

Races, racism, and physical anthropology in Mexico

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This text has two goals: (1) to make it clear that, given its historical development as a colonized country, racism established its foundations in Mexico and is present even in the nation's contemporary dynamics and (2) to point out that physical anthropology, the discipline responsible for physically characterizing indigenous populations from a scientific perspective made no commitment to studying racism, denouncing it, and combating it.

Furthermore, it has not been a central focus in its contributions. To accomplish this, this essay is divided into two major sections to demonstrate that the country is rife with racism and to shed light on the position of the discipline regarding this situation.

Like several other countries, Mexico was colonized in the sixteenth century. This starting point in the reconstruction of its history and in social analyses is impossible to avoid. This is because 525 years after the Europeans "discovered" the continent they named America and 496 years since the fall of Tenochtitlan at the hands of the Spanish conquerors, leading to the formation of New Spain and a 289-year long colonial period, this founding condition of what is today the nation continues to revitalize itself. Recovering this condition becomes inevitable, especially if what is analyzed is anthropologically related to the national identity and the ethnic and linguistic plurality characterizing it, which are reflected in the biological and cultural diversity of contemporary Mexicans, as well as in the historical ways of symbolizing them. Eduardo Galeano (<https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1856051-en-1492-los-nativos-descubrieron-que-eran-indios-descubrieron-que>, March

30, 2018) magnificently synthesizes the impact of the conquest on the native peoples: "In 1492 the natives discovered that they were Indians, they discovered that they were living in America, they discovered that they were naked, they discovered that sin existed, they discovered that they owed obedience to a king and a queen in another world and to a God in another heaven, and that that God had invented guilt and clothing and had commanded that whoever worshipped the sun and the moon and the earth and the rain that moistened it had to be burned alive." "The indigenous peoples are those who, having a historical continuity with the populations settled here before the conquest, preserve a cultural identity that gives them social cohesion and distinguishes them from other sectors of society" (Own translation, CONAPRED, 2007).

In other words, the metaphoric "encounter of two worlds" meant for those peoples not only their defeat to an alterity that later on subjugated them politically and economically, resulting in high mortality rates and subjecting them to humiliating slavery, but also that treated them as inferior human beings. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the conquest actually took place when the conqueror's worldview was imposed on the conquered through symbolic violence that ultimately made them feel despised. They saw themselves as dirty and ugly (dark-skinned, short, with straight hair and eyelashes, rounded bodies, coarse features, etc.) in contrast to European phenotypes, ways of life, and manners, regarded as beautiful, worth imitating and superior. That is to say since that time, the interactions between groups triggered an early form of racism, apart from social and economic changes (Mexican Independence,

Revolution, stabilizing development, neoliberalism, migrations, and so forth), that continue to characterize the country today.

Racism "... is understood to be racial discrimination, all distinction, exclusion, restriction, or preference based on race, color, lineage, national or ethnic origin that is aimed at or that results in annulling or diminishing the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise, under conditions of equality, of human rights in political, economic, social, cultural and any other sphere of public life" (Own translation. CONAPRED, 2011, p. 51).

It has been documented that the conquest of what is now Mexico formed a melting pot between the Spaniards, known as *peninsulares*, and the Creoles or *criollos*, the natives or Indians, and with less demographic weight, also the blacks who were brought here as slaves. It was a melting pot that established an official social hierarchy based on *castas* (not on races), classifying the "cross" between these ethnic mixtures with specific names. For example, a Spanish man with an indigenous woman produced an offspring called a *mestizo*; a *mestizo* with a Spanish woman: *castizo*; a Spanish man with a black woman: a *mulato*, and so forth. Of course, at the peak of this hierarchy and a far cry from the others were the Spaniards and *criollos*, those phenotypically closest to Europeans. It is essential to note that the recognition of these combinations denoted that since colonial times, the crossbreeding that would later give rise to the metaphor "bronze race," existed. In other words, the symbolization of the *mestizo* was used after the Mexican Revolution (1910) as an explicit policy of integration, based on deliberate attempts to assimilate the Indian into the nation, blurring them and "whitening them," so they would stop being Indians.

The strength of this colonial symbolic violence persists even today. The category of "Indian" denotes in itself the condition of the colonized and is used as an insult:

"Indigenous peoples in Mexico form part of these groups that are in a state of vulnerability through a situation that is extremely contradictory, because while on the one hand

they constitute the nation's cultural richness and diversity... on the other... it is that cultural difference that has made them throughout our history subjects of discrimination" (Own translation. CONAPRED, 2007, p. 5).

More than five hundred years later, the European phenotype continues to be considered "better". It has been confirmed that in itself it represents social advantages, such as better jobs, higher salaries, more possibilities of social mobility, and so forth. As a counterpart, the "Indian" continues to be discriminated against, condemned to be the poorest of the poor. Also, to a lesser extent, "*mestizos*," are too, especially if their phenotype is combined with poverty, making it valid to state that, as a result of the colonial formation of interpersonal relations and social hierarchies, ethnicity and skin color stratified and continues to stratify society as a result of prevailing racism.

Given this panorama, and finally recognizing the seriousness of the problem, in 2003, Mexico issued the *Ley Federal para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación* (Federal Law to Prevent and Eliminate Discrimination; http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/262_011216.pdf, March 22, 2018), creating with it the *Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación* (National Council to Prevent Discrimination; CONAPRED, <http://www.conapred.org.mx/>, March 22, 2018), an institution whose objective is to diminish discrimination through policies and measures that guarantee the right to equity. It receives complaints and implements actions to promote the exercise of rights and opportunities, independently of ethnic origin, gender, age, disability, social or economic condition health, pregnancy, language, religion, opinions, sexual preferences, marital status, etc. Since 2005, this agency has conducted Surveys on Discrimination in Mexico. The first (2005) corroborated with hard data that could be observed daily: the presence of racism in the country.

In 2010, the second survey was carried out, quantifying that 64 percent of those surveyed considered themselves to be brown-skinned, that

more than half confirmed that people insult others in the street for their skin color, 23.3 percent would not consider letting people of another race live in their homes, and 28 percent affirmed that people are treated different depending on the color of their skin (CONAPRED, 2011).

A synthesis of the problem carried out by Aguirre (2015, p. 10) reports that the social groups that suffer the most discrimination are: indigenous people (27.6 %); homosexuals (20.5 %); women (9.5 %), and the disabled (9.5 %), highlighting that one out of every three of those surveyed (36.3 %) stated they had experienced discrimination. Six out of every ten (64.2%) said that in Mexico there is a lot or an extreme amount of racism and two out of ten, that there is an average quantity (20.5%), totaling 84.7%. The third part (33.6%) said that racial discrimination is manifested by denying people job opportunities, 17.1% by preventing them from gaining access to certain places, and 14.5% by insulting them (Aguirre 2015, p. 11). CONAPRED (2011, p. 52) reported that by asking ethnic groups what their main problems were, 19.5 percent stated that it was discrimination.

In contrast, African-Mexican groups, which account for 450 thousand people today (CONAPRED, http://www.conapred.org.mx/documentos_cedoc/GAP_Afrodasc_ACCSS_OK.pdf, February 27, 2018), were long erased from the nation's panorama and from anthropological and demographic research. They were not even considered in censuses. In 1946, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1972) published a pioneering study, but only recently have they emerged as a subject of study and the focus of vindication constituted in itself a structural form of discrimination against them.

In the face of this longstanding situation in Mexico, what is most striking is that the discipline that recognizes human biological diversity and the phylogenetics of the species as its object of study is physical anthropology. However, it has reduced the complex issue of the physical characterization of indigenous populations, through anthropometric variables, morphoscopic characteristics, and diverse indices analyzed statistically,

without considering racism, the social disadvantages, and the conditions of life in which they had been and still are subsumed.

Physical anthropology and raciology. An overview of its rise in colonized countries

The aim of the project that established the origin of Anthropology as a scientific discipline was to inventory the world's diversity (alterity). Consequently, parallel to the development of knowledge, forms of interaction were generated, specifically of appropriation and intervention in the reality that was being studied by introducing an order in what was apparently chaotic: the manifestly diverse. In the act of naming things of an alien world in order to organize and classify them, the physical and cultural differences of human beings were prioritized. In fact, anthropology arose and was tied to colonialism and the objective to justify "white" superiority. Therefore, at that time, there was no doubt regarding the status humanity of "others", the alterity. This is, humans, but relegating them to a naturalized place from which from they could not escape. Humans, indeed, but different and inferior to the "whites". Occupying a respectable but marginal periphery with regard to those that were considered "true men." Hence, nineteenth-century raciology constructed humanity as unitary, but diverse and unequal at the same time.

The Mexican case

Proposing a specific date to identify the origins of physical anthropology in Mexico is somewhat arbitrary. It can be dated back to 1862 with the publication in Paris of the Ethnological Instructions for Mexico, and in 1864 with the formation of the *Comisión Científica, Literaria y Artística de México* (Scientific, Literary, and Artistic Commission of Mexico). Through these two events, the first agenda for research on the Mexican population was created by the French

and shortly thereafter, with the journeys of exploration, as well as the start of an Anthropology developed by Mexican researchers who began to characterize the Mexican population. However, the term “physical anthropology” would not be used until 1898 by physician Jesús Sánchez. In his opinion, this studied “man as a zoological consideration.” It was divided it into four parts, including physical and experimental anthropology or somatology. For the author (1898, p. 196), it had to concern:

“Somatology comparatively studies races, variations of the skeleton, muscles, and viscera; applied experimental psychology (intelligence, sensations, impulses, and so forth); embryology, inheritance, and congenital transmission; teratology or the production of varieties and monsters. The evolution of man; the comparison of the anatomy of man and of anthropoids. It also comprises biological studies, changes produced by nutrition, climate, altitude, humidity, and so forth; the physiology of the diverse races; criminal anthropology; fertility and sterility; reproduction; comparative longevity; life statistics and the anatomical classification of races” (Own translation. At the time, teratology dealt with the notion of “monsters” to label “abnormalities”).

In the final decade of the nineteenth century, it is possible to recognize three fundamental and foundational problems in the agenda of the nascent field of Mexican physical anthropology (García Murcia, 2017): the identification of the physical type of Mexican Indian, the early population of America, and criminal anthropology. All of this could be interpreted as variations of their fundamental concern: the so-called problem of the Indian. The “others” of world anthropologies tended to inhabit faraway villages. In contrast, Mexican physical anthropology, since its remotest origins, found that its “others” dwelled in the same country: the Indian.

Questions concerning human differences implied the analysis of the common or shared origin of beings, a polemic that led to classic

proposals on monogenesis and polygenism. The original inhabitants of the American continent were seen as anomalous beings, associated with degeneration and the corruption of the subject, a paradox difficult to classify. Thus, questions concerning the origin and early settlement of Mexican territory explicitly attempted to provide a response to the supposed anomalous character of the Mexican Indian. In this way, these questions sought answers in two complementary sources: the study of local cultures and the measurement of their bodies. Of the latter, they led the development of basically anthropometric and morphological features of the Indians as a race.

Finally, under the influence of world trends in anthropology, Mexican physical anthropology adopted the Lombroso criminal anthropology. Was there an organic predisposition that induced delinquents to carry out acts against the law? If so, was it possible to recognize the criminal’s physical traits, and with this, to prevent criminal acts? To answer these questions, it was necessary to construct anthropometric profiles of delinquents already identified as such in a country that at the end of the nineteenth century had profound social inequality. The population in prisons coincided with the poorest members, and thus, with the Indian. In this way, criminal anthropology again stigmatized indigenous people, in this case, for their “criminal potential”, in other words, indirectly, as for their physical type.

All these concerns in Mexican physical anthropology were integrated into the plan of the incipient Mexican state, where science and progress were sought to help build a solid, modern, developed nation, where the problem of the Indian never seemed to find a comfortable place. Be that as it may, the scientific approach to the physical and cultural diversity of the nation was nuanced by the assessment of the physical characteristics of the Mexican Indian, of *mestizos*, and the population of Spanish origin.

Through these three issues, three ideas on the notion of race come into focus. On the one hand, the assumption of a naturalist tradition, where the description and classification of somatic differences were sufficient to recognize the different

human groups racially. Although it was unclear how many groups existed at the core of humanity, it seemed to grant it a certain arbitrary character. On the other hand, there was another stance of a sociocultural nature, where the races, in addition to their physical attributes, were defined by their traditions, languages, and even their character, or their moral attributes. Another cultural category, however, always related them to an innate, organic, physical determination.

In an article published in 1919 in the *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, physician Nicolás León, considered the father of Mexican physical anthropology, described the distribution of spaces in the Department of Anthropology in the National Museum: Bones of anthropoids that permit the anatomical comparison of human beings for the evaluation of primitive characteristics; pathological or clearly teratological peculiarities; unique features of an ethnic origin, such as intentionally deformed skulls from the pre-Hispanic period; and skulls and brains of races, particularly of the following groups: Nahuas, Seris, “Maratines,” “Athabascans,” Yumas, Quiche Mayas, Totonacs, Chiapanecs, Tarascans, “Otho-Mixtecos-Zapotecs,” and “Mixe-Tzoques.”

Similarly, spaces were proposed for skulls and skeletons of creoles, mestizos, and foreigners, particularly Spaniards, as well as death masks and busts of great men, and a space for mummies. The absence of any explicit mention of the population of black origin or any other group should be mentioned, thus reinforcing an implicit discourse on the formation of Mexican identity: Indians, mestizos, and Spaniards. Likewise, linguistics, regarded as a naturalist discipline, also played a role in the definition of indigenous races, identifying language as the essential and distinctive element of indigenous belonging. Thus, supposedly speech provided information on the biological configuration of the groups, and therefore, it was highly useful as another strategy for racial identification.

The *mestizo* were a key, albeit ambiguous, factor in the discussion *mestizo*. On the one hand, and in the context of the European tradition that praised the purity of race, the presence of

the *mestizo* was seen as the incarnation of degenerative processes, but simultaneously, in Mexico, their existence represented the possibility of indigenous improvement with their “whitening” potential. Thus, the anthropological discourse engaged in dialogue, which was reinforced by the official (discourse) of the Mexican state that also recognized that from the interbreeding of the Spaniards and the Indians a new race had emerged, unlike all others: the “race of the bronze,” the Mexican race. This idea would play a central role in the post-revolutionary process of eliminating the differences in order to achieve national unity.

The message was clear. The nation had been constructed based on the mixture of Spaniards and Indians, which has forged a distinctive race, with advantageous attributes, adapted to the work needed by a country that sought to reach modernity: the *mestizo*.

Contradictory visions of the *mestizo* were built, paradoxically, from arguments that defended the existence of pure races. The body of the *mestizo* was praised as the symbol of the prosperity of a nation willing to achieve progress and development, while maintaining its rich cultural past. A Mexican body formed in the melting pot, a new race, for a new man for a new nation: the perfect equation.

In this way, at its origins as a discipline, physical anthropology played a role in the creation of that new nation. Anthropological science had initially identified the Indians as a degenerate race, and had pondered on the advantages of *mestizaje* as an element of whitening and “improvement” and had identified that new body, the product of *mestizaje*, as a new race on which a nation was to be built, constructing a mythical naturalism on its foundations that permitted the justification of the new order needed by the new nation that was being forged.

The professionalization of physical anthropology in Mexico took place in 1938 with the creation of the Department of Anthropology in the National School of Biological Sciences, at the newly created *Instituto Politécnico Nacional* (IPN; National Polytechnic Institute), where

formal teaching of the discipline began. This professionalization took a fundamental step forward in 1939 with the creation of the *Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (INAH; National Institute of Anthropology and History), to which this Department was affiliated as the *Escuela Nacional de Antropología* (National School of Anthropology) in 1942. However, this professionalization took place at the same time as the Second World War (1939–1945), a conflict that made it politically inconvenient to speak of or to take on racism, due to the political use that Hitler had made of the supposed superiority of the “Aryan race” and the inferiority of the “Jewish race,” the focus of his extermination campaign. It should be noted that Juan Comas, the leader of Spanish-Mexican physical anthropology, spoke out against these naturalist positions of racial inferiority/superiority.

It is possible to hypothesize that as a result, although studies that attempt to physically characterize indigenous groups and to compare them persisted in Mexico during and after the Second World War, interest in it was flagging and it was no longer a central part of the contemporary agenda. Race was abandoned as a concept in Mexican anthropological discourse (Villanueva *et al.*, 1999) and it was and is also marginal as a specific topic of research in social anthropology. However, a small number of anthropologists have made extremely important contributions, including Rodolfo Stavenhagen (http://www.iis.unam.mx/pdfs/iismedios/mayo2013/aunam_stavehagen.pdf, March 25, 2018) and Alicia Castellanos (<https://www.uv.mx/tecoaac/general/racismo/>, March 25, 2018).

Having reviewed two catalogues of undergraduate theses in physical anthropology at the National School of Anthropology and History in Mexico (Cárdenas *et al.*, 1992; Barragán & Lerma 2009), the only institution teaching physical anthropology until 2012, which spanned from 1944 to 2006, not a single entry could be traced using the keywords: discrimination, races, or racism. The same could be said of the researchers active in the two main institutions: the INAH and the *Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas*

(Institute of Anthropological Research) of the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM; National Autonomous University of Mexico). None of the researchers there have made this issue their central topic of inquiry.

Surprisingly, although ethnographic research and the social issue of the indigenous peoples have been of central interest, both in social anthropology and in Mexican ethnology, undergraduate, masters, and doctoral theses on races, racism, and discrimination are rare.

Using the national catalogue comprising all the theses and dissertations produced between 1945 and 2017, the search for the key word “race” resulted in two entries; racism produced a total of 11, the first in 2000; and discrimination, 14, although only 11 were related to the indigenous population, accounting for a total of 24 in 72 years of training anthropologists (<http://antropotesis.alterum.info/>, March 27, 2018).

Final reflections

Physical anthropology owes Mexicans a greater dialogue on its focus of study with the overarching national problems, such as racism, recovering the impact of macroprocesses in the micro-spaces of the daily life of the subjects it studies. To date, socio-historical dynamics in the studies of “living” populations tend to be marginal. For example, the long tradition of studies of growth and development have not achieved the parallel research of an anthropology of infancy and youth (the formative stages of life) in different socio-historical contexts that engage in dialogue and which are enriched with the parameters that are quantified. The same may be said of the physical characterization of indigenous populations. Their bodies were measured through anthropometric indices and their morphoscopic characteristics were determined, but without giving any meaning to them as individuals with lives unfolding in conditions of poverty, discrimination, and racism. We hope that new generations remedy this lack of dialogue between physical anthropology and the nation’s reality.

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Authors contribution

Both authors contributed jointly to the content of the paper through academic discussions and the sharing of bibliography. Both authors also read, provided feedback and approved the final manuscript.

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