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Recommended Citation

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Independent Study Project - Final

Indigenous conceptions of community organization and autonomy in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte: answers & resistance to State-sponsored practices of internal colonialism

Carter Minnick

SIT Mexico: Migration, Borders, and Transnational Communities
Fall 2021

Acknowledgements

Firstly, special thanks to Prof. Omar and Profa. Argelia for your valuable insights throughout the writing process. To everyone involved at SIT, thank you for all the work and care dedicated to a great program with much to offer. Your support and guidance made this experience all the more meaningful. To Gustavo and all others working at the autonomous, communal university project in Guelatao, as well as to the entirety of the community, thank you for so generously sharing your experiences with me. Through this work, I hope to have been able to capture even a little of the wisdom that marks day to day life here in the Sierra. It goes without saying that all errors and limitations of such a project fall entirely over me.

Abstract

Over the past century, the Mexican government has continued to reproduce dominant, colonial relationships with its indigenous populations. Within the last few decades, clashes between harmful neoliberal visions of national development and continued demands for indigenous autonomy have only intensified. In the context of such events, this present work seeks to explore a specific conception of community identity, coined as *la comunalidad*, in the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca. After the breakdown of its most fundamental tenants, I will attempt to both underscore its position as a framework of resistance in combatting historical and ongoing state-organized aggressions against these communities, as well as its fundamental role in the subsequent construction of various aspects of local autonomy. Finally, I will look towards internally defined challenges to the reproduction of such models of community organization. Throughout the paper, special attention will be paid to the contemporary and global value of such alternative community development strategies for the re-imagining of more harmonious social and environmental futures.

Methodology

This paper was conducted in large part based on archival research and subsequent analysis. In addition, I was generously offered the opportunity to realize two interviews in the community of Guelatao in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca (with staff involved in the communal, autonomous university project), as well as attend a local Milpa fair one afternoon. This allowed me to expand my academic perceptions and corroborate previous information through the dialogue and perspectives shared with me on these occasions. However, for a work with ethnographic focuses, this limited time spent in the community, as well as my positionality as an outside, Western-educated researcher, represent inherent limitations of the paper. To attempt and combat this academic and ethical friction, I opted to place a special analytical focus on the indigenously produced concept, *la comunalidad*, as a way to construct a discourse that values and takes seriously these often-silenced perspectives. Again, my deepest gratitude goes out to these communities for allowing me the opportunity to engage and learn from them throughout every step of this process.

Introduction

“Historically, the entire vision of development has been to forget and change the ancestral knowledge of our indigenous pueblos.”¹ This is one of the first things that Gustavo Lopez Mendoza, general coordinator of the Autonomous Communal University of Oaxaca, relates to me as we discuss the context in which this educational project was established. Although the university offers enrollment to students across the state, the main campus is housed in Guelatao de Juárez, a small community tucked into the mountains of the Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca which gave birth to the original idea in September, 2020. It is just one of many local constructions of autonomy and resistance that have continued to provide resilience to the highly indigenous area of the state. Like many other indigenous populations in Mexico, these communities must continually confront imposing national and state interests over their historical practices of community organization and self-determination.

¹ Gustavo Lopez Mendoza, interviewed by author, Guelatao de Juárez, Nov. 25, 2021.

Throughout the work, I will refer to these imposing interests as representative of a larger, systematic practice of what has been termed *internal colonialism*. To briefly define such a term, we can cite the description of Pablo González Casanova, who emphasizes the necessary existence of social and power structures that seek to perpetuate relationships of dominance and exploitation against heterogenous cultural groups.² In our present context these heterogenous cultural groups are represented by the dominant Mexican State and the indigenous population of Oaxaca's Sierra Norte. As we will see, these abuses can extend to diverse areas of social life including but not limited to political, environmental, economic, and educational realms. Due to the limitations of this paper's scope, we will restrict ourselves to the reproduction of such a phenomena in the post-revolutionary period (1917-present), and with a special focus on the intensification of these colonial relationships in recent decades following the Mexican governments widespread implementation of a group of late 20th century principles of economic and social progress, commonly referred to as neoliberal theory.

Before moving any further, it is worth fleshing out the basic tenets of such neoliberal rationality, for as we will see later on in the work, it has in large part been the driving force behind recent state-orchestrated aggressions against community life not only in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte, but throughout large sectors of Mexico's indigenous and rural populations. Although the philosophical inclinations of this ideology were growing in stature throughout 20th century Mexico, the full-scale introduction of corresponding policy changes was to be largely sparked by the international debt crisis of 1982. Such state-restructuring would take shape in various

² González Casanova, Pablo, "El colonialismo interno" in *De la sociología del poder a la sociología de la explotación: pensar América Latina en el siglo XXI*, Siglo del Hombre Editores CLASCO, 2009, p. 146.

juridical and political reforms of which primary aims would include, (1) the dismantling of state protectionist mechanisms, (2) privatizing national businesses, (3) creating incentives to attract foreign investment, and (4) reducing the federal budget towards social programs. These processes arguably reached a climactic height with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1st 1994, a set of policies that for many indigenous territories in southern Mexico, represented a continued aggression against the conditions of their existent poverty (demonstrations of which will be explored more fully later in the work).³ As is well known, the news of such an event would play a large role in the emblematic revolt of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) on this very day in the state of Chiapas.⁴

It should be noted, however, that there exists various debates regarding where to place one's analytical emphasis on the definition of neoliberalism. While the former description largely focused on its economic implications, others have favored the social and ethical dynamics at play, underlining its role as a hegemonic discourse that seeks to promote specific definitions of the human race, progress, and what constitutes a "good life."⁵ These descriptions often revolve around goals of economic growth as moral development, individual liberty, and a free market. It is in this second context that I will present the main analytical framework of the current paper, the indigenously birthed concept of *la comunalidad*, as the rejection of such

³ Mariana Mora, "Decolonizing Politics: Zapatista Indigenous Autonomy in an Era of Neoliberal Governance and Low-Intensity Warfare." (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2008), pp. 18-19.

⁴ The range of principal exigences of this indigenous organization can be included but not limited to: improved health-care services, land recovery and reform, literacy and education reform, justice system advocacy. Many demands were also directed at the recognition of greater autonomy from the Mexican state in almost all areas of social life. For a more comprehensive review of this historical context, see Lynn Stephens 1995 work on the topic.

⁵ Ibid, p. 20. See as well (Lander, 2005), (Luna, 2010) and (Fuente Carrasco, 2012).

liberal ideals in favor of a delineation and re-connection with long-standing notions of local community ethics and organizational principles.

In what follows, I will first cover a thorough definition of the term *comunalidad* as well as establish its analytical implications for the remaining sections of the current work. I will then move on to emphasize its fundamental role not only as a structure of resistance against damaging visions of national development, but also its key guiding presence in the construction of four main aspects of local autonomy construction in the Sierra Norte: politics, economics, territory, and education. Finally, I will finish with a section dedicated to current challenges in the reproduction of these community visions, and a space for final reflections.

La Comunalidad: Key Aspects

A historical investigation of *la comunalidad* brings us back to the end of the 1970's in Oaxaca's Sierra Norte, where communities across the region were developing strong organizational movements looking to confront diverse state-organized hostilities against their community lifestyles. These mobilizations would largely coalesce into four large ethnopolitical organizations: the Union of the Pueblos of Rincón (1978), the Coordinating Committee for the Defense of the Natural, Human, and Cultural Resources of the Mixe Region (Codremi, 1979), the Organization for the Defense of Natural Resources and Social Development of the Sierra Juárez (Odrenasij, 1980), and finally the Assembly of Zapotec Authorities (1981). As their varying names suggests, such regional movements had numerous aims, ranging from defending communal forest territory and preventing mineral exploitation, to improving regional supply

routes and providing more educational and healthcare opportunities.⁶ It is from these demands that we can witness a subsequent surge in internal indigenous thought, looking to systematize and describe their community life and ethos in the face of threatening outside actors and antithetical visions of their local development. Forming part of this context would be important encounters between Jaime Martínez Luna and Floriberto Díaz, two indigenous anthropologists from the region, who upon sitting down to continue such processes of reflection would soon coin the notion of *comunalidad*.⁷

From the emergence of this term to its actuality, there have been a wide variety of angles from which it has been analyzed. This paper will attempt a two-pronged interpretative approach. To begin, I will trace its more technical aspects that sustain and support this historical community ethos and mark day-to-day social organization throughout the Sierra. Then, I will seek to demonstrate its essential nature in the construction of local autonomous practices in the four aforementioned areas of analysis.

Much has been written about the more practical aspects of *la comunalidad*, and in this example we will take up the outline of Benjamin Maldonado Alvarado, who has laid it out in four concrete sections:⁸

1. Communal power: consists in the exercise of local power through two communal institutions: a general assembly of citizens as the maximum representation of government (participatory democracy), and a system of obligatory, unpaid *cargos*

⁶ Elena Nava Morales, "La Comunalidad oaxaqueña: lucha y pensamiento indígena," in *Pensamiento Indígena en Nuestra América: Debates y Propuestas en la Mesa de Hoy*, new edition, Santiago: Ariadna Ediciones, 2018, p. 27.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 27.

⁸ Benjamín Maldonado Alvarado, "Perspectivas de la Comunalidad en Los Pueblos Indígenas de Oaxaca", *Bajo el Volcán*, vol. 15, num. 23, 2015, pp. 155-61.

- (municipal political positions of authority) which fall under an obedient relation to the former. Political parties are absent and election to authority is based on the community's perception of your loyalty and service to communal interests. The convocation of the assembly is carried out to inform actions, take decisions, and oversee processes of internal accountability.
2. Communal work: This is realized through two different forms, *el tequio* and *la ayuda mutua* (mutual help). The former represents non-remunerative and obligatory community service, normally once or twice a month, for the realization of projects of community benefit (cleaning of roads, construction of school/health centers, etc.). The latter involves long-standing communal practices of providing things like work, food, or money to neighbors in times of specific need (death in the family, construction of a house, support after natural accidents/disasters). As Maldonado points out, these practices – along with *cargos* - are often duties that secure one's pertinence to the very community.
 3. Communal territory: this describes a demarcated set of land that is passed down communally among families that oblige with the basic principles and duties of each community. Not only does it represent a factor of social cohesion based in a historically and culturally defined common good, but it also serves for the preservation of sacredly defined spaces and natural resources.⁹

⁹ Mario E. Fuente Carrasco and David Barkin, "Concesiones forestales, exclusión y sustentabilidad. Lecciones desde las comunidades de la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca", *Desacatos*, num. 37, 2011, pp. 100-102.

4. Communal celebrations: not only do these gatherings represent aforementioned spaces of reciprocity and mutual aid, but are key to the reproduction of community and social identities as expressed through the joy and sharing of regional culture through music, dance, dress, food, language.

It should be noted that such a condensed outline of community life will not be without its contradictions. *La comunalidad*, like any other form of collective logic, is a dynamic collection of practices that change and fluctuate through contextual pressures of time and space. Nonetheless, this initial sketch will help to situate ourselves in the present context as we now turn our focus to how these visions are concretely applied to the development of local autonomy practices as a representation of resistance and transformation of the historical relationships of dominance between the State and indigenous pueblos.¹⁰

Political Autonomy

The landscape of political autonomy for the indigenous pueblos of the Sierra Norte (and Oaxaca as a whole) has seen significant changes in the past few decades. Among the biggest modifications in this context were the constitutional reforms enacted in 1995 ushering in what is known as a *politics of recognition*. The terms essence is laid out in a reform to article 25 of the state constitution, outlined the following: “the law will protect the traditional and democratic practices of Indigenous communities, those which until now have been utilized for

¹⁰ Alejandra, Aquino Moreschi, “La comunalidad como epistemología del Sur: Aportes y retos”, *Cuadernos del Sur*, vol. 34, INAH/UABJO/CIESAS, 2013, p 8.

the election of their local governments.”¹¹ Such legal recognition would come under the normative system of “usos y costumbres”, which permitted the election of municipal authorities through community assemblies without the intervention of formal political parties.¹² As mentioned in the introduction, such concessions can be understood in the context of intensifying neo-liberal encroachments against the indigenous countryside and the growing number of local defense organizations that would explode onto the national scene with the Zapatista uprising of 1994. As Knight aptly points out, this revolt sent shock-waves through the state governments of southern, mostly-indigenous states, and with an eye towards preventative measures that could impede burgeoning fears of rebellion in an already well-organized Oaxacan state, institutional recognition of these communities’ internal authority structures were made.¹³ However, upon a deeper historical analysis, it would be an oversimplification to represent these acknowledgments as the introduction of comprehensive political autonomy. As the language in the constitutional reform suggested, these traditional practices had existed before their formalization into state law. What did they look like before and had the concessions really enacted the changes sought after?

To understand how the political sphere was experienced before these reforms, we must scrutinize the post-revolutionary context. In the midst of the consolidation of power in the post-revolutionary project, it would take until 1929 under the name of the National Revolutionary Party (PNR) that local and regional powers would be united under a single

¹¹ Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca 1995. Decreto núm. 278. “Periódico Oficial del Estado Libre y Soberano de Oaxaca, núm. 19: 1-2.

¹² Ryan A. Knight, “Autonomous struggles, political parties, recognition politics, and state (re)production in Oaxaca, Mexico”, *Interface*, vol. 12, 2020, p. 166.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 165-66.

banner. This stabilization of state power would largely continue, although with various name changes, until finally settling upon the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) in 1946. PRI would become the dominant force in Mexican politics and nationally rule without party opposition until the year 2000, forming a long-lasting single authority state whose influence easily extended all the way down to regional and local governments across Mexico.

In indigenous municipalities in Oaxaca, this often took the shape of a clientelist structure, where local political bosses, or *caciques*, were utilized to maintain federal political interests.¹⁴ As Recondo details in his study of this type of political strategy, by using internal authorities from each community, PRI would develop a recipe to guarantee the reproduction of its dominance:

In reality, the post-revolutionary regime reproduced a kind of indirect rule according to the term used in the study of contemporary colonial regimes. A form of domination in which the central power establishes indirect control over local societies through authorities from those same societies. This guarantees the reproduction of the mode of domination but preserves at the same time a certain margin of political autonomy at the local level. As such, the PRI-State, far from destroying the traditional local form of community organization, incorporates it, by noticeably modifying it and making it one of the fundamental units of the reproduction of the system of domination.¹⁵

So, while it was common for PRI to respect local elections throughout this period, and thus providing indigenous communities some room for following their traditional forms of political organization, municipal authorities were still afterwards required to register with the official party, PRI.¹⁶ In an exchange for a degree of autonomy, this policy would still maintain a strong

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 164.

¹⁵ David Recondo, 2007. *La política del gatopardo: multiculturalismo y democracia en Oaxaca*. Nueva edición [en línea]. México: Centro de estudios mexicanos y centroamericanos, p. 22. (Eng. translation, Ryan A. Knight).

¹⁶ Knight, p. 165.

local influence and lead to a history of local institutions that suffered from federal/state infiltration.¹⁷

Various other authors have pointed out the existence of similar transactional forces operating behind the current constitutional reforms, which included the prohibition of political parties and abolished the previous requirement for locally elected leaders to register with the official state authorities. For example, Anaya-Muñoz highlights that such alterations would coincide with the strongest ever decline in PRI's candidate vote percentage, asserting that the passing of a law to prohibit the presence of newly emerging political party opposition in indigenous municipal elections represented a cogent reason to move forward with the reforms.¹⁸ And although it has been noted that PRI has lost its stranglehold on the politics of these communities¹⁹, one can argue the model of state re-production and its methods of influence have simply been transformed. As Knight summarizes nicely, common critiques originating from municipalities dedicated to these forms of self-organization have converged in various ways. Among the strongest external pressures are the indirect roles that now a multitude of political parties play in dividing local communities.²⁰ Many times, this takes shape through the funding of local influencers who work to diminish or manipulate the power of the assembly to serve foreign party interests such as supporting lucrative (and harmful) energy projects or the use of short-term enticements of money and material goods to produce political

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 165.

¹⁸ Alejandro Anaya-Muñoz, "Governability and Legitimacy in Mexico: The Legalisation of Indigenous Electoral Institutions in Oaxaca." (PhD diss., Department of Government, University of Essex, 2002, pp. 192-202.

¹⁹ Knight attributes this to national political reforms in 1978 that allowed for greater consolidation of political opposition and their subsequent influence in municipal politics (p. 167).

²⁰ Knight, p. 169.

support and stabilization of a historically oppressive set of institutions.²¹ In this way, they have appropriated the individual role of the cacique and clientelist structures through a variety of mechanisms that range from those listed above to even the more violent repressing of community movements and leaders.²²

It is important to nonetheless stress the value of the municipal election reforms under the system of *usos y costumbres* (or *comunalicracia* as an internally preferred term) as an act of visibility and step forward towards recognizing indigenous rights and forms of community organization. For many, this represented a legal acknowledgement and nod of respect to one aspect of a larger array of practices (*la comunalidad*) that continue to drive forward community life in Oaxaca.²³ And perhaps it is this return to the totality of the concept of *comunalidad* where we see best represented what political autonomy means to the pueblos of the Sierra Norte. Through a comprehensive resistance to multiple oppressive systems, it is the convergence of practices and community organization directed at the reproduction of the entirety of social life without the interference of the state. We have seen this interpretation echoed by the Zapatistas - after a decade of convoluted legislative battles for constitutional recognition, a return to daily, bottom-up construction of autonomy was prioritized. Jaime Luna perhaps exposes it best:

This is why governmental language, elaborated from Spanish, expresses codes that have nothing to do with the sources of our reasoning...²⁴ Self-determination is ultimately security in ourselves. It is the possibility to govern ourselves, it is the desire to make a different and more harmonious society. From this perspective, self-determination must

²¹ Ibid, p. 169.

²² Ibid, p. 169. (See as well, Camacho 2015, Camacho 2018, Maldonado 2002, Gasparello and Quintana Guerrero 2009, Navarro F. 2014).

²³ Ibid, p. 168.

²⁴ Jaime, Martínez Luna, "Conocimiento y Comunalidad", *Bajo el Volcán*, vol. 15, num. 23, 2005, p. 111.

be understood as the daily work of everyone and a new way of understanding the future.²⁵

As we continue to shed light on this daily work throughout the following sections, it will serve us to keep this political framework of self-determination in mind, because as Mora aptly points out, “it is precisely through autonomous practices of resistance where life and the political converge.”²⁶

Environmental Autonomy

In the last 30 years, Mexican governmental attempts to control, concession, and extract natural resources from communally owned indigenous territories have considerably increased.²⁷ And although the implementation of neoliberal policies has certainly amped up the intensity of this exploitation, it is certainly not the birth of a novel phenomenon. With this in mind, this section will cover a concrete case-study in the forests of Oaxaca’s Sierra Norte, demonstrating how historical encroachments on their communal land has led to key mobilizations in the defense of their territory and natural resources through strong social cohesion and subsequent constructions of alternative, local autonomy processes.

The current case study primarily concerns a handful of Sierra Norte communities and the decades long exploitation of their beautiful, extensive, and communally owned, mesophile forests. Historical context places us around 1940, and in the middle of political processes that

²⁵ Jaime, Martínez Luna, *Eso que llaman comunalidad*, Oaxaca, CAMPO/Fundación Harp Helú/Secretaría de Cultura/Culturas Populares, 2010, p. 57.

²⁶ Mora, p. 13.

²⁷ Alongside the current study of forest concessions, there exists an extensive history of other land exploitation. For interested readers, one can begin by referring to Enrique Fuente and Barkin’s 2012 case study on mining concessions in the Sierra, as well as the more recent imposition of wind parks and their harmful effects on local communities in Oaxaca’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec, consulting Alexander Dunlaps 2017 study.

looked to follow a model of economic industrialization based on *import substitution*, a paradigm that seeks to reinforce an internal economy not dependent on the importation of goods from foreign countries or companies.²⁸ Somewhat ironically, a step towards this ambition was formalized in the Sierra in 1954 through a 25 year concession of forest production rights to a private Canadian transnational business, Fapatux, and with clear echoes to later neoliberal policies that would open up and privilege such foreign actors to an even greater degree. Although the former would be transformed into a parastate organization after their bankruptcy in 1964, the brutal exploitation and unjust distribution of benefits would continue strong until reaching its peak in 1980.²⁹ This was achieved through multiple different avenues: lack of promised jobs through the introduction of pre-trained outside workers, poor working conditions and low salaries with extensive hours and the high presence of physical accidents and injuries, bureaucratic hurdles and inadequate payments regarding the “rent” of the land, and the inability to develop their own use of the territory for the common good and determination of the community.³⁰

Enrique Fuentes and Barkin’s 3 phased analysis of how social resistance was constructed throughout this time will help us deepen our understanding of the eventual 1982 repeal of these forest concessions.³¹

1. The “first moment” largely consisted of the lived experience of exclusion and damage directed from an outside group of agents, manifested in a excess of ways just described.

²⁸ Enrique Fuente and Barkin, p. 102.

²⁹ Ibid, p. 102.

³⁰ Keuze, P., F. Pérez y A. Cervantes, “El bosque y las comunidades indígenas: el caso de la Sierra Juárez, Oaxaca”, en Amalia Muñoz Rocha (coord.), Jornada El Campo y el Campesino: Producción y Hambre, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, México, 1984, pp. 177-183.

³¹ Enrique Fuente and Barkin, pp. 102-06.

The final stages of this phase begin to take shape as the presentation of a necessary and different vision of justice constructed by the excluded group, as accepted by social consensus and produced from its contrasting duality with the initial acts of injustice.

2. The “second moment” begins with a rejection and equalization against the imposed power, and quickly transforms into a social mobilization. Although it would start with smaller demands such as better working conditions and pay, the identification of exclusion and equality would soon coalesce into its most unequivocal nature: the demand for recession of the concession. This immediately acquires regional strength and identity through the formation of the Organization of the Defense of Natural and Social Development of the Sierra Norte as an expression of obediencial power, operated much in the same vein as communal assemblies with inspiration in *la comunalidad*.
3. The third and final “moment” takes a more decisive approach after the identification as equals with the aggressor. Clear and direct demands to the Mexican government are made, at once affirming their difference as well as proclaiming their equality and rights against the imposing party. A subsequent establishment of communal values and common norms are made in the preparation for local autonomy. Finally, social dissonance grows rapidly upon the renewal of the concession and the rupture of communication increases with supply strikes and blockades, as well as many other organizations forming in solidarity, something that would pressure and occasion the backing down of the new Mexican government in 1982.

Perhaps the most important thing to come out of this long and tiresome conflict with the federal government was the previously mentioned utilization of communal values and norms forged for the realization of the autonomous management of their forests. This struggle set the bases for the strengthening of the region's social fabric and as Jaime Luna has detailed, was intrinsically related to the formal emergence of the term *comunalidad*³² to describe these ancient modes of resistance and systematization of alternatives to a fundamentally unjust continuation of internal colonialist practices.

In this instance, what came out of such a community notion was a transformation of the government's unbounded logic of accumulation, and a different community ethos was put into practice to resolve the many existing issues of distributive social and environmental justice. This can be clearly seen in current community foresting practices that have left unsustainable extraction rates and opted for the development of diverse productive forces including the practical construction of furniture, community ecotourism spots, and water purification plants.³³ In keeping with the practice of communal authorities, the indigenously run Forest Stewardship Council was created in which each community has an active participation in regulating forest management through principles of sociocultural, economic and environmental sustainability and justice.³⁴ These have not only helped to generate changes in how to ethically engage in risky capital based markets but also have served greatly as a sort of "proof of concept" off of which further local autonomy practices have flourished, thus leading to less reliance on historically deceitful relationships with the State.

³² Morales, p. 28.

³³ Enrique Fuente and Barkin, p. 106.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 106.

In more general terms, these community struggles stand out for their stubborn resistance to a rational economics that the neoliberal world has been consumed by. The differences are stark, with modern economic thought marked by a mentality of unlimited growth, an often overly-critical cost-benefit approach that seeks to quantify many aspects of our physical environments, and a more spiritual separation from man's ultimate dependence on nature and their relational harmony. As Enrique Fuente and Barkin contrast well, *la comunalidad* places itself as a "fundamental institution to promote languages for the valuation of nature... an analytical invitation to listen and understand other voices... voices for dialogues of wisdom."³⁵

Economic Autonomy

The community-based struggles over territorial self-determination outlined above provide a nice segue into discussing what Jaime Luna considers "the issue that requires the most intelligence from all Serranos; the most difficult [problem] but also the most definitive, is the economic one."³⁶ Yet, alongside this, he also lays out his ideal: "the most recommendable thing would be that we work the land in accordance to our natural necessities. However, our belonging to a wider economic system makes our lives more complicated."³⁷ Unpacking this second sentence will be crucial to understanding what makes this ideal especially complex as well as how, through what I will propose as a focus on regaining *internal control* of their fiscal

³⁵ Mario Enrique Fuente and David Barkin, "La minería como factor de desarrollo en la Sierra Juárez de Oaxaca: una valoración ética", *Problemas del Desarrollo*, vol. 172, num. 44, 2013, pp. 140-41.

³⁶ Jaime Martínez Luna, *Eso que llaman Comunalidad*, p. 53.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 51.

activities, the people of the Sierra Norte have diversely responded to a series of intensifying State aggressions against the feasibility of such long-standing lifestyles.

It is well documented that small scale rural farmers have been hit especially hard throughout the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in Mexico over the past 30 years. In the agricultural sector, Alvaro González Rios succinctly lists NAFTA's 1994 culmination of four main offensive propositions that have worked to wither away at this already vulnerable work population:³⁸

1. Form profitable farms in areas held by smallholders.
2. *Ejid*os (common property), through an new modification to Article 27 of the Mexican constitution, can now be rented, sold, or leased.
3. A priority switch from subsistence to cash crops.
4. Encourage decentralization to facilitate projects and subsidies towards productive sectors while ignoring poverty.

In Oaxaca's countryside these new directions were to work in concert with social welfare cuts that previously helped subsidize and sustain small-farmer agriculture, following a philosophy of driving out "non-productive" agriculture through denying local farmers access to credit, infrastructural investment, and abandoning technical training. To make matters worse, even non-market based sustenance farmers (especially relevant sector in the Sierra Norte) have been hurt by continually rising input costs, and lack of necessary manual labor for cultivation

³⁸ Alvaro González Rios, 2012. "Maíz and Indigenous Communities of Oaxaca: Two Victims of Neoliberalism." Edited by Thomas Weaver, James B. Greenberg, William L. Alexander, et. al. In *Neoliberalism and Commodity Production in Mexico*. University Press of Colorado, p. 100.

due to these policies and their impacts on rising out-migration, which is now annually estimated at over 200,000 Oaxaqueños leaving for the US and northern Mexican states.³⁹ Capping off these structural changes, prioritized multinational companies would now enjoy an expanded legal framework allowing for greater outside capital flow, drastically reduced import taxes, and cheap access to raw materials on once communal land, all leading to a subsequent flooding of Mexico with cheap, foreign maize and other traditional commodities such as coffee, rubber, and other fruits and vegetables.⁴⁰ All this has resulted in staggering market changes within Mexico, highlighted by a 40% reduction in corn prices in just a four-year span from 1990-94.⁴¹

In such hostile conditions, the question arises, how have the communities of the Sierra Norte confronted these challenges? Jaime Luna suggests that the beginning of this analysis lies in the realization of their pertinence to an economy that is largely not in their hands. To detail this, he goes on to highlight specific cases dotting the history of such a region, ranging from brutal exploitation of forest and mining resources, to the more recent instability of coffee and grain markets whose prices are neo-liberally manipulated to favor external actors and leave the security of the community at the whim of historically racist and colonial political forces.⁴² This recognition urgently pushes forward the task of building autonomy and regaining internal control of their financial stability, which we saw foreshadowed in the construction of communal forest businesses after the defeat and rescindment of decade-long external concessions. Yet, this historical legacy has only continued to shape economic development and autonomy in the

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 101-05.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 100-103.

⁴¹ Ibid, pp. 100-103.

⁴² Jaime Martínez Luna, *Eso que llaman Comunalidad*, pp. 51-52.

Sierra by providing a framework of community resistance that has led to the repeated construction of new economic paradigms over the subsequent decades. Let us turn to these now.

Various communal enterprises have continued to emerge off the back of the principles established during the forest struggles, and the Sierra Norte region now is home to diverse communal businesses involving things like the recollection and production of mushrooms and resin, fish farms, water purification plants, and the offering of eco-tourism services.⁴³ In an attempt to survey these alternative economic activities, we will take a closer look at the lattermost example and its relation to principles of *la comunalidad* as a way forward in creating spaces of an autonomous, internally controlled economics.

In the midst of a 1980/90's worldwide boom of alternative tourism that sought to satisfy growing market desires of greater contact with nature, as well as more participation with the culture and people of the receiving communities, 8 separate communally organized businesses were established in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, with hopes to palliate recent agricultural hardships and economically benefit their communities whilst maintaining sustainable relationships to the land.⁴⁴ Challenging our common notions of how even non-profit businesses can be run, Villavicencio and López Pardo's illustrative case study of Capulálpam's community ecotourism structure has much to offer:⁴⁵

⁴³ Bertha Palomino Villavicencio and Gustavo López Pardo, "Relaciones del turismo de naturaleza, la comunalidad, y la resiliencia en la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca, Mexico", *PASOS, Revista de Turismo y Patrimonio Cultural*, vol. 17, num. 6, 2019, p. 1206.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1206.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 1213.

1. Firstly, administrative members and their duties carried out by the board of directors and other entities are elected through the community's participatory assembly (*Comunalicracia*), and their responsibilities are *cargos* without salary for a period of three years (unpaid collective work).
2. Every four months the management group reports to the common assembly and is permanently supervised by an oversight committee dedicated to the assurance of proper use and generation of resources for the common good (accountability and social transparency). This is also supplemented by the fiscal obligation of contributing to social projects in the community after covering basic expenses and required investments (solidarity and reciprocity).
3. The enterprise has provided 18 permanent paid jobs (another 20 in times of high tourist activity), provides an additional market for local agricultural products, and help to preserve and promote the recognition of their cultural and natural wealth by visitors and themselves (territory and identity). Lastly, the *tequio* of the entire population has contributed to the improvement of trails as well as the organization of civic and religious events that are shared with tourists (unpaid collective work and identity).

These projects do not position themselves as a magic bullet for the resolution of economic autonomy and control from an ever-imposing State figure. As I witnessed in Guelatao when visiting a locally held Milpa fair, it is clear that within these communities there exists a diverse set of opinions concerning how and where to move forward. It should be noted that perhaps the most significant challenge of all lies in what many older community members described

that day as a willingness to return to the fields, to reconstruct that intimacy with the production of basic needs and food sovereignty that younger generations have increasingly turned away from. However, as Villavicencio and López Pardo point out upon concluding, these communal businesses provide a concrete, alternative rationality based on collective justice, reciprocity, and solidarity for the common good, thus generating a dynamic capacity for resilience in the face of a dominant liberal economic logic.⁴⁶ In this way, while it may be currently impossible to leave the oppressive system altogether, communities in the Sierra Norte have at least found ingenious ways of flipping the conventional rules on their head in the meantime.

Educational Autonomy

I thought it fitting to finish these four sections of local autonomy construction highlighting the educational visions of the Sierra Norte given that, at its most basic core, *la comunalidad* is deeply concerned with the creation of more harmonious futures and the possibility of new social horizons. In what follows, we will see that such a task will necessarily involve the voices of future generations, as well as the importance that an internally defined education will have in combatting harmful, homogenizing national narratives that have marked the indigenous classroom experience since the introduction of federalized education in the Sierra following the decade of 1930. We will first trace the history and impacts of such a repressive project, before then moving on to an exploration of two local, alternative educational designs in which the indigenous youth of today are encouraged to reconnect with

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 1214.

their cultures and values in an act of community defiance to century-long processes of national assimilation.

It is important to mention upfront that the following analyzation of the federalization of Oaxacan state education will not follow the traditional lines of a cost-benefit paradigm, so to speak. As Sigüenza Orozco necessarily points out, it is historically well documented that these post-revolutionary, national educational projects represented important financial and logistical support to extremely poor regions of the Sierra Norte and the inadequate coverage of state education that existed at the time.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, we will part from a perspective that recognizes the dual responsibilities of this endeavor in the formation of culturally sensitive curriculums, as well as the acknowledgment that the absence of such a pedagogical direction can represent important historical abuses, irrespective of certain benefits.

The beginning of federalized education in Oaxaca was a slow and co-existing process with current state and local structures.⁴⁸ As Jaime Luna details, for the mountainous region of the Sierra Norte, the nation's presence did not really begin to make itself felt until around 1940 and beyond. In fact, for a period there existed a local system that respected and supported the community experience:

There were municipal teachers and the community was free to choose them, even contributing part of their salaries. In the absence of pedagogical materials, teachers relied on community experience, that is to say, the student was closer to his or her culture. The use of their [native] language was more of a necessity than a line of work in the face of overwhelming monolingualism. The teachings reflected an intense relationship between work and play. Many of the principals... of the communities that nowadays guide the life of our towns were educated under this system.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Salvador Sigüenza Orozco, "El sistema educativa estatal y los primeros años de la federalización educativa en la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca (1920-1942)", *Relaciones*, vol. 142, 2015, p. 156.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 155.

⁴⁹ Jaime Martínez Luna, *Eso que llaman Comunalidad*, p. 53.

It is difficult to precisely date when these practices were phased out by the federalization process, but we do know that an important turning point was the creation of the 1937 agreement on the federalization of teaching methods. The federal government would now contribute almost 60% of the funds directed towards state education, and with this compromise, the obligation to follow the programs, methods, and systems adopted by the National Secretary of Public Education (SEP).⁵⁰ These new demands were to have special social interests as well, as clearly demonstrated in the subsequent 1942 educational reform that put an end to the rural school, and prohibiting the use of any mother tongue in the states' classrooms.⁵¹

The fervor for post-revolution national unity and development would only grow over the following decades, leaving its footprints all over the advancing project to provide a free, federal based primary education across the entire country. These programs arguably would reach a climax at the beginning of the 1960's with the national government dispersing free, obligatory textbooks to be used in every classroom. The cover itself says a lot about the dominant narrative at the time, with the State opting for "an indigenous woman of brown skin, dressed in a white tunic and accompanied by an eagle and serpent, the national flag, a book, and many different agricultural and industrial products."⁵² The strategies for indigenous integration did not stop here, however. Sigüenza Orozco helps to list just a few: ⁵³

⁵⁰ Salvador Sigüenza Orozco, p. 139.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 145.

⁵² Salvador Sigüenza Orozco, *Héroes y escuelas, la educación en Oaxaca. El caso de la Sierra Norte (1927-1972)*, DF Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2007, p. 240.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 249, 263.

1. In the 1960's, in governmental attempts to conserve "Mexicanism", loyalty and national sentiment was pushed through the creation of statues and adoration of the figure of Benito Juarez in schools across the Sierra Norte. Given his indigenous background and historical political trajectory within the country, this social capital was used to promote an image of heroism and triumph through reason and patriotism.
2. The foundation of the 1964 program "School for Rural Home Improvers". This program would be directed at indigenous women across the state in the search for a better *patria*. The methods of said project included offering an economic stipend for attending and was to "correct" indigenous customs by offering complementary knowledge on a wide variety of topics such as alimentation, hygiene, cleanliness, and importance of the family.
3. Throughout the 1960's there was special attention paid to the role of the now nationally incorporated rural teachers in instilling a patriotic spirit in the countryside. Specifically in the Mixe region of the Sierra Norte, this would be carried out through weekly homages to the nation's flag, frequent civil acts, and communal reunions to diffuse national news.

Upon beginning his 6-year governorship in 1968 and the growing importance to connect rural areas of the state to the more developed center, Oaxaca's Víctor Bravo Ahuja leaves little room to dispute the reigning mentality of the times: "only by means of roads will it be possible for monolingual indigenous groups to become Spanish-speaking and replace their primitive habits with higher forms of coexistence."⁵⁴ As is easily seen, these campaigns were not only to

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 246.

serve desires for greater national unity, but also to propagate systemic attacks imbued with deep-seated racism directed towards the termination of indigenous life and culture. It is from this cultural onslaught that we will now move on to examples of community-based educational projects with an eye to the relevance that these have not only through novel pedagogical methods but for the very formation and reproduction of community life.

Falling in line with other previously described community movements taking shape in the 1980's, across the state of Oaxaca emerged diverse proposals of decentralized, community education.⁵⁵ Over the next two decades these movements, working historically alongside the EZLN uprising and the formal birth of the term *comunalidad*, were to give rise to a plethora of community education projects, with just one of these being the formal creation of Indigenous Community Middle Schools (grades 7-9) in 2004.⁵⁶ As we saw with the communal eco-tourism businesses, the schools very structure and educational practices are linked with community organizational forms; namely, collective decision-making, collaborative work, and a focus on local knowledge and languages, among others. This is supplemented by a classroom priority that is known as the theory of social practice.⁵⁷ In this educative model the material selected is imparted through direct participation and exercise, and takes on special meaning in our current context. By applying this design to the values that help to reproduce community life, there

⁵⁵ Although outside of the scope of this work, the 1980's Teacher's Movement in Oaxaca would represent important historical antecedents to such proposals of decentralized education. Primary demands of local teachers would revolve around remedying internal corruption within Mexico's largest, national educational union (SNTE). For a more comprehensive treating of the topic, one can refer to Lorena Cook's essay, "Organizing Opposition in the Teachers Movement in Oaxaca."

⁵⁶ Julieta Briseño-Roa, "Participación y apropiación de prácticas escolares de niños y niñas en la educación indígena comunitaria de Oaxaca, México", *Indiana*, vol. 38, 2021, p. 168.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 168.

begins to develop a strong appropriation of such principles that otherwise would be deteriorated by traditional schooling methods.

Briseño-Roa provides an excellent example of this when observing the change in comportment of various indigenous children coming from other conventional primary-schools. To resume, several behavioral adaptations were noted as the semester unfolded in a Mixe community middle-school of the Sierra Norte: a gradual adaptation to performing most tasks in groups (communal work), a sharp decrease in physical and verbal violence regarding shared school materials (social collectivism/harmony), and a clear increase in their autonomous capacities to carry out long-term projects without the explicit supervision of a teacher (increases in intrinsic scholastic motivation).⁵⁸ The semester culminates in the oral presentation of final projects before the community. As a final demonstration of the impacts such a pedagogy has had, the spotlight is turned to an inter-community forum on state education laws that was held in 2014, with over 500 people present, including authorities and local indigenous leaders. After many other speakers, the three delegated students would make their way to the front, confidently take the microphone and narrate their educational experiences in Mixe and without any paper guide, something that even the attending teachers themselves admitted they would not dare to do.⁵⁹

As we head into a short discussion of present-day challenges to the reproduction and transformation of community-based practices in the Sierra it is important to keep these educational developments in mind. As we will see, the overlapping importance of the formation

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 173-74.

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 179.

of active community subjects, greater youth (and female) voice, and a sense of pertinence to one's pueblo will all signify meaningful issues forming current dialogue from the inside of these communities.

Community Challenges

After reflecting on the interviews and (limited) time spent in the Sierra Norte conducted for this research, I have decided it pertinent to add this brief section addressing a few community challenges. Rather than a decisive or comprehensive critique, this section is written with the intention of creating a dialogue that encompasses not only the abundant wisdom of these communal realities, but areas of internal friction and conflict in the hopes of privileging perspectives that are equally as important to the reproduction and transformation of social life in the Sierra.

As alluded to, youth and female voice will represent two significant areas of analysis. Using Aquino-Moreschi and Contreras-Pastrana's article on intergenerational subjectivities in different Ayuujk and Zapotecan communities of the Sierra Norte as a guide to explore these issues, let us trace a few of their trajectories over the past few decades.

Returning again to the 1980's, we find the clash of two historical realities that still marks a sense of tension in community life today. As we will remember, this decade would represent the emergence of a generation of adult community members dedicated to the defense of the natural resources, community self-determination, and identity as original peoples against an

intensifying neo-liberal State.⁶⁰ Yet, at the same time, these aggressive policies were provoking what is now a consistent pattern of youth out-migration and with it, dissonance between these families' expectations on their children's involvement in the community and the advancement of these historical struggles.⁶¹ As is stands right now, although youth recognize and value these familial and cultural ties, the prospect of unstable economic horizons that solely promise the security of basic necessities continues to push them outwards.

Adding on to the presence of economic pressures, ethnographic interviews with youth conducted as part of the study reveals significant friction concerning issues of freedom of expression, ranging from strict gender roles and ideas of sexuality, to how one should dress and act within the community.⁶² While there exists a recognition among many of the youth that they enjoy greater autonomy than their parents or grandparents, they still document customs such as strong control over female mobility (pressures to remain in the house, not to hang in the streets) and their connections with repressive ideas of sexual modesty and honor (preserve virginity, not have boyfriends) that carry heavy criticism and alienation if one deviates from these norms. As various youth conclude, these practices can often result in a greater desire to travel to the "North", a space that is coupled with visions of increased freedom of individual expression.⁶³

For Ayuujk and Zapotecan youth, it is clear that channels of dialogue about these issues must continue to open up, as they question what they consider to be a larger set of hegemonic

⁶⁰ Alejandra Aquino-Moreschi and Isis Contreras Pastrana, "Comunidad, jóvenes y generación: disputando subjetividades en la Sierra Norte", *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Niñez y Juventud*, vol. 12, num. 1, 2015, pp. 467-68.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 467-68.

⁶² *Ibid*, p. 468-72.

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 469.

representations of a static and traditional indigenous identity. Building bridges in between these subjectivities will be crucial as these communities look to not only retain the continuity and strength of their community identity and forms of historical resistance, but the capacity for dynamic change and growth in the face of both external and internal pressures.

Conclusions

The present work seeks to position itself in three principal focuses through which I hope to have cultivated meaningful dialogue. I will briefly touch upon each one in turn.

First, in the construction of historical consciousness. Although initial conceptions of the analysis were to be limited to the introduction and effects of Mexican neoliberal politics (conventionally defined as 1980-present), I quickly found this scope quite inadequate in being able to trace a more comprehensive historical reality. It was with this in mind that the investigation of post-revolutionary practices of internal colonialism was taken up, and I hope to have demonstrated that the former can be well understood as a modern manifestation of the latter.

Second, in the serious and respectful engagement with indigenous voices. The selection of *la comunalidad* as the paper's primary motor of analysis was done in an attempt to converse with these communities using their own language and concepts, to the best of my abilities. As detailed throughout, this community ethos and its set of organizational principles oriented towards the common good has allowed these pueblos not only to withstand and resist centuries of historical abuses, but to build living alternatives that have much to offer to

Western societies increasingly plagued by the ills of unsustainable capitalism and broken forms of democracy.

Third, in the creation of imagined futures. In the midst of growing environmental and social crises, the act of theorizing new and sustainable community horizons is arguably the first and simpler task. Working to bring such visions to practice is where the complexity inevitably enters. It is at this intersection where these communities continue to lead the way by showing us how to build bridges between merely theoretical knowledge and a deeper, more transformative knowledge in which we can reconnect ourselves with more harmonious social horizons.

The paths these communities have forged over centuries of abuse emanate courage and resilience that we in the “developed” world would do well to begin to take seriously. Let us open our ears to their call:

“They will rob us of our fruits,
they will cut off our branches,
they will burn our trunks,
but they will never, never uproot our roots,
for as long as *la comunalidad* persists, our ancient peoples
will always live... and surely the whole of humanity as well.” – Andrés Miguel Velasco⁶⁴

Carter,

He leído con gusto e interés este trabajo, es claro que dedicaste tiempo y trabajo en el mismo. Lograste acercarte de cuidadosamente al entendimiento de conceptos y prácticas

⁶⁴ Jaime Martínez Luna, *Eso que llaman Comunalidad*, p. 186.

comunales en el contexto de un Oaxaca oprimido y colonizado. Tu trabajo incluye datos interesantes y relevantes, contextualiza a los pueblos de la Sierra Norte en un tiempo post-revolucionario y se acerca al entendimiento de una cosmovisión Indígena que se denominó “comunalidad”, una visión a veces no compartida en otros pueblos, a pesar de los rasgos compartidos. Me hubiera gustado leer “tu voz” un poco más, incluyendo tu posicionalidad y tu papel en el proceso de “encontrar” principios comunitarios como parte de un ejercicio intelectual y personal (e.g. tus motivaciones iniciales). Tu escritura es fiel al discurso que ha caracterizado el trabajo narrativo-investigativo, esto es bueno, pero te sugiero “retar” la complejidad semántica y léxica a favor de una simplicidad que refleje un claro entendimiento de aquello que se discute. En otras palabras, buscar un lenguaje que nos acerque a la gente que no ha sido privilegiada con el discurso académico y que provea un balance entre lo que valoramos (e.g. comunidad) y la capacidad de entendimiento mutuo y colectivo. Esto es particularmente relevante cuando hablamos de temas como el que elegiste en este proyecto.

Felicidades, este es un trabajo enriquecedor y bien organizado.

Notas: SIT requiere el uso de APA para los ISPs.

Calificación: A

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