

## The Quincentenary, a Question of Class, Not Race

### An Interview with Rigoberta Menchú

Translated by Aníbal Yáñez

*Interviewer:* What do you think of the official celebrations that are being promoted in the First World on the occasion of the quincentenary of Columbus's arrival in America?

*Rigoberta Menchú:* I think that they have to be seen in the context of the kind of relations established by the countries of the First World with those of the Third World and of economic and political interests. The commemoration of the Quincentenary is really taking shape more in the political and economic relations between governments than among the people. I think that we should turn it into a true expression of the people—and not just of the indigenous people (that would be folklorism) but of all the people of the continent. More than this, we must find a way to make this expression international. Those of us who consider ourselves truly committed to our peoples have this obligation. It is very difficult because even our brothers the indigenous people who participate in parliaments and congresses generally represent minorities and therefore do not get a hearing. I believe that we must unite all the voices; we must agree where we can and make these agreements a priority as the date approaches. Our peoples are building their future every day; they will not wait until 1992 to see whether there will be a struggle.

*I:* Spain promoted this celebration a number of years ago under the title of the "discovery" of America. What is your opinion of this?

*RM:* I think that to speak of discovery is to minimize the values of our peoples, especially given that our ancestors had an age-old culture.

*I:* What is the explanation for this false term's being the official Spanish position and that of many Latin American governments?

*RM:* The first thing to understand is that the Quincentenary represents political interests, economic interests, and even issues of legitimacy. A just evaluation of history and of what is taking place today has been set aside.

Rigoberta Menchú is a Maya-Quiché Indian and leader of the Comité de Unidad Campesina in Guatemala. Her testimony about her family and the Indian community in which she was raised, as told to Elisabeth Burgos-Debray, was published as *I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso, 1984). (For information about testimonial literature, see *Latin American Perspectives* 18 [issues 70 and 71, Summer and Fall, 1991].) Aníbal Yáñez is in the graduate group in Latin American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, and is a participating editor of *Latin American Perspectives*.

The celebrations so far have not reflected popular opinion, much less that of the indigenous peoples. The ancient owners of the continent are not truly represented. The Quincentenary ought to be an evaluation of events that is just, dignified, and true. For two years now we have been proposing to the United Nations that 1992 be declared an international year in recognition of the struggle and resistance of indigenous peoples, that all the indigenous leaders who have given their lives and blood for liberation be recognized and honored, and that there be an evaluation of events that is fairer and closer to reality. Our peoples' oppression must end before we can aspire to a true encounter of two cultures. The looting and exploitation of our peoples must also end.

*I:* What does it mean for your own cultural identity that you have learned Spanish?

*RM:* I learned Spanish because I needed to; when I left my Quiché community I realized that otherwise it would be impossible to share experiences with brothers from other places. Understanding the language of a people means the possibility of understanding their universe, their world, their ideas. Spanish has given me the opportunity to know something about the lives and struggles of other peoples, from South Africa to the Amazon. Also, I have seen how important it is for the natural leaders of a community to learn a universal history that enables them to develop a solidier, broader consciousness. I value Spanish as a means of communication and of learning. I wish I could speak more languages.

*I:* In an interview we conducted with the Native American leader Leonard Peltier, he spoke to us of the "Indians" they call "apples" [red on the outside, white on the inside] who betray their own brothers. From Spanish colonial times we know of caciques who enjoyed privileges. Every colonialist project tries from the outset to coopt some stratum within the people itself to facilitate its work. What do you think about this?

*RM:* Our own experience tells us that the fact that someone is Indian does not necessarily mean that he is a good person, that he is incapable of doing anything wrong. This is far too simplistic given the realities of our peoples. On this continent and specifically in Guatemala there are Indians who have aspired to political careers, to economic leadership within a system imposed on the majority. And it does not matter that they are conscious of what is happening in our country—of the violations, of the blood that has been spilled by our people—as long as they have privileged lives and limited political space. There are some who have been totally absorbed by the system and have become ringleaders of the most criminal and repressive kind. They feel ashamed of their own people, who are poor, and go so far as to change their names. But there are also others who because of ideological deformations,

because of indoctrination (what in Guatemala we call brainwashing), have become criminals and have participated, either personally or indirectly, in the massacres. This is why we must view the situation of the Indians objectively, not romantically. To the degree that an Indian has had privileges to defend and has participated in profiting from the labor of others, he has become transformed to the point that he is even crueler. It is not a question of race but one of class.

*I:* When Columbus arrived in these lands he thought that he had reached India and that its inhabitants were therefore "Indians." Fifteen years later it became clear that this was another continent. Why is it that 500 years after that historical mistake was corrected the original inhabitants of the continent are still called "Indians"?

*RM:* Well, in the case of Guatemala, for example, we could call an assembly of all the indigenous peoples to decide what we want to call ourselves. This has not been possible because there are other, more urgent problems that we must solve.

Now, I would venture a personal opinion. For a long time, and through many stages, the term "Indian" has had only a negative, deprecatory connotation. Calling someone an Indian is saying that he is inferior and ignorant. It may be that we are ignorant of technology, but that is because we have not been given access to it; and this does not mean that we do not know many other things. Because of all that they represent in terms of struggle, of ancient values, I have stated that I am very proud of my roots. I feel that I am truly a granddaughter of the Mayas, and I am proud of what the term "Indian" means for us.

*I:* Do you think that this term, being part of a discourse of domination, should be replaced?

*RM:* That is a decision that is up to the peoples, but it is crucial that the conditions exist for it to be made — and not only the decision regarding their name but also, for example, the interpretation of their land. I believe that indigenous peoples' feelings for the land are not yet understood. The land for us is not only an economic resource but a source of culture: it is life and roots. Agrarian reform in our homeland must therefore take all of this into account.

*I:* Another part of the same official discourse maintains that there were neither victors nor vanquished. There is talk of the birth of a new culture, the mestizo, which supposedly reflects the contributions of both Europeans and "Indians." Would you agree with these ideas?

*RM:* That is a hoax. It is only necessary to look at the number of indigenous people who have died compared with the number of Spanish dead to know who were the victors. It is only necessary to look at the current condition of

the people to understand who is the victor. It is true that expressions of indigenous culture have been integrated into mestizo culture, but in general indigenous culture has been pushed aside, discriminated against, or simply served as decoration.

*I:* This concept of *mestizaje* is similar to another one, the idea of the "encounter of two worlds," which makes it appear that two cultures were joined and harmoniously gave rise to something totally new. Is it true that Latin American culture contains indigenous and European contributions in equal measure? Does such a balance really exist in *mestizaje*?

*RM:* We know that *mestizaje* did not come about because the Spaniards were thinking about equality and mutual respect. Many of our grandmothers were raped, and the product of that rape cannot be compared with the harmony of the encounter of two sentiments or of two cultures. Today our countries power is in the hands of creoles or privileged mestizos. This speaks to us of the imposition of one culture over another. Five hundred years later we are still living the consequences. First it was the Spaniards, but later came others: Germans, North Americans, and so on. Can you imagine what the vision of the universe, the concept of nature that our people still hold would mean for a new and more humane society?

*I:* The national heroes who have become stereotypes and are celebrated by governments on a political level, for example, Tecumun Uman in Guatemala — are they really representative of the indigenous people?

*RM:* They are figures whom we must recover and in some measure already have recovered from official history. It is said, for example, that Tecumun Uman did not know about horses, that he thought that he was killing the rider when he killed the horse. Our people are perfectly capable of recognizing the difference between a human being and another animal. How can they tell us such falsehoods? Here we see quite clearly the signs of the discrimination that is used to justify oppression and exploitation.

*I:* Is brotherhood between "Indians" and "non-Indians" possible in pursuit of a common goal?

*RM:* Of course it is possible. I can speak quite a bit about this because of the experience of our organization, the Committee of Peasant Unity (Comité de Unidad Campesina — CUC). It arose precisely under those conditions — enormous barriers between Indians and *ladinos*. If the CUC was repressed and persecuted, if there were attempts to destroy it, it was because its role was that of doing away with the disunity among the people. I have had the opportunity to meet many *compañeros* who are not Indians but are fighting in the same cause. I recall Marianela García, the Salvadoran *compañera* from the Human Rights Commission. She set a great example for many women; I

talked with her about the identity and the brotherhood of our peoples, and she was Salvadoran and mestiza. When I learned that Marianela had been killed, I was filled with sorrow because I knew about her ideas, her ideals, her sacrifice. When she died not only El Salvador but the entire continent lost a daughter.

*I:* What is the way to win recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and of the people in general?

*RM:* An appropriate option would be to support projects such as this one for the emancipation and identity of Latin America. While in some places it may not be possible to raise one's head because it will be chopped off, that does not mean that those heads do not exist. This is a process that has been taking shape day after day with the efforts and the sacrifice of our people. The alternative is in the people themselves and in those who are with them.

## Latin America Faces the Quincentenary

### An Interview with Oswaldo Guayasamín

*Translated by Fred Murphy*

*Interviewer:* What position should Latin American intellectuals take toward the Quincentenary?

*Oswaldo Guayasamín:* I think any talk of celebrations is really mistaken. How can we celebrate an event that was, at its own historic moment, so terrible and damaging for all our great pre-Columbian cultures? The humiliation, the slaughter, of millions of Indians who were the owners of this continent makes this clear.

*I:* Some people are talking about the "encounter of two worlds" . . .

*OG:* Yes, but that's all just phraseology to justify these disastrous events for the continent.

*I:* What would be the proper term for it?

*OG:* I haven't thought about that, but the point is that America is fortunately now reacting in a powerful fashion. I have news from Mexico, Central America, Argentina, Bolivia, and Peru about persons who are working intensely to see that this event is not celebrated.

*I:* Isn't such a critical, emancipatory position going to cause problems for the official celebrations headed by Spain?

*OG:* It could cause difficulties. Here in Ecuador, for example—several years ago I made an immense statue of Rumiñahui, a hand-embossed bronze sculpture 8 meters high. We're now making the columns that will be placed behind this figure, columns nearly 20 meters high and covered with bronze, and a movable sun. Rumiñahui is one of the greatest heroes of the pre-Columbian epoch; he defended the land, America's land, and carried on a fierce resistance from Cajamarca to Quito. For Latin America Rumiñahui is one of the most important figures, and we're trying to inaugurate this monument in 1992. The idea of the Ministry of Education and Culture is to invite groups from all over the continent, from each country—dance troupes, music groups—not to celebrate but to protest, to integrate America, to realize once more the memory of what America was before the Spaniards arrived.

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