

## **Redeeming the 'Indian': sport and ethnicity in post-revolutionary Mexico**

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**ABSTRACT** For many historians of Latin America and others, twentieth-century Mexico offers a shining example of a country that has been able to overcome its ethnic divisions. Following a decade of brutal civil war (1910–20) the state devised a range of reforms designed to incorporate previously marginalized sectors of society. Semi-autonomous indigenous communities were singled out for particular attention as rural teachers and cultural missionaries engaged in the dual task of bringing 'civilization' to the 'Indian' and simultaneously gathering cultural remnants of 'traditional' indigenous culture for inclusion within an all-embracing new national culture. Within an environment of mutual understanding and respect, mestizo children in Mexico City, for example, would learn the dances of the Yaquis in Northern Mexico, and Yaqui children would practise the games of Mayas from the South. But what were the motives behind such measures, and how successful were they? Using sport as his focus, Brewster suggests that the political rhetoric accompanying these reforms contained an inner contradiction: the cultural diversity of Mexico's ethnic groups would be celebrated within a homogeneous national culture. He argues that there is little evidence that mainstream mestizo society ever compromised its own values in order to embrace those of its indigenous compatriots. Rather, the underlying trend was one in which indigenous communities were forced to accept an urban-based model of civilized society completely alien to their own. Moreover, Brewster argues, the frequently ostentatious public celebration of indigenous culture, whether in sport, dance or other arenas, rarely moved beyond a level of paternalistic tokenism. Behind the facade of national unity, the reality of ethnic divisions lay hidden, only to re-emerge at the end of the twentieth century to the surprise of a complacent mestizo society.

**KEYWORDS** Cosmic Race, ethnicity, identity, indigenous, mestizos, Mexico, Olympic Games, sport

**M**exico is often viewed as the Latin American country that has most successfully dealt with what the continent's political and social elite used to call the 'Indian problem'. While the country's chequered history offers more than its fair share of examples in which minority groups have suffered persecution, it is true that during the twentieth century it did not witness the scale of massacres perpetrated on indigenous communities that, for example, periodically took place in parts of Central

America.<sup>1</sup> A common explanation for Mexico's exceptional status is the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), a bitter civil war that exposed deep divisions in the society and claimed the lives of as many as 10 per cent of the nation's population. Such was the trauma of the conflict that the emergent state placed the highest importance on healing the wounds of the past. A return to civilian authority offered an opportunity to reassess the character of the Mexican nation, its people and its future. A new constitution, a raft of reforms and a fair degree of coercion were variously deployed to convince Mexicans that they all had a stake in the country's future. Within this political context, it was seen as imperative that the country's indigenous groups were brought in from the cold. No longer could they be allowed to remain a misunderstood and sometimes threatening group on the margins of mainstream mestizo society.<sup>2</sup>

At the heart of the state initiatives was an increasingly coherent, if paradoxical, cultural policy that celebrated the nation's regional and ethnic diversity while simultaneously attempting to unite and homogenize the population under a single, centrally derived, Mexican identity. This article analyses the way in which sport, and the political manipulation of sport, played a role in this hegemonic cultural project. At a national level, overt displays of gymnastic prowess took centre-stage: a symbolic affirmation of the Revolution's youthful, optimistic and, above all, peaceful future. At a micro-level, the introduction of mass sports formed part of a broader educational initiative designed to break down the insularity of the provinces, and to convert those sectors traditionally seen as 'docile' into useful members of society.

Within this context, the state appropriation of indigenous sporting practices became an integral part of the federal government's attempt to embrace the Mexican countryside. Contradictory, yet durable, stereotypes of the Mexican 'Indian' were rehearsed in the iconography and symbolism deployed by sports bodies.<sup>3</sup> But the ostensive inclusion of the Indian was arguably designed more to quiet the frayed nerves of a traumatized mestizo population than to realize the full potential of its indigenous compatriots. In offering indigenous athletes a public platform, the government sought to

1 Any general history of twentieth-century Central America will provide accounts of such massacres. One of the most notorious incidents, however, was the violence committed against indigenous groups in El Salvador between 1931–2; see Thomas. P. Anderson, *Matanza: El Salvador's Communist Revolt of 1932* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1971); Roque Dalton, *Miguel Marmol* (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press 1987). For a provocative thesis as to why indigenous groups in Central America have suffered such violence, see R. Adams, 'The conquest tradition in Mesoamerica', *The Americas*, vol. 46, 1989, 119–36.

2 Mestizos: Mexicans of a mixed Spanish and indigenous ancestry.

3 Despite being, to some degree, a pejorative, the term 'Indian' is commonly used by historians of Latin America to refer to indigenous groups generally, and appears henceforth in this paper without quotation marks.

provide tangible evidence that the uncontrolled emotions of the revolutionary Indian had been tamed and put to the nation's use. Rather than leading to a successful cultural pluralism, post-revolutionary reforms led to a situation in which ethnic traditions were faced with one of two possible outcomes: either a process of incorporation leading to folklorism, or continued marginalization characterized by misunderstanding and prejudice on the part of mainstream mestizo society.

### **Social exclusion and the 'Indian problem'**

Before analysing the ways in which Mexican authorities tried to resolve the 'Indian problem', it might be useful to clarify the background to this issue. Its origins date back to the European 'discovery' and subsequent conquest of the Americas beginning in the late fifteenth century. Military defeat and disease decimated the indigenous populations of the continent and undermined previous social structures. Survivors were rendered powerless to resist colonial claims on their bodies and souls as Spaniards moved Indians into new settlements, which made it easier to exact demands of tribute and convert them to the Catholic faith. While miscegenation inexorably eroded such isolation, this early decision to place Indians beyond mainstream colonial society has left a legacy that persists to the present day. While colonial theologians and intellectuals debated the inherent capabilities of the Indian, the underlying paternalism that characterized the Spanish authorities' relationship with indigenous communities did much to cement their subordinate and marginalized position.

Enlightenment and the subsequent struggle for independence offered nineteenth-century Latin Americans an opportunity to reassess ethnic relations. While the nascent Latin American republics spoke boldly of equal citizenship and equal rights, in many instances indigenous communities were in too weak a position to claim such parity. Former colonial protection of community lands was viewed as a barrier to modernization and was swept aside in favour of individual ownership and entrepreneurial endeavour. Conflict over communal land became a common occurrence throughout the Latin American countryside, but the imperative for progress and order almost invariably placed the Indian in a disadvantaged position. Increasing numbers left communities that no longer offered them legal protection, and sought employment and opportunities in the cities. Lacking social support structures, Indians occupied a marginal position within the cityscape, scratching out an existence as best they could. The attitudes of the cosmopolitan members of the socio-political elite were heavily influenced by the squalor in which the urban-dwelling Indians in their midst lived.

In many ways, Mexico's ethnic relations were no different from those elsewhere in Latin America. During the many violent factional disputes that characterized the first half of the nineteenth century, political discourse

regarding Indians was limited to the claims that rival factions of the dominant mestizo society made upon their loyalty. While their fighting prowess offered Indians certain opportunities in times of warfare, any concessions obtained were almost invariably forgotten when peace returned: the Indian remained on the margins of respectable society.<sup>4</sup> Such was the case under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1911) as the country emerged from decades of bitter civil war to embark on a prolonged period of economic and technological development. For a political elite persuaded by Social Darwinism, the assumed deficiencies of Mexican Indians justified their continued exploitation. Within the provinces, rail routes, irrigation schemes and growing demands for natural resources all placed pressure on remaining Indian community land. For Indians such as the Yaquis of Sonora, who violently resisted the march of progress, Díaz had one response: repression and mass deportation to distant regions of the country.<sup>5</sup> Within the cities, elite society viewed the Indian as a blemish in the national complexion that was best covered up. The ‘pigmentocracy’ of colonial times lingered as throughout Mexico ‘... upper class women used a “quarter of an inch of powder” to whiten their appearances. Porfirian high society considered the white race more beautiful than that of the natives, who were regarded by some as “ugly shrimps”’.<sup>6</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that all members of the political elite viewed the ‘Indian problem’ as being one of racial inferiority. A significant element within the intelligentsia doubted whether policies of annihilation or marginalization would resolve the fundamental challenge posed by the Indians in their midst. Rather than denying their indigenous origins, these positivists argued that Indian traits were valuable ingredients for Mexican identity. Demonstrating an unshakeable faith in the redeeming qualities of education, Justo Sierra claimed that the classroom would act as the vehicle by which a

4 There is a growing body of work reflecting on the significance of indigenous participation in military campaigns in Mexico during the nineteenth century. The following offer merely a sample of these studies that come to diverse conclusions: Eric Van Young, ‘The raw and the cooked: elite and popular ideology in Mexico, 1800–1821’, in A. Ouweneel and S. Miller (eds), *The Indian Community of Colonial Mexico* (Amsterdam: CEDLA 1990), 295–321; Florencia Mallon, *Peasant and Nation: The Making of Postcolonial Mexico and Peru* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1990); Guy P. C. Thomson with David LaFrance, *Patriotism, Politics, and Popular Liberalism in Nineteenth-century Mexico* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources 1999); Peter Guardino, *Peasants, Politics, and the Formation of Mexico’s National State: Guerrero 1800–1857* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 1996).

5 See E. Hu-DeHart, *Yaqui Resistance and Survival* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1984).

6 T. G. Powell, ‘Mexican intellectuals and the Indian question, 1876–1911’, *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 48, 1968, 19–36. See also William D. Raat, ‘Ideas and society in Don Porfirio’s Mexico’, *The Americas*, vol. 30, 1973, 32–53; Martin S. Stabb, ‘Indigenism and racism in Mexican thought, 1857–1911’, *Journal of Inter-American Studies*, vol. 1, 1959, 405–23.

new nation would be created from its diverse ethnic components. Public education would 'break the isolation of rural people by use of the school as an agent of national culture. Mexico's future depended upon an amalgamation of the heterogeneous native tribes into a homogeneous national culture.'<sup>7</sup> Recognizing the degree of alienation between Indian communities and mainstream mestizo society, Sierra counselled an approach that would identify redeeming features in the Mexican Indian. The pre-Columbian era, a Golden Age of indigenous cultures that preceded the corrupting influence of colonial rule, offered hope for the future. As David Brading points out, the archaeologist Manuel Gamio shared these views, and sought to analyse and reform present-day Indians by studying their past. Gamio passionately believed that the evidence of high culture unearthed at pre-Columbian sites such as Teotihuacán pointed to the possibility of a better future for contemporary Indians. Gamio agreed with Sierra that Indian 'backwardness should be attributed to their poor diet, their lack of education, their material poverty, and their isolation from the stimulus of national life'.<sup>8</sup> When exposed to the fruits of mestizo civilization, the potential of the Indian would be realized and used to enrich the national character.

The obstacle that people like Sierra and Gamio confronted, however, was that a majority of the Mexican elite failed to see a connection between the 'degenerate' Indian in their midst and the 'noble' Indian of pre-Columbian times. The metropolitan elites might celebrate the nation's proud Aztec origins and unveil statues of Aztec warriors, yet they were equally as likely simultaneously to solicit city authorities to remove unsightly Indians from their streets. While Manuel Gamio's archaeological excavations added greatly to an understanding of Mexico's antecedents, they arguably fostered a process better viewed as cultural appropriation than as hybridization.<sup>9</sup> The Mexican elite claimed the pre-Columbian heritage as their own, stripping it of 'unsavoury' aspects and converting it into an academic curiosity. It would take the violence of the Mexican Revolution to shake cosmopolitan Mexico out of its complacency. When peasant troops marched through the streets of

7 John A. Britton, 'Indian education, nationalism, and federalism in Mexico, 1920–1921', *The Americas*, vol. 32, no. 3, 1976, 447.

8 David Brading, 'Manuel Gamio and official indigenismo', *Bulletin of Latin American Studies*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1988, 75–89. For a thoughtful essay on the links between a Golden Age and nationalism, see Anthony Smith, 'The "golden age" and national renewal', in Geoffrey Hosking and George Schöpflin (eds), *Myths and Nationhood* (London: Hurst and Co. 1997), 36–59.

9 For an interesting study of the links between archaeology and nationalism, see Margarita Díaz-Andreu, 'Nacionalismo y arqueología: del Viejo al Nuevo Mundo', *Arqueología. Revista de la Coordinación Nacional de Arqueología del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia de México*, vol. 20, 1998, 115–38. See also Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, *Mexico at the World Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), 181–240; Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, '1910 Mexico City: space and nation in the city of the centenario', in William H. Beezley and David E. Lorey (eds), *Viva México! Viva la Independencia!: Celebrations of September 16* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources 2001), 179–80.

Mexico City in 1914, urban sensibilities were shocked to the core. Their dark skins and rustic ways exposed huge chasms within Mexican society and forced a re-examination of those the mainstream always viewed as socially inferior. No longer the docile, apolitical Indians, they now showed determination, menace and power. The Revolution delivered a salutary message: when the dust settled, steps needed to be taken to ensure that never again would the physical potential of the Indian pose a threat.

If the trauma of civil war had exposed nothing more than a tension between ethnic groups, the Revolution may not have had such profound consequences. After all, colonial and republican societies had emerged seemingly unscathed following periodic displays of bellicosity from fractious Indians. The fact was that, during the Revolution, issues of class and ethnicity were difficult to separate. It is clear that the poorer sectors of rural Mexico kept the violence going, and that indigenous communities comprised the poorest within this group. This did not mean, however, that all Indians took up arms or that their motives for doing so followed a universal pattern. One reason why the Revolution took so long to resolve was that it lacked any well-defined direction. Revolutionary violence was deeply divisive, causing fractures between regions, communities and families. Allegiances rarely fell into neat categories: Indians were recruited to fight troops containing other Indians; peasants were frequently led by their social superiors into conflicts against fellow peasants.<sup>10</sup> Loyalties were often swayed more by charismatic leadership than by ideology; local objectives took precedence over national aims. Such divisions did not suddenly evaporate when the victorious revolutionary faction moved to assume central political authority in 1920. Bitter resentment and factional rivalries posed a constant threat to the federal government's tentative hold on political authority. Pragmatism, corruption, coercion and piecemeal reforms helped to buy the loyalty or acquiescence of former warring factions, but federal reformers believed that more fundamental initiatives were needed to vanquish forever the social tensions that had ignited so violently during the 1910s. A process of national incorporation began in which social, ethnic and regional differences were to be defused and converted into a cause of national celebration and cohesion. It is this initiative that would later earn

10 For examples of indigenous mobilization, see Keith Brewster, *Militarism, Ethnicity and Politics in the Sierra de Puebla (1917–1930)* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2003); Keith Brewster, 'Militarism and ethnicity in the Sierra de Puebla, Mexico', *The Americas*, vol. 56, no. 2, 1999, 253–75; P. Friedrich, *Agrarian Revolt in a Mexican Village* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall 1970); F. J. Schryer, *Ethnicity and Class Conflict in Rural Mexico* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1990); H. Campbell, *Zapotec Renaissance: Ethnic Politics and Cultural Revivalism in Southern Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press 1994); J. W. Rubin, *Decentering the Regime: Ethnicity, Radicalism, and Democracy in Juchitán, Mexico* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press 1997).

Mexico's post-revolutionary governments plaudits for their treatment of indigenous groups.

### **Cultural politics and the reinvention of Mexican identity**

The main priorities for post-revolutionary governments during the 1920s were to pacify the country, to heal the deep wounds of civil war and to convince Mexicans that the cessation of hostilities marked the beginning of a bright new future. Two major obstacles needed to be overcome to realize these aims: the lingering factionalism that persuaded veterans to swear allegiance to local rather than national leaders; and the underlying antagonisms that lay within society, particularly between ethnic groups. In both cases, cultural politics was to play a significant role.

Resolution of the problem of political factionalism stimulated a rewriting of national history. Rather than viewing the Revolution as a civil war, it was increasingly portrayed as a traumatic event from which all true Mexicans emerged victorious. A centrally conceived tradition of the Revolution was constructed in which the bitter factionalism of the conflict was explained as the misdirected frustrations of a longer, more common struggle against exploitation.<sup>11</sup> A process of reification took place in which *La Revolución* became, in itself, an object of public celebration. Through public ritual and propaganda, factional revolutionary leaders were converted into the figures of official cults, and emphasis was placed on an association between these dead heroes of the Revolution and the government that their endeavours were purported to have produced.<sup>12</sup> Perceiving the hierarchy of the Catholic Church to be an enemy of the Revolution, the state moved to replace holy days and religious icons with new public holidays and statues of national heroes, the secular shrines of post-revolutionary society. The Monument to the Revolution became a focal point for the many thousands of Mexicans who marched through the capital's streets on 20 November each year to commemorate the day in 1910 when the call to arms was first heard.<sup>13</sup>

11 Ilene O'Malley, *The Myth of the Revolution: Hero Cults and the Institutionalization of the Mexican State, 1920-40* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1986). See also Samuel Brunk, 'Remembering Emiliano Zapata: three moments in the posthumous career of the martyr of Chinameca', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 78, no. 3, 1998, 457-90; Alan Knight, 'Popular culture and the revolutionary state in Mexico, 1910-1940', *Hispanic American Historical Review*, vol. 74, no. 3, 1994, 393-444; JoAnn Martin, 'Contesting authenticity: battles over the representation of history in Morelos, Mexico', *Ethnohistory*, vol. 40, no. 3, summer 1993, 439-63; David E. Lorey, 'The revolutionary festival in Mexico: November 20 celebrations in the 1920s and 1930s', *The Americas*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1997, 39-82; Thomas Benjamin, *La Revolución: Mexico's Great Revolution as Memory, Myth and History* (Austin: University of Texas Press 2000).

12 O'Malley, 127.

13 Benjamin, 133-6.

The question of ethnic divisions in the post-revolutionary era reinvigorated the much more longstanding debate concerning what it means to be a Mexican. Past misunderstandings between ethnic groups were explained as relics of the discredited colonial period. In the future, the Mexican nation would acknowledge and draw strength from its composite parts. In many ways, this approach addressed Manuel Gamio's romantic notion as laid out in his 1917 publication *Forjando Patria*. Published in the midst of violence, it called on revolutionary factions to forge a new *patria* 'from Hispanic iron and Indian bronze'.<sup>14</sup> In 1925 the outgoing education minister, José Vasconcelos, developed the idea: 'a mixture of races accomplished according to the laws of social well-being, sympathy, and beauty, will lead to the creation of a type infinitely superior to all that have previously existed.' The mestizos would become the so-called 'Cosmic Race', fortified by the attributes that both indigenous and European cultures could bring.<sup>15</sup> It was not until the violence had subsided, however, that the post-revolutionary government began to inculcate such sentiments within an official indigenist programme. This policy was characterized by state paternalism; it was welfare-orientated, seeking to bring education, health provision and 'civilization' to isolated Indian communities with the ultimate aim of cultural assimilation.<sup>16</sup> Mexico's indigenous people ceased to be seen as 'little Indians', and suddenly became 'compatriots', 'brothers', 'the rural proletariat'.<sup>17</sup> With patience and perseverance, the Indian would become a thing of the past, every bit as historic as the statues of Aztec leaders that adorned the streets of Mexico City.

Much of the responsibility for diffusing these cultural initiatives fell to the education ministry, the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP). As Josefina Zoraida Vázquez points out, education became 'an instrument that the government... used to model the collective conscience of a country and form a sense of loyalty towards the nation state'.<sup>18</sup> Policymakers believed that the long-term success of the Revolution depended on making future generations aware of their rights and responsibilities, and persuading them that their destiny lay in allegiance to *la patria*. Importantly, the revolutionary potential of the countryside convinced the federal government of the need to reach out to the peasantry. Mary Kay Vaughan suggests that, in the 1920s, the federal rural school was asked 'to discipline and channel the energies of

14 Quoted in Brading, 82.

15 José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La raza cosmica*, trans. from the Spanish by Didier T. Jaén (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997), 31.

16 Julio C. Tresierra, 'Mexico: indigenous peoples and the nation-state', in Donna Lee Van Court (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples and Democracy in Latin America* (London: Macmillan 1994), 190.

17 For examples of such rhetoric, see Brewster, *Militarism*, 157–8.

18 Josefina Zoraida Vázquez, *Nacionalismo y educación en México* (Mexico: Colegio de México 1970), 21, trans. and quoted in Benjamin Smith, 'The Myth of Zapata: Construction and Contestation', M.Phil. dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2002.

the rebellious peasants'.<sup>19</sup> Many of these 'rebellious peasants', of course, were to be found in indigenous communities. As such, a vital prerequisite to the inclusion of Indians in the new Mexico was their acquiescence to the norms of 'civilized' society. Under the auspices of the SEP, specific departments were established to address the 'Indian problem'. In 1921 the Department of Education and Culture for the Indigenous Race was established, and was followed four years later by the Department of Rural Schools for the Incorporation of the Indigenous Culture.<sup>20</sup> Rural teachers and cultural brigades were sent out into the countryside 'to harness and defuse the unbridled passions of the Indian' and make the indigenous population worthy of its new-found status.<sup>21</sup> Within the tight embrace of patriotism, the Indians were taught to read, speak and write in Spanish, to respect the flag, to cherish the nation and to wash their hands and brush their teeth. Urban civility began to penetrate the furthest reaches of the republic and erode the insularity that social reformers believed had held back the development of the semi-autonomous Mexican Indian.

Arguably, a more important motive for resolving the 'Indian problem' was to complement the state's efforts to convince mainstream mestizo society that the Indian was worthy of full and equal citizenship. If such notions as the Cosmic Race were to have any validity at all, mestizo society needed to acknowledge and accommodate the rich legacy of indigenous cultures. The results of this post-revolutionary experiment are questionable, however, as there is scant evidence that such an accommodation ever took place. Rural teachers and cultural missionaries did gather surviving remnants of those indigenous civilizations that had fought so valiantly to defend Mexican soil against Spanish conquest, and the evidence filled glass cabinets in museums and provided material for history textbooks. Yet these objects of indigenous cultures were every bit as inanimate as the stone statues or pyramids of Teotihuacán. What post-revolutionary society portrayed was a vision of indigenous culture that called for the minimum of compromise: representations of a glorious indigenous past that could easily be incorporated into Mexican culture without fear of rejection. This produced a facade of ethnic tolerance, with the indigenous contribution to the Cosmic Race being relegated to the historic, folkloric and ceremonial. In this 'cosmic race', it was the Indian who was forced to do all the running, in a headlong dash towards assimilation.

While this process revealed itself in many different arenas, one of the most interesting was that of physical culture. The physical potential of the Indian had long been recognized, as witnessed by periodic attempts to recruit

19 Mary Kay Vaughan, *Cultural Politics in Revolution: Teachers, Peasants, and Schools in Mexico, 1930-40* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press 1997), 4.

20 Tresierra, 194.

21 Ramón E. Ruíz, *Mexico: The Challenges of Poverty and Literacy* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library 1963), 26-7.

indigenous soldiers to fight domestic or foreign foes. Yet mestizos trod a fine line between harnessing this potential for their own purposes and creating a military force that might turn against them. During the nineteenth century, several regions experienced the latter, although a cry of 'caste war' was usually sufficient for rival mestizo factions to unite in protection of their 'race'.<sup>22</sup> The vital difference during the Revolution was that the spectre of armed Indians having a degree of autonomy was not simply witnessed in the outlying regions of the republic, but was seen in the heart of the nation's capital. The federal government's subsequent promotion of sport and physical education, therefore, reflected a deep concern that such aggression needed to be defused and channelled into non-threatening forms that all Mexicans could accept. Like the ceramics that filled museum shelves, indigenous physical expressions were placed on public display as curious, non-threatening remnants of a bygone age. An analysis of the Mexican authorities' promotion of sport shows that national celebrations of indigenous physical skills rarely extended beyond the ceremonial and never truly became an integral part of Mexican sporting life.

### **The ring-fencing of cultural plurality**

Prior to the Revolution, enthusiasm for sports in Mexico was confined to a small elite and upper-middle class that had the time and money to pursue them. As in most other cultural fields, it took its lead from the 'developed' world, with activities such as golf, polo, horse-racing, cycling, rowing and ballooning all becoming popular activities.<sup>23</sup> The attitude towards sport changed dramatically in the years following the Revolution, as the federal government began to invest physical exercise with symbolic and practical value. Reflecting a broader imperative to demilitarize the countryside and move towards peaceful coexistence, federal authorities chose not to make military parades the centrepiece of the nation's annual celebration of the Revolution. Rather than soldiers, legions of athletes (or civil servants dressed as athletes) filed through Mexico City's streets. In 1941 the sporting content of Revolution Day celebrations became more formalized, with the events climaxing in a sports competition in which the nation's youths displayed their physical prowess while simultaneously affirming their

22 See, for example, Jan Rus, 'Whose caste war? Indians, Ladinos, and the Chiapas "caste war" of 1869', in Murdo J. MacLeod and Robert Wasserstrom (eds), *Spaniards and Indians in Southeastern Mesoamerica* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1983), 127–68.

23 William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club and Other Episodes in Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1987), 15–52; Ethel Tweedie, *Mexico As I Saw It* (London: Nelson [1911]), 156–73.

allegiance to the post-revolutionary order.<sup>24</sup> Sport became a metaphor for the country's vitality and potential, as youthful vigour became synonymous with an optimistic, secular and healthy future. In line with revolutionary rhetoric, great efforts were made to increase access to the benefits of regular participation in sport. Politicians began to see sports such as baseball and basketball as a panacea for the political, religious, social and ethnic divisions that still beset the nation.<sup>25</sup> The increasing popularity of soccer was indicative of government efforts to promote mass participatory sports at the expense of traditional pastimes, such as cockfighting, that were associated with gambling and drunkenness.<sup>26</sup>

The SEP's initiatives to promote sport reflected the broader project of creating a new Mexican character. Through regular instruction, physical exercise could help eradicate the degeneracy of society and contribute to the vital task of 'improving the racial stock' so that Mexico might fulfil its destiny.<sup>27</sup> During the 1920s rural teachers incorporated gymnastics, and movement and dance exercises into the curriculum. As one teacher in the Sierra de Puebla wrote in his guide to federal educational programmes in 1928, the government's campaign to promote physical exercise was vital

24 Lorey; Benjamin. Various other attempts had been made to introduce an athletics competition into the proceedings during the 1930s, but it was not until 1941 that it became institutionalized.

25 Mexico was not alone in this. Fuelled by concerns over mass immigration, similar developments took place in the United States; see Steven W. Pope, *Patriotic Games: Sporting Traditions in the American Imagination 1876-1926* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 1997). Post-revolutionary governments were also concerned with their international image and, in particular, wished to normalize relations with the United States. To this end, the staging of and regular participation in international sporting events played an important role. For an analysis of Mexico's participation in the Central American Games, see Richard McGehee, 'The origins of Olympism in Mexico: the Central American Games of 1926', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1993.

26 Joseph L. Arbena, 'Sport, development and Mexican nationalism, 1920-1970', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 18, no. 3, 1991, 350-63. Although English migrants (predominantly Cornish miners) had brought soccer to Mexico in the late nineteenth century, it was not until the 1920s that it began to attract a wider following. Teams with such names as the Mexican Country Club and the British Club graphically portray the nationality of those who competed for the Mexican national championship in its early years; see Carlos F. Ramírez, *Cual es la historia, al día, del Fútbol Mexicano, 1902-1960* (Mexico City: Editorial Navaro 1960), 11; Claudia Palma Rubín de Celis, *El mundo del fútbol: su impacto social, político, y comercial* (Bogota: Tm. Edits 1994), 41.

27 Between 1929 and 1945, over 100 articles appeared in Mexico City newspapers emphasizing the importance of sport in the development of the Mexican nation and its people. For examples of such rhetoric, see: 'El deporte y la Revolución', *El Nacional*, 4 November 1935, 8; David Ayala, 'Los deportes deben ser estimulados en beneficio popular', *El Nacional*, 3 January 1936, 4d; 'Una juventud disciplinada y fuerte es la base para tener ejército eficiente', *Excelsior*, 18 November 1940; Antonio Zozaya, 'Educación física', *Excelsior*, 23 November 1940.

to promote and establish the physical development of our race as the basis of intellectual and moral education; to create strong, healthy and vigorous individuals who can contribute efficiently to the defence of the nation; and to cultivate truly aesthetic ideals that reflect the beauty and balance of the human body.<sup>28</sup>

In October 1932 the federal government announced the establishment of the National Sports Confederation, a move that teachers welcomed as helping 'to accomplish the highest duty the Constitution asks of our youths; that of receiving a standard of civic and military training that will enable them to defend the sovereignty and integrity of our homeland'.<sup>29</sup> In 1935 Senator David Ayala sought to push the agenda still further. He noted the widespread enthusiasm for sports among the advanced countries of Europe and drew direct links between sport and national development. For him, sport created a people who were stronger in body and mind, and who practised habits of punctuality, hygiene, co-operation, honour and discipline. By creating a centralized ministry of sport, he argued, the government would produce athletes who could bring honour to the nation and, more importantly, help to combat the religious fanaticism and alcoholism that 'atrophy the peasant's spirit and poison his body'.<sup>30</sup> Through sport, Mexicans could be taught to feel proud of themselves, their nation and of a political order that had emerged to uphold the ideals of the glorious Mexican Revolution.

While none of the initiatives outlined above were specifically targeted at indigenous communities, the fact that many of them were conveyed to the Mexican countryside inevitably strengthened the state's project of cultural homogenization. Particularly in the 1930s the federal government recruited the assumed physical prowess of pre-Columbian civilizations for the national cause. In 1935, for example, the SEP launched a national campaign 'to revive enthusiasm in sports and games practised by indigenous tribes of the past' and to use them as the basis of a 'new form of national physical education'.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps in response to some disquiet concerning the importation of games from the United States, one newspaper article suggested that an indigenous game practised in the northern states of Chihuahua and Sonora was the most likely precursor of baseball, and that its introduction into schools would prove 'very useful in the development of our children'.<sup>32</sup> The SEP's

28 Baudelio Candanedo, *Programas Detallados* (1928), 29. This and all subsequent translations from the Spanish are by the author unless otherwise noted.

29 'Un organismo con autonomía', *El Nacional*, 9 October 1932, 8. Although this article refers to the body as the 'National Athletics Confederation', it seems clear that it was the National Sports Confederation.

30 Memorandum, September 1935: Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City (hereafter AGN), Lázaro Cárdenas 532.2/1.

31 'Deportes y juegos indígenas', *El Nacional*, 7 February 1935, 8.

32 *Ibid.*

bi-monthly magazine for teachers, *El maestro rural* (The Rural Teacher), included details of indigenous regional dances and games with the aim of disseminating them through the extensive network of federal rural schools.<sup>33</sup> As a result, the post-revolutionary generation would grow up with an appreciation of the rich diversity of its origins. In fact, there is little evidence that indigenous sports ever achieved the central position in the national curriculum predicted by the state-controlled press. Peasant communities did begin to embrace new sports but, judging by their petitions, most seemed to seek federal support to appropriate land for baseball grounds and basketball courts.<sup>34</sup> The 'nationalizing' of indigenous pastimes did have one broader effect, however, and that was to erode the cultural attributes that distinguished individual ethnic communities from mestizo or other indigenous groups.

An example of how such policies invaded Mexican political culture can be seen in 1941 when the Revolution Day sports competition was officially adopted. Under the auspices of the newly created Departamento Autónomo de Asuntos Indígenas (Autonomous Department of Indigenous Affairs), the athletics competition included folkloric dances and a display of sports practised by indigenous groups from all over the republic. Indigenous forms of archery and javelin-throwing were offered, as well as blow-pipe competitions from the southern state of Oaxaca, *tampuche*, a tennis-like game from the northern state of Nayarit, and the famous ball games of the Mayan Indians that were recreated by players wearing costumes typical of pre-Columbian times.<sup>35</sup> Even more poignant, perhaps, was that in early November two athletes set out from opposite ends of the republic, each carrying a so-called 'Symbolic Flame of the Revolution'. The first team of runners with the southern torch comprised twenty-five Mayan Indians who crossed the south-eastern state of Yucatán before handing over to their counterparts in the neighbouring state of Campeche. The northern torch was entrusted to Yaqui runners who took it through their territory before passing it to mestizo athletes. President Avila Camacho was moved sufficiently to

33 Such details appear in many editions, but for a typical example, see *El maestro rural*, vol. 1, no. 1, March 1932, 14–16, which gives movements and lyrics for a dance called 'Matlachines', practised by indigenous groups since early colonial times and recovered by cultural 'missionaries' from the SEP.

34 See, for example: letter from the Comité Agrario of Atexas, Hidalgo, to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 11 September 1936: AGN, Lázaro Cárdenas, 532.2/35; letter from the director of the elementary school in Amanalco de Becerra to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 19 September 1936: AGN, Lázaro Cárdenas, 532.2/36; letter from residents of Acambay to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 15 March 1937: AGN, Lázaro Cárdenas, 532.2/47; letter from residents of San Buenavista, Toluca, to President Lázaro Cárdenas, 25 March 1938: AGN, Lázaro Cárdenas, 532.2/65.

35 Presidential announcement of first 'Juegos nacionales de la Revolución', 7 July 1941: AGN, Manuel Avila Camacho, 532/29; 'Como se haran los Juegos deportivos de la Revolución', *El Nacional*, 12 August 1941, 4d.

comment that 'the feat of the indigenous runners is testimony to the exemplary resistance of a race that has suffered the most cruel oppression, and offers much promise for the kind of future that all Mexicans desire'.<sup>36</sup> As the flame passed through each town on its way to Mexico City, local authorities sent telegrams to the president expressing their community's loyalty to and enthusiasm for the Revolution Day commemorations. It was a symbolic reaffirmation of a revolution that had drawn regions, classes and ethnic groups into a common national enterprise.<sup>37</sup>

A similar message can be found in the links made between sport and indigenous iconography. In 1948, for example, an image of a vigorous Aztec warrior was chosen to represent patriotism and physical endeavour. The warrior was depicted holding in his hands the presidential declaration of support for the National Sports Confederation in which President Miguel Alemán reminded Mexican youths that sport could provide the sense of discipline and solidarity necessary for facing their future responsibilities.<sup>38</sup> The Aztec warrior symbol was again recruited for patriotic duty in 1955 when, to mark the third year of Adolfo Ruíz Cortines's presidency, the National Confederation of Popular and Revolutionary Youth Organizations organized a marathon through the streets of Mexico City. The circular emblem of the organization was divided into two halves: on the left, the red, green and white of the national flag, each colour bearing a letter of the governing party, the Partido Institucional Revolucionario; on the right, the face of a proud, resolute Aztec warrior, seemingly content to represent such a patriotic institution.<sup>39</sup> But perhaps the most significant example of the official appropriation of indigenous culture occurred in 1968 as Mexico City prepared to host the Olympic Games. Politicians saw it as a matter of national honour that the Games should be an unprecedented success, viewing them as a chance to dispel forever 'the picture of an Indian sleeping his eternal siesta and the depiction of a country plagued by revolutions'.<sup>40</sup> The Mexican organizing committee used the event to link the country's rich cultural heritage to a new image of dynamism and modernity. The president

36 'De la periferia al centro', *La Prensa*, 7 November 1941, 11. The President did not specify whether he was referring to the centuries of oppression under Spanish colonial rule, or to the more recent repression of Yaquis and Mayans under the *Porfiriato*.

37 Memorandum, n.d.: AGN, Manuel Avila Camacho, 532/29; 'De la periferia al centro'. See also 'Como se haran los Juegos'; 'Cooperación para de los Juegos de la Revolución', *El Universal*, 5 September 1941, 4d; *Excelsior*, 22 November 1941, 12.

38 Poster, June 1948: AGN, Miguel Alemán, 532.2/4. These responsibilities may well have included the duty to defend *la patria* through national service: conscription had been introduced during the Second World War.

39 Memorandum, 4 December 1955: AGN, Adolfo Ruíz Cortines, 532/58.

40 See letter from Manuel Velazquez to Beatriz Trueblood, 10 November 1967: AGN, Comité Organizador de los Juegos Olímpicos (COJO), caja 403, 154; see also the speech given by Roberto Casellas to the British Mexican Society, London, 14 May 1968.

of the committee, Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, decided that the emblem of the Mexico Games needed to portray this combination of past and present. The artistic designs distinctive of the Huichol ethnic tribe were singled out for particular attention. These stark black-and-white patterns linked up directly with the Op Art movement sweeping across the western world during the late 1960s. Their concentric lines were adopted by the committee and became the internationally recognized logo of 'Mexico 68': a visual portrait of the country's successful integration of its ethnic past and its modern future.<sup>41</sup>

More than for any previous Olympic Games, the organizing committee determined that the Mexican Olympiad should include a year-long series of events in which participating countries would display their cultural traditions. A central theme running through much of Mexico's cultural contribution was the revival of the myth of a Golden Age. For a Mexican elite, long brought up on a diet of the classics, a rather tenuous link between the ancient Greeks and the Aztecs presented an opportunity that was too good to miss. Poems, odes and newspaper articles made knowing references to the Hellenic spirits of the past being revived among the temples of the Aztec gods.<sup>42</sup> The recent opening of Mexico City's National Museum of Anthropology was acknowledged in the first series of Olympic commemorative stamps: they depicted pre-Columbian ceramic figures chosen by experts at the museum, each engaged in a sporting activity. The second series reflected designs that the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera had chosen to decorate the walls of the Olympic stadium when it was built in the early 1950s. The way that the figures on the stamps were formed and framed bore more than a passing resemblance to those of the classical Greek era.<sup>43</sup> Naturally, Mexico's archaeological sites featured heavily in the Games' promotional literature, while the host nation's contribution to the World Folkloric Festival included students performing a familiar selection from the national repertoire of songs and dances of the country's indigenous groups.<sup>44</sup>

41 Author's interview with Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, Mexico City, 24 April 2001; see also Sergio Rivera Conde, 'El diseño en la XIX Olimpiada: entrevista al Arq. Pedro Ramírez Vázquez', *Creación y cultura*, vol. 1, no. 1, June–August 1999, 13–38.

42 For examples in newspapers see: 'Foro de Excelsior', *Excelsior*, 22 December 1966, and 'Principio unificador', *Excelsior*, 25 February 1968. See also President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz's inaugural speech to the Assembly of the International Olympic Committee, printed in *El sol de México*, 8 October 1968, and Eusabio Castro, 'Olimpica 68', in Olga A. Martínez (ed.), *Olympiad 68* (Chicago: Illinois State University Press 1971), a poem written in Pindaric odes that compares the Greek and Aztec cultures.

43 See *Carta Olímpica 14: Timbres postales preolímpicos*: AGN, COJO, Mexico City.

44 'El festival mundial de folklore vestirá inusitado esplendor', *Novedades*, 16 June 1968, 4d. For a good overview of the range of socio-political issues raised by Mexico City's hosting of the Olympic Games, see Joseph L. Arbena, 'Hosting the Summer Olympic Games: Mexico City, 1968', in Joseph Arbena and David LaFrance (eds), *Sport in Latin America and the Caribbean* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources 2002).

While such displays of ethnic appreciation would appear to underline the post-revolutionary regime's efforts to embrace indigenous groups, my contention is they went hardly any further than the grandiose ceremonies to unveil statues to Aztec warriors that took place during the late nineteenth century. Throughout Mexico's post-revolutionary history, what the establishment chose to celebrate was an image of a noble Indian warrior frozen in time. While Mexico's revolutionary constitution of 1917 explicitly declared the right of indigenous peoples to preserve their cultures, the reality reflects official policies designed to bring about their assimilation into mainstream mestizo society. The confusion of messages emanating from the centre has produced a view of indigenous groups that is full of ambiguity. Consider the remarks of Dr Josué Sáenz, president of the Comité Olímpico Mexicano in 1967:

In Mexico we have our ethnic myths, including notions that Tarahumaras run faster and with less exertion than any other race, that Chamulans have the strongest legs in the world . . . and that Yucatecans have the strongest necks in the world because they have to support such large heads. But the reality is that we are not a strong race. This is neither due to genetic factors nor some form of biological inferiority, but as a result of centuries of poor health, poor nutrition and a lack of infrastructure that have impeded the development of sport.<sup>45</sup>

Sáenz's quote is revealing in several respects. First, he relegates the notion that Mexico's ethnic groups possessed exceptional physical attributes to the status of 'myth'. This ignores the fact that the Tarahumaras had consistently been singled out for their extraordinary stamina in long-distance running.<sup>46</sup> Second, in recounting the 'myths' he reveals the latent racism running through mestizo society to explain such physical attributes. Third, in using the collective personal pronoun to suggest that 'we' Mexicans 'are not a strong race', he participates in the official rhetoric about all Mexicans bearing the consequences of colonial deprivation, something that even the most cursory studies of colonial society repudiate. Having defended his patriotic credentials, by listing poor health and nutrition as reasons for the weakness of the Mexican race, he subtly distinguishes himself and the social elite from

45 'Comité Olímpico Mexicano: informe a la asamblea', speech by Dr Josué Sáenz to the General Assembly of the Comité Olímpico Mexicano, 18 December 1967: AGN, COJO, caja 401 Comité Olímpico Mexicano.

46 Carl Lumholtz, *Unknown Mexico*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan 1903), i.290–94, 431. Foreigners recognized the exceptional capacity of Tarahumara and Tepehuane runners as early as the 1890s when the findings of explorations conducted by Carl Lumholtz were published. More recently, Tarahumara runners gained first, second and third places in the 1993 Leadville 100 (a 100-mile race in Colorado that is recognized as one of the toughest in the world); see also W. Dirk Raat and George R. Janecek, *Mexico's Sierra Tarahumara: A Photohistory of the People of the Edge* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press 1996), 62.

the subject of his observations. As if to affirm Sáenz's thesis, neither of the two Tarahumaran runners selected for the marathon won a medal in the Mexico City Olympics. Yet, when asked to account for their poor showing, the athletes put it down to being forced to wear running shoes instead of sandals as was their custom. It appears that there were limits to the extent to which indigenous cultures could be harnessed, plucked out of their environment and asked to do a job for *la patria*.

### The future of cultural diversity in Mexico

When, in January 1994, a group of mainly indigenous rebels took up arms in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, it took many by surprise. One of the more poignant remarks that followed the armed conflict was that by a rebel spokesman who suggested that the Zapatista rebellion had made urban-based intellectuals rush to their bookshelves to learn more about a marginal people in a marginal state within their own country.<sup>47</sup> This one ironic remark directly challenged the sense of complacency with which post-revolutionary Mexico had viewed its ethnic peoples. In questioning the extent to which the 'Indian problem' had ever fully been resolved, it was reflecting a reality in which members of mestizo society still viewed Indians as 'shiftless', 'apathetic' and 'stubborn'.<sup>48</sup> As the Zapatista rebellion unfolded, increasing global sensitivity to the plight of ethnic minorities offered Mexico's indigenous peoples a chance to voice their demands to a much broader audience than in the past. In 1995 Mexican cultural critic Carlos Monsiváis reflected that the Zapatista rebellion had forced Mexico to face reality:

after a century of lies and denying it, it's finally recognized that Mexican society is racist... [Mexico] is a racist country. The idea of the indigenous as inferior is widely accepted... The indigenous problem is now a national problem, not just a topic for anthropologists and intellectuals.<sup>49</sup>

Despite decades of policies designed to assimilate Indians into mainstream society, they remain on the periphery. The 'pigmentocracy' of colonial days has been hard to erode. Fair-skinned, fair-haired Mexicans still gravitate towards the metropolitan elite, while dark-skinned, black-haired Indians still tend to be found among the country's rural poor. While it is true that the

47 The rebels took the name of the famous revolutionary Emiliano Zapata.

48 Roger Bartra, 'The problem of the native peoples and the indigenist ideology', in *Race and Class in Post-colonial Society* (Paris: UNESCO 1977), quoted in William Canak and Laura Swanson, *Modern Mexico* (Boston: McGraw Hill 1998), 92.

49 Claire Brewster's interview with Carlos Monsiváis, London, 1995, in Claire Brewster, *Responses to Crises: The Political Writing of Four Mexican Authors, 1968–1995* (forthcoming).

mestizo not only bridges the gap but can be found at both extremes, the ideal represented by the Cosmic Race has never quite been realized.

As in the past, cultural identity has taken centre-stage in the political storm initiated by the Zapatista rebellion. Whereas a confident mestizo society viewed indigenous languages and customs as endearing, if irrelevant, remnants of a shared pre-Columbian past, anthropologist Guillermo de la Peña notes that the new indigenous movements are using them as part of ongoing negotiations concerning the status of indigenous peoples within Mexico's national boundaries.<sup>50</sup> In the case of Chiapas, June Nash argues that 'the Zapatistas' new vision of federalism is that of a multinational state with territorial autonomy for indigenous peoples as part of the Mexican nation. The cultural autonomy they call for would make a living reality of the bicultural policies now part of the rhetoric of the SEP.<sup>51</sup> While accepting the particularities of the Chiapas case, this rhetoric of ethnic tolerance, diversity and understanding has arguably been an enduring component of the broader cultural politics of twentieth-century Mexico. In the arena of sport, the apparent celebration of indigenous sports never penetrated beyond the superficial: such sports never became a central part of the educational curriculum nor did they become a central part of national sporting events. When they reached a national stage, they did so to embellish grand opening ceremonies before the serious sporting competition took place. Yet the reason for their inclusion was anything but superficial. The post-revolutionary celebration of indigenous sporting endeavour formed part of a deliberate attempt to incorporate semi-autonomous communities within a national identity. It attempted to place Mexico's ethnic groups within the ever-tightening grip of patriotic nationalism and, by invoking images of a glorious pre-Columbian past, it sought to convince mestizo society that the Indian was worth incorporating. Both materially and symbolically, the physical vigour of the Aztec warrior was recruited to the revolutionary cause. As the Zapatista rebellion revealed, however, indigenous groups never fully relinquished ownership of their cultural traits. For many decades indigenous groups in southern Mexico had been reappropriating dress, languages and civil/religious practices in the search for a degree of local autonomy.<sup>52</sup> Whereas the revolutionary state lifted sport and other social activities out of the cultural context in which they had previously flourished, present-day indigenous groups were now reclaiming them and using them as tools with which to reconstruct a cultural identity

50 Guillermo de la Peña, 'La ciudadanía étnica en el México contemporáneo', *Revista internacional de filosofía política*, vol. 6, 1995, 116–40; Guillermo de la Peña, lecture delivered at the University of Cambridge, January 2000.

51 June Nash, 'The reassertion of indigenous identity: Mayan responses to state intervention in Chiapas', *Latin American Research Review*, vol. 30, no. 3, 1995, 7–41.

52 Jan Rus and Robert Wasserstrom, 'Civil-religious hierarchies in central Chiapas: a critical perspective', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1980, 466–78.

based on inter-ethnic coexistence, mutual respect and cultural diversity. It remains to be seen whether indigenous sports are also to become part of the struggle to redefine Mexican identity and inter-ethnic relations.

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