



A. S. Dillingham. *Oaxaca Resurgent: Indigeneity, Development, and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Mexico.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. Illustrations. 270 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-1494-9.

Reviewed by Stephen Lewis (California State University, Chico)

Published on H-LatAm (May, 2022)

Commissioned by Casey M. Lurtz (Johns Hopkins University)

This thoughtful book explores development and education policy, *indigenismo*, and Indigenous mobilization in a Mexican state that has often been at the vanguard of such matters. A. S. (Shane) Dillingham knows the Mixtecas well and ambitiously places his work in its national, hemispheric, and global contexts. He also provides historical context for the recent effervescence of teacher-led activism in Oaxaca.

Dillingham's narrative revolves around two main themes. The first explores what he calls the "double bind" of *indigenismo*, where "a glorious past is contrasted against an allegedly degraded Indigenous present" (p. 7). Indigeneity was seen as a colonial condition, "a barrier to be overcome," and was often used as a cudgel against populations deemed to be Indigenous, even as it grounded Mexico's national identity and could be used to advance claims for resources, cultural rights, and autonomy (p. 4). These claims eventually result in the book's second major theme, what Dillingham calls the "unintended consequences" of *indigenismo*.

Dillingham's first three chapters provide an excellent analysis of the programs of the National Indigenist Institute (INI) in the region, especially

its attempt to move "excess" population from the Mixteca Alta to the coast. Some *indigenistas* advocated for land reform in the Mixteca Alta and called for the nationalization of regional mines, while others attributed the poverty of the Mixtecs to their indigeneity and not to the economic and structural dynamics that transcended the region. The more radical diagnoses disappeared in later development practice. Dillingham claims that by making indigeneity the culprit, it became possible to naturalize existing inequalities and forego major structural reforms that might have been politically impossible.

The population transfer program, sponsored by the INI and the Departamento de Asuntos Agrarios y Colonización, was intended to both stimulate agriculture on the coast and culturally transform Indigenous colonists. The INI opened coordinating centers in the Mixteca Alta (at Tlaxiaco) and on the coast, in Jamiltepec. But *indigenistas* struggled to convince Mixtecs to settle permanently on the coast. Dillingham notes with a touch of irony that Mixtecs at the time were traveling long distances to work seasonal jobs in Sinaloa, Sonora, Baja California, and even the United States, but were mostly unwilling to permanently

relocate to the Oaxacan coast. This is because they wanted to maintain a connection to their lands, their saints, and communal government structures. The few Mixtec families who did agree to resettle were opposed by Afro-descended communities on the Costa Chica and coastal Mixtecs, among others. In one of his most important contributions, Dillingham places the INI's failure in the context of other failed state-sponsored relocations of rural peoples at the time, including elsewhere in Oaxaca (the Papaloapan basin), Peru, and the Urban Relocation Program for Native Americans in the United States.

Dillingham then turns his attention to the INI's education programs. Innovative bilingual radio schools overcame Oaxaca's challenging topography and the lack of formally trained educators. This program became less necessary after 1964, when the federal Ministry of Education (SEP) took charge of training increasing numbers of bilingual Indigenous educators.

The push to train more bilingual teachers coincided with the crisis in indigenismo, the Third-Worldist discourse of the Luis Echeverría presidency, and the anti-colonial, anti-imperialist ideas of the New Left. Oaxaca's Instituto de Investigación y Integración Social del Estado de Oaxaca (IIISEO) opened in 1969 and exposed future teachers to heavy doses of anti-colonial training. Graduates were expected to return to their communities of origin and serve as teachers and agents of development. But they were neither paid well nor considered full-time state employees. Radicalized by their training, they seized and occupied the IIISEO campus in 1974 and organized themselves as the *Coalición de Promotores Culturales Bilingües*. Among other things, Dillingham shows how this group demanded permanent SEP teaching positions. One year later, it struck four INI coordinating centers simultaneously in its ongoing struggle for professionalization and control over the schools where bilingual educators worked. Once incorporated into the SEP, Oaxaca's bilingual

educators then fought for representation in their local union at a time when it struggled to break free from the *charro*-led Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación, or SNTE. Dissidents won control of Section 22 of the SNTE over the course of the 1980s along with salary increases, which Dillingham shows to be important in the context of ongoing economic crises.

Oaxaca Resurgent then illustrates how official indigenismo responded to the crises of the 1970s with a new approach called "participatory indigenismo." In 1979, the SEP and INI inaugurated the Pátzcuaro Ethnolinguistic Program. It offered three years of formal coursework in linguistic training as well as history and social anthropology, both taught with a focus on anti-imperialism and decolonization. Multicultural reformers wanted to train Pátzcuaro graduates to replace the missionary linguists of the controversial US-based Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). Indeed, in September 1979, Mexico (temporarily) severed its long-standing working relationship with the SIL. In the 1980s, the SEP began to publish bilingual bicultural textbooks, but bilingual teachers often preferred to teach in Spanish or were assigned to schools outside of their language capabilities. As so often happened, Dillingham argues, top-down, pluralist programs were difficult to implement, hampered by scarce resources, stubborn bureaucracies, and time-worn attitudes that equated indigeneity with poverty and backwardness.

This carefully crafted book ends with an insightful discussion of multiculturalism, one of the "unintended consequences" of indigenismo. "Multiculturalism was not just an effective system of neoliberal governance," writes Dillingham. "In Oaxaca it was also a concession made to activist demands" (p. 177). He warns that "scholarly cynicism has erased both the historical contingency of the 1970s and the demands of indigenous activists" (p. 18). Multiculturalism, therefore, is much more than a "clever hegemonic tool wielded by powerful interests." It is also "an antiracist

achievement of grassroots activism and negotiation” (p. 19).

Those of us who have conducted archival research on indigenista development and education sometimes struggle to highlight the indigenous brokers who were trained and paid to carry out these programs. In this book, Dillingham supplements his archival work with a healthy dose of in-

terviews to shine a light on these critical actors. Indigenous men (and, later, women) used the crisis of Mexican indigenismo, Echeverría’s “opening” and his Third-Worldist discourse, and the politics of the New Left to push for multicultural state development and education programs. Dillingham restores agency to these people, which may be this fine book’s greatest contribution.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-latam>

Citation: Stephen Lewis. Review of Dillingham, A. S. *Oaxaca Resurgent: Indigeneity, Development, and Inequality in Twentieth-Century Mexico*. H-LatAm, H-Net Reviews. May, 2022.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56898>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.