



Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 2012, 621-631
www.ncsu.edu/acontracorriente

Review/Reseña

Gillingham, Paul. *Cuauhtémoc's Bones: Forging National Identity in Modern Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011.

Cuauhtémoc and the making of Indianness something 'good to think'

Andrea Cadelo

University of Warwick

Unlike any other sermon, in the address Padre Salgado made to his congregation in Ixcateopan, a small, poor and remote village in the Mexican State of Guerrero, on February 2, 1949, he claimed to have proof that Cuauhtémoc, the last Aztec emperor, was buried under the altar of his church. The priest had made this announcement based on a bundle of papers that the village politician Salvador Rodríguez Juárez had found in his own house: a book, 'Destierro de Ignorancias y Amigo de Penitentes'

whose marginalia linked—in a rather obscure way—Cuauhtémoc with Ixcateopan; a sheaf of seven pages, kept within a hide cover, describing the burial of the last Aztec emperor, signed in transparent ink by the Franciscan missionary Motolinía, who claimed that he buried Cuauhtémoc's body beneath the Ixcateopan parish. The book's marginalia were also purportedly written in his hand. Rodríguez Juárez had also found a five-volume journal written by his grandfather, Florentino Juárez, between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, in which he claimed to be the 'living letter' to the village's secret tradition, initiated by Motolinía himself for fear of his own people: the Spanish. According to this tradition, a group of Indians had cut off the body of Cuauhtémoc from the cotton-silk tree where, by orders of Cortés, he had been hanged, and taken it to Ixcateopan, to make the emperor's homeland his resting place.

Father Salgado's announcement, which soon caused nationwide expectation, led the governor of the State of Guerrero, General Leyva Mancilla, to name a commission to verify the authenticity of the documents and to coordinate the dig that, on September 26, 1949, led eventually to a body. The head of the commission, Eulalia Guzmán, announced 'with tears in her eyes' that they had found Cuauhtémoc's tomb, but after two weeks of intense celebrations the commission sent by the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) completely dismissed its authenticity. Not only were the bones found in 'terrible conditions', but they also 'were not of one but of five different persons'; 'the skeleton had two left humeri, two right heel bones and four femurs'. 'Cuauhtémoc's tomb had turned out to contain a young adult male...accompanied by an adolescent, a young woman, and two small children' (71). The authenticity of the documents was similarly dismissed: neither the handwriting nor the content of Motolinía's letter was sixteenth century. The anachronism, however, had been deliberately planned. The handwriting of the marginalia could not have been Motolinía's, as the book had been printed more than two centuries after his death. The documents were claimed to be imperfect eighteenth-century copies of older, lost documents, as a letter by Archbishop of Mexico, signed in 1777, explained. Yet the clear signs of late

nineteenth-century composition of all the documents suggested that these, as well as the grave, had one forger.

Although 'academically' conclusive, the INAH's verdict about the tomb and the documents was politically unacceptable and was received with suspicion throughout the political and social spectrum. Silvio Zavala, deputy director of the INAH, accurately spotted Florentino Juárez, not as the 'living letter' of Motolinía's tradition, but rather as an inventive peasant who devised and executed an impressive fraud in the nineteenth century. Yet even among those convinced of the spuriousness of the case, the identity of the forger was to become an issue of contestation. Overall, the 'resurrection' of Cuauhtémoc in 1949 set off a scandal within Mexican cultural politics of such proportions that in 1976 the authenticity of the tomb and of the documents supporting its tradition was still being debated.

Through the deconstruction of this forgery, the analysis of the reasons that motivated it, and why news of this kind was not to pass unnoticed in late 1940s Mexico, Paul Gillingham's 'Cuauhtémoc's Bones' explores the central role of Indigenismo and the cult of Cuauhtémoc in the shaping of Mexican cultural nationalism from the Porfiriato to the 1970s. Challenging the hitherto scholarly assumption that Mexican Indigenismo began in 1910, one of the central arguments of this book is that it was during the Porfiriato when the Aztec past became more ubiquitous than ever before and Cuauhtémoc was iconized as a national symbol. This claim in itself constitutes an important contribution to the subject and aims to highlight how from the mid-century on the elites, fearing that their national communities were too fragile invested in 'nationalist symbols, civic rituals, and standardized education to inculcate a sense of patriotism' in a Mexico 'intrinsically divided by geography, culture and race' (151).

Gillingham's book is certainly a very rich and interesting work, which engages the reader from start to end. His exploration of the late-nineteenth-century and post-revolutionary Mexican cultural nationalism, by unravelling the complexity of the Ixcateopan's case, is remarkable. As he convincingly argues, only by taking into account the dynamics of Mexican nationalism can we understand why in the 1890s a peasant came up with the intriguing and fascinating plan of faking Cuauhtémoc's tomb, how

doable it was, and also why, after all, not him but his grandson was to capitalize from it.

Gillingham shows very well the pervasive and polyvalent character of Indigenist discourse. He accurately stresses its inherent contradictions and its betrayal of a racist perception of difference through its promotion of acculturation and an opposite approach to the past and present Indian. We learn that this discourse was embraced either to counteract a Hispanist interpretation of history and of national identity, to refute colonialism and imperialism, or to promote a homogenizing mestizo vision of the nation in which the role of the Spanish heritage played a key role.

For Gillingham, two main camps where Indigenist discourse was mobilized with regard to the Ixcateopan's case were academic and political. This division is apparent mainly in chapter two, where he describes the events that led to finding the body, and in chapter three, where he reconstructs the scandal set off by the discovery of the *sui generis* skeleton. To the first field he ascribed the scholars forming part of the expert commissions in charge of assessing the authenticity of the tomb and its tradition: the INAH commission and the subsequent multidisciplinary team, nicknamed the Gran Commission, comprised of the most influential scholars of the country, including Manuel Gamio. The Gran Commission's report, which remained unpublished until the 1960s, confirmed the INAH's verdict: the Ixcateopan's case was nothing more than a forgery.

To the political/instrumental field, Gillingham ascribed functionaries ranging from Eulalia Guzmán and the governor of the state of Guerrero, to the minister of education Gual Vidal and President Alamán. Whilst for Leyva Mancilla the verdict of the INAH was a 'crime against the patria', after the INAH's verdict and before the appointment of the Gran Commission, Gual Vidal decided to organize a 'patriotic caravan' to the village. Prominent members of the Mexican intelligentsia, such as the mural painter Diego Rivera, for whom the 'perverse' work of the commission was 'disastrous' for the 'sublime Indians', are also included amongst the instrumentalists of the past (71-72).

I find Gillingham's dichotomy problematic. It seems to reveal a distinction between an academic, scientific, objective, and thus, one infers,

uninterested discourse, and a political discourse, prone to an instrumental use of history. However the boundaries between academia and politics, within the Indigenist discourse Gillingham explores, are much more blurred than he supposes. As we learn in chapter two, the interpretation of the past, specifically of the Conquest, lay at the core of the overt rivalry between Eulalia Guzmán's excavation team and the members of the INAH's commission. Her revisionist, anti-Hispanist interpretation, in which Cortés was represented not as a great political strategist, but as a 'genius of the lie', led the INAH to blacklist her work. That she had invented part of the 'life, deeds and diseases of Cortés', as Gillingham suggests, might be true; yet, judging from his reconstruction of the fall of Tenochtitlan at the hands of Cortés and the events leading to the death of Cuauhtémoc in 1545 in chapter one, she was not entirely wrong when she argued that Cortés had 'preempted history's verdict by writing a considerable part of it himself' (74).

Gillingham's reconstruction of the Conquest reproduces its Hispanist and Eurocentric version, taking for granted tropes likely shaped by the Spanish themselves to make their actions more digestible, such as the notion that indigenous people believed the Spanish to be gods. However, scholars such as Camilla Townsend and Inga Clendinnen have found evidence against this claim.¹

They have also problematized two tropes equally embraced by Gillingham, such as the representation of Cortés as the genius of strategy and of Moctezuma as a puppet ruler. These tropes betrayed the hierarchical construction of difference that has accompanied much of the literature on the conquest reliant on the version of the Spanish 'who had the incomparable advantage of actually being there', and dwelling on a typical question—why several hundred Spaniards managed to defeat millions of Indians (34).

Gillingham's account of the conquest and Cuauhtémoc's life introduces the reader to the benefits and risks of Cuauhtémoc as a potential

¹Inga Clendinnen, 'Fierce and Unnatural Cruelty': Cortés and the Conquest of Mexico, *Representations*, No. 33 (Winter 1991): 65-100; Camilla Townsend, 'Burying the White Gods: New Perspectives on the Conquest of Mexico', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 108, Issue 3, (June 2003): 659-687.

icon of a nationalist discourse. As opposed to Moctezuma's alleged blandness, Cuauhtémoc's resistance to the Spanish made him attractive as a nationalist symbol. At the same time, as Gillingham insightfully argues, this association was to pose problems for a nationalist discourse willing to unify the nation, while avoiding triggering Indian revanchism. The semiotic ambivalence of Cuauhtémoc is important to understand the ambiguous approach of the state to the cult of the last Aztec emperor, as we learn later in the book.

Before turning to the major forger, chapters four and five offer us a very interesting reconstruction of the discussion that took place in Mexico around the main suspects of the fraud, and provide a more nuanced understanding of academic Indigenismo. Zavala's early conclusion of Florentino Juárez being the main forger countered 'the indigenista text of the secret burial of Cuauhtémoc with another, equally indigenista in content and rhetoric of creative popular resistance to the hegemony of a hispanicized elite' (85). However, as Gillingham argues, this thesis was not accepted mainly due to 'the "black legend" of the Porfiriato: the post-revolutionary representation of the late nineteenth-century Mexico as a period of ignorance, illiteracy and generalized obscurantism' (85). Accordingly, since 1949 'a mind of a greater scope' was looked for behind the Ixcateopan's tomb and tradition (86).

The main suspects discussed were the state, the nineteenth-century politician and writer Vicente Riva Palacio and Salvador Rodríguez Juárez. The confusing responses of the government following the scandal, the fact that work at the church could not have passed unnoticed, and the proofed genealogy of the oral tradition supporting the story of Cuauhtémoc's burial to the nineteenth century, ruled out the state as a candidate. Riva Palacio, 'central to Porfirian Indigenismo' both as a historian and novelist, played a key role, as Gillingham tells us, 'in making Cuauhtémoc, in terms of Mexican nationalism, good to think' (95). 'The challenge was to disassociate the emperor from indigenous revanchism' and to connect him with the theme of mestizaje, as a founder of a polity that linked the Spanish and Indian heritage (94). While in his *México a través de los siglos*, he achieved this through the figure of Cuauhtémoc's baptism, in his novel *Martín*

Garatuza, he accomplished this by giving the emperor a Spanish lover, Isabel Carbajal (102; 94-95). Though 'among eminent Porfirians, Riva Palacio was the best man for the job of forging Cuauhtémoc's tomb', Gillingham convinces us that a man who had reproduced so many facsimile signatures of 'the great and good sixteenth-century Spain' could not have got completely wrong the signature of Motolinía, as was instead the case with the Ixcateopan's documents (103).

That Salvador Rodríguez Juárez had been forging additional proofs to fill in possible gaps in the case, as early as 1949, had been clear even to Eulalia Guzmán, a firm believer in the authenticity of the tomb. This, and a new set of antique manuscripts with which he surprised the historian Reyes García in 1976, led the latter to believe that the entire fraud was the product of Rodríguez Juárez's 'nationalist fantasy'. Yet, Gillingham contests this argument, pointing to the distinctive tone that sets apart the documents found in 1949 from those produced in 1976. Where Florentino Juárez 'played the peasant', insinuating 'by omission', Rodríguez Juárez 'played the professor' packing his writings 'of what he envisaged as legitimising references to the mainstream historical narrative' (123).

Finally, in chapter six Gillingham devotes his attention to the main forger, Florentino Juárez, and to the explanation of the driving force behind the fraud as being instrumental. As Gillingham tells us, Juárez had been able to consolidate his position as a member of the village's elite through literacy and by securing ownership of the land. Various strategies, including fraud, within the framework of the nineteenth-century liberal reforms had been instrumental in this. Yet, in the closing stages of the century, through the amputation of Ixcateopan's territory with the secession of its neighboring village Ixcapuzalco, Juárez had lost some of his best lands. Juárez knew that the loss of the village was reversible; given the constant rivalries between adjacent villages, 'municipal borders were not cast in stone' (149). Thus, while pursuing the case through conventional channels, as Gillingham explains us in chapter seven, Juárez used cultural nationalism as a tool 'to increase his and his regional sway', making 'his village faction the owners of a central symbol of Mexican independence.

This was a sound rational-choice calculation, for a bold nationalist gesture was an ideal way of currying favour with key decision makers' (150).

This chapter is perhaps one of the most interesting parts of the book. It is here where Gillingham analyzes how 'doable' the fraud was, and thus how Juárez used cultural nationalism as a tool to concoct the fraud, by examining 'the multiple cultural materials on which he could draw in his creation' (148). Giving the reader a detailed sense on how Indigenous themes permeated contemporary literature and art and illuminating some of the ways in which these motifs circulated and might have been appropriated by subaltern actors, during the Porfiriato, Gillingham convinces the reader that Florentino's plan, notwithstanding its spectacular character, was a perfectly reasonable product of its time.

He points us to the cultural products whereby Juárez could have become aware of Cuauhtémoc's biography, of his missing body, and of the instrumentality of the past. We learn that he could have read Justo Sierra's *México Social y Político* (1889), and that he could even find 'a clear-cut template for his fraud' in Manuel Payno's *Los Bandidos de Río Frío*. In the case he had been less well read, the *Periódico Oficial* could have helped him to recognize the central role of Cuauhtémoc in Mexican national identity (55). Finally, we realize that archaeology, having begun a century earlier, was in a boom by the 1880s and a second wave of excavations popularized indigenous past to the point of making its forgery a common and lucrative practice.

With his explanation of the purpose of the fraud, Gillingham wants to dismiss any Indigenist or 'primordialist interpretation' of the Ixcateopan's case. In light of it the fraud would be read as an expression of Florentino's 'organic commitments to the indigenous past', which meeting 'with the intense modishness of Cuauhtémoc in the 1890s' had driven him 'to *forjar patria*' (146). According to Gillingham 'before Cuauhtémoc's bones muddied the waters, emic representation of ethnic identity went largely unromanticized in Ixcateopan' (128). 'Ixcateopan in his time was a strongly, self-consciously mestizo society', as 'villagers knew that to be "Indian" ... was to be at the bottom of the society' (146; 128). This self-consciousness, rooted into 'secular racialist hierarchies and enduring

socioeconomic realities', was deeply bound to an effort of reinforcing the higher status of Ixcateopan as a mestizo cabecera village. Therefore, Gillingham suggests, Florentino devised his plan, neither responding to an emotional ethnic identity, nor with the willingness of 'forjar patria'. He concocted the plan following simply a 'materialist' or instrumental interest: to restore Ixcateopan's importance as a cabecera village.

Whereas through the Ixcateopan case Gillingham wants to show how Indianness was not genuinely felt but merely instrumentalized for personal and social purposes, I think it would be worth thinking about the instrumentalization of Indianness as a phenomenon, in itself of an enormous relevance. In a society hitherto ruled by the imaginary of whiteness as the paradigm of what was 'good to think' and to be, as a well as a means of personal and social empowerment, Indianness was taking over. What heretofore whiteness had been able to unlock - the process of reconversion of capitals—was accessed from Cuauhtémoc onwards through the association of the self and the social milieu with Indianness.

Taking the example of Ixcateopan we could claim that not only Indianness, but also whiteness, was largely unromanticized. Likewise we could claim that the distinction between a primordialist and instrumental understanding of identities does not hold water, if we think that the shaping of identities is a process intimately bound to the broader struggles of power that take place in society. What 'Cuauhtémoc's bones' did when they 'muddied the waters' was to displace the principle of identity that was to trigger the reconversion of capitals. As Gillingham argues, before Cuauhtémoc's resurrection, villagers tried to identify themselves as 'pure creoles', being aware that the association with anything Indian would not only stain their character but also undermined the reconversion of symbolic capital into other forms of capitals. Given the overlapping character between urban and racial hierarchies, the villagers sought to consolidate a reputation of Ixcateopan as a mestizo cabecera. Whiteness was thus the capital in dispute, and its desirability would clearly fit Gillingham's concept of instrumental or material use of identity. More than merely placing the accent in how unfelt Juárez's association of Indianness was and later on that of Rodríguez Juárez's—which, by the way, reveals an understanding of

identity as something fixed and static—making Indianness something ‘good to think’ is clearly not a minor contribution of Cuauhtémoc.

Beside this different accent in interpretation, these chapters leave the reader convinced about how doable the fraud was and the reasons behind it. The question to be answered is, as Gillingham suggests, not so much why Juárez concocted the fraud, but why he failed to see his Cuauhtémoc unearthed? While Juárez died in 1915, his Cuauhtémoc was not to be unearthed until 1949. Why was there a greater degree of responsiveness in Mexico, in the late 1940s, to the body of Cuauhtémoc, if as an icon of national identity it had been basically invented with the Porfiriato?

This question leads the author to compare, in chapter eight, Mexican cultural nationalism of the Porfiriato and the post-revolutionary period. In his view, the main difference was more a matter of method and scale than aim. Cuauhtémoc managed to be unearthed because with the 1930s, a more cohesive and technocratic nationalism, deployed at an unprecedented scale, took shape. At the same time, in the slow and ambiguous response on the part of the federal state to the symbol of the last Aztec emperor, in mid-twentieth century Mexico, resonated the reasons behind Juárez’s failure. Potentially encouraging Indian revanchism, and running counter to the idea of a mestizo nation, Cuauhtémoc’s cult was a risk for the homogenizing ethos of the state nationalism, as Gillingham insightfully argues.

The more ambivalent and lethargic answer of the state to the tomb and cult of Cuauhtémoc, which it was nevertheless swift to exploit, contrasted with the keen response of the governor of the state of Guerrero, of the Ixcateopan’s elite, and overall of groups other than the elite, ‘from regional politicians, bureaucrats, peasants, men and women who shared the realization that history is a natural resource and resolved to exploit it’ (199). Gillingham devotes the last chapter of the book how the ‘grassroots instrumentalists’ were the most successful of ‘this story’s symbolic manipulators’. As much as the Rodríguez Juárez family benefitted from Cuauhtémoc’s bones, through economic prerogatives, the village benefitted alike, receiving developmental programs, monuments, and by achieving an

increased political prominence. Regardless of any evidence to the contrary, for the villagers, 'Cuauhtémoc was, is, and always will be buried in Ixcateopan' (214).

Overall, I recommend reading 'Cuauhtémoc's Bones'. Gillingham's reconstruction of Mexican cultural nationalism during the Porfiriato and the post-revolutionary period, until the 1970s, is very rich. He certainly achieves to convey the pervasive and varied character of Indigenismo and the role it played in the construction of a Mexican national identity. His analysis of the Ixcateopan case is particularly useful to understand the dynamics of Mexican nation building as a top-down and bottom-up process. It shows how Cuauhtémoc, a symbol invented by the Porfirian elites to invest with strength their 'imagined community' ended up being more wholeheartedly embraced at a grassroots level of society. That this was a story of success, especially at the grassroots level, is certainly convincing. Yet, in my view, we will be trapped in reductionism if we think that the subaltern cult of Cuauhtémoc can be only explained from a materialist point of view, as Gillingham instead suggests. Paradoxical as it may seem, the instrumental/materialist appropriation of Indianness, by making Indianness something 'good to think' and the Indian the magnet of a wide-range of benefits, entailed a refashioning of the self. The self-representation as Indian was no longer a stain to be removed, but a symbolic capital to be exploited.