INTERCULTURAL UNIVERSITIES IN MEXICO: A STUDY IN THE
CONFLUENCE OF IDEAS.

David Lehmann
(University of Cambridge)

Since 2000 nine Intercultural Universities (henceforth UIs – Universidades
Interculturales) have been founded and officially recognized by the Mexican state[1]. They
are funded by a combination of state and federal funds, and operate under the aegis of the
Coordinación General de Educación Intercultural y Bilingüe (CGEIB – founded in 2001)
which offers guidance and takes part in certification processes. The Coordinación is not
an executive agency: it has no resources to spend on its initiatives. Its role is
'transversal', designed to infuse the Ministry of Education (SEP) with sensitivity to
interculturalidad, and regulatory, setting standards and monitoring compliance. Its role is
quite different from that of the Dirección General de Educación Indígena which oversees
the schooling of indigenous people or indigenous areas, but does not therefore have a
commitment to interculturalidad; the Dirección has 470 staff, compared with the
CGEIB's 10 and employs 37,000 *maestros indígenas* in the schools. The Coordinación's
role is one of guidance rather than imposition, but in the hands of highly committed and
skilful officials it has a real influence. One of the UIs, the Universidad Autónoma
Indígena de México (UNAIM) began operations in 2001, but the others only became
operational in or after 2004.

In addition there are privately or community-funded initiatives such as the one in the
Municipalidad El Rayón in Tabasco (near the Chiapas border) which has clamoured
unsuccessfully so far for recognition (it seems to be under Zapatista inspiration) and the
Jesuits' privately funded Centro Ayuuk, in Jultepece de Angayoc, near María Lombardo,

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[1] In the State of Mexico, Puebla, Chiapas, Quintana Roo, Guerrero, Michoacán and Tabasco they are
mostly called Universidad Autónoma Intercultural de (name of the state). In Veracruz it is called
Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural and in Sinaloa it is the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
with no reference to the state. Reasons for these divergences will emerge.

in the lower Mixe region, deep in the interior of the state of Oaxaca which in mid-2008 seemed to be tied up in an ongoing recognition process at the state level, but is nonetheless operative as 'Centro Ayuuk' and is in receipt of support from the Ford Foundation's Pathways to Higher Education programme.. The overall number of students in the state institutions is small: in total they had 5700 in October 2008, and 2900 of these were in two of them (UNICH - Chiapas and the UNAIM in Sinaloa.)[2] – none had more than 2,000 students when I visited them in 2006-8 – but presumably this will grow. The capital needed for their founding, in three cases for sumptuous buildings, owed much to the head of the Comisión de Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI), a dynamic figure with a business background (Xochitl Galvez) said to be close to then President Fox (2000-6), and to the apparent political interest of State Governors, but their future growth and stability will depend on budget allocations, notably from the state governments which since the decentralization of the Mexican state in the 1980s (Rodriguez 1997) have been the owners of educational funding – though not precisely of educational policy. Educational certification – for example the authorization to use the name 'university' – rests with the Ministry at national level Nonetheless, the state UIs are enshrined in budgets and so as established institutions neither they nor their permanent posts can be removed, though they can be eroded by inflation, non-replacement and so on.

The figure of the Universidad Intercultural is unlike previous institutions in the educational field as a whole or in Higher Education, and is one of the very few institutional departures accompanied by substantial resource commitments to be undertaken in Mexico, or indeed in Latin America, by the state and in the name of either multiculturalism, interculturalidad or simply indigenous peoples. This exceptionalism deserves mention because it puts in context the resistance of the Mexican political class and the then President to demands for autonomy emanating from the Zapatista leadership and from the 1996 San Andrés accords between them and a government delegation, which were rejected by the National Congress. The UIs are of course an initiative of the federal executive, but there has been no sign that they are disapproved of by politicians at national or state level, rather the contrary, since several State Governors have supported

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[2] Data kindly provided by Lourdes Casillas of the SGEIB, May 2009

them politically and materially. In no other Latin American country have such institutions been established with state support. The Nicaraguan URACCAN (the pioneer for the whole region, of which more later) does not appear to be state-funded. In Brazil there are university courses to train indigenous teachers in the Amazon, but not stand-alone universities, and an obscure decree creating one in Peru and signed by erstwhile President Fujimori has remained without effect.

Another major example in Mexico would be the legislation at state level (Oaxaca, Michoacán for example) providing for usos y costumbres (Assies, Haar et al. 1998; Recondo 2007) in the election and conduct of municipal authorities. But although these are equally important in terms of the recognition of the validity and efficacy of local traditions, including indigenous traditions, they do not involve the establishment of institutions within the state apparatus, with the long-term financial commitment which that brings. In the Peruvian and Brazilian Amazon the state has established Teacher Training Colleges,

It is already apparent from these few sentences that the Intercultural Universities have emerged from the confluence of a variety of interests and ideals: the President and his close associate the President of the CDI, the CGEIB and its Coordinadora, of whom more later, the State Governors; in addition, as we shall see, a set of ideals about education in general and indigenous education in particular, promoted in the education profession nationally and internationally, also played their role, though professional organizations of educators were not in any way involved. Absent, note, was any grassroots indigenous pressure, or even pressure from NGOs. Indeed, corporate indigenous organizations devoted to placing indigenous demands in the public sphere (in the style of Ecuador's CONAIE , or the organizations of the Peruvian Amazon like AIDESEP[3]) have in any case but a scant presence in Mexico outside the Chiapas municipalities controlled or half-controlled by the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional the Zapartistas).

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[3] Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador - Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador; - Asociación Interétnica de Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana- Interethnic association for the development of the Peruvian Lowland Forest.

The UIs already represent a range of institutional models, and despite their short existence already show signs of developing distinctive sub-cultures. All the universities save two are under the direct supervision of the Ministry of Education (SEP) as far as quality and certification is concerned, and of state governments for their budgets. Their capital budgets, however, have often been funded by the Federal government, notably the CDI (ex-INI) during the Fox *sexenio*.

The two exceptions are the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI) and the Centro Universitario Ayuk The UVI is established inside the Universidad Veracruzana as an autonomous operation, but one which is governed by that University and thus insulated from direct dependence on the state government. However, its budget is voted by the state Chamber of Deputies which has increased the UVI's budget correspondingly. The UVI is also different in that although it operates from central premises in Jalapa, the state capital, all the teaching takes place in small campuses located far from any two, such as the one I visited more than an hour from Acayucan.

The Centro Ayuuk is a private institution and had not yet achieved full recognition in 2008. It is part of the Society of Jesus' University network and has a much smaller staff, fewer students and much more humble buildings than its state-sponsored counterparts.

The UNICH in San Cristóbal de las Casa (Chiapas) is the only one established in a state capital; the UIEM is located in San Felipe del Progreso (a small town some two hours' bus journey from Mexico City), the Tabasco UIET is deep in the countryside, and the UNAIM in Sinaloa is located in a the desperately poor village of Mochicahui some 20 minutes' drive from the large town of Los Mochis.

A satisfactory account of the birth and early development of the UI requires a multi-faceted approach and this account brings together information and opinions from leading figures in the CGEIB, from Rectors of the UIs themselves, from teaching staff, from students and from intellectuals with opinions on the subject. The account shows how this institution acts as a vehicle for the achievement or practical application of a range of ideals, and for the pursuit of certain educational goals, certain career ambitions, on the part of different categories of professionals, of politicians and policymakers, and of academic staff and students. As ideas are repeated from one location to another, with their accompanying internal codes and readymade phrases, so the picture coalesces.

I visited the following institutions in Mexico in late 2006, and in May 2007 and May 2008: the UAIM - Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México (Mochicahui, Sinaloa – twice, in late 2006 and in May 2008); the UVI - Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (Jalapa and a 'sede' near Acayucan) twice, in 2007 and 2008); the UNICH - Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas (in December 2006 and May 2008); the UIEM - Universidad Intercultural del Estado de México (San Felipe del Progreso, May 2008); Centro Universitario Ayuuk (Jultepece de Angayoc, Oaxaca, near María Lombardo, May 2008); UIET - Universidad Intercultural del Estado de Tabasco (Oxolotan, May 2007 and May 2008). In addition I met with officials at the CGEIB and other interested parties.

What is *interculturalidad* in higher education?

1. The students

This question can be answered in many ways, depending on the context in which the word is used. Its arrival in common currency and its gradual replacement in Spanish-speaking countries of the word multiculturalism is a subject of interest and importance in itself, because of what this tells us about prevailing implicit and explicit concepts of identity, of inequality and of the frontiers which demarcate difference in these countries. But that is a long discussion, and for the moment our focus is on these institutions whose relatively recent arrival on the educational scene in Mexico, and to a lesser extent

elsewhere in Latin America, has at least the merit of bringing new evidence to a discussion which can become too inner-directed and too deeply embroiled in the theoretical and political sensitivities of different sections of the anthropological profession and the culture of the NGO community.

The idea of the intercultural university seems to have first grown up on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, after a period of very tense relations between the Sandinista government (1979-1990) and the leaders of the Miskito people, whose Caribbean/Afican origins, Protestant religion and English creole set them apart from the central regions of the country and placed them outside the Sandinistas' world view – and indeed their view of their own country.. Relations became even worse when entangled in the '*contra* war' because the Sandinista leadership saw Miskito rebellion in that context as counter-revolutionary and pro-US. However, by 1987 relations had calmed and an Autonomy Law was passed in 1987, three years before the Sandinistas, in their then revolutionary incarnation, were defeated in an election. The Universidad de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa del Caribe Nicaraguense (significantly abbreviated to URACCAN[4]) began to receive students in 1995 as an 'universidad indígena comunitaria con enfoque multiétnico e intercultural' (Hooker 2004), and according to its website by 1996 claimed 2000 students. Many people in Mexico, anthropologists especially, cited URACCAN as a pioneering institution and its Rector, Alta Hooker, as an inspirational leader.

Apart from the allusion in its acronym, note the founder's mission description of URACCAN: it includes both the words 'indígena' and 'intercultural', and its adds the word 'multiétnico', though not 'multicultural'. It is a very inclusive name, and this is repeated in the Mexican institutions, which keep to 'intercultural' and avoid 'indígena', save in the case of the pioneer UAIM - and by the time I visited them UAIM had also in practice adopted the word intercultural. The authors and publishers of the book quoted here, which marked the founding conference of Latin American intercultural universities, to which Alta Hooker, Sylvia Schmelkes and other prominent figures contributed, also were careful to use the phrase 'educación superior para los pueblos indígenas', and not

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[4] Significantly because the word sounds like the Spanish for hurrican – 'huracán'.

'educación superior indígena'[5]. In Mexico, there is no question of restricting entry to students from indigenous areas, or in any other way to students who might be formally classified as indigenous; this would count as discriminatory, and would go against deeply ingrained habits of fuzzy or hybrid classification in Mexico and in other Latin American countries. But also, among the many purposes of these institutions none is intended to accentuate social separation between people of differing ancestry, linguistic background or ethnic identity. Intellectuals of sternly universalist bent have said to me that these institutions will become 'ghetto' universities awarding degrees of little value, but from the point of view of their defenders one of their purposes is to open up higher education to indigenous groups, and to stimulate the emergence of development workers and managers committed to the indigenous cause. Sylvia Schmelkes has written in the same sentence of a desirable 70% indigenous students, but also of a conceivable need to reserve 20% of places for non-indigenous: the objective of training intellectuals and professionals committed to the development of indigenous peoples and regions is not confined exclusively to indígenas'.[6] Nonetheless, in the same presentation, she made it clear that there is no question of restricting or reserving entry to certain culturally or ethnically defined categories of people. Indeed, in Spanish America such a notion is not only usually unconstitutional, it is also culturally unthinkable. (Affirmative action on the basis of income is another matter: it is in a sense present in Mexico via monthly grants for low-income students, but only in Brazil is there a more aggressive affirmative action policy in the form of fully, or more usually partially, race-based quotas.) In the meantime, while the UIs are admitting all qualified applicants (that is, those who have completed the two years of 'preparatoria' which Mexican students have to do before going to university, at the pass level), without further competition on the basis of their

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[5] I am grateful to Lourdes Casillas for pointing this out to me.
[6] 'Las universidades interculturales en México: una contribución a la equidad en la educación superior?' Paper delivered at the First Conference on Ethnicity, Race, and Indigenous Peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean May 22-24, 2008. However, in the published version of the paper she is more emphatic, speaking of a quota system already in force: 'Intercultural universities have been designed to be open to all, indigenous and non-indigenous students, though the proportion of indigenous students is intended to be around 70%. A quota system is in place to ensure at least 20% *Mestizo* participation. The purpose of helping to educate committed intellectuals and professionals who can assist in the development of indigenous peoples and regions is not exclusive to indigenous students.' Schmelkes, S. (2009). "Intercultural universities in Mexico: progress and difficulties." Intercultural Education **20**(1): 5-17.

marks, the issue of quotas is purely theoretical. The method, therefore, is affirmative action, in the sense of creating conditions which would encourage indigenous applicants and also of creating curricula which are deemed suitable to those applicants' background and opportunities, and these students would have great difficulty in gaining admission even to the less competitive public universities, while private ones are most likely beyond their means.

The clientele of the UIs is thus shaped not by direct selection, but rather by image and location. The locations are intended to be in predominantly indigenous areas (Schmelkes 2004: 386), All those studied, except UNICH, are deep in the interior and a long way from major cities or even large towns. The Universidad Veracruzana satellite campuses (*sedes*) are deep in rural areas. In my experience the largest location apart from San Cristóbal was San Felipe del Progreso, a small town in a municipality of 177,000, three hours' from a Mexico City bus station. The expectation is that indigenous students who might otherwise not go to university will be attracted, and also that indigenous women whose families would resist their attendance at classic universities feel free to attend – and indeed 53.7% of students are women (3050/5684), a little more than the 49% in undergraduate higher education as a whole (ANUIES)[7].

The UIs represent an effort by the federal and state governments to further broaden the accessibility of higher education, and to do so in rural areas which are not attractive to investors in private education, with a resource endowment which is much more favourable than in the best known state institutions and unheard of in the private ones. By this I refer to the staff-student ratios visible in classes I attended, where there were perhaps 20 students in the class, especially in the UIs located in rural areas, and also to the atmosphere of collaboration and easygoing sociability between academic staff and the students. The vast lecture halls which are standard in most institutions are absent, replaced by more intimate classrooms. Again, the UNICH, located in San Cristóbal de las Casas, was slightly different, and had more of the atmosphere of a classic Mexican

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[7] ANUIES is the *Asociación Nacional de Universidades e Instituciones de Educación Superior,* and the figure which refers to undergraudates in Higher and Technological Education, is drawn from its published statistics for 2006-7.

university, perhaps because of its size, or because of its urban location. It certainly had far larger and more sumptuous premises than any other, although (in 2008) fewer students than the UAIM which had to make do for teaching with a partially restored *casa de hacienda* and a noisy utilitarian structure of concrete with two floors of bare classrooms. The UNICH did not provide residential quarters, while those provided by the UAIM were extremely elementary: on my visit I saw what was in affect a dormitory for nine women, and was told that in earlier years students had undergone real deprivations to keep on studying (sleeping in dilapidated houses, buying supplies of food direct from local farmers for their very simple refectory…)

The founding of these universities should be seen in the context of massive changes in higher education within Mexico, Latin America and indeed worldwide – changes which can be summarized as 'privatization' and 'massification', which also of course bring diversification. The number of students in HE in the region has multiplied since the 1960s. This can be seen in the founding of new universities under government auspices, but also in the proliferation of innumerable private institutions, some non-profit but mostly for profit, which are attracting young people in search of a university qualification but who for different reasons are unable to attend the more prestigious, classic institutions. To use the title 'universidad' it is of course necessary to obtain recognition from the relevant Department of Ministries of Education. Initially, in response to the exponential growth of student numbers at UNAM post-1968 and the consequent loss of confidence in standards on the part of the more prosperous sectors, a trend was set in Mexico by the establishment of the Instituto Tecnológico de Moneterrey by the city's industrial elite. The Jesuits' Universidad Iberoamericana in the capital and ITESO (Instituto Tecnológico del Suroeste) in Guadalajara, had already been existence for some time, and now other quite prosperous institutions by the Catholic devotional movements Opus Dei (Universidad de Guadalajara?) and the Legionarios de Cristo (Universidad Anahuac), all of which remain quite exclusive with more demanding entry standards than the UNAM. But then the market opened further and Universities proliferate even in small provincial towns offering principally evening courses in low-cost subjects – but not often in medicine or engineering which remain, even in the state universities, highly

competitive. According to ANUIES in 2006-7, 0.76m. out of 2.1m. Mexican undergraduates were in private institutions. In Brazil the proportion is higher.

2. The mission: official version

The UIs are described by their founders and early promoters within the state, notably Sylvia Schmelkes, Lourdes Casillas and Laura Santini, more in terms of an exercise in cultural politics than in affirmative action, and much the same can be said of their intellectual allies like Gunther Dietz and the Rector of UVI Sergio Tellez, all of whom come from a background in educational research and, broadly speaking, from the 'educación popular' movement originally inspired by Paulo Freire and also taken up by movements inspired by Liberation Theology (Lehmann 1990) and, in Mexico, notably by sectors of the Jesuits. To that they have added ideas about difference and diversity and in some cases also an agenda aimed at elevating the status of non-Western thinking and indigenous cosmovisions.

In the CGEIB's foundational document on *Políticas y fundamentos de la educación intercultural bilingüe en México* (2004), directed, I was told, mostly at the primary sector, and which refers to education at all levels, the word *diversidad* is mentioned at least 45 times in the space of 27 pages and 13,500 words, excluding quotations from other documents and uses in senses other than cultural diversity. The word *otro* in the sense of 'my other' or 'one's other' is used 15 times, each time italicized, and the word *otredad* 3 times. Another favourite is epistemology which is mentioned 13 times, The words *equidad* and *inequidad* 9 times, and *justicia* 9 times. Although this last observation is not intended to cast doubt upon the authors' commitment to equality or social justice, the frequency of words drawn from the verbal armoury of post-modernism and post-colonialism is a sign of a desire to separate intercultural education both from traditional approaches and also to shift educación popular in a new, more multicultural, direction.

The proposal is that all Mexican education be intercultural and the education of indigenous peoples, or those who speak indigenous languages, should also be bilingual.

Intercultural education is therefore not a separate sector of education but a dimension of education in general. The document is couched in very general, often philosophical terms, and after the first section on the laws governing education which underlie the approach have been passed, it becomes much more academic than a standard policy document. As the previous paragraph indicates, the preoccupation is principally with the affirmation of identity and the recognition of difference. The assumption is that socio-economic injustices are built on discrimination against non-dominant cultures and languages and will be reduced as a result of the changes in the politics of recognition (though that specific phrase is not used). But the document goes further than this, and speaks emphatically of the equal validity of different cultural logics ('otras lógicas culturales igualmente válidas') and of the need to contrast basic scientific concepts with those deriving from other cultures 'para encontrar la lógica en los diversos temas de la ciencia.' Perhaps significantly, this phrase is not very clear: the phrasing leaves open the possibility of 'different knowledges' in the language of post-modernism, but does not fully commit to it. The next sentence is a call for ethnocentrisms to be laid bare so that each body of knowledge can be freed of a distorting and unnecessary outlook : 'para liberar a cada una de las ciencias de una mirada deformante e innecesaria'. Again the phrasing is puzzling, as if the text was hesitating to make too emphatic a relativistic claim.[8] Further on, however, a more concrete claim is made about the contributions of indigenous cultures which are 'fundamental for modern science' such as 'herbolaria', soil classification, and 'los ciclos lunares y sus relaciones con el trabajo humano'. This is followed by another, softer sentence asking whether the most significant contribution of indigenous cultures has not been in 'broadening the horizon of logical possibility and alternative ways to understanding of the world in which we live' (Pero quizá la

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[8] Given the sensitivity of the point, it is be worth providing the full text of the two passages referred to: 'reconocer la propia identidad cultural como una construcción particular de *lo cultural* y, por tanto, aceptar la existencia de otras lógica culturales igualmente válidas', intentar comprenderlas y asumir una postura ética frente a ellas. No es una tarea sencilla, requiere de un diálogo entre culturas que generalmente es conflictivo. No obstante, ese diálogo puede convertirse en un espacio de encuentro productivo en tanto que abre la posibilidad de reelaborar la lógica cultural propia.'…' Los conceptos fundamentales de las ciencia y las metodologías derivadas necesitan ser contrastadas y enriquecidas con otros conceptos y modelos provenientes de las culturas para encontrar la lógica en los diversos temas de la ciencia. Es necesario analizar y sacar a la luz los etnocentrismos para liberar a cada una de las ciencias de una mirada deformante e innecesaria.'

contribución más relevante haya sido el ampliar el horizonte de las posibilidades lógicas y de rutas alternas para conocer el mundo en que se habita.) The notion that cultural differences embody different ways of thinking is also transmitted, albeit tentatively, in the use of the word epistemology: the epistemological dimension is first mentioned in statements about how identities are historically constituted, and how cross-cultural encounters can establish a 'dialogical dynamic' (dialogical is a Paulo Freire term). From there the argument shifts into claims about cognition (' nuevas síntesis cognitivas') and about how 'an epistemological dimension attempts to articulate the logics of construction of indigenous cosmovisions…and contains within itself a broad and complex vision on the process whereby knowledge is constructed'. The phrase is, I repeat, tentative, not dogmatic, as if the authors are hovering on the edge of a claim that thought processes and rationality (denoted by terms such as 'cognitive' and 'epistemological') differ from one culture to another.[9]

These ideas may without doubt be philosophically debatable, but they reflect real concerns, and above all, in the 'cultural turn', from attempts to improve the education of the excluded within conventional paradigms, to 'interculturalidad', they constitute a reaction, as Lourdes Casillas explained to me, to years of frustration trying to improve the education of the excluded. Nor are they purely theoretical. In the Tabasco UIET I was brought into a discussion of 'what constitutes an essay' and above all what weight should be given to 'opinions' in student work. I spelt out the standard response which my

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[9] Por esta compleja vía de apertura, relativización y toma de conciencia de la posibilidad de cambio, el diálogo intercultural prepara a las culturas para que se conozcan mejor entre ellas y, de este modo, a sí mismas, ya que implica un proceso de constitución de la identidad individual y social, es decir, la relación dialéctica entre los sujetos y su colectividad. Su eje es la capacidad de reconocer la historicidad de la propia identidad: las relaciones que establece con el entorno social, tensarlas, relativizar, situar tanto la historia personal como la colectiva y viceversa. Significa transgredir los esquemas ya interiorizados para llegar a nuevas síntesis cognitivas que, a su vez se cuestionan por la historicidad de otras culturas. De tal suerte, se establece una dinámica dialógica permanente. Todo lo anterior conlleva una nueva visión sobre el pensamiento colectivo, pues ya no se construye a partir de una figura única del mundo sino de un pensamiento ético renovado con la forma de sabiduría moral, construido a partir de la intersubjetividad y de la interculturalidad.

En nuestro caso, esta dimensión epistemológica intenta articular las lógicas de construcción de las cosmovisiones indígenas de México y envuelve una mirada amplia y compleja sobre el proceso de construcción del conocimiento, en que los elementos naturales y simbólicos se imbrican.

own background would produce: an essay is not the place for the expression of personal opinions unless they are grounded in publicly available information. To this one of the teachers replied with an eloquent reminder that codified, established knowledge might invalidate, delegitimize or dominate the students' own knowledge. Now when stated in theory such ideas may sound self-indulgent or even irresponsible, denying the task of education to provide structure and to develop analytical capacities. But context does matter, and my prescription had quite different implications in Mexico compared to my own 'home context', in which students have numerous opportunities for self-expression – in extra-curricular activities, in small group discussions with academics – so the discipline of impersonality in their essays and exams is less likely to suffocate them than would be the case for Mexican students, who arrive with what the UIET's programme advisor called 'asimetrías escolares y sociales tremendas', having been subjected to an unadulterated version of 'teacher knows all' throughout their lives and who, even when they reach the UIs, are barely able to express themselves orally or in writing in a non-colloquial Spanish. (The UIs have a preparatory year to lay the basis for writing skills etc.)

As the discussion about essays continued to bat to and fro, under the guidance of the programme advisor whose job could be described as the implementation of the philosophy of interculturalidad and participation, so opinions fanned out and became nuanced. While one person said that 'if everything or anything goes' then 'todo se vacía' – nothing is left (literally 'everything empties out'), and another said the challenge of multiculturalidad was to 'be competent in any place' – taking the 'multi' of multiculturalidad seriously, an eloquent voice was raised in reminder of the repressive or humiliating educational background of the 'chamacos' (the kids). When they went to school they had to stop talking about the magical and supernatural beings which populated their imaginary because teachers would laugh at them. Although some might say that she was simply repeating a caricature derived from the highly developed rhetoric of victimhood which has become common currency around indigenous questions, that in itself is hardly an argument against encouraging self-expression.

As has already been pointed out, the massive challenge represented by the introduction of change at primary and secondary levels and the resistance of the enormously powerful vested interests in Mexico's school system, presumably made that too big a challenge to even contemplate for the new-born CGEIB, but building these universities was a 'blue sky', or 'green field' initiative which did offer a chance to try a different approach, and one which would face up squarely to the cultural abyss which, in addition to and intertwined with socio-economic forces, seemed to perpetuate the educational exclusion of indigenous people. This, was not an approach without precedent: the influential London-based educationalist Basil Bernstein's ideas about restricted language codes in the British class structure as barriers to educational achievement (Bernstein 1974) had been developed in the 1960s, and Bruner and Vygotsky were both highly influential psychologists whose names cropped up in my interviews, as did that of Howard Gardner, a psychologist of similar persuasion.

The CGEIB document also sets an agenda for the very difficult subject of bilingual education – difficult because it has proved so hard to train teachers to undertake the teaching of indigenous languages who would then work as teachers in remote areas and commit to it, and also because of the inherent difficulties of teaching children to write a language which has not developed together with a written culture, even if it is their language. In addition, as the title of Virginia Zavala's book indicates, there is a non-meeting of minds between the aims of bilingual education and the respective places of indigenous language and Spanish in indigenous culture (Zavala 2002) (García 2003; García 2005). The document divides indigenous localities into those where the indigenous language dominates and those where Spanish dominates, and states that Spanish should be taught as a second language in the former, while the indigenous language would become the second language in the latter. But that tells us little about the underlying problem of training and implementation. Given the resources available to the CGEIB it is not surprising that it has focused more on the intercultural and than the bilingual part of its mission.

3.   A practitioner agonizes.

The tensions which arise when a person or institution really tries to apply these ideas were expressed in almost agonizing terms in a 40-minute interview in May 2008 with Dr Antonio Saldivar, an educationalist also influenced by the psychologist and educator Vygotsky, with a doctorate from Salamanca, who, after 14 years working on educational issues in El Colegio de la Frontera Sur, a development research institution devoted to development, now works as Director of the INED (Innovación Educativa - a jointly sponsored institution of the Colegio and the Chiapas Secretariat of Education), both in San Cristóbal de las Casas (Saldívar 2001). Saldivar eloquently expressed the tensions arising in a context of extreme inequality and the impossibility of resolving them.

Now, it is standard for social scientists and philosophers to deny that any culture is superior to another, and indeed to decry the very notion of 'a culture' as a misnomer because of its implication that cultures are 'bounded, internally consistent and integrated' (Lukes 2008, p. 39 and chapter 4) (Benhabib 2002: Chapter 1) (and her fierce criticisms of Taylor and Kymlicka, pp. 51-67): they oppose such usage either on straightforward empirical grounds or because of their 'essentialism'. Yet can we disassociate ourselves from the words and feelings of an experienced educator like Saldivar, when he describes the cultural dimension of the relationship he experiences when he engages with indigenous and their education?   Saldivar described the impossibility of avoiding the sense of hierarchy, of unequal power, when a person like himself goes into a 'comunidad' – i.e. an indigenous village or community[10]: 'de entrada hay una sobrevaloración de lo que yo puedo aportar a esa comunidad y hay una subvaloración de esta comunidad' ('from the outset there is an over-valuation of what I can contribute to that community and an undervaluation of that community'). Note that Saldivar was speaking spontaneously and had not subjected his words to conceptual refinement, and was expressing his perception of the expectations surrounding the arrival of an educational project, or any kind of external improvement initiative, among people suffering from

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[10] The word 'comunidad' as used in Mexico merely means a place inhabited by indigenous – it has no particular conceptual or legal connotations. The interview took place in May 2008.

severe social exclusion. And he goes on to say he – that is, the bearer of a project - cannot engage in a dialogue with the other in that sort of situation because it will not yield a truly mutual or reciprocal learning process ('yo no puedo dialogar con el otro…porque entonces no se va a dar un proceso realmente de aprendizaje entre ambos'). He expresses the cultural dimension of the inequality separating him and millions like him from the indigenous as a genuine feeling of unease, even guilt. The implication, as I interpret it, is that no number of recognitions and reverences to cultural equality can suppress the inequality or its cultural dimension: differences in knowledge obviously, in dress, in mannerisms, in command of Spanish, which reflect a vast disparity in social networks, all express a profound inequality. And the attempts to overcome the inequality, like the intercultural universities, seem to him to further compound it, or at least to merely accentuate the specifically cultural chasm. There is no way of detaching cultural exchanges from the power structures in which they occur, or of detaching cultures from their bearers. There is also no way of detaching power relations, however much they are mediated by projects or welfare programmes or other (inevitably top-down) initiatives from their cultural expression, for it is after all through words and gestures and rituals that these initiatives are transacted.

He criticizes the curriculum of the intercultural universities as yet another illustration of the same asymmetry (my word), because it is market-oriented: they teach principally 'alternative tourism', 'sustainable development', 'language and culture' and they do not reflect a concern for the specific characteristics of indigenous cultures save perhaps to folklorize. Yet at the same time he is painfully aware of indigenous families' hope that their children will gain from their schooling the skills – notably language skills – which they will need for the labour market. 'Claro … piensan que el tzotzil ya no les sirve…' (Obviously they think tzotzil is no longer any use to them) he says, referring to one of Chiapas' many indigenous languages, and its limited use in the labour market and the wider world. This attitude is a recognition on the part of indigenous parents of underlying inequalities, and he is in doubt as to whether policy and projects can, or maybe even should, go against the tide.

Saldivar also spoke of a deeper cultural distance: he contrasted the western spirit of 'abstract thought, systematization and classification' with the indigenous emphasis on 'experience, personal contact, oral communication and personal interaction in learning'. A new model must recognize that there is not only one way to get to know something. Yet at the same time he recognized that a member of the mestizo culture, perhaps, or of the dominant culture, has no reason, no need or maybe no motive to profess or confess a cultural identity. Cultural identity only belongs to – is only needed by - 'the other' – that is, to the oppressed other: '…yo nunca me cuestiono quien soy yo… el que tiene que cuestionarse y tratar de entender su cultura es el otro, yo no. Entonces cuando de repente me veo frente a esta circunstancia hay una incomprensión'. ('I never have reason to ask myself who I am... it is the other who has to ask that of himself and to try to understand that his own culture is the other's not mine.') Indeed, maybe even the other's attributed need to profess a cultural identity is a type of external imposition by 'me'' or 'us'.

The intricacies of reference in this spontaneous sentence reflect the knots in which multicultural talk and notions of otherness can tie us. Saldivar is using 'I' (yo) as a third person – the 'yo' he is speaking of is a stereotypical representative of the dominant culture, on the face of it not himself: after all, if he was indeed that person, he would not be uttering this phrase. Yet at the same time he is saying that whether he likes it or not he is that 'yo'. And the 'yo' places the other – the indígena - in a position where, like it or not, that other has a culture and has to understand his own culture. The dominant culture is exempt from self-understanding and self-description, even though its capacity for generating fiercely self-critical ideologies (chiding itself as colonial, universalist etc.) does not undermine its dominant status.

The interview expresses with unusual frankness and some eloquence lived dilemmas which theorists are not, so to speak, paid to resolve. But Saldivar's life also goes on, and this is illustrated by his account of an experiment in training, or better retraining, school teachers in interculturalidad. In a paper published in 2004 in the *Revista Mexicana de Investigación Educativa* (Saldívar Moreno, Micalco Mendez et al. 2004) he and his colleagues describe a two-week course entitled 'Diplomado Educar en y para la

diversidad' for (almost certainly all female) schoolteachers[11], using the constructivist method inspired by Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner – which has little in common with post-modern cultural relativism. Although he does not mention Freire, the spirit of Freire is very much in evidence, with the use of methods to bring the teacher trainees face-to-face with reality – a word which was fashionable in educational circles in Freire's early career in the 60s and early 70s.[12] A key phrase in the article is the affirmation that 'learning operates through the body and not only the head' which may not be exactly the sort of language that Freire himself would have used, but conveys his insistence on learning as a confrontation with life's experience. The purpose of the constructivist approach (Vygotsky 1978) according to the paper, is that participants should 'consciously take ownership of strategies of participative and intercultural teaching which are integrated into the teaching context' ('que los participantes se apropien concientemente de las estrategias pedagógicas participativas'). And indeed the paper shows results: responses to questionnaires at the beginning, during feedback and in a final evaluation of the two-week exercise show a shift in their understanding of what a teacher does: at first they bring a rule-bound concept governed by procedures and regarding only official actors and locations as relevant, during the course their replies are full of ideas about creativity, motivation, feedback, 'vinculación' (see below), and of innovative locations in the countryside and archaeological sites, but then in the final evaluation it seems that the prospect of returning to work in the schools under bureaucratic surveillance, in the face of resistance to innovation, somewhat dampens that enthusiasm and the list of ideas and locations becomes once again more orthodox – museums replace the archaeological sites, the open fields are forgotten or perhaps consigned to an unrealistic utopia, and the

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[11] At one point the paper uses 'maestras' to refer to them

[12] During the Chilean Agrarian Reform, Freire's influence was strong in programmes designed to support campesino unionization, which rested on his method of literacy training involving 'promotores' who would animate discussion sessions in which the students would discuss the reality of their situation – the landlord, the inequalities, the possibilities of union organization and land redistribution. The idea was to educate campesino educators who would then take an educational role in their own social environment. This was under a moderate Christian Democrat government, and seems to have been so successful that the government, under President Eduardo Frei Sr. exercised some sort of pressure so that Freire would not continue in the influential international institution which employed him (ICIRA – Institute de Capacitación e Investigación en Reforma Agraria) and which was the leading institution on Land Reform in Latin America. So Freire left in 1969 for Harvard and later Geneva. This was a sub-plot in the crisis in the Land Reform programme as a result of which the more radical advocates were removed or resigned and a faction of the Christian Democrat party broke away

reference groups which had included local traders, artesans and vernacular healers ('médicos tradicionales') now narrows back to the school and its immediate environment.

Maybe behind these remarks is a person who is looking to bring about cultural change – but in *both* indigenous *and* the non-indigenous culture. Why is it that when they go to the US, Mexicans, 'having the opportunity to take up the best of both worlds, keep only the worst of both worlds'? By worst he means, on the one hand, the consumerism of US culture, and on the other the alcoholism and the machismo of Mexico. And he also uses the word 'integration', so offensive to multiculturalists, to describe interculturality as the 'recognition of what is positive and what is not positive in my culture and what is positive and what is negative in the other culture': interculturalidad is 'una posibilidad de … mejorar la experiencia de vivir en la relación que tengo con el otro' (an opportunity to improve my experience of living a relation with the other' – or maybe '…of living in a relation with the other').

4. Academic elaborations

Gunther Dietz, on the other hand, who as an academic is constrained neither by teacher training responsibilities nor by public office, is an enthusiastic ally of intercultural and multicultural education, nonetheless reflects in his writings the complications of a position against both 'hegemonic nationalisms' and their mirror image 'counter-hegemonic multicultural ethnicities' (Dietz 2007: 22). In the subsequent discussion, which sets out his own position after a long review of other positions, he argues first for the need 'to avoid reproducing essentialized notions of diversity or interculturality which *de facto* reproduce ancient racial and/or ethnic "us/them" classifications and hierarchies', and then for a propositional programme which must 'first recognize the substantialized, temporalized and territorialized bias of different collective identities and their claims making expressions and discourses' and, second, must contextualize these identities with regard to broader societal power relations' . (ibid.) Just as Saldivar contrasted the dominant culture as not in need of an identity, so Dietz decries the perception of the

'dominant pole' as the '"normal" or "default" type' (p. 23). But whereas those inequalities were a source of *angst* for Saldivar, Dietz's main *angst* is in avoiding essentialism, sinplistic ethnic labeling and the like – and in what I suspect is a painful awareness that the flag-bearers of the downtrodden fall into that impasse. In a long review of the concept of cultural diversity and thus of multiculturalism, this is the first time that power or material inequalities have been mentioned. So, although he writes somewhat disapprovingly of the 'universalist, relatively mono-logical and "mono-epistemic" character of the classical western university', at the same time he also recognizes, positively, the challenge of 'linking the characteristics of an intercultural university, oriented towards and rooted in the indigenous [rural] regions, with the dynamics and criteria of a "normal" public university', as well as concrete issues of employment, noting the failure of existing educational arrangements to provide a path for many indigenous people to a reasonable job and a decent income (Dietz 2009: 3). Dietz's proposal seems perfectly compatible with classic universalist educational principles associated with Paulo Freire, not least, when he refers to the mutual character of knowledge transfer,: 'whereas more academic, urban and non-indigenous representatives start recognizing the viability and promoting the visibility of the intercultural university as a culturally diversified and relevant higher education alternative, novel learning processes of mutual transfers of knowledge are emerging in the indigenous regions.' (ibid.)

The CGEIB also finds itself having to put aside high philosophical ambitions of the policy document by the CGEIB described above, as on its website statement explaining the UI project, and which hardly mentions the issue of cultural difference at all, confining itself to universalist ambitions of improvements in access and quality and relevance:

The most ambitious reformulation of the educational project was developed at the earliest of these institutions, the UAIM in Sinaloa by an anthropologist Jesús Angel Ochoa-Zazueta and the university's first Academic Coordinator Ernesto Guerra, who after being originally trained as an economist engaged himself fully in educational theory and practice. They enjoyed more autonomy than the later ones because they came into existence before the federal government had even created the CEIGB and were located

far from the intellectual centre of Mexico City in a region where debates on indigenous issues did not have the same ancestry they had in the Centre and South of the country. Ochoa starts[13] from a simple observation of the spectacular failures of Mexican education, and proceeds to denounce the preference given to *didáctica* and *pedagogía* over learning. In paragraphs reminiscent of the contestatory educational doctrines of Freire, again, and indeed of Ivan Illich (who gets a mention), they sing the praises of education as process of creation and discovery and denounce the infantilization (my word) to which standard methods subject pupils and students. He challenges the contrast of adult and child on the grounds that searching, curiosity, conceptualizing, checking out and the like are attributes of all people at all ages: the notion that childhood and youth are for learning, or receiving knowledge, and later adulthood is for seeking knowledge is criticized. Educators have the responsibility of preparing young people to learn, in an exploratory sense, and not to depend on teaching. The suggestive phrase 'pasividades del pupitre' or 'the passivity inscribed in sitting at a desk' is contrasted with a project to change a candidate for instruction ('candidato a dicente') into a person who is aware that his needs can be satisfied and that he lives in a 'decision-making arena' ('un teatro de decisiones').

In an accompanying paper Ernesto Guerra[14], at the time Academic Coordinator at UAIM, contrasts traditional pedagogy with their alternative proposal in terms of a preferred relationship between teacher and taught in which the student body, or 'grupo sociointercultural' of students (a variant on 'intercultural' designed to encompass non-ethnic differences) are rechristened 'Titulares Académicos' and join together with the 'Facilitadores-Clarificadores' to diagnose learning needs, plan, evaluate, motivate and jointly undertake an activity better described as research than teaching or imbibing knowledge. And, foreshadowing what was at the time of his writing a very new university, Guerra describes students as using what they know of their own lives to lay

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[13] This account is taken from an article in the UAIM's own journal *Ra Xinhai – Revista de Sociedad, Cultura yDesarrollo Sustentable* 1,12 2005. 'Anerogogia y skopeóutica: retorno a la educación por aprendizaje'. I have omitted the complicated Greek terminology terminology which Ochoa and Guerra have developed so as to simplify the summary.
[14] 'La aneregogia de la voluntad: Propuesta educativa sociointercultural de la Universidad Autónoma Indígena de México'. *Ra Xinhai – Revista de Sociedad, Cultura yDesarrollo Sustentable* 1,12 2005.

the foundations of a critique of both dominant and subordinate cultures. The diverse ethnic and class background of students, and the presence of men and women, is seen as a basis for the development not of hybridity but of mutual respect and enrichment.

The 'academic architecture' of UAIM as described by Guerra – and observed by others - does not include classrooms ('aulas') but rather meeting places suited to learning, there are no admission exams, since they would exclude young people from an indigenous background for whom Spanish is a second language; and when an assignment concludes the 'titulares académicos' (and they themselves do use the term) work in groups to present a piece of work, since the purpose is not to test their knowledge but rather to evaluate their research and learning capacity. There are no attendance registers since there should be freedom of action. The freedom allows people to learn under their own steam, so that some 'titulares' have acquired skills proper to a computer technician outside their official course structure. The themes of cultural differences and different cosmovisions appears right at the end almost as an afterthought.

In two interviews more than one year apart Ernesto Guerra expressed the multiple ideals and ideas which come together in an intercultural higher education institution. These can be enumerated as (1) a dissatisfaction with formulaic, hierarchical methods of teaching in which the teacher imparts a package of facts and theories; (2) hostility to traditional forms of assessment which set up unnecessary competition among students and tend to impose uniformity – 'whereas we are working with diversity'; (3) hostility to assessment systems 'which produce failure'; (4) an acute awareness of the dimension of cultural supremacy which pervade examination systems: 'one culture cannot fail another'; (5) a hedged, tentative statement of multicultural faith.

We can see already that his thinking is a combination of classic critiques of official education systems, but with an indigenist streak. The classic critiques, even when they insist on the education's failure to bridge cultural divisions (cf. Bernstein, Bruner, and Michael Apple, whom Guerra mentions), do not invoke indigenist or ethnically-based multicultural ideas, so Ernesto also invokes quite specific ideas about the cultural gulf

separating indigenous people from the mainstream. So, in relation to point (5) above, he says 'we believe that knowledge is relative to each culture', but also that collectively he and his colleagues 'no estamos hablando de saberes indígenas, sino de conocimientos indígenas', meaning that indigenous people know many things ('conocimientos') which others do not know, but – in contrast to 'hard' multiculturalists - that theirs is not a different way of knowing ('saberes'). The students mix their own cultural baggage with that of other students and of the 'facilitadores', producing an intercultural dialogue without implications for the veracity, or truth, of one or another culture ('sin decir cuál es el verdadero'). Yet at the same time, he points, as an example, not only to indigenous knowledge of the properties of plants, but also to the need to take into the perspective from which a person is describing, say, a tree: 'we think there is a universal body of knowledge, but from the point of Totzil, Tzeltal or Yoreme[15] people, the tree's meaning is different.'   Finally, in a further bricolage of ethnic and universalist ideas, Guerra criticized the Mexican government's system of university quality control (Programa Integral de Fortalecimiento Institucional –PIFI) as 'universalist, mestizo and based on the idea that western culture is the only one'. The PIFI is a system similar to that implemented in UK universities by the state to ensure teaching quality and compliance with the conditionalities of government funding. Its application to the UAIM did indeed cause something of a crisis, leading to the resignation of the Rector and eventually to Guerra's own removal from the post of Academic Coordinator, because their system of 'titulares académicos' and 'clarificadores', and their abandonment of the classroom and traditional examinations did not fit into its categories at all.

Leading themes applied in practice

1. Critical education theory

The example of these writings from the founders of the UAIM, as well as allusions which peppered other interviews elsewhere, allow us to emphasize the influence of the constructivist school of education among UI staff and on the founders of the CGEIB. And

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[15] Totzil and Tzeltal are from Chiapas, mostly, while the Yoreme are a Sinaloa people.

indeed, the convergence between their ideas – especially those expounded by Ochoas and Guerra at the UAIM – and those of the two leading constructivists and pychologists, Vygostky (who lived and worked in Russia and died in 1934 aged 38) and Jerome Bruner (both of whom have been translated into Spanish), and the convergence of their ideas with those of Paulo Freire, is very striking. In the words of Luis Moll (Moll 1990) in the introduction to a volume devoted to his work and influence, Vygotsky's approach to education was holistic, emphasized the social context of education beyond the teacher-taught dyad, as opposed to a conception of education based on the psychological stimulus-response model. Vygotsky is famous for his concept of the 'zone of proximal development' whereby 'learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child's independent developmental achievement' (Vygotsky 1978: 84). The concept has no doubt become vulgarized through endless repetition, but it has become a banner for opposition to 'rote-drill and practice instruction' and 'atomistic, skills-based instruction' (Moll 1990, 7-8).

Vygotsky is invoked to support the idea that learning should be in socially meaningful educational activities. In teaching children literacy a "whole language" approach should be adopted and that teachers' role is to 'provide the guidance so that children, through their own efforts, assume full control of diverse purposes and uses of oral and written language' (p. 9). Moll then explains Vygotsky's conception of the role of 'schooled' concepts, that is scientific concepts and formal language use, as a way for children to acquire an organized system of knowledge, and his 'almost Freirian' idea that children's use of everyday concepts is transformed by interaction with schooled concepts (p. 10). In the end, Moll sums up Vygotsky's contribution to education as the introduction of conscious awareness into the classroom, and on the creation and communication of meaning as distinct from the transferring of skills. Bruner advocates much the same thing: in *The culture of education* (1996) (Bruner 1996) he denounces the 'mould in which a single, presumably omniscient teacher, explicitly tells or shows presumably unknowing learners something they presumably know nothing about' (p. 20-1), and

outlines a concept of intersubjectivity. Bruner describes learning as 'an interactive process in which people learn from each other, not just by showing and telling' (p. 22), and of the need for educators to realize that education 'exists in a culture. And culture, whatever else it is, is also about power, distinction and rewards.' (p. 28)

A weary observer might well ask why these ideas are never adopted, or only very partially, especially in state schooling anywhere. What Vygotsky was saying in the 1920s, and Bruner already in the 1960s, Freire said in the 1970s and Illich said also in even more contestatory language, continuing until today. These authors were all being read in Latin America, and indeed worldwide, in education courses and teacher training, but with precious little effect: generation after generation the same criticisms of education systems are repeated sometimes in almost the same language. In Mexico, for example, as Antonio Saldivar described it, education is rigidly governed by a combination of state bureaucratic imposition and trade union corporatism, and teacher motivation is universally denounced as near zero especially in rural areas, yet the leader of the Teachers' Union (Elba Esther Gordillo) is a major power in the land (who provided the current President with a crucial margin in his election) and her followers are untouchable. In Peru, which also figures in this research project, there are more teachers per capita than any other country yet the standard of school results are almost the worst in the hemisphere. Saldivar, in a special programme within an NGO and with Ford Foundation funding, could achieve some results with a handful of teachers in indigenous schools, but it is surely a drop in the ocean. These ideas have been applied in informal education – Educación Popular – often under the aegis of basista sectors of the Catholic Church, and in participatory research (Fals-Borda 1987; Lehmann 1990; Brandão 2007). But they have never penetrated mass, state-managed education.

The UIs were designed by a group of educational researchers and policy advisors whose advice had no doubt rarely been adopted, and who now found themselves in the unique position of creating a whole new type of university with newly appointed, young teaching staff, and in the midst of the enthusiasm over indigenous causes. But the indigenous theme was new: their true heritage was in the critical educational theories: the

commitment to creating a participatory atmosphere and to 'constructivismo social' may have penetrated more deeply than the intercultural agenda itself.

2. 'Vinculación'

In an interview in May 2008 the head of Higher Education in the CGEIB spoke of the involvement of the community in 'procesos de reflexión sobre la comunidad y no la imposición del maestro', and of an education in which the students themselves learn to value their own knowledge and experience. She described how, with her colleagues, they had been taken aback by hearing from students that they found it incomprehensible that teachers should teach them, from the blackboard, how to sow a crop when they knew all about such things from their parents, and that the 'comunidades' – i.e. indigenous communities – had a harmonious form of life which they wish to preserve, 'pero la civilización no los deja'. Her conclusion was that a balance has to be sought between the contributions of science and the experience of the communities. She attached much importance to encouraging students to value their own experience and also to stimulating teachers to appreciate how 'on the ground ('en el terreno') things can be conceived differently 'y tener otras formas de sistematización', which might lead one to think she was invoking alternative cosmovisions, but in fact the sentence continued with the theme of 'investigación-acción vinculada con los nexos fuertes de trabajo con la comunidad' ('action research linked to the strong work-based ties in communities'.)

To illustrate how this translates into classroom activity, I sat in on discussions of research projects – described also as 'investigación-intervención' - at the Sede Las Selvas of the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural. The sede, or campus, was at the time in very simple premises, in Huazuntlan, more than an hour's drive inland from Acayucan, Veracruz. At that time the campus had neither photocopier nor Internet access, but nevertheless classes proceeded in a regular fashion and the village was benefitting from renting rooms out to students.. The class had three staff and eight students and the latter presented their projects, all to be undertaken in their home communities. The projects were concerned with the solution to local problems, and they were to be thought of in a

context, even in a worldwide context, and conducted in a 'reflexión común', without any 'imposition', at least to start with ('nosotros no vamos a imponer lo que queremos… sino a partir del contexto social') – though there was an admission that they have a 'concrete objective to encourage the indigenous language'. The class was conducted like a meeting: first a Chair and Rapporteur were elected from among the students, amidst a ripple of amusement and chatter, though eventually, as the students seemed to be uncertain how to proceed, a teacher took over the lead.

The classroom discussions about these projects recalled the dilemmas and agonizing hesitation which I had observed in the 1980s when working with *comunidades de base* in Brazil (Lehmann, 1990): in both cases popular intellectuals are wrestling with a tension between their almost emotional involvement with the cause of the people – and often of their own people – and their awareness of the distance created by their education and social networks. The academics laid down five guideline questions:

> How will my research contribute to the development of my community ('pueblo')[16]?
> Do I have the required theoretical and practical tools?
> How will my subject strengthen my community's culture?
> How can I ensure that the research-intervention will not get stuck in 'activitis'[17] and fail to contribute to the community's development?
> How can I help to create a space for the discussion of the problem of culture?

These students were talking about projects in their own communities, but within two years of studying at the UVI and despite the campus location in their own area, they already felt like outsiders: 'We must start from their needs, not our own….we must be neither *campesinistas* nor *tradicionalistas*…it will be hard to reach an understanding ['convivencia'] with parents, children and schoolteachers…'

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[16] I have translated 'pueblo' as 'community because 'people' is too broad: they were clearly talking about their localities of origin – which is often described as 'comunidad' in Mexico, as has already been noted.
[17] This is the original word – it means feverish activity without reflexion.

These descriptions placed the students in a different position vis-à-vis their heritage from that sparked by questions about language, which seemed to involve them more personally. The accounts of fieldwork were in the third person: about 'them', not 'us', even though the customs described belonged to the students' own background. This sounded similar to what one might hear from any undergraduate dong a project in a deprived community: a fascination, even excitement, with the discovery of the new (even if it should in theory have been very familiar to some of these students), an eagerness to solve social problems, and a pride that, in the words of one former UVI student, the comunidad saw them as 'la esperanza'.

This positioning vis-à-vis one's own community in the projects – and in this case one can speak properly of a community because they live in those places and they are small scale - places the students in a relationship of detachment in the face of their families and their social networks. In addition to the well known life-cycle transition represented by attendance at university – where young people are in a social setting which is neither home nor work and have to learn to manage their roles in an unfamiliar way – these students are also being placed in an unusual role by the projects, as researchers in their own communities. The universities are encouraging them to take an outsider's look at their own families and social networks, to develop solutions to practical problems. In itself, the search for solutions to practical problems would be of little interest, but this conception does, at least in principle, mark a change in the role of young people: they are not leaving to join another world, but rather are bringing back to their home environments ideas acquired in an atmosphere of open discussion and dispassionate analysis – that is, ideas acquired in an academic environment. Seen from this point of view, vinculación echoes, on a much smaller scale, the mass campaigns of education orchestrated by Cárdenas in the 1930s and continued thereafter in educación indígena and in the institutionalization of a political role for teachers in indigenous areas (Recondo 2007) . Those campaigns were also inspired by a developmentalist ideal, but (a) they sent in outsiders, and (b) they were not inspired by an ethos of listening to the indigenous, let alone tuning in to their cultural heritage (Vaughan 1997). Nonetheless, despite these important differences, the contemporary version shares with its predecessor a

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modernizing and developmentalist agenda, and may be more realistic than ideas about the resuscitation of cosmovisiones and alternative knowledges.

I heard the word 'vinculación' much more often than that I heard 'other knowledges' or 'cosmovisiones', and above all I heard it from students and staff alike: it seemed to fire the students' enthusiasm more than any other element of their studies. They were forming groups to undertake projects in particular communities, sometimes their own. In a conversation with a group of third-year students at the UNICH I heard of four projects: one involved waste management and another crop diversification (from maize to market gardening) with the use of natural fertilizer. The other two were presented as providing a responsive survey and diagnosis service to issues raised by villagers. There was also talk about communities going from one project to the next but lacking 'continuidad en el asesoramiento' ('activitis' again). In response to my query that the use of natural fertilizer would require much more labour than chemical fertiizer, a student said that the most important part of their course was 'compartir tus conocimientos empíricos y los conocimientos teóricos' or combining what they have learnt with the experience accumulated in the comunidad. There is nothing in this exchange about the superiority or inferiority of one knowledge or another, simply a recognition that people who are heirs to centuries of farming experience have something valuable to say on the subject.

In conversation with a group of teachers also at UNICH similar ideas were expressed with more elaborate vocabulary: through 'vinculación comunitaria, la universidad va a la comunidad no tanto para llevar conocimiento sino a retroalimentarlo con los saberes tradicionales que ya existen en esos lugares'. Here again we find a practical construction of what in multicultural jargon would be a story about other knowledges, cosmovisions and the like.

In a conversation with 3rd and 4th year students at the UNIEM in the state of Mexico the term cosmovisión was used, but not in the sense of a system of knowledge. It served as the opening to an ethnographic discussion about cultural differences: there was mention

of blessings to bring on rain and of rituals and exchanges surrounding marriage among the Mazaua – that is, among their own people - and a general remark about the importance of religion 'que forma parte de sus creencias y de su relación con la naturaleza'.

In contrast to the detached quasi-ethnographic third person used to describe their communities, language brought out the first person in students' reflections: each participant's intervention began with a statement of the language he or she spoke, and there were remarks about the contrasting experiences a person can have in using his or her language – and indeed about the very notion of possessing a language of one's own. In other universities students also spoke of a range of situations in which language issues were complicated for them or for people like themselves: sometimes parents had distanced themselves from their 'mother tongue' when migrating because they felt ashamed to speak it and had likewise discouraged their children from doing so; stories, autobiographical or not, of schools which punished children in school for speaking 'lengua' (i.e. 'lengua indígena'). Students described how some people, because they are discriminated against or because people say to them 'no hables así', prefer to cover up their ethnicity… 'se lo reservan nada más para ellos mismos, pero saben cual es su etnía, cual es su género'. Others, in contrast, 'están en la lucha de ser reconocidos como personas, hablen o no hablen una lengua originaria…estamos reafirmando nuestro poco o mucho conocimiento de la cultura de donde venimos'. The sentence is confused, as verbatim transcriptions often are, yet the confusion is itself revealing: language is identified with the affirmation of origins. These words are saying, surely, that poor command reflects the strenuous effort required to learn an unwritten indigenous language in adulthood – an effort which is nothing if not a sign of a striving to recover one's roots: in the meeting with third-year UNICH students, I asked if they speak tzeltal or tzotzil at home but there was a silence until one student said her grandparents had already migrated to S. Cristobal, by which she was implying that they had put their language behind them – and so now she described how learning her grandparents' language made her feel she

was recovering 'las raíces nuevamente' and returning to 'valorar nuestra cultura'. In addition she was speaking the language at home now.

3. Heritage

Maybe academic anthropology over-theorizes mundane concepts, mutating them into something radically other. At the UNIET (Tabasco) heritage was not perhaps quite what the official version defined: as a class exercise I was taken on two tours by a class in the Ecological Tourism course, one to the town of Oxolotan, the other to an ecological reserve near Tupijalapa. (To give an idea of proximity, many students, whose homes in nearby communities were too ill served by transport to allow daily commuting, took rooms in Oxolotan and some teaching staff lived in Tupijalapa.) After conversation in the University itself in which teaching staff had talked about cosmovisions and the distinct Maya way of thinking about science, it was noticeable that for the student group a defining moment of Oxolotan history was the bombing of the church by the notorious Governor Tomás Garrido. Garrido was a militant atheist who ruled Tabasco from 1919 to 1934 and this bombing was part of his unrelenting military and political war against the church in the 1920s during the Calles Presidency (the time of the Cristero Wars). Today the Church survives, a shell which has been restored by the National Institute of Archaeology (INAH) as a museum.

One of the teaching staff, as it happens a Presbyterian preacher, told me, during this outing, that when questioned the students insist that the first religion in Oxolotan was the Catholic Church and that even when pressed they do not refer to indigenous religion. This reinforced my interpretation of the Catholic imprint of their heritage as they, and presumably their families, understood it.

These vignettes give us a clue about how the concept of culture which filters down through teachers or through the vocabulary of interculturalidad are translated into the students' own language of heritage: what they call, for example, 'nuestras raíces' or 'el rescate de nuestra identidad'. These phrases have nothing to do with 'otros saberes' or the

merits of Maya mathematics.[18] Rather there were expressions of excitement when the group described their projects, which in their case involved talking to their grandparents and hearing about the olden times, about their migration down from Chiapas highlands, grasping the origins of the name Oxolotan (it means 'el lugar de los tigres'), or the date of the Garrido bombing, understanding the unicorns on the church façade.

Conclusion

The research of which this is one part can be described as an epidemiology of Latin American multiculturalism. When I set out I had never heard of intercultural universities, and indeed they are not a very large-scale phenomenon. Nevertheless, they represent an almost unique venture, for despite many ratifications of ILO Convention 169 and pious constitutional amendments paying homage to the pluricultural character of their countries, Latin American governments have invested very little in multiculturalism. Thus these universities are exceptional in terms of capital investment and annual expenditure commitment: most other initiatives are funded by NGOs. They are also a relatively open arena for influence by a multiplicity of political interests and of intellectual activisms, and of different conceptions of multiculturalism and *interculturalidad*. Many questions, of course, remain to be explored: the treatment of language, the rationale of the investment by state *gobernadores* in these universities, the effects of the PIFI which might impose a much more rigid regime on the universities, the relative lack of interest on the part of the second PAN administration, etc. But the purpose of this paper has been to untangle the intellectual influences shaping the ethos of *interculturalidad* in higher education, and it has shown that the UIs have been a focus for more than just multiculturalism, and that interculturalidad draws heavily on radical education theories, on the tradition of *educación popular*, and indeed on quite practical issues of development and student preparation for the labour market. To be sure, issues of identity, heritage and language are also prominent, but their insertion into the practicalities of institutional life has placed them in a context marked by these other concerns, so that the post-modern and relativist conceptions of cultural difference and

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[18] I was assured by Sylvia Schmelkes, the founding Coordinator of the CGEIB, that indigenous children get above average scores in mathematics untill they reach formal, written maths, and then they start to fall behind.

multicultural incompatibility, which are so prominent in academic literature on the subject within anthropology especially (Hale 1997; Hale 2002), and even in the official statements about intercultural education, are more muted than the true believers might lead one to imagine.

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