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The Village Is Like a Wheel: Rethinking Cargos, Family, and Ethnicity in Highland Mexico

By Roger Magazine. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2012. xii + 152 pp. US$ 45.00. ISBN 978-0-8165-1161-7.

In *The Village Is Like a Wheel*, Roger Magazine offers a fresh look at an old problem in Mexican indigenous studies: the nature of the *cargo* system. This is not exclusive to highland regions; indeed, some areas used as examples in the book are from the lowlands. Inspired by the work of Roy Wagner (1981) and Marilyn Strathern (1988) in Melanesia and Viveiros de Castro (2004) in Amazonia, his point of departure is the local understanding of *cargos*—unpaid offices filled on a rotating basis by community members, mostly men—in the village of Tepetlaoxtoc, in the highland Texcoco region of Mexico.

The village is located in the foothills at 2400 masl, at an intermediate level between an urbanized plain and the more traditional, agricultural sierra villages. However, as it lacks agricultural land and access to water, during the 1970s and 1980s its inhabitants relied heavily on stable, well-paying jobs in Mexico City, just 40 km away. But as a consequence of the national economic crises and neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, these workers returned to the village, where many started small, family-based businesses. This movement revived the community and renewed interest in the traditional patron saint fiestas, which are organized through *cargos* called *mayordomías*. The usual markers of Mexican indigenousness—language (here, Nahuatl) and a mode of life based on agriculture—are no longer present in Tepetlaoxtoc, yet the villagers distinguish themselves sharply from the urbanized lifestyle.

In 1955, Eric Wolf defined the "closed corporate community" as a colonial structure that highland peasant villages in Latin America had reappropriated as a sort of cultural defense against the outside world; there, communal integrity and membership boundaries were maintained in part by the *cargo* system. For Frank Cancian, in his 1965 study of Zinacantán (highland Chiapas), hierarchical *cargos* formed the community social structure and provided prestige to their holders (who for the higher positions must expend large amounts of goods and money). Magazine states that "these conclusions regarding *cargo* systems came to constitute the unquestioned base of Mesoamerican community study" (p 41) for the following decades. What he proposes, based on the views of his informants, is that the *cargos* "provide a structure as a kind of starting point or base on which people can produce each other as active subjects. The *cargos* and the related structure are means to an end, and not ends in themselves" (p 43). The fiesta must be realized "among everyone" (ie by the community as a whole, *entre todos*), and work and money flow in a logic of reciprocity. Therefore, the *mayordomo* is primarily a motivator of other people's actions, getting them to participate by working or cooperating financially for the fiesta. Those invited to participate must first show reluctance, but once they accept, this must change to *gusto* (pleasure): a change of attitude that reflects the production, by the *mayordomo*, of an "active subjectivity," but involves neither direct coercion nor exercising power over others. Apparently, what a good *mayordomo* gains is not a position in a hierarchy of "prestige," but "recognition" of his experience and knowledge. According to villagers, an unsuccessful *mayordomo* is one who fails to understand this logic and acts like a city dweller: he is arrogant and individualistic, depending only on his own money to finance the fiesta; that is, he will try to produce "things" (a good fiesta) instead of moving others to feel *gusto* and act interdependently.

At the family level, interdependent action takes the form of *ayuda* ("help") or exchanges of services, which may involve objects and labor. The author proposes a similar theoretical shift from structure (kinship and family organization) and the reproduction of the "object-aspects" of the person (the peasant family as a survival and reproduction unit) to the villagers' "interest in the production of active subjects" (p 77). Building on previous works (Yanagisako 1979; Good Eshelman 2005; Taggart 2007), Magazine shows that within the family, *ayuda* occurs at the intergenerational level, where it constitutes the person as a parent, son or daughter, etc; whereas in its interfamilial form, *ayuda* refers to the exchange of work and objects during life-cycle rituals (baptism, marriage, etc). In contrast to the "object-value" of capitalism, *ayuda* creates "person-value": it is expressed as "wealth" and is inalienable from its donor. The author compares other regions and communities where Nahuatl is still spoken to link *ayuda* and other concepts expressed in Spanish terms with their equivalent in the indigenous language and practices.

The final chapter tackles a series of issues that haunt Mesoamerican studies: indigenous versus *mestizo*; rural versus urban; tradition versus modernization; and the (supposed) transformation of the former term in each pair into the latter. Again, the author's point of departure is the local point of view. Villagers have a genuine interest in modernization, but they use modern things for local ends: "villagers cherish things that facilitate interdependence and subjectivity and reject those that hinder them" (p 113). They strive to maintain control over water systems and schools through committees, and incorporate and value the "new" (techniques, job experience, etc) at the level of "persons," insofar as it leads to wellbeing through

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interaction with others and *ayuda*. This does not mean, of course, that villagers have complete control over their destiny in these times of global capitalism. However, it is important to consider these local understandings of social practices because distorted representations may influence the formulation of public policy in the multicultural state and have concrete, negative effects on people's lives.

At this point, the reader familiar with the "ontological turn" in anthropology may have recognized the value of this recent, burgeoning perspective, but also some of its more polemical aspects. For example, despite its emphasis on the "person," there is a tendency to present people's views as hegemony or social consensus: conflicts and dissident voices are underplayed, or presented as contrasting exceptions (eg the unsuccessful *mayordomo*). This perspective may also exaggerate broad-ranging dichotomies (mostly inherited from Viveiros de Castro's structuralist background), like "thing/object" and "person/subject" as an ontological divide between "us" and "them." However, as Magazine argues, the prevalence of the acculturation/modernization issue in Mexican studies allowed him to go beyond the tendency—apparent in works on Melanesia and Amazonia cited in the book—to study indigenous representations as isolated from "colonialism and contact with the modern world" (p 99). *The Village Is Like a Wheel* is an inspiring work for any reader interested in community studies or contemporary theoretical debates.

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