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Cacique Rule and the Zapotec

Domain of Sovereignty, 1930–1960

*"The PRI Doesn't Exist in the Isthmus"*¹

During the years from 1934 to the early 1960s, Juchitecos succeeded in establishing and maintaining a "domain of sovereignty" (Chatterjee 1993, 6) distinct from the hegemony of the new national state. The political arrangements between Juchitán and the outside that characterized the rule of General Heliodoro Charis, the regional political boss, insured that officials were not imposed by outside authorities, landholdings and natural resources remained in local hands, and the language and rituals of Zapotec daily life flourished among ordinary and elite Juchitecos. In all of these ways, Charis's cacicazgo secured resources and practices for which Juchitecos had repeatedly taken up arms since the mid-nineteenth century. Resistance on the part of state-level elites to national reform initiatives also limited the reach of outside authorities and contributed to Charis's enduring strength in Juchitán.

Oral histories reveal the price of this strength, which included violence against Charis's political opponents and their families, the enrichment of the boss and his associates, and partial denial of land and labor rights to peasants and workers. They also reveal the absence of the PRI from boss politics and the presence of fierce political opposition to boss rule on the part of reform movements.² While people's memories of Charis indicate ambivalence toward the figure of the boss in these respects, they demonstrate widespread praise for the way in which he wielded images of Indian savagery and ignorance to local advantage against politicians in Mexico City.

Popular and official mythology coincide in establishing a clear boundary between the years of Charis's boss rule and subsequent decades, when

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politics was dominated first by mobilizations within the PRI and then by COCEI radicalism. During my field research, an older, COCEI-supporting market woman observed that “he got all the things we have” and “when he died, all things died here.” Her son-in-law, a young, COCEI-supporting oil worker, revised this to say, “when he died, politics began here.” In the course of this new politics, according to a teacher who became active in the PRI in the 1960s, “people became aware of the necessity of seeing” practices and possibilities that had been obscured during Charis’s rule.

In his discussion of the formation of anticolonial nationalism, Partha Chatterjee argues that a realm of autonomy, self-definition, and control with regard to cultural matters was established in India before the nationalist political battle began. Chatterjee points to issues of language, historical narrative, family and community structure, and education to show the ways in which a particular cultural rendering of the Indian past and of Indian identity and daily life paved the way for explicitly political campaigns decades later (1993, 6–9). In applying this concept to Juchitán, I expand the notion of domain of sovereignty to include forms of political and economic, in addition to cultural, activity. “Domain of sovereignty” aptly describes the developments of Zapotec culture and Juchiteco politics that were in no way radical or oppositional, but that established the possibility of autonomous, locally initiated activity—fostering, from the beginning of the postrevolutionary system, a counterweight to national power.

This insight is useful for examining the historical antecedents of a regionally and ethnically based poor people’s movement, as well as for thinking about democracy in terms of voice and autonomy, rather than formal procedures alone. While COCEI’s politics differed significantly from nationalist mobilizations elsewhere in the world, with respect to the identity of Juchitecos as both Zapotecs *and* Mexicans and the movement’s willingness to act within the Mexican nation, COCEI gained much of its force from its identity as a movement of Zapotecs combating outside domination. And while the Zapotec domain of sovereignty did not precisely follow Chatterjee’s designation of a spiritual as opposed to material domain, it established the bases for identity and resistance that Chatterjee demonstrates in the early, cultural stages of Indian nationalism. What Juchitecos saw and the political pathways available to them in the decades after Charis’s death in 1964, when much about the economy of the region and its relationship to Mexico City began to change, grew out of who

they understood themselves to be and how they practiced politics. These understandings and practices were shaped by the domain of sovereignty that had been constructed and defended during the Charis cacicazgo.

Charis the Boss

Charis's local prominence began in the late teens, when he established a base in the area of Monte Grande, in the hills outside of Juchitán. At this time, the minority Reds, in alliance with Oaxaca elites, maintained political control of Juchitán. Remembering his first meeting with Charis, Justo Pineda, a political opponent, told a friend that he "met a big Indian named Charis, alone in the mountains hunting." As an Indian and one of the leaders of the more popularly based Greens, Charis was a local political outsider. However, Charis backed the successful national leader Alvaro Obregón in the later years of the Mexican Revolution and led a battalion of Juchitecos in his support. As Obregón himself ascended, Charis rose in military rank and assumed a prominent post in the central Mexican city of Querétaro.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, support for Charis grew in Juchitán. The claims of the Greens to represent local autonomy and well-being in resistance to outside intervention were clearly articulated in Charis's Plan de San Vicente (1982 [1920]). According to Pineda, what distinguished Charis was that "he got together with people and mixed with people. They really loved him." After an incident in the 1920s in which Charis gathered supporters, attacked the town hall, and freed prisoners, Pineda continued, "The whole pueblo started to say 'Charis,' which was a very unusual last name. It began to sound familiar." In the 1930s, Charis returned from a series of national military campaigns and used his twin successes as a popular local figure and a leader of the national revolutionary army to establish himself as the regional political boss for the following twenty-five years. "Taking advantage of his political influence," in the words of Victoriano López Toledo, another of Charis's long-standing opponents, "the first thing that he [Charis] did was work for the unification of the pueblo, and he succeeded in ending the division that had existed for so long in Juchitán" between the Reds and the Greens.

The general's accession to power was brought about by a combination of armed rebellion and political compromise, arranged during a campaign

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visit by presidential candidate Lázaro Cárdenas. In 1932, two local doctors backed the candidacy of a popular Charis supporter for municipal president. When Governor López Cortés imposed his own candidate, the doctors fled to the mountains and waged a short-lived armed campaign against state troops (López Nelio n.d.-b), resulting in the rebels' deaths. This willingness to resort to arms in support of popular claims to self-government facilitated the subsequent political compromise and Charis's ascent to power.³ During Cárdenas's 1934 campaign visit to Juchitán, Charis's friend and second-in-command, Luis Pineda, wrote and delivered a speech emphasizing local support for Charis and Charis's loyalty to the governor. Charis's willingness to acknowledge the governor's power paved the way for the local victory of his candidate, Pineda, and, shortly thereafter, Charis's position as national senator.⁴ In Pineda's account, "Charis told me to say in the speech that the pueblo of Juchitán wasn't fighting with the state government and that the crowd there was proof of it. Cárdenas liked this and promised that unity would lead to improvements for the region, with schools and roads. The governor then allowed Charis to run Juchitán." After that, municipal presidents in Juchitán changed yearly, according to the law. Like other regional caiques of this period, Charis did not generally hold public office, but rather placed loyalists in key positions of power.

Charis's ascendancy in 1934 signified a temporary alliance between regional, state, and federal governments. Initially, this included a popular (Green) local government (finally defeating the more Oaxaca-oriented Reds), the conservative state elite (previously allied with the Reds), and a newly radical federal government led by Cárdenas. Charis could successfully strike this bargain because he had both local support and extensive ties in Mexico City, and because neither state nor federal authorities wanted to face continuing popular revolt in the Isthmus. Furthermore, the exchange of regional autonomy in return for support for the post-revolutionary state served the ongoing federal need to establish centralized control over regional political domains.

With the eclipse of the Reds, Charis came to ally with the Oaxaca elite in support of what became the status quo. In Juchitán, this meant a skillful combination of the maintenance of grassroots support for the popular general and the safeguarding of elite landed and political interests. In this context, Juchiteco Greens and Reds alike came to identify themselves as Charistas, although they were nominally members of the PRI as well.

Through his ties to the federal government, Charis became known for bringing the first municipal services to Juchitán. He repeatedly petitioned for electricity, water, schools, hospitals, and roads, and received a number of these, including the school in the center of the city and the first public hospital in the region. In many accounts, it was the petitioning that was most significant. According to his contemporary and supporter Honorato Morales, Charis "didn't get potable water, but he asked for it for six years. He asked for drainage for thirty years, but didn't get it. He always asked. Some things they gave him and some they didn't." Even according to one of the families he attacked, "some things Charis did were good and some were bad . . . Before, nobody thought there would be irrigation. He asked for irrigation—it's his accomplishment."

Oral histories offered by Juchitecos, both ordinary people and political elites, suggest a more ambiguous postrevolutionary past than the myths about Charis's control and benevolence acknowledge, in terms of the formal politics of the period and people's understanding of the dynamics of Charis's power. According to one market woman, for example, "Charis brought everything we have: light, water, schools." According to another, in partial contrast, "if someone lived well, Charis sent someone to kill him, so that there wouldn't be a man who stands tall, macho, except him." To a campesino and his market-vendor wife, Charis "was a good guy, he asked for schools, irrigation, and water" and "he didn't rob," while their neighbor in the market, a younger woman, retorted, "yes, he robbed, but nobody knew." Others in the PRI and COCEI described Charis's strong-arm tactics, which banished whole families from town, as well as the formation of civic opposition movements early on in Charis's political tenure. To his critics, "he was a bandit" in the years before he assumed political power, one who "with his friends . . . took money from the Huaves [a neighboring ethnic group]." In office and out, he was "despicable and vulgar, he used and raped young girls, he killed others for political reasons so that he could be the only one, but he didn't kill face to face, rather hidden."

Charis kept for himself the land that Obregón had awarded to his troops, and he arranged for the assassination of Rosalino Matus, a peasant who pressed for distribution of the land to its rightful owners (Campbell 1990b, 211; López Nelio n.d.-a). Charis also controlled some of Juchitán's valuable salt mines, where he dominated the unions, provided substandard equipment, and ordered the shooting of a rival union leader.⁵

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Similarly, Charis opposed Cárdenas's efforts at land reform in nearby Santiago Laollaga, forcing the president to arm local citizens as part of his *defensa rural* and providing arms himself for supporters of the hacienda (Binford 1983, 298).

Charis spoke Spanish badly, having learned it in adulthood, and brought Luis Pineda with him for reading, writing, and public speaking. The figure of the poorly educated, Zapotec general arguing for the needs of his people in Mexico City earned him enormous local loyalty, and a whole body of anecdotes arose concerning the contact between the Indian and the national politicians.⁶ "General Charis had no schooling," said the COCEI-supporting oil worker quoted above, "just sheer courage." He succeeded, according to the market-vendor mother-in-law, much as she had herself, "even though he didn't know how to explain things well, a bit in Zapotec and a bit in Spanish."

Charis's limited linguistic abilities lay at the center of many stories of his interaction with outside authorities. According to one of his soldiers, for example, he defended a number of his men when the military chief of operations in Monterey wanted to throw them out, because they spoke only Zapotec: "Charis told him that he couldn't: 'the language suckled them, general, you can't take it away from them; it suckled them, with it they grew up, it is everything for them, that's why you can't prohibit them from speaking it . . .'" (de la Cruz 1992, 65). In a story recounted by writer Andrés Henestrosa,⁷ when Charis decided to address the crowd assembled to greet presidential candidate Avila Camacho in 1940, his enemies laughed at him, "and his friends were pained, because our representative was speaking a Spanish so elementary, primitive" (de la Cruz 1992). Henestrosa may be alluding more to his own discomfort, as a member of the Juchiteco elite and a national intellectual, than to the discomfort of Juchitecos generally. In his telling, however, Charis rescued the situation—and turned the implicit racism of the laughter to his advantage—by turning to Avila Camacho and saying to the crowd, "Friends, so that you are not pained by me, who doesn't know how to speak Spanish, and so that enemies are not happy and laugh at me because I don't know Spanish, I am going to ask you to give us a school where the Juchitecos can learn Spanish" (de la Cruz 1992, 67). "This oratorical recourse," according to Henestrosa, "earned him great applause from friends and enemies."⁸ In these applause, furthermore, as well as in the admiration of the

soldiers, lies recognition of Charis's skill in maintaining the Zapotec domain of sovereignty and fostering among Juchitecos the ability to interact with the outside on their own terms.

Though he has generally been portrayed as the undisputed regional cacique for twenty years, Charis faced significant challenges throughout his tenure. Some of these challenges, such as the imposition of a candidate for municipal president by outside authorities in the early 1940s, underscored the conflictual relationship between Juchitán and outside political authorities and the tenacity of local resistance. Contemporary observers tell of watching Charis march by with hundreds of supporters, then the outside candidate with eight, and of Charis subsequently bowing to the presidential order, only to return to power a year later. Other oppositions to Charis grew out of conflicts within the Zapotec domain of sovereignty itself. According to López Toledo, who led the Front for Democratic Renovation, the predominant anti-Charis political movement in the Isthmus, Charis's initially honorable political activity "degenerated to the point that he acted as the boss of the Isthmus region" by the mid-1940s. Upon his return to the Isthmus from military service, López Toledo "sensed the unrest of his neighbors, of citizens in general, who no longer supported the bossism of General Charis and wanted a change in the politics of the pueblo." In keeping with what would become the guiding principle of political reformers and moderates in Juchitán, they "wanted others with advanced ideas to take the reins of politics."

During the same years, some national leaders sought to establish a more reformist government in Oaxaca. Both the regional and the national oppositions to the predominant Oaxaca and Isthmus political arrangements spoke in the name of anti-machine politics: the establishment of "modernizing" administrations of businesspeople⁹ and professionals who would support freer commerce, economic growth, urbanization, and education.¹⁰ Under the leadership of López Toledo, the Front for Democratic Renovation gained considerable Isthmus-wide support in an explicitly anti-Charis and anti-machine campaign. The Front emphasized the corrupt, uneducated characteristics of Charis's appointees, whom it characterized as politicians, and fought for the entry into politics and administration of educated businesspeople and professionals.

In 1944, López Toledo was designated the official candidate for the municipal presidency in Juchitán by "modernizing" governor Edmundo

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Sánchez Cano, who opposed the Oaxaca political and commercial elite with much the same vision López Toledo brought to Juchiteco politics. According to the accounts of contemporaries, López Toledo won office with majority support, but was ousted less than a year later when Sánchez Cano fell, to be replaced by a governor more to the liking of the Oaxacan upper class, Eduardo Vasconcelos. For several months, López Toledo refused to leave office in Juchitán and ran his own municipal government "parallel" to the official one, so that there were in effect two local governments. When it became clear to López Toledo that the situation would not be resolved through negotiation, he stepped down and left Juchitán.¹¹ In 1950, the federal government attempted for a second time to weaken the Oaxaca elite by appointing Manuel Mayoral Heredia as governor, and the Front for Democratic Renovation again had access to outside political authority and local office. This time, López Toledo and the Front opposed Charis's candidate for federal deputy and eventually succeeded in preventing him from receiving the nomination. Mayoral Heredia, however, was ousted in 1952 and replaced by General Carrasquedo, again an ally of the Oaxaca elite, and Carrasquedo in turn supported Charis.

These accounts of attempted reform in Juchitán and Oaxaca make clear the centrality of state and national relations for politics in Juchitán. Federal reform attempts at the state level in the 1940s and 1950s provided support and access to office for the modernizing coalition in Juchitán, but the rapid failure of these state-level efforts fatally undermined the Front's ability to challenge General Charis. Sánchez Cano fell, as did Mayoral Heredia, in the face of broad alliances of Oaxacan students, professionals, politicians, and businessmen, including many who might have benefited from the new development plans, but who chose instead to support Oaxacan autonomy by opposing federal interventions. As a result, the conservative Oaxacan commercial elite maintained its power, and supported cacique politics in Juchitán, until the end of the 1970s. The authority of the outside, however, was mediated by the practice of "shared" municipal administrations. When Luis Pineda became the first Charista municipal president, the resulting municipal government consisted of five Charistas and four representatives of the state PRI.¹² This sort of arrangement, which continued throughout the years of Charis's rule, was one of the ways in which Juchitecos negotiated the presence of the PRI in the city, and it shows the centrality of elections and municipal

administration in brokering the ongoing tension between Juchitán and the outside.

During this period of cacique politics, the ruling political group, which included landowners and teachers, by and large left businesspeople alone. Juchiteco businesspeople, in turn, generally made individual arrangements with politicians and were not active in public politics, with the exception of the minority who supported reformist movements. In the words of one local politician, "The businesspeople made accommodations . . . No one from among them came to be a political leader . . . The businesspeople didn't participate in politics, they had no political strength." One of the reasons Juchiteco businesspeople could seek individual accommodations with local political authorities was that the role of the national state in economic development in Juchitán, while significantly greater than in the Central Valley of Oaxaca and most of the rest of the Oaxaca, was minimal in comparison to its promotion of dynamic national bourgeoisies in some regions of Mexico. For the most part, economic activities during this time changed slowly, with gradual commercial growth centered around the railroad line in Ixtepec, steady activity at the salt mines, and, in Juchitán, the consolidation of craft activities in the hands of local entrepreneurs. Because there was little change in agricultural activity before 1960, furthermore, and land was available to peasant families, the ruling political group by and large left peasants to their own devices. At the same time, politicians began providing the private sector with infrastructure projects that would both promote its growth and facilitate more direct state involvement in later development projects.

In this configuration, the PRI as an official party, though nominally in existence since 1929, was at best only beginning to function in Juchitán by the time of Charis's death, and it was by no means a mass-based party. Although all politicians, including Charis, were nominally *priístas*, Juchitecos discuss the absence of the official party during the Charis years explicitly. According to Ta Jorge,¹³ an older campesino, "there wasn't a party. The designation of candidates, nothing more." In response to the question, "Did you vote for the PRI?" another older campesino answered, "No. In those days Charis was in charge. We voted for Charis, nothing else. There wasn't PRI or COCEI." Mario Bustillo, who led the PRI in the 1970s and 1980s, said that during the Charis period it was difficult to go to Oaxaca, and communication with the capital city was minimal. "I think

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that they left Charis alone," Bustillo continued. "He put in people. There weren't sectors or, properly speaking, the party itself. Yes they were there in the statutes, but they didn't function."

According to Esteban Peralta, a PRI politician active during and after the Charis years, the sectors, as the PRI's mass organizations were called, were all part of "the PRI as a whole," but they existed "in name only, nothing more. They met to get instructions before elections . . ." Peralta's recounting of the relations between labor unions and the PRI, and his rationale for their existence, indicates the lack of clarity concerning the location of political authority. Unions existed, he said, "only to manipulate people, to have them unionized so as to use them politically, to attract people so as to make a majority, even though the majority didn't matter, since things were run from above, the name of the new governor came from the national PRI in a wax-sealed envelope. Here they let Charis control things." According to López Toledo, Charis would designate leaders for all the organizations, "so it would look like the machinery was functioning." Jaime Ferra, a municipal president at the end of the Charis period, said about politics during the years of boss rule, "There was order, not organization."

Neither peasants nor workers in Juchitán were organized into Mexico's centralized peasant (CNC) and worker (CTM) confederations for two reasons. First, there were no large *ejidos* (collective peasant landholdings) or industries—the economic enterprises around which the CNC and the CTM initially formed—in the southern part of the Isthmus in the 1930s, when the mass organizations were consolidated by Cárdenas. Second, Charis saw no need for such organizations and ignored the directives to form them that arrived periodically from Mexico City.¹⁴ When ordered to establish a branch of a national organization, Charis would appoint a supporter as leader of the organization, instructing that person to fill out and sign documents as necessary. In this way, leaders of local PRI-affiliated organizations, including the local branch of a national women's confederation, were seen as keepers of the seals and documents, not as active participants, and there was no incorporation of peasants, workers, or women into organizational or party politics.

The absence of strong affiliates of the large national confederations does not indicate an absence of organizations based on occupational groups, but rather a local domain of sovereignty in politics that was constructed and maintained apart from national confederations. Regional

agricultural and livestock organizations indeed played active roles in political and economic battles during the Charis period and in the 1960s, and they subsequently became focal points for conflict between the PRI and COCEI. These regional organizations, however, enjoyed considerable independence from the national and state PRI. Party leaders in Juchitán recount that efforts to form more substantive sectors of the party began in the post-Charis years of the late 1950s and early 1960s, although even then the results were largely insubstantial.¹⁵ PRI-affiliated organizing efforts among peasants and workers gained greater force only in the 1970s, when active sectors were seen as necessary for combating COCEI's radical mobilization.

Leaders of both COCEI and the PRI have made exaggerated claims for peasant well-being within the Zapotec domain of sovereignty under Charis. Similarly, most scholars of Isthmus society argue that the economic prosperity of local elites during these years—before the economic growth that resulted from highways, the dam, and oil facilities—coexisted with a relatively secure life for the region's peasants, artisans, and few workers (López Monjardin 1983b, 74). Campbell finds that Isthmus Zapotecs "lived in endogamous villages with diversified and vigorous local economies which provided for most basic needs," and that "most peasant producers maintained control of land and their tools of production" (1990b, 174, 175). One consequence of this view of economic life is that COCEI's radical mobilization in the 1970s can then be explained as the straightforward result of attacks on peasant well-being (COCEI 1983). However, a closer look suggests that these conclusions about self-sufficiency and well-being are based on little evidence and conflict with the way people remember the past.

Economic security for Juchiteco peasants was partial and problematic during the Charis period. Even in the nineteenth century, Juchitán had not exhibited the pattern of relatively egalitarian political and economic life that was still characteristic of many similarly small towns with homogeneous ethnic traits. Wealthy Juchitecos were involved in salt production, agriculture, and commerce, including trade in dyes, textiles, and salt with Europe and Guatemala. As a result, economic differentiation among Juchitecos was marked, though both landed and commercial holdings in Juchitán were relatively small, in comparison to other regions of the country. When discussing their own economic history in interviews, Juchitecos first emphasized the difficulties associated with the

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present, including dramatic price increases, but then went on to say quite directly that the past had in fact been a time of greater poverty: “[they were] hard times. Things cost less, but we had no money.” People indicated that they were poorer in the earlier period, in terms of access to food, clothing, shelter, education, and health care, even as they might remember the past as “a nicer time, a cheaper time.” Furthermore, many men had to migrate for work in the dry season during the Charis years. In an older peasant’s words, “There wasn’t irrigation. It was sadder then. As soon as the rainy season was over, we had to leave to go somewhere else.” While he was gone, he remembered, his wife lived with his mother: “If there was not enough to eat there, she’d go to her own mother’s house. Sometimes there wasn’t even breakfast.” Thus, the cultural and economic domain of sovereignty in Juchitán during the Charis period included the absence of peasant men, who were forced by the lack of local work to migrate, and the poverty of those left behind.

In reflecting on the Charis period, a younger market woman emphasized the poverty of the past, as well as the intertwined cultural and economic differences between past and present: “The old people used to bathe naked in the street. There were no bathrooms. People bathed anywhere. There was no plumbing. Also no shame. Before, nobody would laugh. Now people laugh. It was better before. No, those were hard times. Now anybody has a bathroom.” Similarly, Doña Mariana, a prominent and prosperous local midwife, spoke frequently of her discomfort with the male nudity she encountered during the Charis years in the poor neighborhoods of the city. She also criticized people’s habit of eating with their hands, though she later confided that she had eventually come to understand the pleasurable aspects of such a practice. The observations of the young market woman and the older midwife, like those of the migrating peasant, underscore the dual character of the autonomies of the Charis period, during which many Juchitecos were both poor and “backward” by elite local standards, while at the same time they experienced a valued form of community life. The comments of the two women, neither of whom wore traditional dress on a daily basis, also demonstrate the openness of even those Juchitecos critical of local cultural practices to the potential value of those practices.

The ambivalence of people’s memories of the past, and their clear indication of greater poverty in the earlier time, suggest that scholars are right in terms of cultural autonomy and economic *survival*, but wrong in

terms of absolute levels of economic well-being. Autonomy during the Charis period included the need for large numbers of peasant men to migrate for six months at a time, and survival included hunger. On the other hand, as data presented in the next chapter will indicate, health indices since the 1960s reveal lower levels of infant mortality and of adult morbidity and mortality in Juchitán than in most poor regions of Mexico. Campbell presents the most persuasive evidence for well-being in a discussion of Isthmus ecology—the combination of “ocean and riverine fisheries, salt sources, extensive, flat farming and pasture lands, and tropical forests (which provide wood, animals, and vegetable products),” along with proximity to major north-south and east-west trade routes (Campbell 1990b, 186). These resources indeed distinguish the Isthmus from the more limited ecological and commercial opportunities of many other indigenous regions of Mexico.

Furthermore, there was little explicit consciousness of exploitation during Charis’s rule, or, at least, little that is remembered in the 1980s by poor families who lived through the earlier period. Then, there appears to have been some correspondence between what people expected from local economic and political arrangements and what they got. People were in fact getting new kinds of goods from the national government, such as hospitals, schools, and roads. In addition, they were governed for the first uninterrupted period of several decades by a local hero who was seen to represent the poor, within the complex dynamics of cacique politics.

Thus, between 1930 and 1960, in the absence of the sorts of social and economic transformations that occurred in regions of large-scale land reform and industrialization, daily life in Juchitán continued to reflect the ethnic practices and forms of agriculture and craft production of preceding decades. Changes occurred—changes that would be significant in later forms of political resistance and rebellion—but they occurred slowly, and in the short run they reinforced past practices. During these years, Isthmus Zapotec literature and art developed a presence on the national cultural scene, a presence that would play a role in stimulating renewed waves of artistic activity in Juchitán in subsequent decades, and then offer direct financing and protection for COCEI in the 1970s and 1980s. Economically, modest local fortunes were accumulated through the financing of sesame crops and the control of craft production and marketing, and urban infrastructure projects were initiated. Local leaders

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during the Charis period successfully maintained control of most local resources and, as described above, secured considerable local political autonomy as well. The absence of attack from the outside, finally, allowed these phenomena to come together in a sense of autonomy and self-determination that had not existed during the more tempestuous and violent years of rebellion.

In this context, cacique politics in Juchitán allowed elite interests to be defined as the general interest. Elites acted as arbiters of Zapotec style, often as a means of competition among themselves, as well as to safeguard their status and bring themselves pleasure (Royce 1975). The general outlines of language, dress, ritual, and historical opposition to the outside were shared among elites and ordinary people, all of whom understood themselves to be members of one pueblo. This particular configuration of ethnicity and class was facilitated not only by the shared Zapotec culture and the participation of the bourgeoisie in the elaboration of that culture, but in addition by the local availability of land, the presence of new public-works projects, and the continuing identification of conflict with issues that pitted Juchitán against outside authorities and interests.

Rethinking Boss Politics and Corporatism

Victoriano López Toledo and the Front for Democratic Renovation never fully succeeded in ousting Charis,¹⁶ whose power gradually diminished at the end of the 1950s and ended with his death in 1964. However, the conflict between supporters of an established political boss, including the city's peasants and workers, and an opposing group of professionals, reformers, and aspiring bosses became the mainstay of municipal politics in Juchitán. The Mexican system of one-party rule provided no mechanism for resolving this conflict. The political battles of the late 1940s and early 1950s concerned competing visions of politics and economic development, and this kind of conflict would occur again in the 1960s and continue unresolved for the next twenty years. Should the pueblo look "modern," as that was defined nationally and internationally, with thriving businesses and efficient public administration? Or should Juchitán's economy and culture continue to revolve around small-scale agriculture, handicrafts, and a sprawling central market, with an accompanying poli-

tics of Zapotec alliance and coercion? This choice, furthermore, did not involve distinct pathways of "Western" or "Zapotec," but rather concerned how the two would interact, what weight and meaning being Zapotec would assume in a changing Mexico. Juchitán itself constitutes one of a small number of locations where indigenous people have participated in urban, national life *and*, by resisting the customary imperatives of that life, fostered spaces for alternative arrangements.

Conflict over competing visions of development also involved attempts to establish a procedurally workable system of government, which by the late 1950s had come to mean a PRI that could mediate diverse interests. From 1956 to 1965, these procedural issues took center stage in local politics, temporarily eclipsing the divide between politicians and reformers. The planning of a dam and irrigation district for the Isthmus, together with subsequent efforts to oppose the formation of an ejido, provided some basis for unity between the previously opposed camps. However, in Charis's absence, there was no agreed-upon system of candidate selection or municipal administration. As a result, the 1960s was a period of intense conflict over political procedures and their relationship to administration and development.

Why didn't reform efforts succeed in Juchitán in the 1940s and 1950s? In the 1930s, when Cárdenas was promoting large-scale reform and the incorporation of peasants and workers into mass organizations elsewhere, Charis was taking power for the first time in the Isthmus and Juchitecos were working out the parameters of boss rule. In the 1940s and 1950s, when reform efforts were indeed attempted in Oaxaca and Juchitán, there was no longer a national policy of mobilizing the lower classes and challenging established elites. Furthermore, the success of Cárdenas's mobilizations and reforms depended in part on the development of grassroots radicalism, in labor and *agrarista* movements alike. In Juchitán, in contrast, Charis maintained mass support and the reform movement was an elite, minority phenomenon. The federal government, moreover, generally left local politicians alone when they were strong enough to maintain order. During this period, being strong enough meant, among other things, being able to *traer gente*, to demonstrate popular support, and that was one of the things Charis could do best. In this situation, the Oaxaca Valley commercial elite's opposition to reform anywhere in the state successfully forestalled occasional federal reform initiatives.

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Thus, in Juchitán a shrewd and strong boss could consolidate power because of the federal government's need for control over diverse regions during a tumultuous postrevolutionary period. After the national regime allowed him to take power over state opposition, the boss and state politicians found that they could coexist quite comfortably, in the absence of reform efforts that threatened them both. The boss's continuing ability to publicly demonstrate mass support earned him power within Juchitán and credibility outside. Some businesspeople and professionals, organized in the Front for Democratic Renovation, had a different vision of politics, or could gain in specific ways by new development policies, and wanted to oust him, while most did quite well by coexisting. The power of the regional cacique and that of the state elite reinforced one another, allowing the consolidation of a cultural and political domain of sovereignty, but preventing the establishment of a coalition focused on economic growth and the development of more democratic processes of political mediation within the PRI.

The postrevolutionary history of Juchitán thus provides convincing evidence that Mexican politics cannot be accurately understood as the establishment and breakdown of an institutionalized one-party regime exercising control through corporatist mass organizations. While the implicit bargain struck by Cárdenas, the governor of Oaxaca, and General Charis was typical of the arrangements that underlay the early years of the "institutionalized state," the dynamics of this arrangement—with its reliance on bargaining, autonomy, and ethnicity—are not acknowledged in the usual corporatist picture. The nature of the relationship between the central government and the region after 1930 was neither institutionalized, nor corporatist, nor controlled from the center, in the way these terms are commonly used to describe Mexican politics. The regional cacique did not form an effective political party within the PRI, official mass organizations did not supplant local ones, and the PRI did not function to mediate conflict among elites or between elites and masses.

Contrary to the corporatist picture, which assumes a complete reorientation of political affiliations under Cárdenas (Hamilton 1982), the political commitments and relationships found in Juchitán drew heavily on those that had been established in the course of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century rebellions. In the process of resisting economic incursions by Oaxacans, Europeans, and others, Juchitecos had come to see

themselves as a unified pueblo and to be defined by Oaxacans as criminal and barbaric. The multiclass alliance that resulted from this local history, and produced a regional domain of sovereignty, was not reinforced by the political practices of the PRI, and it broke down in the 1970s partly as a result of the economic projects and political policies of the party and the regime.

The corporatist analysis does not examine elections before the late 1970s, viewing them as affirmations of political decisions reached in the center and seeing the apparent significance of elections since the late 1970s as a new phenomenon. Such an analysis characterizes the Díaz regime, like the postrevolutionary one, as a successful form of centralized political and economic control. The history of Juchitán, in contrast, demonstrates that elections that matter, and competition over local office generally, have long been important focal points for negotiations over power, both internally and between Juchitán and the outside. The designation of local political officials by state and national authorities was hotly contested before and during the Díaz regime, often in the form of violent rebellion. After the revolution, electoral competition was central to the installation of Charis as regional boss, to reform attempts in the 1940s and 1950s, and to efforts to establish a political party and allocate regional power in the 1960s. This does not mean that elections were fair or that the winners necessarily took office. Rather, elections affected the allocation and exercise of power in complex direct and indirect ways—through the massing of supporters, the holding of public office, negotiation over economic and administrative policies, and the formation of ethnic and regional identities. The question of votes and how they would count related directly to the different ways in which the PRI was formed and developed as a political party in successive decades and to the way in which opposition was enacted. The use of parallel local governments as a means for expressing the endurance of opposition and of shared city councils, which allowed representation of opposing camps within the official party, demonstrates that forms of opposition autonomy and non-corporatist representation were central to the politics of the midcentury period.

In contrast to the active, hegemonic PRI and weakened ethnicity of the state-centered model, Juchitán had no institutionalized political party between the 1930s and the 1970s, but exhibited a vibrant indigenous ethnic life, including language, ritual, poetry, music, and painting. In

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contrast to the national peasant and worker confederations of the corporatist model, Juchitán housed only weak branches of the confederations, but active local land and livestock associations unaffiliated with the center. Rather than the supposed corporatist peace of the 1930–60 period, Juchitán during these years experienced ongoing conflict between a regional boss and reformist civic oppositions. On the state level, in contrast to the economic development and political institutionalization of the corporatist model, diverse Oaxacan elites mobilized repeatedly and successfully against technological and industrial change and against the reform governors designated by the central government. These mobilizations in turn consolidated elite control of markets, cacique control of regions, and diverse regional ethnic identities and practices—precisely those patterns that were supposed to wither away under the hegemonic corporatist state, and which continue to challenge and shape national politics today from such locations as Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Chiapas.

The conflict between cacique-based politics and reform coalitions, unacknowledged in the corporatist analysis of this period, characterized regional politics in the Isthmus and in the state of Oaxaca from the 1940s to the 1980s. Its lack of resolution during the life of General Charis left local elites with no base upon which to establish a political party that could incorporate diverse groups and mediate conflict among them in the 1960s. The absence of such a political party at the local level in many regions of Mexico made it near impossible for the national electoral reforms sponsored by Carlos Madrazo in the mid-1960s to succeed. These reforms, in turn, particularly the institution of a primary system within the official party, might have established mechanisms of political competition for solving local disputes and linking center to region during the subsequent years of conflictual economic transformation.

The rigid and closed political party that evolved, with considerable turbulence, by the end of the 1960s in Juchitán was distinctly not the PRI of the corporatist or state-centered analyses—it did not incorporate ordinary Juchitecos, it did not mediate local interests, and it did not provide mechanisms of communication and control between Juchitecos and the state and national government. The PRI of the late 1960s, in turn, elicited an opposition much like the earlier Front for Democratic Renovation, with a base of support among middle-class and elite businesspeople and professionals. In their efforts to rework the domain of sovereignty to their own advantage, elites in the 1960s began a process of explicit

politicization of daily life that took on a life of its own and ultimately forged new discourses of democracy and development. This elite-led politicization occurred through mass mobilizations and electoral participation and through critiques of corruption, poverty, and failed economic development. The persistence and complexity of the debates in *El Satélite* during the 1960s and 1970s demonstrate that Juchitecos were well aware of the broad significance of politics. The state-centered model does not acknowledge the existence of these debates or their effects in shaping people's beliefs about politics. Furthermore, again in contrast to the state-centered model, this debate was carried on outside of and in explicit critique of official, national politics.

Contrary to the corporatist state analysis, with its emphasis on mass incorporation, elite quiescence, and insignificant elections, it was a group of middle-class and elite citizens within a noncorporatist PRI that first articulated the very critique that COCEI would put forth several years later and that first mobilized peasants and workers to vote against the official party. This political effort, as Chatterjee argued for Indian nationalism, occurred after a domain of sovereignty had been achieved in linguistic, artistic, ritual, and family arenas. In this context, a radical grassroots movement of Zapotec students, peasants, and workers in the 1970s could successfully appropriate the cultural and economic components of the domain of sovereignty to forge a mass-based, counter-hegemonic project. A mid-twentieth-century politics of boss rule, and of elite cultural and economic predominance, thus shaped a Zapotec pueblo that could later reshape the discourses of nineteenth-century Indian violence and barbarism to challenge both outside authority and the indigenous elite.