"Are We Not Foreigners Here?"

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In his 1979 essay “Mexico and the United States,” the Mexican poet Octavio Paz attempted to account for the profound social, economic, and psychic differences that have plagued relations between Mexico and the United States since the middle of the eighteenth century, when, he asserted, Mexicans, then under Spain, first became aware of an emergent national identity. He briefly focuses his attention on the question of the Indian presence in both countries and its function in their national narratives, concluding:

Mesoamerican civilization died a violent death, but Mexico is Mexico thanks to the Indian presence. Though the language and religion, the political institutions and the culture of the country are Western, there is one aspect of Mexico that faces in another direction—the Indian direction. Mexico is a nation between two civilizations and two pasts. In the United States, the Indian element does not appear. This, in my opinion, is the major difference between our two countries. The Indians who were not exterminated were corralled into “reservations.” The Christian horror of “fallen nature” extended to the natives of America: the United States was founded on a land without a past. The historical memory of Americans is European, not American.\(^1\)

Paz went on to examine the influence of Hispanic Catholicism and English Protestantism on each country’s fundamental assumptions about the role indigenous populations would later play in political, economic, and cultural spheres. With Hispanic Catholicism, he argued, “the notions of conquest and domination are bound up with ideas of conversion and assimilation,” whereas in the English Protestant tradition, “conquest and domination imply not the conversion of the conquered but their segregation.”\(^2\) In his essay “The Emancipation of America,” the Mexican historian Jaime E. Rodríguez O. took this distinction one step further, writing, “Whereas educated members of both communities emphasized the unique characteristics of their land and peoples, the Spanish Americans incorpo-
rated their Indian heritage into their interpretation of American identity, while the British Americans did not.” While both Paz and Rodríguez O. have a point about New Spain’s determination to carve out a place for indigenous peoples within colonial society, neither Spain nor its successor government were above at least de facto segregation.

In fact, although Paz and subsequent observers have emphasized differences in how both the United States and Mexico viewed Indian populations and conducted Indian affairs, one can locate remarkable parallels in even a superficial examination of broader policy currents and patterns of thought regarding the Indian presence in both countries. First of all, both the United States and Mexico ultimately opted for Indian policy agendas that included the forced acculturation and assimilation of Indian peoples, or the stamping out of their essential “Indianness.” This required that each nation at least attempt to dismantle Indian peoples’ cultural, religious, and political institutions, leaving only those of non-Indians in their stead. Both nations then developed massive, and expensive, bureaucratic machinery through which they hoped to accomplish this objective. And finally, both nations reached a point where they grudgingly admitted that they had failed in their efforts and would have to acknowledge and even respect the determination on the part of indigenous communities to maintain at least a semiautonomous political and cultural existence. But above all, both nations have historically exhibited a sustained preoccupation with the Indians residing within their borders. As the historian Francis Paul Prucha put it, Indians have been “consistently in the consciousness of officials” on both sides of the international boundary, and for good reason. They had survived seemingly against all odds, and it seemed that no matter how aggressive officials were in attacking their land base, undermining their subsistence strategies, and promoting their acculturation and assimilation, indigenous peoples found a way to persist in some form or other as separate cultural, and often political, entities.

Yet the question remains why parallel “problems” within both nation-states failed to produce parallel solutions. In other words, why did Mexico not develop the kinds of “blanket” Indian policies that characterized late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian policy in the United States? And even more fundamentally, why did the Mexican government not opt for the reservation system as an arena in which to enforce acculturation, as did the United States, despite a similarly strong desire to stamp out more overtly “Indian” practices within its borders? Although the historian Claudia Haake argued that “at a most basic level the similarities [between U.S.
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and Mexican federal Indian policies] outweigh(ed) the dissimilarities,” a closer look reveals some notable impediments to the formulation and implementation of a coherent, consistent “Indian policy” in Mexico, impediments that often owed their origin to a dogged determination to forge a single nation from what seemed like a dizzying array of extant and competing nations, coupled with a pragmatic realization that any “blanket” policies would inevitably prove insufficient and even counterproductive in accomplishing this task.\(^5\)

This chapter examines these similarities and dissimilarities in order to, above all, contextualize the experiences of the Yaqui, Kickapoo, and Tohono O’odham Indians during the late nineteenth century and through the twentieth century. Scholarship on U.S. Indian policy is abundant, whereas scholarship on Mexican Indian policy is considerably less so. This is partly due to Mexico’s aforementioned lack of any blanket policies, which makes policy currents difficult to identify and less subject to generalization. But much like the U.S. government, the Mexican government frequently changed direction with regard to those legislative measures designed to catalyze change within indigenous communities in the pursuit of some kind of broad policy objective. Depending on the presidential administration, the ideological climate, and, especially, the availability of funding, Indians were sometimes celebrated and subsidized, sometimes maligned and marginalized, and sometimes ignored altogether. Yet non-Indians in Mexico consistently viewed Indians as social, cultural, and economic impediments to national progress, and often treated them as such. Although policy climates on both sides of the border did not always directly impact the Yaquis, Kickapoos, and Tohono O’odham, they do often explain the mobility of these groups, or at least their resolve to maintain control over their respective destinies in the face of policy currents seemingly designed to undermine that control. Their resolve, in turn, frequently led them beyond their own borders and across international ones, where they knew they could escape national prerogatives that too often proved detrimental to Indian peoples, their sense of community and peoplehood, and their nationalizing agendas. Yet federal Indian policies could also serve as tools for Indian peoples, or as a means of pursuing an immediate or long-term tribal agenda. Appealing to policymakers and/or submitting to prevailing policy currents, in other words, could also prove vital to the maintenance of at least a semiautonomous existence for at least portions of these indigenous nations. However, as will be shown, cooperation and compromise came with consequences. For a
whole host of complicated reasons, some of these Indians were, in the end, forced to choose the lesser of the two evils when it came to U.S. and Mexican Indian policies, which often meant finally severing the ties that bind at the increasingly formidable U.S.-Mexico border.

From virtually the United States’ inception, it recognized the legal legitimacy of three types of government: federal, state, and tribal. The Americans, like the British before them, relied on the treaty system, a system built upon a mutual recognition of national sovereignty, to govern relations between federal, state, and/or tribal governments. As the Commerce Clause (article 1, section 8) of the Constitution puts it, “The Congress shall have Power . . . to regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes.” Although the U.S. government did not permit tribal nations to raise armies or issue currency, tribal sovereignty otherwise remained intact. Native nations had the authority to define citizenship, devise law enforcement and justice systems, regulate and tax property, and otherwise govern the domestic affairs of its citizens.6

The late nineteenth century would witness an escalation of unprecedented proportions in federal involvement in Indian affairs in the United States, and throughout the twentieth century that involvement would only deepen. Prior to that, however, early U.S policymakers favored a simple policy of physical removal and segregation of Indian peoples, particularly after the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803 made this strategy more viable. The failure of Indian peoples to acculturate and assimilate, from the perspective of U.S. policymakers, necessitated such drastic measures. Although the Indians’ physical removal was far from voluntary from the very beginning, it was not until the administration of Andrew Jackson (1829–37) that removal became an official government program. Well-intentioned reformers promoted the policy as the only means of preventing the Indians’ destruction, giving them what reformers believed to be much-needed time and space to prepare for acculturation and eventual assimilation into white America. The federal government, meanwhile, enthusiastically adopted the rhetoric of Indian reformers, but tended to harbor less noble motivations for implementing removal. Simply put, Indian removal had the added benefit of pushing Indians beyond the perimeters of white settlement, thereby opening up their lands for the nation’s expansion. The advent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in 1824 slightly predated the implementation of removal. Initially situated within the War Department, the BIA moved to the Department of the Interior in 1849.
Charged with the management of Indian lands and the implementation of Indian policies, the BIA would henceforth become a constant, almost domineering presence in the lives of Indian peoples. With the BIA at the helm, removal as a policy proceeded with a remarkable rapidity. By 1840, in fact, lands east of the Mississippi River had been largely cleared of Indian tribes, though some tribal members opted to remain as individuals and obtain U.S. citizenship. The government sometimes relied on diplomacy to persuade Indians to relocate, though military action was an option that negotiators rarely took off the table and sometimes implemented without hesitation.\footnote{7}

Removal and relocation as a policy, however, quickly fell out of favor. With the nation’s dramatic territorial acquisition in the wake of the U.S.-Mexican War, coupled with the discovery of gold in California, Indian lands once again came under siege by non-Indians who were either passing through or slowly expanding in ever-increasing numbers onto lands set aside by the federal government. Government policy, then, responded to this turn of events with the reservation system, which policymakers sometimes referred to as the policy of concentration. Pretty soon even the so-called Great American Desert, or the Great Plains, once thought fit only for Indian inhabitants, was suddenly reimagined as the nation’s “heartland,” or a land of boundless agricultural potential. Concentrating Indians on even further reduced landholdings, then, had the dual benefit of making Indians easier to supervise, acculturate, and ultimately assimilate while also opening up surplus acreage in this “heartland” for white settlement.\footnote{8}

Gradually it became obvious that the strategy of either isolating native populations on reservations or moving them westward was no longer viable given the expense of administering the Indian reservations and the nation’s rapid growth. The U.S. government then began implementing a long series of measures designed to force the integration of Indians into the dominant social and economic order, thus relieving itself of the responsibility for their well-being. The aforementioned Dawes Act represented perhaps the most ambitious federally sanctioned attempt to detribalize and “Americanize” Indians. Under this act, Congress essentially legislated many reservations out of existence. It forced select Indian tribes to accept individual allotments in lieu of collectively held lands, the goal being, in the words of one reformer, to “awaken in him wants,” or to encourage private enterprise and competition among Indians by undermining communal landholding patterns. Massachusetts senator Henry Laurens Dawes, for whom the law was named, along with the majority of his self-styled Indian reformer contem-
poraries, viewed this as the most logical and expedient way to break the communal, and thus cultural, bonds between Indians and to force their integration into surrounding communities. However, it ultimately resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the Indian land base. As the Kickapoo case demonstrated, allotments regularly fell into non-Indian hands, as Indians were either swindled by speculators or surrounding landowners or sold their allotments for quick money.9

With their focus remaining squarely on a policy of forced assimilation, policymakers concurrently experimented with Indian education as a means of supplementing the aims of the Dawes Act. Reformers during this period (roughly 1875–1928) viewed education as the preferred method for introducing and instilling Christian values in Indian youths, since the majority of reformers shared the sentiment that older generations were, so to speak, lost causes. Sure, older Indians could be forced to accept allotments, build houses, and submit to Anglo-American laws and customs, the argument went, but in their hearts they would always remain Indian, forever bound to tribal traditions. Thus, removing Indian children from the reservation and placing them in boarding schools would, reformers hoped, preclude the possibility of a tribal identity taking root.10 The fact that the U.S. government could legislate its will over the American Indian population as a whole both without their consent and in a blatant spirit of paternalism illustrated the fact that Indians’ collective fate was now at the mercy of ever-shifting currents in popular political thought. The BIA, meanwhile, gradually emerged as a bureaucratic powerhouse, exercising what one scholar called “a nearly unfathomable degree of authority.” This late nineteenth-century emphasis on forced assimilation, however, ultimately fell out of favor with policymakers, owing partly to its uneven results, but also to a shift in attitudes among reformers and policymakers that was in part inspired by the spirit of the Depression-era New Deal.11

The 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), the legislative arm of the so-called Indian New Deal, embodied this shift in attitudes. Under the direction of Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, who served from 1933 to 1945, the BIA launched a massive campaign to preserve, protect, and foster the growth of what remained of Indian land and culture. Essentially, federal Indian policy under Collier concerned itself with the reversal of previous policy measures that favored forced assimilation, such as the Dawes Act. Through the IRA, Collier hoped to promote notions of cultural pluralism and tribal sovereignty, while reinforcing the concept that reservations should be viewed as permanent homelands.12 Although the law did
not fulfill all of Collier’s desired aims, it did result in adequate economic success and, perhaps more importantly, had a profound psychological impact, leaving many tribes more secure in their identities and more hopeful for their futures. It also ended the allotment of Indian lands and helped reconstitute tribal governments, which left Indians feeling more confident that their reservations and reservation-based institutions had acquired enough legal legitimacy to withstand future attacks. As for the issue of indigenous nationhood in the United States, one study characterized the IRA as a “two-edged sword,” explaining:

On the one hand, they gave form and status to tribal governmental institutions, ending an era in which many tribes were either effectively powerless and run as wards of the federal government or largely neglected but unable to assert authority that federal and other authorities would recognize. On the other hand, they commonly proved to be ineffective systems of government for tribes. For many, many tribes, governments organized under the IRA entailed a fatal flaw: they were boilerplate systems that ignored the wide variety of legitimate governing forms tribes had used to rule themselves for innumerable years. Perhaps like trying to impose a monarchy on the United States today, foreign systems in Indian Country have generally lacked legitimacy and support—and therefore effectiveness.

It would be yet another challenge nascent indigenous nations like the ones discussed herein would face in reclaiming and/or protecting tribal sovereignty. Although policymakers never viewed the IRA as a complete failure, the act was nevertheless allowed to languish during the war years. Congress began the 1950s with yet another legislative about-face in the form of a new policy current ominously referred to as “termination.” Essentially, termination comprised twelve measures aimed at severing trust relationships between the federal government and all tribes located in Florida, New York, Texas, and California, and individual tribes such as the Menominee, Klamath, Flathead, Chippewa, and Potawatomi. The new legislation relegated governmental responsibilities in the areas of social welfare, education, law enforcement, and economic assistance to the individual states, thereby effectively terminating tribal ties with the federal government and abolishing some reservations.

Termination resembled the Dawes Act not only in its ultimate objectives, which included complete cultural and economic mainstreaming and the revocation of tribal sovereignty, but also in its ideological origins. The Dawes
Act reflected prevailing national sentiment in the post–Civil War years, as the country united in an attempt to redefine “nationhood” by calling for some semblance of national unity in the face of continued cultural diversity. In this environment, the conspicuous presence of political and cultural “islands” was particularly distressing. Similarly, in the post–World War II era, with McCarthyism in full swing, reservations came under attack, with pundits claiming that they represented socialist institutions sanctioned by and situated within the confines of the self-proclaimed “greatest democracy in the world.” The emphasis placed on American Indian tribalism and cultural regeneration and preservation during the Collier era of Indian affairs would find an ideological complement in the Indian rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Put simply, termination, much like the Dawes Act, failed to bear fruit, instead only deepening the Indians’ dependence on the federal government while doing little to alienate them from their tribal identities. The second half of the twentieth century witnessed the formation of AIM, or the American Indian Movement, which maintained a presence, in sometimes aggressive fashion, in the national political arena on behalf of Indian peoples across the country. It also witnessed the passage of the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, which represented a further attempt at placing more political power in the hands of the Indians themselves. In the 1960s, as in the 1930s, the United States found itself swept up in a spirit of reform that touched many aspects of federal policy, leading many to renew their commitment to the “Indian cause.” From here Indians would experience a surge in cultural pride, a renewed commitment to protecting hunting and fishing rights, an erosion of the authority of the BIA and of non-Indian religious institutions, and the strengthening of tribal governments and courts. “It is the great irony of nineteenth-century Indian policy,” the legal scholar Charles Wilkinson points out, “that the sharply reduced tribal landholdings, which Native peoples bitterly protested, later became cherished homelands and the foundation for the modern sovereignty movement.”

Pinning down such currents in Mexican thought and federal action is a much more difficult task, since pinning down what it means to be an Indian in Mexico is more complicated. Being “Indian” in Mexico, generally speaking, has tended to have more to do with economic status than ethnic or cultural makeup. Mexicans have often equated “Indianness” with “ruralness,” the idea being that isolated populations are more likely to cling to “tradition.” Mexicans have also commonly employed the term indio as an insult, understood as not quite a racial or cultural category, but more as a
suggestion of “otherness.” Or, on another level, it can simply imply a “lack of cool.” At one time, these attitudes even pervaded the scholarly community. For example, Albert Bushnell Hart, a professor of political science at Harvard University, wrote in 1914, “The fundamental trouble in Latin America, and particularly in Mexico, seems to be that the population is substantially of native American origin,” and as a consequence the region had “not acquired the coolness and political reasonableness which are the basis of modern civilized government.”

Over time Mexican thinkers revised and refined definitions of Indianess. Writing in 1942, the Mexican scholar Ramón G. Bonfil argued that the most “valid” marker of Indianess is the existence of a “different mentality,” one “which makes [Indians] live beyond our laws, creating special patterns of social organization, different forms of labor than we have, and a cultural tempo distinct from that in which we live.” He also added that perhaps as a consequence these individuals tend to be situated at the bottom of the “pyramid of Mexican society,” which has historically left them vulnerable to exploitation.

Another longtime marker of Indianess in Mexico has been one’s language. As the anthropologist Miguel León-Portilla explained, millions of Mexicans “retain such pre-Hispanic survivals as a diet based on corn, and the use of ‘huaraches’ instead of shoes,” so officials had to ignore these and similar cultural traits and instead look toward language in order to “most easily” identify Indians.

Yet, as one historian noted, “Still, more than five hundred years after Columbus ‘discovered’ Indians, there is confusion today over what exactly constitutes an Indian in Mexico.” At least in a legal, constitutional sense, Mexican Indians ceased to be “Indian” in the wake of the Mexican Revolution. Thus, any special status as “indigenous” was supposed to become a thing of the past. Compounding the difficulties in separating Mexican Indians from non-Indians is the fact that racial mixing evidently occurred in Mexico to a much greater extent than in the United States. And as one scholar succinctly explained, “Where there are no Indians there can be no Indian policy.”

This was not always the case in Mexico, however. In fact, under Spain, Mexico had a fairly well-defined Indian policy, particularly since Spanish colonial officials viewed Indians as childlike and therefore in need of guidance and oversight. The crown considered it a moral obligation to expose infidel Indians to Catholicism and Hispanic civilization. This did not mean, however, that Indians were unfit to labor on the Spaniards’ behalf. Colonial Indian policy thus established various mechanisms, including the encomienda and mission system, to extract labor from Indians while, ostensibly,
saving them from both themselves and an afterlife of torment. Lofty goals notwithstanding, in the end the Spanish were far more successful in integrating Indians economically than culturally, gradually coming to believe that the former goal was realistic and worthwhile and the latter was not. The fundamental problem was that the Spanish never stopped viewing Indians as children. Although Indian acculturation consistently remained the goal of Spanish policymakers until the end of the colonial period, few Spaniards made an honest effort to meaningfully integrate Indians into Hispanic communities, instead opting to keep them concentrated in missions or self-contained Indian communities. Indians, then, had to take it upon themselves to challenge their segregation and marginalization, and they did so most often by entering the market economy. As the historian David Weber explains, “In many places, it seems that exposure to the market economy and the workaday world of Hispanic frontier society did more than missions to alter Indian society and culture.” Indians learned the Spanish language, learned Spanish trade protocol, and even learned to “drink, swear, and gamble in the Spanish way.” Many Indians, however, let their “acculturation” go only so far. Some continued to use stone tools, for example, despite the general availability of metal tools. And while some significantly altered their religious beliefs to accommodate Catholic doctrine, the pull of more traditional forms of worship and systems of belief typically remained powerful. After all, religions are often born out of the process of assigning meaning to the spaces in which peoples live and work. Catholicism could rarely compete with such so-called emplaced religions. While the Spanish could alter behaviors and even some beliefs, divesting these spaces of meaning was another matter altogether.

The 1821 Plan de Iguala, which established Mexican independence, attempted to further undermine the distinction between Indians and non-Indians so firmly established during the Spanish colonial period. It declared all Mexican nationals, regardless of their ethnic and cultural backgrounds, equal citizens of the newly independent republic. Although this was a largely symbolic gesture, the declaration demonstrated that, unlike the United States and Canada, Mexico was determined to break with Indian policies that it now viewed as irrelevant and even counterproductive relics of its colonial past and thus at odds with the nationalizing project it now had to undertake. The break, however, often had grave consequences for the nation’s indigenous peoples, since it placed them in an even more vulnerable position. For example, in 1863, President Benito Juárez announced a federal initiative in which terrenos baldíos would be divided up and sold in
order to fight French efforts to colonize Mexico. The new laws resulted in
the loss of 4.5 million acres of land over the course of four years, the vast
bulk of which belonged to indigenous peoples who were unable to provide
proof of ownership. Although Juárez’s initiative predated the Dawes Act
by a couple of decades, it had an eerily similar impact on Indian peoples.
While intended to provide small farms to members of Indian communities,
federal and state initiatives aimed at land distribution more often than not
led to their displacement. Indians, in turn, often ended up laboring on large
haciendas, the owners of which had the influence and financial means to
simply purchase those lands intended for redistribution. Another funda-
mental problem was that land alone did not always deliver on the promise
of productivity or economic security. Local environments, especially des-
ert environments, were not always suitable for agriculture, and local indig-
enous peoples were not always eager to be molded into mestizo farmers by
the Mexican state. Mexico often appeared to be among those states that
have been, as the political scientist and anthropologist James Scott put it,
“driven by utopian plans and an authoritarian disregard for the values,
desires, and objections of their subjects.” In Mexico’s attempt to foster
“huge, utopian changes in people’s work habits, living patterns, moral con-
duct, and worldview,” it either failed to note or chose to ignore a whole
host of realities on the ground, many environmental in nature, that would
inevitably complicate these efforts.29

As in the United States, one can easily detect patterns of anti-Indian
thinking in nineteenth-century Mexico, at least among Mexican officials.
They excluded native languages from legal and administrative discourse,
and liberals as well as conservatives came to conclude that Indians must
either be transformed and assimilated or exterminated altogether. It was a
process one scholar characterized as an attempt to “whiten the nation”
through institutional means.30 Near the end of the century, however, Mex-
ican intellectuals took the lead in defending indigenous populations from
these assaults or in encouraging their integration into the Mexican nation
through a deeper understanding of their cultures and histories. Their ef-
forts, though laudable, would amount to very little during the Porfiriato
(1876–1911), when the Mexican government, with the dictator Porfirio Díaz
at the helm, was far more likely to promote an image of Indians as impedi-
ments to national progress. In fact, in confronting those impediments, Díaz
attacked their land base first, opening up supposedly vacant lands to for-
eign immigration and cultivation, a strategy that, again, had much in com-
mon with that of Dawes-era reformers north of the border. He also permitted
individuals operating under the auspices of his “colonization programs” to ignore Indian ejidos, or lands held in common by Indian groups. In the end, about two million acres of communal lands fell into non-Indian, and often non-Mexican, hands.\textsuperscript{31} This is one policy development that \textit{did} profoundly impact the Indian subjects of this book, as will be shown. One contemporaneous noted that Díaz’s reforms made Indians feel like “a son whose father denied him food while at the same time inviting strangers to dine.” Although Díaz took a few halting steps in developing a system of Indian education, as reformers in the United States were then doing, he did so halfheartedly and with few successes. Most of the Indian schools established during the Porfiriato floundered due to the lack of a sustained financial commitment. The Indians, too, had something to do with these early failures. For example, in 1909 the Kickapoos burned down their new school before it had even opened, which, as will be shown, would not be the last time they would go to such extremes in resisting non-Indian education.\textsuperscript{32}

In a nation whose history is peppered with noteworthy indigenous figures, anti-Indian sentiment in Mexico proved problematic. How could one reconcile the Indians’ alleged inferiority given so much historical evidence to the contrary? As one historian put it, “Mexico’s historical experience demonstrated the absurdity of the racist position. The lives of Juárez, Altamirano, Ramírez, and many others proved that Indians had the same capabilities as white men.”\textsuperscript{33} Francisco Belmar, a member of Mexico’s Supreme Court, acted on this increasingly pervasive sentiment in 1910 by founding the Indianist Society of Mexico. He hoped his organization would encourage the study of Mexican Indians in order to ultimately “redeem” them, or in a sense rescue them from poverty and supposed misery. His ideas caught on in a big way in subsequent years. In fact, in a brave display of defiance, a member of the organization, speaking in the presence of Díaz himself, stated bluntly, “I come, gentlemen, to confirm that the indigenous race is abandoned, and that this is not just.”\textsuperscript{34}

An unprecedented \textit{official} push for Indian assimilation into the Mexican nation began in 1910 with the Mexican Revolution, which precipitated Díaz’s downfall. In yet another parallel to the Dawes Act north of the border, Plutarco Elías Calles’s government attempted to incorporate Indians into the national fold by depriving them of their lands. With the 1916 Decree No. 33, the Calles government addressed the Indians of Sonora specifically in the form of a thinly veiled threat, warning, “The nomadic tribes and those of the Yaqui and Mayo River will not enjoy the right of Sonoran citizenship as long as their farms and villages maintain their anomalous organization.”
In return for joining the national fold, the decree promised that those indigenous peoples who instead lived in “the organized communities of the state” would enjoy the “privilege of citizenship.” The obvious problem was one of incentive. The lure of citizenship simply was not powerful enough for the nation’s semiautonomous indigenous groups to vacate their lands, forfeit their autonomy, and relocate to “organized communities.” It was a problem that had plagued non-Indians in North America for centuries: How does one go about controlling those Indians who, in the words of David Weber, “successfully maintained their political and spiritual independence” and “continued to assert their claims, often with gun and powder”? In some regions of North America, this “problem” persists to the present day.

Still, as in the post–Civil War years in the United States, internal conflict in Mexico in the early twentieth century encouraged an aggressive pursuit of national unity that very often targeted Indian populations. Mexican leaders placed a similar emphasis on conformity, declaring that Indians who fought in the revolution needed to be reminded that they were Mexicans first and foremost. For example, in 1925 Mexico’s Education Ministry founded the Casa del Estudiante Indígena in Mexico City, which attempted to “civilize” Mexico’s indigenous peoples through an education in and exposure to Mexican culture. In the 1930s Mexican officials began opening similar schools in various Mexican states, each designed to stamp out tribal cultures, teach indigenous peoples the Spanish language, and replace their allegiance to the tribal unit with Mexican patriotism. The program specifically targeted indigenous boys, calling for their removal from indigenous communities and their total immersion in modern Mexican society. It was an Indian policy initiative that suggested a familiarity with the boarding school experiment in the United States.

These efforts were an early expression of a broader trend in twentieth-century Mexican history that Mexican intellectuals termed indigenismo. While postrevolutionary Mexico demanded Indian integration into Mexican society and the body politic (though, of course, only after acculturating), it also often voiced pride in its Indian heritage. In fact, Mexico’s postrevolutionary political and intellectual elite came to view indigenous peoples as central to the nation’s identity. The historian Rick López explains:

> These urban elites interpreted Mexico as falling horribly short of new ideas about what it meant to be a modern nation. They felt that to be modern a nation had to be a culturally, economically, and politically distinct and unified people with deep historical
roots...Indianness, they argued, was the thread that would unite the diverse populations living within the territory of the Mexican Republic and distinguish Mexico among a global family of other nation-states. To be truly Mexican one was expected to be part Indian or to demonstrate a concern for the valorization and redemption of the Mexican Indian as part of the nation. Those who rejected the country’s Indianness were publicly chastised for their foreignness and lack of nationalist zeal.  

Thus, *indigenismo* was, as another historian succinctly put it, an attempt to challenge “the exclusive association of modernity with whiteness.” Yet while reformers used indigenous peoples as a rallying point in jump-starting their nationalizing project, they were also keenly aware that their message was not likely to resonate with the very peoples they were celebrating. So beyond playing up their centrality to Mexican national identity, reformers promised to provide at least those Indians who fought in the revolution with a variety of opportunities to participate in the local and national economy. Inviting them into the economic fold, the reformers reasoned, might help foster the nationalistic impulse that they felt lacking among Mexico’s indigenous population, which, in turn, might lessen the sociocultural gap between themselves and the nation’s Indian peoples.  

“We do not accept the thesis,” stated one official, perfectly summing up Indigenista ideology, “that the Indian’s backwardness is due to innate deficiencies which he has neither will nor ambition to overcome. On the contrary, we believe that his backwardness is the fault of those who have made him an object for exploitation.” Another Mexican official stated his case more forcefully, arguing, “That builder, that creator, that patriot is, as we all know, the humble, naked, poor, despised Mexican Indian. The destiny of the nation lies today, as it did yesterday and as it always will, in the hands of this powerful titan.” Before the nations of the Americas could progress, he concluded, the Indian must be allowed to “descend from the cross of misery and ignorance where the wicked ones mercilessly tied him.” The image of Indians as having been callously exploited and marginalized by their selfish, greedy, non-Indian countrymen was evidently a powerful one.

It was also an accurate one. As the historian Alexander Dawson points out, Mexican Indians in the first half of the twentieth century “lived in misery, and were broadly perceived as a crippling burden to the nation.” Near midcentury some Mexican officials began expressing concerns that *indigenismo* had stagnated and that more aggressive steps needed to be taken to
spur Indian acculturation. This more urgent emphasis on Indian acculturation coincided with an increasing faith in scientific investigation to address such perceived social ills. Following the lead of Indian enthusiasts such as Belmar, government officials came to the conclusion that they must first understand Indians if they were to improve their standard of living and, ultimately, incorporate them into the Mexican nation. The Mexican government had taken the first steps in this mission back in 1917, when it created the Department of Anthropology, and the mission gained momentum under the direction of the influential anthropologist Dr. Manuel Gamio in the years that followed. Scientific studies were one thing; however, reformers soon identified the need to apply these studies. In the 1930s, the government created the National Institute of Anthropology and History and the Autonomous Department of Indian Affairs in order to bridge the gap between scientific study and practical application. In 1947, the Mexican government placed the Autonomous Department of Indian Affairs under the Ministry of Education, renaming it the Department of Indian Affairs. The following year, the government created the National Indian Institute under the Ministry of Education, renaming it the Department of Indian Affairs. The base of operations for these various organizations remained, for decades, Mexico City. A host of journals, including the bimonthly Boletín Indigenista and the quarterly América Indígena, supplemented their efforts, serving as what one publication called ‘information organs.” These too were based in Mexico City. As in the United States, the bureaucratic machinery that aimed to govern the lives of Indian peoples was seemingly growing more complex with each passing decade.

Still, Mexico worked diligently to foster the impression that its program was hemispheric in scope, even devoting financial resources to international outreach. For example, in 1941 the Mexican government invited Pueblo Indians from the United States to meet with various Indian communities across Mexico. A performance at Mexico City’s Palace of Fine Arts, during which the Pueblos presented songs and dances, capped off the visit. And beginning in 1940, the Department of Indian Affairs inaugurated an annual Day of the Indian. Held every April at the Fine Arts Plaza in Mexico City, the affair celebrated Indian contributions to broader American history while providing the opportunity to reflect on ongoing problems facing the hemisphere’s indigenous peoples. At one such Day of the Indian, in fact, Sonoran Yaquis and Kickapoos from Coahuila treated attendees to tribal dances.
At the 1953 gathering, Dr. Alfonso Caso, director of the National Indian Institute of Mexico, explained the purpose of the Day of the Indian:

The ceremony we hold every year on this day is more a symbol than an act of remembrance. We are not here to commemorate the past glories of the Teotihuacán, Toltec, Aztec, Maya, Zapotec, Mixtec, Tarascan, Chibcha, Inca and many other great civilizations that used to flourish on the continent . . . Today’s celebration is not only for the purpose of recalling the greatness of our Indian ancestors; it serves to indicate the firm will of the governments and people of America to destroy an often secular injustice that reduced this Indian race, at one time lords of the Continent[,] to the state of material and cultural impoverishment in which it now finds itself. That is why I say that today’s ceremony is a symbol; it means that the people of America have definitely decided to solve the problem of the great Indian masses of America and bring them what they lack: communications, schools, health services, land and water, protection of their forests, and protection against non-Indian groups that have exploited them for centuries.46

In this mission, Latin America also looked to the United States for an example. Ecuador’s ambassador to Mexico, Dr. Jorge Villagómez Yépez, singled out the New Dealer John Collier, whom he referred to as the “wise president” of the Institute of Ethnic Affairs, in praising the United States’ activism. Collier, he asserted, “has proclaimed the need for an ‘orderly withdrawal’ and for the reintegration of the North American Indian into the general life of the country. The magnificent idea behind this is cultural pluralism which favors protecting the distinctive characteristics of underdeveloped ethnic groups and aiding in their special development.”47 Although he seems to have misinterpreted Collier’s broader mission of revitalizing Indian cultures through a strengthening of reservation communities and tribal governments, his remarks do demonstrate that Indigenistas went to great lengths to promote a mission that they believed had attained an air of universality, or at least one that was on the cutting edge of Indian policy currents. As Dawson explains, Indigenistas “took the radical view that the nation was made up of a plurality of cultures, and called for self-empowerment, the inclusion of locals in decision making, and ultimately even recognized the right of indigenous peoples to self-determination.”48 Generally speaking, however, Mexican policymakers frowned on the reservation system employed by the United States. One Mexican official
summed it up nicely, stating, “To imprison [the Indian] theoretically or practically on ‘reservations’ is to condemn him to a sterile life, and ultimately extinction.”

Thus, Indigenistas took great pains to learn from what they perceived to be the United States’ Indian policy failures. In the mid-1920s, for example, a Mexican official toured Indian schools and reservations in the United States, and was troubled by what he witnessed. First of all, despite the long push for Indian assimilation in the United States via the Dawes Act and the Indian education experiment, Indian peoples, in his words, “continued to form a separate social group,” completely cut off from “the rest of the components of the American union.” Second, Indians obviously resented the fact that while pushing for their assimilation, the U.S. government appeared simultaneously determined to “not make them an integral part, neither as citizens nor as social subjects, of the great national family.” One must take this official’s observations with a grain of salt, however. As the historian Stephen Lewis aptly observed, “In a predominately mestizo nation, the idea of ‘social separation’ was a disturbing one, even if it existed in practice.”

And at least in the case of the Tohono O’odham, Mexican officials put forth little effort in dissuading the O’odham from relocating en masse to the Arizona reservation. As has been shown, there was in fact a concerted push in late nineteenth-century Mexico to, as the historians Andrae Marak and Laura Tuennerman put it, “eliminate corporate identities and communities—especially those of the Catholic Church, peasant pueblos, and indigenous groups—and replace them with wage laborers and capitalist yeoman farmers who, it was hoped, would view themselves as Mexican citizens.” The O’odham watched as Mexican settlers entered their lands in search of precious metals or a piece of the expanding cattle industry. They also had to contend with a railroad, which had been constructed to connect Guaymas, Sonora, and Nogales, Arizona, that now ran through the heart of their ancestral lands. It is little wonder, then, that so many opted for life on a reservation in the United States, however distasteful and counterproductive Mexican reformers found the reservation concept to be.

In the end, the process of acculturation failed to progress to the satisfaction of reformers, despite unprecedented efforts on the federal government’s behalf. And when elected in 1934, President Lázaro Cárdenas helped many of the nation’s Indian peoples maintain a buffer zone between themselves and their non-Indian neighbors through a series of land reform measures. As Claudia Haake observed, “Cárdenas saw the ejido as more than a transitional device and rather as a model to capitalistic agriculture.” In a very
real way, then, the *ejido* designation, as interpreted by Cárdenas, had much in common with reservations in the United States, which, at least during the Collier era, came to be viewed as permanent homelands for Indian peoples. Also among Cárdenas's initiatives was the redistribution of roughly eighteen million hectares of land to an estimated 800,000 recipients, many of them members of indigenous communities. The number of landless in Mexico fell from 2.5 million to 1.9 million. As will be shown, the Yaquis in particular were beneficiaries of this new trend in the history of Mexican “Indian policy.”

Still, not all Indians embraced Cárdenas’s efforts at reform. In fact, in the 1930s Mexican educators conducted a survey of Indian communities and encountered staunch opposition to integration into Mexican national culture and the Mexican economy. Thus, as the twentieth century progressed it tended to be the Mexican government and non-Indian mestizos who felt “abandoned” by indigenous peoples, not the other way around. Put simply, they were surprised and dismayed to receive so little in the way of cooperation from indigenous communities. Indians were, in the words of one scholar, “refusing to fall in line with postrevolutionary visions of a modern Mexican state,” a situation non-Indians found disappointing and, ultimately, troubling. For example, non-Indians continued to regard the southern O'odham as at best “proto-citizens” who desperately needed state tutelage and at worst, at least according to one historian's assessment, “lazy, drunken . . . thieves,” a “wandering people,” and an ongoing “problem” the nation had still not managed to solve despite its best efforts. And the clearest sign that the O’odham had “abandoned” the Mexican nation was that fact that by the second half of the twentieth century so many had permanently left their lands in Mexico, choosing instead to reside on the Sells reservation in Arizona.

Thus, while the national government had invested heavily in a twofold strategy that, again much like that of the United States fifty years before, during the Dawes era, focused on economic integration and education as key to assimilation, Indian populations remained resistant to their efforts. And it was through that resistance to federal programs that Mexico’s indigenous peoples made their voices heard, and, at least temporarily, forced the federal government to reimagine Mexico as more a plurality of nations than a single nation. Simply put, Indigenistas were perhaps overly ambitious from the outset in that they attempted to, as Dawson explains, “create a new state and extend its authority across a national territory that remained largely outside the scope of federal control.” Unlike the indigenous peoples they

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were working hard to reform, early Indigenistas believed that modernity and nationhood were one and the same. Creating a nation, they maintained, required the undermining of Mexico’s many pockets of indigenous autonomy.\textsuperscript{54}

Mexico’s Indians were not as malleable or compliant as the Indigenistas had anticipated, however, and the goal of assimilating Indians into the Mexican mainstream ultimately proved unrealistic. Simply put, the Indians refused to forfeit their own cultural convictions, and were growing more and more adept at limiting the reformers’ access to their communities.\textsuperscript{55} Another barrier to their nationalizing efforts involved, again, persistent difficulties in identifying who was Indian. Dawson explains, “\textit{Indigenistas} used a variety of racial and cultural data, along with their own imaginations, [to identify] both the Indian and the mestizo,” ultimately concluding that Indians comprised between 30 and 50 percent of Mexico’s population—figures that must have led to a reevaluation of their nationalizing mission. In other words, since the Indian population appeared to be growing in tandem with the rest of the population, Indians no longer appeared to be a shrinking, doomed minority despite decades of efforts aimed at their acculturation.\textsuperscript{56}

In the end, the problems encountered by Indigenistas forced them to abandon many of their initial goals and move to a surprising new line of thought. Continued diversity within Mexico’s borders, they were beginning to conclude, was in fact a source of strength. Dawson explains, “Mexico, they decided, was not one nation but many, each with a right to self-determination based upon their distinct histories, geographies, and cultures.” They found no reason to eliminate local systems of government, such as councils of elders (an institution the Kickapoos once maintained), and instead portrayed such systems as a way for indigenous peoples to exist in modern Mexico with dignity. It was a revolutionary new intellectual direction, and one that would have staying power. One intellectual went so far as to suggest that more “advanced” Indian tribes should be recognized as separate nationalities within Mexico’s borders, and, as such, should be allowed to conduct their own affairs in their own language and according to their own local needs.\textsuperscript{57}

Whether or not federal policies affected any real change in indigenous areas within Mexico is difficult to ascertain due to the absence of any “blanket” Indian policies, such as the Dawes Act, the Indian Reorganization Act, or the termination measures, coupled with persistent difficulties in actually identifying Indians. In their efforts to incorporate Indian peoples into the social, economic, and political orbit of the Mexican nation, officials consis-
tently downplayed the Indians’ separateness, or the socioeconomic gulf that stood between them and their non-Indian neighbors. Unlike the United States, which differentiated between “recognized” and “unrecognized” Indian groups (with the former enjoying a host of legal privileges and exceptions), Mexico made no such distinction. Generally speaking, post-revolutionary governments in Mexico have largely confined their efforts, where indigenous peoples are concerned, to land distribution. Furthermore, their efforts targeted not just landless indigenous peoples, but all of Mexico’s landless poor (even though the government has been well aware that the vast majority of Mexicans comprising the “landless poor” are of indigenous ancestry). In explaining the government’s continued lack of activity in the arena of Indian affairs, at least when compared to the United States, Claudia Haake contended, “It may be that the state was not strong enough for a coherent policy towards the members of the indigenous members of the nation, or, more likely, that it was unwilling to face the consequences this would have brought.” Furthermore, it has historically been in the best interest of the Mexican nation to ignore the “Indian problem” by simply pretending that, at least in an official capacity, Indians did not exist. Policies more generally aimed at “peasants,” then, could maintain the fiction of national unity while relieving the government of additional responsibilities. As Haake astutely observed, since the Mexican Revolution, Indians have been a “people disowned,” struggling against a “policy disguised.” Policies emanating from the Mexican government, in other words, rarely treated Indian peoples and mestizos the same. The most expeditious way to confront the “Indian problem,” it turned out, was to acknowledge their Indianness, or their political and cultural uniqueness, and then strategize accordingly.58

Luckily for these reformers, the bulk of the twentieth century witnessed far less dramatic forms of indigenous resistance than the previous century on both sides of the U.S-Mexico border. At least in the case of the Yaquis, Kickapoos, and Tohono O’odham, new patterns of resistance would emerge in courts, before congressional committees, in communications with immigration or other federal authorities, and in letters to connected politicians, scholars, or even these Indians’ transborder counterparts. In other words, at a certain point the various Yaqui, Kickapoo, and Tohono O’odham communities more or less stabilized. Patterns of transnational mobility that had so often led to violence, instability, and uncertainty during the previous century gave way to a new (and, it turned out, more viable) survival strategy: working through the system rather than continuing to operate
beyond its purview or in open defiance of its prerogatives. Oftentimes these groups adopted this new strategy by choice, engaging one or the other nation-state in order to meet an immediate or long-term agenda, while other times government bureaucrats attempted, with varying degrees of success, to impose their will on these determined but increasingly divided indigenous nations. In the end, transnational networks that had once flourished would, almost across the board, constrict to the point that little trans-border human traffic flowed unfettered. What had once been a symbol of opportunity and possibility had become an obstacle that seemed less and less worth the effort to confront. Still, indigenous peoples on both sides of the increasingly formidable border would keep their eyes fixed on the terminuses of these once flourishing transnational networks, always with a sense of themselves as part of something larger than a single nation could contain.