Bachelor of Philosophy Sample Thesis Prospectus
(Sociology/Political Science)

Title: Demanding a Voice: The Indigenous Struggle in Chiapas, Mexico

The population of Mexico is one of diverse backgrounds, with its indigenous population constituting the oldest group. As the first settlers of the territory constituting present-day Mexico, the Indians should provide a strong cultural and economic base for the country. Yet throughout this land’s history, the Indians have always been the segment of the population that has suffered the most. Their exploitation began with the Spanish conquest in the early 1500’s, continuing through Spanish colonization. After Mexico gained its independence from Spain in the early 1800’s, the subordination of the indigenous population remained active throughout the years of civil war and reform. The Indians have maintained the lowest level in the socioeconomic hierarchy of Mexico for five hundred years. The abuse throughout these five centuries has been manifested through the exploitation of indigenous labor, degradation of Indian culture, lack of political voice, and exclusion from social work programs, leaving indigenous areas without the necessary social and economic infrastructure for their advancement. In Mexico today, these characteristics plague the areas with a high concentration of indigenous population. The abuse of power and corrupt government practices on behalf of past Mexican Presidents coupled with the accepted belief that the Indians are inferior to other Mexicans have facilitated this suffering. History has allowed for two disparate worlds to emerge from Mexico. One is increasingly modern and industrialized, centered in urban areas in northern Mexico. It is this vision that leaders of Mexico actively promote in order to convince the rest of the globe that Mexico has achieved the status of a First World Nation. The other world, hidden from view, is that of the indigenous and peasant population, that lives in poverty and oppression. This group suffers from the same marginalization and exploitation that it has endured for the past five hundred years.

In today’s era of globalization, the situation facing the Indians in Mexico remains bleak. As Mexico moves forward into regional trade agreements, the indigenous must overcome their history and current state of deprivation in hope of advancement. The Mexican government has begun to enter the world market through economic liberalization policies initiated in the past two decades. One of the largest was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), implemented in 1994, which established a free trade region between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. Reforms necessary for the implementation of NAFTA have proved to be detrimental to the indigenous population in Mexico, as the government ignores the reality that its society is not homogenous, and sectors that were poor prior to the NAFTA are falling farther behind. Yet the Mexican government continues to plow forward, negotiating larger regional trade agreements with its neighbors for the good of the already wealthy sector of the population, leaving the Indians open to further marginalization.

A practical example of this marginalization is found in the southernmost Mexican state of Chiapas. There is a high concentration of descendants of Mayan Indians, whose social situation is one of the bleakest in all of North America. The Indians lack basic human rights, a political voice, schools, hospitals, electricity, and clean water. As Mexico pushes further ahead with its economic reforms, the few programs that had been in place to aid these Indians have been repealed, and the
Indians continue to be ignored. Throughout history, these Indians have been repealed, and the Indians continue to be ignored. Throughout history, these Indians have endured poverty, exploitation, and oppression, while attempting to revolt and ignite change. Yet no movement has ever been successful. With the advent of NAFTA and further global integration, the Indians realized their situation would only continue to worsen if they did not begin to fight for change. In the 1980’s the Zapatista Movement began to form among the Mayan Indians in the jungle of Chiapas. Although this movement was not well known to the rest of the world at the time of its initiation, the Mexican government was abreast of the organization, and unsurprisingly, ignored it. After ten years of peaceful work with no substantial government response, during which time the Indians felt further left behind as Mexico attempted to make the transition from Third World to First World, the Zapatistas took action. Symbolically orchestrated, the Zapatista Army for National Liberation began their public revolt on January 1, 1994, the eve of the implementation of NAFTA. The armed fighting lasted less than two weeks, but the struggle continues today, and the Zapatistas are still a mobilized organization in Chiapas.

This paper will examine both the manifest and latent functions of globalization agreements such as NAFTA on the indigenous population within Mexican society, specifically in Chiapas. It will examine the prospect for the Zapatista Movement to meet with future success; analyzing the role that globalization will play in this movement’s effectiveness. Globalization, with its increasing connectedness and spread of technology could prove to be a beneficial tool in the process of gaining solidarity and support. Or globalization could allow for the gap between the rich and poor on both a national and international level to grow, leaving the poor segments in oblivion. This problem is not limited to Mexico. As the world economy has become increasingly interdependent, the emergence of trans-national social movements may produce serious consequences for citizens in many nations. If these protest movements gain enough support, every person alive has the potential to be affected in some way.

To accomplish this research, I have read and will continue to read many books, magazine, newspaper, and journal articles on the history of Mexico, the treatment of the indigenous population, liberalization policies that have been implemented, and the Zapatista Movement. This information will be coupled with interviews of respected faculty members in these fields of study.