

The Changing Futures of the Maya and their Anthropologists: Negotiating the Present in the Yucatan Peninsula

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Abstract: This article examines the conversations between Maya-speaking villagers in the Yucatan peninsula and Mexican and American anthropologists that have visited them since 1970 from the point of view of their different perceptions of the present and expectations for the future. Its aim is to analyze how the Western notions of history, which have been dramatically transformed with the recent crisis of the Modernist *régime d'historicité*, have interacted with the villagers' own dynamic conceptions of historical change. As such it presents a historical reading and interpretation of anthropological texts.

Using the concepts of 'cosmopolitics' and 'diplomacy', as developed by science studies, it constructs a theoretical framework to understand how the anthropologists interpreted the situation and prospects of the Maya-speaking peasants and how they in turn interpreted their interaction with their visitors, and with the Mexican state and other global forces, according to their particular historical experiences of the succession of cycles of servitude and freedom. Through these negotiations both parties constructed different 'common nows', mutually understandable presents that allowed them to apprehend their shared situation.

This analysis leads to the definition of a historical relativity that shows how meaningful exchanges between different historicities can take place without one, including the Western notion of history, ever engulfing or fully explaining the other.

Keywords: history; anthropologists; Maya; Yucatan peninsula; Mexico; 20th-21st centuries.

Resumen: Este artículo examina las conversaciones entre campesinos hablantes de maya en dos regiones de la península de Yucatán y los antropólogos mexicanos y estadounidenses que los visitaron a partir de la década de 1970, desde la perspectiva de sus diferentes concepciones del presente y sus expectativas respecto al futuro. Su objetivo es analizar cómo las nociones occidentales de la historia, que han sido transformadas dramáticamente por la crisis reciente en el régimen de historicidad modernista, han interactuado con las propias y cambiantes concepciones de estos campesinos respecto al cambio histórico. Como tal presenta una lectura e interpretación históricas de los textos antropológicos.

Utilizando los conceptos de 'cosmopolítica' y 'diplomacia', desarrollados por los estudios de la ciencia, construye un andamiaje teórico para comprender la manera en que los antropólogos han interpretado la situación presente y las perspectivas futuras de los campesinos hablantes de maya, y cómo ellos, a su vez, han interpretado sus interacciones con estos visitantes, con el estado mexicano y con otras fuerzas globales de acuerdo a sus experiencia histórica particular, configurada en una sucesión de periodos de servidumbre y libertad.



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A través de tales negociaciones, ambos grupos construyeron diferentes ‘presentes comunes’ mutuamente comprensibles que les ayudaban a interpretar sus circunstancias compartidas.

Este análisis conduce a la definición de una relatividad histórica que muestra cómo puede haber intercambios significativos entre historicidades diferentes sin que una, ni siquiera la noción occidental de la historia, absorba o interprete completamente a las otras.

Palabras Clave: historia; antropólogos; maya; península Yucatán; México; siglos xx-xxi.

In 1973, Alfonso Villa Rojas, a Mexican ethnologist trained in the American school of social anthropology by Robert Redfield, returned to the villages of Tusik, Señor and X-Cacal Guardia, in the state of Quintana Roo, Mexico, where he had done extensive fieldwork in the late 1930s. A few years later, in 1978, when he published a Spanish version of his original ethnography of the Maya peasants of that region, first published in English in 1945 (Villa Rojas 1945; 1978), he added an epilogue in which he described his visit three decades later.

In this short text he described the radical transformations experienced by these rural communities, produced by capitalist development and their increasing integration to the national and international markets: the construction of roads and communication networks that linked the region to the outside world; the transformation of housing and other buildings through the increasing use of cement, and modern construction materials; the increasing abandonment of traditional swidden agriculture, and the opening of the forests to market oriented forestry and intensive agriculture and livestock exploitation; the increasing participation of the men and women of the village in wage labor activities, both inside the community and more often outside it, and their increasing consumption of modern industrial goods, many of them imported; the inroads of State funded educational institutions and the decline of the traditional native Christian religion of the population, centered on the figure of the Holy Cross (Villa Rojas 1978: 533-558).

Like most of his contemporaries Villa Rojas was a firm believer in the idea of historical progress. He was also a convinced adherent of the Mexican anthropological school of *indigenismo*, a theory and political doctrine that was adopted and promoted by the post-revolutionary regime of Mexico from the 1930s and which formed the basis of its policies towards the Amerindian populations.

This doctrine held that Indigenous peoples should be ‘integrated’ to Mexican society, by adopting Spanish as their main language and participating in the national capitalist economy and in the political institutions of the State and its ruling party, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI). In order to do that they should abandon their particular ethnic identities, and ‘backward’ ways of life, while preserving the most valuable, picturesque aspects of their cultural traditions. Anthropological science was meant to play a key role in facilitating and directing this process of peaceful integration,

and anthropologists, such as Villa Rojas were to be key agents in it, leveraging their knowledge of the Indigenous cultures to foster the cause of 'integration' (Caso 1958).

Therefore, Villa Rojas thought that the transformations he observed were an unavoidable part of the modernization of X-Cacal, Tusik, Señor and the neighboring villages, and regarded them as a step towards a future of economic development and social justice within the general progress of Mexican society; he also felt proud of having contributed to the unleashing of the process four decades before.

As a keen social observer, Villa Rojas was also critical of some aspects of the radical changes experienced in the region, such as the increased economic uncertainty faced by its inhabitants, and the rise in political and religious conflicts, alongside economic inequalities, as well as the growth in the consumption of alcohol and marihuana (Villa Rojas 1978: 543). However, as an *indigenista* he celebrated the increasing 'integration' of these indigenous peasants into the Mexican nation-state, and predicted their abandonment of their particular ethnic identity and the adoption of the dominant national identity of the *mestizo*, mixed-race majority. The resulting disappearance of the Maya language and other 'traditional' customs he regarded as an unavoidable part of this process.

In the conclusion to his epilogue he asserted that any Maya "cultural resistance" to these transformations was "rapidly weakening under the influence of so many external elements that are penetrating [Maya communities] both massively and inexorably" (Villa Rojas 1978: 557-558). This assertion was a refutation of the thesis of Alicia Barabas and Miguel Alberto Bartolomé, two South American anthropologists who had worked in the region in the intervening years. In line with a Marxist and ethnicist anthropological perspective, they had written that the Maya were the protagonists of a centuries-long struggle to maintain and defend their ethnic identity, a resistance that explained all aspects of their interaction with other groups in the Yucatan (Barabas & Bartolomé 1977).

More than 30 years later, in 2008, Betty Faust, an American anthropologist, also returned to the Maya village in which she had done fieldwork earlier, Pich in Campeche, on the western side of the Peninsula of Yucatan, where she had lived in the 1990s. When the Spanish translation of her original ethnography (Faust 1999) was published in 2010, she also included an epilogue in which she described and evaluated the changes experienced by this peasant community in the intervening period.

Faust observed social and economic transformations that were similar to those described by Villa Rojas, being related to a comparable process of capitalist modernization. In this case, the lands formerly belonging to the community had been sold to a corporation that had embarked in ambitious project of livestock and agricultural production, following strict environmental preservation guidelines, and providing employment to many members of the community (Faust 2010: 300-301).

However, Faust's evaluation of these changes was much more negative than Villa Rojas's, and was not tempered by an adherence to *indigenismo* or a faith in progress. To

the contrary, she expressed fears that this economic development, despite the short term advantages it may appear to provide, such as a rising living standard and increased access to prestigious consumer goods, rendered the Maya inhabitants of Pich increasingly vulnerable to a looming ecological crisis, brought on both by local deforestation and by global warming. She also lamented the loss of their traditional customs, particularly of the complex web of knowledge and technologies that supported the practice of swidden agriculture, a method of cultivation whose resilience in the face of ecological transformations had been proven over the millennia. Her conclusion is melancholy:

Part of the local wisdom is still transmitted to the young, but few of them understand the Maya language, and even fewer can speak it. [...] Generally the young are more interested in finding a job, surfing the web, watching television and attending school. They, like the writer of these pages, sometimes regret not having learnt more from their grandparents, and some have shown interest in the information preserved in this book [...] (Faust 2010: 302).¹

Inspired by the contrasting views of these two anthropologists, the present article shall carry out a reflection on the shifting notions and experiences of time and history in Western culture, and their coexistence and interaction with the pasts, presents, and futures experienced by the inhabitants of these Maya-speaking villages of the Peninsula of Yucatan. As such, it approaches anthropological texts as testimonies of the existence of different historicities, Western and belonging to the Maya-speaking populations of the region.

With this aim in mind, I intend to read ethnographies as historical sources that reflect and represent the points of view, paradigms and prejudices of their authors as well as the social reality of the communities they visited. In my readings of these testimonies I shall strive above all to understand the way in which both parties agreed and disagreed about their interpretations of the historical transformations they were living and witnessing.

First of all, I shall demonstrate that Villa Rojas and Faust interpreted the transformations the peasant societies around X-Cacal and Pich according to the Modern and 'Postmodern' *régimes d'historicité* that were prevalent in the Western world in the mid 20th and early 21st centuries, respectively.

Then I shall compare their descriptions with those of other anthropologists who worked with the same Maya communities in Quintana Roo in the period between 1970 and 2010, such as Paul Sullivan, Allan Burns and Bianet Castellanos. With their help I shall attempt to reconstruct the ways in which the different Maya men and women who interacted with the visitors conceived their own present, always in relation to their past, and also the contrasting expectations they held about the future.

¹ All quotes from Faust are my translations from the 2010 Spanish edition.

As we shall see, these conceptions have deep roots in the shared history and culture of the Maya-speaking peoples of the Yucatan, and a centuries-old tradition written and oral tradition of historical record keeping, while at the same time interacting with and reacting to Western notions of history and to contemporary realities.

By conjoining these elements we shall achieve a more complex understanding on the way in which the anthropologists and the inhabitants of Yucatan established communication and negotiated mutual understandings about their shared present and their impending future. These negotiations led to the construction of 'common nows', shared experiences of the present that provided them with a sense of contemporaneity. These 'common nows' were rooted in analogies in their understandings of the past, the present and the future, and also were based on similarities in their conceptions of human agency, their attitudes towards the uncertainties of the near future, and their perceptions of the changes in the environment through time. These shared understandings, however, were not exempt from equivocations and confusion, since both sides tended to pay more attention to their agreements than to their differences.

In order to understand these complex negotiations I shall employ the concept of 'diplomacy' defined by Latour (2002) as the construction of common truths between persons who inhabit different human and natural worlds, distinct 'pluriverses' not a single 'universe'. As such they have to construct a shared reality, what Latour calls a "common world" that they can inhabit together (Latour 2002: 3).

This concept challenges the predominance of Western science by denying its claim to be the only form of knowledge capable of finding the reality that underlies all 'cultural' beliefs and that provides a universal bedrock of natural laws, true time, or historical reality to evaluate them. In this particular context, this means that we shall not assess the historical 'accuracy' or 'truthfulness' neither of Villa Rojas's or Faust's interpretations of the historical transformations of their respective Maya communities, nor of those constructed by the Maya-speaking villagers themselves. Also we shall not explain the coincidences between the anthropologists and the Mayas of each community as a reflection of their closeness to a shared 'objective' reality or 'actual history'.

From this point of view, the concept of 'cosmopolitics', as defined by Stengers (2005) and developed by Cadena (2010) is also highly useful, because it emphasizes that the authors belonging to different worlds and participating in a 'diplomatic' negotiation have no way of fully understanding the unknown dimensions and the varied nature of the agents of the world inhabited by their interlocutors, which makes the whole dialogue open to equivocations and misunderstandings.

The changing futures of the West

Villa Rojas and Faust provided strikingly contrasting interpretations of the rather similar transformations experienced by the villages they visited in Quintana Roo in the 1970s and Campeche in the 2000s, in great part because Western conceptions of historical change and expectations towards the future were radically transformed in the intervening period.

In the 1970s Villa Rojas, and most of his contemporaries, felt certain about the positive nature of the future that awaited the Maya because they adhered to the dominant Modern conception of history that considered that progress was both necessary and desirable. This explains why, even though he expressed concern about the ecological deterioration brought on by deforestation around Tusik and X-Cacal, he did not consider it an insurmountable obstacle to the progress he was describing and advocating, since he assumed that human agency and economic development were destined to dominate nature and that economic development would in the end be capable of counteracting its own negative effects on the environment (Villa Rojas 1978: 535-539). For instance he expressed confidence that government development programs, such as the creation of an industrial center in the city of Carrillo Puerto (the former capital of the mostly Maya peasants who rebelled against the governments of Yucatan and Mexico between 1847 and 1937 in what has been called the 'Caste war of Yucatan', which we shall discuss further below) would eventually provide gainful employment for the local population (Villa Rojas 1978: 551).

However, like many modernists, starting with his teacher, the American anthropologist Robert Redfield (1964), Villa Rojas was not exempt from a feeling of nostalgia in the face of this seemingly unstoppable progress. In his descriptions he lamented the 'loss' of ancient customs and ways of life, but remained convinced that it was unavoidable, and did not even hint at the possibility of stopping the march of progress to preserve them. As we have seen, he also manifested some misgivings about the negative impacts of modernization, including social conflict, alcoholism and drug addiction (Villa Rojas 1978: 550). However, even these concerns were perfectly aligned with then dominant Modernist conceptions of progress, which were deeply aware of its negative, and unavoidable, 'side-effects'.

In contrast, by the 2000s Betty Faust considered signs of ecological deterioration around Pich, neither as minor nuisances in the unstoppable path of development, nor as stepping-stones in the process of human domination over nature, but as harbingers of looming ecological and social crises for which no solution seemed to be at hand. In her outlook, she shared the uncertainty of many of her 21st century contemporaries about the capabilities of human societies to solve their problems and about the limits of ecological sustainability, both locally and globally. Therefore, she could not take for granted, as Villa Rojas did, that future progress would solve, or at least moderate, these problems. Accordingly, she regarded the loss of cultural traditions, and ecologic knowledge, as an unmitigated catastrophe.

Hartog has explained this radical, and rather sudden, transformation in the historical perspectives in of the West as a result of a change in the prevailing *régime d'historicité*, that is, in the dominant perception of the relation between past, present and future. In the Modern *régime*, which had been dominant since the late 18th century, the future was expected to be qualitatively different and better than the past and the present, which should be left behind in the name of necessary progress. In the current 'Postmodern' *régime*, which has come into place since the 1990s, the future is perceived as essentially uncertain and even threatening, the present as the only certain referent, and the past as an irreplaceable patrimony that needs to be preserved and defended in the face of that uncertainty (Hartog 2003: 200-201 and *passim*).

Thus we can assert that Villa Rojas's positive evaluation of the changes in Quintana Roo was rooted in an optimist Modernist conception of the future. In contrast, Faust's negative outlook of the similar changes in Campeche responds to the uncertainties of the now prevailing *régime* of historicity.

Concurrently, since the 1990s, Beck has proposed that we are witnessing the emergence of a global risk society, in which the future is perceived as holding all kind of environmental and societal threats, instead of the promises of human progress, and the political process is forced to deal with the distribution of risk and vulnerabilities, rather than rewards and opportunities, as it did in the previous Modernist period (Beck 2007).

Then, environmental degradation was regarded as an unavoidable 'side-effect' of progress and almost nobody doubted the capability of society to provide solutions to them. This is why Villa Rojas could be so confident that the development initiatives implemented by the Mexican State in the area around X-Cacal were bound to benefit the inhabitants of the village and positively transform their lives and livelihood, offsetting most of the negative effects of progress.

In contrast, Faust is highly skeptical of the intervention of government agencies and private enterprises in Pich, and describes at length the social failures and the ecologic havoc inflicted by previous 'development programs' implemented in the 1970s and 1980s (Faust 2010: 264-268), which are similar to the ones celebrated by Villa Rojas in Quintana Roo. From her point of view, risk and uncertainty, as well as unintended consequences, should no longer regarded as mere nuisances or collateral effects of a mostly positive process of development and progress, but should be placed instead at the center of the discussion of the relation between the State and the local communities and between humans and the environment.

In the following section we shall analyze how these two anthropologists, and others who visited the region in the intervening years, interacted with specific Maya men and women and listened to their own views of the past, the present and the future, in a diplomatic negotiation of the 'common nows' they constructed with them.

Future uncertainties and insufficient explanations

In his analyses of the transformations in the Western conception of history, Koselleck pointed out that changing expectations about the future implied different conceptions of the capacities and limitations of human agency in its relationship with the uncertainties of times to come (Koselleck 1989: 17-38). This uncertainty about the future was one of the common grounds where Villa Rojas and his informants could establish a 'diplomatic' negotiation to construct a 'common now'.

In his ethnography of the Maya of Quintana Roo, Villa Rojas asserted that the traditional system of swidden agriculture involved a great degree of insecurity, due to the variability in the rain cycle and the risk of hurricanes, among other unpredictable factors. However, to his astonishment, the peasants of Quintana Roo did not work harder in order to accumulate reserves to ward off against these uncertainties:

The idea that time is money, so dominant in industrialized countries, will take long to be accepted by them. As far as I could tell, they seem to live happily and they did not lose any sleep over the many dangers of hunger and sickness that hang over their heads (Villa Rojas 1978: 228).

In 1973, when he returned to the community, he found that the unpredictability associated with subsistence agriculture had been substituted by a new set of uncertainties, associated with capitalist wage labor, chief among them the complicated relationship between limited incomes and growing desires, needs and expenditures. Significantly, the laborers from these villages still lacked the economic reserves required to confront these new sources of insecurity.

Villa Rojas regarded these new economic uncertainties as fundamentally unlike those associated with subsistence agriculture. He thought that they no longer derived from a 'conservative' outlook that attributed both fortunes and misfortunes to fate, but denoted a new 'optimistic' perspective in their relation to the future, one in which human agency was considered paramount (Villa Rojas 1978: 550).

In a telling episode, Anastasio Kanté Ek, the owner of the local store in the village of Señor, aptly named 'La Providencia' (The Providence), insistently asked him to volunteer his economic forecasts for the coming five years or more, which he intended to record in a cassette tape. Villa Rojas agreed reluctantly to let him record his predictions for the following two years only, which failed to satisfy his host (Villa Rojas 1978: 551).

The anthropologist attributed Kanté Ek's preoccupation with the coming years to the fact that he had adopted a Modern future-oriented historical outlook and was thus fundamentally preoccupied with economic success. In this interpretation, he adhered to the theory of his teacher Robert Redfield. He argued that in order to embark on the road to modernization Maya communities had been forced to abandon their previous fatalistic cultural attitude, which assumed that the future would be identical to the past, and had adopted an optimistic, progressive viewpoint filled with "aspirations to make

things different”, and infused with the hope that the future would be markedly better and could be shaped by human agency (Redfield 1956: 106).

However, Villa Rojas’s attitude in the face of the demands of Kanté Ek reveals a contradiction inherent in the Modern conception of the future: while he harbored no doubt about the positive long-term prospects of the inhabitants of Tusik and neighboring villages, he was unable to provide his friend with any concrete information, and reassurances, about the uncertainties they faced in the short term, which appear to be the ones that most concerned him.

With the benefit of hindsight we can add that Villa Rojas was indeed prudent, and fortunate, when he refused to venture any predictions beyond the following two years, that is after 1975. Indeed, in 1976 the Mexican economy crashed and the ensuing crisis radically curtailed the prospects for national economic development, and for the improvement of the lots of many poor peasants, such as his Maya friends (Rodríguez Kuri & González Mello 2011).

A few years later, between 1978 and 1980, when the American anthropologist Paul Sullivan visited the same villages in Quintana Roo, he found a different attitude towards the times ahead. Responding to his queries about prophecies, the people of the region told him they were intensely preoccupied by the near future and the portents it may bring. These concerns appeared to overshadow any positive view of the changes they had experienced in the past decades.

The people Sullivan interviewed were acutely aware that the societal, economic and environmental transformations of the recent past meant that they had to work ever harder and longer in order to make a living, since their traditional subsistence activities no longer satisfied all their needs (Sullivan 1983: 169). Even worse, this meant that their fate was no longer under their own control, but rather in the hands of external actors, such as the government agencies that provided them with loans and assistance, and employers that could hire or fire them, and who determined how much to pay for their labor. Many of them deeply resented this loss of autonomy (Sullivan 1983: 218).

In fact, some of the Maya villagers of the region described their current economic situation to Sullivan (1983: 106-107), and later in the 2000s to Bianet Castellanos (Castellanos 2010: 147), in very graphic terms as ‘being fucked’ by the *dzulob*, or foreigners, a loose concept used to denote anyone from outside their village. The vulgar Maya term *top*, literally ‘to fuck’, to have intercourse, is the basis of this metaphor, based on patriarchal conceptions of the superiority of the active, masculine role in sexual intercourse, and the inferiority of the passive role.

According to Sullivan’s interpretation it refers to the fact that a segment of the inhabitants of the villages in Quintana Roo perceive their relationships with the *dzulob* as clearly unequal and as being more or less completely under the control of the foreigners (Sullivan 1989: 175-176). Thus, they consider their position under modern Capitalism

as clearly disadvantageous and unfair, and they resent acutely that the modernization process has entailed a significant loss of agency for them and has placed them at the mercy of forces that are beyond their control.

Within this framework, they interpret the short-term uncertainties and fluctuations inherent of the market economy in which they participate not as minor incidents in the path toward a brighter future, according to an optimistic Modernist outlook, but as omens of the return of a period of servitude, and portents of impending cataclysms and wars. To better understand these forebodings we shall analyze below the particular conceptions and experiences of time and history in which they are rooted.

Beforehand, however, it is important to examine other causes of the sharp contrast in the way in which the villagers of Quintana Roo talked to Villa Rojas and Sullivan about the radical transformations experienced by their communities since the 1930s.

A key reason is, of course, the sharp transformation in the economic situation prevailing in the region. Villa Rojas was there in 1973, in the last years of a decades-long period of economic expansion (the so called ‘Mexican miracle’); Sullivan in 1978-80, when the negative effects of the crisis of 1976 were being acutely felt all over Mexico. This economic crash may have come to confirm the forebodings shared by many in Quintana Roo about the future and their fear of the imposition of a new time of servitude. Thus their attitude towards capitalist modernization was bound to be far more critical than a few years earlier.

Another important point of contrast concerns the origins and affiliations of both visitors. As we have seen, Villa Rojas was an active Mexican *indigenista* anthropologist, deeply committed to the ‘integration’ of all Mexican indigenous communities to Mexican *mestizo* society, to the authoritarian regime of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*, and to the modern market-oriented capitalist social order, at least in the nationalistic developmental variant promoted by the Mexican state at the time (Navarrete Linares 2015: 141-142). Indeed since 1947 he had been an employee of the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (National Indigenist Institute), the agency in charge of carrying out the ‘integration’ of Indigenous communities (Medina 2001).

As a firm believer in progress and ‘integration’ he was bound to pay more attention to the opinions of those persons who shared his views in the villages he visited, such as the owner of a shop who directly benefited from increased trade and economic integration. Conversely, he would understate the importance of dissenting interpretations, regarding them as quaint but ineffective grumblings from ‘conservatives’ in the face of unavoidable progress (Villa Rojas 1978: 545-546).

Finally, the position of Villa Rojas as an *indigenista* anthropologist may also have determined the attitude of the villagers themselves towards him, since they considered him as a *mexicano*, that is, one of their traditional historical enemies, and more specifically and accurately, as an agent of the Mexican government. Therefore they would be

less willing to share with him any critical views of the Mexican state and its policies, to talk about their misgivings about the future, or to make him party to the prophecies that were circulating in their midst.

Paul Sullivan, on the other hand, belonged to an entirely different school of anthropology. At Johns Hopkins University he was a student of Grant D. Jones, a prominent ethnohistorian of Maya resistance against Colonial rule (Jones 1998), and of Sidney Mintz, famous for his work on Afro-American cultures and their role in world historical contexts (Mintz 1976; Sullivan 1983: i-ii).

Therefore he was more inclined to take notice of signs of what he considered dissent and resistance among the Maya. Moreover, his fieldwork in Tusik and X-Cacal was centered precisely on prophecies, and naturally he sought out informants willing to share with him their particular views about the future, and was less interested in registering the positions of the firm adherents of progress.

Additionally, for the villagers of X-Cacal, he was a *gringo*, a category that conflates both Britons and North Americans, who the Maya regard as historical allies in their rebellions against and confrontations with the Mexicans (Burns 1983; Sullivan 1994). Thus, they would have been far more willing to speak to him about their discontent with the Mexican government and with their worries about current socioeconomic situation than they would have been with Villa Rojas. Indeed when Allan Burns, another US anthropologist had come to the same area in the early 1970s to collect oral narratives, his Maya informants had addressed then US President Richard Nixon directly through him in a formal discourse and asked him to convey a message of friendship and admiration to him and his nation, soliciting his help in their centuries old fight against the Mexicans, and requesting arms to fight their traditional enemies (Burns 1983: 72). They also shared with him extensive and highly detailed oral narratives about the wars of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the so-called *Guerra de Castas*.

These clarifications shed further light on the 'diplomatic' negotiations between the different visiting anthropologists and different sectors of the village societies of Quintana Roo, demonstrating that both parties had diverse points of views and interests, and thus shared different concerns and information with each other. I am not arguing that the anthropologists merely searched for informants who would confirm their theoretical positions, but rather that in their interaction with the different points of views and ideas held by women and men in the villages, they paid more attention to those that addressed their own interests and confirmed their points of view; similarly, different sectors of the local inhabitants would be more willing to share their perspectives and concerns if they found a foreigner with an understanding ear and shared preoccupations. It was through these diverse and dynamic 'diplomatic' exchanges, that the parties constructed diverse 'common nows', that is shared experiences of the present in relation to the past and the future.

Cycles of freedom and slavery

The peasants and local intellectuals of Quintana Roo with whom Sullivan spoke, and also the elders of Pich, in Campeche, who talked with Faust some twenty years later, shared a deep concern over the steadily deteriorating economic circumstances of their respective villages. They feared that these worsening conditions would lead to the establishment, or rather the reinstatement, of a regime of 'slavery' or 'servitude', not unlike the ones they had endured in the past (Faust 2010: 112-113; Sullivan 1989: 172-173).

The concept of 'slavery' or 'servitude' to which these Maya-speaking peasants alluded is highly complex, and it does not necessarily mean literal enslavement, but rather the submission of the villagers to any authority that curtails their liberties and forces them to work more than they would be willing to, and to engage in activities that they regard as undesirable and onerous, and which they would not undertake of their own accord. This concept is intimately related to the history of the relationships between the Maya-speaking peasants of Yucatan and their colonizers in the past five centuries.

For instance the 18th century text of the *Chilam Balam of Chumayel* relates that the Spanish conquest of the 16th century led to the establishment of "servitude through debts" (Roys 1967: 78-79).²

In the 1990s, the elders of Pich were concerned that the government of Mexico had sold the whole country into servitude to foreign powers in order to pay its onerous debts. Therefore they were initially hostile to the presence of Betty Faust, because they thought she was an American agent that had come to their village to gather information for the establishment of a new plantation in their territory in which they would be compelled to work against their will (Faust 2010: 112).

Their fear was rooted in collective memories of the growth of the *haciendas*, great plantations devoted to the production of sugar, sisal fiber and cattle in which their forebears were forced to work through a system of debt peonage, under the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, between the 1870s and the 1910s. According to the descriptions of their grandparents who had lived in that period, they regarded this servitude in highly negative terms (Faust 2010: 112-113).

The villagers of Quintana Roo also told Sullivan and Burns that they remembered a dire period of slavery: The times of rapid expansion of *haciendas* for the production of sugar in central and eastern Yucatan in the first half of the 19th century region of the peninsula (Sullivan 1989: 162).

It is clear that the villagers of Pich and those of Quintana Roo, regarded two clearly distinct historical periods in similar terms, as ages of 'servitude'. This common

2 The Spanish translation of Mediz Bolio speaks of "el principio de la esclavitud por las deudas" (the establishment of slavery through debts), (*Chilam Balam de Chumayel* 1988: 51).

conceptualization is significant because the differences between the historical processes in each region are profound.

In central and eastern Yucatan the expansion of the *haciendas* in the first half of the 19th century provoked a massive peasant rebellion commonly, if mistakenly, known as the 'Caste War', that started in 1847. This was an uprising of the lower classes of the region, most of them Maya speakers but not all of them Indian, that is, not all of them belonging to that legal category defined by the Colonial regime. As Gabbert demonstrates it was not an ethnic war fueled by racial hatred, as it has been defined by the 'non-Maya' party, but rather a reaction by Maya and other peasants to the dispossession of their lands and to the constant civil wars among political factions in newly independent Mexico (Gabbert 2004: 97-98). Significantly, when the rebels advanced into western Yucatan, many Maya-speaking Indians joined the fight against them, siding with the government and the 'white' landowners. They did so because they felt as threatened as the land owning 'white' upper class by the invading troops of rebels, or 'wild Indians' and 'barbarians' as they referred to them (Dumond 1997; Gabbert 2004: 99-100; Reed 1981).

After the initial phase of open war, many of the rebels withdrew to the remote jungles of eastern Yucatan (now Quintana Roo and southern Campeche) and established a galaxy of fiercely independent villages and polities. Some of these, including the ones visited by Villa Rojas and Sullivan a century later, paid allegiance to the 'Holy Cross', a religious figure that had been revealed to them and incited them to live independently of the Mexicans according to the principles of a 'true Christianity' (Bricker 1977). Many of other polities did not join this loose confederation, but remained independent for many years, some into the 20th century (Dumond 1977).

In the western regions of Yucatan, in stark contrast, the Maya-speaking villagers became increasingly integrated into the social and economic life of the region, and had to suffer the subsequent expansion of the *haciendas* for producing sugar and sisal, as in the case of Pich, thus experiencing their own period of 'servitude'.

It is no surprise, therefore, that to this date, Maya speaking peasants of each region remember these events in contrasting ways: The inhabitants of central and eastern Yucatan consider themselves proud inheritors of the rebels (Burns 1983: 80-87; Sullivan 1991: 157), while those in the western regions still speak ill of those 'barbarian' invaders and are proud of having fought against them (Gabbert 2004: 91).

This is why I would argue that the use of the same concept of 'servitude' to explain the divergent processes in the regions of Pich and of X-Cacal, points to the existence of a shared frame of historical interpretation among the inhabitants of both regions.

In general terms, the periods of slavery are identified with domination by foreign forces, such as the Spanish empire, or the Mexican state. It is also associated with the requirement to pay tribute, as in Colonial times, or with the dispossession of the lands

of the communities and the compulsion of the peasants to work outside their villages in large-scale commercial farms or other sources of servile, or wage, labor.

However, servitude is not associated exclusively with the rule of foreigners. Some Maya of Quintana Roo, for instance, told Sullivan that the most recent period of slavery they had endured was under the dominion of their own religious and political leaders, who governed in the name of the Holy Cross, in the period in which they were virtually independent from Mexican control, after the great rebellion of 1847 and into the 1930s. They consider it so, because the Maya leaders forced their followers to work in order to sustain them and their sanctuaries and conscripted them to participate in their defense against hostile Mexican military forces; furthermore, they employed corporal punishment to enforce these obligations (Sullivan 1989: 165). Indeed, there is evidence that, although many Maya villages of eastern Yucatan accepted the ultimate spiritual authority of the Holy Cross, they were far less willing to recognize the power of the earthly representatives of that religious figure. Over the decades, they repeatedly challenged their legitimacy and even assassinated several of the spokespersons for the Cross, as well as the generals that led the army that defended it (Dumond 1977; Sullivan 2004).

Therefore, when the Maya of Quintana Roo decided to finally negotiate a peace accord with the Mexican state in 1938, at the behest of none other than Villa Rojas, at least some of them were seeking liberation from the servitude that had been imposed on them by their leaders. This liberation was a fulfillment of a prophecy that had circulated among the villagers of the regions since the beginning of the 20th century, attributed to one Florencio Cituk:

Today stone to stone we walk, on hidden roads we walk. But there will be, says he, says True God, there will be the opening of all roads.
We will eat together with the foreigner. We will eat together with our enemy.
We will converse with him. There will come the time when white roads cross in Noh Cah Santa Cruz (Sullivan 1989: 165).

For the Maya of that period, life under Mexican rule opened a new epoch of peace and freedom, a time of 'open roads', considered to be the opposite of the isolation they had endured under the rule of the Cross. Henceforth they would be at liberty to interact with the foreigners, to trade freely with them and to benefit from their goods and their technologies.

Faust also found that the inhabitants of Pich consider peaceful interaction with foreigners and openness to the ideas and goods brought by them as a strong positive value, and that they are willing to embrace these novelties that come from afar. What they do not like is to feel that they are being taken advantage of; that is, forced into 'servitude' (Faust 2010: 87-88).

Villa Rojas interpreted the willingness of many Maya peasants to take part in relations of labor and commerce, and their acceptance of modern technology as signs of

an irreversible adoption of the progressive, forward-looking outlook of Modernity as defined by Redfield. He even expressed surprise when several women in Tusik asserted that life had become “more beautiful, since now we can buy everything in the stores” (Villa Rojas 1978: 551). His astonishment can be attributed to the fact that he considered that the optimism of these women exceeded the realities of the actual progress of their community, and underestimated the uncertainties and problems they faced.

Like many Western observers, Villa Rojas attributed this change in the outlook of the Maya peasants of Quintana Roo to the technological transformation of the landscape of the Yucatan peninsula, particularly the building of roads and of electrical and telegraph networks that linked their formerly isolated communities to the present world (Villas Rojas 1978: 537).

However, Sullivan argues that the Maya understand the concept of ‘open roads’ quite differently. From their point of view it is not the consequence of technological transformations, or the building of the physical infrastructure of roads, cables and networks, but the result of the free movement of people from and to their communities, and of the exchange of goods and ideas between them and the outside world. Thus, it is the Maya themselves who open the roads, as they exercise their freedom of movement, and not external Western technologies and State agents (Sullivan 1989: 171).

Moreover, as we have seen, the feeling of liberation that accompanied the opening of the roads was not everlasting, and 30 years later some villagers of Quintana Roo had come to regard their lives under the rule of the Mexican as a new form of servitude, as they told Sullivan.

They also asserted that the return of slavery would, in turn, lead to a new war, similar to the great rebellion of the 19th century. This negative outlook was expressed in the form of prophecies, such as this one:

The war that is coming, God will make it,
in every nation, all over earth.
Because the war that is coming, [it will be] because of hunger.
Hunger will make it, surely.
Because there isn't any justice under the big bureaucrats. They are paid by the government
but [...] The poor man, nothing is left to him.
There is no justice.
For that reason, then, the thing will happen, easily. Blood will be shed again
(Sullivan 1989: 178).

Just like the inhabitants of Tusik and X-Cacal who spoke with Sullivan, the older inhabitants of Pich told Faust that they also feared that the worsening of economic conditions in the late 20th century could lead to a return of the servitude they had suffered a century earlier under the *haciendas* (Faust 2010: 112-113).

Thus we can propose that the villagers of Campeche and Quintana Roo share, at least partially, a conception of history as a pendular movement between regimes of slavery, periods of social conflict, or war, and periods of liberation, or open roads. From this point of view, any regime, whether native or foreign, may eventually come to be seen as overbearing and oppressive, a time of 'servitude', and therefore will provoke a longing for a future liberation.

I call this conception Maya not because I assume it is shared necessarily by all the different communities and persons that speak the Maya language or that anthropologists and historians call Maya. Nor do I claim that it is an essential feature of Maya culture, and as such it is inherently and necessarily different and distinct from 'Western' or other 'indigenous' views. Rather, I would argue that it can be called Maya because it is part of the conceptual repertoire constructed and shared by different Maya-speaking peasant communities in the Yucatan peninsula over centuries of shared history of interaction with Colonial and National domination, and maybe even with indigenous powers in the pre-Columbian times (Farriss 1992).

As such it can be found in the historical prophetic books of *Chilam Balam* that were widespread in the region in the late Colonial period, and there are traces of it in the contemporary oral traditions of the two groups of villages we are discussing. In Quintana Roo, they have survived in the formal genres of public discourses with historical content (Burns 1983: 72), and also in the many forms of prophecies that circulate widely and in the books and annotations written by local intellectuals and read aloud in public occasions (Sullivan 1991: 227). In Campeche, they are alluded to in the everyday discussion of the current situations and their future outlook that draw from the collective memories of the villagers.

Therefore we can propose that despite the striking differences the historical experiences of the Maya-speaking villagers in Campeche and Quintana Roo have been similar enough to allow them to build and maintain a shared awareness of the dynamics of the historical events that affect their lives.

These forms of knowledge include, per force, the external agents that have interacted with the local communities and take into account their protracted and complex participation in their lives. As such, these conceptions of history are intrinsically 'diplomatic', since they operate as frameworks that allow their holders to interpret these alien forces and negotiate with them. They are also 'cosmohistorical' since they strive to understand and include the other worlds that come knocking, or storming, at the door of their own pluriverse.

This shared frame of reference explains why the Maya peasants in Pich and in X-Cacal and other villages, warily scrutinize their present and their near future for signs of a new imposition of slavery, as has happened in their past. It also explains their parallel longing for liberation and for peaceful and open exchanges with 'foreigners'.

Both these attitudes were encountered by Villa Rojas, Burns and Sullivan, and also by Faust, but each of them chose to emphasize one or the other according to his or her own research interests, and to the way they echoed his or her own conceptions of historical time, Indigenous culture and the future.

As expert 'diplomats', the villagers of Campeche and Quintana Roo also knew what aspect of their frame of reference to share with each of their different visitors with the aim of furthering their negotiations with them and constructing a useful 'common now'.

Environmental times

From a traditional anthropological and historical point of view, the encounter between the anthropologists' visions of the future and those of the Maya-speaking peasants in Quintana Roo and Campeche could be conceptualized as an interaction between two distinct and ultimately incompatible conceptions of temporality and historicity. According to this interpretation, the West has a predominantly linear idea of history, based on a naturalistic conception of time. This lineal history is associated with Modern notions of progress, in the case of Villa Rojas, and with 'Postmodern' notions of ecological crisis, in the case of Faust. In contrast, the Mayas would appear to have a predominantly cyclical conception of time that emphasizes the recurrence of similar periods through history.

Such a contrast has traditionally been seen as the underpinning of a dichotomy between Western scientific history and non-Western myth, the former supposedly anchored on writing, rationality and critical enquiry, the latter on orality, religion and symbolism (Detienne 1985).

As I hope is already evident, I am proposing a completely different way of understanding the relation between Western notions of history and those that can be found in the Yucatec villages.

To begin with, as Farris has pointed out the contraposition between Western lineal time and non-Western cyclical times is overly simplistic, since all conceptions of time contain both cyclical and lineal elements (Farris 1985: 49).

In the case of the inhabitants of Pich and of the villages around Tusik, several of their concerns about the future point to the existence of a clear dimension of linearity and irreversibility in their perception of time.

The most important is their keen awareness of the changing environmental circumstances that have affected, and even threaten to impede, the practice of swidden agriculture. In Quintana Roo, the continued clearing of the forest for agriculture and livestock raising has led to a notable and steady decline in the yield provided by the land, and an increased demand for peasant labor in cultivating it (Sullivan 1983: 188-189). This decline in productivity only intensifies the forebodings of the Maya about times to come, as it forces them to depend more and more on 'foreigners' for complementing the meager production of their plots, with the concomitant fear of being 'enslaved' by

them. In Campeche, in turn, a sharp drop of the rainfall in the past decades has also reduced the yield of swidden agriculture and threatened the continuity of this form of production. Faust attributes this dry spell in great part to the increasing deforestation of the region (Faust 2010: 70-71).

As she points out, however, Maya agriculturalists have faced similar crises in the past. Indeed, changes in rainfall patterns, deforestation and the exhaustion of the fragile soils of the forest are some of the reasons adduced for the 'collapse' of Classical Maya civilization in the 8th and 9th centuries (Chase & Chase 2006; Demarest, Rice & Rice 2004; McAnany & Negrón 2010). These processes of ecological deterioration, however, were offset by the resulting dispersal of the peasant population, which reduced the intensity and frequency of land clearing and allowed the forest more time to recover. Indeed, according to her argument, the millennial survival of the system of Maya subsistence agriculture in the precarious tropical rain forest environment could be attributed to its capacity to adapt to these long-term cycles of population concentration and agricultural intensification that resulted in the deterioration of the environment and the following population dispersal and de-intensification of agriculture that allowed for the regeneration of the forest (Faust 2010: 115-156).

For instance, when the rebels of the so-called Caste War of the mid 19th century moved into the sparsely populated regions of eastern Yucatan (now Quintana Roo), they found a forest that appeared to be virgin. However, archaeological and historical evidence shows us that it had been intensely cultivated centuries before, up to the time of the Spanish conquest, but had been mostly abandoned since, giving it time to be restored. Therefore it was highly propitious for swidden agriculture practiced by the rebel communities even up to the mid 20th century (Sullivan 1983: 194-195). Yet, by the 1970s, the increasing population and the proliferation of settlements all over the region presented the peasants with the exact opposite situation: a forest that was being progressively exhausted and had much less room and time for recovery.

Faust criticizes the government-sponsored development projects implemented in Campeche in the late 20th century because they sought to impose forms of intensive agriculture that are not adapted to the forest environment and thus jeopardized its capacity for regeneration, threatening the survival of swidden agriculture (Faust 2010: 107-108).

So the novelty faced by contemporary Maya is that a process of ecological deterioration of the forest that once was part of a larger social and ecological cycle, and thus could be reversed or at least partially offset by the dispersion of the population, may have become irreversible because of the shifting social and economic conditions resulting from modernization.

This new regional situation synchronizes them with the global conjuncture of environmental crisis, and provides a common ground for sharing their concerns about the

future with those of Faust and other contemporaries, thus building a new kind of 'common now', informed by notions of risk and ecological crisis.

A similar contrast in perspectives may explain a second element of linearity that pervades contemporary conceptions of the future in Quintana Roo. According to Sullivan, the prophecies about the coming war that will result from the renewed imposition of slavery emphasize the apocalyptic and irreversible nature of the upcoming conflagration. He regards this apocalyptic perspective as a novelty for the Maya: a result of the rise of Adventist and other apocalyptic religions in their midst, and thus establishes a distinction between the current prophecies about the end of the world from previous ones that promised changes in cosmic eras but not an Apocalypse (Sullivan 1983: 137).

In this respects we can propose that the view of the future of many contemporary Maya contains strong lineal, unrepeatable and irreversible elements that match those that are perceived by Western observers. At the same time, though, when they look back some Maya observers find that these elements can also be associated with similar events and threats of the past, and thus they acquire a cyclical, or pendular, nature. Indeed, when Sullivan asked an old man about the reinstatement of slavery in the coming future he replied in this way, alluding precisely to the great rebellion of the 19th century:

Hah! It will. That's what's coming to pass, so it will remain so.
 Not like it was, perhaps. Its form is different. Different, but still that's it. Only its form is different as it is instituted again. But if it's really instituted, MOTHER, people will get mad. People will get mad again. Oh MAN, look out! It's going to happen again! Oh MAN, how many people will get mad! Poor people will get mad. Those who have the means of livelihood won't get mad.
 [...] "Well, we're not going to get fucked! Let's go fuck them!" Well, here go things getting bad again.
 First you get fucked. Well, isn't that how it happened long ago?
 First they got fucked, because of hunger. Well, because my late father told me, hunger made the war happen, he said. It didn't just happen, he said. If you're full, you won't make war, he said. Hunger did it, supposedly, when it happened long ago (Sullivan 1989: 177-178).

The coexistence of linear and cyclical elements in Maya historicities is not a completely new phenomenon. Farris has pointed out that during the Colonial period, the Maya of Yucatan wrote both the books of *Chilam Balam*, organized around a strictly cyclical calendric count of 13 *katuns* (periods of almost twenty years) and detailed genealogies that contained elements of linearity (Farris 1985: 50-51).

As we can see, Maya historicities are plural complex frames of references, which contain different temporalities and concepts that allow for their creative use in remembering the past, interpreting the present and foretelling the future. Since these interpretations always involve 'diplomatic' negotiations with foreigners, one measure of their success is precisely their ability to find shared ground with them and to build 'common nows' that allow Mayas to interact more meaningfully with their visitors.

The relativity of the present

The interactions between the Maya and the anthropologists that have been analyzed in this paper provide abundant evidence of what we can call the ‘relativity of the present’, adapting the concept coined by relativist physics to refer to how the perception of the now is determined by the specific trajectories of physical bodies in space-time (Pickover 1998).

The Maya villagers from Campeche and Quintana Roo and the different anthropologists that come to visit them did not initially live in a ‘common now’, beyond the rather empty and abstract coordinates of the calendar they shared. This means that even though they were able to interact in space-time, the place of that interaction within their larger historical frameworks, and its dynamic relation with the past and the future, was different for each of them. This is why they had to engage in a ‘diplomatic’ negotiation to construct a more meaningful ‘common now’.

Asserting that the villagers of Campeche and Quintana Roo have different conceptions of the flow of time, and of the dynamics of history, as Westerners is no great novelty within the framework of cultural relativism. This affirmation of plurality is usually immediately qualified by the confirmation that Western ‘scientific’ history has a privileged direct access to the true nature of linear physical time and the true laws of historical evolution, and that the conceptions of the ‘natives’ are merely cultural constructs that cannot claim the same degree of truth or accuracy. However, as we have seen, the shifting perspectives and interpretations of anthropologists in the past decades are eloquent proof of the uncertainty and mutability of Western notions of time and history. Gumbrecht has called the current situation a ‘crisis’ of the modern conception of history, and its claim to be the single legitimate and true representation of human universal history. According to him we live now in an “ample present” where different conceptions of historical time and becoming can coexist and be heard and no single one of them can claim to subsume the others (Gumbrecht 2010: 17).

This crisis provides us with a valuable opportunity to go beyond cultural relativism and the dominant role it attributed to Western science and history, and to engage in a true ‘cosmopolitical’ dialogue with other historicities.

From this new perspective we should dispense with the belief that either Villa Rojas’s Modernist views, or Faust’s post-Modern perspective, or the villager’s ‘pendular’ conceptions of the recurrence of periods of servitude, should be evaluated according to how they reflect more or less precisely ‘true’ time and history, the bedrock of reality that underlies cultural conceptions. Rather, following both relativist physics, and anthropological perspectivism, we should conceive them as the particular and irreducible points of view of persons and collectives living in their particular spatial and temporal trajectories (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 345).

Therefore we can propose the existence of a true historical relativity, along the lines of the one sketched by Lévi-Strauss in *Race et Histoire* (Lévi-Strauss 2001: 73-74). Different collectives experience the present according to their own historical trajectories, and, as in relativist physics, there is no single time-space that can integrate their different chronotopes, that is their conceptions and perceptions of space-time.³

All that we can aspire to construct are ephemeral and equivocal 'common nows' that allow us to interact and to find shared frames of reference and of meaning in the present, the past and the future, always within specific contexts and with particular aims.

However, we must also bear in mind that in the 'diplomatic' negotiations we described in this article, each party, particularly Western scientists, assumed that the others lived in the same time as them, since they regarded their own history as the only true existing one. Thus Villa Rojas was confident that the Maya of Quintana Roo had assumed a Modern future-oriented optimistic outlook, according to the anthropological theories of Redfield and they were well in the path of being 'integrated' into Mexican society, according to the doctrine of *indigenismo*. Similarly, Faust was convinced that they partook of her preoccupations about a future of global ecological crisis and deterioration. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of both regions wondered whether these *dzuloob* had come as bringers of new forms of servitude, or as potential allies in their struggles and established different relations with them according to their interpretations of their origins and their intentions.

This gave rise to equivocations and confusions, as we have seen above, since the parties assumed that they had reached agreements, when they actually differed about their interpretations of the relation of the present with the past and the future. As Cadena has pointed out, equivocations are an integral part of any 'cosmopolitical' negotiation, since 'homonymies', or apparent coincidences, can mask profound differences and disagreements between the different socionatural worlds that are interacting (Cadena 2010: 350-351).

However, these equivocations and coincidences also allowed for communication and understandings and permitted the building of 'common nows'. Hence the contradictory interpretations that the anthropologists present of the ways in which the Mayas of Quintana Roo and Campeche view their current situation and future prospects are not exclusively a projection of their own different conceptions of the present and hopes or apprehensions about the future, but also of the diverse ways in which different villagers evaluated their current situation and prospects.

3 Of course we can construct universal chronologies, such as those employed by archaeologists but they would have no meaning unless they are inserted in a particular and necessarily partial, interpretive framework, such as evolutionism.

Villa Rojas was more open to listening to and giving credence to perspectives that confirmed his own interpretations of the irreversible modernization of the village of X-Cacal. He acknowledged that there were opposing opinions, but regarded them as mere grumblings from a disaffected minority. At the same time, it is also quite likely that in 1973, after a decades-long period of economic expansion in Mexico, many inhabitants of X-Cacal and surrounding villages shared his optimistic outlook of the future and regarded their integration to the Mexican capitalist economy in a favorable light. In this way they were able to construct a 'common now' centered on these favorable expectations.

In 1978, when Sullivan came to the region, he asked other questions, informed by a radically different interpretation of the history of the Maya and of the relation of Indigenous societies to world-historical processes. So he gave more weight to divergent opinions and concerns about the future, and sought precisely the disaffected traditionalists that Villa Rojas had dismissed. Also, many villagers may have provided him with different answers because their economic situation had changed dramatically in the meantime and their outlook of the future was bleaker.

Similarly, Faust's concerns with ecological deterioration may have shaped her ethnographic agenda, but the villagers of Pich who were having increasing trouble practicing their traditional swidden agriculture also shared them and they found a significant common ground with her.

From the perspective of historical relativity, the Maya appear to be even more of our contemporaries without necessarily living in the same present as we do. This means that they are as affected as the rest of the world by Modernization, the oscillations of the capitalist economy and the global environmental crisis. However, they constantly construct their own interpretations of the current situation and insert them within their own historical trajectories, arguing and disagreeing about their possible interpretations. In this process of constant reinterpretation they also listen, and give more or less credence to the sayings of foreigners who come to their villages. Thus 'progressives' and the persons more invested on modernization such as the store owner, found common ground with the views of Villa Rojas. In contrast 'traditionalists' discovered an echo of their concerns about the return of servitude in Burn's and Sullivan's queries. Finally, the beleaguered practitioners of swidden agriculture found a sympathetic ear, and a valuable source of environmental knowledge, in Faust.

These diplomatic negotiations are not simply disinterested exchanges, but are inseparable from broader social, economic and political relations, and can only be understood within that framework. Participating in the market economy and selling their labor had already incorporated the Maya peasants in the spatial and temporal frameworks of Modern capitalism, which were quite different from those of traditional subsistence agriculture. The villagers of Quintana Roo correctly identified Villa Rojas as an agent

of the Mexican Nation-state that held sway over them; instead, Burns and Sullivan were seen as potential allies against the Mexicans. In Pich, Faust gained the trust of the villagers when she demonstrated that she was an ally that was willing to stand up for them against those who discriminated them, and that she shared their concern with the fate of traditional swidden agriculture (Faust 2010: 66-67).

In turn, the presence of the anthropologists in the Maya villages was not unrelated to the national and global political and economic forces that were transforming their own lives and that of the Maya. Villa Rojas returned to Quintana Roo on the crest of a wave of national capitalist modernization; Burn's and Sullivan's presence was made possible by the international research agendas of the US, and in that sense the villagers of X-Cacal were not entirely mistaken in regarding them as representatives of their government; Faust arrived in Pich thanks to the support of international research foundations concerned with ecological deterioration.

This changing mesh of coincidences and divergences demonstrates that the 'diplomatic' negotiations of a common present are much more than equivocal and ultimately impossible exchanges of information and points of view between people that inhabit irreducible different worlds. Indeed, 'cosmopolitics' is possible because we live in more than one world (the reality that is defined by the dominant Western scientific knowledge) but in less than two entirely separate universes (Cadena 2010: 347-348). It is precisely through 'diplomatic' interactions such as the ones described in this paper that we can discover the commonalities and differences between our worlds, and can move beyond the limits of what each one of the parties defines as reality.

In fact these 'diplomatic' negotiations become part of the complex web of relations that link and entangle the respective realities of the parties, and thus modify them, making them less separate, but sometimes also confirming their incommensurability.

In its constant search for cultural purity and distinctiveness, cultural relativism underestimates the power of these exchanges to construct new shared frames of interpretation and 'common nows'.

Conversely, these exchanges should not be regarded either as part of a process of incorporation, or subordination, of Maya notions of history, and of Maya socionatural worlds, to a single, true universal History, that would be represented and embodied by Western agents and Western scientists. Just as the 'local cultures' it encounters, 'universal (Western) history' is itself constantly shifting and being transformed by the kinds of negotiations we have described, which take place all over the planet in many different contexts, both between different societies and within each of them. Because its traditional belief in unity and linearity, Western Modern history has been generally unable to appreciate the plurality of perspectives that have been integrated into the increasingly intricate webs of human, economic, and ecological globalization in the past few centuries (Conrad 2013).

The ‘common nouns’ constructed by different human beings and groups in their multidimensional exchanges, are nothing more than a vast array of particular and limited interactions, the web we constantly weave with our ‘diplomacy’, our conversations, our commerce, our conflicts, our agreements, and our misunderstandings.

It is my hope that this article may have demonstrated that we cannot and should not aspire to reach a single, universally valid historical point of view, but also that the plural, contradictory and ever changing kaleidoscope of perspectives we do find in our shared and different human histories are all the more fascinating.

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