

## **INDIGENOUS RACISM IN MEXICO: A HIDDEN REALITY**

Javier Ulloa, México

"ONE GIRL NAMED CIELO COMMENTED THAT WHEN SHE SAID HER NAME IN CLASS, HER TEACHER ASKED HER "WHEN HAD SHE EVER SEEN SUCH A BLACK SKY", BECAUSE SHE IS BROWN.

### **Translation into English**

#### Introduction

There is no more arbitrary element for arguing superiority, deserving privileges or assigning responsibilities than skin colour or racial characteristics. However, millions of people in our country, including indigenous peoples and the approximately 450,000 Afro-Mexicans, are exposed to mistreatment, marginalisation and rejection because of their physical appearance in relation to their skin colour or ethnicity. For generations, indigenous peoples have had to suffer poverty, abuse and unjustified unequal treatment, hindered from exercising their rights and ultimately from fulfilling their legitimate life projects on an equal footing with others. They are a hidden reality.

In 2020, Mexico's total population was estimated to be 127.8 million, 51.2 per cent female and 48.8 per cent male. (Conapo, 2020). Mexico is home to 68 indigenous peoples, each speaking their own native language, which are organised into 11 linguistic families and are derived from 364 dialectal variants. According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), 25.7 million people, or 21.5% of the population, self-identify as indigenous. Meanwhile, 12 million inhabitants (10.1 per cent of the population) reported living in indigenous households. Also, 6.5 per cent of the national population is registered as speaking an indigenous language, representing 7.4 million people. According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), 69.5 per cent of the indigenous population, 8.4 million people, live in poverty, and 27.9 per cent, 3.4 million people, live in extreme poverty. In addition, 43% of speakers of an indigenous language have not completed primary education, while 55.2% work in low-skilled manual jobs.

Discrimination on the grounds of race or ethnic origin, reflected in actions that deny or restrict the enjoyment of rights, is a phenomenon that in our country is rooted both in institutions, reflected for example in the obstacles to accessing health and education services, and in social practices that define unequal hiring and employment relations, to mention but a few, with the consequence of denying a diversity that is constitutive of a society such as ours. In 21st century Mexico, indigenous language speakers between the ages of 15 and 59 have the highest illiteracy rates, 13.3%. Out of every 100 women speakers of indigenous languages, only three go on to higher education. Five out of ten women have access to the labour market. Although the constitutional framework has been reformed to emphasise and prioritise the entitlement of every person to human rights, the stubborn social reality tells us that the equal guarantee and realisation of these rights is an illusion in the case of the majority of the population. The continuum between the stipulated rights and their effective development depends on discrimination.

On the other hand, it is necessary to bear in mind that diversity is, above all, a matter of the rights of individuals, communities and peoples who, although they may have a plurality of values, conceptions and life plans, are framed by principles such as those of equality and mutual respect that make peaceful and just coexistence possible. When there is exclusion from the equal exercise of rights, the social pact and the institutional structure that governs social relations are violated. This is why cultural diversity presupposes a plural, egalitarian and open form of state that includes different people with different characteristics, including, of course, racial characteristics. Immigrants from Central America, among others, very often suffer discriminatory practices in Mexico, but the most notable form of discrimination in this country is not necessarily directed at them but towards their own native peoples.

Racism exists and it is important that we highlight it. Not only because it crosses everyday life and shapes the sensibilities and social, political and economic relations of all sectors of the population, but above all because racism is a criterion that establishes the parameters of inclusion and exclusion, of privilege and oppression; it is the "social distribution of death, where it is predicted who will flourish and who will not". When we talk about racism in Mexico we are often confronted with the tension between the conceptual use of the terms racism and discrimination. Racism is a totalising and structural system, while discrimination is a specific act of differentiation related to some form of injustice. In either case, they are actions of concealment of the right to exist of those who are different. It is a system of ideas that hold that one ethnic group has been condemned by nature to be hereditarily inferior, and another group has the privilege of being hereditarily superior. Racism fuses national, ethnic, linguistic, religious and racial groups into an amalgam whose superiority and inferiority is spuriously attributed to a particular race. On the other hand, the ideology of miscegenation is present in racism against indigenous people. Mestizaje is the fruit of the racial mixture that took place during the 300 years of Spanish colonialism in Mexico and that after independence and the abolition of slavery, all those fusions of races, well identified during the colony, now become, with their own differentiations, a single race, which currently represents 80% of the total population of the country. The cosmic race of which the Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos spoke idyllically, but which is unmasked by Octavio Paz in "Labyrinth of Solitude" as a race that cannot discover its true identity. He searches for it in French or English Europe, and later in the United States, but does not find it. He denies his indigenous or black mother, because he may be anything but. She is denied, hidden, covered up, made invisible, and along with that, they are denied access to their rights and stripped of what belongs to them. Mestizaje is not only a historical moment or even an ideology, but also a living experience that crosses daily and institutional life, that shapes and organises relations in Mexico. The term racialisation, then, can be very useful in explaining the ways in which racism continues to operate in Mexico. The racialisation of people, spaces, discourses, identities, cultural practices, education, allows us to pay attention to the process that attributes despicable characteristics, which end up retributing the logic of racism.

The main problem of a plurality of cultures is the difficulty of their reciprocal recognition. The encounter between Western culture and the native cultures of Mexico was an example that showed the terrible drama that this problem can lead to. Is it possible to understand what is entirely different? What are the limits of this understanding? Mexico, like many other countries in the world, was a laboratory for answering these questions, and certainly with tragic consequences. Racism was this false but effective answer for the colonisers of yesterday as well as today.

1. Racism denies, conceals the other. That is, it translates them in terms of objects and situations known in one's own world, so that the voice of the other can only accord with the concepts and values accepted by the dominant culture. The other, in reality, is not accepted as a subject of meaning, but only as an object of a single subject.
2. Racism can afford to judge the other as equal: "All people are sons and daughters of God". The "law of nations". But what happens? Nevertheless, there are limits. The possibility of a multiple truth cannot be admitted. The indigenous person is either convinced or hidden. They are subjects of rights, but not of meaning, which is why even with their rights they continue to be objects of exploitation, and with it, the dispossession of their lands, their goods (even their cultural goods are exploited by the big brand-name companies that steal indigenous designs to make their clothes), their rights to health, education, among others.

What do we aspire to, in order to build a society free of racism and its concealment? Their recognition in their equality as well as in their diversity. Recognition in the sense that they themselves give to their world. This means starting from the acceptance that reason is not one, but plural; that truth and meaning are not discovered from a privileged point of view, but can be accessible to infinite others; that the world can be understood from different paradigms.

To break with the idea that the world has a centre and to assume that in a plural world any subject is a centre, with all its rights. The Zapatista movement woke us up in January 1994 to recognise this denied, hidden and therefore exploited world, and with the voice of "Never again a Mexico without us", it continues to challenge us and move us not to give up because the visibility of indigenous peoples translates into the elimination of all internal and external vestiges of racism.



An indigenous girl in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico. Gabriel Bouys/AFP/Getty Images

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