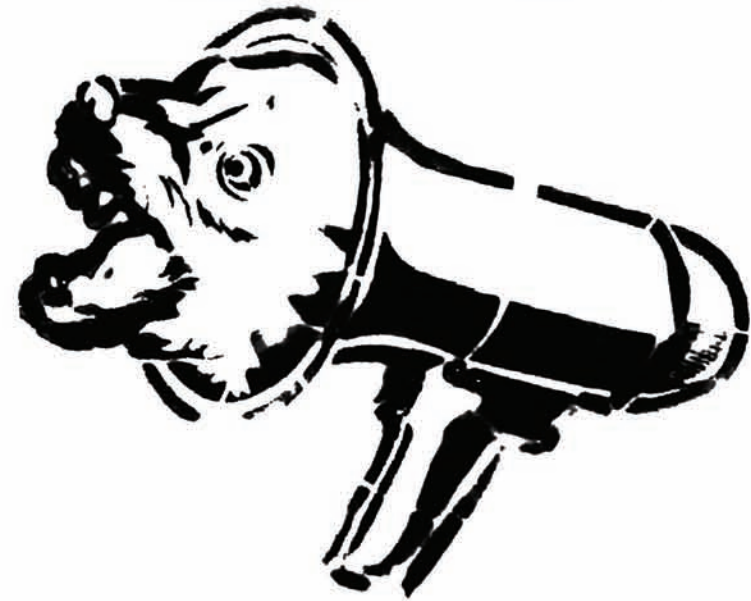


'Broken Barricades' is a critical look at the 2006 uprising in Oaxaca, Mexico. Starting as a teachers strike and occupation of Oaxaca City main square, this developed into a mass struggle against the corrupt Oaxacan State and it's police and death squads. And still the fight continues not only for political freedom and equality but for the many political prisoners locked up from those earlier events

This is the first in a new series of 56a publications looking at amazing struggles around the world to remind, inform and make links between these struggles and ourselves. **Solidarity!**

Oaxaca

Broken Barricades





AHORA LAS
MUJERES
NOS HEMOS
LEVANTADO,

Y VAMOS
ASEGUIR



HASTA
EL FINAL...



"NOW US WOMEN HAVE RISEN UP, AND WE WILL CONTINUE UNTIL THE END..."
-ANONYMOUS PARTICIPANT IN THE OCCUPATION OF CANAL 9

BROKEN BARRICADES :

The Oaxaca Rebellion in Victory, Defeat, and Beyond
by Collective Reinventions

¡FUERA ULISES!

a graphic account from Oaxaca
by Ana Nimo



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THIS BOOK REPRESENTS MY INTERPRETATION OF THE EVENTS IN OAXACA FROM JUNE THRU NOVEMBER OF 2006. IT IS INFLUENCED BY MY PERSPECTIVE AS A VISITOR AND AN ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN. I'M SURE THAT THERE ARE AS MANY PERSPECTIVES AS THERE ARE VIEWERS, AND THAT A GOVERNMENT SUPPORTER, AN ANARCHIST, OR A MEMBER OF THE APPO WOULD TELL THE STORY DIFFERENTLY. CERTAINLY, MANY OTHER VISITORS DID NOT SEE THINGS AS I DID, ONE TOURIST'S BLOG I READ STATED, "I HATE THE APPO, THEY DESTROYED MY BURGER KING!"

WHILE I BELIEVE MY CRITICISM OF THE APPO TO BE ACCURATE, I FEEL THAT ASSEMBLIES CAN BE AN EFFECTIVE FORM OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION. I BELIEVE SOME OF THE APPO'S PITFALLS WERE; CHOOSING NOT TO USE CONSENSUS TO REACH DECISIONS; CHOOSING AN EFFECTIVELY HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE; BLOCKING BROADER PARTICIPATION BY DENYING ACCESS TO MEETINGS AND FAILING TO FORM REGIONAL ASSEMBLIES; AND DEMANDING CONTROL AND CONFORMITY IN THE RESISTANCE RATHER THAN ALLOWING FOR AUTONOMOUS ACTION AND A VARIETY OF TACTICS. AN ASSEMBLY FORM THAT AVOIDS THESE PROBLEMS HAS A BETTER CHANCE OF BEING AN EFFECTIVE AND EGALITARIAN VEHICLE FOR CHANGE.

ORGANIZING AND ACTIVISM WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES IS CRITICAL, HOWEVER I ALSO BELIEVE IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO REACH OUTSIDE OF THESE BOUNDARIES IN ATTEMPTS AT SOLIDARITY WITH PEOPLE SUFFERING ELSEWHERE. SOME OF THE ACTIONS PEOPLE IN THE U.S. HAVE TAKEN IN SOLIDARITY WITH THE OAXACAN STRUGGLE HAVE BEEN; WRITING LETTERS TO LOCAL AND MEXICAN OFFICIALS TO PROTEST HUMAN RIGHTS ABUSES; SHOWING DOCUMENTARIES; TRANSLATING ARTICLES; HOLDING FUNDRAISERS; ORGANIZING SPEAKING TOURS, AIDING OAXACANS SEEKING TO ESCAPE POLITICAL PERSECUTION, HOLDING PROTESTS, OFFERING PHYSICAL, ECONOMIC, AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT TO GROUPS IN OAXACA, AND ATTACKING MEXICAN CONSULATES. I ENCOURAGE PEOPLE WHO ARE MOVED TO TAKE WHATEVER ACTIONS THEY ARE CAPABLE OF AND FEEL ARE EFFECTIVE.

CURRENT NEWS FROM OAXACA CAN BE FOUND AT; revuelta.radiolibre.org, narconews.com, vocal.sexतालuna.org, mexico.indymedia.org, and oaxacalibre.org

THE COMITE DE LIBERACION 25 DE NOVIEMBRE PROVIDES LEGAL SUPPORT TO THE POLITICAL PRISONERS IN OAXACA, MONEY CAN BE SENT TO THE PROOAX ACCOUNT WITH SCOTIABANK INVERLAT, SUCURSAL / BRANCH OAXACA, ACCOUNT # 22 77 263, INTERNATIONAL CODE ABA MCOMXMM.

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"¡SOMOS MAS, Y ESTAMOS DISPUESTOS A LUCHAR!"
"WE ARE MORE, AND WE ARE READY TO STRUGGLE!"

BROKEN BARRICADES :

The Oaxaca Rebellion in Victory, Defeat, and Beyond

The following text is the result of a collaborative effort, and is the fruit of a considerable number of meetings and discussions. It reflects the give and take, even the hesitations, of an ongoing conversation. It should also be noted at the outset that this essay makes no pretense of being a definitive account of the Oaxaca rebellion, nor is it the product of a directly observed or lived experience of the events themselves. Like all significant historical events, there are many truths—instead of one Absolute Truth—to be discovered in the Oaxaca rebellion. In any case, this analysis was written at a literal distance from the unrest in Mexico in the period under discussion here. While the text is unashamedly partisan, in the sense of taking the side of the Oaxacan rebels, and specifically the most radical among them, it is not a work of mere advocacy or apologetics. Still less does it represent the kind of ventriloquism common to the left: it does not speak for Oaxaca, which can most certainly speak for itself. It seeks to afford some perspective on the rebellion, and to reveal some of the roots of a complex phenomenon, and nothing more.

It is written after the apogee of the Oaxaca rebellion, but with the certainty that this movement is not over, that in one form or another the struggle that began in 2006 will continue. Our analysis is presented in the hope that will shed some light on Oaxaca before the uprising is mythologized (by anti-authoritarians); distorted (by all the Leninist vanguards who, in their arrogance, are eager to impart their stern “lessons” to the “masses” in Oaxaca); or simply fades away, far from the glare of the proverbial media spotlight.

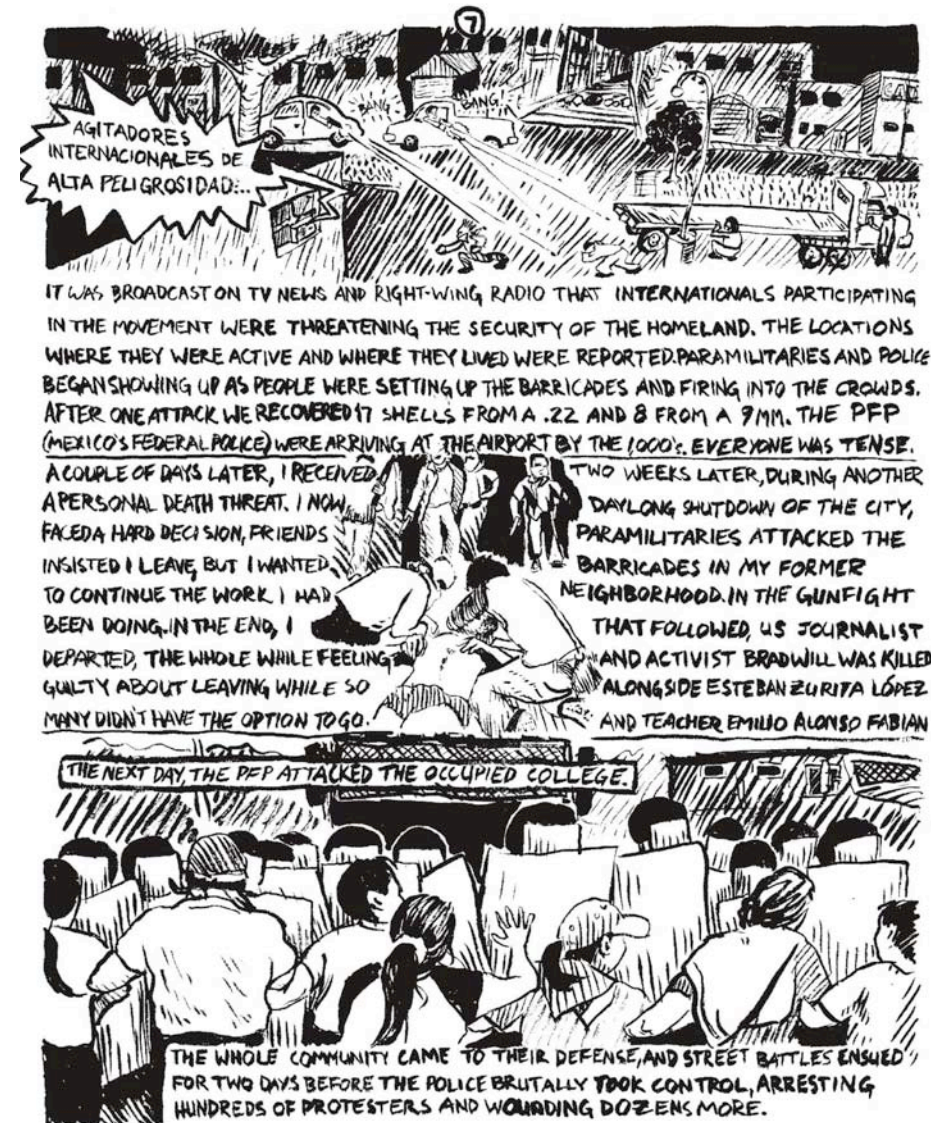


“Since all of this, we will not be the same at all as before; we can’t be and we don’t want to be.”

Oaxacan resident quoted in *La batalla por Oaxaca*
(Edicione Yope Power, Oaxaca: 2007)

For the last half of 2006, and continuing well into 2007, the city of Oaxaca, Mexico was the epicenter of a rebellion that defied both the the Mexican state and its local incarnation, the governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. In this defiance, the social movement that emerged in Oaxaca challenged other nexes of power, capital, and class within Mexico, assuming a markedly anti-hierarchical and, over time, anti-systemic cast. As it grew, expanding well beyond its initial focus and demands, the uprising in Oaxaca also dispelled conventional notions of centrality and importance tied to quantitative criteria: a provincial capital in the second poorest state in Mexico (after Chiapas), a city best known beyond its borders as a tourist destination, became for a time the focus of considerable attention on the part of radical opinion throughout the world.

While it shared certain characteristics with the Zapatista movement in neighboring Chiapas—most importantly in its strong orientation toward indigenous peoples and the defense of their common lands and traditions—it also differed from the EZLN in other significant ways. The Oaxacan movement arose in an urban environment, even as it drew support from (and embodied the concerns of) the rural, largely Indian communities in the Oaxacan hinterland. Also, unlike the Zapatistas, it had no army, only crowds of determined men and women, supported at key moments by contingents of youths willing to fight the police in the streets of the city.



⑥ SEVEN MORE RADIO STATIONS WERE OCCUPIED TO MAKE UP FOR THE LOSS OFF CANAL 9. BUT THE SHUTDOWN SCARED THE APPO POLITICOS, WHOSE LIVELIHOODS WERE AS TIED TO PRIVATE PROPERTY AS THOSE OF THE EXISTING REGIME. AND BY LATE AFTERNOON, AT WHAT WAS ARGUABLY THE MOVEMENT'S STRONGEST POINT, THEY ORDERED THE PEOPLE TO LIFT THE BARRICADES, ALLOWING THEM TO BE MAINTAINED ONLY FROM



THE BARRICADES BECAME A FOCAL POINT FOR NEIGHBORHOOD ORGANIZING. SMALL ASSEMBLIES FORMED OUTSIDE THE APPO, ATTEMPTING TO RESOLVE LOCAL ISSUES, CRIME RATES DROPPED AT NIGHT AS INTERSECTIONS ONCE NOTORIOUS FOR DRUG TRAFFIC AND PROSTITUTION WERE NOW WATCHED OVER BY TEACHERS AND THEIR ALLIES. THOSE THAT COULDN'T STAY HELPED IN OTHER WAYS, BRINGING COFFEE AND FOOD. BUT AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF STRUGGLE THE PEOPLE WERE TIRED, THE APPO WAS SPLINTERING, AND THE ATTACKS AND KIDNAPPINGS CONTINUED.



THE APPO POLITICOS, IN AN ATTEMPT TO MAINTAIN THEIR POWER, BLOCKED THE BARRICADE ASSEMBLIES' ACCESS TO MEETINGS AND BANNED THEM FROM CONCEALING THEIR IDENTITIES WITH SKI MASKS AND BANDANNA'S AT APPO EVENTS AND AT THE BARRICADES.



ONE BY ONE, THE MOST INFLUENTIAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE BARRICADES WERE IDENTIFIED AND TARGETED FOR ATTACKS OR THREATS OUTSIDE OF THEIR HOMES.

Crucially, in Oaxaca there was no charismatic leader in the mold of the voluble Subcomandante Marcos.¹ Instead, there was a reference—stated again and again in the discourse of the movement—to the fact that this was a movement *de los abajo*, of those “from below,” meaning both that the participants primarily came from the base of the Mexican social pyramid but also that the movement itself was controlled by its rank-and-file and not by those who sought to become its “leaders.” The rebellion found organized expression in an assembly, and did so in the plural, not the singular. Not only did it give itself the name of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca, it was a movement in a near-permanent state of assembly, or rather *assemblies*, at least in its beginning phase.

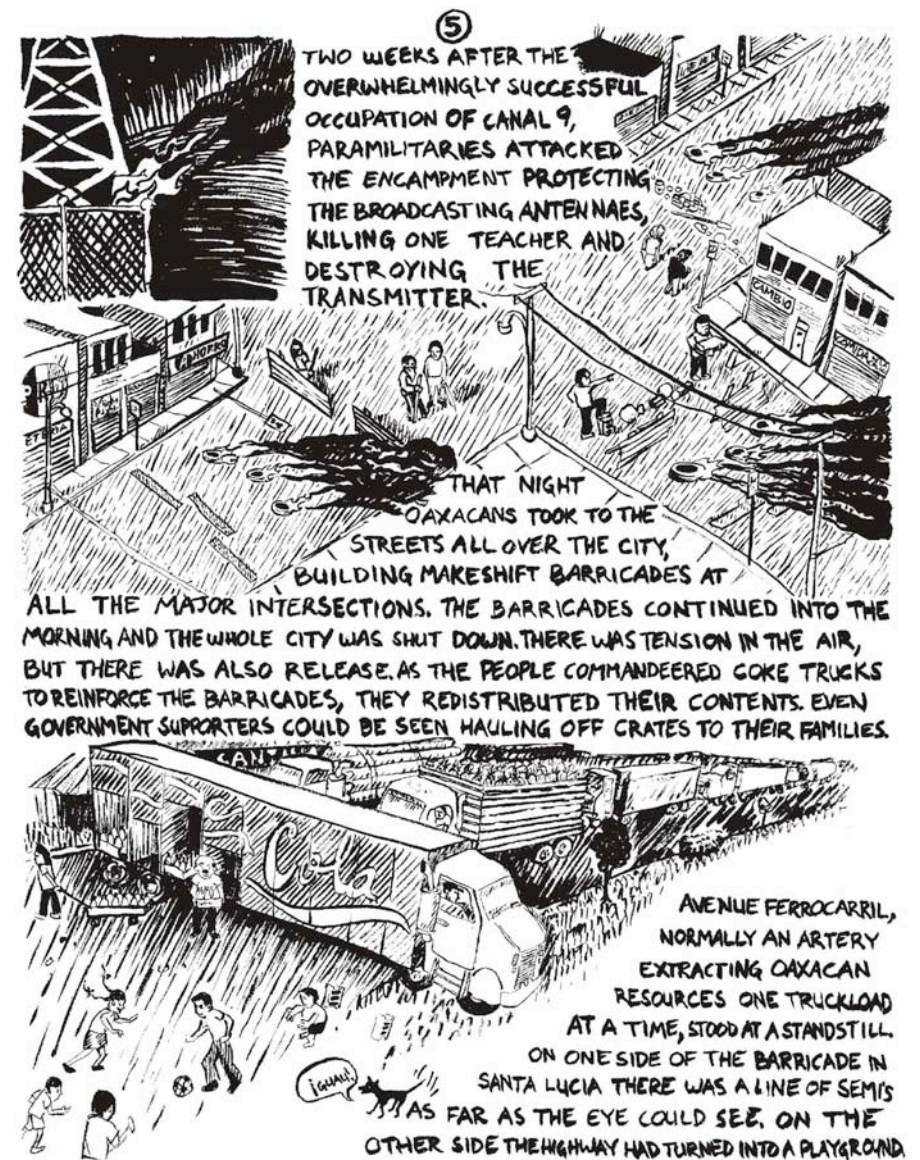
Beyond the question of the movement’s form—reminiscent of the traditions of direct democracy dear to the anti-authoritarian left—there is also, of course, one of its content. Here, one treads cautiously. While many reports on the Oaxaca uprising have stressed its radicalism, its innovativeness, its status as the “first rebellion of the 21st century,” these claims have often been made in the facile, overblown language that is the hallmark of leftist triumphalism.² Such accounts of the movement often read like a morality play in which the noble People—who, in the naïve chant of Latin American militancy, “will never be defeated”—fight valiantly against Evil Incarnate (Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the Mexican state, Yankee imperialism). Given the realities of Oaxaca, its grinding poverty and its brutal, corrupt authorities, such a depiction is not without its aspects of verisimilitude. But it hardly does justice to the complexities of the Oaxacan rebellion, and provides little basis for a discussion of its implications.

Other more critical, but equally shrill voices pointed out the weaknesses, the contradictions, the insufficiencies of the rebellion. The arid Marxists of the International Communist Current dispensed their usual verdict

on all such uprisings: not “proletarian” enough. Anarchist insurrectionists in Mexico City denounced a rebellion that did not abolish the state and capitalism overnight. Again, in such analyses there were kernels of truth: the Oaxacan rebellion could be understood as a kind of radical populism; there were bureaucrats present in APPO from its inception. But to dismiss the entire rebellion in this way only showed where dogma can lead to: a cutting off of the branch (or pedestal) on which one stands. There is no need to endorse the Oaxacan movement uncritically and become yet another leftist cheerleader, but attitudes of disdainful superiority or maximalist denunciation are equally unhelpful. Unless, of course, one wants to miss the full significance of the rebellion entirely.³

That said, one must recognize that even at the height of the rebellion, when the fires of Oaxaca were seen as beacons of hope around the world, certain paradoxes were noted by some commentators. Here was a movement that resonated internationally with those opposed to the status quo, and yet within Mexico itself the rebellion found no large echo, and no sequels in terms of mass actions or similar rebellions. While there was extensive coverage of Oaxaca in the Mexican media, there was no general strike in the country in support of those being crushed by the repressive power of the state in November 2006. One, two, many Oaxacas did not erupt across Mexico.

Where the situationist Raoul Vaneigem saw a Oaxaca Commune—and in this rhetoric he was merely restating a theme used by others before him—a large number of Mexicans saw something else. Rightly or wrongly, they viewed Oaxaca as being one or more of various things: a corporatist, self-interested strike by teachers; a rebellion belonging to the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, and not the rest of Mexico; an entirely local affair that was for the Oaxacans to decide. While the influence of media distortions in such perceptions cannot be discounted, it does not explain everything. What is clear



④
 IN TRUEMEXICAN SPIRIT, EVERY OCCASION IS CAUSE FOR A FESTIVAL, AND THE OAXACAN INSURRECTION WAS NO DIFFERENT. BLOCKADING THE OFFICIAL, TOURIST-ORIENTED GUELAGUETZA (A TRADITIONAL GATHERING, SIMILAR IN SPIRIT TO A POW-WOW,) THE APPO ORGANIZED ONE OF THEIR OWN, THE "GUELAGUETZA POPULAR," WITH HOMEMADE FOOD, DRINK, MUSIC, DANCING, AND MAYBE EVEN A MOLOTOV COCKTAIL OR TWO.



BUT AS THE PEOPLE PARTIED,
 THE GOVERNMENT CONTINUED
 IT'S COUNTERATTACK...

is that something in the Oaxacan movement, or in current Mexican realities, worked against its calling forth other such movements. Understanding this is perhaps the greatest analytical challenge confronting those identifying with the movement.

II

To get to a place where answers to the above questions can even be ventured, one must renounce the conceit of believing that one can "explain" Oaxaca, as if there were a single explanation (or set of explanations) that could be adduced, or as if those in the streets of Oaxaca (or elsewhere, for that matter) were waiting for some sort of benevolent act of critical interpretation that would bestow significance on what they have already made significant in their own lives.

It is also necessary to back up a bit, and to allow one to be astonished again at what did take place—and continues to take place—in Oaxaca. If such a commotion has been made about the Oaxaca rebellion, it is in the first place because of all the commotion occurring in Oaxaca itself. Beginning in June 2006, and continuing virtually without interruption for the next six months, the so-called common people of Oaxaca did uncommon things.

In an epoch in which environmental issues seem to trump all others (and there is no denying their fundamental importance), it is worth remembering that there is a human environment, and a *social* world, as well. What occurred in Oaxaca was an example of radical environmental change, one accomplished with a minimum of resources, and a maximum of initiative and creativity. It even extended to the kind of novel recycling plan implemented on the barricades of Oaxaca: scraps of junk, even entire automobiles, were put to new uses. The walls of the city were repainted with

graffiti, featuring spray painted invectives and stenciled designs. Not all of this was at the level of poetry—far too much, in fact, remained at the level of mere sloganeering—but it did achieve the effect of reminding a world that had seen Oaxaca as only a quaint and picturesque market town that indeed something was happening in this place, that the city was a battleground whose identity was being disputed, its physiognomy refashioned.

This eruption of the marvelous in Oaxaca caught many by surprise. In the absence of serious research conducted on the scene or any comprehensive attempt to let the Oaxacan rebels tell their stories for themselves, various readymade analyses were put into service, without much concern as to whether they were commensurate with the situation they purported to describe. It is not only the “corporate media” that engages in superficial reporting; many posting on Indymedia, while clearly motivated by something other than commercial gain, have been guilty of the same. In spite of the so-called “information age,” language and cultural barriers still exist that hinder a full translation of an event like Oaxaca into words, and for that matter, even Spanish words.

Many leftist supporters of the Oaxaca movement have produced a quick and easy solution to the riddle of its origins: it is all due to the ravages of “neo-liberalism.” Moreover, in a textbook case of a simplistic linking of “cause” and “effect”, the Oaxaca uprising is characterized as a response to, and revolt against, the deleterious impact of NAFTA and the Washington Consensus: the set of enforced trade agreements and financial policies that constitute the arsenal of neo-liberalism, which is only a newer name for laissez-faire and monetarist economics (of the Chicago school that wrought such havoc in Chile and Argentina, for example).⁴

Of course, just because an argument is simplistic—one thinks of the one positing the U.S.’s need for control over oil supplies as the root cause of

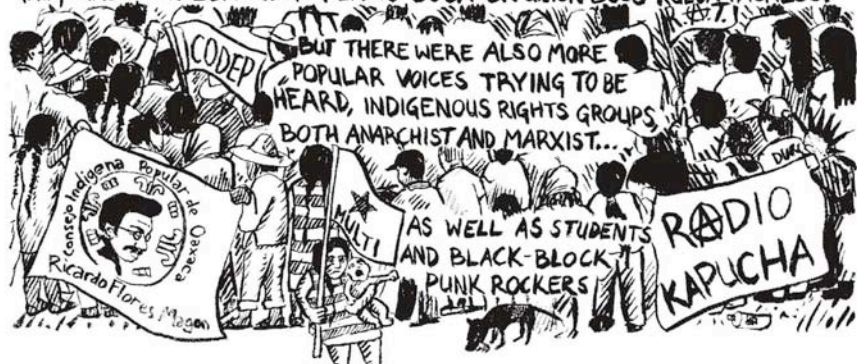




A FRIEND EXPLAINED TO ME HOW THE POLICE CAME IN WITH BILLY CLUBS AND TEAR GAS AT FOUR IN THE MORNING, ATTACKING THE SLEEPING TEACHERS AND THEIR FAMILIES. BUT THE TEACHERS FOUGHT BACK WITH ROCKS AND STICKS, AND AS THE CITY AWOKE MANY WORKERS AND STUDENTS JOINED IN THE FRAY. BY NOON, THE POLICE, DANGEROUSLY OUTNUMBERED, WERE FORCED TO RETREAT.



MANY GROUPS JUMPED ON THE ATTACK AS A POLITICAL VEHICLE, AND THE PEOPLE'S POPULAR ASSEMBLY OF OAXACA (APPO) WAS FORMED AS AN UMBRELLA ORGANIZATION. MANY OF THE LOUDEST VOICES IN THE APPO WERE OLD-HAT POLITICIANS AND UNION BOSSES, FOLKS WHO WOULD WORK UNDER ANY BANNER FOR POLITICAL GAIN, LIKE SPOKESPERSON FLAVIO SOSA OR UNION BOSS RUEDA PACHECO.



BUT THERE WERE ALSO MORE POPULAR VOICES TRYING TO BE HEARD, INDIGENOUS RIGHTS GROUPS BOTH ANARCHIST AND MARXIST...

its invasion of Iraq—doesn't mean that it is wholly wrong. The question is whether neo-liberalism is the *casus belli* of the social war in Oaxaca, or even the primary target of those who have taken to its streets in protest.

Certainly, the damages wrought by neo-liberalism can be and have been measured. For the past nearly 20 years, Mexico has been caught in the vortex of a globalizing hypercapitalism and its transforming, destructive powers, of which NAFTA was only a relatively small expression.⁵ Before the implementation of NAFTA, the billionaire Texan populist Ross Perot warned darkly of the “giant sucking sound” that one would be able to hear as North American factory jobs migrated south of the U.S. border. He neither cared nor was clairvoyant enough to know that the post-NAFTA horror show he tried to scare American voters with would play out in a far more complicated way as far as Mexico was concerned.

Hydraulic forces would hollow out the U.S. economy without transferring substantial numbers of industrial or post-industrial jobs to Mexico, outside of those in the *maquiladora* (assembly for re-export, using mainly components of non-Mexican origin) zone along the U.S-Mexican border. And since it was indeed a question of a world market, and of a drive to find the lowest price for labor, Mexico was only of transient interest for transnational capital. Mexico began to lose jobs to China and elsewhere, as its export sector was undercut by products from areas where labor costs were even lower than its own. Investments in the small electronics sector in Mexico have yielded a relatively low number of jobs in high technology assembly and manufacturing, and these have been clustered around Jalisco and Mexico City, and in the *maquiladora* zone just described. In terms of information technology, what resulted was an “enclave economy,” and not any kind of “take off” of the Mexican economy as a whole. (For more on this subject, see Kevin P. Gallagher and Lyuba Zarsky, *The Enclave Economy: Foreign Investment and Sustainable Development in Mexico's Silicon Valley*, Cambridge, Mass. (2007))

Moreover, the magnetic pull of the United States—which for decades has been unofficially importing a cheap labor force for its agricultural and service sectors from Mexico—did not disappear with NAFTA. A significant number of Oaxacan workers have continued to migrate to el Norte, and their remittances have become a major source of income in the Oaxacan economy.

This larger story is really only *part* of the story insofar as Oaxaca is concerned, however. If NAFTA and the changes wrought by neo-liberal policies have shaped oppositional currents throughout Mexico, including Oaxaca, and sharpened their language in terms of a denunciation of foreign capital and globalization in general (a critique of domestic Mexican capital being another matter altogether⁶), they did not alone generate the social crisis that led to the Oaxaca rebellion.

In the case of Oaxaca, this crisis predates NAFTA, and even in the current period there are other factors at work. The Plan Puebla Panama, for example, which is designed to provide infrastructure for the easier transportation of goods and resources has been targeted by Oaxacan protesters who see it as leading to a further integration of their region into an area dominated by North American capitalism. This may indeed be the end result, but the Plan Puebla Panama was largely an initiative of the Mexican state, acting in concert with other countries in the region. It may ultimately serve the interests of foreign capital, but it also has a south Mexican and Central American dimension.

And while there is of course a larger context to the Oaxaca rebellion, its immediate dimensions were shaped less by neo-liberalism in the abstract than by concrete regional characteristics of social stratification, culture, and history, including the tradition of organized protest in Oaxaca state. This also meant that while the movement had a local coloration, a uniquely Oaxacan identity, it was for this very same reason a deeply rooted, embedded phenomenon, one



THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO ANARCHISTS AND ANTI-AUTHORITARIANS STRUGGLING FOR JUSTICE AND EQUALITY EVERYWHERE, BUT ESPECIALLY TO THE ANARCHIST POLITICAL PRISONERS IN OAXACA, INCLUDING;
DAVID VENEGAS REYES (EL ALEBRITE)
SILVIA GABRIELA HERNANDEZ SALINAS (CHIVIS DIVIS)
OSCAR
JUANA MORALES PÉREZ AND THE INDIGENOUS PRISONERS OF SAN ISIDRO ALODAPAM AND CIPO.



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that could not easily be suppressed, removed, or indeed replicated elsewhere.

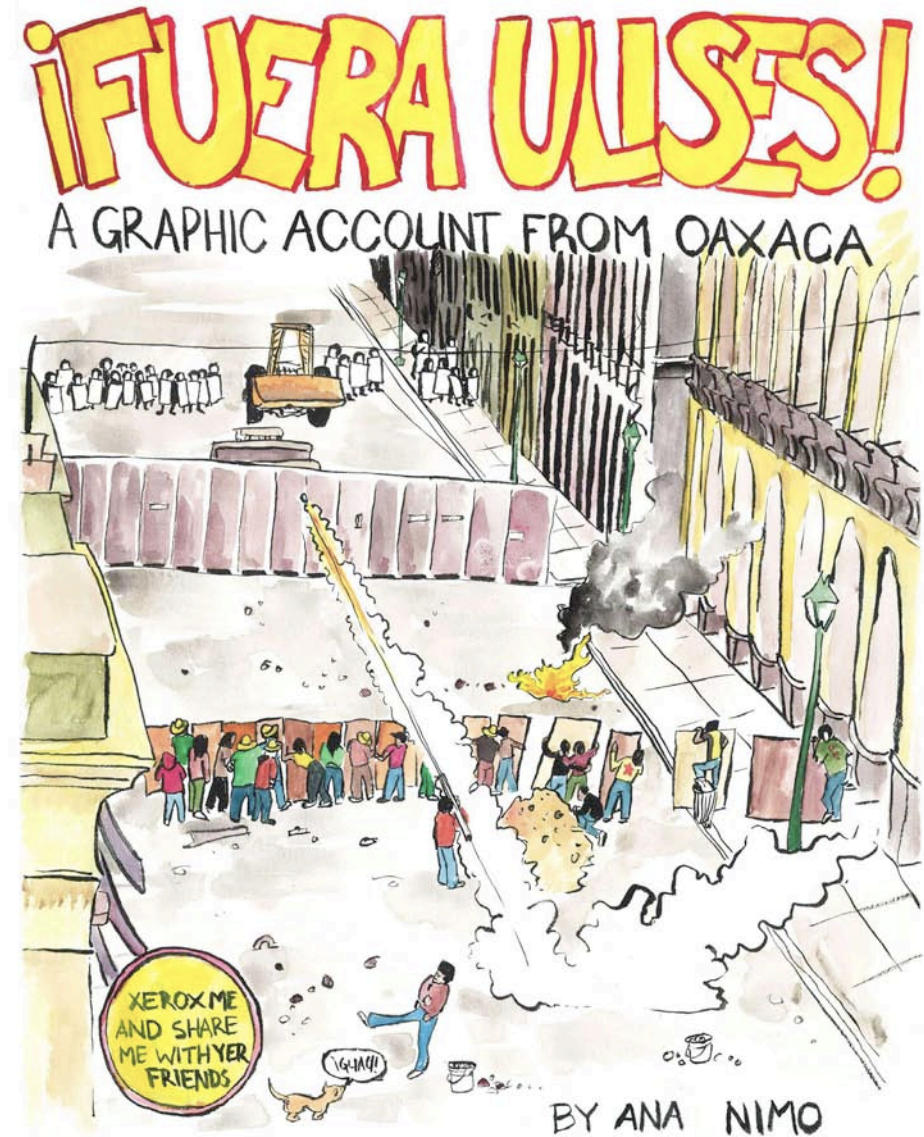
The rebellion was further defined by the kind of power structure it opposed, which again had specifically Oaxacan features, ones not necessarily found everywhere else in Mexico. In Oaxaca, the dinosaurs of the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party, the political party that had perpetuated its rule at the national level through clientelism, repression, and the creation of a large public sector) were still in power in Oaxaca state and practicing their decades-long traditions of corruption and brutality, using *caciques* (political bosses) as their local surrogates. For a long time, power had been enforced in Oaxaca at the point of a gun, coupled with a kind of institutionalized bribery: the granting of subsidies to various organizations, including those perceived to be a potential threat to the social order. Under Ulises Ruiz Ortiz's predecessor, José Murat, these subsidies were given to indigenous groups, including some organizations who loudly proclaimed their Magonista radicalism, such as the CIPO-RFM (Popular Indigenous Council of Oaxaca—Ricardo Flores Magón).⁷ The withdrawal of such subsidies by Ulises Ruiz Ortiz may have been the first of the many missteps he made in confronting opposition to his rule.

Ulises Ruiz Ortiz's decision to unleash his police against an encampment of teachers on their annual strike for better pay and improvements in the educational system was the spark that ignited a rebellion, producing a broader and bolder social movement in the streets of Oaxaca. What emerged when the clouds of tear gas cleared in June, 2006 was APPO, the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca. Its creation—in what was a classic example of a collective invention, with no individual author or instigator—was a manifestation, and the direct expression, of a struggle that had become both wider and deeper. The "assembly" part of its name was an assertion of the supposed sovereignty of its rank and file, which meant that the movement would, in theory, no longer be beholden to the teachers' union and its bureaucracy.

III

When looked at retrospectively, the trajectory of the Oaxaca rebellion resembles that of one of the fireworks that were used as improvised weapons by the movement. There was a smoldering at the beginning, a swift ascent, and then an explosion that left pieces and burning embers scattered on the ground. In trying to discern just where the brightest sparks were, some recapitulation of the key episodes in the movement is necessary. Furthermore, an interpretation of the movement's rise and fall requires a closer scrutiny of its various components.

APPO was a problematic entity from its inception. It quickly became clear that, in its emphasis on a kind of lowest-common-denominator unity, APPO had become all things to all people, being part bureaucratic condominium and part social movement. For the anti-authoritarian component of the rebellion, it was an example of direct democracy. For the Stalinists of the FPR (Revolutionary Popular Front, an organization controlled by the Communist Party of Mexico (Marxist-Leninist)), whose operatives moved aggressively to install themselves in positions of leadership, empowering themselves as spokespersons for APPO, it represented a golden opportunity to expand their influence. Other political groupings, such as NIOAX (The New Left of Oaxaca in which the *político* Flavio Sosa—and the first political prisoner of the Oaxacan movement—had found his latest perch), saw an opening for a more conventional kind of political advancement. In the words of those who later criticized such manipulation and opportunism, APPO was viewed by some as a “trampoline”: its power could be leveraged to achieve other aims, whether securing elective office or furthering the agenda of a Marxist-Leninist party, or both at the same time. The much vaunted “autonomy” of the base of APPO was often more honored in the breach than in reality, at least within the assembly itself.



As mentioned previously, the Oaxaca rebellion did not appear *ex nihilo* or simply as a spontaneous response to economic and political circumstances. There had been a longstanding history of opposition to the status quo in the state of Oaxaca, one in which the tactic of the *plantón* (protest encampment) had been used repeatedly; indeed, it was part of the repertoire of social protest in Mexico generally. Over two decades, Section 22 of the teachers union had demonstrated its combativeness and its demands often exceeded purely economic categories: better education for indigenous peoples has been foremost among them. However, there had also been a clear limit to the kind of struggle waged by the teachers. While often portrayed as altruistic champions of the indigenous peoples of Oaxaca—and behind this idealized portrait there is indeed some truth—the teachers’ struggle clearly also had an element of self-interest.

For example, it was no accident that the leadership of the teachers’ union, immediately prior to intervention of the Federal Police in October 2006, was prepared to cut a deal and sell out the rest of APPO. This betrayal was denounced by the rest of the Oaxacan movement, including the rank and file of the teachers union itself, but the picture was not as simple as a clear division between union bureaucrats on the one side and radical base on the other. Within the teachers union, and in opposition to its more mainstream leadership, the Stalinists of the FPR had a considerable following, and this was the organizational fulcrum that allowed them to effectively colonize much of APPO itself, installing their activists in key positions and attempting to curtail and silence the anti-authoritarian currents within the larger rebellion. It is perhaps no surprise that radical Oaxacan teachers, who like their counterparts in so many other countries see themselves as bearers of consciousness to the unenlightened masses, would also be such avid Marxist-Leninists.

Before this dreary denouement, however, a good deal else happened in Oaxaca that was due to the initiatives of the movement's base and which largely escaped the strict control of its proto-bureaucratic "representatives." These outlined a new configuration of social power in Oaxaca, but not in the classic sense of "dual power" so often discussed by revolutionary theorists in the twentieth century. In Oaxaca, this reconfiguration was more implicit than explicit, more "nomadic" and mobile than something objectified. This relative failure of the movement is something its critics on the left point to, but they overlook the fact that it was "in its own existence in acts" that the Paris Commune had value in the eyes of Marx.

What still isn't clear at this late date is what happened inside APPO, and what its proceedings were like. We know that there countless meetings, and that various commissions were elected with specific tasks to accomplish. In this respect, there does seem to have been a principle of mandates that operated within APPO. But the fact that various spokespersons (and it worth reiterating that these were for the most part Stalinists) continued to speak for the movement, without any accountability to its base, throws this into question. The fact that the assembly insisted on functioning on the basis of consensus, at least in its first few months, is also interesting, but no less problematic. Strict adherence to consensus would seem *ipso facto* to mitigate against the ability of a radical minority to have its viewpoints expressed in the assembly. Anti-authoritarians within the movement would later discover the limits of such a principle, and of an illusory consensus which in any case was not something that bothered the unscrupulous operators of the FPR. At present, we have no transcripts available to see if the deliberations of the rank and file of APPO meeting in assembly were, in fact, analogous to the debates of the Petrograd Soviet or to revolutionary workers' assemblies in Barcelona in 1936-1937. For all of the use of the term "Oaxaca Commune," at this point it can only be understood at best as a goal the movement aspired to, and at worst as mere wishful thinking.

⁷ See the article by David Recondo, "Oaxaca el ocaso de un régimen," *Letras libres* (Mexico), February 2007. Magón's own anarchism is discussed later in the present essay, as are the revolutionary politics of organizations such as the Alianza Magonista Zapatista.

⁸ Quoted in Judith Francis Zeitlin, *Cultural Politics in Colonial Tehuantepec*, Stanford: 2005, p. 168.

⁹ Alejandro Anaya Muñoz. *Autonomía indígena, gobernabilidad y legitimidad en México: la legalización de usos y costumbres en Oaxaca*, Mexico City: 2006.

¹⁰ For one example of this, see Brenda Aguilar, "Autonomías Latinoamericanas: Algunas reflexiones sobre Utopías Posibles," 2008 (http://anarkismo.net/newswire.php?story_id=7625)

¹¹ For a Marxist critique of a radicalism based on peasant "otherness," see Tom Brass, "Neoliberalism and the Rise of (Peasant) Nations within the Nation: Chiapas in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective," *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 32, Nos. 3&4, July/October 2005.

¹² See, for example, Wilfredo Kapsoli, *Ayllus del sol: anarquismo y utopía andina*, Lima (1984), as well as books by Osvaldo Bayer (on the Patagonian general strike of 1921) and Sergio Grez Toso (on the history of Chilean anarchism).

¹³ For background on Oaxacan workers in the United States and Canada, see Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon*, Duke University Press (2007)

a globalized capitalism that indeed has battered down all the walls of China (as if to fulfill Marx's prediction of 1848), this should not be surprising. The campaign to "vindicate" Marx does not stop there, however, and when the term "vulgar Marxism" is used disparagingly by a writer, it usually only means that he or she is about to deploy a slightly more sophisticated argument, but one still based on Marxist categories. It is this Deeper Marxism that rules both the academic and militant left, including the parts of both that style themselves as anti-authoritarian, whose reliance on a Marxist crutch only shows their lack of autonomous critical skills. While the critique of Marxism past and present lies outside of the scope of the present essay, it is something implied in the orientation of our tendency toward renewal and reassessment in conceiving of an emancipatory social project.

⁵ To fully understand the dimensions of the crises that have buffeted the Mexican economy in recent decades, one must go back at least to the debt crisis of 1982, when the Mexican state—in the paradoxical position of being both a producer of oil revenues and a debtor nation receiving recycled petrodollars in the form of loans from international banks—defaulted on its debt payments. By means of a policy of austerity and privatization, Mexico qualified in 1987 for a "rescue" by international financial institutions, one negotiated by none other than the consigliere of the Bush family, James F. Baker. Further concessions on the part of Mexico would be demanded on the part of the Clinton administration as part of another "bail out" program, all of this forming a prelude to the implementation of the terms of the NAFTA treaty and, simultaneously and in response to NAFTA, the beginning of the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas.

⁶ See the interesting points raised about the nationalist left in Mexico by the Grupo Socialista Libertario in its critique of the EZLN's Other Campaign (translation can be found at www.collectivereinventions.org).

What is clear, however, is that the period of October-November 2006 was the highwater of the Oaxaca rebellion, and the decisive stage for the movement in a strategic sense. With the entry of the Federal police into the city on October 29, 2006, the movement was confronted by the armed power of the Mexican state, and not just the police and goons (*porros*) of the governor. Following this intervention, the rebellion was first placed on the defensive, being dislodged from its central positions in and around the *zócalo* (town square or plaza) and falling back, under the pressure of riot police and tear gas fired from helicopters and on the ground, toward the area around the university.

On November 2, 2006, as the police moved toward the university to silence the movement's remaining radio station (one that had served as a vital means of coordinating resistance to the police), a defense was mounted by the rebellion, using the barricades that had already been erected in the city. Determined street fighters were successful in thwarting the police advance into the university, and for a time it looked as though the movement had regained the initiative. But after this victory in the streets, protesters sought to retake the *zócalo* on November 25, 2006, and in doing so they fell into trap designed expertly by the authorities, who launched their own violent counter-offensive against the movement. The results of this would be counted in the scores of wounded protesters, the killings conducted by *porros*, the imprisonment of activists, and a general strategic situation in which the movement was forced underground and literally put on the run.

When the rebellion raised its head again in Oaxaca City in early 2007, it was not the same movement. The movement confronted a kind of police state at the local level, while its own contradictions had sharpened, reaching the breaking point. Already, on November 25, 2006, at a crucial moment of confrontation with the police, the self-styled leadership of APPO

had tried to remove the Cinco Señores barricade, only to be shouted down by its defenders, who refused to move. A more general split between the Stalinist, official face of APPO and the anti-authoritarian currents within its base was intensifying, and would emerge in broad daylight in early 2007.

IV

In the beginning of September 2006, at a time when barricades surged throughout the city of Oaxaca, it was evident that an unprecedented occurrence was taking place: the city had been converted into a laboratory. Never in the contemporary history of the country and its cities had barricades been erected on such a large scale (and neither had there been spontaneous creations of such amplitude in an urban setting in Mexico), something that also implies that never before had the population of a city taken control of such an extensive urban area.

Hector Ballesteros,

Introduction to Puntos B: Cartografías de una ciudad en crisis: Oaxaca 2006,
interactive DVD, 2007
(<http://puntosb.blogspot.com>)

As well as a narrative of politics at the macro and micro levels, the Oaxaca rebellion should be understood in terms of the creation of an alternative social space within the city of Oaxaca itself. This space was created by means of occupations, the erecting of barricades, and in the large street protests (called “megamarches,” often, but not always, accurately) conducted by the movement over a period of many months. As much as any meeting of APPO, this is where the movement expressed itself and, like so many other similar movements, free and creative expression was one of its central characteristics. The rebellion itself was a kind of streaming torrent of words, images, and deeds. These left their imprint on the walls of the city, on the

from other cults of personality? And just where does internationalism begin, and Mexican nationalism end, in the Zapatista program? After all, the EZLN doesn't call itself the Zapatista Army of National Liberation for nothing.

² The Oaxacan experience has attracted participant-witnesses who have produced interesting and detailed accounts of events. It also been a magnet for the kind of “revolutionary tourist” denounced long ago by Hans Magnus Enzenberger (“Tourists of the Revolution,” *Dreamers of the Absolute*, London: 1988) and whose breathless dispatches from the frontlines have not necessarily been accurate or informative. In the former category, one must mention George Lapierre, whose chronicles of the first six months of the rebellion are rich in detail and insight, and are frankly vastly superior to the earnest, but highly simplistic articles that comprise Nancy Davies's *The People Decide: Oaxaca's Popular Assembly*, New York: 2007. Unfortunately, Lapierre's accounts—written originally in French—have not yet been translated. Many of his accounts can be found compiled in the special issue of the French journal CQFD, “La Libre Commune d'Oaxaca,” January-February 2007 (www.cequifautdetruire.org).

³ For the ICC's verdict on Oaxaca, see <http://www.internationalism.org/>. For the anarchist insurrectionist critique of APPO, which in its itemization of the various political maneuverings within APPO was both prescient and precise, see the text by the Coordinadora Insurreccional Anarquista (http://espora.org/okupache//b21hart_imp.php?p=1249&more=1). A notable early analysis of the Oaxaca rebellion, and one that avoided the pitfalls of either abstract denunciation or uncritical support, was “This Is What Recuperation Looks Like” by Kellen Kass, published in *A Murder of Crows*, no. 2, March 2007 (it can be found on line in the library section at www.libcom.org).

⁴ A kind of vulgar Marxism is the common currency of much of what passes for radical analysis these days. And in an era of war, economic turbulence, and

(who include, in addition to the generals and thugs of the right, the bureaucrats and caudillos of the left), they are doomed to remaining interesting footnotes to history, rather than doors that open on to a brighter future.

March 2008

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Translations of selected texts from and about the Oaxaca rebellion can be found at: www.collectivereinventions.org

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¹ For all of the Zapatistas' disavowal of their being a vanguard in the tradition of Latin American Marxism-Leninism—a disavowal that led to the EZLN becoming the favorite army of the world anarchist and altermondialiste movements—it is still not clear how far Marcos has moved from the Maoist background of his youth. For all of the editions (in countless translations) of every utterance of the Subcommander, no one among the legions of Zapatists seems to have asked themselves a few obvious questions: Why is it that it is almost always Marcos—the intellectual who is both the ideologue and strategist of the EZLN—who speaks in the name of the Indians of the Lacandon jungle? How does the aura of celebrity surrounding Marcos differ

intersections of its streets, and in the minds of its inhabitants. When the police reoccupied the center of Oaxaca, one of the first acts of the authorities was to order a painting over of all graffiti, an act that resulted in swathes of different colored paint replacing the slogans and stencils of the movement. This abstract police “art” was designed to erase all traces of the rebellion, but all it did was to provide those with cans of spray paint a fresh canvas for their works.

As Hector Ballesteros implies in his remark about Oaxaca becoming a “laboratory,” the rebellion had an experimental quality in the uses it made of the city. Whatever its shortcomings in terms of political clarity or an ability to generalize its struggle, the rebels of Oaxaca showed a remarkable endurance, as a well as a considerable talent for improvisation and innovation.

One of the myths that has grown up around the movement, and needs dispelling even at the risk of upsetting many of its supporters, is that the rebellion was completely or even essentially non-violent. While the movement seems to have made a collective decision not to escalate its own violence, and to act in self-defense of the spaces it occupied, it was not a peaceful struggle in the pacifist sense. Instead, it was a hybrid: something more than a movement conducting civil disobedience, and something less than urban guerrilla warfare; it had aspects of both.

The term “asymmetrical warfare” is a buzzword among military theorists, a euphemism for a battle in which the sides are unequal, or wage qualitatively different kinds of combat. For such analysts, the Oaxaca movement may ultimately serve as a textbook case. An interesting example of the rebellion's creativity is how participants gave a new and positive meaning to the phrase “smoke and mirrors.” At crucial points in the battles with police, groups of *bazuqueros* (named for the plastic tubes they used as launchers

for fireworks) would shoot sky rockets at the police lines, thereby partially offsetting the effect of volleys of teargas directed at the protesters. Buses were also set on fire and rolled toward police lines: these were called *kamikazes*. (If nothing else, the Oaxaca rebellion has added some words to the lexicon of radical social protest.)

Mirrors were used both to reflect light and to put matters in a *different* light. When a police helicopter circle over a crowd of protesters on November 1, 2006, hundreds of hand mirrors were used by those on the ground in an attempt to confuse or disorient the pilot. If nothing else, it showed the Mexican armed forces that they were dealing with a movement that was not easily intimidated. After reports of rapes and other violence by police against women who had been arrested, protesters held up larger mirrors to the federal police, who could see their faces in the mirrors with the superimposed words: “I am a rapist.”

One of the most interesting aspects of the Oaxaca rebellion, and one that may in fact define it for posterity, has been the degree to which women have participated in it, creating their own space within the movement and undertaking important initiatives of their own. In this, they have directly challenged the reigning *machismo* of Mexican society in general and the patriarchal traditions of indigenous culture in Oaxaca state specifically. The radical redefinition of gender roles is a topic much discussed in the well appointed campuses of North American and European academia. In Oaxaca, such change has had a more down-to-earth and substantive meaning: relations between men and women, and among diverse categories of people generally, are being renegotiated in everyday life and in the context of a radical social movement.

even of the status of illegal immigrants in a hostile (i.e., increasingly nativist and racist) socio-political environment.

Oaxacan workers have brought their culture and their politics with them in their travels to the North. They have created their own labor organizations, with their own publications, and have often brought to these activities a specifically indigenous perspective, which cannot therefore simply be assimilated as “Hispanic” or “Mexican-American.” It would seem incumbent upon supporters of the Oaxacan rebellion to learn more about the Oaxacans in California, Oregon, or British Columbia, for example, and about their struggles, which have included demonstrations in Los Angeles in 2006 against police repression back home in Oaxaca.¹³

There are also ways to *make* connections to Oaxaca, and to make a conscious choice to aid the most radical wing of the movement there. There is material support that can be given to organizations; there are protests that can be (and have been) organized at Mexican consulates in support of political prisoners, and in the United States generally against anti-immigrant hysteria.

There are also, and not secondarily, words: ones that go beyond mere received opinion, even of the “alternative” kind. The best tribute to the rebellion is to partake of its spirit in taking risks, and by sticking one’s neck out, even on the written page.

In a contemporary era characterized in many parts of the globe by war, misery, and environmental destruction—and made all the more dreary by mass indifference, resignation, or distraction in the face of this, especially in the misnamed “advanced” societies—events like the Oaxaca rebellion are as inspirational as they are rare. One can be fairly certain that, at least in Latin America, other radical social movements will emerge, and that they too will have their anti-authoritarian, emancipatory currents. But unless these consolidate themselves and become conscious of their aims and their enemies

everywhere, and to that extent one could say, if one wanted to engage in empty posturing, that “We All Live In Oaxaca.” But the specific mix that generated the Oaxaca rebellion, the particular socio-economic structure and history of the city and region, is not reproduced in the “metropolises” of the North, or even in those of the South, for that matter.

However, it would be a mistake to understand the Oaxaca rebellion as only a local, and localized, phenomenon. Oaxaca is literally part of the world, and especially in the context of a globalized economy, whether it wants to be or not. Oaxacan workers have emigrated to the US and Canada, and have brought their politics with them. The circulation of people who move within Mexico and outside it is impelled by forces that affect those in other countries and regions, and to that extent, others have a stake in the outcome of rebellions such as that in Oaxaca. This stake goes beyond the abstractions of political economy or even the concrete encounters with some aspect of Oaxaca that might occur in everyday life (if you live in California, for example, the person cleaning your dishes in a restaurant or picking the fruit and vegetables that end up on your table might very well be Oaxacan).

VI

“Geography is not an immutable thing. It is made, it is remade every day; at each instant, it is modified by men’s actions.”

Elisée Reclus,
L’Homme et la terre (1905-1908)

For those outside of Mexico, especially in the United States and Canada, a study of the various processes that link these countries to Mexico, and to Oaxaca specifically, is perhaps more timely than an illusory attempt to “fully” understand the question of *usos y costumbres*. The phenomenon of large numbers of Oaxacans seeking work in the North is generally well known, but there are more aspects to this than the simple question of remittances or

Women took the lead in one of the most remarkable episodes in the rebellion: the taking over of a local television station, which then resumed broadcasting as a movement station, with the occupiers creating new programs, conducting interviews, and radically altering the balance of media power within the city. Not of all of these broadcasts were free of dogma or repetition, but in at least some of them a rebellious, alternative spirit shone through.

Young people also played a major role in all phases of the rebellion, contributing both *élan* in the street fighting and taking the initiative in creating alternative media that played a vital role as sources of tactical intelligence (about police movements, for example) and as a means of communicating the ideas of the movement to the surrounding population. These media included the radio stations used by the movement, as well as publications like *Barrikada* and various cultural workshops that brought fresh perspectives and new idioms to social protest in Oaxaca. And this was all done without younger activists ever narrowly defining themselves as protagonists of a “revolt of youth.”

However, there was a far from progressive aspect to the rebellion’s relation to its very youngest participants, and this was the curious (and perhaps culturally specific) use of children as mascots who mimicked adults in giving staged performances of speeches before much older audiences, mouthing words that they clearly could not have written, much less fully understand. This was repeated in similarly contrived appearances by children in programs broadcast by the occupied television station and by the movement’s radio stations. What may have looked cute to a Oaxacan audience only seems to an outsider to be both contrived and cloying, however benign its intention may have been. Documentaries made by U.S. and Mexican independent media have recorded such scenes without any comment, displaying a kind of

paternalistic indulgence that ironically, and no doubt unintentionally, echoes past stereotypes of indigenous peoples as “nature’s children.”

In terms of the socio-economic categories represented in the movement, great attention has been paid of course to the role of teachers, at least initially, and that played by the working population generally in Oaxaca, along with the inhabitants of poor neighborhoods. Marxists have seen the heterogeneity of the movement as its Achilles’ heel: it was not strictu sensu a “truly working class” phenomenon. This may indeed be a reason why the movement did not receive tangible support elsewhere in Mexico, unlike recent strikes there that have received an active response from other workers. But the issue of class, in an era (remove: of) in which there is so many fixed social categories, including class structure, are being disarticulated or recomposed, is one that is in need of a radical rethinking to begin, especially as the much-touted “modern proletariat” dear to situationists and others has yet to make its appointed rendezvous with history. There is no doubt, however, that a sociological inventory of the Oaxacan movement would reveal specific characteristics that may not be found elsewhere, either in Mexico or in other countries.

Where does the sound come from?

It is the sound of the barricade...

“The Sound of the Barricade”

a song of the Oaxaca rebellion

One category of participants that is discussed by Mexican observers, but by few outsiders, is that of the *chavos banda*, a term that is difficult to render into English, but which means something like “street toughs” or “hoodlums” (a French equivalent might be *blousons noirs*). This group played an active role in the rebellion, especially on the barricades and in the fighting with police, and became so conspicuous as to figure in the polemics of others. Not

For modernizing capitalism or productivist Marxism, social differences are to be steamrolled in the name of homogenization, a process in which there is no place for traditional practices, except in their instrumentalization as folklore or cultural window dressing. But if traditional societies can be characterized precisely by the qualities that differentiate them from dominant society, there is another kind of difference that cannot rise up in a consensual, collective society at the village level. What is not there is a certain complexity and variation, as well as an aleatory quality that is usually associated with a more urban life. There is little possibility of a subculture, and ultimately, of politics in such communities. It is no accident that the initial site of the Oaxaca rebellion was in Oaxaca City and not the countryside, a fact that also largely accounts for its complexion as something other than the Zapatista movement in Chiapas.

Moreover, there is a danger in imbuing traditional society or some radical peasantry with a redemptive, salvationist mission that replicates that formerly assigned to the industrial proletariat. Today’s anti-authoritarians run the risk of furthering a kind of contemporary Third Worldism in their uncritical support of the Zapatistas and the Oaxacan movement, and even more nuanced interpretations sometimes reek of vicarious pleasure, the enjoyment of radical violence at a distance, one that is both geographic and social. There must be some more meaningful and creative way to engage the Oaxaca rebellion than that which basically corresponds to watching the street fighting of others (and lamenting the fact that circumstances don’t allow one to engage in the same sort of activity oneself).

However laudable the concept, mere emulation is another non-starter. In the first place, especially for those in advanced capitalist societies, all the world is not like this place called Oaxaca, however much one might like to think so. To be sure, there are cops and corrupt, arbitrary authorities

and cooperation had survived into the twentieth century:

The Mexican people hate, by instinct, authority and the bourgeoisie. Everyone who has lived in Mexico can assure us that there is no one more cordially hated than the policeman, that the soldier, admired and applauded in all other places, is seen with antipathy and contempt, and that anyone who doesn't make his living with his hands is hated.

This in itself is enough for a social revolution which is economic in nature and anti-authoritarian, but there is more. Four million Indians live in Mexico who, until twenty or twenty-five years ago lived in communities possessing the lands, the waters, and the forests in common. Mutual aid was the rule in these communities, in which authority was felt only when the tax collector appeared periodically or when "recruiters" showed up in search of men to force into the army. In these communities there were no judges, mayors, jailers, in fact no bothersome people at all of this type.

Regeneración, September 12, 1901. Translation by Chas Bufe,
Dreams of Freedom: A Ricardo Flores Magón Reader, AK Press (2005)

The common lands question is one that has intrigued a number of radical analysts of the situation in Oaxaca. While one might want to believe that in Oaxaca and Chiapas some sort of equivalent of the Russian *mir* survives as a opening through which society could make a radical leap—on the basis of collective property and communal, cooperative practices—into libertarian communism, in the absence of greater proof this only utopian speculation. As it is now, the “rural communes” of Oaxaca are often locked in disputes with each other over their collectively owned lands, and the demand for indigenous “autonomy” often seems more a call for a kind of radical autarky than any general, revolutionary transformation of society.

surprisingly, since these were members of the “lumpen-proletariat” (and one must remember just how pejorative and subjective a term this is, and that it is another of Marx’s more dubious theoretical legacies), they were viewed with scorn by the Stalinists of the FPR and by those with a more secure social status generally, such as the teachers and the petty bourgeois who were also part of the movement. And it is not an unambiguous story, for that matter. Many of these politicized street fighters were influenced by anarchist ideas (another reason why they were treated with such disdain by Marxist-Leninists), but that didn’t mean that their autonomous actions always made strategic sense to the organized anarchists in the Oaxaca rebellion. Clearly, however, it would be interesting to know more about how such tensions have played out since the end of November 2006, and to learn what has happened to the *chavos banda* since the ebbing of the rebellion as a movement in the streets.

In addition to those on the barricades, the other radical focii of the Oaxaca rebellion were comprised of those groups and individuals within APPO who challenged the hegemony of the FPR Stalinists over the formal structures of the movement. These anti-authoritarians, who loosely comprised the Magonista/anti-bureaucratic wing of the movement, did have a conscious political perspective, one that was committed to free debate and the autonomous power of the rank and file of APPO. Having been outmaneuvered by the FPR in the early phase of APPO, these elements—who included the groups that make up the Alianza Magonista Zapatista and the more recently-formed VOCAL (Voces Oaxaqueñas Construyendo Autonomía y Libertad)—were in a weak position to challenge the Stalinists, especially when the base of APPO could no longer meet easily or openly in the wake of the severe repression in the weeks and months after November 2006. However, these groups did publicize their vehement criticisms of the FPR’s manipulative politics and its character assassinations of those opposed to its vise-like hold on APPO (for English translations of materials detailing the positions of the anti-authoritarian left in Oaxaca, see www.collectivereinventions.org).

Shortly after these divisions within APPO came out into the open, the leading activist of VOCAL, David Venegas, was imprisoned by the state, giving the anti-authoritarians in Oaxaca a figure and a cause (political prisoners) around which they could rally, while at the same time trying to articulate their anti-Stalinist perspectives on the future of the movement. However, the imprisonment of Venegas deprived them of an eloquent and sharp tongue, one that was unafraid of taking the fight to the FPR (Venegas was released from prison—for the time being—in early March 2008, but still faces trial on a number of charges). In late 2007, the anti-bureaucratic wing of APPO held a public meeting, calling itself the Third State Assembly of APPO, that was convened in an open break with the FPR or “official” wing of APPO. This brought together a number of groups, and representatives from neighborhoods and the (former) barricades, including a considerable number of young anti-authoritarians.

While this development seemed to indicate that there was a clear opening for the anti-Stalinist sector to grow and establish itself on its own terms as an autonomous movement (with or without the use of the APPO name, which some in VOCAL saw as already badly compromised by the actions of the FPR), but it appears that, for the time being at least, the Oaxacan anti-authoritarians are waging a valiant but lonely battle, making do with limited resources and attracting only a relatively small number of people to its cause.

State repression and the bureaucratic politics of the FPR and its teachers’ affiliate have taken their toll in Oaxaca. The movement is no longer what it was, and no longer mobilizes the crowds it did in its heyday. Thrown on the defensive, what remains of the rebellion has been reduced to almost a single demand—the one, overriding issue that has been there from the beginning—the removal of the reviled Ulises Ruiz Ortiz from office. In doing so, the movement has become self-limiting: it no longer overtly embodies a

the kinds of issues present in Oaxaca, there is a much more direct connection. Peruvian anarchists in the very early years of the twentieth century not only were trying to integrate indigenous perspectives into their theory of how an Andean libertarian communism could be achieved, they included Andeans among their ranks. There is a certain, sweet irony in the fact that the histories and movements that seemed so antiquated or obsolete to 20th century Latin American Marxists (with a few exceptions, José Carlos Mariátegui among them) are now receiving the attention they deserve. Historians of Latin American anarchism continue to uncover a past that has implications in the present, and they have not yet begun to exhaust the subject.¹²

As for Oaxaca, one need look no farther than its most famous anarchist native son: Ricardo Flores Magón, whose influence on the current social movement there is such that there is an entire sector whose orientation is Magonista (and this has been described in a previous section). Although, and this was also mentioned earlier, there is a possibility for any radical tendency to be neutralized or bought off by the state (and there does seem to have been a kind of recuperated Magonism among the various political currents in Oaxaca), at the core of Magón’s own thinking is an uncompromising insistence on revolutionary transformation and the linking of ends and means in the struggle to bring about a free society. His anarchism included more than a mere sensitivity to indigenous issues: in a very real sense, these concerns were at the core of his radical vision.

Magón famously declared in 1911 that “the Mexican people are suited for communism,” by which he emphatically meant *libertarian* communism, an egalitarian society beyond the state and capital, and beyond the tyranny of party bosses of whatever stripe. And this was no mere assertion of his own credo: he based his affirmation on observations made in Oaxaca and elsewhere in Mexico, where he knew that a tradition of communal ownership

There is, of course, more to the Marxist argument than mere condescension, including a younger Marx's own rhapsodizing in *The German Ideology* about a communist society in which he could hunt, fish, and philosophize all on the same day, without having to be defined by any one activity.¹¹ However, for almost all Marxists, who base their perspective on a theory of necessary, inevitable stages of history, there is only one possible passage to a post-capitalist future, and that gate is opened by the industrial working class. All other agency on the part of other subordinated social elements is discounted; at best, it can be an adjunct to the actions of the working class, who must play a vanguard role (except, although this is never admitted by Marxist theorists, when they must follow the lead of the real vanguard: the radical intelligentsia to which the theorists belong).

In recent years, however, Marxist teleologies have been thrown for a loop more than once, and dissident Marxists have recognized this. Autonomist Marxism has shown itself to be much more open to a consideration of non-traditional social movements (in Argentina, Bolivia, and Mexico) as being charged with radical, anti-capitalist potentialities. Unfortunately, their writings on the subject often veer into post-modernist self-parody, as when the terms “valorization” (as a positive term relating to radical protagonists and their autonomous actions) and “biopolitics” appear.

In contrast, the anarchist tradition historically has been far more open to the consideration of radical initiatives by peasants, and has gone much further than Marxism in including a critique of the domination of nature (a project that it is the heart of productivist Leninist states) as part of its rejection of social hierarchies, the state, and capital. It precisely for this reason, along with an insistence on the importance of cooperation and community, that the works of Kropotkin, Réclus, and Landauer have acquired a new relevance, even for some Marxists. And in the case of Latin American anarchist thinkers, and

vision of a different society, something that is admittedly very hard to do in present circumstances. Still, meetings take place, and young anarchists have been especially active in keeping the flames of the rebellion from being entirely extinguished. Meanwhile, the teachers' union has gone its own way again, and while making an appeal for the release of political prisoners, has essentially returned to the terrain of corporatist, economic demands.

The last pages of the Oaxaca revolt clearly have not been written yet. However, if the rebellion is ever to become a mass phenomenon again, and if its message is to be taken up elsewhere in Mexico, it will have to, somewhat paradoxically, both reconnect with larger Oaxacan society and break out of being narrowly typecast as a purely Oaxacan movement. It is a very tall order, and it seems arrogant for those on the outside to criticize the shortcomings of a rebellion that went as far as the one in Oaxaca did. But turning a blind eye to the movement's weaknesses and dilemmas is of no use to anyone.

V

...it can be calculated that, with little effort, more than 10,000 men would be ready to come to this parish from the surrounding mountains, bold like the climate of the land, as is witnessed by the atrocious happenings that have taken place, more in this one province than in all the others of the realm; and so wary are these men that I have heard and know things about them in this business that cannot be said of very experienced captains.

Fr. Alonso de Cuevas Dávalos, Bishop of Oaxaca,
in his letter to the viceroy from Tehuantepec, April 1660⁸

In trying to trace the contours of the larger context in which the Oaxaca rebellion emerged, one is reminded of explorers seeking the origins of

the Nile: it all depends on how far back one wants to go. As the above citation indicates, the Oaxaca region was considered a rebellious land a full century after the Spanish conquest of Mexico, and it was the scene of several major revolts against colonial authority. In describing the same revolt of 1660 that so alarmed the good Bishop of Oaxaca, another of his compatriots referred gravely to “circumstances of rebellion and bad spirit” that prevailed in the region.

Supporters of the current rebellion have been tempted to draw a direct line from incidents like the 1660 Tehuantepec revolt, which occurred in the south of what is now Oaxaca state, to the events of today, viewing the contemporary movement as being only the latest episode in an unbroken tradition of aboriginal opposition to Western society in all its guises, whether in the form of Spanish conquistadors, the Mexican state, U.S. imperialism, or globalized consumer culture. This theme has frequently appeared in the discourse of indigenous radicalism itself, where the connection between past and present has been made literal in the celebration of “500 years of resistance” on the part of native peoples to “foreign” (i.e., non-indigenous) domination. If one sympathizes with the thrust of this argument, there are nonetheless problems with any idealization of native traditions, and with the construction of an imperfectly understood communality set against the supposedly absolute evils of Modernity. In stating this, one does not impugn, or describe as “false consciousness,” the viewpoints of the indigenous themselves about their lives, their struggles, and their fundamental grievances against the ruling order, both local and global. On the contrary, it accords these viewpoints the autonomy they deserve (who else but the indigenous can speak for, rather than just on behalf of, native cultures?), and it recognizes a certain incapacity on the part of the outside observer to grasp the realities of indigenous societies, to see the world in the same way as those looking at it through non-Western eyes.

from indigenous movements in the state. A careful study by Alejandro Anaya Munoz reveals the elite’s strategy, in the face of this threat, to have been one of cooptation and the integration of indigenous demands, combined with the traditional resort of buying off local *caciques* and making pay offs to villagers at election time.⁹

What then, in the end, can be said about the relationship of traditional practices to the social movement in Oaxaca? Clearly, there is one, but as explained above, it is not unequivocal. This does not mean that it is trivial, either, or that the indigenous perspective is somehow only a secondary question. However, a definitive theoretical position *vis-à-vis* these issues may be a chimera. Rather than trying to arrive at an answer that in any case could never be definitive, but only approximate, one may have to pose questions instead, and to insist on the wrinkles in a landscape that others see as flat or uncomplicated.

For unconditional—and uncritical—supporters of indigenous struggles there are no such conceptual problems. They simply endorse traditional practices as being innately egalitarian and communal; some even go so far as to make extravagant claims about the *cosmovision* (view of the world) of native peoples, raising the dissimilarity between traditional and modern mentalities to the level of pure ontological difference.¹⁰ This a classic example of an essentialist argument: there is a true “Indian-ness” that is ahistorical, immutable and organic. And what emerges from such thinking is a kind of identity politics based on an indigenist fundamentalism.

Conversely, traditional Marxists tend to be preemptively dismissive of any argument on behalf of radical peasantries and their communal traditions. In this, one hears the voice of the Master: the Marx who famously referred in the opening section of *The Communist Manifesto* to “the idiocy of rural life.”

produced in other struggles in Latin America in recent decades, ranging from Chile 1973 (the *cordones industriales*) to the recent *piquetero* movement in Argentina.

The relevance of indigenous customs and practices is open to question in other respects as well. In many traditional Oaxacan villages, one is obliged to perform “socially useful labor” and to accept responsibility in a number of defined positions (the aforementioned *cargos*). If one refuses or evades such obligations, one is deprived of citizenship in the village, in effect becoming ostracized from the life of the community. Oaxacans who leave their village and become immigrant workers in the U.S. and Canada still must fulfill such obligations in order to retain their status as village citizens. It is testimony to the importance of such an identity that many such immigrants return to their villages to acquit their responsibilities; it is revealing of the ambiguities of such an identity that its communality implies a certain coercion and that today the notion of what is voluntary or freely given is undermined by the fact that village members can pay others to perform their *tequio* obligations: the rural commune meets the cash nexus, and not only at this point. Remittances from Oaxacans working in the U.S. and Canada serve to buoy the state economy, but they have also transformed aspects of village life in rural Oaxaca, bringing satellite dishes and other appurtenances of the consumer society so disdained by First World supporters of indigenous cultures.

Furthermore, in the present array of social power in Oaxaca, the system of *usos y costumbres*—practices that have a legal, codified status in the state—can be understood as a form of recuperation, as a way of integrating traditional indigenous society into pre-existing structures of political and social power. The official enshrinement of *usos y costumbres* took place in 1995 during the tenure of the PRI governor José Murat, at precisely a time when the ruling elite in Oaxaca felt under attack by demands for autonomy

However, recognizing such a limit to understanding does not require a wholesale abandonment of critical faculties in favor of the empty generalities that characterize so much of the language of First World supporters of Fourth World radicalism, rhetoric that is more emotive than analytical, and more acclamation than a substantive encounter with indigenous realities. To read some accounts, one would think that there had existed some pre-Columbian Golden Age in which peace, equality, and cooperation reigned throughout the lands that would come to be known (in homage to their European colonizers) as the Americas. Put simply, this legend doesn't allow facts to get in the way of its utopian story line. It ignores or trivializes the existence of hereditary (and absolutist) authority, castes, slavery, and tribal warfare in the indigenous world prior to the Conquest.

To return to reality and to the situation in Oaxaca, a key challenge for outsiders (and the status of being an *extranjero* is not one that is necessarily possible to overcome, but may be one that, when allowances are made, affords a perspective that is of value precisely because of its focal length from the subject) is precisely that of grappling with the relationship of the rebellion to indigenous culture. Participants have stressed that there has been a strong imprint left on the movement by the example of traditional “practices and customs” (*usos y costumbres*, which can also be translated as “customary law” or “traditional practices”) observed in many villages in Oaxaca state. This influence is underlined, to begin with, with the central importance within the movement of the idea and practice of an assembly as its locus of decision-making. This, participants have stated, is a direct outgrowth of the role of village assemblies as sovereign bodies of consensual authority.

The other elements of *usos y costumbres* that are most often described by observers and by indigenous peoples themselves are: 1) the importance of the village assembly as the sovereign body of consensual decision-making; 1)

the system of *cargos* or offices that a village citizen is expected to serve in; 2) a form of obligatory and unpaid labor on behalf of the community known as *tequio*; 3) a practice of reciprocal exchange of gifts and services known (in Zapotec) as *guelaguetza*; 4) a deep commitment to the value of cooperation; and 5) the continuing communal ownership of lands.

It is worth noting that nearly all of these “practices and customs” are ones that have changed over time, and have undergone fundamental transformations, as has, of course, the very structure of indigenous society in Mexico, beginning with the disappearance of its hereditary nobility. Moreover, if today’s *usos y costumbres* are not whole and intact practices from another age that have been preserved in some kind of cultural amber, they are also not uniform, varying considerably within Oaxaca state.

As an example of how history has modified what are presented as “timeless” traditions, one can take the example of one of them: *tequio*, generally described as unpaid, but obligatory, labor on behalf of the community. Along with the importance of cooperation in indigenous villages, this practice is often adduced as a living example of mutual aid in a communal society, which in many cases in Oaxaca it undoubtedly is. However, it is interesting to trace the etymology of the word itself and to see the different meanings it has acquired in various contexts. *Tequio* is derived from the Nahuatl (Aztec) word *tequitl*, and originally meant “tribute,” as in labor and lands due to the traditional nobility (the pre-Columbian, indigenous ruling caste) or other overlords (including the Aztec conquerors of other indigenous tribes). It was later integrated and codified as the tribute system of the Spanish colonizers, who deftly made use of tribal and caste divisions within indigenous society, fissures that had already played a major role in facilitating the Conquest itself.

While *tequio*, as it is practiced in contemporary Oaxaca, may conjure up in some North American or European minds a vision of voluntary collaboration—as in the community gardens of Berkeley’s People’s Park in 1969 or in still earlier cooperative endeavors in Provo Amsterdam—its positive connotations are again something that developed and were modified over time, and not everywhere. In parts of Central America, the negative meaning has not been lost: in Nicaraguan Spanish, *tequioso* means “overbearing,” “cumbersome,” or “bothersome,” clearly showing its root in a word associated with coerced labor, obligation, and duty.

The system of *cargos* is also problematic, and hardly merits the enthusiasm of anti-authoritarians who are proponents of assemblies and revocable delegates. In approximately 15% of traditional Oaxacan villages, women are formally barred from participating in the village assembly, and from holding office (a cargo). This fact has recently received a good deal of attention in the Mexican media as the result of the case of Eufrosina Cruz Mendoza, who could not stand for president in her native village of Santa María Quiebolani (in Oaxaca state) for the simple reason that she is female. Such an example of a kind of gender-based apartheid should give serious pause to anyone trying to see Oaxacan villages as being contemporary analogues to the rural collectives of the Spanish Revolution. It also underlines the degree to which the contemporary Oaxacan movement broke new ground *vis-à-vis* traditional indigenous culture, especially (but not only) in regards to gender roles. In many ways, then, the Oaxaca rebellion was not an atavistic or “traditional” phenomenon. The assembly in the urban Oaxaca rebellion—to the extent that it functioned as a gathering of the rank-and-file participants electing mandated, revocable delegates—was something different than an assembly of all the citizens of a indigenous village. It may have had a link to communal practices in Oaxaca state, but it was also an innovation compared to those same traditions, with more in common with autonomous forms