Oaxaca in 2006 was the stage for the seemingly spontaneous and rapid development of one of the most important social movements of recent history. While the social and political conflict would last a relatively short time, it became an international reference for its political transcendence as the complexity and organizational capacity of the Oaxacan movement contested mundane notions of democracy and political participation by the creation of an alternative to an increasingly antiquated system of regional dominance. Many national and international observers noted the common similarities of the movement to that of other new social movements throughout the world and especially to the famed Paris Commune of 1871. Less obvious was the specific political culture inherent in Oaxacan society that gave the movement its most unique and transcendent characteristics.

The movement that coalesced around the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) originates from a long history of popular struggle. It is at once a completely new and novel form of political organization and at the same time an heir to specific political cultures of urban, rural, class and ethnic mobilization throughout the state whose antecedents can be found in both recent and past history. Despite its

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1 For example: Luis Hernández Navarro, “La Comuna de Oaxaca” in La Jornada (Martes 25 de julio de 2006.)
seemingly spontaneous nature, the historical precedents for its eruption can be found in a continual if uneven development of the organizational capacity of various sectors of Oaxacan society to confront the economic and political forces that make Oaxaca one of the poorest, most corrupt states in the Mexican republic. With the creation of the APPO, never before had such disparate social actors united under the same banner to address similar grievances and propose a deep and profound transformation of the state through the direct input of the mobilized multitude of civil society.

How did such a movement emerge? How could such disparate and dissimilar organizations find common ground to work together? How did a common organizational structure emerge from the myriad of political expressions intrinsic to each organization? How was it that unorganized citizens spontaneously and autonomously organized themselves into barricades, self defense brigades and community assemblies?

According to various authors, the reason behind the Oaxacan conflict was a crisis in the Mexican political system and the collapse of the state party system of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in Oaxaca.\(^2\) Despite a gradual democratization at the federal level, Oaxaca has become a subnational authoritarian regime that rose to

new heights of brutality under the Ulises Ruiz Ortiz administration. This brutality was in fact, a symptom of a much larger structural crisis in the PRI who has seen its political control over the state weaken. The Ulises Ruiz Ortiz administration, after a strategically and tactically flawed attempt to repress a labor conflict with the state teachers union, became the symbol of bad governance of successive generations of authoritarian rule. The APPO arose in response to this corrupt and brutal administration. While I definitely agree with these claims, I do not think it is the whole picture. If these are the structural reasons that gave rise to the movement, it does not explain the coherence and unity of action witnessed among the formal structure of the APPO and the autonomous resistance that gave the movement its popular base.

I believe that the struggle that coalesced into the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca was able to obtain its organizational and political coherence under such brutal and constant repression because of the political and cultural reference of the assembly. The assembly offered a unique and particularly Oaxacan political culture deeply rooted in the distinct local and regional histories of struggle that offered a common language, symbolism and organizational dynamic to the movement. The assembly also elicited specific notions of identity and democracy unique to Oaxaca that, in the context of the breakdown of authoritarian control of the state government, gave the movement a legitimizing notion based on ideas of power and good government inherent in the communal traditions of rural, particularly indigenous, Oaxacan communities (or pueblos). Thus, while on the surface the assembly was the

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organizational backbone of the movement, it also elicited deeply held notions of the
moral, ethical and communal feelings linked in popular thought through time
immemorial to the moral economy of the traditional Oaxacan pueblo. Thus, in my
reading of it, Oaxacan Commune resembles less the Paris Commune and more like a
reconstruction of the idealized rural village supplanted upon the modern urban city of
Oaxaca.

The Political Culture of the Assembly

The specific political culture of the assembly arose out of two of the most
important social movements in the state: the democratic teachers movement and the
struggle for indigenous autonomy and the democratization of the municipality
symbolized by traditional normative systems known as usos y costumbres. In each
movement, the political organization and supposed democratic practice of the
assembly forms the vertebral column of its structure and identity and would be the point
of convergence for the multitude of disaffected and enraged citizens who organized
themselves into the APPO. The Oaxaca movement would unite these two traditions in
one big assembly of assemblies that would claim speak for all the peoples of Oaxaca.

This first part analyzes the political cultures that influenced the creation of the
social movement and its organizational structure. I will then go on to show how these
two political cultures united in the creation of the APPO as both a formal structure and
as a grassroots social movement. However, the attempt is not simply to make an
analysis of these particular political cultures. It is an attempt to analyze the movement’s
language and ideas, highly charged with meaning and identity, in order to flesh out
deeper elements just below the surface that point to a widely held moral economy relating to political power and its use and abuse.

**The Community Assembly in Rural Communities**

The state of Oaxaca in 1995 formally legalized the election of representatives by the system of customary law known as *usos y costumbres* (practices and customs). Of the total 2,433 municipalities in the Republic, a fifth of them (570) lie in Oaxaca. Of these 570 Oaxacan municipalities 418 elect their authorities by the system of *usos y costumbres* and only 152 by the system of political parties. In other words, roughly four out of five municipalities elect their representatives by a system other than political parties. *Usos y costumbres* is the historic legacy of the imposition of the Spanish legal tradition on the customary law of the indigenous peoples.

In the state of Oaxaca there are at least fifteen different ethno-linguistic groups⁴ who make up 53.6% of the population. This rich diversity of cultures and language as well gives rise to a diversity of political organization. The original political organization of the indigenous peoples however was fundamentally altered upon Spanish conquest. The imposition of the Spanish municipality during the colonial period markedly changed the nature of indigenous customary law. This combination of vestiges of pre-Hispanic tradition and Spanish law has been characterized by anthropologists as the cargo

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system—a civil and religious hierarchy based on meritocracy. In its contemporary form in Oaxaca, however, it is more commonly known as usos y costumbres.⁵

The modern system of usos y costumbres has been constantly evolving from the colonial period. Changes were imposed upon independence and later the creation of the modern Mexican Republic made citizens “equal in rights before the law” of all inhabitants within the confines of the nation. Theoretically these changes prohibited the right of indigenous communities to their customary law and the few privileges the Spanish Crown had offered them.⁶

Despite its formal prohibition, what actually occurred in the majority of indigenous and Mestizo⁷ communities in Oaxaca after the revolution was a continuation of customary law in the election of municipal, state and federal authorities in the community assembly. In Oaxaca, the government granted a certain level of local autonomy to these electoral practices in exchange for a monopoly of their votes. Local candidates would be elected and the elections approved by the PRI but the PRI would designate the candidates as members of their party and in such away easily obtain the necessary political hegemony to achieve their party’s victory.⁸

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⁷ While often considered “indigenous,” the practices of cargos and usos y costumbres are not limited to communities where indigenous people are a majority. The practice is common in Mestizo communities as well making it a unique contribution to Oaxacan political culture regardless of ethnicity.

Paradoxically, the system of usos y costumbres has become a major demand by indigenous communities fighting for autonomy and popular movements seeking the democratization of the municipality. Despite the abuse of the system, it is seen by many of its proponents as a way to gain local control and avoid electoral conflicts. It has been suggested that the constitutional reforms legalizing customary law were put in place by the PRI to check a rising tide of oppositional parties in the state, an effort that, while it has been successful in some cases has backfired in others, putting into further jeopardy their monopoly of political power.  

While the system of usos y costumbres is heterogeneous and each community has its norms, the idealized practice entails a community assembly in which the participants make decisions based on consensus after having heard and analyzed the issue. The election of representatives is not through a secret ballot mediated by representatives of political parties but through open votes in the communal assembly. The most salient feature of the system, for our purposes, is that the community assembly is seen as the political and moral authority in the community.

Power in the assembly permits there to be authorities that are not above community will, and, therefore, that are not separate from the collective interests by imposing personal ones. Because of this, the assembly can dismiss or not recognize someone's authority, tying to him the stigma of a loss of prestige...Indigenous-and campesino-communal organization in Oaxaca, on whatever level, cannot be understood if it is not taken into account that the assembly forms its base. The assembly elects authorities, discusses and decides issues, and generates agreements and orders.

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9 Ibid, pg. 51. It has also been noted that, while not the original impetus, the legalization of customary law was put into place in order to avoid an indigenous uprising in Oaxaca like that of Chiapas in 1994.
because it unites the whole community with rights. The assembly looks for consensus as norm.\textsuperscript{10}

The system of usos y costumbres, and especially the assembly, is the basic political structure around which community life revolves. In theory, all adults with privileges in the community have the moral obligation to give back to the community by serving different positions within the local government, thus making political participation available to all adults. Status and prestige within the community is related to the fulfillment of these many times burdensome obligations.

The system of usos y costumbres is seen by its proponents, therefore, as a local, democratic form of political organization that is rooted in the past.\textsuperscript{11} It is an extremely important aspect of Oaxacan political culture, both indigenous and Mestizo. It is also highly charged with meanings and notions of moral duty and service for the good of the community. This political culture and its organization through the assembly would find its way not only into the conception of democracy and organization in the state’s democratic teachers movement, but also much later in the formulation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca.

\textbf{The Assembly in the Democratic Teachers Movement}


\textsuperscript{11} There is considerable debate about whether the system of usos y costumbres is really democratic. Its proponents claim that it is a democratic system that distributes political power among the community and that it is a system superior to that of political parties because it avoids electoral conflicts by different interest groups. Detractors claim that it is not democratic, point out cases where women do not have the right to participate and espouse the substitution of usos y costumbres by a reformed, modern legal system.
The National Union of Education Workers (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación - SNTE) was born in 1943 of various currents of labor militancy among teachers throughout the country under the auspices of the federal government. Beginning in the early seventies, however, the union was dominated by an authoritarian faction with close ties to the leadership of the PRI and then President Luis Echeverría. This faction, the Revolutionary Vanguard, was led by Carlos Jongitud Barrios who became the General Secretary of the National Executive Committee (CEN) of the SNTE in 1974. With the consolidation of his power he implemented the ideology of unity and revolutionary nationalism unique to his faction and instituted a fierce political and ideological control over the union’s base. Given the power and influence Jongitud Barrios and Revolutionary Vanguard held and the close ties between the union bureaucracy and the centralist bureaucracy of the state, the system led to widespread abuse and corruption.

Various instances of resistance to the Revolutionary Vanguard began to emerge throughout the republic. With the efforts of teachers from Chiapas, Tabasco, Guerrero and Sinaloa, the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación - CNTE) was formed in 1979. This dissident caucus within the labor union would unleash a fierce battle against the union bureaucracy for a democratic reform of the union. In Oaxaca in the early eighties, opposition emerged to the corruption and repressive control over the state’s union local, Sección 22, exercised by the Revolutionary Vanguard. The movement, through a combative, conscious and active participation of the base, was able to
challenge the bureaucracy of the union and achieve a democratization of the union local as well as important increases in wages.12

The Democratic Teachers Movement founded itself on the basis of a set of guiding principles. Among the most important principals are the struggle for union democracy, the participation of the base in the making of decisions, the rejection of the movement as a political trampoline within the system, an understanding of duty and service of those who are elected representatives in the union hierarchy, and the valuation of the state assembly as the maximum authority emanating from the democratic participation of the base.13

The victory of independent unionism over the state’s corporatist structure quickly became a reference for social and political struggles throughout the state. Their political culture would be spread as the democratic teachers movement began to be disseminated among the communities throughout the state who were also facing their own forms of caciquismo and authoritarianism. The teachers would begin to found organizations based on class and ethnic affiliation and interact within the local political context bringing together the distinct political culture of the locality with that of the new orientation of the state’s teachers union. To this day the education workers of the Local 22 have been the most consistent social and political activists in the state. As Luis Hernandez Navarro describes,

Beyond their labor militancy, the education workers of Oaxaca have a large history of relations with campesinos and indigenous organizations. In

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13 Sección XXII del SNTE, “Los Principios Rectores del Movimiento Magisterial Democrático de Oaxaca,” approved in the II Prepleno Seccional Democratico (October 12, 13 and 14, 1996), photocopy.
a society with such an importance in the rural world as that of Oaxaca, the teachers frequently function as the organic intellectuals of the community. Their knowledge of Spanish and their knowledge of the system convert them, on many occasions, in promoters of the problems of the communities...An important part of Oaxaca society is in solidarity with the teachers. It is not unusual that teachers participate in these movements. Furthermore, many of them have been organized and led by mentors. The teachers union is the only democratic social force with a presence throughout the territory. It is the only organization capable of making felt in a coordinated and simultaneous manner its political weight in all the municipalities of the entity....It has been a constant in recent history that the teachers identify with the communities in which they work and become not only activists within their union, but also as well spokespersons of the demands of the communities.\textsuperscript{14}

Gabriela Kraemer Bayer, one of the first scholars to see the connections between the particular political cultures of both the teachers movement and the indigenous movement explained how important the creation of the assembly was to the success of the movement and its ability to link various struggles across regional and ethnic lines:

How did the teachers displace a good number of these imposed leaders? On one hand by revitalizing the union structures put forth in the articles of association, such as assemblies in the workplace and delegations. On the other hand, a parallel structure was created: the struggle committees and the brigades created in exclusive way to denounce the irregularities and inform the objectives of the movement in the most out of reach communities, which are in fact indigenous communities, and convince the most apathetic teachers. As all leftist movements of the era, they undertook marches, sit-ins, work stoppages, general strikes and hunger strikes, denounced acts of repression, spread their movement in the mass media and found echo among the intellectuals of the time that contributed as well to the diffusion of the struggle. \textit{But after twenty two years of having began the struggle, upon asking the Oaxacan teachers installed in a plantón in the Zócalo of Mexico City in 2002 what they remembered as the most important moment of their struggle, they...}

agreed in highlighting the general assembly of delegates in which took place the first democratic elections of union representatives. This unprecedented act for the state’s teachers was converted into a model for all the later union assemblies. Some teachers highlighted that the experience was useful to hold assemblies in indigenous communities and to construct union democracy. However, I believe that at the same time, the indigenous teachers took back to their communities a part of what they lived in the union assemblies, as in no other way can the notorious similarity be explained among some community assemblies and the assemblies of teachers and students. 15

As Kraemer Bayer reported in her article, one of her ethnographic informants put this in further perspective:

“As the majority of communities in Oaxaca and of the nation there is a practice that they call usos y costumbres where a meeting is convoked of the community or town and they themselves through their own criteria name their authorities (...) Nobody can become, for example, a municipal president if he was not already topil (...) it is a practice that we think democratic because the people have to learn all that is the structure of their community to be able to become a leader. Practically here in the teachers’ union we have done it in this way, no one can become secretary general who has not first been secretary of a delegation, later representative of the region or sub-director and so on successively until arriving at the highest level of the structure. So all these teachings we have learned from the pueblos and the pueblos as well have learned from us.” 16

As you can see, the political culture of the Oaxacan teachers’ movement and that of the indigenous and Mestizo communities that govern by usos y costumbres have influenced each other enormously. Oaxacan political culture was changed forever given the mutual influence of what both the democratic teachers’ movement and the movement for indigenous autonomy and self-determination see as the most important aspect of democratic political participation in the state: the assembly. These notions of asambleatarian democracy would be found in the formal structure and the

16 Ibid, pg. 143.
autonomous daily resistance of the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca. Even 
the name, The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca elicits the memory of 
struggle found within the indigenous communities and the labor movement. 

Given the specific context of what many saw as an authoritarian government 
whose reign of repression and graft had risen to such levels as to make it impossible not 
to resist, the movement envisioned a new kind of governance and a new kind of 
political participation that was founded both upon the rural ethnic struggles of the 
indigenous communities and the urban class based struggles of the teachers 
movement. And given the ethical and political vacuum represented by a decay in 
state party system of the PRI and the lack of trust in political parties, the Oaxacan 
people looked to what they understood as the most politically ethical example they 
had reference to in their cultures: the assembly as both democratic practice and moral 
obligation. It allowed for the rapid and spontaneous creation of a popular assembly 
that strove to unite all the diverse expressions of resistance to be found throughout the 
state.

The APPO as Assembly

In the defining document released as a result of the Constitutive Congress of the 
APPO\textsuperscript{17}, the movement puts forth its local, national and international vision of the world, 
its problems and how to confront them. According to the document, the fundamental 
way of life of Oaxacan people is being destroyed by the onslaught of neoliberalism 
and the authoritarianism of the state and federal government. As a solution, the 

\textsuperscript{17} Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, “Congreso Constitutivo de la Asamblea 
Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca. Resumen General de los Resultados de las Mesas de 
The document points to the need for a social and political revolution that will democratize the state on an economic and social level ushering in a new social compact through a new constitution. It proposed the transformation of the APPO into a state wide organization at the service of the Oaxacan people, the transformation of the movement into a peaceful, democratic and humanist revolution and the linkage of their struggle internationally with similar movements throughout the world.

These transformations, it is claimed, should be achieved through the strengthening of local cultures and forms of social, political and economic organization. In opposition to the “authoritarian, corrupt, corporatist and caciquil politics of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz” and the system he represented, the document declared that the creation of a democratic alternative was through...

Community assemblies as the fundamental level of decision making inside the APPO, for being the traditional form that in the pueblos their representatives are established. Through the practice of the Assembly we have demonstrated that it is the only manner to generate wide discussion, communal participation, decisions made by consensus, as well as the participation of those who for their age have communitarian experience; because of this, against a state law that does not represent or recollect the democratic proposals of the actors in the actual process, the exercise of our own normative systems should be advocated....To construct and strengthen new forms of struggle taken from experiences based in communalism (tequio, communal assemblies, the cargo system and the collective ownership of the land), the organization of popular neighborhoods, the barricades, the juntas de buen gobierno, which have permitted us to advance in social organization and in the concrete exercise of autonomy.

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18 Ibid., pg. 4.
19 The Juntas de Buen Gobierno, Good Government Boards, are the governing bodies in Zapatista autonomous communities in Chiapas.
In the political realm the document proposed:

To establish new forms of citizen participation and legitimacy of democratic life through the recognition of the referendum, the revocation of mandate, the popular consultation, the plebiscite, popular initiative, a second turn in the elections and the creation of a Council of Pueblos as an organ of vigilance of the actions of the government, among others. The recognition of the forms and mechanisms of participation and representation of the Indigenous peoples in the instruments of debate and decision on a state and national level, based on their conceptions and democratic practices emanating from their political and legal systems.21

While there a number of other reforms proposed, the importance for our purposes here is to see how the local political culture is envisioned not only as the basis for the construction of the APPO but for the construction of a new world as well. The structure of the APPO recollected the structure of the state assembly of the teachers union as witnessed in the declaration that: “All the decisions that are taken by the APPO should and will be analyzed and discussed by the bases. The Councils of the APPO, as much on state, regional district or municipal level will be integrated in a democratic, honest inclusive, transparent and plural form.”22 It recollects the experience of the communities based on the system of cargos where authority as seen as a duty to one’s community that should not be financially remunerated. The principle governing the conduct of a representative in the APPO is one of service. “To govern and represent obeying. To serve the people, not receive payment for the performance of duty (cargo).”23 And just like the community assembly in the rural community that is governed by usos y costumbres, “All decisions made will be by consensus, the

21 Ibid., pg. 6.
22 Ibid., pg. 10
23 Ibid., pg. 10
decisions and postures of the APPO, will emanate exclusively from the Assemblies and the collective discussions.”

The structure would create a horizontal movement of assemblies organized across different regions, sectors, municipalities, districts, localities, neighborhoods and barricades whose representatives would converge in the state assembly of the APPO. The organizational structure of the APPO was based on the assembly as democratic practice. The Popular Council was to be the decision making body made up of ten persons (five men and five women) of each region on a rotational basis. The time of service to which the person is elected was to be two years with the possibility of the revocation of mandate if the person did not fulfill his or her responsibilities. The APPO took this idea from the state assembly of the teachers union as well as the various pan-ethnic indigenous assemblies that exist throughout the state. Thus the structure of the APPO was to function very similar to the traditional idealized pueblo that operates by usos y costumbres in that service to the community and the movement would allow the participants from each locality gain merit based on service and the reward for such service would be to be able to represent their particular community or sector in the assembly of the APPO.

Another document gives us further insight into how the movement saw the assembly as democratic practice. At a national forum “Constructing Democracy and

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24 Ibid., pg. 10
25 For example: La Asamblea de los Pueblos Zapoteco, Mixe y Chinanteco de la Sierra Juarez, La Asamblea de Autoridades Mixes, Frente Indigena Oaxaquena Binacional, etc.
Govermability in Oaxaca: Agenda for the Transformation of the State” convoked by the APPO, the teachers union, community authorities throughout the state and various civic organizations, the nature and scope of the Oaxacan movement’s struggle for democracy and their conception of this democracy were put forward articulately. It was argued that only changing the formal aspects of democracy, the structures of the state bureaucracy, would not significantly change the nature of Oaxacan society and would not achieve the real democracy that was required. However, by struggling for a radical and participatory democracy “from below,” the democratic transformation of society so longed for would be achieved. Within this concept of radical democracy, the demands of the state and national indigenous movement clearly make their appearance. 

The guiding principal of this radical and participatory form of Oaxacan democracy, it is argued, is based on “communalism (comunalidad) as source and meaning of the power of the people.”

To this effect, the logic and meaning of the assembly for not only indigenous communities but for all Oaxacan communities was pivotal as the assembly was seen as the source of communal power, as the will of the people. According to the document,

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26 The Foro Nacional “Construyendo la Democracia y la Gobernabilidad en Oaxaca” Agenda Para la Transformacion del Estado was held on August 16 and 17 of 2006.

27 Evidence of indigenous participation can be found from the first meetings that gave birth to the APPO. Of the fourteen identifiable groups making up the Collective Provisional Direction of the APPO at the founding congress, there were four indigenous organizations whose political discourse is autonomist. For example, OHIDO-Organizaciones Indias por los Derechos Humanos en Oaxaca, CODEP Comité de Defensa de los Derechos del Pueblo, CIPO-RFM Consejo Indígena Popular de Oaxaca-Ricardo Flores Magón, MULTI-Movimiento Unificado de Liberación Triqui Independiente. While not all the groups organized into the APPO identify themselves as indigenous, it must be taken into account that various groups organize in indigenous communities although it might not take part in identity politics (the Frente Único Huautleco, for example, is a group of PRD supporters in the predominantly Mazatec town of Huautla de Jiménez). Source: Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca. Minutes from meeting on June 20, 2006.

the goals of the movement should be to “realize continual popular assemblies...” and to

Strengthen the social organization of our indigenous communities, based in the system of cargos. Give value to the word of the indigenous peoples through assemblies or workshops in which children, teenagers and municipal authorities participate to know and analyze the values of our communities like respect, service, mutual aid, truth, the common good, the value of life; as well as reflection about the meaning of authoritarianism, justice, equality and inclusive democracy, recuperating the knowledge of the indigenous peoples.29

Thus, the struggles of the indigenous communities to assert their identity and difference are not only represented by the movement consolidated in the APPO, they instead become the moral, ethical and political foundation upon which to build a new society. While these notions reify and essentialize indigenous identity and ways of life, they point to something more useful for our purposes. They point to notions of a moral economy that is envisioned in the idyllic indigenous community that will be discussed further on.

With the above discussion, it is obvious that the two distinct traditions of popular organizing, that of the struggles of indigenous peoples to reclaim their autonomy and that of the struggle for the democratization of the teachers union, found a common point of convergence around the politically and culturally loaded concept of the assembly. This legacy of the particular political culture of Oaxacan social movements created the organization coherence necessary to create such a widespread popular movement that enjoyed massive participation. The above discussion, however, points only to the formal organizational structure of the APPO and not the other, often

29 ibid. p. 22
overlooked aspect of the APPO: that of the APPO as a spontaneous, anti-authoritarian movement at the grassroots level that sprung up throughout the many neighborhoods and barrios of Oaxaca City and its surrounding communities. Without taking into account this spontaneous and decentralized participation of the radicalized populace, one cannot come to a real understanding of either the APPO as a movement or its understanding as an assembly of assemblies that reclaimed notions of ancestral good governance in the mythological Oaxacan pueblo put in place in the thousands of barricades erected throughout the city during the height of the conflict.

**The Barricada as Pueblo**

Since the 1940’s, the city of Oaxaca and its surrounding communities have seen a continual population growth as it is the center of the state’s principal economic, political, social and cultural activities. This growth is produced both internally and externally as Oaxaca, being the largest city in a “poor” state, has a very high level of rural to urban migration. The lack of a plan for urban and suburban development however has given rise to a chaotic concentration of inhabitants that can only be described as urban sprawl. This sprawl is increasingly taking over ejidal and communal lands for agriculture, ecological and archeological reserves, and has rapidly brought rural suburban areas into the urban metropolis at an extraordinarily rapid pace. In Oaxaca City there are almost 14,000 families living in urban poverty with 2,042 city blocks classified as poor.\(^{30}\) This urban expansion has also decayed the availability of housing in the city center, has strained the city’s capacity to provide adequate resources like water and is destroying the nature of the system of traditional “barrios”

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important to the historic identity of the city. With these changes there has been a constant loss of values of identity, culture, attitudes and behavior of both rural and urban inhabitants leading to growing apathy, atomism and social problems.\textsuperscript{31}

The lack of attention to urban inhabitants by various governments and what many residents saw as the spectacular destruction of the city’s human patrimony by the Ulises Ruiz Ortiz regime created a strong sense of confrontation between residents of distinctive neighborhoods even before the June 14\textsuperscript{th} desalojo.\textsuperscript{32} The residents of different neighborhoods who had been impacted by these changes were to be principal actors in the ensuing movement and to be found in the megamarches and the barricades. Their demands would also be heard in the first meetings that would decide the direction of the nascent movement consolidated in the APPO.\textsuperscript{33} As well, it would not be possible to analyze the formal structure of the APPO without analyzing the APPO as a decentralized and rather spontaneous grassroots movement that permeated the capital city. The analysis shows that even at the ground level, at the base of the movement in diverse neighborhoods and among different sectors of society brought together in barricades and occupations, the other face of the Oaxacan movement, the same common notions of political culture through assembly were practiced.


\textsuperscript{33} See comments by Fidelia and Francisco, both citizens not part of any recognizable group but presenting the problems of their communities and the destruction of the historic patrimony of the city. APPO, Minutes of Meeting, June 20, 2006. This was the meeting that brought together 365 representatives of 85 organizations to create the “Collective Provisional Leadership” of the APPO.
The creation of the first barricades, thus provoking its comparison to the Paris Commune, was a spontaneous act of self defense in order to protect radio stations and antennas taken over by the popular movement in response to increased state aggression. When the forms of community solidarity in the hundreds of barricades erected throughout the capital of Oaxaca are analyzed a common pattern emerges. The barricade became an autonomous social space in which existing social relations were broken and neighbors and strangers alike created a wide network of reciprocal relations based on self defense, security, communal kitchens, entertainment and political education. The center of decision making in the barricades was, of course, the assembly. Each barricade organized itself into a functioning unit with decision making powers in the formal assembly structure of the APPO even after the dismantling of the last barricade in November of 2006. The organization of colonos, urbanites, youth, housewives and other hitherto unorganized subaltern groups into the barricade facilitated the participation in the APPO of those who normally lack a voice in their society to speak and make decisions. It allowed people disenchanted with the system of political parties to find a more direct form of political participation. Exactly where did this seemingly natural form of organization come from? It becomes clear when we analyze who are the inhabitants of the city of Oaxaca.

As noted above, Oaxaca City is a city of rural to urban immigrants and generations of newly urban inhabitants. Many of these communities are “popular” neighborhoods meaning that their settlement was done in a haphazard way without legal permission. As Carlos Beas Torres notes, these inhabitants are the lumpen or subaltern groups whose precarious existence led them to a unique form of struggle during the popular movement.
The urban Indians came down from the outlying neighborhoods and their communities and protested in the streets of the capital of the state, they constructed barricades and took over the city in which they have suffered so many offenses. There they exercised their power, they became the owners of the street and for the first time in their lives they were no longer seen as cheap labor, but as rebels, as up risers. Thousands of underemployed, workers, small businesspeople, construction workers, haulers, youth from gangs, ghosts, the poor among the poor, the yopes\textsuperscript{34}, those who have neither present nor future, those that are not politically organized and do not feel represented by the parties, decided to make themselves visible and recuperate the city that historically has been taken from them (p. 239)...\textsuperscript{35}

These urban castaways, as Luis Hernandez Navarro describes, upheld a fierce resistance in the various barricades and tomas that can be linked to the struggles of rural and indigenous inhabitants throughout the state:

Resistance, understood as the struggle of the subaltern sectors to not be absorbed by their dominators, has learned how to find in these tangled trenches its development. The modalities of Indigenous resistance have permeated the complex of Oaxacan society...This resistance had to give birth to new forms to recreate itself in the context of a chaotic and savage urbanization, as that which the City of Oaxaca and its surrounding suburbs have experienced. It is an urbanization that devours communal lands, dries up the wells, contaminates the groundwater, liters the fields with trash, while at the same time providing precarious employment, expensive housing and deficient services to those expelled from their communities. To subsist, the new urban Indians brought to the polis their comunalidad, their will to be collective. It is because of this that the Oaxacan revolt found in the poor neighborhoods of the capital of the state, in its women and youth, a central actor. The Oaxacan Commune was nourished by and inspired by indigenous communalism. This ancestral resistance, adapted to the new urban conditions, is what explains, in

\textsuperscript{34} A disrespectful word that upper class Oaxacans call people at the other end of the economic and racial spectrum. It is generally understood to be a very bitter way of saying someone is an uncultured Indian.

\textsuperscript{35} Carlos Beas Torres “Oaxaca, una rebelión plebeya,” OSAL ano VII No. 21 sep-dic 2006
great part, why the popular movement to demand the fall of Ulises Ruiz does not cease, despite the savage repression that it has suffered.  

The resistance of the moral community against immoral power was symbolized on the streets through a recreation of village institutions like community policing. Since the protesters effectively ran out the local and state police there were instances when thieves or agents provocateurs took advantage of the absence of the state’s security apparatus. In response, the APPO created the Magisterial Police of Oaxaca (Policía Magisterial de Oaxaca, POMO) and the “Honorable Force of Topiles.” The topil is the first rung on the hierarchy of the traditional cargo system where to become an adult member of a community one must give one’s service to the community, in this case to its defense and the maintenance of order. According to one protestor, “The topiles, the people’s police that served the entire social movement, were formed as part of the APPO Security Commission. Traditionally topiles are responsible for security in indigenous communities; it is a job that rotates with community members. In these communities, every man has to be a topil for at least a couple of years as part of his duty to the community...It’s part of usos y costumbres, which are indigenous systems of governance. So the APPO decided to reclaim that tradition and form our own security system, based in the customs of Oaxaca’s pueblos.” Due to the absence of what was deemed “good governance” on the part of the traditional political system represented by governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, the APPO re-symbolized the supposed moral and ethical political culture of community service inherent in the system of usos y costumbres within an urban context.

The form of organization of Oaxacan *pueblos* was not only seen as a tool for resistance in the present moment but, instead was seen as a liberating force for the future of Oaxacan society. It points to the recreation of community solidarity, supposedly in the process of being lost, as a historic legacy of the Oaxacan people. The creation of community becomes a form of resistance against the atomism and destruction that market society is predicated upon. As put forth in a communiqué by one of the organizations who participated in the barricades...

We must recuperate and systematize the experience of the form of organization of the barricade, because we learned that in it there is a true exercise of democracy, arising from concrete necessities and communitarian solutions to them. The barricade is what comes closest, according to us, to the creation of community and it is the construction of community the form of resistance we must consolidate.38

“Alebrije,” a protester who would become famous because of his persecution by the Oaxacan government, saw the Oaxacan *pueblo* as the origin of the communalism lived in the luminous state of the barricades. According to him the barricades were an...

...experience of community very important for us, inhabitants of the city where this had been lost, and because of this I think it is possible...contradictorily to what before was thought, it is possible that our society function, that an urban Mestizo society, function as the *pueblos* function because it was said, and is the basis of the political discussion: if it works, it works for some parts but not for others, why not? This made it evident to us that we can function by the respect that is created in the *pueblos* that function by *usos y costumbres*, although there are a whole lot of us, because in the barricades meetings were held like an assembly, from here came the assemblitarian spirit in the city...An experience of

fraternity, of solidarity for the sake of it, was created.... If I could sum up what happened in the barricades it was that the assembletarian spirit came down from the mountains to the city and established itself among those that had forgotten it, because in some form we all come from there.  

He also saw in the assembletarian democracy of the so-called “Oaxacan Commune” the rendition of society and the basis for a future libertarian society.

It is forgotten and ignored that the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca is naturally opposed to power. As horizontalism, respect for consensus and respectful dialogue are the fundamental principles of the assembly, inherited from the assemblies of our Indigenous communities that have practiced them for millennia and are precisely the reason for their survival against successive invasions, plunders, aggressions, colonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism that the masters of power throughout the centuries have attacked them with. Today the assembly remains valid as an original form of self government for the communities, but above all as a political proposal of national scope and for the peoples of the world. The APPO is this historic paradigm where the experience of the struggle of the peoples of Oaxaca and of the different peoples of the world that have struggled for liberty, justice, dignity and peace converge and that is presented as fundamental in a moment in history where savage capitalism is found in its terminal crisis and power, his bastard son, has demonstrated its most criminal nature.

Conclusion: The Moral Economy of the Oaxacan Commune

This analysis has sought to locate the origins of the APPO in the political culture of Oaxacan society and show how the assembly became the organizational and ideational backbone of the movement. This analysis does not take us very far if we simply stop there. Neither does it tell us much about why the movement became so popular. I am arguing, therefore, that the assembly is not simply the organizational structure of the movement but is instead a concept deeply embedded with meaning.

40Ibid. p. 202
The assembly is a concrete manifestation of certain notions of power, legitimacy and order rooted in the past that has been an important part of the moral economy of many Oaxacan communities. By moral economy I mean, following the seminal work E. P. Thompson, the set of notions, achieved by popular consensus, around consistent traditional views of social norms and obligations of the proper economic and political functions of society.

These cultural values are part of a larger moral universe described by Scott. “Woven into the tissue of peasant behavior, then,” he wrote, “whether in normal local routines or in the violence of an uprising, is the structure of a shared moral universe, a common notion of what is just. It is this moral heritage that, in peasant revolts, selects certain targets rather than others, certain forms rather than others, and that makes possible a collective (though rarely coordinated) action born of moral outrage.” The moral universe that the Oaxacan movement strove to defend was its communal nature, symbolized primarily by the assembly but also by a complex of other ideas relating to the moral obligations of a member of a community. This communalism (comunalidad) forms a vital part of indigenous political philosophy and can be found, in whole or in part, in the social fabric of Oaxacan communities and the disparate acts of everyday forms of resistance. The moral universe of the pre-modern peasant community, idealized by the movement as both “traditional” and “indigenous” is fundamental to the idea of communalism.

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The main difference between my argument and the original work of the moral economists is partly due to the fact that with the Oaxacan Commune we are not dealing with a peasant society but with a modern, urban society integrated into the global market economy. Even the rural areas are completely subsumed in the market economy. The movement, while primarily taking place in the state capital, did involve people from throughout the state including people from rural areas, however. The question then, is how urban and rural people immersed in the market economy could still find in their political imaginary the moral universe of peasant society. Jeffrey H. Cohen argues that rural people in Oaxaca should be considered “post-peasant” in their integration with the global market economy as they have never completely undergone a complete process of proletarianization.\footnote{Jeffrey H. Cohen, “Community, economy and social change in Oaxaca, Mexico: Rural life and cooperative logic in the global economy,” in Otero, Gerardo (ed.), \textit{Mexico in Transition. Neoliberal Globalism, the State and Civil Society}, (London: Zed Books, 2004).} Especially in a place where underdevelopment has crippled any foreseeable benefits from modernization and pre-market social relations may co-exist with a market economy. According to Booth, the proponents of a moral economy take the totalizing nature of market relations for granted.\footnote{Booth, William James. “On the Idea of the Moral Economy,” in \textit{The American Political Science Review}, vol. 88, no. 3 (Sep., 1994), pp. 656.} It is my contention that the moral universe of the Oaxacan pueblo has uneasily co-existed with market relations and that the market economy and its inherent social relations have not completely become the dominant mechanism integrating the fabric of Oaxacan society. While goods have become commodified to a large extent, communal land holding is still extremely common and social relations still retain fragments of pre-modern, non-market elements.
In fact, Cohen regards vestiges of the communal legacy as a helpful adaptive mechanism among rural people in Oaxaca, even those fully integrated into the global economy. Traditional forms of government through usos y costumbres, forms of communal work like the tequio and community solidarity like guelaguetza help people adapt and survive thus acting as a form of social insurance. As he notes, “Communal identity is not about an escape into a world of indigenous harmony, but is a structure that, in its reproduction and reinventions allows individuals to embrace the chaos of the moment and deal with the issues of change while maintaining a coherent body of shared ideals.”

Thus, the appeal to communalism is not a simple nostalgic longing for a now disappeared Gemeinschaft. It brings our idea of power through the assembly to appear less like a romantic vision of the past and more like what Scott considers métis, a complex of traditional knowledge and local strategies based on a history of practical experience. It is hoped that this discussion shows that the concept of moral economy has much wider application than solely classical peasant society.

While I am claiming that the theoretical tool of the moral economy is useful to help us understand the Oaxacan conflict, another difference with the original theories of the moral economy is that my analysis has not centered on economic relations. Despite being situated into an economic context marked by an enormous increase in tortilla prices, the inadequacy of migrant remittances for economic prosperity and social dislocation due to an increase in the penetration of the global market due to neoliberal reforms, the conflict was not primarily a rebellion of the belly. The Oaxacan

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conflict points to a moral economy of power and power relations, not simply economic relations. It was a rebellion who gave primacy to power and the moral obligations of those who hold it. However, as theorists of the moral economy center on economic relations, they have frequently overlooked the fact that in pre-modern societies there was no clear division between economic and political structures as is assumed in modern, market societies.

Thompson’s notion of communal legitimacy, however, helps us leave the pre-market past and market present dualism of much of moral economic theory. Legitimacy is recognition by a community to a set of moral and ethical principles that are rooted in the past and are the basis for collective action in the present. Notions of power in Oaxaca are bound up with certain moral principles. The notion of power as service to the community was the foundation for the outrage against the Oaxacan government. Power, following Arnold, although intangible, is a social good. As he noted, “popular consensus about what distinguishes legitimate from illegitimate practices resides in the nested meanings of specific constitutive and/or communal social goods. These meanings harbor implicit notions about legitimate practices as well as legitimate relations in and among affected groups and individuals. A significant threat to or a sustained, deliberate deviation from accepted practices and relations prompts organized response...including rebellion.”

The assembly, I am arguing, is a political institution that is granted communal legitimacy. The oppressive government of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz was a significant deviation from accepted practices and norms of how power should be organized in Oaxacan society. The APPO was an expression of

popular desire to bring the social good of power, divorced from the communal social fabric by the mediating and alienating effects of the modern political system, under community control and rework it into deeply held notions of solidarity and service. The assembly was the way to ensure that power was utilized within these deeply held notions of legitimacy.

However, the Oaxaca conflict was not, as in E. P. Thompson’s case, an apolitical longing for a past system of paternalist protection. It was instead an overtly political and moral rejection of an antiquated, brutal and malignant paternalism of the state party system of the PRI. Nor was the rebellion of the APPO, as Habermas put it, “the melancholy charm of irretrievable pasts and the radiance of nostalgic remembrances of what has been sacrificed to modernization.49” They were not only critiquing modern society, however, but rebelling against it and trying to create an alternative. This alternative was based on ideas of a democratic communitarian model of social organization still to be found in popular collective memory but with its vision rooted as much in the possibilities of the future as in visions of the past.

This alternative strove to reweave political power into the fabric of social relations based on bonds of cooperation and solidarity as embodied in the idealized indigenous pueblo. The creation of the APPO as an assembly was an attempt to bring the political system under community control through a decentralized network of community assemblies organized into the great assembly of assemblies that was the APPO. The organizational capacity, popularity and cohesion of the movement was due to the use of the assembly as both the praxis of radical democratic participation.

and the recreation of a moral universe rooted in local and international visions of utopian politics.