Maya Transgressive Aesthetics as Pragmatic Humanism

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Qué no son, aunque sean.
Qué no hablan idiomas, sino dialectos.
Qué no profesan religiones, sino supersticiones.
Qué no hacen arte, sino artesanía.
Qué no practican cultura, sino folklore.
- Galeano, “Los Nadies”

Introduction

What would a Foucaultian ethic of resistance - conceived as pragmatic humanism - look like if one were to graft the stakes of this debate onto a contemporary societal configuration in which the struggle against hegemonic limits was an everyday form of practice and, indeed, survival? This chapter deals with an emergent movement in Guatemala, variously referred to as the pan-Maya movement, el movimiento maya, the Maya revitalization movement, or Maya cultural activism (Fischer and McKenna Brown 1996a). Whatever one wishes to call it, this movement is one aimed at empowerment; it seeks through ethico-political practices to upset conventional representations of the Maya people and to redress imbalances – economic, social, political, and cultural - brought on by centuries of ladino hegemony. This rallying cry is in many ways a nuanced (i.e., non-violent) response to the “Guatemalan holocaust” that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s during which time an ethnocidal campaign aimed at the extinction of Guatemala’s Maya population. In this chapter, I use a late Foucaultian framework to underscore how current Maya practices may be seen as a form of pragmatic humanism, further conceptualized as a form of constructed essentialism and an ethic of resistance. I do not wish to focus so much on the organized ideologies that the Maya do or do not join; instead, I direct my attention to the internal dynamics of Maya revitalization and the particular ways by which participants are focusing on the growth of their capacities through a process of ethical self-invention and reinvention. Such a dynamic may be seen as a nonviolent option aimed at the enhancement of Maya ethico-political sensibility.

1 They do not exist, even if they exist.
They do not speak languages, but rather dialects.
They do not profess religions, but rather superstitions.
They do not make art, but rather crafts.
They do not practice culture, but rather folklore.
The depreciatory terms used to describe the Maya (and found in social studies textbooks for secondary students) are captured by the poet Eduardo Galeano to denote ladino belittling of “the Other” (Sam Colop 1996: 112-13). For more of Galeano’s work see (Galeano 1988).
In the first section, I sketch the outlines of a more general aesthetics of existence currently being constructed by the Maya. In (late) Foucaultian terms, this means a focus on the stakes instantiated in the severing of the growth of capacities from the intensification of power relations: in this case, the ladino hegemonic state. The stakes, for the Maya, are high. They are high because the growth of their capacities means the difference between a band-aid solution to cultural (non)recognition and providing the foundation for long-term, sustainable cultural development. In the second section, I focus on the specific forms of rationality that are being employed in the organization of this cultural movement. I argue that such forms of rationality are part of a process of “tactical essentialism” in that they are designed to upset conventional ladino conceptualizations of truth, freedom, and subjectivity. In the third section, I undertake an analysis of the historical ontology of themselves currently being undertaken by the Maya. The fourth section deals with how the Maya are currently problematizing their present day situation through a genealogical approach to their identities. Finally, in the fifth section, I discuss what I believe constitutes the basic impetus behind Maya enlightenmentality. I argue that the various forms of ethico-political self-fashioning are propelled by a particular ethos regarding their freedom, an ethos further conceived as a limit-attitude.

Section One: The growth of Maya capacities (Stakes)

The construction of identity

The last decade or so has witnessed a cultural explosion of sorts among the Maya of Guatemala. Reeling (still) from centuries of ladino oppression, the Maya have long been denied a voice in political, social, and cultural representations of their history. Following the end of the Second World War and amidst a U.S. backed coup in 1954, a strong current was initiated, one aimed at the ladinization (also referred to as ladinoization) of Guatemalan culture for the purpose of providing a catalyst for development (Fischer 1996: 53). Written in the constitution of 1965 was a “recognition” that the material inferiority of the Maya necessitated socioeconomic improvement as a condition for their integration into ladino culture. Lamentably, the state has restricted its efforts to cultural integration, leaving largely unresolved the economic plight of the Maya people (Cojtí Cuxil 1996: 25). But it is more than merely an economic plight that has been left unresolved; lasting solutions for both cultural and economic problems caused by long-term displacement among the Maya Indians have not been forthcoming under the neoliberal model, and by the end of 1994, over 80% of Guatemalans were still living in abject poverty (Delli Sante 1996: 275). Human rights have been consistently violated in

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As suggested by Jim Handy, however, the U.S. decision to intervene in the democratic Arbenz administration (1951-54) was not the inevitable catalyst that brought down the government. Rather, the catalyst was the institution of the Guatemalan army itself, a highly professional and powerful, yet clearly divisive cluster of factions, one of which successfully worked towards bringing down Arbenz’ government (Handy 1994: 179-84).

The countercinsurgency campaign was initiated by Lucas García in 1981 and continued by Efrián Ríos Montt and Mejía Victores. Some observers have estimated that more than one million of Guatemala’s seven and one half million people were displaced in one manner or another from 1981-1983, most of them Maya Indians from the western highlands. (Smith 1988: 206-7). In addition to mass displacement, it is estimated that between 1978 and 1984, some seventy thousand (largely indigenous) people were killed and forty thousand disappeared. Today, Guatemala’s population is estimated to be around eleven million (Nelson 1999: 9).
spite of the state’s willingness to commit to the Global Agreement on Human Rights in March of 1994. As one commentator puts it, one of Guatemala’s most tragic decades is over, but the tragedy is not (Delli Sante 1996: 273).

But, parallel to long-standing patterns of ladino violence and injustice, the last decade or so has also witnessed the emergence of a strong Maya revitalization movement comprised of rural, urban, cultural and intellectual groups who have as their aim a strengthening of Maya cultural, social and moral values. This resiliency on the part of the Maya is instanced in their courage against a state that brands as subversive even minimalist appeals for linguistic and cultural autonomy (Watanabe 1995: 26). It is, suggests one commentator, like a “finger in the wound” to talk about the body politic of the Guatemalan nation (Nelson 1999). This metaphor is used by many Guatemalans – both ladino and Indian - to describe the painfulness that accompanies attempts to address ethnic difference in a nation that exists, but is not whole or complete (Nelson 1999: 1).

“Maya” is a recent invention. Following a long peace process which culminated in accords reached in 1996, indigenous activists began to deploy the term “Maya” to refer to members of Guatemala’s approximately twenty-one distinct ethnic communities, and, as Diane Nelson points out, these activists are using terms such as *formar* (to create) to denote the self-creating nature of a Maya identity after five hundred years of ladino oppression. Nelson suggests that this “creation” of identity is not to take on an identity that is *either* easily discarded *or* thought to be permanent, but that practices such as education and language revivalism work with individual bodies to produce a body politic “through constant repetition in sites of power that themselves are historically overdetermined, as well as through unconscious investments and resistances” (Nelson 1999: 5).

Cultural rights groups have flourished since the mid-1980s in Guatemala. Principle groups include the Guatemalan Mayan Language Academy (ALMG), the Guatemalan Mayan Writers Academy (AEMG), the Mayan Center for Research and Documentation (CEDIM), and the Center for the Study of Mayan Culture ((CECMA). Many of these groups joined to form the Guatemalan Council of Mayan Organizations (COMG) which itself joined the larger Mayan Unity and Consensus Group (IUCM) (Nelson 1999: 201). Since the reestablishment of civilian rule in 1986, the construction of Maya identity has taken a decisive step away from dominant integrationist and assimilationist policies. The assimilationist approach is one oriented towards the subjugation of colonized peoples. It advances the view that the cultural annihilation of the Maya Guatemalans represents an advancement because it “civilizes and integrates them into a national culture [read: Ladino culture]” (Raxche’ 1996: 78). The integrationist policy is a more gradual one whose aim is to use elements of the Maya’s own culture (in a limited fashion) both to pacify the Maya and take advantage of their folkloric and aesthetic models for purposes of development (such as tourism). Integrationism is a variant of the assimilationist approach, however, in that it attempts to minimize, debilitate, and finally extinguish Maya culture (Raxche’ 1996: 82).

The construction of a Maya identity may be seen in late Foucaultian terms as “games of truth” in which there exist “free individuals who establish a certain consensus, and who find themselves within a certain network of practices of power and constraining institutions” (Foucault 1997: 297). The reality is, as Foucault says, there are no states of communication in which games of truth circulate freely. The idea is not to dissolve power
relations “in the utopia of completely transparent communication but to acquire … the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible” (Foucault 1997: 298). The Maya care of the self as ethico-political practice does not come “already constituted”,” but may be seen as a process of formación, one of self-creation which has, however, the raw materials of long-standing Maya traditions with which to work. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have made the suggestion that where there is power, there is resistance, but that resistance is not always political (Laclau 1985). I would argue that, in the case of the Guatemalan Maya, the bid for cultural recognition and autonomy through passive forms of resistance can be conceptualized as a tripartite relationship of transgressive aestheticism, creative resistance, and political agonism.

**Culture Makers and Constructed Essentialism**

Critics of this movement argue that there is no significant difference between indígenas and the mestizo mainstream. In other words, the Maya population is comprised of multiple and hybrid identities that can only be situationally considered. There is nothing essentially “Maya” (i.e., pre-Columbian) about these people, and a close analysis will reveal that in fact much of their culture is largely Hispanic in orientation (ironically, this constructivist argument falls back on a “modified essentialism” with regard to ladino culture (See Fischer 1999)). Ladino oppression and racism are not myths. The mobilization of the Maya may be seen in terms of a constructed and tactical essentialism. This is not identical to Spivak’s notion of “strategic essentialism” but is more on the order of a tactical and situational set of practices that have as their aim a form of participatory democracy in which Maya self-representation will act as a vehicle for political change. However, as Kay Warren points out, we must resist totalizing this movement and instead focus on how specific elements (e.g., Maya public intellectuals and activists) and key events of the movement can illustrate the language of social criticism and practices of revitalization (Warren 1998: 28). This constructed essentialism is meant to advance political and cultural claims; it is, as Foucault would say, to become a “we.” Indigenous language and the interrogation of history represents a constructed form of uniqueness that is instrumental in highlighting the “unity within diversity” model upon which revitalization efforts rest (Warren 1998: 160).

**Transgressive aestheticism: Maya life as a work of art**

In considering what constitutes Maya cultural revitalization as transgressive practice, it is important to recall that, for Foucault, the transgression of limits is, in itself, a process of ethical self-formation which, through strategic means, can reveal the relations between truth and power. In the case of the Maya, the creation of new skills aimed at cultural empowerment is part of a wider recognition of the political, economic, and social systems of which the Maya are part (Fischer and McKenna Brown 1996a: 4). Through a revival of lost traditions and the creation of new ones, the Maya of Guatemala have begun to rise from the ashes of the holocaust (Smith 1991: 29). But this reinscription of symbols and the furthering of capacities as a strategy for the strengthening of their culture is not confined to an insular set of practices; unlike some ethnic revivalist movements emerging from the post-Communist era, the Maya seek peaceful solutions, many of which attempt to redress the long-standing cultural imbalance through recourse to international treaties, NGOs, and through the constitution of the
Republic of Guatemala itself. They have, for example, successfully petitioned the
government for official recognition of a unified alphabet. Language standardization is
arguably the most important strategy for cultural revitalization because it is, one
commentator suggests, a direct transmitter of Maya worldview and philosophy (England

The transgressive practices of the Maya suggest, along with Foucault, that such
games of truth circulate amidst power relations; it is not a matter of dissolving completely
these power relations, but attenuating their one-sided superintendence through the
acquisition of rules of law, through certain management techniques, and the creation of
an ethico-political sensibility that will facilitate empowerment with as little domination as
possible. The Maya are indeed making their lives a work of art. From scholarly activism
to the creation of women’s groups, human and economic rights activism and even a bid
for the restoration of land rights, the Maya are, through the exercise of technologies of
the self, effecting by their own means, affirmative operations on their own bodies and
souls, conduct, and ontological states in order to transform themselves. In Foucaultian
terms, this means that they are creating their own freedom by making their lives a work
of art. An aesthetics of political existence is not a free-floating stylization of life in which
“anything goes,” but involves the creation of a meaningful political order without
reference to predetermined sets of rules regarding the true nature of community, social
regularities and the individual. It is to transgress existing limits which, as Foucault says,
may be dangerous, but the alternative means that we are apathetically bound and
conditioned by a stale, static and unyielding social and political order (Foucault 1997:
256). When Foucault says that freedom lies outside juridical determinations of it, he
means that freedom is not something that can be guaranteed once and for all by laws and
institutions; it is something to be practiced, it is a questioning of politics and power and
the domination that is inscribed in power that revolves around our ways of becoming who
we are, our ethos. That is why freedom is an ethical matter (Rajchman 1991: 112). It is
the ontological condition of ethics. As we will see, Maya cultural activists are initiating
self-creating programs outside ladino juridical forms, since all appeals through juridical
forms have failed to concretely produce the recognition so desperately sought by the
Maya.

Creative Resistance

Against long-standing ladino domination, the culture-based solution sought by the
Maya may be seen as one of creative resistance. The anthropological debates focusing on
claims that Maya cultural activism must be conceptualized as either “essentialist” or
“constructivist” is in many ways an unproductive one. Fischer’s claim that there is an
underlying “continuity” to Maya practices that can be framed around a concept of
“cultural logic” points to the engagement in a type of ethnoscience which assumes that
knowledge production (“the doxa”) is bound and conditioned by structural regularities.
In other words, he identifies key cognitive patterns which provide the deep structure
underlying thought and practice. As Charles Hale notes, Fischer’s approach provides us
with a model in which culture is prior to and largely insulated from the exercise of power
and the processes of subject formation (Hale inFischer 1999: 491). The sort of reification
and authenticiztion of Maya culture proposed here leaves unaccounted for the
contingency of practices and the polyvalence of voices among the Maya population. On
the other side of the divide, the constructivists fail to take into account that there may be
an ontogenetic strategy at work here, for why even reintroduce “Maya” as a category in the construction of identity? As one critical observer notes, some cultural practices are resilient by virtue of the embeddedness in mythic and ritualistic practices, but they only continue through time due to their present relevance. Such practices do not represent external reality; they are nonrepresentational…yet reoriginating that is integral to their endurance. They are structures that have no necessary meaning and are always open to the meaning of the world in which they are practiced (Kapferer in Fischer 1999: 494).

This understanding resonates with my earlier suggestion that Maya cultural activism may be organized around a conception of intentionality/nonintentionality, or tactical essentialism. Such a conception does not entail the assumption that Maya cultural practices lack fluidity, nor does it imply that there is an “always already” set of characteristics that define individuals as “Maya” or “non-Maya”; rather, it may be seen as one way to incorporate solidarity and ethnostalgia as a way to highlight the constitutive difference of Maya life-practices and as a rhetorical strategy designed to heighten the consciousness of the other. According to Diane Nelson, such was the strategy of Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the Nobel winning Laureate whose testimonio recounting the counterinsurgent massacre of members of her family and village by the Guatemalan army can be seen as a conscious aim to form a “body politic of solidarity” among Maya and among Mayan women in the face of overt domination (Nelson 1999: 49).

How, then, is Maya resistance “creative?” In the first instance, in spite their continued cultural colonization, a multitude of Maya groups, ranging from institutionalized organizations to cultural activists to everyday clusters of local actors, have sought to carve out an autonomous (i.e., non-racist) space for themselves through practices of language revindication, traje (traditional Maya dress) and religious revivalism, educational revitalization and artistic (re)creationism, some of which will be discussed in more detail below. In their search for autonomy from the interdictions of ladinization, they have focused on the growth of their capacities by revising and rethinking techne, or the ways by which actors concretely acquire their intelligibility through what Foucault calls “deliberate forms.” As John Rajchman notes, one might then say that as an “ontological condition,” freedom does not prescribe the descriptions under which our actions must fall, but frees us to construct our own freedom, to make it a technical practice (Rajchman 1991: 112-13). It is these techniques as a concrete, creative set of practices that Foucault calls “the care of the self.”

The care of the self involves a new experience of self and of others. It is a new relationship between body and soul, a way of living that opens up the possibility for transgression. It is a way of constituting the intersection between remembering a past that has been forgotten and the self-regulation of practices and self-invention of subject positionings. In order to retain the instrumental uses of identity without making them regulatory imperatives (Butler 1991), the Maya of Guatemala have begun to critically analyze and (re)articulate the past, not with the ill-fated intention of discovering its “true” nature, but in order to move back and forth between the past and a self-constituted political project of the present. This is what I mean by constructed essentialism.

Political agonism
It is a somewhat standard view that, because Foucault sees power as productive (i.e., as both enabling and constraining), he does not adequately supply normative grounds for his analyses of resistance. It was suggested earlier, however, that his preference for power that precipitates an agonal form of subjectivity – as “permanent provocation” – by which insidious forms of power can be attenuated gives Foucault the quasi-alternative some see as missing in his overall critique of modern humanist political rationality. Agonal resistance is not, on Foucault’s terms, a good or normative reason for resistance; it is not a means to a utopian end, but can lead, as Connolly points out, to a transformation of the ways in which we experience identity (Connolly 1993: 382-3). Elsewhere, Connolly refers to agonal subjectivity as a “politics of disturbance” (Connolly 1991a: 473). This seems to capture what is at the heart of current Maya practices of resistance. In large part, the Maya are attempting to carve out a sense of identity that takes its markings from the images that others have of them. It is a standard view that Maya identity is a hybrid and syncretic set of markings that are firmly anchored in history (Nelson 1999: 128-30). But, the ways in which the Maya struggle to overcome hegemonic limits (including participation in the state) point to a strategy whereby the use of Maya traditions (dress, language, art, history) as definitively given facilitates the struggle to carve out some form of identity outside ladino representations. This means that the agonal subjectivity underlying Maya practices is in part rhetorical, never complete and not wholly discursive. In other words, there is no attempt to define cultural rights practices as merely linguistic; they are concretely embodied in materiality and power relations. When the Maya say that class conflict is not their issue, they are reacting to critics who say that ethnic discrimination and cultural identity are not the salient problems confronting Guatemala; the real issue, the Left says, is class inequities. But as one critic of this view argues, this amounts to the claim that somehow culture and materiality are fundamentally separate issues. As she explains it, the Maya do not see class struggle as their “unitary framework.” They seeks, she says to build a cross-class movement ...that would include middle-class professionals and business people as well as cultivators, students, teachers, development workers, and rural shopkeepers. [Many] extended families routinely have multiple class/ethnic identifications, localized in different ways in rural and urban space (Warren 1998: 48-9).

To use Michael Taussig’s metaphor, it might be said that the Maya view the state as a “mask” – “a dazzling and disturbing representation” - which prevents individuals from “seeing” political reality, as a “nervous Nervous system” that delineates the cultural construction of reality as masked and inherently deceptive (Taussig 1992: 113). In sum, the political agonism as practiced by the Maya is an ethic which is not a form of essential morality, but the constitution of experience through a set of diverse practices. Its aim is to positively facilitate the growth of capacities which have long been disconnected from the political technologies of ladino state fetishism.

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4 Arguably, this includes images transmitted by gringo academics. The anti-Mayan ladino activist Mario Roberto Morales states that, “Maya theories of identity are not their own; they are from the United States. They are Maya agringado (gringoized) (Morales 1995).
Section Two: Tactical Essentialism (Homogeneity)

The strategic forms of rationality deemed necessary by Foucault as a means to concretely achieve the aims of freedom from oppression are the subject of this section. In the Maya case, it was stated that such forms of rationality may be seen as practices of what I called “tactical essentialism.” Tactical essentialism starts from the premise that there is a need to give a name to or create a center for the deployment of rules and the organization of practices that can work to reverse the disadvantages experienced by subaltern groups. It is a homogenizing strategy designed to organize ways of doing things (Foucault calls this the technological aspect) and modify the rules of the game (the strategic side of practices) with the maximum amount of freedom possible. Such experimental technologies and strategies are necessary in order to locate the interstices where change is possible and to determine the precise form that change might take. The Maya search for identity suggests a strategy aimed at the creation of a historically-conditioned, contingent form of identity, one not grounded in Platonic, ahistorical truths, but in a more fluid set of characteristics which will allow for recognition while at the same time avoiding overly determined stereotypes that could conceivably lead to more overt racism and reverse the gains made by the introduction of race, gender, sexuality and other markings in the context of power relations.

Idols behind the altars: reading history as resistance

One of the strategies being employed by Maya scholars involves the reading of history as a form of resistance; it is a strategy designed to summon up the past, not to demonstrate a true history, but to highlight the ontogenetic roots of Maya identity so as to learn new ways of expression and create counterhistories that work towards the dissemination of Spanish translations (Warren 1996: 89-91). The reading of original Maya chronicles such as the pre-Hispanic Annals of the Kaqchikels (1510-1604) and the act of juxtaposing such readings against the nineteenth and twentieth century Spanish translations has revealed, for example, the importance of cosmovisión (a worldview) and ethnogenesis which in turn have provided, as Kay Warren notes, important subthemes in Maya revitalization (Warren 1996: 91-2). She adds that the reading of classical Maya texts also revealed that when Maya cosmology was translated into Spanish, it was incorporated into Christian themes; so, for example, “translators equated the Maya underworld (xib’ alb’ ay) with hell, Maya divinities with the devil, Spaniards with gods, and Maya with pagans” (Warren 1996: 94).

The reading of the emergence of the Kaqchikel state as an autonomous political entity from the dominant K’iché (formerly spelled Quiché) state has disclosed the importance of women in political affairs. It was discovered that they were accorded positions of great prestige in the original cultural system, sometimes fighting alongside their male counterparts. In addition, a reading of the Spanish conquest upsets conventional interpretations which have the Maya in a state of adulation upon first contact. In Maya revisionist translations, The Kaqchikel chronicles depict Maya reactions to the Spaniards as those of terror and fear. There are also documented instances of Maya resistance and heroism which have been used to deal with the passivity

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5 The Kaqchikels are Maya Indians living in the central highlands of Guatemala. Throughout their history, they more than any other Indian group have resisted assimilation and attempted to use colonial politics for their own ends. See, for example, (Maxwell 1996).
the current Maya population perceives to be a long-standing effect of ladino racism (Warren 1996: 95-8). The revival and revision of Kiqchikel chronicles is not, however, merely the privilege of Maya scholars. As Edward Fischer’s anthropological fieldwork shows, Kaqchikels in general view their identities as intricately connected to cosmic forces through certain such things as souls, spirits and “inner motives.” What this amounts to is, in Fischer’s view, a sense of “metaphysical balance” in Maya cosmology, a sense of unity and centeredness that is perpetuated by a movement of cyclical progression evident in Maya cosmology (Fischer 1999: 479-81).

As Warren points out, Maya revitalization cannot sit comfortably in bodies of literature which have as their frame of reference resurgent ethnic nationalism or grass-roots social movements with connections to transnational organizations. Maya culturalists, she claims, find that the ethnic nationalist model reduces multifaceted and pluralistic movements to territorial nationalism, while the transnational ties of grass-roots movements as described by Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez and Evalina Dagnino (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998b) would restrict these practices to a “minority rights” issue, and by doing so would promote Maya assimilation into the mainstream (Warren 1996: 102-3).

Reading Maya history as resistance is both a technology and a strategy designed to extricate ethico-political practice from (ladino) scientific knowledge. By undertaking a genealogical analysis of their own subjectivity, the Maya are seeking, through their own forms of rationality - conceived as tactical essentialism - prescriptive solutions to the various forms of domination, misrepresentation, and oppression. Foucault himself puts it best when he says that “[among] the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas [and] procedures that cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute … a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what’s going on now – and to change it” (Foucault 1997: 261).

**Velar stops/uvular stops: Linguistic self-determination**

Language standardization, it is argued, is focal point for Maya revitalization. It is both a marker of local identity and a way by which to prevent the further fragmentation of some twenty Maya languages (England 1996: 178). In particular, written language is important for historical preservation and the facilitation of literacy. The Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala (ALMG), formed in June 1987, first agreed on a “unified alphabet” for all Mayan languages which has since been legalized by presidential decree. Equally important was the rejection of Spanish orthographic principles; for example, the large committee of linguists that facilitated these changes in language rejected the “c/qu spelling for the velar stop ([k]), instead using k for the velar stop and q for the uvular stop ([q], a sound that does not exist in Spanish” (England 1996: 182-3).

Since the standardization process was initiated, many critics have argued that the small, urban minority of Maya language scholars do not represent the majority of rural Maya. But, as R. McKenna Brown suggests, the point is to heighten awareness of Mayan languages, as both a symbolic and functional marker of identity; it is to make the Maya aware that language maintenance is a resource that needs to be extended beyond everyday usage. To some, it appears that control over Maya linguistic and cultural destiny has led to a reconsideration of fundamental tenets of their science and personal involvement with their work [McKenna Brown, 1996 #699: 173; 176]. As one Maya scholar and activist suggests, the development and use of Mayan language needs to be
extended to public education, courts of justice, the mass media, and public office to make good the 1976 Human Rights Declaration regarding the right to self-determination of indigenous peoples (Cojtí Cuxil 1996: 36-7). In any case, what is important with regard to the development and maintenance of Maya languages is that they are the only facets of contemporary Maya culture that can be considered truly Maya in both genesis and development (England 1996: 189).

While there are many other instances of homogenizing strategies with regard to the realization of Maya self-determination, the two examples of reading history as resistance and the importance of language revivalism and maintenance serve as prime indicators of Foucault’s axiological suggestion that ethical self-reflexivity produces a creative medium that allows actors to identify socially constructed boundaries and construct a historical ontology of themselves as a form of resistance. Both the reading of history and language-maintenance promotion are markers of identity that facilitate a homogenizing strategy for the transgression of limits. They are practical forms of rationality that seek to modify the rules of ladino “games of truth” and permit forms of ethical self-invention within existing power relations. These forms of rationality should not be seen as developing out of an ahistorical, ontologically given human essence, but this does not foreclose the possibility that they arise out a localized human essence which is pragmatic, tactical, and contingent.

**Section Three: A Historical Ontology of Themselves: (Systematicity)**

In his later writings, Foucault finally theorizes what had been missing in his earlier analyses: how we exercise control over ourselves. In addition to his rejection of proscriptive, external moral systems as a regulatory form of ethics, he claims in “On the Genealogy of Ethics” that three domains of genealogy are possible; 1) a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; 2) a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others, and; 3) a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents (Foucault 1997: 262). In relation to practical systems in which we live, a historical ontology of ourselves must, he says elsewhere, answer the following series of questions: How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge (knowledge axis)? How are we constituted as subjects who exercise or submit to power relations (power axis)? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions (ethical axis)? (Foucault 1997: 318). Thus, the systematicity of practical systems must revolve around the care brought to the process of putting historico-critical reflection to the test of concrete practices.

Looking closely at the case of the Maya of Guatemala, we can see a historical ontology of their existence at work. The axis around which they constitute themselves as subjects of knowledge (“control over things”) is instanced in a number of ways. One of these ways witnesses Maya students and professionals and other individuals turning to social science in an effort to supply a voice to academic representations of their culture and history. This is a counterpolitical act intended to recover the plurality of Maya voices, reverse the negative, often dire, political consequences that ladino and other Western academic representations have had for the Maya, and therefore is done to counter “scientific objectivity” (Fischer and McKenna Brown 1996a: 2). Much of their activism has helped to foster the growing interest among younger Maya in their native
languages. In addition, certain Catholic groups have acted to mobilize the Indian population around economic and political issues (Fischer 1996: 58). They are attempting to stimulate an interest among the Maya in constituting their own life, their own knowledge, and their own ethical sensibilities. And, along with the language revitalization movement, other self-forming activities include the launch of a monthly magazine *Ixim* (Corn) and a turn to pre-contact hieroglyphic, numerical and calendric systems aimed at cultural empowerment, ethical self-creation and the constitution of their own knowledge. In addition, a number of Maya organizations are in the process of implementing culture-based programs designed to assist poor Maya farmers. The Coordinadora Cakchiquel de Desarrollo Integral (COCADI) has, for example, begun to teach farmers how market commercially natural pesticides, and produce organic agricultural products so that they may gain control over their own knowledge (Fischer 1996: 58-65). The growing practices of self-writing and the study of linguistics has, as Carol Hendrickson notes, become one of the important ways by which Maya create their own knowledge which in turn can serve as an instrument of sociopolitical critique (Hendrickson 1996: 159). In Foucaultian ethical terms, the practice of self-writing (*hupomnemata*) is important for the training of oneself; it is “to make of the recollection of the fragmentary logos transmitted by teaching, listening, or reading a means to establish as adequate and as perfect a relationship to oneself as possible” (Foucault 1997: 274). Maya women, too, have begun to take control over the constitution of their own knowledge. Hendrickson explains that weaving and *traje* (traditional dress) are important, if non-institutionalized, markers of identity and passive forms of resistance (Hendrickson 1996).

Such practices are aesthetic in the (Foucaultian) sense that they are instances of self-forming activity designed to work on Maya ethical substance, to change themselves, to make their lives “a work of art.” That Foucault wanted to go beyond Kant’s practical philosophy is evidenced in his assertion that we must live according to an ethical attitude, a historical ontology of ourselves, which in turn meant a critique of what we are, a historical analysis of the limits that have been imposed on us and the possibility of trangressing, or a “crossing over” of those limits. As Lawrence Kritzman succinctly puts it, Foucault’s “experimental” attitude derives from his desire to write an ontology of the present which is regarded as “integrally linked to the destiny of the political community” (Kritzman 1988: xviii).

In the *Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus laments that, on our way to death, we tend to get into the “habit of living,” and in doing so, fail to reflect on our existence (Camus 1955:7). Camus’ point is that there is a practical need to reflect on our daily existence; our ethical actions must be grounded in thought if they are to be consistent with our goals. Using Foucault as a point of departure, we can conceptualize the Maya experience as being founded on a similar set of considerations; their self-forming activity – aestheticism in a broad sense – are technologies exercised on the self, forms of self-mastery (*askesis*) which spring from a desire to understand the past, a critique of the present, and acquiring knowledge about what is necessary for the care of the self. As Foucault remarks, “Taking care of oneself requires knowing … oneself. Care of the self is, of course, knowledge … of the self – this is the Socratic-Platonic aspect - but also knowledge of a number of rules of acceptable conduct or of principles that are both truths and prescriptions. To take care of the self is to equip oneself with these truths: this is
where ethics is linked to the game of truth” (Foucault 1997: 285). Through enabling, self-forming practices, the Maya are constituting themselves as subjects of knowledge, as enmeshed in particular power relations, and as moral agents in the construction of their tactical and constructed essentialist identities.

**Section Four: Problematization as a Mode of Analysis: (Generality)**

It is crucial to understand that, for Foucault, our ontological states are given through problematizations and practices; they are not handed over to us apriori. Only we, as embodied, thinking beings who act, can make ourselves what we are. In other words, we become through everyday practices, employing a pragmatic approach to what it means to be human in all of our ethical and political dimensions. In so far as Western practical systems are concerned, there have existed general patterns of regularities which are, however, historically singular in nature. These regularities include the bifurcation of reason (constitution of the subject as both subject and object) and what Foucault had earlier called “dividing practices” that are common to all practical systems. The vital aspect of problematization is that it does not purport to arrive at a “valid” solution to political problems; rather, problematization is “the development of a domain of acts, practices, and thoughts that … pose problems for politics” (Foucault 1997: 114). It is, in other words, to question politics. It is the only way by which to become a “we.” We must ask: why does politics assume the reasons it does for this or that action; why does it assume one position as opposed to another? Problematization helps us to understand the history of thought; it is, in fact, Foucault says, “a work of thought” itself (Foucault 1997: 119). Above, all it can assist in our understanding of how subjects fit into games of truth.

In order to better understand what Foucault means by problematization, his approach to the history of madness can serve as an example. Foucault sought to examine why madness was problematized in the first place: “How was the mad subject placed in this game of truth defined by a medical model or a knowledge?” (Foucault 1997: 290). How did it become an object of theoretical discourse? In the course of his examinations, Foucault discovered that the mentally ill person is constituted as mad in relation to and over against those who declare him (or her) mad; in other words, through coercion. But, whereas these earlier analyses conceptualized the subject as a passive one, his later work on ethics takes the subject on a more active course. How do we problematize current political practices so as to fashion ourselves as ethical, active subjects? We must define the objects, rules of action, and modes of relation to ourselves if we are to analyze questions of general import (Foucault 1997: 318). Problematization is a way of using history to account for the present. It is a strategy that back and forth between presentist and historicist perspectives. Finally, it is a way determine a problem, define its domain of objects, and traverse those objects in order to solve the problem.⁶

**Ladino games of truth and the problematization of Maya identity**

Foucault frequently stresses the study of “procedures of exclusion” as a way to understand how those who are excluded are in the end included through the establishment of social scientific norms. Procedures of exclusion are thus seen as part of the process of normalization. Giovanna Procacci explains that Foucault’s research showed him that,

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⁶ For difficulties associated with problematization as a methodological tool for historical analysis, see (Castel 1994)
through an emphasis on moral reform, for example, the inclusion of the poor turned into a disciplinary action aimed at restoring a “normal” relation between wealth and poverty (Procacci 1994: 212). The Maya of Guatemala have begun to problematize their own subjectivity by looking at, among other things, the procedures of exclusion practiced institutionally in and through ladino games of truth. The domain of objects that has been determined as facilitating these procedures of exclusion is complex. In the first instance, there is a concerted effort directed towards understanding how ladino forms of rationality and games of truth have traditionally (mis)represented Maya subjectivity and undermined their own forms of rationality, such as cosmology, calendrics, meteorology and astronomy.  

Beginning with conquest right up to the present day, the games of truth practiced by the ladino minority have had as their goal the integration of indigenous groups into the “national culture” (Constitution of 1965: Article 110), thus setting up the conditions and parameters of what constitutes “truth” and “falsity.” Under colonial and republican regimes alike, the legislation enacted has cast the Maya and their languages as a hinderance to national progress. During the colonial period, Spanish conquerors resorted to coercion in order to extract Maya labor and convert them to Christianity. This was a normalizing set of procedures oriented around pacification/disciplinary policies that had earlier been successful in medieval Spain. The crown’s “Castilianization” policy in Guatemala included the demand that Indians adopt patronymic surnames and that all language instruction and official ceremonies be conducted solely in Spanish (Becker Richards and Richards 1996: 208-9). The indigenous past was buried in its own ruins.  

In June, 1984, the Guatemalan Bishop’s Conference released a pastoral letter entitled “To Build a Peace.” The letter outlined the historical and structural roots of political violence in Guatemala and called for the implementation of indigenous human rights, the creation of political, economic and social reforms and the eradication of force (Davis 1988: 31). It was not until the restoration of civilian rule in 1985 that the Maya could begin to actively problematize their subjectivity and even then, many of the existing inequities have remained hopelessly insurmountable. In spite of this, in the struggle for recognition, there are numerous positive examples from which to draw. One of these is the role of Maya women in later modern Guatemala. Maya women have begun to problematize their own subjectivity by questioning their subordinate role in ladino society. The mujer maya (“the Mayan woman”) suggests Diane Nelson, “sustains modernity and is in turn changed by it, made problematic” (Nelson 1999: 280). By problematizing their own relation to modernity, tradition, and ladino politics, Maya women have begun to make forays into the political world in which they inhabit through

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7 For an account of these Maya practices, see (Tedlock 1982)
8 The Maya are not strangers to procedures of exclusion. From the other side of the equation, they have over the last century practiced their own procedures of exclusion, which were not, however, enacted as disciplinary policies. Eric Wolf’s notion of a “closed, corporate community” demonstrates with some modifications that the strategy of exclusion from outside forces has long been a practice of the Maya Indians. Wolf’s anthropological fieldwork revealed a pattern among Indians in Middle America. The community is “solidary” towards outsiders; it maintains a monopoly of resources and defends the first rights of insiders against external competition (Wolf 2001: 175). It is thus a kinship coalition that is designed to protect the collectivity as a whole from outside aggrandizement. Such a strategy was thus a way to question ladino politics; it was one of the ways by which communities became a “we.”
activism, professionalism, and education. Even among those who remain in their villages, there is a change of emphasis in their contribution to politics and the economy of the community; many are working at export production plants, in the tourism industry, and other traditionally male prerogatives (Nelson 1999: 281).

Though internal colonialism still reigns in Guatemala, Maya cultural activism suggests, along with Foucault, that the problematization of thought, brought on by political, social and economic processes, has begun to take hold among the Maya. They have initiated the development of a “given” into a question, and have begun to transform, as Foucault suggests, a group of obstacles into problems and produce a response to those problems (Foucault 1997: 118). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the (re)writing of Maya history and culture, in the demand for the formation of Maya study centers, in the demand for recognition of Maya culture at all levels, and in the social demand for the nondiscriminatory application of constitutional rights (Cojtí Cuxil 1996). This cultural revitalization movement aims at making problematic the politics of the past in order to pose a plurality of questions to ladino politics, to expose the arbitrary, delimiting nature of political doctrine, and to work towards a transgression of those limits.

The Maya have thus begun to write a history of the present. A problematization is a historical account which differs from written historical accounts. It is a set of acts, practices, and thought that originate from the perspective of the present, using the past as archival materials. These may include written histories, forms of rationality, modes of scientific inquiry, etc. Admittedly, one of the problems associated with problematization is the arbitrary selection of archival materials with which one constructs a problem. When did the problem first appear? How can we be sure that it began then, and not at some other time? Can we fasten onto the past concerns that only hold true for our time? I would argue that, in the case of the Guatemalan Maya, problematization is not beset with such difficulties. In the first instance, there is a specific time frame around which the Maya can identify the onset of procedures of exclusion, that being the time of conquest. As for Robert Castel’s cautionary view that problematization leads to the “choice” of significant elements from the past and therefore lends itself to partial and arbitrary inquiry (Castel 1994: 239), it may be counterargued that, in the case of the Maya, all of the elements of their past are significant for an understanding of their present-day existence. Ladino procedures of exclusion have had a totalizing element about them; every act – political, social, or economic – has resulted in the placement of a decisively negative, delimiting imprimatur on Maya existence and cultural identity. It is only by making problematic these practices of the past (and present) that the Maya can begin to transgress the political and cultural boundaries into which they have been historically determined and bound. As one Maya scholar puts it, “national unity cannot be constructed while denying an existent plurality. The Maya … do not base their future on the past; they add their future to their history and to the history of humanity” (Sam Colop 1996: 155).

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9 One anthropologist estimates that the number of Maya attending Guatemalan universities, for example, has risen from less than 30 in the mid-1970s to over 500 by 1990. Sixty to seventy of these have earned liceniaturas (roughly, an undergraduate degree equivalent to the master’s degree in North America), ten have earned master’s degrees and one a doctorate. See (Watanabe 1995: 32).
Section Five: Maya Enlightenmentality as Pragmatic Humanism

Foucault’s reconsideration of the Enlightenment led him to de-transcendentalize, I have argued, the doctrine of humanism. If humanism is anything, it is first a concern for humanity and Foucault’s concern for the subjectivity of humanity is patently obvious. Whether it be an investigation into constraining or enabling forms of historically determined subject constitution, Foucault devoted his entire life’s work to decoding the cryptic and deterministic inscriptions of the human sciences of “man.” In a series of lectures he composed between 1978 and 1983, he undertook the task of bridging the gap between his extreme nominalism and the collective ideals of humanism that he found so pertinently articulated in Kant. One way to go about explaining how he approached this formidable task is to assert that he radically historicized Kantianism, holding fast to the regulative utopian ideal of human freedom by refracting critique through historical reflection (Hansen 2000: 39). We can only transgress – not transcend – the limits of anthropological, transcendental humanism from within; and, we can only do so by exposing their contingency through a historical ontology of the present. Fundamentally, this involves the adoption of an attitude, or an ethos about who we are as subjects, as human beings, an ethos which can no longer be exclusively qualified in terms of the various mutations of reason. The ethos that we need to develop resides, according to Foucault, in the presumption of a capacity for self-creativity outside an identical consciousness. As such, he argues, the process of enlightenment is the responsibility of each individual, including the philosophical critic. Enlightenment, Kant reminds us, is a “way out” of a state of immaturity, and by immaturity he meant “a certain state of our will which makes us accept someone else’s authority to lead us in areas where the use of reason is called for.” The on-going process of maturation is, in Foucault’s view, at once spiritual and institutional, ethical and political (Foucault 1997: 305-6).

The specific versus universal intellectual

Foucault once declared in an interview (“Truth and Power”) that the universal intellectual of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries no longer existed. What had emerged, particularly after World War Two, was the “specific” intellectual; one who is specific to the particular and local political struggles that involve that intellectual’s knowledge. The specific intellectual, according to Foucault, encounters certain obstacles and faces certain dangers because she or he can be perceived to be a political threat in light of their knowledge and expertise. The person occupying a specific position is linked to “the general functioning of an apparatus of truth” understood as “a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements” (Foucault 2000: 131-2). More towards the end of his life, Foucault spoke of the “ethic of the intellectual.” By this he meant that the intellectual should not be of a Sartrean sort who wants to project and entire worldview onto the world; Foucault wanted to capture an ethos of the intellectual as vocation of enlightenment, as one who was always in relation to truth, and as one who engages in an on-going critique of regimes of truth (Osborne 1998: 156-7).

The role of specific, public intellectuals in Maya cultural activism is in fundamental ways a page out of Foucault’s own views on the role of the intellectual. Maya professionals from a variety of disciplines have been instrumental in crafting social criticism. From linguists to lawyers to publishers and journalists, Maya public intellectuals have begun to use their expertise to engage in heated political debates, to
challenge state hegemony of education, and to affirm the Maya cause by formulating counterhistories, creating a Maya Studies interdisciplinary program, all in the service of revitalizing and constructing a distinctive Maya culture. The leading activist-theoretician of the movement, Waq' Q'anil Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil, has elaborated the movement's demands on the ladino state for major reforms in administration, language policy, the military, economics, education, communication, and respect for Maya ceremonial centers (Warren 1998: 38.). Cojtí Cuxil writes that the internal colonialism of the ladino state has led to discrimination and economic exploitation through a monopoly on all levels of government. He calls for a revision of the current constitution (ratified in May 1985) to address demands for political autonomy, territorial rights and linguistic revindication (Cojtí Cuxil 1996).

The role of public intellectuals in the Maya struggle for recognition is important in that it is they who are advancing essentialist claims as a tactic to reject the powerful ladino definition of Mayas as the weak, insignificant other. The motivations behind the promotion of Maya languages, calendrics, shaman-priests and conceptions of moral authority are lodged in an urgent desire to revitalize the past before it is lost in the collective Maya memory (Warren 1998: 78). The specific intellectuals leading this movement exemplify Foucault’s view that what is at stake is a permanent “critical attitude to the truth” (Rajchman 1991). The specific intellectual engages in a constant critique with relations of power; she or he can provide the strategies necessary to confront the “general politics” of truth. In Foucault’s words, the specificity of the intellectual is important particularly in relation to the politics of truth in that “[their] position can take on a general significance, and that [their] local, specific struggle can have effects and implications that are not simply professional or sectoral” (Foucault 2000: 132). Hence, the importance of Maya intellectuals.

Human Rights

It was pointed out that, towards the end of his life, Foucault suddenly became a champion of international human rights. But, does this mean that he succumbed to the perils of universalist, transcendental humanism that he had, during the course of his career, taken great pains to disavow? To be sure, Foucault introduced a minimalist conception of the philosophy of the (agonal) subject into his analyses of modern power formations. Is it not, however, possible to say that human rights are socially constructed, that ideas and practices with regard to human rights are created and re-created by human actors in social and historical configurations and settings: that is, pragmatically? Are not the creation and re-creation of human rights in part responses to challenges to power? In a Gramscian sense, can human rights not be seen as operating to legitimate counterhegemonic challenges to extant power relations? (Stammers 1999). After all, were not liberalism and the French revolution “social movements?” In effect, I would argue that this is precisely how Foucault later conceptualized human rights. As he himself says, “singular forms of experience may perfectly well harbor universal structures” (Foucault 1997: 201). But, Foucault did not need to adopt Kantian transcendentalism in order to claim that human rights movements may be global in orientation, yet local in origin.

As Demetrio Cojtí points out, Article 66 of the current constitution (Protection of Ethnic Groups) is just ladino “babble.” The judicial “progress” that has been made is more a “symbolic compensation for the Indian holocaust that began in 1978 than a
conceptual and political advance of Ladino rulers” (Cojtí Cuxil 1996: 25). Maya leaders are thus seeking a ratification of both domestic and international agreements and treaties on the rights of indigenous minorities. The Maya have, in their attempts to foster socio-historical and ethico-political change, sought recognition of their human rights through appeals to the Guatemalan state and the United Nations, both of which assert the right to certain rights, including self-determination and autonomy. Lamentably, Cojtí Cuxil as notes, “Maya revindication seeks a multiethnic Guatemala through the recognition of equal rights for all ethnic communities. [These] demands cannot be satisfied by the limited rights accorded Indians in the current constitution” (Cojtí Cuxil 1996: 29-30). In addition to this, the narrowly defined (Western) conception of human rights as “civil” and “political” have manifestly failed to interrogate gross violations of social, economic, and cultural rights (Stammers 1999: 1001-02).

Ethico-political self-fashioning and Maya critique

In considering what makes Maya revitalization practices ethico-political, we might say, along with Foucault, that the ethical substance being worked over by Mayan ethics consists in self-forming activity that is related to the normative forms of everyday practice. As was suggested, this ethical practice, conceived as an aesthetics of existence, is being developed through the examination of both the past and the present, a reflection upon limits and the possibility of going beyond them. Foucault calls this a ‘limit attitude’. A limit attitude is a permanent, practical critique that “will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are” (Foucault 1997: 315). This means that such permanent critique cannot be universal, but must always be local and experimental. Reinscribing themselves in Guatemalan society, the Maya, by creating dialogue within and through texts, by turning to social science to support their political advocacy, by re-presenting themselves through the writing and re-writing of history, and by fashioning their own ethical sensibilities outside of scientific objectivity, have unquestionably turned to critique as a form of self-legislation amidst an overtly hostile battle over representation and identity formation.

The Mayan ethos

In the cultural practices of the Maya, we can see Foucault’s thought in action. The Maya are, in the last instance, attempting to escape their inherited identities and relations to themselves and others. That was the central concern of Foucault’s work. How do we get free of ourselves, we who have been formed, fashioned, and molded from without? The normative self-organization of Maya ethico-political practices is founded on an ethos of self-determination and resistance to domination. It is founded on a desire on the part of the Maya to create their own lives as works of art, by a commitment to create new forms of thought and action which are both enabling and self-invented. It is founded, finally, on a desire to overcome interdictions and transgress the limits of ladino regimes of truth. It appears to me (a non-specialist) that the Mayan ethic of resistance consists in an ethos derived from a sense of becoming, of a maturity not in the Kantian, self-closing sense, but in an openness toward the possibility of becoming other than what they are. It is to redefine their humanness, but in a manner that is pragmatically and concretely self-
fashioned as *Maya* human. That, one could say, is the promise of Maya enlightenmentality.

**Concluding Remarks**

I have not set out in this chapter to traverse all of the anthropological debates on the diversity or non-diversity within the *movimiento maya*, to tackle the thorny issues of class versus ethnicity, or to place Maya revitalization practices within the context of transnationalism and the global arena. Detailed analyses of these issues have been undertaken more ably by others (see, for example, (Fog Olwig and Hastrup 1997) (Warren 1998) (Brysk 2000). Instead, I have attempted to initiate a problematization of a problematization, using Foucault’s later work on ethics as a backdrop. Problematization, Foucault reminds us, is not the representation of an “preexisting object”; it is the “totality of discursive and non-discursive practices that brings something into the play of truth and falsehood and set it up as an object for the mind” (Quoted in Castel 1994: 237-8). Problematization assists in the development of a “given” into a question or a set of problems “to which diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response” (Foucault 1997: 118). The starting point of analysis and the orientation that propels it is the present-day situation, and the ways in which the questions are asked today (Castel 1994: 238). It is a genealogy of the present in which subjects only resort to “foundations” as a way to produce or “invent” themselves. That is what Foucault calls “ethics.”

The diverse solutions both sought and found by the Maya, I argued, may be seen as a form of constructed essentialism, or pragmatic humanism which arise out of an *ethos*, or a desire to escape a constructed past. This is not so much a reconstruction of the past or an evaluation of its functions in ladino history. Instead problematization of the past discloses an understanding of how past ladino political technologies are important in the current exercise of power. How did the exercise of power in all of its racist manifestations work towards setting up and maintaining current political practices? By problematizing the past, the Maya have constructed the parameters for their own “limit-attitude”; the technologies they employ, the strategies and tactics they use, and the agonal subjectivity they have created, are founded, it could be argued, on an interplay between the Delphic and Socratic maxims “know yourself, but take care of yourself.” The pragmatic humanism to which I allude in respect of Maya practices may be seen as a rhetorical strategy designed to upset conventional (ladino) conceptions of truth, subjectivity, and freedom. It is to enact what the pragmatist Richard Bernstein has called Foucault’s hyperbolic “rhetoric of disruption” [Bernstein, 1992 #719: 154-5]. A rhetoric of disruption works as a “critical sting” that works to expose the ethico-political dangers of games of truth. So, perhaps we can look upon the pragmatic humanism of Maya practices as a like strategy: to expose the dangers surrounding the conceptualization of Maya subjectivity by non-Mayans.

To use the term “pragmatic humanism” is also to say that we all live in particular settings or configurations which might even reveal fundamental differences. In the case of the Maya is to suggest not that the persistence of social inequalities be overcome by a philosophy that purports to place the Maya, along with us, at the center of the universe, but to rid self-creativity and self-determination of its transcendental burdens so as to advance identity claims which will create a necessary fissure that can lead to open participation in a polycultural society. It is to expose the myth, along with Max Weber,
that “progressive,” “objective” science, can tell us how to live our lives. Pragmatic humanism is to develop an enlightenmentality which means, as Foucault understands it, humanity putting its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority. Foucault’s view of Aufklärung as the “permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy” serves as a fitting maxim for Maya revitalization practices. These practices are not searches for “formal structures with universal value,” but are historical investigations into what events have led the Maya to recognize that, through critique, they can constitute, to different degrees, themselves as subjects.