

# Rethinking the Borders in Latin America and the Clash of Social Imaginaries

## The Impact of Intercultural Universities on Indigenous Autonomy

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In order to speak about “borders” in Latin America, it is necessary to take an approach that reflects the specific interethnic realities of this region where autonomy is a key emerging issue. The concept of autonomy is often mistakenly linked to forced political and administrative changes that could potentially dismantle existing states. In contrast, indigenous movements in Mexico and Ecuador use this idea to call for a more egalitarian society in which their cultures may exist freely and yet still operate in the framework of the given states. In this study, I argue that educational models of the intercultural university have recently become important tools in the negotiations between native movements and national governments in Mexico and Ecuador. Despite their common designation as “intercultural universities,” these models vary and represent quite distinct political visions belonging to two different social imaginaries. In the case of Mexico, the model is occidental while for Ecuador, it is a native Andean one. To illustrate the difference, I describe Amawtay Wasi Intercultural University in Ecuador, which has been used by the CONAIE indigenous movement to support its plurinational goals. I then turn to the intercultural university network created by the Mexican Ministry of Public Education, which clearly represents an educational vision imposed by the government on native peoples.



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## Introduction

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To accurately discuss borders in Latin America, it is essential to address the specific interethnic realities and multicultural relations of the region.<sup>1</sup> The anthropological concept of a frontier is actually polysemic and can be understood in either a factual or a metaphorical sense. Outside the common notion of the border as a line that divides one country from another, it has other (cultural, spatial, time-oriented and ideological) dimensions which may serve as a marker of alterity or otherness among humans. Bartolomé suggests two understandings of the “border” or “frontier” that are extremely useful when describing the complex Latin American reality: the ethnic frontier and the interior frontier.<sup>2</sup> In regards to the first term, he notes that ethnic frontiers and political borders do not usually function on the same social and political basis (for instance, middle-class citizens of a Latin American country will probably feel far closer to their middle-class counterparts in another Latin American country than to the indigenous people of their own state). Bartolomé links the second concept to the interethnic situation within these countries, which is one of conflict and internal colonialism. In the context of this study, this is illustrated in the refusal of the nations concerned to provide indigenous peoples with rights over their ancestral territories, which are instead viewed as “empty spaces” that may be controlled efficiently via the political and economic hegemony of the state. The state dispossession of indigenous peoples currently appears to be coming full circle; what began with direct military colonisation and continued through the staking of a claim to surface and subterranean resources is now culminating in the piracy of biodiversity, cultural patrimony and indigenous intellectual property in general.<sup>3</sup> The two concepts proposed by Bartolomé, thus, clearly show how the idea of the “frontier” can be linked to the topics of indigenous autonomy and interculturality (including the intercultural university as a specific institution).

Redefining relations between different cultural groups in Latin American societies is being more widely prioritised at present. This is

linked to the call for a different concept of the state that would establish new systems of social and administrative organisation based on respect for autonomy in particular countries. Although autonomy brings about administrative changes that may be figured as “new borders” within a country, these should not be understood as modes of separatism. Rather, they are ways to officially recognise that post-colonial Latin American societies are far from being culturally homogeneous and that the topic of cultural diversity management is an essential element of human right issues.

At present, indigenous demands are no longer limited to strictly indigenous themes, as can be seen from the interest in “plurinationality” that I explore below. Since the 1980s, native movements have been transforming themselves into autonomous entities with corresponding demands,<sup>4</sup> and to that extent, the 1990s may fairly be dubbed ‘the decade of indigenous people’ in Latin America.<sup>5</sup> While the native movements and uprisings of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century were frequently considered to be consequences of poverty, under-development and the negative effects of neoliberal policies, these analyses have broadened owing to the emergence of the right to autonomy.<sup>6</sup> What had been called “indigenous resistance” since the age of colonisation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is coming to be understood as a series of emancipatory processes with clearly political dimensions: native people are not only resisting the social forces that create unbearable living conditions for them but starting to negotiate with the nation state in which they dwell and to raise a set of specific demands.

In this context, this work aims to describe and explain how particular applications of the educational model of the intercultural university fit into the ideological framework of cultural diversity management. Such management may concentrate on two very different goals: a) including cultural “Others” in the global market and preserving current power relations that prioritise globalised segments of society or b) redefining social relations by introducing a concept of autonomy which enables native people to employ their creative potential from within their own cultural systems.

## **Autonomy in the Indigenous Movements of Mexico and Ecuador**

The indigenous movements of Ecuador and Mexico are very important in the Latin American context. Both these movements pursue the right

to self-determination and autonomy. In talking here about autonomy, we must be very clear about our meaning since the term generally evokes scenes of secession and separatism. In fact, indigenous autonomy, as defined by Convention No. 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in connection with the term *pueblo* (people), is a special kind of social pact that would convert native peoples into the social subjects of a new federalism.<sup>7</sup> Such autonomy does not refer to the reorganisation of a country on an ethnic basis. On the contrary, the current aim of indigenous movements in many Latin American countries is to remain inside the framework of the nation, which is invited to redefine its essence and move towards a concept of the plurinational state. Using ideas of plurinationality, autonomy and interculturality, among others, these indigenous movements propose new solutions to achieve peaceful coexistence among different cultural groups. These terms are, however, generally misunderstood by the majority of society and, at the same time, tend to be interpreted in many different, even mutually incompatible ways and taken up in rhetoric that serves various ideological positions. “Interculturality,” for instance, lacks a clearly defined and generally shared definition. Furthermore, its deployment in official state rhetoric fails to provide indigenous movements with the right to autonomy and self-government.

Here, then, at the very outset, we witness a clash between two social imaginaries, that is, two different ways in which human societies explain the world around them and make it an epistemologically comprehensible place to live in. Latin American indigenous imaginaries (such as the *Buen Vivir* or “Good Living” proposal of native people) generally lack the imposing tendency that is typical for the Western or Anglo-Saxon way of thinking that endeavours to include “Others” (culturally speaking) in the Western lifestyle and values. Furthermore, indigenous social imaginaries are based on a vision of a balanced relationship between human beings and the environment (the idea of sustainability) and opposed to the modern concepts of linear development and material growth accompanied by environmental destruction. Let us turn to the question of how these issues materialise in the countries that are our focus here.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Mexico was already the site of an important history of clashes between native peoples and the state. In 1992, the same year that indigenous people held massive protests across the continent against the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America, two key events happened in Mexico.

First of all, a new national identity was introduced into the Constitution, which subsequently stated that Mexico was a 'pluriethnic' country. From today's perspective, it is obvious that this rather descriptive term was chosen to avoid language with more political connotations such as "plurinational," which is used by the Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador (CONAIE) indigenous movement and refers to the coexistence of native peoples and non-indigenous society in symmetrical power relations that can only be achieved by "interculturalising," and thus, decolonising the state.<sup>8</sup> This shift in the Mexican constitution aimed to divert attention away from the fact that though native peoples had been given the civil personhood of legal subjects (that is, provided with autonomy), they continued to be treated as mere objects of public concern. In the Constitution, autonomy is mentioned in the context of self-determination and the preservation of national unity. Nevertheless, there are no definitions of either the domains where native people may exercise autonomy or the practicalities of its everyday operation.<sup>9</sup>

The second, simultaneous, development was that of Article 27 which was adjusted to allow for negotiations over the *ejido* (common land) in Mexico. Though it was stipulated that the integrity of the 'land of indigenous groups' would be protected, this reform represented a clear threat to the existence of "indigenous territories," a term without a legally binding definition in the *Carta Magna*.<sup>10</sup> Autonomy cannot, however, exist without territorial dimensions since territory is not only physical property, but rather represents a group of cultural and symbolic factors<sup>11</sup> and a domain of decision-making where resources are managed and identities created.<sup>12</sup>

While Mexican governments have remained unsupportive despite the signing of Convention No.169 in 1990, indigenous peoples have acted on their own initiative. Unlike Ecuador, Mexico does not have any entity that could be called "the" state indigenous movement because none of the existing groups include all of Mexico's native nations. The most significant movements for the defence of indigenous rights are Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN), known as the Zapatistas, and Asamblea Nacional Indígena Plural por la Autonomía (ANIPA). Both were created in the '90s and each has specific ideas about the type of autonomy it seeks. Constitutional reform has begun to be the central element of these indigenous demands.

The Zapatistas were not originally a movement created by native peoples, but they very quickly became one. In 1994, they launched an armed conflict in the state of Chiapas which targeted the federal government and forced it into a debate on the key themes of democracy for the whole country, self-determination and autonomy. This led to the formulation of the San Andrés Accords. In time, the Zapatistas grew weary of legal procedures and decided to construct their own system of autonomy unilaterally—since 2003 this has consisted of the Caracoles, Good Government Boards for the entire region and the *Municipios Autónomos Rebeldes Zapatistas* in particular districts. Different governments responded by stirring up conflicts and causing socioeconomic, political and military isolation of Zapatista territory in the expectation that the Good Government Boards would eventually dissolve on their own.<sup>13</sup>

ANIPA, which consists of intellectuals and leaders from various Mexican native nations, was established in response to the rebel activity in Chiapas. Its aim was to expand the autonomous regions into Chiapas to the rest of the country. In other words, ANIPA acted in defence of a regional concept of autonomy (based on proposed pluriethnic autonomous regions known as *Regiones Autónomas Pluriétnicas* or RAPS), which was complicated by the dispersal of the indigenous population. Over time, ANIPA grew close to the Party of National Action government (2000-2006) and eventually disappeared from the scene. In contrast, the EZLN's activity has stayed vigorous and it continues to be seen today exercising autonomy at both regional and district levels.

One obvious first point to be raised here concerns the nature of the autonomy that has been demanded by native movements. Should it be exercised at the community, district or regional levels? To date, native people's experiences of autonomy in different regions and districts – including EZLN's area of influence and community policing in the state of Guerrero – show that solutions must be flexible and contextual.<sup>14</sup>

Without a shift in power resulting in the establishment of a fourth level of government (after the federal, state and district levels), autonomy cannot exist, and thus, the question remains how far the Mexican government is willing to go to decentralise the country politically in favour of native peoples. At present, a false idea is being promoted that autonomy is possible without appropriate political and legal changes. There is, therefore, a split in the approach to autonomy in Mexico. On

the one hand, we find the autonomy produced by the legal reforms of 2001, which has adjusted but not changed the status quo, reducing autonomy to a group of specific rights and the practice of selected cultural customs at a strictly community level. On the other, there is the “de facto autonomy” constructed outside the national legal framework with Zapatista support. These new types of collective organisation are based on traditional indigenous forms of government but also have many innovative features and can materialise at regional, district or community levels.<sup>15</sup>

Let us turn, then, to the situation in Ecuador. The process of indigenous emancipation in Ecuador began between 1980 and 1986 when the CONAIE was founded based on steps by two ethnic groups that had been active since the 1970s: the Kichwa from mountainous areas and a group in the Amazonian forest. In 1990, the CONAIE organised the first indigenous uprising in modern Ecuadorean history, bringing a new approach to the “old” topics of democracy and political representation by invoking interculturality and the plurinational state. The group demanded matching constitutional reforms.<sup>16</sup> Until then, the 40% of Ecuadorean society who were of indigenous origin and generally illiterate, had not been considered citizens and not been allowed to vote. In other words, the indigenous population had no political rights, and political representatives acted as if it did not exist.<sup>17</sup> After the 1990 revolt, the country’s establishment began to consider the possibility of incorporating “Indians” into modern Ecuadorean civilisation, an idea whose equivalent had existed in Mexico since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century within the *indigenismo* framework and one that was unacceptable to the indigenous people in question who were already discussing indigenous nationalities. Through the political party called Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik (Plurinational Unity Pachakutik), the CONAIE was successful in the 1996, 1999, 2001 and 2002 elections. The organisation has, however, since faced problems with its political agenda, which, on the one hand, must retain its cultural specificity, and on the other, requires a broader programme in order to bring it closer to other sectors of Ecuadorean society and safeguard its presence in the power structure. This issue has led to a debate about the interconnection of classism and ethnicism in the Ecuadorean indigenous movement.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, while there has been considerable discussion and social mobilisation, the contents of the CONAIE’s plurinational project are not completely clear.<sup>19</sup>

In 2007, the CONAIE introduced the *Buen Vivir* orientation as the basis for its proposed constitutional reforms, which were then implemented in the 2008 constitution, the first in Latin American history to integrate non-Western ideas about how to live.<sup>20</sup> While in the previous (1998) constitution, Ecuador had been defined as a pluricultural and multiethnic country, in 2008, it officially became an intercultural and plurinational one.<sup>21</sup> However, the failure to word some of these 2008 constitutional provisions adequately and the fact that some parts are contradictory and their conversion into laws and regulations is still pending,<sup>22</sup> have cast some doubt upon the achievement of the indigenous movement. In addition, Article 257 of the current Ecuadorean constitution establishes indigenous territorial units based on interculturality, plurinationality and collective rights. However, various researchers have pointed out that the indigenous autonomy in the Constitution is overshadowed by other forms of territorial self-government and so the practical application of this concept would be exceedingly complicated.<sup>23</sup>

### The Intercultural University Phenomenon and Different Approaches to Autonomy

How then does the intercultural university phenomenon fit into the aforementioned discussion? In both Mexico and Ecuador, educational models called intercultural universities have been functioning up until recent times. This intercultural university may seem to be a single educational concept but it actually encompasses very heterogeneous models of the university. This fact makes particular intercultural universities in the Latin American region quite incomparable and deserving of separate and detailed studies. If we consider the situation in Ecuador and Mexico, then at one end of the spectrum, we find Amawtay Wasi, the Intercultural and Community University of the Indigenous Nations and Peoples, which is an established symbol of the CONAIE; at the other, there is the network of intercultural universities established by the Mexican government. These education initiatives differ significantly in terms of both their ideological background and the goals pursued.

In the case of Ecuador, the CONAIE has significant representation on the national political scene and the party's leaders were in a prime position to pressure Ecuadorean political power circles to push through



their educational project. Amawtay Wasi was conceived from inside the country's Congress, taking up the threads of an idea which had existed in the CONAIE since 1989 when an intercultural bilingual education programme began in Ecuador.<sup>24</sup> The intercultural university project has followed the political trajectory of the indigenous movement that began in 1996 when its political party, Unidad Plurinacional Pachakutik (Plurinational Unity Pachakutik) succeeded in the election, achieving a 10% stake in parliament.<sup>25</sup> In this way, the CONAIE was able to prevent native people's participation in the mainstream educational system and instead defend an autonomous and epistemologically alternative university project for both their own youth and non-indigenous members of society. However, back in 1996, that new project did not differ essentially from the conventional university model that would hardly have benefited the indigenous movement, and the proposal had to be debated among both native and *mestizo* Ecuadorean and foreign representatives until an alternative educational model could be developed.<sup>26</sup> This *minga de pensamiento* (collective intellectual process) was initiated in 1997, and a year later, the project proposal was presented to Congress.<sup>27</sup> At first, it was rejected, having been sent back for revisions four times by the National Council of Higher Education (CONESUP), which did not understand the indigenous educational concept and could not make it conform to the patterns of conventional education. Some changes were made but the representatives of the indigenous movement were determined to preserve the alternative character of their project. As an intercultural university, Amawtay Wasi had to be endorsed and approved based upon its essential difference: this was not a space for vocational education but a political space where knowledge would be discussed.<sup>28</sup> In 2003, hundreds of native people gathered at a CONESUP meeting to urge the approval of the intercultural university. After this successful intervention, Congress approved the Amawtay Wasi project in 2004, making it part of the national university system.<sup>29</sup> In March 2005, the intercultural university opened during the *Pawkar Raymi* celebrations in Pichincha province near Quito.<sup>30</sup>

It was, then, a striking turnaround that after almost a decade in operation, Amawtay Wasi was closed down on 04 November 2013. The CONAIE considers this act to be a violation of the rights of indigenous people established under Convention No.169, which was signed by Ecuador in 1998 and should have guided the process of evaluating the university. The CONAIE, together with the Ecuador's Kichwa move-

ment Ecuarunari, responded by calling for a national mobilisation in Quito and asserting their right to their own form of education without mediators, interculturalism technocrats or “experts” on Indians. Representatives of Amawtay Wasi appealed to the Constitutional Court of Ecuador, which upheld their case, ruling that CONESUP must operate according to Convention No. 169 and the Ecuadorean constitution and that Amawtay Wasi ‘can and should develop its own model of higher education based upon its own learning principles grounded in indigenous knowledge, which can serve as an innovative influence in the national system of education.’<sup>31</sup> Despite this verdict, little has been done to reassess the evaluation process, and some still argue that it was carried out from an intercultural standpoint.<sup>32</sup> The indigenous movement of Ecuador has condemned the government’s action and is endeavouring to achieve the re-opening of Amawtay Wasi, including by making an appeal to the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.<sup>33</sup>

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The situation in Mexico had different underpinnings. Proposals from native people for indigenous universities had existed in the country since the 1970s when Mexico’s Mazahua and Otomi people had called for an ethnic university project. The topic of self-determined education was also emphasised by the Zapatista movement in the 1990s, but it was not until the beginning of the new millennium that Vicente Fox’s government and the PAN party introduced an official plan for an intercultural university. Implementing the new university model into the Mexican higher education subsystem was the task of Sylvia Schmelkes, the first director of the General Coordinating Group for Intercultural Bilingual Education (CGEIB) and Julio Rubio Oca, the higher education undersecretary in Fox’s government. The CGEIB ran diagnostics by consulting 267 high school students from rural communities in eight states (of whom only 8.7% were actually of indigenous origin) to determine their educational expectations. Mexico’s first university based on this new model was opened in 2003. From the very start, the project aimed to provide a new way to integrate native youth into the tertiary education system; it emphasised the development of regional native communities and the preservation and salvaging of native cultures and languages in the curriculum.<sup>34</sup> According to Llanes, the government at first seemed sympathetic to indigenous demands, including those of the Zapatistas, but negotiations with native movements reverted eventually to an asymmetrical relationship based on

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a vertical and paternalist approach.<sup>35</sup> The rhetoric of interculturalism, evident in the name of the new university model, played an important part in this process since the role of indigenous consultants was, in fact, marginal; the concept of autonomy was omitted from the project and replaced with an emphasis on the entrepreneurial mentality, economic development and the elimination of poverty in native communities.

Educational Philosophies Of Intercultural Universities In Mexico And Ecuador	
<i>Mexico (SEP/CGEIB)</i>	<i>Ecuador (CONAIE)</i>
The “university”	The “pluriversity”
Native people are “attendees” and their participation in the creation and management of the intercultural university is limited.	The education model is designed and managed by the indigenous movement.
The education process relies on modern Western pedagogical structures.	The education process takes the form of a “reinvented education,” which is an alternative to existing modern education.
The ultimate goal is development from a Western economic standpoint.	The ultimate goal is Good Living.
A synthetic vision of human knowledge assumes that modern Western science is a filter for indigenous traditional knowledge.	A complex vision of human knowledge understands different cultural traditions as mutually complementary.
The cultures that constitute the university are fragmented and the universalism of the Western intellectual paradigm is favoured.	Universalism is rejected in favour of “multiversalism” in the knowledge that some social imaginaries tend to present certain cultural intellectual products as natural and indisputable.
Interculturality does not lead to a new attitude to cultural difference.	Interculturality is understood as a “polylogue” with “Others.”
Interculturality serves to reinforce the current social status quo.	Interculturality is employed to design social alternatives.

*Table 1: Educational Philosophies behind intercultural universities in Mexico and Ecuador based on Universidad Intercultural (2004) and Casillas and Santini (2006)*

As can be seen, the opening of Amawtay Wasi was negotiated in a more balanced environment than the formulation of the intercultural university model in Mexico, which happened without the significant participation of native people. The philosophies behind these two projects reflect their different ideological platforms and approaches to cultural diversity.<sup>36</sup>

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## Conclusions

From this study of the history of negotiations between indigenous movements and nation states, the surrounding political context and the educational philosophies of two intercultural universities, we may conclude that there are significant differences in the ways that indigenous autonomy is treated in these educational models. While the concept is the very *raison d'être* for Amawtay Wasi University in Ecuador, it is something that is necessarily excluded from the official Mexican intercultural model. Though the Mexican federal government has – and continues to – promoted policies of “inclusion” and “integration” that are clearly embodied in its educational model of the intercultural university, indigenous movements have asserted their right to self-determination and built their own autonomous structures without governmental consent. Through the state’s intercultural universities, it is imposing a vision of development and growth in outlying regions where a high percentage of the population tends to be indigenous. As such, it rejects the autonomy proposed by native peoples in Mexico and dispenses a university education based simply on a positive approach to cultural diversity and the supposed rescue of native cultures. In this way, the government is avoiding dealing with the problem of asymmetrical power relations in Mexican society and ultimately includes “Others” under Western patterns of social organisation.

In contrast, Amawtay Wasi is based on an educational theory that is independent of the Western one. This helps explain why the university was recently closed by the Ecuadorean government: its attributes were evaluated through an ideological prism of “academic excellence” based on modern Western criteria which have almost nothing in common with the indigenous concept of education.

It may be concluded that different models of multicultural coexistence are being designed by diverse agents who are acting from a range

of cultural and political positions that can be tracked through matching educational systems. These models may serve either to strengthen or weaken existing interior frontiers. This conclusion is relevant in the context of Latin American discourses on interculturalism and autonomy, which frequently obscure their own ideology and can easily skew our interpretation of the interethnic realities of these societies and the complex negotiations happening within.



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## Notes

- 1 This work is based on the results of my PhD research project *The Educational Model of the Intercultural University in the Framework of the Latin American Democratizing Processes* undertaken at Facultad de Humanidades of the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México.
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