INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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San Cristóbal de las Casas

Apdo. 110
San Cristóbal de las Casas
Chiapas
Mexico
17 February, 1972

Mr. Richard H. Nolte
Institute of Current World Affairs
535 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

The city of San Cristóbal de las Casas is an enclave of about 25,000 ladino Mexicans surrounded and nourished by more than 100,000 Mayan Indians within a radius of 25 miles. As in other places I have seen where modern western society meets the primitive, the people here work hard to preserve their ladino identity in the midst of a vigorous, expanding indigenous population. The Indians, for their part, work at least as hard at surviving, literally and culturally. The efforts of both sides make San Cristóbal de las Casas as chill in ambience as it naturally is in climate, the coldest and cloudiest in the state of Chiapas.

We have been here for about two weeks, 7,000 feet up on the central highland plateau of Chiapas, and cold in some sense most of the time. At first, we roomed with a ladino family. Like most houses here, theirs bolstered the family's sense of European roots by aping Mediterranean architecture, but ignored some relevant differences in weather between the high mountains of Mayan America and the south coast of Mother Spain. The house is a rectangle of dark, concrete rooms unconnected with one another, all facing a central courtyard. Eaves and porticos keep the occasional powerful sunlight from warming the inner walls and most of the courtyard. Both doors to the kitchen, where the stove provides a little heat, open to the outdoors. Although the volcanic mountain ridges around the basin in which the city rests are forested with oak and pine, the only fireplaces we have seen so far are built into the snug villa of a resident Swiss dowager.

The rectangular design may have persisted here because it shuts out the life of the streets, the noise of the other population of San Cristóbal. Our former landlord swings open the wrought-iron gates just after dawn each morning and eases his polished Chevrolet onto the street, momentarily halting the line of Indians from distant villages hurrying by his doors towards the market. Most of them are women, some of them very old, bent under burdens of vegetables or charcoal slung on their backs in net carriers and supported by a wide strap taut across the forehead. They are so bowed that they can barely see ahead. He drives westward out of town along the Pan American Highway, one and a half hours to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the state capital, where he earns the means to live as he does in San Cristóbal.

By the time our dueño is at his desk, the Indians have reached the market. One stooped, gray woman has settled on a square meter of concrete outside the

market. She has twelve bunches of calla lilies to sell, cut before dawn near her thatched cabaña in the mountains. In the afternoon, when the market has closed, she will spend her earnings in ladino stores downtown for some of the things Indians depend on San Cristóbal merchants to provide— hats, hardware, votive candles and fireworks, ribbons, sugar, and liquor. At dusk she will begin her barefoot hike home. Hundreds of Indians make this daily migration. The nearest principal villages are six miles away.

On both sides of her sit younger women in nests of frayed woolen scarves and the nets of maguey fiber in which they brought their produce to market. The women are fifteen years old or so, each with an infant asleep in its sling hanging from the mother's shoulders. An older child is wandering barebottomed among the scallions and carrots. With one hand a mother digs for change in the folds of her shawl, and with the other absently gropes out a breast for her whining baby.

The men of these women come into town walking ahead of their families and often carrying lighter loads. They wear sandals; the women and some of the children go barefoot. The men congregate on the street where merchants buy Indian wares— textiles, leather goods, fiber mats and bags— to be resold to tourists or other Indians. Two young Zinacantán men were standing just outside a hardware store, craning in around the door jamb to see some lanterns hanging in the window. While an assistant measured out some nails for me, the middle-aged ladino proprietress leaned on the counter with both hands and stared out the window into the street, cold and damp like her store. She

answered "twenty-five pesos" in a flat voice when one man asked the price. She never looked at them. Her eyes were fixed at some middle distance. The two Indians talked it over in their own language, excited, moving from foot to foot.

"Twenty pesos," one offered with a sparkle in his eye.

"Twenty-five is the bottom price," she answered. It began to rain. They took two steps inside and looked at the lanterns up close.

"Twenty-two," one said.

"Twenty-five."

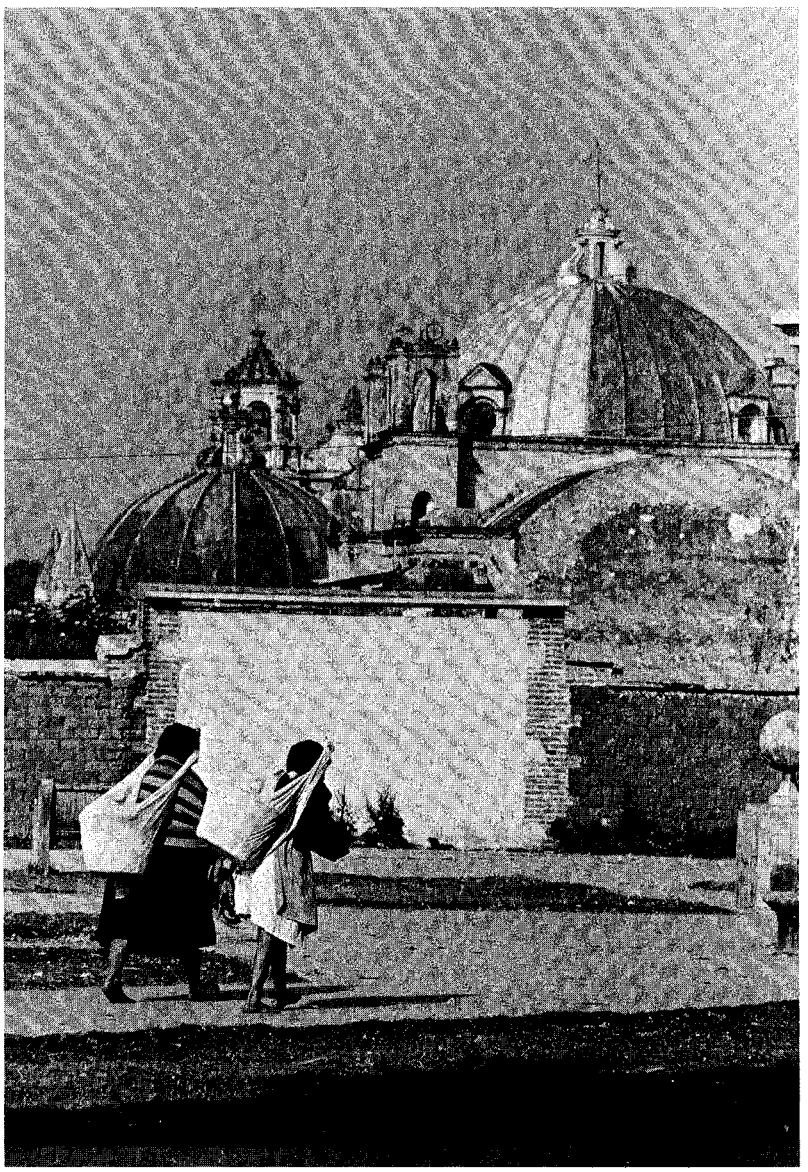
They hurried off down the street. As I left, she was still leaning there. She made me think of some of the British colonial shopkeepers among the blacks on little Harbour Island in the Bahamas, and the family that sells liquor to the Papagos at a trading post just off the reservation. They seem oppressed, like minor civil servants assigned to remote posts to serve people they fear and dislike. The proprietress needs the Indians' business, needs the food and charcoal and tourism they bring to San Cristóbal, just as they need her hardware. But she does not seem to be flourishing by the symbiosis. The ladinos act resigned, not content. They look puffy. The young ones have fine clothes and nothing to do. One couple drives around the narrow streets just honking their horn. It plays the first four bars of "La Cucaracha."

The Indians keep up their end of the apartheid, too. Winnie and I first felt it in our visit to San Juan Chamula soon after our arrival here. The Chamula Indians, more than 25,000 within a few miles of San Cristóbal, live in a pattern of population characteristically Mayan. Scattered widely over the tribe's territory are <u>parajes</u> of a few families each, surrounded by their pastures and cultivated lands. The <u>parajes</u> are affiliated with a ceremonial center that the people originally visited only for religious events and priest-directed secular affairs. After the Conquest, the Spanish wisely chose these ceremonial centers as the location for the headquarters (<u>cabecera</u>) of the municipal system of government they imposed on native Mexico. Now these centers include, besides government offices and the church, clinics, schools,

and the regional marketplace. Like other Mayan cabeceras, San Juan Chamula is populated only by officeholders and service personnel, largely a changing population whose real homes are out in the parajes. According to the 1960 census, 26,789 people lived in the municipio, of whom only 74 claimed residence in San Juan Chamula, the municipio's largest center of population.

Consequently, only on Sunday mornings-- market time-- and fiesta days is the broad, dirt quadrangle before the church filled with Chamulas. The weekday afternoon of our first visit there were only a few children and miserable dogs hanging around. As I walked toward the church, two Chamula men came out and set off four rockets, then ducked back inside. Otherwise it was still. I followed one of the two roads in town until I met the eyes of an old Chamula man puttering around the front of his house, two rooms of dark brown adobe.

We had the kind of conversation I keep having with Indians I meet casually. We agreed that it was a fine day and a nice town, and that the Estados Unidos



The Indians and ladinos distinguish themselves from one another unmistakably in dress. A Zinacantán man (left) wears a pink cotton tunic, blue kerchief with cerise yarn pom-poms, and a round, flat straw hat with multicolored ribbons dangling from it. Each tribe's dress is modeled on that of its patron saint.

are a very long way off to the north, and cold. His wife sat on the wooden floor of the porch, spinning thread from a mass of black wool at her side. She did not look up. I asked whether any ladinos or other outsiders lived in San Juan Chamula.

"Here there are only Chamulas," he said, "and in all the parajes around." He seemed surprised at my question, as if he thought that to be asking it I must have lost my way, must have entered the village unaware that it was Indian. (In fact that would be impossible. No one could drive the rutted, twisting road from San Cristóbal without guessing he had strayed from the Pan American Highway.)

"I only ask because we are interested in living in a place like this."

"Why?" he asked.

"We like it better than the city, San Cristóbal."

From this point, he stopped looking into my eyes and I began having trouble understanding his Spanish. He repeated that there were only Indians living in the municipio. When I asked why, he said the President of the municipio did not want outsiders there. If I wanted more information, I should ask the President.

The President's house is the fanciest in the village, red brick with a tin roof and well fitted glass windows. He was not there, nor any of his family. The shopkeeper next door cheerfully confirmed that the President wanted no outsiders in the municipio. If we had still doubted our unwelcome, we were given ample and unsolicited proof of it minutes later. Driving on beyond the village, a rock wall to the right of us and a sheer drop to the left, I saw in the valley

below two Chamula women weaving on long looms lashed to a tree among some gray boulders. Two little Chamulas were playing nearby, and farther off some black sheep grazed. I stopped to take in the scene and Winnie came around from her side. Then the women leaped up, threw down their looms, and ran for cover behind the rocks, abandoning children and sheep. According to their religion, Chamula women are right to run when they are surprised by a black-bearded man in a foreign car and woman alongside in pants. The Mayan tribes share a belief that espantos (ghosts) are lying in wait for everyone, ready to inflict melancholy or a broken ankle or death when least expected. We had the earmarks of espantos. Since that afternoon, we have heard about lots of friction between the cultures. More and more churches are closed to non-Indians. Gringo women are menaced with monkey-fur fertility symbols at Indian fiestas. Some children pelted friends of mine with rocks in one village when they refused to give them pesos. And so forth. It is the modern continuation of intercultural hostility begun by the Conquistadores and likely to continue until these Mayans are just Mexicans.

When the Spanish reached Chiapas in 1524, Mayan culture had long since declined in richness and influence. The nation that had once been preeminent in art, agriculture, and astronomy was disunited and scattered at the time of the Conquest, living in a continuous territory covering parts of what are today Guatemala, Belize (British Honduras), and the Mexican states of Tabasco, Yucatan, and Chiapas. They were farming the valleys and lower mountain slopes of the area around the San Cristóbal basin, and hunting deer, rabbit, coyote, and wild cats in the higher elevations. Since the Conquest, they have been pushed out of the warm, fertile valleys into the high mountains, and today one can walk for days up there without seeing a wild animal. Still, in part because of their retreat into inaccessible regions, these Mayans are ranked by anthropologists along with the Quechua-speaking tribes of Ecuador and Peru as the most extensive, distinctive surviving culture in the Americas. To endure so long they have had to withstand 450 years of abrasive relations with the Spaniards, ladinos, and, now, gringos.

First the Indians were subject to 200 years of feudalism. After subduing native resistance to the Church and Crown in New Spain, the conquistadores were rewarded with encomiendas, tracts of land together with their Indian inhabitants, from whom the encomenderos were authorized to exact tribute. (Bernal Diaz, definitive witness-chronicler

of the Conquest, received Chamula in encomienda.) The adventurers-turned-gentry balked at settling in the high mountains, but finally, to maintain control of their lands and vassals, established a capital in the cold uplands. That was San Cristóbal.

Early in the encomienda period, the first Bishop of San Cristobál and Chiapas, Fray Bartolemé de las Casas, and other Dominicans persuaded the Council of the Indies to declare the dissolution of encomiendas. The Dominicans pointed out that under Spanish law Indians were "free vassals of the Crown." Indian rights could be abridged only, said the Dominicans, in order to hasten their retarded religious development. By his advocacy of native rights and his refusal to confess slave-owning Spanish Catholics, Las Casas won the reputation in Mexican history of a defender of Indians. In fact, the encomiendas continued for 200 years. Furthermore, Las Casas did succeed in gaining royal support for the forced resettlement of Indians in central locations for ease of religious instruction. The traditional argument for encomiendas held that Indians should serve the Spaniards through that system in exchange for the blessings of Christianity, and Las Casas chose resettlement to help make good the bargain.

The Chamula boy at left is wearing the tunic of his tribe, made of faintly striped white wool. The mother is wearing the standard dress of Chamula women. According to the Mexican government, no one goes without shoes in the Republic today. Teams filming Indians are accompanied by censors, who see that they shoot from the ankles up.

With the abolition of encomiendas in 1720, Mayan traditions rallied a little. Then a series of laws promulgated in the nineteenth century by the newly independent state of Mexico returned the Indians to servitude. For example, the Ley Lerdo (1856) intended to remove Mexico's scarce arable lands from the domination ofthe Church and village corporations. (Returning the land to the little man has been a standard plank in Mexican attempts at reform.) In outlawing corporate ownership of land, the law destroyed Indian ejidos and, like the Allotment Act in the United States, allowed non-Indians to buy up tribal lands. The Indians generally stayed with their land as tenants under the harsh terms imposed by the new owners. They worked on hacienda land four days in seven and on their own, inferior plots the other three, barely enough to keep themselves and their families alive. Other Indians not tenants on the haciendas or coffee fincas worked there as debt-slaves. The hacendado would advance wages to a point of extreme indebtedness and require hard labor in exchange, often lasting the lifetime of the Indian. Sometimes would-be employers (the Indians call them enganchadores, ones who "hook" or ensnare) trapped Indians into debt servitude by giving them money in the presence of a witness and then exacting indefinite service, using the testimony of the witness to support their claims. I am told Indians here still avoid taking money from non-Indians in public, for fear of enganchadores.

Recently, as a result of federal and state assistance programs concentrated in the area around San Cristóbal, the Indian population has grown and their rights have been better protected. As they grow in number they are slowly--more slowly here than perhaps anywhere else in Mexico-- merging with the larger mestizo population. One Mayan tribe, the Lacandones, are not growing, not merging, but dying out. Gertrude Blom, who has made these Indians her specialty, her province, says there are only a few hundred left, and she guards them closely. They live deep within the dense lowland selva of eastern Chiapas, six days by foot or dugout canoe from the nearest town. As they vanish, they experience their own version of culture contact. Other Indians and the chicle interests are picking at their land. A Baptist missionary has set up a fully electric compound in their midst. Film teams fly in, guided by Mrs. Blom, who is in her seventies, the Swiss dowager I referred to above. And teams of tourists fly in for lunch in the jungle, and out again the same day, all arranged by Mrs. Blom. The Zone of the Lacandones is my next destination.

Sincerely,

Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on February 28, 1972