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Mexico and Chile



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For the last ten years, I have been interested in proposing a definition of political culture, and an operational model to study it from an anthropological point of view: that is, trying to discover the deep grammar of behavior related to relations of domination and subordination (power) which give societies their characteristic flavor. In other words, I would like to propose a different approach to the issue of national identity through the study of a nation's political culture. I have used a network-analysis approach as the operational basis to study the structural shape of power relations, supplemented by the cultural symbolic system which reinforces that grammar, and through which it is expressed. The basic idea is that once a system of relations is established in a given society (a political culture), the historical events that follow are interpreted according to that basic culture, and that continuity represents its identity. Changes within that idiom of behavior come very slowly, except through cataclysmic situations (the Spanish conquest, wars and revolutions that actually introduce different political cultures). Continuity is hence created by a characteristic

dominant network structure of the organizations that deal with the control of society, and changes are slowly produced by the variations in which new events are reinterpreted, always within this basic grammar. Networks are either vertically or horizontally oriented, and the combination of these two types of networks creates the structure of social control. A vertically oriented society tends to be an authoritarian one, and a horizontally oriented one, democratic, in which class determines hierarchy, rather than vertically oriented sectors. My own ethnographic studies of different sectors of Mexican society showed that in Mexico, vertical networks are dominant, resulting in a corporative, vertically organized and highly presidential society, where power concentrates at the top and branches broadly down. A superficial knowledge of Chilean society showed a class oriented, multiparty system composed of horizontal networks as the basis of social control. These differences stimulated me to undertake an analysis of the two societies as they seemed to be ideally suited for a comparative study, sharing a similar colonial history, the same language and religion, as well as some basic institutions imposed by the Spanish crown after the Conquest, even if their political cultures have clearly developed in a radically different manner. In other words, my plan is to base my theoretical ideas on two well-grounded field experiences, or rather the opposite: my two field experiences were to be the basis of my abstract proposal on what a political culture is, and how it is the basis of a national identity.

Before coming to the Wissenschaftskolleg, I had elaborated a model of the power structure of Mexico which was the basis of the project; I had also completed a field study of the 1988 presidential campaign in order to analyze the power structure through the mobilization of its participants, and the symbolic aspects of the political culture of Mexico through the ritual aspects of the campaign. At the same time, I had undertaken a similar study in Chile (the 1989 presidential campaign, the structure of some of its political parties and the nature of their leadership). This field work was to be completed during the academic year of 91—92, to be followed by a period of analysis and reflection. However, as I received the invitation to join the Wissenschaftskolleg, I proposed, instead, to invert the process and to use the access to the excellent libraries of Berlin and the tranquillity of the environment, to read and reflect upon the theoretical aspects of the key concepts to which my project was related, i.e., national identity and political culture, as well as how I could fit those concepts to my own field material (present and future) centered around networks and symbols. I was also to use this time to read Chilean historical material unavailable to me in my own university in Mexico.

Therefore, during the first months of my stay at the Wissenschaftskolleg, I spent most of the time reading assorted bibliographies both theoretic-

cal as well as historical. This was complemented by holding a series of seminars and lectures both in Berlin and in Madrid, in which I presented some of my "pet ideas", an exercise which eventually spurred me into writing a theoretical first paper on the political culture of Chile in comparison to Mexico, using my own proposed model. This paper will be the basis of my whole comparative project as it will provide the blueprint which will allow me to organize the field data I already have for both countries, as well as collecting what would still be needed in Chile and Mexico. This effort has been my main accomplishment during this academic year. Another goal I had before coming to Berlin was to write several chapters of the book on the ritual analysis of the presidential campaign in Mexico. I did some of it, and I hope to finish the book next year. As I had to decide what would be the most fruitful way to spend my time, I postponed what I defined as a more mechanical chore, for the more creative one I described in the previous paragraphs.

Finally, during the last weeks of my stay, I collected bibliographic material for a "state of the art" paper on urban anthropology in Latin America, which I was asked to present at the end of this year for one of the events organized in Spain for the quincentenary of the discovery of America, as well as material on the sociology of science for a book on the socialization of scientists in Mexico which will appear in the U.S.A. next year. Both these efforts, though not creative, have been of particular importance to me due to my normal work conditions in Mexico.