

## THE COSMOPOLITICS OF RIGHTS AND VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL MEXICO

*Catherine Whittaker*

*University of Edinburgh  
C.Whittaker-2@sms.ed.ac.uk*

One of the key interventions anthropology offers to the fields of human rights, gender rights, and environmental justice lies in decolonising the rights discourse by questioning the divisibility of these domains. In my 15 months of PhD fieldwork on the politics of indigeneity, gender, and violence among the Nahua of Milpa Alta, who live on the southern periphery of Mexico City, I have found that all these categories are spectral – they vanish when one takes indigenous points of view into account.

I was a participant observer in several indigenous women's cultural revitalization groups and followed the activities of Inmujeres, a government organization dedicated to eradicating violence against women. I found that Inmujeres' idea of women as victims of violence was undercut by Milpaltense ideas: Because the local gender ideology emphasises women's "strength", and violence is ambivalent in their philosophy, women are portrayed as resilient and as potentially violent perpetrators themselves.

For instance, a 64-year-old interlocutor emphasized that she was not a passive victim of her husband's, but that she had a choice to either selfishly leave at the cost of her children's and husband's wellbeing, or to virtuously work on changing her husband's conduct for the good of her whole family. Husband and wife need each other to get the work done which allows the family as a whole to survive and thrive. Similarly, husband and wife depend on each other to enact their complementary roles correctly, by reminding, coaxing, and, controlling each other. Throughout my research, both my male and female interlocutors frequently highlighted women's hard work, wisdom, and virtue, protecting their families and communities from all kinds of harm. Accordingly, few women seek the help of agencies for the prevention of violence against women, but those who do are taught an individualizing narrative of responsabilisation (i.e. taking responsibility for their situation) which places the burden of empowerment on them – similarly to Milpaltense discourse. Given the local importance of interdependence, Inmujeres' promotion of an individualist notion of women's empowerment also risks socially isolating the women accepting this approach – including the director of the local Inmujeres branch herself, who, as a single woman, lamented feeling lonely and afraid.

More importantly, violence against women is encompassed by greater spectres of violence as fighting not only their husbands, but also their peoples exploitation and marginalisation over the past 500 years of the "Communal Fight" to protect the sacred communal forest and waters. Because women have the image of fighters, rather than passive victims, intimate violence against women in Milpa Alta is often understood as an androgynous fight

between equally strong partners, rather than gender violence. This is not to deny that ongoing invasions, marginalisation, and the drug war do affect women differently from men. For example, pesticides kill male farm hands' bodies and the unsafe beauty-enhancement and abortion practices kill female bodies. But because cultural resilience may be valuable to indigenous women's resilience, the mislabelling of violence against women as "cultural violence" is dangerous in several respects: On the one hand, it perpetuates discriminatory views of indigenous people being violent, and on the other, it ignores valuable local violence-mediation strategies as well as wider problems affecting the community.

In Milpa Alta, indigenous women's as well as communal wellbeing strongly relies on cultural production groups, many of which are women-led. Much as in other indigenous contexts (Suzack and Huhndorf 2010: 12), such groups strengthen women's position in the community, as they allow women to foster networks of interdependence beyond their households and express their experiences and desires through multiple art forms, including storytelling, dance, and weaving. Particularly widows and divorcees found much-needed support in these groups, where they could both discuss their experiences or find distraction from these. Cultural production groups also strengthen the community's resilience in the face of state violence and the ongoing drug war, because they foster networks of solidarity and knowledge exchange about conflict mediation strategies. Conflicts are commonly mediated through practices built on the local values of love, empathy, discipline, and respect. For example, a middle-aged woman reported that her husband was hot-headed in the early days of their marriage, so they fought a lot, and if he did not like a dress she was wearing, he tore it apart. She said her husband's transformation into a kind, supportive partner was a process, but she eventually succeeded in making him "understand" her, which she described as letting him see things from her perspective, but also as developing an embodied understanding of her suffering. This empathy transformed their relationship completely. By working hard together, they managed to make a beautiful home. She concluded that love needs empathy to flourish, and a couple needs love to be productive. Other couples described a very similar process.

This is not to privilege a stance of cultural relativism over feminist approaches. There are a number of problematic assumptions at work in creating this division, and implied binary opposition, between feminists and cultural relativists. Not only do they assume that cultures and feminisms do not change and therefore cannot accommodate new ideas, but they are also rife with ethnocentrism and paternalism. What has often been described as a conflict between cultural and individual rights is a non-issue to many indigenous Mexican women, whose understanding of rights is "exclusively mutual", as Shannon Speed argues (2006: 2014). Therefore, they do not demand exclusive individual rights, such as women's rights as defined by the UN, because they cannot separate their experience as individuals from that of the collective. As a result, they not only challenge gender norms within their communities, but in doing so, also challenge the neoliberal logic of the Mexican state, which aims to promote individual rights and a particular, economy-friendly vision of multiculturalism in the name of protecting women.

Moreover, many Milpaltenses perceive their relationship with their environment, such as their mountains and rivers, to be sacred. For instance, when I went camping on a local mountain, San Miguel, with a group of shaman's apprentices, we formally asked the guardian of the mountain for permission to set up camp. For these Milpaltenses, mountains are not

simply part of their territory and thus something to be owned (that is, their property), but instead, sentient partners with people (cf. Sandstrom 1991).

Therefore, Milpaltenses speak of defending not only their “indigenous” rights and their environment, but also their values of living together (*convivencia*), love (*cariño*), and hospitality (*hospitalidad*). Milpaltenses live in a world of interdependent care, in which the communal territory is a sentient loved one (*ser querido*) with whom they share a reciprocal kin relationship. At the same time, Milpaltenses live in a globalised world, in which a eurocentric politico-legal framework has transformed all relationships between people and the environment in relationships between people negotiating property rights. In one moment, they may fulfil the deeply felt obligation to protect their forest as a manifestation of Mother Earth, in another they may send their sons to exploit the same forest to satisfy their family’s immediate material needs.

It is important to point out that differences between Amerindian worldviews and Euro-American ones should not be overdrawn. I highlight differences not to exoticise, but to call for a plural, more fluid understanding of rights in the vein of what has been called “afflowative action” at the workshop. Thus, I argue that it is not enough for anthropology to support affirmative action in South America and beyond, but it must also engage critically with the ethnocentric way affirmative action itself has been framed.

Even in Uruguay, where no Amerindian people have survived, the water activists we met on the workshop participant’s excursion to the Río Santa Lucia spoke of their relationship with the threatened river as a loving kin relation: “The river is our mother.” Their worldview, which linked human rights with environmental sustainability, clashed with the view of water treatment plant representatives, whom they accused of polluting the river. The plant representatives instead highlighted their efforts to protect human rights by providing potable water for Uruguayan households at affordable prices.

To conclude, the strength of anthropology lies in mapping out larger connections, witnessing, and facilitating communication between different sides and actors, while also highlighting challenges, risks, and paradoxes. One such challenge regards the Eurocentric framing of the rights discourse. As Abu-Lughod (2002) puts it, it is too late for us not to get involved. We could leave Milpaltenses and other Amerindian people to their own affairs, citing cultural relativism, but that would be tantamount to refusing to acknowledge our partial responsibility for their life conditions.

My key suggestion for policy makers consists in tailoring government interventions to local needs and taking different worldviews into account. For instance, when I asked Milpaltenses what they want, they widely responded that violence against women is negligible compared to other issues affecting Milpaltense quality of life, such as pollution, corruption, institutional racism, unemployment, diabetes, and rising crime levels. Government funds would be helping women more effectively if they prioritized attending to their unmet basic needs, instead of undermining the kin networks they not only depend on in material and social terms, but which are the very focus of their life world.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ABU-LUGHOD, LILA. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others". *American Anthropologist*, 104(3): 783-790.
- MERRY, SALLY ENGLE. 2009. *Gender Violence: A Cultural Perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- SANDSTROM, ALAN R. 1991. *Corn Is Our Blood: Culture and Ethnic Identity in a Contemporary Aztec Indian Village*. University of Oklahoma Press.
- SPEED, SHANNON. 2006. Rights at the Intersection: Gender and Ethnicity in Neoliberal Mexico. In: *Dissident Women: Gender and Cultural Politics in Chiapas*, edited by Shannon Speed, R. Aida Hernández Castillo, and Lynn M. Stephen, pp. 203-221. Texas University Press.
- SUZACK, CHERYL and SHARI M. HUHNDORF. 2010. Indigenous Feminism: Theorizing the Issues. In: *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, edited by Cheryl Suzack et al., pp. 1-17. UBC Press.