

BICRG Summary

*Confronting Dispossession: Strategy, Gender and Ethnicity in Oaxaca's Anti-Mining Movement*

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This past Fall, the Blum Initiative Collaborative Research Grant enabled me to conduct a follow-up trip to the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, where I had already performed 6 months of dissertation fieldwork in 2016 and 2017. Using ethnographic methods and semi-structured interviews, I am focusing in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region to understand rural and indigenous grassroots activism that seeks to prevent the expanding mining industry from entering communal lands. My dissertation will show how political, cultural, and demographic factors have influenced the emergence of a social movement that opposes mining and other megaprojects on indigenous lands. I explain how the tactics and strategies utilized by this movement and its organizations grow out of previous generations of social movements in this tumultuous region, as well as a deeply rooted sense of collective identity that still persists in the region despite rapid globalization in recent years.

Unlike many previous studies on environmental justice movements in Oaxaca and Latin America as a whole, my work also looks at how traditional patriarchal gender relations are reproduced within certain movement organizations, but challenged within others. In this region known for more egalitarian and “matrifocal” gender roles, various feminist ideologies aim to connect the social movement against global capitalist infrastructure projects to a maternalist ethic of life, land, and “mother earth.” I investigate the roots of this gendered framing, and its role in motivating activism that carries with it substantial risks for participants.

When I arrived in Oaxaca this past October, only 6 weeks had passed since a massive earthquake with an epicenter in the Zapotec indigenous city of Juchitan had destroyed thousands of structures and devastated many local economies. Hence, as is often the case in

fieldwork, my project took an unforeseen turn. I began to focus on how this 8.2 earthquake and the government's response (or lack of response) impacted the ability of the dynamic social movements in the region to continue mobilizing for their political goals. Observing grassroots efforts at what they call *social reconstruction* in the wake of this disaster was poignant, pertinent, and inspiring. As activists whom I had interviewed last year were shifting strategies to accommodate this new reality, and as ordinary people impacted by the earthquake shared their experiences and hopes with me, I came to some new understandings. While engaging with social science literature about how natural disasters are socially constructed and refracted through material power relations, I've identified a new fruitful direction that can form the epilogue (or perhaps the final chapter) of my dissertation. Social movements who are able to maintain resilience during unexpected shocks (by mobilizing the flow of resources, information and narratives through various channels and in different directions) are more able to maintain their legitimacy, sustain supporters, and/or attract new supporters (from "outside" as well as from within their own communities). Drawing on data from my past trip, I will present a paper on this topic at this year's American Sociological Association conference in Philadelphia.



As I reflect on this most recent field experience that was generously supported by the BICRG, I have begun to wonder: Have natural disasters been understudied by political sociologists and social movement scholars? It seems that, in addition to political events like elections, coups, wars, and structural adjustment, natural disasters can also pose political setbacks for social movements. At the same time, a natural disaster might introduce new political

opportunities for activism. In the context of rapidly accelerating climate-change related disasters like hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, this issue merits further conceptualization.

The quake's epicenter lies directly within the federally decreed "Special Economic Zone" that Oaxaca's indigenous movements had previously been organizing against. Activism that was anti-gold mining in 2016 and pro-reconstruction in the follow year is equally part of a conscious strategy to widen the movement's influence, and enable the whole population to act collectively in defense of what has been called *the commons*. Isthmus activists point out that the same financial interests who have promoted and stood to gain from energy wind parks, open-pit mining, hydroelectric dams, and other megaprojects in this geostrategic region are intimately involved in what journalist Naomi Klein calls "disaster capitalism," with the backing of the Mexican state. The significant biodiversity in this region's sea, forests, and rivers are seen by many Isthmenians as a biocultural patrimony to be defended against the depredations of a neo-colonial state and the voracity of extractive-sector corporations. (In this sense, the

movement I have been researching resembles many of today's indigenous mobilizations, from the Lakota Sioux at Standing Rock to the Mapuche of Southern Chile). For example, in the wake of Oaxaca's September 2017 earthquake, rural activists who have been defending their environment against exploitation also perceive their traditional adobe homes as worth defending against demolition by state-contracted construction companies.

From the 12 interviews I was able to carry out this past quarter, I learned how an anti-mining coalition in the city of Ixtepec is helping people whose homes and schools were severely damaged maintain a makeshift daycare center, while providing residents with independent technical advice from NGO's, engineers and architects that the movement has been able to recruit to its cause. According to testimonies I gathered, people consistently viewed such acts as a true reflection of the Zapotec culture of mutual aid, known locally as *tequio* or *guendalisa*, which stresses one's reciprocal obligation to their relationships. Residents who associated the movement's post-earthquake work as a revival of this indigenous custom often experienced the government's official response to the earthquake as the opposite: as more of the same plunder, graft, and neglect that they have long felt marginalized by. Movement organizations were thus able to maintain and expand their support in difficult circumstances, at least for now. I was also

able to observe and participate in meetings about disaster aid with agricultural producers, workshops at a social justice high school for quake-impacted community members, several seminars on the meaning of environmental justice and territorial autonomy, and a march against corruption and state violence. This rich experience helped solidify the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as not only a fertile site for ongoing research, but as my "home away from home" that will have much to teach us about



intercultural solidarity in our present era of socio-environmental crisis.