The Criminalization of Oaxaca Social Movement: Some Reflections

La criminalización del movimiento social de Oaxaca. Algunas reflexiones

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The objective of these notes is to develop some reflections about the social meaning of the transformation of Mexican electoral democracy into a space of dispute for representation among the political elites in order to access the diverse benefits derived from being the government in power.

Representation is linked with the right to vote that resides in the decision-making capability of individuals faced with the diverse offerings of different political parties. This has had an effect on social movements because their dynamics have become meaningful only if they develop ties with political parties, thus making their demands part of the party 's strategy and, therefore, enabling the movement to preserve a space of representation while also deriving possible benefits if the political party assumes power in the government (Bizberg, 2007).

Therefore, a social vulnerability that is the result of both the inability of State-run institutions to guarantee the different types of citizen rights, and the propensity of State officials to use their impunity to destroy society's organizational ability.

There is a contradiction or impasse in Mexican society: a low organizational capability and the impossibility to grow it effectively due to its destruction, which is promoted by the practices of the political elites.

This is how government officials make sure that a social movement's particular demands do not become universal; that is, that they become the demands of society as a whole (Zizek, 2007:26).

A collective's struggle to get its voice heard and be recognized as a legitimate participant in the space of political representation can be neutralized through its negation. This can result from the actions of enlightened technocrats who either attempt to convert the conflict into a matter of negotiation of positions and specific requirements, or seek to reformulate the conflict into a party matter or into a confrontational one between us (friends) and them (foes) that can only be resolved through police or military intervention. This is called post-policy (Zizek, 2007:28-30).

In the case of the Oaxaca social movement, Mexican post-policy oscillated between negotiation and repression. This was possible, also, because of the use of State institutions that made governability possible (Foucault, 2007:213).

The police repression of the Oaxaca social movement was justified through the criminalization of the social protest (Wacquant, 1998), which does not negate the fact that the conflict arose in the context of impoverishment and was, thus, linked with living conditions (Dahrendorf, 1988).

In other words, the so-called structural violence comes about as a result of the state institutions inability to protect individuals from the negative consequences of a capitalist economy for instance, poverty, unemployment and underemployment (Dubet, 2000:27).

Nevertheless, it is insufficient to consider structural violence, or even direct violence (as in the confrontations with the police), as the cause of the social movement in Oaxaca. This is why I have opted for an explanation based on the idea of post-policy.

The social movement of the state of Oaxaca emerged in the context of the electoral dispute for the Mexican presidency in 2006, demonstrating that electoral democracy lacked answers to the social demands that sought to stop the impunity of those in elected office.

However, the poverty of Oaxaca's population, for example, can be seen as evidence of structural violence. In 2002, it had a population of 3 641 774, of which 1 581 100 was between 6 and 24 years old. Its Human Development Index (HDI), as of 2004, was 0.7164, which means that its population had a quality of life similar to Cape Verde's, and, as a result, if Oaxaca were a country, it would be ranked as 106. According to the HDI, the state of Oaxaca was ranked #31 of the 32 states in Mexico (PNUD, 2005:194).

Alongside these conditions of material deterioration, the state of Oaxaca developed a legal framework that sought to strengthen electoral democracy through the inclusion of the traditional mores and customs of the indigenous population in the political process. In May 1995, Article 25 of the state's Constitution was reformed; thus, government officials of the more than 400 municipalities comprised in the state of Oaxaca have been elected through a traditional system, which has meant that even though the PRI's official hegemony in the state has waned, this new system has actually managed to maintain it (Anaya Muñoz, 2006: 11-13).

In other hand, the 1990s, in turn, saw the rapid growth of farmers' and indigenous peoples' organizations with a whole variety of demands ranging from issues such as the removal of the cacique powers, to the ability to decide about the future of natural resources and the marketing of agricultural products. These organizations and their demands were boosted by the indigenous uprising in Chiapas in 1994, grouped around the Zapatista Army of National Liberation. The limitations of the legalization of indigenous mores and customs, in my opinion, have to do with how they were linked to the electoral process to become another support for the PRI, which also managed to neutralize the demands for social justice.

On May 22 of 2006, the teachers of Section XXII of the SNTE went on strike and staged a teacher plantón or sit-in in the Historic Center of town in the capital of the state of Oaxaca. They demanded better salaries and benefits (Enrique Osorno, 2007:18).

On June 14, the state police proceeded to evict the teachers who continued to participate in the sit-in in the Historic Center of town. The teachers resisted, however, so the police did not succeed in removing everyone. This use of the public forces to deal with the blockade of streets and avenues was also evidence that governor Ulises Ruiz was fulfilling one of his electoral campaign promises, having vowed to take such a measure should the need arise.

The show of force on the governor's part actually had the effect of bringing together 360 social organizations[1] to form a coalition that was named the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, APPO).

On June 17, the APPO allied with the teachers of Section XXII with the objective of combining efforts and,

[1]The APPO is part of the legacy of the popular movements of the 1970s and 1980s. It managed to bring together Section XXII of the SNTE, the Independent Organization of Farmers and Agricultural Workers (Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesino-CIOAC), and neighborhood associations. Among the latter, the most prominent one was the Union for Revolutionary Struggle (Unión de Lucha Revolucionaria, ULR), which yielded the most visible leaders in the APPO: Flavio Sosa and Salomón Jara. The media appeared to have a strong preference for Sosa, though this in no way meant that he was the sole leader of the movement since the APPO was based on the concept of collective leadership. In terms of the organizations comprised in the APPO, there were two prominent ones: The Marxist-Leninist Mexican Communist Party (Partido Comunista Marxista-Leninista de México, PCMLM) and the Popular Revolutionary Front (Frente Popular Revolucionario, FPR), whose leaders had a discreet participation in order to avoid being detained, but who actively and strongly supported the rest of the activists in the APPO (Vázquez, 2006:20)

thus, formulate a sole demand: that Ulises Ruiz resign his post as governor of the state.

The decision to repress the APPO was legitimized on September 12, 2006 when the Chamber of Senators refused to accept the proposal of the dissolution of state powers in Oaxaca, which guaranteed Ulises Ruiz's permanence as governor.

The logic of confrontation defined friends and foes, along with the use of firearms. On October 27, 2006, the APPO activists confronted a group of armed policemen dressed as civilians who shot and killed the US journalist Brad Will.

This demonstrated how in Mexico it is not yet possible to transform the demands of a social mobilization into concrete changes, especially when what is being addressed is how the government exercises the rule of law and its power in the country, in other words, how it governs the people (Alexander, 2006:34-36).

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