

Flexible Looms: Weavers' Organizations In Chiapas, Mexico

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ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the way in which the flexibilization of the Mexican economy has been accompanied by neoliberalism as its mode of regulation, and the importance that macroeconomic changes have had for indigenous weavers in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Under the new regime of flexible accumulation, old forms of work are making a comeback. Indigenous organizations are adapting to the new times, with the help of non-indigenous advisors. Using examples from the field, this paper examines the opportunities and constraints weavers' cooperatives are facing in Chiapas, under flexible accumulation capitalism.

Introduction

Recent debates on post-industrial capitalism (Bell 1976; Castells 1997, 1998; Gorz 1992; Harvey 1990; Lash and Urry 1994; Urry 1990) point at the salience of knowledge, the service industry and the semiotization of goods as characterizing current economic phenomena. At the end of the 20th century

and the beginning of the 21st, we are witnessing the victory of old forms of work organization and old patterns of social relations over the highly structured and massive productive forces of Fordist production (Maffesoli 1996; Mingione 1991). Old ways to organize work, including home work, clientelistic relations and religious and ethnic loyalties, have proven both resilient and flexible enough to support an increasingly growing sector of the world economy. In an era of rapidly shifting social and economic contexts, where communications and transportation have shrunk our common experience of time and distance, money has invaded most spheres of everyday life.

The local shapes this global context takes are highly heterogeneous, especially when, as in Chiapas, great disparities continue to prevail between the urbanized areas and the highly rural countryside, between indigenous and non-indigenous people, and between men and women. This paper gives an overview of weavers' organizations in Chiapas, Mexico, to show how they operate in the current context of flexible accumulation and neoliberal economics and politics.

David Harvey (1990) proposes that capitalism is undergoing a process of radical change since the beginning of the 1970s, as the motor of the economy shifts from the great industrial complexes to relatively small and medium-size production outfits. These outfits enter the market under corporations' demand for subcontractors, or responding directly to the consumer market. According to Harvey (1990: 155), in the late 20th century: "Economies of scope have beaten out economies of scale." Following Lipietz (1986 in Harvey 1990: 121-122), Harvey thinks that the changes in the *regime of accumulation* have been accompanied by concomitant changes in the *mode of social and political regulation*. That is, the new forms of production and commercialization are made possible by a new cultural, legal and social context, which creates the material and ideological conditions for their reproduction.

Here I take the approach that the current process of flexibilization sweeping the Mexican economy is made possible by the social and political process called *neoliberalismo* in Mexico (and neoconservatism in other parts of the world). By this process, the national state is withdrawing from many of its previous functions in the realms of politics and economics, even as it seems to take on new functions of social control (see John Gledhill's contribution to this collection). During the last three decades (and especially after 1982) Mexicans have experienced major economic changes, as once-large employers now seek to operate efficiently with as few employees as possible. Some of the best jobs of the past have been lost during this process. There are still large industrial plants, such as the giant Volkswagen manufacturing plant in Puebla, the *maquiladora* shops that mushroom along the Mexico-U.S. border and throughout the countryside (for example, in the state of Yucatan), industrial plants related to electricity and oil production, and others. However, large industrial complexes are becoming more the exception than the norm.¹ The restructuring of the public sector has also meant that government-related jobs have become scarcer since 1987 and that thousands of former government employees have lost their jobs (OECD 1997: 90-91; see also extpb/trends96.html in the World Bank homepage). As Mingione (1991) points out regarding the survival strategies of families in Italy and Latin America, it is not necessarily that many other kinds of work are taking shape, but that old forms of income considered "supplementary" or "informal" in the past are becoming increasingly important in the lives of many individuals and families.

If at one point agriculturists and the unemployed were considered potential industrial workers, and young professionals could expect to become salaried white-collar employees, today everyone is asked to think of him or herself as a potential small entrepreneur. Mexican small producers, in turn, are being asked to target the domestic or the international market or,

if possible, both at the same time. This might seem like an abstract goal, but many rural producers have internalized it already. For example, a rural teacher from the municipality of Chilón, Chiapas, told me last year when we were discussing the concept of gift-giving in a high school class, that gift-giving and fiestas make people poor, people should learn to always sell what they produce, and everyone should learn how to export one's production.

In another example, a group of agriculturists in Jalisco asked an anthropologist to write a manual for the export of agricultural products, and to publish it as part of his research findings (González and Calleja 1998). Also, I have been asked by representatives of weavers' organizations to help them design and produce export catalogues that can be posted as internet web pages. Unfortunately, other than spurring in people the wish to become entrepreneurs, no one seems to be implementing programs to help them do so. As a result, many small and micro-entrepreneurs have taken to the informal economy, much to the dislike of the national and regional authorities and to the detriment of the working conditions prevalent in the general job market (Castells and Portes 1989; Dávila Capalleja 1997; OECD 1997; Roberts 1989).

Along with the major changes taking place in the job markets, government policies have gone from the state's relatively tighter control of the national economy and welfare programs between the 1940s the 1970s, to a situation where the state is progressively withdrawing from economic, social and cultural life. As of the 1980s, the state has progressively relinquished ownership of important companies in many economic sectors. These have included transport (airlines, buses, railroads and city buses in Mexico city), finances (saving funds and banks), communications (telephones, television and radio stations), industry (oil refineries and processing plants of different kinds) and basic infrastructure (roads and airports) (Martínez and Faber 1994; OECD 1997; Banco de México 1999).

Although there have been many problems and failures, such as those that led the government to purchase many toll roads back from private investors in 1998, the government's presence has waned. This new state of things is usually referred to as "*neoliberalismo*," which some Mexicans see as a good thing and others as a bad one. Whatever the prevailing opinions, the fact is that the state has downsized its welfare and subsidy programs, leaving destitute peasants and poor city dwellers alike to make do as best as they can, with little or no institutional help. It is no wonder, therefore, that charity funds, non-governmental organizations and national and international foundations have come to play an important role in the lives of many poor people, as they have moved toward the spaces left by the state and its institutions (Méndez 1998).

But if *neoliberalismo* has meant a loss of security, it has also meant a rise of opportunities. As Harvey suggests, the "economies of scope" target specific types of customers. Production forms such as labor-extensive agriculture and home manufacturing are now encouraged, both by the mass media and by government agencies, as viable economic options. Accordingly, self-styled micro- and small entrepreneurs are trying to target niche markets. Cooperatives, small businesses and individual entrepreneurs look for ways to fashion their products in ways that will make them appealing to specific types of consumers. Information on consumers' tastes and fashion trends has become vital even for the smallest producers, including peasants.

Peasant families and indigenous people living in cities used to supplement their income through the sale of handmade items inspired by the ones they used at home or by the objects found in the ruins of ancient cities. These objects, considered "folk art" by the general public, were aimed at two different internal markets. They were purchased by people who wanted inexpensive items mainly because of their use value, or they were bought by intellectuals, professionals and tourists, who

collected indigenous craft items and ethnic clothing as symbols of Mexican national identity or as reminders of a place and time left behind (Novelo 1993: 44-48). Since the 1940s the Mexican state, first through the federal agency which is assigned the responsibility for indigenous people in Mexico (INI) and later through government agencies (such as the Mexican Bank of International Trade and the National Fund for the Arts [FONAPAS and later FONART]) began to promote folk art (*artesanías*) as an important income-generating activity (Enciclopedia de México 1996, Vol II, pp. 620-628; García Canclini 1982; Novelo 1976, 1993). The term *artesanías* progressively became synonymous with handmade objects produced by indigenous people for the market, to the exclusion of other hand-made objects such as work implements and anything made by urban nonindigenous people (Novelo 1976: 47-92; Novelo 1993: 44-46).

Today the *artesanía* market has grown to encompass, besides indigenous folk art, expensive art work produced by artists of international fame. This is the case, for example, of Sergio Bustamante's sculptures (which sell for hundreds or even thousands of dollars), fine gold and silver jewelry made after "traditional" patterns in Guerrero and Yucatán, Huichol bead art that graces expensive galleries and gift shops, objects such as Zapotec weavings imitating New Mexican Indian carpets, amber sculptures from Chiapas and *alebrije* figurines from Oaxaca signed by individual artists. The bulk of *artesanía* production, however, still consists mainly of the handmade objects crafted by indigenous people and, as I describe below for the state of Chiapas, it is still subsidized to some extent by government authorities (INI 1994). At this point, however, the organizations known as *cooperativas de artesanos* (crafters' cooperatives) have reached hundreds of individual crafters throughout Chiapas and are taking over tasks previously performed by government agencies only.

Government-related support for such crafts is now one among several types of options open to these indigenous producers. In the current climate of *neoliberalismo* urban and rural entrepreneurship are resulting in new strategies to direct local *artesanías*, and especially brocaded textiles, to the international folk art market. In Chiapas, weavers' organizations, locally known as "weavers' cooperatives" (*cooperativas de tejedoras*), are playing a crucial role in the production of new images and reframing of textiles for their commercialization in international consumer circuits.

Weavers' Organizations in Chiapas

The turn toward economies of scope has affected Chiapas much less than other regions of the country, since heavy industry never was economically important in this state. However, old forms of work organization and commercialization strategies are having to update themselves quickly, in view of ebbing government support, the rise of nongovernment support, and the new configuration of national and international markets. Grassroots organizations are rapidly learning how to write and submit grant proposals and reports, as they compete for moneys from charity funds and international nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Indigenous organizations are experimenting with new concepts of merchandising. Some communities are selling carbon stock bonds to polluting companies that agree to pay for the maintenance of Chiapas forests. Others are engaged in the production of certified organic foodstuffs and their advertisement on the internet. Indigenous weavers are catching up to the times too, as they find themselves catering to a rapidly changing and highly demanding market. To do so they have joined in collective organizations that help them reach far-away markets and have access to the international donor community.

The state of Chiapas, Mexico, has long been a laboratory for rural independent associations and social organizations, even before the famous neo-Zapatista uprising of 1994. Popular organizations in Chiapas began to take shape during the 1920s, in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution (Benjamin 1989; García de León 1981; Grollová 1995). The relative isolation of Chiapas from the rest of Mexico, however, has meant that the fate of grassroots organizations tends to depend on the avatars of regional politics more than on national social movements. It was apparently in the 1940s when local *caciques* (local political bosses) emerged in the indigenous communities of Chiapas, becoming the sole mediators between the people they supposedly represented and the outside (Benjamin 1989; Pineda 1993).

It was also during the 1940s that the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), the ministry in charge of turning Indians into Mexicans, began to support indigenous mobilization in Chiapas, including the emergence of indigenous organizations. In the 1950s INI began to let go of its direct financial control of indigenous organizations, to give these more autonomy over their own workings and decision-making processes (Benjamin 1989: 201-204; INI 1994: 98-99; Köhler 1975; Novelo 1993). In the 1970s, under Bishop Samuel Ruiz, the Catholic Church spurred a new wave of indigenous organization (Leyva 1995). At least since the 1980s the Catholic Parish of San Cristóbal began to direct outside funding to local indigenous projects (Benjamin 1989; interview with a social activist, 1993). Also, in the 1970s the national government of Mexico began to fund local organizations and political coalitions (Harvey 1995), in the context of what Jonathan Fox (1992) has described as a Janus-faced game of funding the organizations while punishing their members and leaders.²

The structure of weavers' cooperatives in Chiapas retains, still today, most of the elements present in the model set in the 1950s and refined in the 1970s by INI (Novelo 1976). It was

further adapted to Chiapas' economic conditions in the 1970s and 1980s by government agents, religious activists and volunteers. That is, the organizations have direct or in-house advisors who work with indigenous regional leaders. These regional leaders, in turn, are in touch with local leaders, who represent the interests of an indigenous community or a section of it. Many indigenous organizations rely extensively for their operations on external funding. This funding comes from government sources, individuals, religious orders or, more recently, international foundations.³

The structure here outlined should be seen not as a vertical hierarchy (although there is always the risk of its becoming one) but rather as a horizontal, space-situated communication exchange circuit. In the larger organizations, such as the largest weavers' cooperatives, the members of the organization meet periodically with their local representatives, who are interspersed within each municipality. These representatives then meet with one or more regional leaders, who have a direct relationship with the organization's advisor. In the case of weavers' organizations, the advisor generally lives in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, if he or she works for the regional or federal government, or in San Cristóbal de las Casas, if the organization is a semi-independent one.

This type of structure has proven flexible enough to articulate economic or political endeavors (or more often, the two of them at the same time). Direct or in-house advisors, indigenous leaders, local leaders and the organization's members (locally known as "the base" [*la base*]) have distinct functions and roles to play. Two tiers of indigenous leadership communicate the demands and proposals generated by the organization's membership to the non-indigenous advisors. The advisors, in turn, are in charge of communicating with possible funding sources, supervising the overall organization, and translating between the foundations and the public on the one hand and the indigenous producers on the other. This structure produces a sys-

tem of checks and balances that may benefit the organization as a whole. The prominent role of the advisors and leaders, however, often results in factions vying for power over the entire organization. Factional differences have led to the fragmentation of many local organizations into two or more groupings and to their final breakup into other organizations.

Indigenous weavers' associations in Chiapas are not an exception to this model. They are usually coordinated by a government agent, a well-meaning individual or group of social activists, or an independent organization of development advisors. These advisors, or advising teams, bring together people from different municipalities. They make them see their common concerns and the advantages they could derive from membership in an organization. Once the organization is established, the advisors are in charge of drafting projects, supervising the management of funds and mediating between the organization and non-indigenous society. Indigenous leaders and representatives are in charge of supervising the advisors' activities, representing the organization at national and international events and maintaining the flow of communication among the association's members and between them and the advisors. The organization's membership is in charge of supplying the textiles that are sold at the organizations' stores. These textiles are then promoted within and beyond the country by the leaders and advisors, with the help of national and international agencies and foundations.

Besides these people involved in the everyday workings of the organization, a host of local and foreign visitors, activists, volunteers and interested buyers visit the organizations' stores and shops, and even the houses of the members in the indigenous villages where they live. Members of indigenous organizations in Chiapas have progressively learned to accept these visits as either a necessary evil or, after the neo-Zapatista rebellion, an advantage in the face of possible government or paramilitary aggression.

For indigenous people in Chiapas the proliferation of political and social business organizations, along with the religious conflicts that have arisen since the 1960s, have meant the end of any possible traditional, birth-ascribed *Gemeinschaft* that might have existed in the recent past. In indigenous communities today, when one joins or does not join an indigenous organization, or any non-indigenous organization for that matter, one is making a conscious choice of social and political ascription. Organizations of all types have become so ubiquitous in Chiapas that no contemporary adult in indigenous areas of the state can aspire to remain outside their influence for very long.

The choices of organization also imply political declarations of allegiance. This is particularly sharp in the case of weavers' organizations. A weaver who is a member of *Jpas Joloviletik* has made the choice to stay close to government aid programs. Instead, weavers who broke away from that organization to join a new one risk, in the current context of social conflict that has ensued after the Zapatistas uprising, identification as enemies of the government. Furthermore, a weaver who chooses to remain aloof from the indigenous organizations and decides to sell her weavings to private craft stores risks being criticized and being left out of important economic opportunities by other weavers in her community who have chosen to be members of semi-independent organizations.

Formally, there are two different types of weavers' associations. The first type would encompass those that emerged in close relationship with one or more government agencies. There are three main agencies currently involved in the funding and supervision of weavers' organizations. These are the National Indigenous Institute (INI); a federal agency called *Dirección para la Infancia y la Familia* or DIF (Department for Childhood and the Family); and *Casa de las Artesanías* (The House of Crafts), the Chiapas government's department for the promotion and quality control of regional crafts. Besides INI (which currently

operates jointly with the Secretary of Social Development, SEDESOL), two federal agencies, *Culturas Populares* [Bureau of Folk Culture] and FONART (*Fondo para Nacional para el Fomento a las Artesanías* [National Fund for the Promotion of Crafts]) are in charge of funding cultural projects and specific aspects of the production and marketing of crafts. These include regional and national contests of textile and other popular art forms, and meetings where artisans can get together to discuss common problems and possible solutions.

All these agencies fund and help organize training workshops in basic accounting, the use of natural dyes, and other subjects related to the production and marketing of crafts and the management of small businesses. *Casa de las Artesanías* procures raw materials for crafters at subsidized prices, and then buys from the crafters' organizations the best of their production (Ichín Santiesteban 1999). The *Casa* sells the products it collects through its own stores in Chiapas and other parts of Mexico and through other government channels, including FONART and FONAES (see <http://www.foanes.gob.mx/areas> and <http://www.tpsa.gov.cn/fair/disk/fonart.htm>). Advisors working with government-funded organizations usually are part of government agencies and tend to work with two or more similar organizations.

The second type of weavers' organization encompasses independent associations that have broken off, at least to some extent, from government funding and official advisors. They tend to rely on monies obtained through the sale of crafts, the donations or loans in-house advisors can procure from national and international foundations, and individual donations. These organizations have in-house advisors who are paid from the general operating budget of the organizations, or else have advisors who work with them from small consulting organizations, locally called NGOs, that specialize in development projects.⁴

Although advisors working with the weavers often stress the difference between government-supported and independent weavers' organizations, in terms of their actual operation it is difficult to make a clear-cut distinction between these two types of organizations. This is so because the semi-independent ones may rely on government funding or government programs to some extent, while the official organizations may be connected to semi-independent organizations in more than one way. For example, an official organization may sell some of its products to a semi-independent one. The two might also be connected through the simultaneous membership of individual craft producers in both official and non-official organizations. Also, the best crafters of Chiapas, whatever the organizations they are members of, always participate in the Chiapas state contests of popular arts, which are annually sponsored by the state's government.

However, there is a structural difference at the heart of the official/semi-independent divide. Government agents who work as advisors to these organizations are salaried government employees, enjoying the benefits of formal employment (including health benefits, retirement pension, housing benefits and paid vacations), while the weavers do not enjoy any of these benefits. In the semi-independent organizations, instead, both advisors and weavers work with no social security or employment benefits.

The best-known organizations of weavers (*Sna Jolobil*, *Jpas Joloviletik* and now *Jolom Mayaetic*) have their headquarters in San Cristóbal de las Casas, but it is practically impossible to separate Highlands' organizations from others. Those organizations with headquarters in San Cristóbal de las Casas receive the crafts produced in local organizations based in other parts of the state, including the Lowlands, the North, the Centre and the Sierra regions. For example, Doña Teresita, the representative of a local organization in the center of Chiapas, takes the fine textiles produced there to *Sna Jolobil*, a semi-independent

organization with headquarters in San Cristóbal de las Casas, for them to be sold at this latter organization's store.⁵

Beyond the different relationship with government agencies, the scale of operations makes it possible to distinguish among different organizations. Some organizations are locally based and deal with government and other agencies directly, while others are vertically integrated into a larger association that encompasses local groups in several municipalities. This latter is the case, for example, of organizations like *Sna Jolobil*, *Jpas Joloviletik* and *Jolom Mayaetic*, which draw their large membership from dozens of localities in six or more municipalities. There are hundreds of members in these organizations. Other organizations, such as *Mujeres en Pie de Lucha* in Tenejapa's main settlement, or *Jpas Luchetic* in San Andrés Larráinzar, draw their membership from only a few settlements in the same municipality or, at most, from settlements relatively close to the cooperative's store. Membership in these associations hardly ever includes more than 50 women.

Textile production has long been part of household chores among the indigenous families of Chiapas. It already existed at the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and it has continued to be one of the main activities women perform as part of the gendered division of family labor. Some of the textile motifs indigenous women in Chiapas create today were already documented in the glyphs and stone stellae of the Mayan pyramids. The allure of Chiapanec textiles draws on this historical connection with the ancient Maya as much as on the vivacious colors of the yarn from which they are made. Furthermore, the reintroduction of natural dyes for the coloring of yarn in the 1970s, plus the commercial promotion of the textiles as remnants of the ancient past (Morris 1991), has invested the Chiapas-made clothes, fabrics and textile pieces showcased at local and international outlets, with a timeless respectability attractive to tourists and art collectors alike.

Tourism and the international demand for textiles from Chiapas have created a market incentive for thousands of women weavers throughout the state. The weavers and other women whose work is related to textiles now see their craft as a way to produce marketable goods and have a cash income to contribute to their families' subsistence. This means that many women go to sleep well beyond midnight and get up before dawn, every day, in order to keep up their craft work besides fulfilling their duties as daughters, wives or mothers. The harsh schedules these women impose on themselves take a toll on their health. Women weavers try to strike a balance between their need for cash, and thus the hours they dedicate to weaving, and the needs for rest and time in other activities. In the words of Doña Francisca, an *artesana* from the municipality of Venustiano Carranza:

Necesitamos nuestra salud. No queremos morir. Por verlo [por] nuestros hijos. Es un problema [velar por] nuestros hijos, las necesidades [de ellos]. Por eso es lo que estamos haciendo. [We need our health. We do not want to die. We have to look after our children because our main interests are our children and their needs. This is why we do it.]

The commercial profits weaving and textile production in general are bringing to the Chiapanec countryside have become an important cash source for many families. The niche market for indigenous textiles, however, is easily clogged, as they compete with similar crafts from other parts of the world and other indigenous groups around the globe. For the weavers this competition is ever present and conspicuous, as Guatemalan textiles and crafts are cheaper than Mexican ones in the markets of San Cristóbal de las Casas and other parts of Chiapas.

In 1995 a group of social workers from the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (COMAR) invited me to visit refugee camps and help organize a weavers' cooperative that

could be accepted by existing weavers' organizations in Chiapas. One of the main problems, they explained, was that the refugees were willing to charge less for their textiles than Mexican weavers would, and they were being accused of dumping their products on local markets. If they raised the prices of their products, they said, they could not compete in the regional market with Guatemalan products made in Guatemala. As a result, it was difficult for them to find adequate market outlets within Chiapas, and they did not know how they could export.⁶

Commercial bottlenecks are something the weavers have become increasingly aware of, as they see their textiles in international catalogues and international craft exhibits side by side with other items from around the world (see, for example, the International Trade Organization's virtual exhibit at <http://www.tpsa.gov.cn/fair/disk/textile.htm>). They have learned that even though there is an intrinsic value to their textiles (as they and I believe there is) the consumer can choose from among a myriad of options, many of which are cheaper than what their own organizations have to offer. In this context, some urban fashion designers are trying to show the weavers and other handmade clothes manufacturers how to make their products more appealing to all consumers. In *Jpas Joloviletik*, *Junk'u*, *Unión de Cooperativas de la Selva* and the sewing workshop at *Fundación Leon XIII*, for example, there are new lines of clothing that incorporate native designs in contemporary urban formats such as t-shirts, blouses, shirts and jackets, in an effort to court the general public and not only the textile collector. I want to turn now to a closer focus on a weavers' organization, *Sna Jolobil*, to give the reader a general idea of the opportunities and problems such organizations face.

Knowledge, Transnational Brokers and the Economy of Representation: *Sna Jolobil*, a Weavers' Cooperative

Sna Jolobil, probably the first and most successful weavers' organization, developed in the 1970s when a group of young anthropology students, social activists working for the government, and indigenous weaver Pedro Meza were working together for FONART, one of the Mexican government agencies in charge of funding and marketing crafts. According to Pedro Meza, who is the current president of the organization, in 1974 FONART opened a store in San Cristóbal de las Casas. Martha Turok, a Mexican anthropologist who had come to Chiapas invited by Evon Vogt to join the Harvard Chiapas project, organized a small crafters' cooperative called *Tzotzeku' Me*. Turok began to study what the motifs in weavings from the Chiapas Highlands meant. She was a friend of Walter Morris, a student who was then in charge of buying textiles for FONART's store in San Cristobal, and told him of her findings on the symbols of the weavings. The cooperative Turok had formed and the local marketing groups FONART helped create were, according to Pedro, two important experiences that showed crafters they could organize around the commercialization of their art.

Walter Morris was later commissioned by Francesco Pellizzi, an anthropologist who had done work in Chiapas, to form a collection of Chiapanec textiles (see Pellizzi 1993). Morris had become very interested in the symbols and possible meanings of the weavings' motifs, and he embarked on a project of his own to interpret the symbols the women from the Highlands wove on their clothes (see Morris 1984 and Morris and Foxx 1987). Meza had learned from Susana Bauz, a woman from the U.S. who was learning how to weave, to draw the motifs of the weavings on paper. Morris liked Pedro's drawings and hired him to help in classifying the textiles he was collecting for Pellizzi.

Pedro Meza recalls that a group of craftsmen decided, after the Indigenous Peoples' Congress in San Cristobal de las Casas in 1976, to set up a Sunday market in San Cristobal to sell their crafts.⁷ This market would transform, with help from Morris and the good offices of Pedro Meza as a translator and weaver, into the *Sna Jolobil* crafters' cooperative, which eventually featured mostly textiles and fine cloth items from the Highlands and other regions of Chiapas.

Morris (1996: 37) describes the beginnings of *Sna Jolobil* as follows:

Sna Jolobil grew out of a Mexican Government program, the Foundation for the Promotion of Folk Art (FONART), which opened a regional office in 1974. Within a year, three thousand weavers and potters formed production groups throughout the Highlands. FONART bought directly from artisans and sold Chiapas textiles and ceramics through its chain of stores in Mexico City and along the U.S. border. The goals of the agency shifted after the presidential elections of 1976, when the new government tried to convert FONART into a business and sharply reduced the outright purchases of crafts.

In response, leaders of the production groups established an independent cooperative, *Sna Jolobil*, which opened a shop in a restored colonial building in San Cristóbal in 1978. Two years later, *Sna Jolobil* had six hundred members in twelve major communities, and its annual sales of \$100,000 matched FONART's purchases at their height. *Sna Jolobil* was a unique success, both as an indigenous artisan cooperative and as a "privatization" of a government business. *Sna Jolobil* received the Prize of Art and Science in the field of Folk Art in 1986.

Today, *Sna Jolobil* has some 800 hundred members, mainly in the municipalities of Chamula, Huistán, San Andrés Larraínzar, Venustiano Carranza and Zinacantan. Most of them are women weavers. The organization makes over US\$5,000 a year in profits, more than any other crafters' organization in the Highlands

or anywhere in Chiapas.⁸ *Sna Jolobil* has helped weavers and other artisans understand the value of their crafts as potential commodities. It can be affirmed that this organization was the original one of its kind and has been a model for the creation and consolidation of similar organizations in this state of Mexico.

The economic success of *Sna Jolobil* can be attributed, in looking at similar organizations based in San Cristóbal de las Casas, to the fact that it does not intend to function as a cooperative but, rather, as a business. While other organizations take crafts on consignment and have a hard time keeping track of what has been sold and to whom it belonged, *Sna Jolobil* buys outright from the artisans, if their products meet the quality standards demanded by the board. *Sna Jolobil* tries to make a profit on the sale of crafts, while other organizations try to accomplish more social-oriented tasks and then compensate their economic deficits with grants, loans and donations from the outside. *Sna Jolobil* does receive grants and loans. The board invests these monies in quality raw materials, and in *becas* (grants). Through these grants, the weavers come to San Cristóbal to learn motifs from ancient textiles, and to take short courses where the older weavers teach the younger ones how to do the most difficult weavings.

The qualification of "cooperative" which the board and many of the artisans attach to the organization has little to do with the ways in which the organization operates. In cooperatives structured according to the international cooperative movement's principles and methods, the highest authority is the General Assembly, where all the members have the right to vote on matters that are important for the operation of the organization (Prandini 1982). In *Sna Jolobil* most of the "members" never attend meetings in San Cristóbal because, from the very beginning, it was decided that only the local representatives in charge of collecting the crafts produced by a group of artisans should come to *Sna Jolobil* periodically. Otherwise,

according to Morris (1991), the authority of the local representatives would be undermined.

Another reason why *Sna Jolobil* has been so successful has to do with the ideological construction, collectively generated and consciously encouraged by Morris, of indigenous textiles and other crafts as forms of art (see Morris 1991). Before the mid-1960s, when there were not many tourists in Chiapas, women made clothes, including weavings, for family use. The process whereby weavings, pottery and other types of crafts were transformed into signifiers standing for the tradition and ancient knowledge of indigenous peoples ("Maya," as characterized by academics and tourism entrepreneurs) has created an image of these crafts that can be readily commercialized for export. Through the same process, the rural people of the Highlands themselves have been rhetorically transformed again into "Indians," a category that had been coined during Colonial times. The re-Indianization of these populations gained currency first through anthropology and INI's programs, then through the tourist industry and more recently as a result of the social mobilization in the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising. These processes of redefinition of people and the commodities they sell tells more about the recent changes in Western sensitivity than about anything inherent in the cultural practices and cultural products of the people creating these artifacts.

The impact that tourism, the new social movements, the work of social activists and the postmodern quest for authenticity have had on the lives of indigenous peoples in Chiapas should not be underestimated (Ayora-Diaz in press). The very perception of Chiapas and especially of indigenous communities as remote, has lead indigenous organizations to acquire typically postmodern characteristics, as their members have to portray themselves in ways that make sense to foreign visitors looking for the authentic and the exotic and now have begun to make sense to local people themselves.

Conclusion: Weavers' Organizations in Contemporary Capitalism

Under the new forms of flexible capitalism, small and micro-entrepreneurs from all corners of the world are made to compete against one another for a piece of the same niche markets, without safety nets. Chiapas weavers find that they have to choose from different possible images of themselves, according to the market they intend to target. They can choose to become the makers of magical objects based on a timeless traditional knowledge (as they do in *Sna Jolobil*). Or they can be poor women who need support from international supporters (as they do in several other *cooperativas*). Or else they can choose to make useful items for the general public (as they do in *Unión de Cooperativas de la Selva*), taking the risk of competing, only armed with their own subjective beauty standards, in the general market. Here they have to sell against crafts persons from other parts of the world and against mechanized manufacture outfits that can put out large quantities of weavings for cheaper prices. The options are relatively limited because of the few possible niche markets to which they cater.

As Harvey (1990) suggests, the flexible accumulation regime is couched by a new, specific mode of regulation. In Mexico flexible accumulation goes by the hand of *neoliberalismo*. The revitalization of indigenous producers' organizations is one of the few possibilities that people in Chiapas have to enter the money market and gain some control over the commercialization of their own products. The limitations to this control are great, as they have to do with the avatars of international markets, the rapidly changing tastes of consumers, the intentions of small and micro-producers in other parts of the nation and the world, and on the good offices of non-indigenous advisors, none of which factors the producers can determine. Chiapas weavers are being forced to acquire a good

knowledge of their possible markets, to transform their textiles into marketable symbols that transcend them as persons, and to compete internationally with people they have never met.

In any case, even if the weavers' options are relatively limited when it comes to having to weave for the market, their organizations are flourishing in the context of state withdrawal from old-style development projects. While the government is decreasing its subsidies to agricultural production, the weavers do expand their markets through membership in these new organizations, and learn to become entrepreneurs who market their own cultural heritage. The state seems to welcome, or at least tolerate, the proliferation of such organizations, as they fulfill duties the state is now unwilling or unable to perform. Where in the past the handmade craft market was seen as a supplementary income generator (Novelo 1993), now it is being allowed to flourish so that many families can rely on it almost entirely for their subsistence. Since they rely on educated advisors who act as mediators between the weavers and the public, including textile buyers and possible donors, Chiapas weavers' organizations are at the crossroads of urban intellectuals' good will and indigenous peoples' dexterity and ideas of beauty. So, while the everyday art of indigenous people is being promoted, these organizations are now part of the networks of international development aid, which in Chiapas have become even more important after 1994. In this context, entrepreneurship also includes the soliciting of financial help.

Some of the problems besetting these organizations have to do with their long-term viability. Many of the programs they actually run and benefits their members enjoy (medical services supply, periodical distribution of food and clothing among the weavers, workshops on natural dyes, family planning and human rights, high textile prices derived from the solidarity market) are tenable only as long as outside funding continues to flow in and help patch up economic problems.

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NOTES

- 1 According to the OECD 1997 economic survey, the economic importance of industrial manufacturing began to decrease in Mexico around 1982, when it had reached 20% of the National Gross Product. By 1993 manufacturing accounted for 15% and seemed to be decreasing progressively, as services became the fastest growing sector (OECD 1997: 91-94).
- 2 For a description of this process around a coffee growers cooperative see Hernández Castillo and Nigh 1998.
- 3 When I first outlined this model after my Chiapas data, in 1997, I thought it was peculiar to Chiapas and perhaps a few other states of southern Mexico (Vargas-Cetina 1998). Fisher (1998), however, poses that this model developed simultaneously in much of Africa, Asia and Latin America because of what she calls "a coincidence of education and idealism" (p.7).
- 4 These are organizations of the type Carroll (1992) and Fisher (1993, 1998) classify as *Grassroots Support Organizations*; that is, "civic developmental entities" that provide "services allied support to local groups of disadvantaged rural or urban households and individuals" (Carroll 1992: 11).

- 5 Official agencies and semi-independent organizations compel the members of local organizations to sell their crafts only through channels controlled by the leadership of the organizations or the government agencies subsidizing local production. Because of this, I have chosen to use pseudonyms in this paper to protect the people who have trusted me with their information and friendship.
- 6 After looking at their products I told them that they should improve the quality of their weavings and other products, probably taking courses with Chiapanec craft producers. I suggested getting in touch with some of the most representative weavers' associations, including *Sna Jolobil* and *Jpas Joloviletik*, to discuss the matter of quality, pricing and commercialization in general, in a context of openness and good will.
- 7 I understand that the Indigenous Congress actually took place in 1974, and not in 1976.
- 8 It may not seem like *Sna Jolobil* is making much money, but in the context of other weavers' organizations of Chiapas it can be seen as a successful business, since many other *cooperativas* carry financial deficits. As in other cooperatives, in *Sna Jolobil* the board is more concerned with helping the weavers make an income than with making profits.

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