

Genomic Sovereignty and the “Mexican Genome”

an ethnography of postcolonial biopolitics

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ABSTRACT

This PhD seeks to explore the development of a bio-molecular (i.e., genomic) map as a sovereign resource in Mexico. The basic analytical thread of the dissertation is related to the circulation of genomic variability through the policy/legal and scientific social worlds that compose the Mexican medical-population genomics arena. It follows the construction of the Mexican Institute of Genomic Medicine (INMEGEN), the notion of genomic sovereignty, and the Mexican Genome Diversity Project (MGDP). The key argument for the construction of the INMEGEN relied in a nationalist policy framing, which considered the Mexican genome as a sovereign resource, coupling Mexican “uniqueness” to the very nature of genomic science. Nevertheless, the notion of genomic sovereignty was nothing similar to a paradigm, and was not based on shared visions of causality, since the very “nature” of the policy object —Mexican Genome— was, and still is, a disputed reality. It was through the rhetoric upon independence, emancipation and biopiracy: i.e. experiences of dispossession “in archaeology, botany or zoology” (IFS 2001: 25) that the novelty of population genomics became amenable to be understood as a sovereign matter. Therefore, the strategic reification of Mexicanhood fuelled the whole policy and the legal agenda of the INMEGEN as well, which permitted cooperation without consensus and opened the process of policy innovation. Conversely, scientists considered genomic sovereignty an unfounded exaggeration, but anyhow they cooperated and even created a new policy and scientific enterprise. Genomic sovereignty exemplifies the process of cooperation without consensus on its most extreme version. So, as the notion circulated and gradually became a law to protect Mexican genomic patrimony, the initial coalition of scientists, lawyers and policy makers disaggregated. Many of the original members of the coalition now think of genomic sovereignty as a strategy of the INMEGEN to monopolise genomic research in the country. This dissertation additionally explores the way in which the MGDP is constructed in mass media, in INMEGEN’s communication and in the laboratory practices. These different dimensions of the MGDP depict the difficulties that emerge between the probabilistic, relative and multiple constructions of population genomics and the rhetorical strategies to continually assert the existence of the unique “Mexican Genome”. I argue that the Mexican case study provides an entry point to what I and others (Benjamin 2009; Schwartz-Marin 2011) have identified as a postcolonial biopolitics in which the nation state is reasserted rather than diluted. However the relation between sovereignty, race and nation is not mediated by the biological purification of the nation (Agamben 1998; Foucault 2007), or the active participation of citizens looking to increase their vitality (Rose 2008, Rose & Rabinow 2006), but on an awareness of subalternity in the genomic arena and a collective desire to compete in the biomedical global economy.

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