Title: Subtractive Citizenship and Transnational Indigenous Resistance: Indigenous Mexicans in San Diego

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Introduction

In a 2010 Op Ed published in the New York Times, philosopher Jürgen Habermas criticized the notion of a leitkultur (or dominant national culture) in light of recent discussions about the incorporation of Muslims in Germany, and argued that due to recent public discussions of the perceived “unassimilability” of certain immigrant populations, “we...apparently still have, to overcome the view that immigrants are supposed to assimilate the ‘values’ of the majority culture and to adopt its ‘customs’” out of a “feeling of an endangered national culture, which had to assert itself as the 1 leitkultur that all newcomers must follow” (Habermas, 2010). In modern nation-states, immigrants often have to comply with cumbersome and lengthy legal requirements for political inclusion, and, commonly, once accepted legally they are also expected to gradually forgo their attachments to their homeland, such as their mother language, in order to adopt the new dominant national culture as their own. Following more recent trends, the first generation may skip this pressure and live a more pluralistic existence, albeit living in segregated neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves. However, the immigrant’s offspring are expected and, in many ways, trained by the nation-state’s cultural institutions, such as the school and media, to adhere to a single dominant culture, with the
remaining ties to the original culture considered as “residual.” This model is not smooth, and almost always entails coercive, or even violent practices of control by state institutions over the first, second, or even third generation. Citizenship, conceived this way, works as a subtractive process for some of the members of the political community who may find themselves in the outskirts of the dominant culture, where entire systems of knowledge may be lost in order for the newcomers to “assimilate” into a single dominant sociocultural and political arrangement so as be accepted by the majority. By “subtractive citizenship” I refer to the set of mechanisms and practices that nation states and dominant cultures exert on minority groups who are incorporating into the nation and are perceived as outsiders, especially if those groups are not wealthy elites.

This paper explores the practices of communication that indigenous Mexican immigrants living in the United States engage in in order to counteract the effects of subtractive practices by the state’s nation building institutions, such as the school system and the national media. I focus on the transnational communication practices of indigenous immigrants because they are an example of a more open and transnational engagement and interaction between and within at least two countries. Indigenous migrants are a good example of resistance to subtractive citizenship because as minorities in their country of origin and immigrants in their host country, they live a double marginality (Mercado, forthcoming) that has position them to question and resist assimilation, and exercise a more flexible form of citizenship that is close to the idea of world citizenship or cosmopolitanism. Those transnational practices offer a good example of how cosmopolitan engagements across nations are constructed from below, enriching the conception of citizenship instead of controlling and limiting it, as
assimilation does. I study one pan-ethnic and multi-site organization of indigenous Mexicans mainly from the state of Oaxaca—the Frente Indígena de Organizaciones Binacionales, or Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB). This organization’s binational work extends along a migratory network in both the US and Mexico, passing through the border region between California and Baja California, where FIOB has a strong presence and carries different civic and communicative practices, though for the purpose of this paper I will focus primarily on the San Diego chapter of FIOB.

Models of Assimilation in the United States

Milton Gordon (1961) identified three conceptual models or ideologies to describe assimilation into United States society: Anglo-conformity, the melting pot, and cultural pluralism (p. 263). Anglo conformism, the most prevalent ideology, stipulates the adoption of Anglo institutions, the English language, and the Anglo-Saxon culture as the desirable standard for attaining the good American life (p. 265). The melting pot is a more abstract conception of the ideal American citizen, as forming a single culture out of many. This idea was taken from Crevecoeur’s reflections in Letters from an American Farmer written in 1782. Here Crevecoeur referred mainly to European immigrants getting together and forming another culture (Crevecoeur, 1782, cited in Gordon, 1961, p. 270). The third ideology is “cultural pluralism” which was first defined by Horace Kallen as an anti-assimilationist program directed to both Anglo-conformism and melting-pot assimilation ideologies (Gordon, 1961, p. 277). Cultural pluralists consider that each immigrant group arriving into the United States has its own honorable culture, and
it needs to be respected in its uniqueness, and considered as part of the greater American society. Although cultural pluralism is a respectful ideology for incorporation in terms that it acknowledges difference, Leslie Vaughan (1991) considers that it does not offer a challenge to Anglo-Saxon hegemony in the United States, nor does it improve access to political participation for different groups (p. 451). An example of the failure of cultural pluralism can be seen in the earlier prevalence of the doctrine of “separated but equal” inaugurated by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in the late nineteenth century, which under the arguments of cultural or ethnic autonomy (central to cultural pluralism) denied equal access to rights, resources, and spaces in the public sphere to African American citizens and other minorities during more than six decades. The more recently coined concept of “multiculturalism” draws its insights from cultural pluralism as its precursor (Hollinger, 2006-1995, Sunada, 2000). Multiculturalism also carries some of the problems of cultural pluralism, such as the circumscription to the national space, and the impossibility to fit transnationalism into its narrative. According to Ulrich Beck:

>...multiculturalism rapturously celebrates the social accommodation of diversity, but it lacks a sense of cosmopolitan realism. It accepts the distinction between the national and the international, and consequently it is blind to the contingencies and ambivalences of ways of dealing with difference that go beyond assimilation and integration" (2006, p. 66).

For many, assimilation very much has meant that immigrants severed ties with the homeland and assumed the dominant white Anglo-Saxon American culture as their own. For example, for Robert Park, the author of a very influential book called *The Immigrant Press and its Control*, assimilation helped “dissolving” the
culture of members of less powerful groups into the more powerful one by means of contact. For Park and for many others assimilation very much meant for immigrants severing ties with the homeland and assuming the dominant white Anglo-Saxon American culture as their own in a process of “interpenetration and fusion” (Park and Burgess, 1924, p. 735, cited in Shah, 2003, p. 167). The description of assimilation by Park implies a cognitive change in the individual in order to acquire the dominant culture of the host country. As Shah describes it: “Park often wrote about the necessity of immigrants to acquire ‘new ideas’ (Park 1967, p. 134), to become ‘cosmopolitan’ in outlook (Park, 1967, 201), and acquire and ‘intellectual bias’—all requiring fundamental changes in an individual’s cognitive makeup” (Shah, p. 168). The acquisition of ways of thinking excluded the members of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture, since they were assumed to be the ones holding advanced ideas, and were used as examples to follow. "Peoples we know intimately we respect and esteem. In our casual contacts with aliens, however, it is the offensive rather than the pleasing traits that impress us. These impressions accumulate and reinforce natural prejudices." (Robert Park, cited in Lyman, 1968, p. 17). Thus, the most important characteristic of assimilation became to acquire the characteristics of the dominant host culture as soon as possible, in order to be perceived as less “offensive” to the mainstream.

Even among cultural pluralists, there is still not a clearly articulated challenge to the creation of a dominant core culture for American society. The creation of that “core culture” is still a topic of debate in our days, and the concept of assimilation is usually associated with the clash, and not the convergence of
dissimilar groups. In this clash, usually the less powerful group is “absorbed” or “dissolved” into the most powerful one, with some subgroups living parallel existences to the mainstream culture. The faster immigrants “assimilate,” the better for society, and the less conflict would arise. Soon, this interpretation of assimilation became known as “straight-line assimilation” a progressive process including members of the first generation as the least assimilated, and the second generation on, as the most assimilated, or “dissolved” into mainstream culture.

Notions of “straight-line” assimilation have been the traditional model for the process of acculturation and integration into the mainstream host society, also known as the melting pot (Levitt, 2003), and it has also been the model for assimilation in other contemporary liberal states. Although in recent decades the “melting pot” has been replaced with the metaphor of the “salad bowl,” to honor a multiculturalism circumscribed to the nation, and that does not support transnational involvement of immigrant groups. Many supporters of this view grow suspicious of activities that involve the contact of immigrants with the homeland, as Lin and Song (2006) argue: “a preoccupation with the home country may undermine immigrants’ ties to the local community, holding back their adaptation to the host country” (p. 382).

This critique dichotomizes local and home country interests as a “zero-sum game,” focusing on interest in the local host communities as an indicator of assimilation, without considering that different forms of solidarity are developed by people around common identities linked to their languages, ethnicities, faiths, or homelands. As in the case of indigenous migrants, common solidarity links revolve
around the vindication of their indigenous identity, a resource that they can use to organize and defend their rights as migrants and as indigenous people in both the US and Mexico. Those forms of solidarity lead to organization and the generation of “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” better known as social capital (Putnam, 2000 p. 19, italics added). The social capital generated by transnational communication practices by immigrants, can later be transformed into forms of civic participation in the local communities of both the sending and host countries, and in many cases, already constitutes an important part of immigrants’ practices of citizenship.

Assimilation as an ideology or as a concept is closely related to the project of nationalism, because it relates directly to how internal minorities or immigrants are integrated into the narratives of the nation. Rogers Brubaker (2001) has recently proposed the re-thinking of assimilation as a simple concept, and not a theory, and to reconsider the usefulness of assimilation without necessarily being an “assimilationist.” Brubaker argued that assimilation as a concept can be transformed and re-considered without its negative past, and he calls it “the return of assimilation” focusing on emerging commonalities of cultures. Despite his argument, assimilationist projects have always entailed the formation of a core or national culture, being it based on diversity or sameness, but identified with the national project of the state, and its ideology: nationalism. Thus assimilation is generally always a site of contestation, since it entails either possibilities for convergence or conflict between groups that do not share egalitarian conditions of power and representation in the public sphere.
The Subtractive Process

Thus, normative assimilationist views are also suspicious of transnational activities by immigrants, leading to a limiting conception of citizenship sustained in subtractive practices, or subtractive citizenship. It is called subtractive because contemporary nation states have not developed widespread mechanisms for making citizenship a culturally-enhancing process, instead they have created a diminishing one, linked more to privileges of inclusion, than to social and political pluralism in civic life, both within the nation and transnationally. As Angela Valenzuela noticed in her study of “subtractive schooling practices” (1999), subtractive mechanisms are not only administered by the school system. The media is also a conductor of “mainstream culture” and purveyor of the “desirable narratives” about citizenship. Academia as well is a producer of dominant regimes of knowledge, such in the linking of assimilation and modernization theories arguing that “primitive” cultures need to acquire the traits of more “developed” ones, such as those of Europe or the US (Shah, 2003, Hall, 1996). These state institutions and systems create and promote normative models of subtractive citizenship aimed mainly at immigrants and their children, but also to other minorities who are already formal members of the state and do not identify with the dominant culture. Nation-states have the control of educational institutions, and through public schools the state may dictate formal or implicit linguistic, cultural, and social guidelines or policies for its citizens, in a way determining their cognitive outreach.
However, this process of subtraction does not need to be the rule, the educational system may promote, more cosmopolitan values, such as the recognition of human traits in other ethnic, national or racial groups, and the willingness to learn and solve problems that require international cooperation (Nussbaum, 1996). That nations work for their own prevalence, cohesion, and community imagination is not a given, and more inclusive and cosmopolitan ways, not based on the notions of the acquisition of Western culture and the obliteration of the so called “traditional cultures” can be adopted as part of a more pluralistic formulation of national identity.

At a time when paradigms of globalization and exchange among nations are paramount, it is puzzling to see states trying to control certain sectors of their population in order to make them less mobile and global, especially those groups that are perceived as not part of the upper middle class or belonging to the so called mainstream culture. Immigrants are a good example of this, but it is not only their status as immigrant that makes states want to “manage them,” and control the way they are incorporated into globalization processes. There are also other factors of discrimination, such as perceptions of class, ethnicity, and race that may render certain groups “unfit” for citizenship, making them less able to adapt to a multi-cultural world by imposing a pre-conceived cultural and social hegemonic norm of integration. Assimilation norms are commonly subtractive for newcomers who are not members of economic elites, or who constitute a perceived “moral or cultural threat” to the integrity of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1991).
Mainstream societies do not easily incorporate entire cultures or group customs at once. If there are some things that can be incorporated into mainstream dominant culture, those things may be considered “residual” and be symbolic holidays from the incorporating culture, such as St. Patrick’s Day for the Irish, or Cinco de Mayo for Latinos in the United States. Elites fare way better in this subtraction process, since multilingualism can be an asset among cultural political and economic elites. For elites, the mother language use can remain strong, even after several generations, since access to diverse schooling opportunities and travel abroad are more available, and keeping their mother languages is a lesser stigma because multilingualism is a desired trait among business people, government officials, and professionals.

Double Exclusion and Resistance

During most of the Twentieth Century, a homogenizing ethnic model was promoted by government elites, exalting being mestizo and Spanish speaker as the ideal citizen of Mexico. That model in reality denied the rights of diversity to a big portion of the indigenous Mexican population, and other minorities by not respecting their traditions, and language, and trying to obliterate their own identity by imposing mestizaje as a legitimizing identity (Castells, 2004), one created and administered by the state. The mestizo identity was then created to unify the country as a single nation and imposed from above, causing the cultural, political and social exclusion of the indigenous people (León-Portilla, 2011).

To be able to impose the model of an “ideal Mexican citizen” the modern Mexican state also has engaged in subtractive practices, such as not providing an educational infrastructure for teaching indigenous languages in public schools, and
embarking in an educational project where indigenous culture was not valued, and had to be replaced by European culture and language. As Michael Foucault said: “where there is power, there is resistance” (1998). Indigenous groups have used different strategies to resist the power of subtractive practices of the dominant regimes, whether the Spanish colony or the “civilizatory” programs of the nation-state, both in Mexico and the US. In 1994, the Zapatista uprising in Mexico brought to the fore the awareness that indigenous people have maintained their distinctive culture and languages despite the subtractive practices of the Mexican state. The fact that indigenous immigrant organizations in the US are aiming to preserve their cultural traits, such as their original language, and reinventing their citizenship by participating across national, cultural and social borders, it is also telling of a de facto “citizenship of the world” or cosmopolitan engagement from the grassroots (Mercado, 2011). It cannot be said however, that those forms of resistance are aimed to maintain the “purity” of the indigenous ways of living. Those ways of living have certainly changed profoundly by three centuries of colonization, and the active practices of nation-building, and migration.


There is an estimate of about twenty thousand indigenous Oaxacans in San Diego (Gaona, 2004), mainly concentrated in the North part of the County, and composed mostly by Mixteco and Zapoteco groups who work in agriculture, construction, landscaping, cleaning, and other services. Although the geography and high dependency of the automobile in San Diego makes it very difficult to congregate, many of these immigrants have organized in smaller associations mainly to provide emergency help to
those of the community in need. For example, *La Organización Tecomaxtlahuaca*, has helped families to repatriate their loved ones who have passed, back to their towns in Oaxaca. In order to do this, they constantly fund-raise in the local community, and lobby the Mexican Consulate for support on the transportation of bodies. There are also some hometown associations, (HTAs), which are immigrant organizations aimed to help their towns of origin with small and medium scale infrastructure projects, such as paving roads, and building clinics and schools, usually by organizing fundraisers in the communities of residence. HTAs organize transnationally and it is very common that they include second-generation immigrants usually in the context of cultural activities.

There are similar organizations in San Diego, such as Familia Unida (United Family), the Coalición de Comunidades Indígenas de Oaxaca, or COCIO, La Organización de Migrantes de Santa Rosa Caxtlahuaca, along with some more political ones, such as the case of the Indigenous Front of Binational Organizations (FIOB).

FIOB was created in 1991 in Los Angeles California as the Frente Mixteco-Zapoteco Binacional (FM-ZB) or Mixtec and Zapotec Binational Front. FIOB is an umbrella organization grouping smaller associations, which have become chapters in different parts of California, Baja California, and Oaxaca. During more than twenty years of existence, FIOB has become a binational and pan-ethnic organization (Velasco-Ortiz, 2002), including diverse indigenous groups on its membership, such as Mixtecos and Zapotecs, but also Purépechas, Mayas, Nahuas, Triquis, and Chatinos. Its declaration of principles states that:

“FIOB is constituted as an association of organizations, communities and individuals (men and women) from diverse origins, who have decided to join efforts, ideas and projects to overcome economic, political, cultural, and social problems that our indigenous brothers and sisters, migrants and non migrants,
face in Mexico and in the United States, in order to fight for their rights and identity as indigenous people” (FIOB Statutes, 2008, p. 6).

The organization has prospered by grouping mainly indigenous immigrants from Mexico, but also opening up to other indigenous groups in the Americas for example Mayans from Guatemala, mestizo immigrants and other individual members who want to join because they sympathize with their values.

According to Rufino Domínguez, one of FIOB founders, during the 1980’s indigenous immigrants formed different organizations in the United States and Mexico mainly to counteract human and labor rights violations, along with discrimination, racism, and other factors, such as language discrimination by both, their Anglo employers who may not understand why they may not speak Spanish fluently, and other mestizo Mexican migrants, who criticize them for their darker skin color, and for speaking Spanish with an indigenous accent. One of the challenges, according to Domínguez, was to group those organizations in order to make them effective in protecting indigenous migrant rights in both sides of the border (Domínguez-Santos, 2004, p. 71).

Some organized Oaxacans in San Diego, joined FIOB in 1997, and became a formal chapter of the organization that year. Although FIOB San Diego does not have an office in the city (unlike other FIOB chapters in Los Angeles or Fresno that have functioning offices and paid staff), they operate through a network of charitable organizations, clinics, and local churches located mainly in the North County, such as the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), or the California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA), the Mission San Luis Rey, the Vista Community Clinic, and the Disciples of Christ Church in the city of Vista, among others. Members of FIOB, have secured permanent collaboration and usage of some of the facilities of the churches for their
workshops, celebrations, and meetings. Although FIOB is not a religious organization, they have found support among these local churches. For example, in the last few years, FIOB has held its yearly celebration for the anniversary of the birth of President Benito Juárez in the patio of the Disciples of Christ Church, which is located at the corner of Benito Juárez and California streets, in Vista. The name of this street was the result of advocacy group from members of the Oaxacan community in that city. Juárez is the only indigenous president in Mexico’s history, and a Zapotec from Oaxaca himself, which constitutes an important symbol of dignity and struggle for many Oaxacan immigrants.

As José González, a Mixteco immigrant from Oaxaca, and one of the main organizers of the celebration in San Diego would say: “Juárez has taught us that it is possible to keep our dignity and organize as indigenous people, he represents an important part of what we are and what we fight for” (personal communication, Vista, CA, March 2012). In the birth of Juárez celebration, hundreds of people gather in the city of Vista to buy tamales, mole or tlayudas, typical foods from Oaxaca, and to listen to members of local human and immigrant rights organizations, such as the AFSC and the CRLA, talking about their rights as indigenous immigrants in the US, and what can they do in case they have encounters with local authorities and the border patrol.

FIOB members have told me that sometimes the churches do not agree to let them perform some of the dances, as Enrique, another of FIOB members in San Diego laments: “We invited an Aztec folkloric group to perform during the Juárez celebration last year, and the pastor in the church told us that he did not approve of the usage of skull motifs on the dancers’ dress, and that the dances and drums seemed too aggressive” (personal communication, March 17, 2012). Other than this, the Vista church has been really
helpful in providing a space for FIOB to meet and to organize its leadership and human rights workshops, and other activities. Juan G., a Zapotec activist from Oaxaca says:

“Whenever we ask the pastor to use the church facilities, he agrees, as long as we keep it clean and do not disturb worshippers” (Personal communication, March, 2012). Many of the gatherings in the Vista church, have been to discuss projects in some of the communities of origin in Oaxaca, such as the construction of an auditorium in Santa Rosa Caxtlahuaca in La Mixteca. For this, they select active members of the organization who can travel across the border, and can execute some of the projects in both sides of the border. In the Vista church, FIOB organizes human rights workshops, and “decolonization talks” in which they talk about their condition of immigrants and indigenous people in the context of the US and Mexico.

The transnational and communicative activities of FIOB have been important to counteract subtractive practices by both the Mexican and the US nation-states. FIOB leaders have used their own cultural capital to keep disseminating different kinds of knowledge inside and outside the organization. Passing on useful information to its members, such as immigrant rights and safety in the work place, has been one of the main activities of FIOB San Diego, especially because indigenous migrants have been an easy target for revisions by the police and the Border Patrol due to the color of their skin and their indigenous features. Members of FIOB are very concerned that people know their rights in case they are detained. The North County chapter often uses the support of other members in Los Angeles, or Fresno, who usually visit Vista, Oceanside and Carlsbad to run workshops on indigenous rights, leadership, and cultural awareness. Those workshops are attended not only by Oaxacan indigenous immigrants but by other
Mexican mestizo immigrants, who have found community support in FIOB San Diego. They have also organized women leadership workshops, and health campaigns with the help of local foundations, such as Foundation for Change, which in the last three years has provided small grants for supporting the educational activities of the organization. The San Diego members have also organized in solidarity with FIOB members in Tijuana and other parts of Mexico, doing fund-raisings and support caravans for indigenous migrants who work in San Quintin, Baja California. For those groups, having support from FIOB in the US means that the local authorities and employers will pay more attention to their demands, because of the pressure that a transnational organization may exert on local authorities back in Mexico. Some of the main promoters of FIOB in San Diego say that it is a lot of work to keep the organization afloat, “it is difficult, we have no money, and we have to invest all this time, but we are used to difficulties, we came here with nothing, so, if we organize for our rights and dignity, that will count for something, we have nothing to lose, but all to gain” said José González, who is now the binational sub-coordinator of the entire organization.

Migration has placed indigenous people in relative new positions of power, not because the land where they arrive receives them with open arms, but because they are aware that discriminatory experiences they had endured in Mexico may be repeated in other contexts, therefore they have already developed ways of resisting discrimination by organizing and fostering solidarity bonds with other indigenous, and immigrant groups in the migratory networks. Organizing allows indigenous people to keep their cultural identities, but also to acquire other kinds of knowledge in their daily contacts with human and labor rights organizations, transnational government officers, foundations, NGO’s,
and other immigrants and actors, mobilizing that knowledge in their benefit. For example, FIOB started an indigenous language interpreter’s program by taking advantage of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, saying that everybody is entitled, in the case of being processed in a court of law, to an interpreter of his or her native language (personal communication with Rufino Domínguez, November 29, 2010). Several San Diego FIOB members are also interpreters of indigenous languages in courts and hospitals, assisting those in need with their language and multi-cultural skills. Indigenous language interpretation activities in the United States, directly contradict the assimilation cultures of both countries, because indigenous people have been able to pass on their native languages to their children, even when they do not have the support of a formal school system in either their country of origin or destination. FIOB has also an official Website since 1997, and a bulletin that was turned into a trimestral magazine named *El Tequio*, which stands for *tequio* or community work, and it is mainly produced by volunteers who donate their stories, photos and articles to the publication, which in its printed form is distributed in the migrant networks, and in its virtual form through social media and the organization’s website.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen from the example of FIOB San Diego, from positions of vulnerability, indigenous migrants have been able to question not only the homogenizing culture that has oppressed them for centuries, but also the economic and political structures that have enabled and validated that oppression by putting them in vulnerable positions, such as exploitable labor when they move to another country looking for a better life. On the migratory networks, indigenous migrants have found that their
communal work has helped them to organize and to create solidarity links with other immigrants and grassroots organizations, such as the case of FIOB San Diego collaboration with AFSC, the CRLA, and the churches in North County, or the help they offer to other members of the organization and indigenous groups who migrated to the state of Baja California to work in the agriculture industry. FIOB has also been able to use the provisions in the US law to establish their indigenous languages interpreter’s program, which provides awareness about the importance of indigenous languages in the US and Mexico. Due to all their communication and organizing practices, organizations such FIOB provide a good arena to study emergent forms of world citizenship, or the engagement with more than a single nation-state. In the case of FIOB, this cosmopolitanism comes from the grassroots, and directly questions the subtractive practices of the state.
References


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