation was becoming untenable. Campesino organizations were not willing to give up the political capital amassed during the previous four decades, and indigenous organizations saw an opportunity to cash in politically, socially, and economically by reclaiming and emphasizing their ethnic identity, which was challenged several times during the course of the regional congresses.

CNC VERSUS INDIGENOUS BILINGUAL PROMOTERS

The conflicts between campesinos and indigenous peoples did not only play out during the indigenous congresses. Tensions also emerged within the ranks of government agencies. The bilingual promoters, led by López Velasco and Samuel Díaz Holguín (Tarahumara), faced off against CNC Secretary General Celestino Salcedo Monteón and SIA Secretary Amelia Holguín. From the beginning of the congress organization process, these two camps were in constant discord, as discussed in chapter 3. Both Salcedo Monteón and Holguín viewed the bilingual promoters with a suspicious eye, especially since they had tried to take the lead in organizing the congresses in early 1975.

For example, halfway through the regional congresses the confrontation between these two leadership groups came to a head in the Mixtec region of

Oaxaca, with the congresses in serious danger of being called off. Because the Mixtec are a significantly large ethnic group divided by state boundaries between Puebla and Oaxaca, three separate congresses were held to ensure their proper representation. First, the official government entourage traveled to San Pedro Atzumba, located in the municipality of Tehuacán in Puebla, for the first Mixtec congress, held on April 19, 1975. There, Faustino Carrillo Pacheco was elected president of the Puebla Mixtec Supreme Council. Former DAAC bilingual promoter Efraín Orea Aguilar argued that the CNC was overstepping its bounds with the Mixtec. The mere involvement of the CNC in the indigenous congress process, he argued, meant that indigenous peoples were still being classified as campesino; from his point of view, the CNC was taking advantage of the regional indigenous congressional process to make demands pertinent to campesino interests while ignoring the needs of indigenous communities.⁴⁰ Both indigenous leaders and proponents of campesino leagues recognized the emerging struggle between the two rural identities and also understood what was at stake for each political group. Surely many indigenous peoples were suspicious of this unprecedented outreach, but they also saw the possibilities for indigenous organization and mobilization on a local, regional, and now national level. Another consideration is the fact that Orea Aguilar, a former bilingual promoter, could have been planted by the current bilingual promoters in order to raise the issue of an indigenous organization from within the Mixtec community. In this instance, Amelia Holguín may not have been the only one guilty of tampering with the indigenous regional congresses.

The second Mixtec regional congress was held in Santo Domingo Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca, on May 1. A member of the Oaxaca Mixtec and an engineer working for the SRA, Francisco Hernández Morales served as the region's congress organizer. Samuel Díaz Holguín and SRA official José Pacheco Loya presided over the congress, while López Velasco took the opportunity to explain the intention behind establishing a Supreme Council structure and a national indigenous organization. When Hernández Morales was elected the Supreme Council president, the congress came to a close with favorable results in the eyes of the bilingual promoters. About 1,500 people from 223 communities attended the first two Mixtec congresses.⁴¹ However, the third Mixtec congress would be the most challenging for the bilingual promoters. A day after the second Mixtec regional congress, the group made its way to the mountain town of Tlaxiaco for the third Mixtec congress, held in Oaxaca on May 2. This congress was intended for the indigenous residents in the regions surrounding Hua-

juapan de León and Coixtlahuaca. López Velasco and Díaz Holguín greeted indigenous participants as they arrived. According to López Velasco, former Oaxaca State Deputy Evaristo Cruz Mendoza was campaigning to become the president of the Mixtec Supreme Council but received little support from indigenous participants. Cruz Mendoza interrupted the congress proceedings, stating that the gathering was completely unnecessary and Mixtecs did not need the federal government to meddle in the affairs of their communities. He informed the bilingual promoters that he had received direct orders from Amelia Holguín to prevent the Mixtec congress from taking place.⁴² According to López Velasco, he was ignored and written off as a bitter individual by community members, and Hernández Morales was elected to represent the Mixtec from this region. But Evaristo Cruz Mendoza's quick dismissal as a serious threat would prove costly for the bilingual promoters.⁴³

When the bilingual promoters returned to Mexico City after May 5, 1975, to evaluate their progress, they were met with accusations of manipulation and tampering. The struggle with the CNC and Amelia Holguín had reached new heights. Because of these charges Holguín suspended the remaining congresses scheduled for the month of May. Similar charges were made against José Pacheco Loya and Salomón Nahmad Sittón, both allies of the bilingual promoters. Pacheco Loya and Nahmad Sittón were accused of appointing individuals with close links to them to the congressional delegations, thus controlling the outcome of the Supreme Council president elections. Apparently, prior to the return of the bilingual promoters to Mexico City, Evaristo Cruz Mendoza, the Mixe from Oaxaca, had met with Salcedo Monteón and SRA secretary Gómez Villanueva. Outraged by the allegations and alarmed by the possibility of the regional congresses being tainted and, more importantly, canceled, the bilingual promoters requested an audience with Gómez Villanueva. They wanted the opportunity to explain that the congresses were organized according to what had been agreed upon by the CNC, SRA, and INI and that in no way were they interfering in the process or manipulating members of ethnic groups. The SRA secretary advised the bilingual promoters to speak to Salcedo Monteón, given the serious nature of the denunciations and their potential to derail the congresses.⁴⁴

Desperate to save the remaining indigenous congresses, bilingual promoters Marcos Sandoval, Francisco Hernández Morales, Samuel Díaz Holguín, and López Velasco traveled to Salcedo Monteón's home in Mexico City. The bilingual promoters argued that the regional and national congresses were too

important to cancel. Salcedo Monteón explained that, precisely because he understood the historical and political significance of the congresses, he would not put up with any manipulation and personal gain resulting from the bilingual promoters' involvement in the congresses. In addition, he did not want nonindigenous individuals intervening in the organization of the congresses. According to López Velasco, he responded to Salcedo Monteón that the latter could conduct any investigation he chose and he would find those involved in the CNAPACI were indeed "authentic" indígenas:

Sir, you can investigate whether we are indigenous or not, those of us here are and we have respected our indigenous brethren. I want to tell you, as the President of the CNAPACI, I represent the majority of the ethnic groups because along with my colleagues, we were elected by indigenous representatives throughout the country. We want to respectfully inform you that we do not wish for any non-indigenous person or misinformation to intervene in our work.⁴⁵

The bilingual promoters stated that, while they understood and respected that the SIA sector of the CNC was in charge, they too had a right, as elected indigenous representatives, to have their voices heard. They argued that they were more trusted by indigenous peoples than Amelia Holguín or most CNC officials. Salcedo Monteón relented and asked them to guard against nonindigenous meddlers but also to respect the work that the Secretariat of Indigenous Action was doing. He then asked them to meet with SIA Director Holguín to sort through the misunderstandings.⁴⁶

After the impromptu meeting with Salcedo Monteón, the bilingual promoters scheduled a meeting with Amelia Holguín and in the meantime continued with the regional congresses already scheduled in western Mexico. The bilingual promoters returned to Mexico City on June 9 for a scheduled June 10 meeting with Holguín, but they were informed she was not in Mexico City. When López Velasco was finally able to make contact with Holguín, according to him, she informed him that she had canceled the remaining scheduled indigenous congresses until her political campaign for federal deputy in the state of Hidalgo ended, and only then would she resume her task with the CNC.⁴⁷

Since President Echeverría and CNC Secretary General Salcedo Monteón were both out of the country at the time, the bilingual promoters turned to Gómez Villanueva yet again. They wrote a collective letter to the SRA director on June 12, alleging that because of the inability and unwillingness of Amelia

Holguín to carry out the duties charged to her by Salcedo Monteón and surely the president himself, they would continue with the regional indigenous congresses of their own accord:⁴⁸

Under no circumstances will we accept that the congresses be suspended since these represent an opportunity, provided by the President, to indigenous peoples of Mexico so that we can participate in the development of indigenous communities.

Just cause does not exist to suspend the congresses and the ones already held have been satisfactory for the indigenous peoples who took part in them as they reflect a sense of unity.

In each of the congresses, indigenous peoples have taken advantage of this opportunity to organize and in most of them they have named their council and representative organ.

With this in mind and considering your high sense of responsibility and humanist commitment on behalf of indigenous peoples, we ask for the following: being that it has been extremely difficult to contact Mrs. Holguín, possibly due to her commitments and other duties as Deputy of the State of Hidalgo, and so that the fulfillment of the congresses is not derailed, Deputy Samuel Diaz Olguín [*sic*] should be placed in charge of organization of the congresses as he has been doing for the last sixteen congresses without problems.⁴⁹

They argued that the indigenous congresses were having the intended consequence of organizing indigenous communities and defended the right to host the remaining scheduled congresses.⁵⁰ The letter revealed the extent of the political rift between the bilingual promoters and Amelia Holguín, with both groups clearly locked in a struggle over the congresses. The phrasing made it clear that they were armed with the validity and legitimacy that Echeverría's populism, via participatory indigenismo, provided them in order to take over the congresses. They used that rhetoric of rights and responsibilities to shape a field of force in which they reframed Holguín's actions as selfish and irresponsible and claimed that they were enacting the participatory nature of indigenismo. In addition, the letter reads like a manifesto that proclaims indigeneity as a legitimate identity by which they could make political claims. Their "authentic" indigena identity gave them the authority not only to defend the regional indigenous congresses but also to take over their organization when a nonindigena was unwilling to follow through with his or her official obligations.

The bilingual promoters were successful in their bid to take a leadership role in the organization process of the remaining congresses. While this turn of events did not make Amelia Holguín particularly happy, without Salcedo Monteón's backing, and given the fact that Gómez Villanueva supported the bilingual promoters (they were, after all, employed through his agency), there was not much she could do. In addition, by putting her political career interests as a primary reason for canceling the regional congresses, her credibility was tainted, and she may have lost any influence she had in the eyes of her superiors. Thus, this event proved to be a significant victory for the bilingual promoters, who carried on with their work.⁵¹ But their rift with CNC officials only deepened. After four years of struggle and confrontation, the bilingual promoters were finally enjoying a direct role in guiding the regional indigenous congresses. From that moment, the bilingual promoters had undisputed control of the congresses and finished the remaining twenty-two congresses as its leaders. López Velasco, with support from Gómez Villanueva, Pacheco Loya, and Nahmad Sittón, led the bilingual promoters, and Samuel Díaz Holguín served as both a bilingual promoter and the CNC representative accompanying the official entourage, effectively pushing out the CNC for the time being. Upon Salcedo Monteón's return to the country, he had no choice but to grudgingly accept the changes and publicly lend his support to the bilingual promoters.

The continuous disputes between the indigenous bilingual promoters and CNC midlevel officials were not necessarily about manipulation of indigenous communities by the bilingual promoters. Rather, they revolved around the volatile relationship between campesino and indigenous identities and the politics and political capital at stake for both the CNC and the potential indigenous organization the bilingual promoters wanted to establish. These entities were engaged in a high-stakes struggle taking place in a literal and figurative field of force, fighting for their very political capital within the rickety state. In fact, the contentious relationship between these two parties and competing rural political actors only intensified at the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples. Furthermore, these tensions flared up well after 1975 as rural peoples struggled to come to terms with the complex political and cultural meanings and fusions of campesino and indigenous identities. Bilingual promoters seized the opportunity to take control of the regional congresses and spread the word of a national indigenous organization to foster excitement and garner support for it. If such an organization were to be created, it would directly challenge CNC supremacy for both the construction and representation of a popular ru-

ral identity, that is, for the very political soul of the countryside. With the organization of regional indigenous congresses the struggle became very real.

CONCLUSION

The regional indigenous congresses provided opportunities and possibilities for indigenous empowerment that emerged with indigenous mobilization on local and regional levels during the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the midst of serious struggles between midlevel actors, at least sixty-five regional congresses took place in 1975, and most elected Supreme Council presidents. In many ways the organizational process of the regional indigenous congresses was successful, and although suspicions toward government officials and their intentions did not fade, these congresses were precursors, on a local and regional scale, to the layers of struggle that would take place and demands that would be made at the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples a few months later. In spite of suspicion and distrust, some indigenous peoples recognized the regional congresses as opportunities to denounce their pitiful living conditions as well as to make political and cultural demands.

This chapter offers a glimpse into the slow but significant political transformation of rural identities and the struggles that were part of this process. One of the most debated issues during the six months in which the indigenous regional congresses took place was that of rural identity. That is, both campesinos and indigenous peoples struggled to use ethnicity and class as ways to not only frame their demands but also justify them. Thus, the delegates at the regional congresses had to decide to petition the federal government as either indigenous or campesino Mexicans, which made for a contentious and volatile countryside. The serious nature of this identity struggle revealed the need for the CNC to define a rural identity in terms of class—as campesino—in the face of a burgeoning indigenous mobilization intent on capitalizing on ethnic identity to justify demands. The regional congresses served as battlegrounds where rural identities were negotiated on the basis of local necessities. Both campesinos and indigenous peoples risked a great deal in the process.

These battles spilled into the hallways of government buildings as the ongoing struggles and disagreements between Amelia Holguín and the indigenous bilingual promoters grew. It is clear that Holguín's actions were less than beneficial to the organizational process of the regional indigenous congresses, and

she relied on deceitful ways to discredit both the congresses and indigenous leaders working as bilingual promoters in the eyes of local indigenous peoples and her superiors. Because the orders to carry out the indigenous congresses had come directly from President Luis Echeverría, Holguín had to be careful in how she attempted to sabotage them. Although in 1971 Alfredo Bonfil had been supportive in guiding the organizational process of the indigenous congresses through the CNC, his successor, Celestino Salcedo Monteón, was not, at least not voluntarily.

In some ways this conflict reveals the willingness of President Echeverría to find alternative ways to deal with demands for land that he must have realized he could not realistically fulfill. Echeverría's strategic reluctance to recognize the seriousness of the situation helped to create the direct confrontations between campesinos and indigenous peoples, ones that reemerged at the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples. But that may be letting him off the hook entirely. The other possible scenario is that the president may have understood all too well the political fire and brimstone roiling in the countryside by 1970. He may have deliberately pitted the two largest social sectors in rural areas against each other not only to keep them preoccupied but to also present himself as the benefactor when he was forced to step in and resolve the conflicts—a populist president indeed.

The continual confrontations between campesinos and indigenous peoples reveals the gravity of the struggle for a political rural identity and the number of ways that these played out. Although indigenous Mexicans composed 10 percent of the national population and had never disappeared from the rural landscape, in the eyes of national society many had simply “become” campesinos. But while this marriage of ethnic and class identities appeared unremarkable or even natural to government officials in Mexico City, after 1940 the realities on the ground, where political subjectivities were shaping the lived experience, were different. At the First National Congress of Indigenous Peoples, the field of force would shift as the national congress created a public and national platform where an array of demands could be presented, including that of indigenous self-determination.