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**A Review of *Rethinking Mexican Indigenismo: The INI's Coordinating Center in Highland Chiapas and the Fate of a Utopian Project***

Book Review by María L. Olin Muñoz  
Associate Professor of History, Susquehanna University, Selinsgrove, PA

*Rethinking Mexican Indigenismo: The INI's Coordinating Center in Highland Chiapas and the Fate of a Utopian Project*. By Lewis, Stephen E. 2018. Albuquerque: New Mexico University Press.  
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Stephen Lewis' *Rethinking Mexican Indigenismo: The INI's Coordinating Center in Highland Chiapas and the Fate of a Utopian Project* examines the lofty ideals and efforts behind the National Indigenist Institute's (Instituto Nacional Indigenista- INI) premier project during the middle part of the twentieth century. Organized into three sections, the book details the limited successes of the Indigenist Coordinating Center (Centro Coordinador Indigenista—CCI) project in Chiapas as well as its many failures. Lewis argues that Chiapas, the highlands in particular, became the incubator for applied indigenismo in Mexico.

In the first section, Lewis explains that the INI's gaze fell on Chiapas precisely because it came to represent a major challenge to INI officials seeking to assimilate Mexico's indigenous population. Ethnic divisions, deep poverty, significant alcoholism, and the continued presence of *caciquismo* (patron-client relationship), highlighted by the works of anthropologists Sol Tax and Alfonso Villa Rojas, made Chiapas the desired petri dish to begin the work of transforming indigenous Mexicans into modern citizens. Of course, the assumption was that indigenous Mexicans were incapable of being modern on their own terms. In this section, the most fascinating discussion deals with the multiplicity of actors and the complexity of their relationships—ladino v. indígena, state v. federal actors, indigenistas v. ladino, and indigenista v. indigenista. One of the book's strengths is that these complex power struggles to guide and/or thwart the Coordinating Center projects in the highlands are shown throughout; from education projects to struggles over alcohol production and consumer cooperatives, these relationships were strained at best.

The second part of the book lays out the ways INI was forced to shift from a plan for major economic development in the region to the more "moderate" task of assimilating Tseltal and Tsotsil communities. To do so, CCI officials resorted to multiple approaches in attempts, not always successful, to establish fruitful relationships with ethnic communities, including recruiting young local indigenous men as bilingual promoters and go-betweens, to mediating between Western medicine and local traditions, to taking on a powerful alcohol monopoly held by the Pedrero family. These efforts netted mixed results. For example, the scathing report on the Pedrero family's hold over aguardiente industry in the region resulted in an overhaul of the federal tax code on alcohol products and hiring of honest state liquor personnel. Yet, INI's attempts to weaken the hold of the Pedrero family did not succeed as the social, economic, and political clout of the family in the State remained.

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Perhaps one of the most fascinating questions the author asks of his research is whether INI inadvertently did more to create a new generation of local caciques than to disassemble existing ones. The incorporation of bilingual promoters—local indigenous men (largely) who were literate and being paid for their services—meant these men could, and did, leverage these newfound advantages in many ways. Lewis shows that some of these bilingual promoters not only eventually situated themselves as municipal presidents across the highlands, but were paid for these roles when municipal presidents had not received compensation before. It appears that these advantages allowed this generation of men to craft positions of power while circumventing established local hierarchies. Still, these CCI bilingual promoters had been part of an earlier program during the 1930s that trained them as scribes and guided them into religious obligations and leadership roles during the 1940s. By that account, INI may have contributed to the rise of these bilingual promoters as a type of local cacique, yet not solely responsible.

Also, in this second section, in a discussion of the puppet theatre Teatro Petul, Lewis does a good job of laying out the ways INI attempted to use Petul to “teach” children and adults about the importance of education, Western medicine, and personal hygiene. It is in explaining why the puppet show eventually lost relevance for Tseltal and Tsotsil children and adults in the late 1960s where the author falls short. The tepid suggestion that puppets were seen as tools of the devil is not convincing. Given the author’s focus on the political and economic changes that were shaping government funding and support for INI projects, is it not also possible that the Tseltal and Tsotsil communities in the Chiapas Highlands had grown tired of Petul’s message and packaging considering their overall lived experience had not been as radically transformed by the CCI project as the indigenistas of the 1950s had hoped? Perhaps Petul’s “advice” and promises simply failed to resonate with them by the end of the 1960s.

Lewis’s *Rethinking Mexican Indigenismo* is a welcomed addition to the growing scholarship that attempts to make sense of Mexico’s rapid decline as a continental leader on indigenous policies, which is the focus of part three of the book. Through his study of the National Indigenist Institute’s CCI project in the Chiapas highlands, Lewis is able to show the failure of such an ambitious project where indigenistas sought to mold the elusive revolutionary citizen out of indígenas, both in Chiapas and throughout the country.