

Teaching Rebellion; Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca, edited by Diana Denham & C.A.S.A. Collective

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BOOK REVIEW

Teaching Rebellion; Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca, edited by Diana Denham & C.A.S.A. Collective. Oakland: PM Press, 2008. Paperback,. Pp. 232.

*Where should we go after the last frontiers? Where should the birds fly after the last sky?
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air? We will write our names with scarlet
steam.*

*We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh.
We will die here, here in the last passage. Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree.*
- Mahmoud Darwish, from "The Earth is Closing on Us"¹

Teaching Rebellion; Stories from the Grassroots Mobilization in Oaxaca reflects the spirit of the historical teachers' struggle in Oaxaca, Mexico in the spring of 2006, which is rooted in the principal of radical (direct) democracy and social justice. The narratives assembled in this book are the voices of political implications of theory drawn from the experimental frameworks within this community struggle for "living wage, infrastructure repair, free school books and social services for poor students" (p.25). As the authors state, this book "is not a definitive assessment of the movement that took shape in Oaxaca in 2006, nor is it a comprehensive collection of the stories that people lived and carry with them...it is an effort to represent a cross-section of Oaxacan society, to reflect both the diversity of actors and the diversity of their experiences..."(p.21). This grassroots mobilization characterizes the movement active in challenging societal structures first started by the National Union of Educational Workers in Oaxaca. After a short while, unification of various citizens' mobilization has evolved into one of the largest and most tactfully organized community struggles in the country, and at least a million people have taken to the streets to demand social justice. Within *Teaching Rebellion* the centrality of praxis activates capacities, ideals and solidarities capable of challenging and reformulating societal structures. As one

indigenous community radio activist stated, "once you learn to speak, you do not want to be quiet anymore".

Throughout the book, we are witnessing new forms of organized struggle as a result of the policies applied by eighty years of single party rule of Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and its hegemony which "compress critical space and stifles critical thought" (Hill, 2003, p.1) within the social and political spheres. Under the control of PRI, the concrete realities within the city of Oaxaca inform us that the majority of the population "disproportionately burdened with poverty, corporate-led development projects have targeted communal lands rich with natural resources and biodiversity, dismantling indigenous people's rights to self-determination and ravaging their means of economic sustainability" (p.27-8). PRI's economic policies serve to perpetuate the interest of neoliberal policies in the interest of dominant hegemony and situate itself involving in the neoliberal model of education. The widespread poverty and marginalization as a result of state powered neoliberal policies concludes periodic waves of social revolts that have the capability of being constant foe of the government. In the first place, the street protest of teachers starts and evolves into one of the largest struggle in the country. As opposed to Ulises Ruiz Ortiz's words-the state governor as a member of PRI- *ni marchas, ni plantones* - no marches and no sit-ins (p.29), teachers and people of Oaxaca organize large marches including "the peaceful occupation of government buildings and television and radio stations, strikes, sit-ins, disruption of traffic with thousands of makeshift barricades throughout the city, public art, a 21 day hunger strike by members of the teachers' union, community self-defense against police violence with using sticks, rocks, and Molotov cocktails and the use of public spaces to construct altars for assassinated activists" (p.31). Throughout the struggle the sites of resistance organize under the name of *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos Oaxaqueños* -The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO)- a community organization that is rooted in dialogical communication through an involvement of its members in policy making processes. In time, APPO creates its own alternative public security forces called topiles and becomes the people's police and government. Then, the struggle develops integration with media in order to promote the alternative ways of communication and through media networks has the chance of speaking for itself. Radio Universidad becomes the voice of the movement and offers a medium to transmit their struggles.

Such a locally based social movements increasingly serve as the conduits that challenge the boundaries of the institutional politics within the larger political system, and pave the way for the embodiment of agency under the cultural, economic, and political constraints. What explains its power is giving expression to the multi-vocal and heterogeneous demands and fettering the potential predispositions to accept relations of domination. Throughout the book, we are witnessing the personal narratives which are not in silence or in some nebulous spaces but to capture the shared codes that undergird the current political, economic agenda. Authors conducted informal conversations with Oaxacans about their

memories of the conflict, and testimonies add a lens in which on the one hand illuminate the political agenda of the government and the impacts of neo-liberal policies, and on the other hand capture the spirit of struggle. People's sensuous experience with the atmosphere reflects the movement's spirit through the voices of 23 active witnesses within the struggle. The book clearly reflects the moments of struggle through each personal narrative and helps us recognize that individuals and the community have a remarkable influence on the formulation of the state policies. When accepting the 2004 Sydney Peace Prize Arundhati Roy indicated that, "We know of course there's really no such thing as the 'voiceless'. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard" (Jaramillo, 2005, p.xxx), the preferably unheard and deliberately silenced voices, in this book, insist upon recreating their own struggle in its own image and language which is a way from stripping its own agency based on the movement's principles of social justice, radical democracy and humanist values. Each voice within the book "denaturalizes the mythic status of oppression" and the light surges from the new pedagogy entries into oppression's closed rooms (Jaramillo & McLaren, 2009, p.3).

The collection of diverse voices show us how struggle is lodged *within* and *with* the praxis. The voices of Eleuterio, as a primary school teacher; Marinata, as a grand-mother; Sara, as Director of the Oaxacan Human Rights Network; Marcos, as one of the founder of APPO; Leyla, as activist from Committee in Defense of the Rights of the People (CODEP); Cautli, as a twenty-one year old medical student; Ekaterine, as a dancer and a student; Genoveva, as a member of Oaxacan Women's Coordinating Body; Tonia, as an activist; Francisco, as an engineering student and radio technician; Gustavo, as an independent journalist; Hugo, as a visual artist; Yescka, as a graffiti artist; Silvia, as a defender of Radio Universidad; Padre Arias, as a priest; Carmelina, as a Zapotec indigenous woman; Aurelia, as a maid; Carlos, as a founder of Union of Indigenous Communities of the Northern Zone of the Isthmus (UCIZONI); Pedro, as a journalist; Jenny, as an international human rights observer; David, as an agronomist and activist; Derwin, as a nine-year old child; Adan, as an elementary school principal from the movement, and at this point some of their words are worth quoting at length;

Eleuterio (as a primary school teacher): "A whole movement began to promote authentic indigenous education...but the general current in the government says that everything indigenous is backwards. If we keep being 'Indians', the nation won't progress" (p.45).

Marinata (as a grand-mother): "Hasta la Victoria siempre (Ever onward to Victory). That's what I believe" (p.62).

Marcos (as one of the founder of APPO): "It is not enough to know that we want change; we have to know what kind of change we want and how to bring about that change" (p.83).

Leyla (as an activist from CODEP): "the most important thing is changing the power relations between oppressed and oppressor. These relationships exist on the smallest scale within the family, within the neighborhood and within the community. So the idea of 'empowering people' starts from changing our own relations and making them the most egalitarian possible" (p.96). i

Genoveva (as a member of Oaxacan Women's Coordinating Body): "for a long time women did not have a voice or a vote in the communities; the men decided everything. But today' spaces are opening up for women little by little. Women are included in meetings, participate in discussions, and are allowed to vote. Things are changing because of everything we have been fighting for since the repression of 1996-1997, when we, as women and family members of political prisoners, saw the necessity to take action" (p. 126).

Francisco (as an engineering student and radio technician): "We tend to live passively. We think only of ourselves and we do not feel like we are part of anything bigger, like our communities or pueblos (towns). Mass media only encourages individualism, and that is the cause of our social passivity" (p.143).

Hugo (as a visual artist): "There is a beautiful word, radical, to change things at the root. That is what we have tried to do in this movement, and our hope lies in that idea" (p.176).

Silvia (as a defender of Radio Universidad): "On the streets, we learned to be more human" (p.205).

Adan (as an elementary school principal): "Social movements can sometimes be short-sighted. We're looking for ways to move into the future" (p.325).

Each of these voices prove to us that the movement created its own definition of the good life which is "beyond development", "beyond economy", "beyond individual", "beyond the nation-state" (p.332), and do not accept globalization that has "two attractive masks: as a political mask 'democracy', and as an ethical mask, 'human rights'" (p.333). The movement has its own definitions for "democracy" and "human rights" that allow a space for each human being below, above and within them.

Despite the strength of witnessing to local testimonies, *Teaching Rebellion* has some shortcomings. While the book contributes to the interpretation and explanation of the movement, the most missing part from the book is any concrete discussion of historical context and situating the agents within the historical and cultural aura. So despite book's commitment to praxis and revolutionary transformation, throughout the book authors provides not enough historical and cultural context to situate the movement within its past and within its possible future. This omission is critical considering this book for the reader who is looking for the historical and cultural boundaries that shape the radical transformation within the societies.

As final words, the book reminds us the poem of Nazim Hikmet, *Optimism*, (Blasing & Konuk, 2002, p.204) which says;

*The world's no run by governments or money
But people rule
A hundred years from now
Maybe
But it will be for sure...*

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