CONSTRUCTING UNGOVERNABILITY: 
POPULAR INSURGENCY IN OAXACA, MEXICO

by
Chris Halvorsen

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
THE DEPARTMENT OF GEOGRAPHY AND REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
WITH A MAJOR IN GEOGRAPHY
In the Graduate College
THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

2007
STATEMENT BY AUTHOR

This thesis has been submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for an advanced degree at The University of Arizona and is deposited in the University Library to be made available to borrowers under rules of the Library.

Brief quotations from this thesis are allowable without special permission, provided that accurate acknowledgment of source is made. Requests for permission for extended quotation from or reproduction of this manuscript in whole or in part may be granted by the head of the major department or the Dean of the Graduate College when in his or her judgment the proposed use of the material is in the interests of scholarship. In all other instances, however, permission must be obtained from the author.

SIGNED: Christopher Halvorsen

APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR

This thesis has been approved on the date shown below:

Sarah Moore   May 3, 2007
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

LIST OF ACRONYMS

I. INTRODUCTION

   Plan of the Present Work

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

   Power and Space
   The production of space
   Power and territoriality
   Social Movement Theory and Street Politics
   Urban movements
   Latin American Movements and the Question of Autonomy
   The Popular Assembly Movement in Oaxaca
   Context and Methodology

   Methods

III. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

   Background
   Post-revolutionary Oaxaca
   Social Mobilization in Oaxaca
   Section 22 and the Democratic Magisterial Movement
   Indigenous Politics
   Authoritarianism and Violence
   Inception and Intensification of the Conflict

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

   Street Politics
   Anti-movement Discourses
   The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca
   APPO and the State

V. CONCLUSION

   Further Questions
   The Future of the APPO

REFERENCES
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 3.1, Chronology of key events in 2006 ................................................. 56
FIGURE 4.1, Partial barricade in the city center of Oaxaca ................................. 59
FIGURE 4.2, Public meeting in the zócalo ....................................................... 69
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines recent events in Oaxaca, Mexico that demonstrate the continued relevance of the spatiality of resistance for understanding social movement activism and alternative political projects. Arising out of a violent confrontation between state police and the striking teachers union, the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca created spaces of autonomy and resistance that challenged the legitimacy of the state. The fluid movement between a politics of demand, in which social actors force changes in the state apparatus, and a politics of the act, in which movements construct new forms of social relations in their own sites of activism, represents the dual nature of practices that attempt to alter spaces of resistance while at the same time negotiating with broader social structures. The movement in Oaxaca is an example of the possibilities of political projects that recognize the need to move beyond mere resistance to form creative alternatives.
LIST OF ACRONYMS

APPO: Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca)
CNTE: Coordinadora Nacional de los Trabajadores de Educación (Coordinating Committee of the National Education Workers)
COCEI: Coalición de Obreros, Campesinos y Estudiantes del Istmo (Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students of the Isthmus)
COCEO: Coalición de Obreros, Campesinos y Estudiantes de Oaxaca (Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students of Oaxaca)
CROC: Confederación Revolucionaria Obrera y Campesina (Revolutionary Worker and Peasant Confederation)
FEO: Federación Estudiantil de Oaxaca (Oaxacan Student Federation)
PAN: Partido Acción Nacional (National Action Party)
PFP: Policía Federal Preventativa (Federal Preventative Police)
PRD: Partido Revolucionario Demoratico (Democratic Revolutionary Party)
PRI: Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
SNTE: Sindicato Nacional de los Trabajadores de Educación (National Educational Workers Union)
UABJO: Universidad Autónoma ‘Benito Juárez’ de Oaxaca (Benito Juárez Autonomous University of Oaxaca)
I. INTRODUCTION

As tear gas hung in the air on the morning of June 14, 2006, in Oaxaca, Mexico, a social movement was being born that would garner international support and take hold of the state for months. The governor of the state of Oaxaca, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, had ordered police to evict striking teachers and their families from the center of the city of Oaxaca de Juárez. However, with the support of fellow Oaxaqueños, it was in fact the teachers who drove the police out of the city, leading to a popular occupation of the city that lasted until late into the fall. The 25-year-old teachers’ movement in southern Mexico was, quite suddenly, gaining broad public support that would bring together diverse social actors to challenge the legitimacy of existing social and political institutions in Oaxaca. This support was vital in the creation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) in the days following the raid. This organization was a broad-based and integral piece of the social mobilization that occupied the city of Oaxaca for six months in the summer and fall of 2006.

The Popular Assembly, and the movement of which it formed a central part, rapidly extended its political project from a simple opposition to the state’s governor to a critique of the political and economic system at work in Oaxaca, one of Mexico’s poorest states. The critiques of clientelism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism formed the basis for a wide-ranging political project promoted by the APPO with the desired end of a fundamental transformation of Oaxaca’s political structures and economic policies. Behind these lofty goals, however, were the political practices of participants of the social movement who refused to reduce means to ends and desired to alter social relations
within the movement while they simultaneously strove for more extended and lasting social change.

This thesis deals with political conflict and the forms of cooperation that can arise from it. At a moment when autonomous political change has come to the fore in the writings on and practices of social movements, the conflict in Oaxaca represents a case through which to explore the complexities of the politics of autonomy (Chatterton 2005; Day 2005; Esteva 2001; Holloway 2002; Katsiaficas 2006; Mertes 2004). Intersecting with geography, we can think of the social movement’s creation of autonomous spaces that challenge dominant political and economic orderings. These types of political projects often combine with, even as they differ greatly from, hegemonic projects that seek to directly confront state power. A politics of autonomy suggests moving away from both traditional Marxist-inspired movements that aspire to take over the state and a liberal politics that reproduces political structures by addressing them as the sources of social change. As we will see, the Oaxacan movement was a blend of differing approaches, but its most interesting and profound aspects were, arguably, its affinities with the politics of autonomy that has had a growing role in social movement activity in Latin America (Zibechi 2004).

Latin America has recently seen dual trends within progressive politics. On the one hand, many commentators have pointed to the rise of left-leaning heads of state in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Argentina, and Uruguay. While these leaders are diverse in their political positions, there has nonetheless been a move to label them as part of a leftward shift in Latin America, and a return to state-driven leftist politics. At the same time, writers have pointed to the importance of the Zapatistas in influencing
autonomous politics and social movement activism that eschews state participation (Esteva 2001; Seoane 2004). This highlighting of autonomy can also be seen in aspects of the unemployed workers’ movement in Argentina, the World Social Forum meetings in Brazil and Venezuela, and in much of the indigenous organizing in Ecuador and Bolivia. While regional generalizations are problematic, this divide between the state-driven left and the social movement left may play an important role in future political developments in Latin America. The fact that Mexico has not followed the leftward swing in electoral politics has done little to hinder the growth of autonomous and civil societal movements, such as the Popular Assembly of Oaxaca, that are pushing the meaning of radical politics in new directions.

Social movement research in geography has been directed at the spatialities of movement practices. Much of this work is based on the spatial theories of French theorist Henri Lefebvre (1991). The impacts of Lefebvre’s theories have been wide-ranging in geography, including work on socio-spatial dialectics (Soja 1980; Merrifield 1993), uneven development (Smith 1984), and social movements (Martin and Miller 2003; Miller 2000). The social movement literature has largely attempted to reconcile Lefebvre’s production of space with theories from sociology, namely, resource mobilization (Martin 2003; Purcell 2001; Uitermark 2004; Wolford 2003). While these Lefebvrian efforts have been productive in demonstrating the intersection of spatial practices and representations of space in social mobilizations, the present work attempts to strike a different path. I will argue that the 2006 conflict and mobilization in Oaxaca can be better understood by abandoning Lefebvre’s spatial dialectics and instead taking up the spatial vision of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). Focusing on the
complex territoriality, shifting relations, and divergent practices of social movements, Deleuze and Guattari present more compelling analytics for the study of mobilization and resistance (Routledge 1996).

This study explores the spatialities of autonomy and resistance. Specifically, I will discuss how the social relations within the Oaxacan mobilization were spatially articulated, and how these changing relations impacted the organization of the Popular Assembly. Given that autonomous theory views the state as a non-neutral arbiter, the role of the state, and its relationships to the APPO, are also relevant as well. These state relations were variable throughout the conflict and within the movement itself. It is thus relevant to explore how the movement forged political relations with the state, in terms of both the federal and state level governments. What were the various ways that movement participants engaged, or attempted to avoid the state, and how did the Mexican state respond? This question becomes important for understanding the implications of movement practices in terms of constructing new social relations and political institutions in Oaxaca. At times fiercely autonomous, while at others engaging in pragmatic dialogue and negotiation, participants in the Popular Assembly movement constructed political practices that linked the internal social relations within the movement to those created with state actors. These variations affected the material practices of the movement and also movement outcomes and accomplishments. The transformation of the city into a space of autonomy and resistance has, and will have, serious implications for the role of both state and civil societal actors in Oaxaca.
Plan of the Present Work

The following chapter presents a theoretical framework for understanding the Oaxacan conflict and reviews the literature of social movements, resistance, and autonomy. Beginning with a discussion of Michel Foucault’s theorization of power, the thesis moves on to look at the differing ways that Henri Lefebvre and Gilles Deleuze treated power and space and what gain be gained from each approach. Subsequently, I review the major literature on social movements within geography, with a particular emphasis on urban-based movements. Finally, I conclude with recent theorizations of autonomous politics and how they relate to space and power.

Chapter III examines the historical and political context of the Oaxaca conflict. By looking at recent transformations in Oaxacan and Mexican politics, such as the growth of indigenous movements, creeping authoritarianism and militarism, and the continuation of the teacher’s movement, I situate the contemporary social movement in a field of shifting power relations. The chapter concludes with a chronological run-down of key events in the 2006 conflict.

In Chapter IV I describe the results of my field research from the summer of 2006 and bring together material from the previous chapters to provide an analysis of the Oaxacan social movement and political conflict. I attempt to draw links between the material spatial practices of movement participants and their political aims as represented by the creation of the Popular Assembly. While divergent in practices, goals, and means, commonalities can be seen in how participants in the social movement engaged with the physical space of Oaxaca in order to develop alternative social relations and frame a relationship with the state.
Finally, I will conclude by discussing the implications of this study for theories of social movements, resistance, and autonomy. I will draw out lines for future research that extend from this work and point to areas in our theorizations of social change that remain in need of elaboration. I will end with an examination of the current status of the Popular Assembly, the role it may still play in shaping Oaxacan politics, and how lessons can be learned from the APPO that can inform other political projects.
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 2006 movement to oust the state governor of Oaxaca intersects with a number of academic discussions. I will here focus on the areas of power, space, resistance, and autonomy. I will begin with a discussion of key theorists on the relationships between power and space, namely Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Deleuze and Guattari, with an emphasis on the work of geographers relating these theorists to social change and resistance. The chapter will then address work on social movements, focusing on urban-based movements. I will tie together theories of power, resistance, and social movements with a discussion on autonomous politics, particularly in Latin America. While incomplete, this framework provides some key directions for understanding the Oaxacan conflict and the importance of the Popular Assembly.

Power and Space

Social power can be understood in two general ways. The first implies a power over, a form of domination or control over human action. A second understanding of power considers it as a power to – that is a capability or a potential to act. These two conceptions can also be understood in a number of ways. Power is frequently viewed as an objectified thing in the world, as a tool to be held and wielded by individuals. An alternative is to view power as a relational concept; power does not emanate from and is not held by individuals, but rather is produced from the interactions between people and institutions.
The above definitions of power are incorporated in Michel Foucault’s theory of capillary power. He argued that viewing power through the lens of either the sovereign or of repression was problematic in that both notions treat power as a hierarchical process in which powerful actors dominate those below. In contrast, Foucault developed a notion of power as a process of capillary diffusion in which “individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (Foucault 1980: 98). In his analysis, Foucault moved away from individual or group domination and focused instead on the ascending, rather than descending, aspects of power. While the state and its institutions are still seen as sites of power, they lose their privileged, monolithic position when their limits are recognized. Because power is dispersed throughout society, taking control of the state without altering the micropolitics of civil society simply reproduces similar regimes of subjection. Thus social change through the exercise or capture of state power is insufficient “if the mechanisms of power that function outside, below and alongside the State apparatuses, on a much more minute and everyday level, are not also changed” (Foucault 1980: 60).

Foucault’s shift away from repression allowed him to focus on the positive, rather than negative, effects of power in society. This positive, productive aspect derives from the consensual nature of disciplinary power in which subjects are self-regulating, rather than dominated through force. A key difference between disciplinary power and repressive forms of power is a shifting focus from exceptional forms of power in which violence is enacted to a more banal and prosaic power that disguises itself. In both cases power is relational, but in the former case, the focus is on violence and coercion – aspects of power to which Foucault pays less attention. At moments of intensified social struggle
and conflict, however, these forms of power are arguably at as least as important as the more banal types, if not more so. Departing from Foucault, it is necessary to take into account the repressive apparatuses of the state that can be mobilized to counter threats to existing conditions. While state power itself is limited, it also limits possible change; power (in the sense of a capacity) may be distributed throughout society, but it is not an even distribution. The act of defining a political project away from the state still must recognize the role played by state actors and political violence in society. When individuals begin to break out of a regime of self-discipline, a coercive power is often enacted, either on the body of the individual, or in a manner similar to a clash of social forces. Even in the institutions examined by Foucault (the prison, asylum, etc.) one can see both the disciplinary power that he is interested in, as well as a coercive power which physically restrains and dominates individual bodies.

Taking on these notions of power, the critical engagement of scholars studying social movements has focused especially on the dualism of domination and resistance. In the book *Geographies of Resistance*, Pile (1997) argues for a theoretical framework that differentiates resistance from power. He argues that resistance occurs not solely in spaces defined by power relations but instead seeks “to occupy, deploy and create alternative spatialities from those defined through oppression and exploitation” (Pile 1997: 3). In Pile’s account, power becomes closely equated with domination, which stands in stark opposition to resistance. Resistance is not just an effect of power or domination, but can arise beyond power relations. While this formulation allows us to differentiate between the relations implied by both domination and resistance, and to treat resistance as more than just a mirror image of domination, this binarization masks the
inter-workings of resistance and power and leads to a potentially homogenizing view of practices of oppression and exploitation.

Challenging the dualism of domination and resistance Sharp et al. (2000: 20) argue:

No moment of domination, in whatever form, is completely free of relations of resistance, and likewise no moment of resistance, in whatever form, is entirely segregated from relations of domination: the one is always present in the constitution of the other.

Spaces of resistance can be created, but they always include some aspects of dominating power relations. Therefore it is not useful to absolutely separate power and resistance, but rather to show how power relations shape, and are shaped by, acts of opposition. Additionally, even the most “liberatory” social movements may contain “the creation of internal hierarchies, the silencing of dissent, peer pressure and even violence” (Sharp 2000: 23). Nevertheless, we can isolate some important characteristics of resistance that lead us to see that it does not merely reproduce hierarchical relations. The creation of resistant spaces and practices may certainly contain aspects of domination, but, as I will show in the case of the Oaxacan Popular Assembly, it also may facilitate the acknowledgement and challenging of those relations. Thus while “social movements … frequently suppress their own internal heterogeneities and sub-groups in the interests of some broader strategy,” this suppression does not go uncontested, but rather can be confronted within social movements (Sharp 2000: 23).

It is clear that equating power with domination misses out on the ways in which resistant practices are permeated with power relations and capacities. At the same time, any rigid separation between resistance and power analytically robs social movements of the ability to construct alternative spatialities and social relations, since their construction
requires the deploying of certain power relations. This does not necessarily mean a “power over,” but instead should imply power as a positive and productive social relation in the Foucauldian sense. Thus, Pile’s understanding of the potentially liberating aspects of resistance that differentiate it from processes of domination is a positive development but must also incorporate Sharp et al.’s Foucauldian notion of the constant entanglement of resistance and domination within power relations.

This discussion of power is incomplete, however, without a discussion of the inherently spatial nature of power relations. While there are many ways in which power may be understood spatially, two major trends within geography will be discussed: those originating from the work of Henri Lefebvre and others from the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari.

*The production of space*

Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) work departed from a Cartesian notion of space as a static container for social activities. He used structuralist ideas originating from Marxist theory to create a dialectical (at times trialectical) notion of the production of space (Merrifield 1993). Space was removed from its Cartesian plane and was seen as produced through its relationship with the dominant capitalist mode of production (Harvey 1989). The production of space has been viewed by some as an uneven process controlled by the interests of capital and elite classes, thus privileging the mode of production as the key factor in determining social space (Smith 1984). Lefebvre (1991) identified various aspects of space produced through these processes: representations of space (the space conceived by dominant classes and urban planners), representational space (the lived
space often dominated by conceived representations), and spatial practice (social space as perceived through routine and signs). These three spatial categories were treated as dialectically interrelated and produced through the actions of the state, capital, and possibly changed through contesting practices. Within his typologies, Lefebvre argues for a complex inter-working of the abstract and the material; the realm of lived experience and that of conceived or perceived space are only separable to a degree. Rather than treat these spaces simply as products, Lefebvre treats them as sites of production. This requires the insertion of a temporal element into his theory. The production of space is not instantaneous and is never completed, which leaves possible the failure of political projects. Revolutionary transitions provide the greatest opportunity for the creation of a new social space, but they merely provide the conditions for a process that extends forward through time. A transition from one mode of production to another can only be achieved through the creation of a new social space constructed within the old spatial order.

This framework operates as a representational system wherein the perceptions of space signify abstractions that represent dominant interests. Certain spaces are coded as “public,” thus privatizing the rest of the landscape. Commercial centers become sites of consumption and reproduce the hegemony of capital accumulation. In this manner space is fragmented and hierarchized. At its root, space is material, but “in modern space, the body no longer has a presence; it is only represented” (Lefebvre 2003: 88). The emphasis is placed on the passivity of consumers of space who become alienated from control over their everyday lives. It is only through the appropriation of spaces that a differential space can be produced that challenges the homogeneity of abstract space.
Lefebvrian theorizations were reworked to emphasize human agency, as a counter to the privileging of elite power in his work. Society and space were still seen in a dialectical and mutually constitutive manner, but the role of the economic base was removed from its privileged position (Soja 1980). Castells (1983) pushed this further by examining grassroots social movements, but fell back to the strength of structures over grassroots change. For Castells, socio-spatial processes were dominated by flows of capital, and social movements simply reacted to the actions of the state and capital. Few movements were able to produce new relationships between society and space that countered the disappearance of meaning of places caused by the mobility of capital.

Within the conflict in Oaxaca, social space can certainly be understood through a Lefebvrian lens, as participants in the social movement contested the state’s representations of space that had attempted to privatize public space. Through the resistance of movement participants, the meanings and uses of spaces were altered. Lived space was altered through the transformation of the city brought on by the barricades, graffiti, encampments, and marches of the movement. The occupation and appropriation of the city then provoked a reciprocal response by the state, keeping in place the dialectics of social space. This formulation does provide a gateway into an analysis of the conflict in Oaxaca, however it is beneficial to also look to alternative spatial theories. The work of Deleuze and Guattari presents a more fluid notion of social space that moves away from dialectics and representation, emphasizing mobility, decentralization, and micropolitics instead.
**Power and territoriality**

Building on the work of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari introduced a rhizomatic theory of social power that offered a further departure from traditional frameworks. Similar to capillary power, the rhizome is a de-centered assemblage constituted by material practices. This decentralization provides rhizomatic social groupings with resilience due to the constant formation of circulations and connections that are “detachable, connectable, reversible, [and] modifiable” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 21). The focus of the rhizome is on diverse networks and connections – “a moving matrix, composed of organic and non-organic parts forming symbiotic and aparallel connections” (Colman 2005: 231). This formulation allows us to view social assemblages as non-homogenous and non-atomistic entities composed of a widely varying and changing collection of social actors. Of course, society is composed of a mix of both rhizomatic and arboreal (i.e. hierarchical) tendencies, leading Deleuze and Guattari to warn of the desire for repression and the movement toward stratification and rigidity that can be found even in the most non-hierarchical of situations. These concepts are useful for understanding social change, not just the maintenance and reproduction of certain social segmentations.

A view of rhizomatic social change also requires the concept of micropolitics:

> It is wrongly said (in Marxism in particular) that society is defined by its contradictions. That is true only on the larger scale of things. From the viewpoint of micropolitics, a society is defined by its lines of flight, which are molecular. There is always something that flows or flees, that escapes the binary organizations, the resonance apparatus, and the overcoding machine (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 216).

The ability of states to organize themselves as central powers relies on the micropolitical organization of society. That is, what Deleuze and Guattari label as molar organizations create binaries and hierarchies, whereas molecular orderings still segment society, but
often challenge rigid hierarchies; for example when minority identity-based groups oppose racist, patriarchal or ethnocentric social systems. Opposed to Marxian dialectics, which focuses on molar contradictions, Deleuze and Guattari argue that social power is defined by its molecular limits - the lines of flight that escape reterritorialization by the state. This spotlight on the limits of power and micropolitics allows for a movement away from totalizing structural changes, and draws attention to spatial deterritorializations and liberatory lines of flight. Lines of flight have their own dangers and limitations, but present an outlet for an alternative politics of change.

Abandoning Lefebvre’s spatial dialectic, Deleuze and Guattari argue that social space can be understood through their conceptions of nomadic versus state societies.\(^1\) The nomadic society is that which flees from segmentation and arboreal hierarchies. Nomads deterritorialize the space of sedentary societies, rather than reterritorialize these spaces in the logic of the state or capital. The state, on the other hand, attempts to reterritorialize and striate space, a concept similar to Lefebvre’s abstract space: “One of the fundamental tasks of the State is to striate the space over which it reigns, or to utilize smooth spaces as a means of communication in the service of striated space” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 385). Smooth and striated spaces, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, coexist in dynamic and uneven forms. Striated space limits, controls, and territorializes, whereas smooth space opens up possibilities, allows for movement and fluidity, and prevents stratification. This is not a dialectical relationship, but rather one forming complex relations that do not create material binaries or classic dialectical contradictions.

\(^1\) In many ways, the nomadic/state society example should be treated as a useful typology, rather than a historically accurate depiction.
Work by geographers has been able to infuse Deleuze and Guattari’s theories of space and territory with the study of social movements resulting in a heterogeneous and complex picture of resistant practices. This is evident in Routledge’s claim that we can interpret social movement practices as rhizomatic: they take diverse forms, they move in different dimensions (of the family, community, region, etc.), and they create unexpected networks, connections and possibilities. They may invent new trajectories and forms of existence, articulate alternative futures and possibilities, and create autonomous zones as a strategy against particular dominating power relations (Routledge 1996: 512).

That is to say, much like a Foucauldian notion of power, resistance should be seen as a de-centered and dispersed process that can include strategic actions, but does not necessarily follow a unitary logic. This implies an acknowledgement of social difference in the perceptions, experiences, and meanings brought to – and gained from – social movement activity by varied, and often contested, subject positions (Routledge 1993). Spaces of resistance, whether they are barricades, organizational meetings, or marches, are transformed into places of importance for an oppositional politics. These spaces could be labeled “terrains of resistance”:

These terrains are manifested in myriad ‘spaces’ that include the physical and territorial spaces of streets, squares, buildings, forests, and bodies - the places of resistance; the collective spaces of the crowd and the spontaneity and saturnalia of conflict - the moments, packs and swarmings of resistance; the symbolic and articulated vectors and forces of dissent, the personal and collective spaces of identities, memories, imaginings, dreams and desires-the strategies and the voices of resistance (Routledge 1996: 519).

For Routledge, social movements can accomplish a deterritorialization of space into terrains of resistance “assembled out of the materials, practices, becomings and knowledges of everyday life” – a micropolitical formation of spaces that challenge the macropolitical logics of capital and the state (Routledge 1996: 517).
As I have argued, a Lefebvrian formulation of space provides a multifaceted analytic through which to understand the Popular Assembly movement in Oaxaca. However, a Deleuzian interpretation of the conflict’s dynamics adds another layer of complexity. Following the police action against the striking teachers, space in the city was dramatically transformed through a process of deterritorialization. The state was cut off from access to many parts of the city, while the creation of a relatively smooth space materially altered the city and enhanced the mobility and networking of movement actors. This was a productive deterritorialization, in which connections were formed between diverse social actors and groups. Deleuze and Guattari’s ideal line of flight is one that develops new relations between social assemblages and holds out against reterritorialization long enough to dramatically alter a political and social system. The extent to which the social movement in Oaxaca has created long-term changes is currently unknown; nevertheless we can gain insight into the practices of participants in the movement by focusing on their spatial and territorial aspects.

To arrive at a better understanding of how social movements relate to space, place and the state, I will now focus explicitly on social movement theories and then turn to theories of autonomous politics.

Social Movement Theory and Street Politics

Work on social movements in geography has emphasized the spatial workings of power relations and the embeddedness of political processes in given socio-spatial contexts. This theoretical approach is not a recent phenomenon, nor has it been the sole purview of geographers. As Piven and Cloward (1979: 20) stated:
People experience deprivation and oppression within a concrete setting, not as the end product of large and abstract processes…Workers experience the factory, the speeding rhythm of the assembly line, the foreman, the spies and the guards, the owner and the paycheck. They do not experience monopoly capitalism.

Nor do they experience neoliberal globalization. Just as oppressive conditions must be understood in concrete settings, so too must be reactions to those grievances. This understanding leads to a focus on the historical and social contexts in which struggles occur by situating those struggles in specific sites and places. As Gledhill (2000) argues, looking at the micro-politics of processes allows us to understand how power is grounded in everyday practices. Taking this further power does not simply “touch down” in the everyday from higher-level structures; it is wholly constituted in material practices that in turn create societal forces. Any discussion of social movement theory must take care to situate movements in their respective contexts and spatial situations. It is to such an examination of social movement theory that I now turn.

Arguing for the relevance of spatialities in the consideration of social movements, Miller (2000) provides an attempt to bridge geography and resource mobilization theory. This approach views social movement activities as forms of demands that were placed upon the state, with important considerations placed on the “scale-jumping” characteristic of these demands – movements could shift the target of their demands from local government to state, national, or international levels. Other work reconciling space with sociological theories focused on the distribution and networking of movement actors, the importance of the urban and rural built environments for protest, the routinization and appropriation of everyday life, and the embeddedness of social meaning in specific sites (Sewell Jr. 2001).
Space as the site of collective politics was viewed as part of a process of constant contention in which space acted not just as the arena for struggle, but also as a constitutive aspect of that struggle (Martin and Miller 2003; Wolford 2003). Space is thus seen as an instigator to collective action, a factor guiding the process of contentious politics, and as an outcome produced through the workings of these processes (Martin and Miller 2003). If spatial processes act as flows and networks, then place represents a fixity of those processes in specific nodes or moments (Martin and Miller 2003; Merrifield 1993). Place is the site of everyday practices and lived existence. It is imbued with value(s) and meanings through abstract economic processes and state actions, as well as those very practices and lived experiences. Places are constantly changing negotiations between social processes and actors; they are where contestation is manifested and where lived experience is situated (Martin and Miller 2003). While people have the ability to tie their experience of place to broader social processes and forces, they only directly know those processes and structures through their interactions within the places of everyday life. Thus place, as Piven and Cloward suggested, has a great deal of significance for collective action and grassroots politics. As Escobar (2001) argues, the defense of place by social movements is not a mere defense of tradition and the past, but a productive creation and celebration of difference. Similarly, in much social movement literature, a link has been made between place-based movements and the frequent location of acts of contentious politics with urban locales. It is this significance of the “urban” in social movement practices that forms the basis of the next section.
Urban movements

The urban has long been seen as a significant site for the study of social movements (Eisinger 1973; Castells 1983). Asef Bayat has characterized many urban movements as examples of ‘street politics,’ a set of conflicts and the attendant implications between a collective populace and the authorities, shaped and expressed episodically in the physical and social space of the ‘streets’ – from the alleyways to the more visible pavements, public parks or sports areas. The ‘street’ in this sense serves as the only locus of collective expression for, but by no means limited to, those who structurally lack any institutional setting to express discontent (Bayat 1997: 63).

According to Bayat, street politics often takes the form of everyday resistances. These should not be equated with a purely defensive resistance, as he argues that it is often offensive action. This can take several forms, the first being “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” whereby individuals alter a portion of urban reality to meet their needs. These encroachments take on a collective nature when individuals organize to defend their individually acquired gains.

We can understand street politics as taking on a highly visible and confrontational nature as well. Barricades, marches, policing, and other attendant features of intensive political conflict and social mobilization can show us the ways in which the materiality of the city is a constitutive force in the progression of social movements. As Tyner (2006) argues in his examination of the Black Panther Party, the strategies and discourses employed by social movements highlight and contest conventional notions of territoriality that play out in street politics. These are not quiet encroachments, but rather clamorous challenges to received wisdoms over who controls and has a voice in spaces of the city.
The urban has thus been viewed as a strategic site for the operation of forces of domination and resistance. Uitermark (2004) argues that the frequent location of highly visible collective action in cities is due in part to the “urban bias” and the localization of global processes in urban centers. Urban areas embody the construction of abstract space by capital and the state – a space that naturalizes the relations of its own production. Drawing from Lefebvre and the Situationists, Uitermark claims that social movement actors respond to the spatial alienation represented by these processes – the centering of many processes of power relations and alienation in the city necessarily leads to resistance occupying the same sites.

Of course the urban can be thought of as a discursively constructed concept, but this still has material consequences for the trajectory of urban social movements. At the same time, an urban-centered movement such as what has occurred in Oaxaca has certainly been vastly influenced by rural politics and has also spread beyond the city into small communities. While movements are often defined by their rural (e.g. the Brazilian Landless Workers’ Movement, the Zapatistas) or urban characteristics (e.g. the Paris Commune, the European Autonomen squatters’ movement), many movements transcend such a division. Nevertheless, while not seeking to uphold a rigid and untenable urban-rural binary, cities can provide a context for certain sorts of identity formations, state policies and projects, and spatial interactions (Jansen 2001). Cities form an arena for the definition of the relations between subjects and the state and a potential space for attempts to redefine that relationship through contentious action. The urban thus becomes important for questions of rights and social justice. Echoing Lefebvre’s (1996) claim that the right to the city is the right to urban life, Mitchell (2003) argues that cities
represent a space that is necessarily public and heterogeneous. But he identifies trends that restrict urban life to control by the abstract space of capital. Citizens must struggle for the existence and nature of the public sphere in the city through the appropriation of space aimed at the creation of liberatory “places of simultaneity and encounter” characterized by creativity and non-market exchanges (Lefebvre 1996: 148).

These types of autonomous spaces have been the focus of much recent work that points to their importance in the ability of social movements to construct alternative political engagements. While diverse in scope, the current emphasis on the politics of autonomy presents a useful lens with which to view the newest projects that promote social change.

Latin American Movements and the Question of Autonomy

Eckstein argues that Latin American social movements tend toward a form of street politics, because “in Latin America, real power is rarely vested in formal political institutions, and even when peasants, workers, and the urban poor enjoy formal political rights, they lack access to the effective, informal channels of influence” (Eckstein 2001: 28). But it is not just the poorest of the poor who find political expression through street mobilizations, as even those with fewer economic grievances often take to the streets in an effort to facilitate political change. While Eckstein attributes social movement activity largely to changing economic conditions, much protest is political in nature, even if it eschews formal partisan and electoral politics.

This concern was evident in earlier claims of the declining role of political parties in social movement organizing:
[Political parties] have not been indispensable for acceding to power (witness the cases of Cuba and Nicaragua); and that they become a dead weight impeding change when they take hierarchization and verticality to extremes, are reduced to defending the vested interests of certain groups or social classes, make an ideal of and practice violence (as they often do), or allow manipulation and debasement to fester (which they often do) (Fals Borda 1992: 306).

Many scholars pointed to the emergence of New Social Movements in Latin America that did not have a traditional class or party dynamic and were more interested in issues of identity and autonomy from political structures (Slater 1985; Escobar 1992). This was seen as a break with “old” movements that were viewed as overly rigid and hierarchical.

The idea of autonomy raises the question of the political nature of the new social movements. These movements were not involved in traditional liberal conceptions of politics as revolving around electoral cycles, policy formation, and governance, but were rather involved in a redefinition of politics (Katsiaficas 2006). The new social movements’ centering of identity and pluralism led to the fragmentation of politics, according to many scholarly accounts. With social organization being built around seemingly ever-smaller groupings, the potential for fundamental changes seemed limited. But Katsiaficas (2006: 250) argues that the newest social movements need not be constrained to “interest-group politics conducted by non-traditional means,” but can take on a broader transformation of society.

Day (2005) takes up this project of defining a new political alignment for social movements - one which simultaneously critiques both resistance and identity politics. Day argues that resistance reproduces and assumes that which must be challenged. Calling into question what he calls a “politics of demand” he claims that for radical social movements:
there is no force to which demands might be addressed. But the converse is also true – every demand, in anticipating a response, perpetuates these structures, which exist precisely in anticipation of demands (Day 2005: 89).

For Day, resistance, freedom and domination are never “pure” and the state is not a totalizing entity; no social system exists that does not have an “outside.” This leads to a call for a “politics of the act” that is based on affinity and solidarity across identifications and social differences, acknowledging a multiplicity of subject positions and also transcending the fragmentation of new social movements. While this represents a change in focus away from the “negative” connotations of resistance, Day errs in implying that social movements do not often simultaneously employ both a politics of demand and a politics of the act. In Oaxaca, the Popular Assembly built institutions that stressed autonomy and self-sufficiency, while at the same time pressuring the state to respond to their grievances. That being said, Day does place a beneficial focus on political projects that do not “ask” for change; instead they produce changes in specific social sites, much like Routledge’s deterritorializing “terrains of resistance”. In this manner we can see social movements as diverse assemblages that confront domination both internally and externally, employ an oppositional resistance, and that also create forms of political and social organization and participation of varying degrees of permanency.

Day explicitly rejects Gramsci’s idea of hegemony in his normative calls for social activism. Following Holloway’s (2002) argument against the use of state power for the purpose of social change, Day posits that resistant practices that align with the state simply reproduce liberal capitalism. In this view, the use of a hegemonic politics on the part of resistant groups in order to capture state power is a limited alternative politics. In the traditional Gramscian formulation, the seizure of state power is attendant on the
ability of civil societal actors to gain control over political society (Gramsci 1971). This centers politics within the state and thus directs social engagement towards state actors. The effect of state-centrism is to ignore and limit the political possibilities of non-state actors and to contribute to a furtherance of a politics of demand.

The newest social movements are not autonomous from some generalized political sphere- they do seek to transform the meaning of politics. The critiques of new social movement theory, however, force us to grapple with what exactly movements strive to be autonomous from, especially if it is true, as Hellman argues, that “the question of autonomy is fundamental to new social movements wherever they arise” (Hellman 1992:54). Is this a regional autonomy, or is it political, economic, cultural, ethnic, and/or linguistic? Is it aimed at the individual or collective social groupings?

Paul Chatterton (2005) defines autonomy as a struggle for mutual aid and self-organization that avoids individualism and egoism, instead opting for collectivism and community building. It is a political project that privileges cooperation over competition and rejects hierarchical social institutions as a means for problem solving and decision-making. So it is not only institutions such as the state from which movements desire autonomy, but it is also from certain sets of social relations that atomize individuals by treating them as state subjects within a capitalist market. It is in this manner that autonomy as an organizing principle and political process, rather than an event or state of being, has influenced social movements throughout Latin American, from the Movement of Unemployed Workers in Argentina, the Zapatistas in southern Mexico, and the landless movement in Brazil, amongst others.
Arguably the most important influence on recent Latin American ideas of autonomy has come from Zapatismo. Obviously important here is the declaration by the Zapatistas that they do not wish to take state power. Beyond this however, and perhaps more importantly, is that Zapatismo represents an even broader transition away from the achievement of a “final objective” at all (Zibechi 2004: 393). While this is not meant to downplay the presence and effect of Marxist-influenced groups within many movements, Zapatismo has resulted in a questioning of the relationship to the state, the meaning of revolutionary change, and in a breaking down of the dichotomy between means and ends (Marcos 2004). Within Zapatismo horizontal social relations replace hierarchical ones, indigenous autonomy is privileged, and needs are addressed without waiting for states to grant requests, all done through “the de facto creation of territories in which collectives build their new world, gaining spaces in which they seek to earn their living, but also to establish fair, supportive relationships” (Zibechi 2004: 396).

At the same time, autonomy does not require ignoring the very real actions of the state, nor of eschewing formal organizations (Seoane 2004). Rather, autonomy is a guide to create a balance between individual freedom and collective capabilities, leadership and direct decision making, while being always careful to avoid the tendency to stratify and rigidify relationships. This provides space for the “others” of society that do not fit within binary frameworks and for a re-evaluation of the temporal scales of social change (Marcos 2001). Social change becomes an unending process of the construction of egalitarian social relations and resistance to the power of the state and other top-down societal institutions. As Esteva (2001) argues, autonomy provides a critique of formal representative democracy, which derives from a liberalism that does not treat individuals
as self-governable, but rather as the source for the legitimacy of the concentration of political power in the state. Autonomy elevates participatory forms of democracy that result in political decentralization. This political project presents an ambivalent relationship with the state: should autonomous movements subsume their demands within state political structures or resist capture by the political system? More importantly, what are the practical and material effects of different relationships that social movements have with the state?

At the present moment, I will draw together the differing theories of power, space, resistance, and autonomy in an attempt to delve more deeply into the Oaxacan conflict. I will discuss the questions that form from the synthesis of these concepts and how they arise from, and may be applied to, social movement practices in Oaxaca.

The Popular Assembly Movement in Oaxaca

As we will see in the following chapter, the conflict in Oaxaca has numerous antecedents. Using Foucault and Deleuze to view the micropolitics of power helps us not only to understand the significance of these antecedents, but also the actions of the social movement that developed from the conflict. These micropolitical practices mesh well with the ideas of “terrains of resistance” and street politics that come out of social movement theory. The material actions by movement participants in specific sites constitute any social movement and it is through these practices that meanings and values are produced. Here I arrive at the main question: how are social relations transformed through such street politics, that is, how did political practices in the city of Oaxaca shape
social relations within the movement as well as alter the social movement’s relationship with the state?

In this regard, the question of autonomy becomes vital for an understanding of the Oaxacan conflict. While I am not arguing for an identification of the Oaxacan Popular Assembly as a “new social movement,” the literature that has arisen from new social movement theory is useful in its focus on the politics of autonomy. Oaxacan activists developed complex relationships with the Mexican state characterized by autonomy, negotiation, and violence. Additionally, the broad political engagement and the fundamental and widespread changes sought by the APPO addresses Katsiaficas’ (2006) uneasiness with social movements that do not take on such goals of systemic transformations. Given that the APPO was born out of intense conflict, it was able to transcend, to a degree, the limitations of disjointed identity politics by consolidating many groups and individuals into a single coalition. This bridging of difference follows the ideas of scholars who argue that there has been a renewal in cooperation between trade unions and other civil society groups (Lier and Stokke 2006). The coalition of the teachers’ union with Oaxacan political and civic groups, NGOs, regional groups, and other trade unions, represented the strength of solidarity, but also presented moments of conflict. The organizational structure and goals of the assembly are not wholly novel, but do possess unique characteristics that set the movement apart from historical predecessors and also situate it as an useful example for creating and understanding both present and future political projects. Viewing the movement through the lens of theories of autonomy, I will attempt to draw out some of these implications and develop an
understanding of what autonomy means in the context of the Oaxacan Popular Assembly and how it has played out as a principal for participants’ activities.

By examining the diverse activities within the Oaxacan conflict, from street demonstrations to the organizational politics of the APPO, I hope to understand the internal heterogeneity of the movement as well as the many relations that developed between participants and the Mexican state. In order to address our central question, I will focus on three major sub-questions: What were the differing practices and relations of the movement participants, both in the “streets” and in the Popular Assembly? What were the organizing principles of movement participants and how did these ideals link back to their material practices? Finally, what were the movement’s relationships with the state and how did these change over time? I will now move on to discuss the research methods that I employed to address these issues, followed by a background of Oaxacan politics that will seek to situate the current conflict both spatially and temporally.

Context and Methodology

With funding provided by the Tinker Summer Field Grant sponsored by the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Arizona, I conducted field research in June and July of 2006. This research has shifted focus dramatically since its inception. While I originally planned to research neighborhood and community-based social movements in Oaxaca, the outbreak of widespread political conflict in the state led me to alter the direction of the study to look at the social movement spawned from the teachers’ strike.

Arriving in Oaxaca on June 17, three days following the police’s attempted eviction of the striking teachers, I was immediately placed in the midst of a new, rapidly
growing social movement. I quickly realized that pushing forward with my initial project on neighborhood organizations would not be the best course of action; the current conflict seemed not only more interesting and visible, but also a more important and pressing subject. This change presented an immediate difficulty in rethinking and adapting my research plan to a new topic. Many of the general questions remained the same; how social movement practices are spatially enacted, the relations that develop between social movement participants and state institutions, and the new sets of relations that may be produced through contentious politics. However, I had to rapidly acquire the background information necessary to understand what was then happening with the emerging movement in Oaxaca. Thus much of my initial time in Oaxaca was spent doing background research in the public library and the newspaper archives in order to learn the history of the teachers’ movement.

As I was undertaking this archival research, I was also observing the activities of participants in the movement. I spent time in the teachers’ encampment and marches. The day I arrived in Oaxaca was the day of the first meeting of the Popular Assembly, thus over the next few days I was able to observe some of the initial meetings held to discuss the nature and role of the new organization. Through the month of July I continued to establish contacts within the movement and used my growing knowledge of the historical background to guide my development of interview questions.

Methods

The research methods that I employed while in Oaxaca were qualitative in nature and sought to “begin with a broad, general set of questions or understandings about the
phenomena under investigation and then become more focused as the research progresses” (Snow and Anderson, cited in Snow and Trom 2002: 153). My research was pinned to the initial experiences and observations gained from the Oaxacan conflict as participants’ own viewpoints shaped the progress and direction of the project. Additionally, with the focus of investigation being the multiple values and sociospatial practices of movement actors, the “thick” detail offered by the case study was a useful tool for uncovering the complexities of movement processes. The main weakness with this strategy is the limitations it presents to generalization. A key assumption underlying my use of this approach is that the case study implies that the selection of different cases will lead to different observations and outcomes. The importance is the uniqueness and not necessarily the similarity of the multitude of possible cases. Nevertheless, a degree of generalization is possible given Snow and Trom’s (2002) distinction between statistical and theoretical generalization. Using a single study to develop new theories or to refine and/or expand existing theoretical models is well within the realm of a case study.

Central to the research methods that I used was participant observation, a method employed when the researcher directly observes, and often participates in, movement actions (Lichterman 2002). This method employs fieldwork that has written notes and observations by the researcher as the primary sources of data. These observations came from my presence in group meetings, observation of organized actions and daily functions, and informal conversations with group and community members. The data collected from these sources is vital in understanding the movement’s goals and the everyday social and spatial practices they employed to meet them.
In Oaxaca, I was observing the daily activities within the movement: the routines of the encampment and barricades, the protest marches, public meetings, street graffiti, and informal conversations. At times I would take notes on these observations at the scene, but generally the note-taking process would occur at the end of each day. My role as a researcher leaned more toward the “observer” rather than the “participant,” which had clear impacts on the types of data and access that I had to the movement. The role of the researcher is directly connected with the information he/she is able to uncover and the access they will have to movement resources, operations, and behind-the-scenes discussions (Snow et al. 1986). I was more interested in the views and actions of “regular” movement participants than leaders. This, combined with the lack of time, pushed me to eschew establishing contacts in the teachers’ union in order to gain access to official resources and individuals. Instead, I focused on the large number of people politically active in the streets. This provided me with information on what spurred people to support the movement, their spatial practices in the city, and also proved helpful in looking at the decentralized nature of the movement and the relative unimportance of a leadership hierarchy. While pushing for official access may have given me more information on decisions going on within the union and negotiations with the government, it would have also swayed my analysis towards a vertical look at the organization of Section 22 and the Popular Assembly, rather than a focus on my interest, the arguably more important horizontal relations created within the movement.

Integrated with the participant observation was a set of semi-structured and unstructured interviews. These interviews began with general questions so that I could gain familiarity with what was going on within the movement. The semi-structured
format allowed me to get at the topics movement participants feel are important, but still left room for the respondent’s experiences and interpretations to be heard by a previously unaware researcher (Blee and Taylor 2002). The issue of sampling was a major issue that I addressed. Considering the fact that there were literally thousands of potential research informants in the streets of Oaxaca, I was forced to narrow down whom I would talk to. I began by approaching random individuals who seemed to be affiliated with the teachers’ union. Interested parties directed me to other people whom they felt it would be beneficial for me to talk with. I attempted to interview a mix of people involved with the movement including teachers, Popular Assembly members, unaffiliated supporters, and others unattached to the movement, but strongly affected by the conflict. I conducted fifteen interviews that lasted between 15-30 minutes. Within these interviews, I was able to ask questions dealing with participants’ perceived roles in the movement, their thoughts about the state government, and how they situated the movement in relation to Oaxacan and national politics.

While the use of interviewing offers the possibility of deep and critical insight into individual values, it can also be used as a tool of power. The interviewer must keep in mind his/her possible role in shaping the responses of the interviewee (Fontana and Frey 2000). At the same time, this negative potential of interviewing can also be turned into a potential positive by reversing the equation and acknowledging how, especially in an un-structured environment, the interviewee can also shape the questions and ideas of the researcher. My use of unstructured interviews took the form of both informal, and often unsolicited, conversations with individuals, as well as my participation in discussions among movement participants. Given the unplanned nature of these
conversations, I generally attempted to write down my notes and reactions as soon after the encounters as possible. These discussions were especially helpful in that the topics were driven by those active in the movement, thus, as Dunn (2005: 88) notes, my questions became secondary to the issues of importance to the informants.

Additionally, the highly contentious nature of the political climate while I was in Oaxaca was another limiting factor. I had to make a concerted effort to protect my research informants by avoiding any links between them and my notes and findings. Given the recent history of police intervention, it was unclear how participation in the movement would be treated by the state, and thus participants were at risk of possible arrest due to their active support of the social movement. This led me to eschew recording interviews, instead opting for handwritten notes (This decision also helped reduce the potential lack of trust between myself and informants, another result of my brief stay in the field). Therefore, in analyzing the interviews, I had to rely on my notes and short quotations, rather than full transcripts.

As mentioned, I performed some archival research in order to gain familiarity with the history of the conflict and to fill in the gaps left by my other methods. This research focused mainly on past and current Oaxacan newspaper accounts of the movement and gave me a historical context for the teachers’ movement that spawned the 2006 conflict. The newspaper records provided information on state actions, negotiations, and occurrences around the state that I was unable to obtain through discussions with movement participants and observations within Oaxaca City, thus supplementing the short duration of my research. Additionally, I used published texts of the Popular Assembly, including resolutions, declarations, and meeting notes, to gain
more insight into how the APPO’s organization developed over time and the political positions it took. Given my relatively brief time in the field, I continued to collect information following my departure. I followed developments within the social movement through reports in Oaxacan and Mexican newspapers, radio broadcasts from Oaxaca, and continued communication with contacts made in Oaxaca.

The methods employed allowed me to better understand my research question. Through my observations I was able to gain insight into the spatial practices of movement participants and, combined with the interviews, see how those practices related to the organizational politics of the social movement and the Popular Assembly. The interviews placed the movement participants in a national context in a manner that allowed me to understand some of their ideas about the role of the movement and its relationship with the state.
III. BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Background

On the surface, the recent conflict in the state of Oaxaca dates back to the spring strike of Section 22 of the Mexican National Education Workers Union (SNTE). Beginning in May 2006, the striking Oaxacan teachers occupied the zócalo (town square) of the capital city of Oaxaca. In the midst of failing negotiations over their demands for salary increases and increased educational resources, the state government responded by sending in several thousand police on June 14 to evict the teachers, their families and their supporters from the encampment in the zócalo. The police action failed, however, and in the following days the teachers’ union joined forces with over 85 other organizations to form the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca - APPO). The central demand of the assembly was the removal of the state governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, but their platform soon expanded to address broader changes in Oaxaca’s political, economic and social conditions.

Beyond the proximate cause of the June 14 police raid, the escalation of the conflict and the formation of the Popular Assembly can be traced back to several developments within contemporary Oaxaca politics. Among these are the history of the teachers’ movement in southern Mexico, the growing political repression on the part of the state government, and the growth of indigenous political movements in Oaxaca.
Post-revolutionary Oaxaca

Oaxaca, located in southeast Mexico, is the country’s most rural state, with only 20% of its population living in an urban setting, and its most indigenous, with 70% of the population identifying as indigenous (Morales 1999). The agricultural base of Oaxaca has also led it to be one of Mexico’s poorest states, as well as a major source of out-migration (Clarke 2000; VanWey, Tucker and Diaz McConnell 2005). Long exhibiting great socio-economic disparity, much of Oaxaca’s history has been characterized by a relative disengagement with outside political powers, resulting in a degree of isolation and independence from colonial Spanish rule as well as from the post-independence Mexican state (Murphy and Stepick 1991). An added effect of this isolation has been limited funding from the federal government and a small state budget (Clarke 2000).

While the state is predominantly rural, the state’s capital, Oaxaca de Juárez, exhibits many trends found within other Latin American urban centers, such as increasing population, migration, and informal development (Angotti 1996). The city comprises nearly half a million of Oaxaca’s 3.5 million residents. It is at least a temporary destination for many migrants from rural southern Mexico, which has led to a rapidly increasing urban population and housing shortages over the last fifty years. This migration and growth has created a situation of tenuous access to urban services such as electricity and treated water and to squatter settlements in the colonias populares.

Despite Oaxaca’s location at the periphery of Mexican economics and politics, it has still felt the effects of national political transitions. As with the country at large, Oaxacan politics were dominated by the Institutionalized Revolutionary Party (PRI) in the decades following the Mexican Revolution. Until political reforms in the 1990s, all
elected officials since 1929 in Oaxaca had been from the PRI, a situation mirroring national Mexican politics until the 2000 presidential victory by Vicente Fox Quesada and the conservative National Action Party (PAN). The PRI had been successful at maintaining power through a combination of repressive and clientelist practices. Through the 1990s, especially following the contested 1988 presidential election, the PRI had been gradually losing support, with its patronage policies no longer sufficing; clients would take the PRI’s offerings and not return the favors with votes (Dresser 2003). The victory of Fox and the PAN was thus a culmination of a gradual transition to electoral democracy, although the PRI remained powerful in several states, including Oaxaca. With recent electoral failures, the PRI is currently seeking to hold on to its remaining power and to redefine itself in relation to the ruling PAN and the center-left Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), which is popular in Oaxaca. During the PRI’s lengthy period of single party rule, it was never politically homogenous. Rather, the party has incorporated a variety of political positions, ranging from more conservative elements to more populist ones. With the rise of left and right wing parties, the PRI may be forced to narrow its ideological spectrum, and define itself beyond simply a defense of the “revolution” (Dresser 2003).

The continuation of traditional PRI politics in Oaxaca is represented by both the presence of clientelism as well as coercion. It is not uncommon for bags of cement to be delivered to homes and communities with the understanding that it is given with the expectation of political support. There is at least a belief that withholding a vote for the PRI will result in losing social welfare payments from the government (Stephen 2002). Thus, for many Oaxacans the PRI has become synonymous with monthly subsidy checks,
with less attention paid to general political positions or ideologies. And, as Clarke (2000) argues, despite the gradual weakening of the PRI, it is still firmly entrenched in Oaxaca’s politics and has made attempts to co-opt municipal level governance. Nevertheless, there has been frequent contestation of the power of the political elite in Oaxaca that has challenged the PRI’s predominance.

Social Mobilization in Oaxaca

Organized collective action has a long history in Oaxaca, but grew in strength and intensity in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Following the student movement in Mexico City in 1968, student movements in Oaxaca became highly active and radicalized through the 1970s. In an attempt to assuage accusations of repression following the 1968 massacre of students in Tlatelolco, the federal government took a relatively more tolerant position dealing with social movements (Murphy and Stepick 1991). In Oaxaca, student organizations, such as the Oaxacan Student Federation (FEO) and the Worker, Peasant and Student Coalition of Oaxaca (COCEO) became active around a variety of issues. These groups defended indigenous movements, urban squatter settlements, university autonomy, and labor union independence. In 1974 COCEO waged a campaign in support of municipal workers through a series of strikes, commandeering of buses, and the formation of independent unions. Through these actions workers gained pay increases, shortened working hours, and improved access to health care (Murphy and Stepick 1991).

The successes of the student movement hit an obstacle with the election of Zárate Aquino as governor at the end of 1974. Aquino used the military to crack down on student opposition and land invasions, broke up trade unions, and limited the political
rights of non-PRI politicians (Clarke 2000; Murphy and Stepick 1991). Conflicts between social movements and the government grew in 1975 and 1976, with several issues intersecting to create a crisis of governability. Differing from previous revolts against local government, such as the movement led by the economic elite that brought down governor Mayoral Heredia in 1952, the mobilizations against Zárate Aquino were composed of fewer elites, and more radical students, workers, campesinos, and opposition politicians. Beginning in 1975, the Universidad Autónoma ‘Benito Juárez’ de Oaxaca (UABJO) was shut down by recurring strikes in protest of the appointment of new directors and a rector. Concurrently, municipal elections were disputed when non-PRI candidates were excluded, and strikes were held in Oaxaca City to protest hikes in bus fares. In February 1977, striking students clashed with pro-government groups as businesses throughout the city were shut down. The day following a massive crackdown on strikers by state police, Governor Zárate Aquino resigned and, in the following months, COCEO was effectively destroyed through government repression and exploitation of factionalism. With the succession of a hard-line government following Zárate Aquino, some movement leaders were co-opted into joining formal political channels, and those who remained active were either marginalized or repressed (Zafra 2002).

This period of Oaxacan politics shows the history of cooperation within social mobilization between various sectors of the populations, represented by the COCEO coalition. While COCEO did not survive factionalism and repression, it was survived by an affiliated group called the Worker, Peasant and Student Coalition of the Isthmus (COCEI), which has been politically active up to the present day. Additionally, while
much of the protest activity was focused on Oaxaca City, the issues addressed represented a broad constellation of Oaxacan society. Urban and rural politics were interwoven in terms of actual political practice, and a rigid distinction between the two was not always clear when mobilization was enacted.

Section 22 and the Democratic Magisterial Movement

The contemporary teachers’ movement in Oaxaca can be usefully traced back to 1980, when the teachers of Oaxacan Section 22 joined a growing group of dissenting union locals struggling against the authoritarian nature of the national education union. The movement called for increased democracy within the internal structure of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE), as well as for changes in Mexico’s educational system, which had seen funding cuts as the government instituted fiscal austerity programs and struggled to pay back mounting International Monetary Fund debts (Martínez Vásquez 2004b; Martínez Vásquez 2005). An opposition group - the National Coordinating Committee of Education Workers (CNTE) - set itself against the powerful PRI Vanguardia Revolucionaria faction that ruled the national union. Vanguardia was accused of corruption and politicization in the naming of teaching and union positions (Zafra 2002). The leadership was accused of being too close with the government and receiving patronage positions, given that both the union and the Mexican state were controlled by the PRI. To end the massive teacher’s strike, in both Oaxaca and Mexico City in the spring of 1980, the dissenting teachers were offered a partial recognition of their demands, including a pay increase and recognition of their local leadership. However, the main grievances of authoritarianism and lack of adequate funding
continued unabated as the promises were left unrealized, leading to a continuation of labor strikes throughout the 80s and 90s.

After the mobilization of 1980, Section 22 advanced a series of desired union reforms: non-reelection and revocability of leaders, grassroots participation, free political affiliation, rejection of state or party control, democratic decision making, creation of alliances with workers and campesinos, and an end to corruption (Martínez Vásquez 2006). The struggle to realize these demands resulted in more confrontations with Vanguardia throughout the 1980s. PRI-backers from that faction occupied the Section 22 union building in October of 1983, and Section 22 members fought through 1985 and 1986 for an open congress in which to choose their new leadership. This was a contentious period in which Oaxacan demands went unanswered and teachers saw falling salaries and educational funding.

As a part of the CNTE, Oaxacan teachers participated in the national movement to remove union leader Carlos Jonguitud Barrios from power in 1989. The replacement of Jonguitud Barrios with the current SNTE leader Elba Esther Gordillo Morales led to a shift in the union’s relationship with the Mexican state. The union leadership forged previously opposed agreements with the government to decentralize the country’s education system. This decentralization meant that labor demands were increasingly to be addressed by state governments rather than the federal government, a move the union feared would lead to a diminished bargaining power (Middlebrook 1995). As Martínez Vásquez (2004b) points out, this relationship with decentralization is a contentious and contradictory one for Section 22. Oaxacan teachers desire local autonomy over both educational curriculum and union leadership, yet they wish to keep the union centralized
enough to reap the benefits of the bargaining power of a large workers’ movement. This relates also to the nature of educational funding in Mexico, which has shifted from the federal government to state governments, thus hindering the capabilities of poorer states such as Oaxaca.

While achieving modest gains through the 1980s, the Oaxaca Section 22 was widely criticized by outside observers in the ‘90s for failing to remove authoritarian governance, stifling open debate, and favoring mobilization over dialogue (Yescas Martínez and Zafra 2006). These concerns arose within Section 22 as well, with political subgroups in the union calling attention to the lack of participatory democracy in voting procedures and “pseudoradicals” who used political posturing as a means to secure personal power (Noticias 3/3/98). The strike in the spring of 2006 was the latest in a series of annual strikes held by the union that generally resulted in an occupation of the city for several weeks, followed by a slight pay increase. The twenty-five year history of the dissident Oaxacan Section 22 formed a stable organizational foundation for the creation of the APPO, yet it also brought in immediate internal issues to address, such as the need for democratic decision-making processes, the elimination of political patronage, and open political affiliation and dialogue.

Many have argued that the gains that the union has achieved, such as increased salaries and benefits, have done little to improve education in the state, despite the teachers’ arguments that these represent educational and not administrative funds.² Martínez Vásquez states that salary increases have

² Section 22 has argued that meeting the demands of the annual strikes will increase Oaxacan educational standards. The difference Martínez Vásquez highlights between administrative and educational spending leads to the question of the impact of raising wages and benefits for teachers on the quality of education that students receive.
not had an impact in scholarly achievement, the total expansion of coverage, the reduction of illiteracy, the technological modernization of the schools, educational innovation…the reduction of the social gap between indigenous education and that offered to the urban population. (Martínez Vásquez 2004a)

The continued lack of quality education for rural and indigenous education is highlighted by others also (Maldonado Alvarado 2002).

At the time of the May 2006 strike, Section 22 was composed of teachers from a wide variety of backgrounds, including from the urban middle class and from rural indigenous communities. The union is also fragmented into a range of about eight subgroups of various tendencies, including the socialist Coordinadora Democrática Magisterial Oaxaqueña, the indigenous COCEI, and the recently formed priista Consejo Central de Lucha.³

Indigenous Politics

Similarly, Oaxaca has recently seen a resurgence in indigenous movements that have managed to alter state political organization. Oaxaca is home to a large indigenous population (roughly 70% of its inhabitants) composed of 16 main ethno-linguistic groups (Norget 1997). Somewhat inspired by the Zapatista movement of Chiapas, Oaxacans have created official governing institutions based on indigenous political practices that seek autonomy from the influence of political parties (Esteva 2001; Stephen 1997). Oaxaca’s municipalities have long practiced alternative forms of governance that, while not officially sanctioned by authorities, were largely tolerated. In part, this independence can be traced back to Oaxaca’s relative isolation as well as to a long struggle by the indigenous population. In 1995 usos y costumbres, or traditional usages and customs,

³ The Consejo Central de Lucha has since broken with Section 22, establishing the rival, anti-APPO Section 59.
were officially incorporated into municipal level governance as an alternative to the
election of political parties. Oaxaca holds 24% of all of Mexico’s municipalities, and 412
of the 570 (the remaining 158 lean heavily toward the PRI) in the state voted to operate
using *usos y costumbres*, which replace secret votes for party politicians with assembly-
style meetings. These assemblies are often male-only and work to limit the influence of
political parties (namely the PRI) in municipal governance, however parties are still
active in state-level politics. Both prior to and following the 1995 transition, PRI
officials would often falsify election ballots to correspond with the decisions made by
municipal assemblies in an attempt to co-opt *usos y costumbres* and keep them under the
umbrella of partisan electoral politics (Clarke 2000).

The official recognition of municipal autonomy in 1995, and constitutional reform
in 1998 guaranteeing indigenous rights, can be seen both within the context of
multicultural political reforms throughout Latin America, as well as a manifestation of
fear of Chiapas-style rebellion spreading outward (Esteva 2001; Sieder 2002). At the
same time, those currently holding political power in Oaxaca, namely the PRI, have
attempted to impede efforts to advance community autonomy, with municipal reforms in
2001 doing little to strengthen municipal institutions (Baltazar Macías and Guerrero
Amparán 2002).

The political practices of *usos y costumbres* relate to a number of other important
concepts for the present movement, which include ideas of the *guelaguetza*, or reciprocal
work and exchange; *cargo*, or accountable political posts and obligations; *tequio*, a
community labor draft; *topiles*, community watch patrols; and the *asamblea* itself – the
communal assembly meetings in which political decisions are made (Cohen 1999). As
Cohen argues, these types of practices develop familial relationships based on reciprocity and cooperation. The implementation of these social institutions varies across Oaxaca. They are most predominate in indigenous communities, but they are widespread enough that activists and members of the APPO adopted many of these formalized social relationships during their mobilizations against the governor, such as community assemblies and topile night watches. These practices do represent a break from traditional political and social systems defined by parties, waged labor, and centralized decision-making, however they should not be romanticized. Problems persist in the political efficacy of usos y costumbres, pertaining especially to the secondary role played by women and the semi-voluntary nature of many of the responsibilities. In some municipalities women have struggled to gain a greater voice in political decisions, though gains have been infrequent (Clarke 2000). Some communities enforce participation in tequío labor requirements, but this is made much more difficult by increased migration, pay-offs, and the lack of desire to work without monetary compensation (Cohen 1999; VanWey, Tucker and Diaz McConnell 2005).

Also relevant in an understanding of alternative indigenous politics in Oaxaca is a look at the effects of the Zapatistas of Chiapas. Lynn Stephen (2002) writes of the often contradictory influences of Zapatismo, arguing that Oaxacans are influenced by the autonomous political movement in their neighboring state, while simultaneously linking

---

4 Mutersbaugh (2002) offers a discussion of an alternative style of cooperation in rural Oaxaca: production cooperatives. He highlights the conflictual nature of cooperation that arises from its social milieu, and argues that conflict can enable cooperation.

5 The move toward political decentralization indeed represented by the municipalities has facilitated social cooperation, but has also led to conflicts. Municipalities often dispute boundaries and the main population centers of municipalities have more input into political and financial decisions than more peripheral communities. These tensions are further aggravated by religious, ethnic, linguistic, and class differences found throughout Oaxaca.
the Zapatista cause to the PRI. This should be expected given that both the Chiapas rebels and the PRI invoke the legacy of Zapata as justification for their political projects. Thus, many Oaxaqueños are sympathetic to the Zapatista cause, and also support PRI agrarian policies that they can use as leverage against local elites.

Authoritarianism and Violence

The fact that the recent strike broke from the traditional process of mobilization followed by accommodation can be traced in part to the growing use of political repression by the state government. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Oaxaca experienced a situation of increasing violence and ungovernability, marked by assassinations, violent factional clashes within communities and the increasing threat of armed uprisings, in part provoked by pre-emptive military operations against possible foci of dissidence. (Gledhill 1998: 21)

This situation can partially be explained by the increasing militarization of Mexican society following the 1994 Zapatista rebellion, as well as increased anti-drug operations (Dresser 2003). This trend can be seen with the continued militarization of police forces, particularly with the formation of the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) in 1999, which engage in intelligence, counter-insurgency, and civilian operations (Stephen 2002). The Mexican police and military forces have been cited for abuses (particularly frequent in southern Mexico) that consist of targeting and intimidating human rights workers and opposition political figures, amongst others. In Oaxaca, under the pretext of campaigns against armed guerrillas, the number of troops has increased as have actions against indigenous and peasant organizations (Sosa Elízaga 1999).

In 2004, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz of the PRI came to power as governor in a disputed election and has since been accused of carrying out political assassinations of opponents.
Additionally, PRI-backed groups have attacked the offices of independent media outlets that have been critical of the government, such as the newspaper Noticias, whose warehouse was invaded by police under previous governor José Murat’s administration. This trend continued with the violent occupation and the shutting down of Noticias’ headquarters in 2004 by the pro-PRI Revolutionary Worker and Peasant Confederation (CROC) labor union, which, without their consent, claims to represent the newspapers’ workers. Thus, the tendency of the Ruiz administration in the lead-up to the conflict has been that of a politics favoring the use of violence rather than dialogue to resolve disputes, as seen by the frequent imprisonment and extra-judicial killings against members of activist and social organizations (Martínez Vásquez 2006; Matias 2006). This trend can be seen with the federal government as well, especially in light of the May 2006 Mexican Federal Preventative Police’s attack on flower vendors in San Salvador Atenco.6

The specter of authoritarianism in Oaxaca can also be viewed through recent shifts in policing by the Ruiz administration, especially in terms of public space in the city. His administration place increased restrictions on the use of the zócalo for political protest. The central plaza has been a main site for political expression and mobilization throughout the city’s history, and the governor’s banning of both protest and street vending in the square drew ire from activists who saw the move as a step toward the privatization of public space. In recent years urban public works projects have been the objects of contention by residents who view the “renovation” of the city as a destruction

---

6 In early May 2006, The Peoples’ Front in Defense of the Land held demonstrations and road blockades in support of flower vendors from Texcoco. The vendors had been declared engaged in illegitimate commercial activities by the police, who prevented them from setting up stalls in the Texcoco market. The ensuing protests in nearby San Salvador Atenco led to an intervention by federal police resulting in hundreds of arrests and human rights violations, including reports of torture and rape.
of traditional cultural patrimony and public space and as an attempt to dole out private contracts with little public involvement.

These shifts in Oaxaca’s political climate form an important backdrop for situating the 2006 conflict. Dissatisfaction with the political elite combined with the influences of usos y costumbres and the vast network of Section 22 teachers were some of the key ingredients that coalesced to shape the popular responses to the police raid of June 14.

Inception and Intensification of the Conflict

Following the annual tradition, the members of Section 22 of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE) announced an indefinite strike of its 70,000 members on May 22, 2006, following failed negotiations with the state government. The immediate demand of the strikers was a salary rezoning, transitioning Oaxaca from Zone II to Zone III. These zones pertain to the cost of living, and the minimum wage levels, of the various regions of the country. Thus, the teachers’ demand was to raise salaries throughout the state, not only for education workers.

The strike wore on and negotiations with the government broke down. Section 22 rejected the government’s proposed 252 million pesos increase of funds towards rezoning, arguing that they needed 1,400 million pesos, but would be willing to compromise at 680 million. With the failed negotiations and the ongoing encampment in the city, Governor Ulises Ruiz gave the order on June 14 to send in 3,000 local police to evict the strikers. The predawn raid forced teachers and their families out of their tents in the zócalo and surrounding streets, and police tore down the tarps and the facilities of the
union radio station, *Radio Plantón*. Meanwhile, the teachers and their supporters regrouped and pushed the police from the city center using rocks and sticks. By late morning they had retaken the streets from the police. This had been an unprecedented use of force against political demonstrators, and the governor would soon see the consequences as supporters of the teachers took control of the city for five months (see Figure 3.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2006</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>August</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22: Strike begins</td>
<td>14: Police eviction attempt</td>
<td>2: Federal elections, punishment vote</td>
<td>1: CORTV taken and Radio Cacerola established</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23: Rejection of government offer</td>
<td>16: First megamarcha</td>
<td>5: Section 22 announces return to classes</td>
<td>4: CORTV attacked with firearms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>17: APPO forms</td>
<td>18: Government cancels Guelaguetza</td>
<td>8: Office of newspaper notices attacked</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>21: School year ends, teachers return to plantón</td>
<td>10: Government issues 50 arrest warrants for APPO members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>22-24: Guelaguetza Popular</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>September</th>
<th>October</th>
<th>November</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21: March to Mexico City to demand that the federal government removes Ulises Ruiz from power</td>
<td>19: Federal Senate rejects dissolving governmental power in Oaxaca</td>
<td>2: Police clash with students at Benito Juárez Autonomous University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27-29: APPO’s State Assembly is convened</td>
<td>29-30: Federal police enter city, take control of zócalo</td>
<td>10-13: APPO holds Constitutive Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25-26: More clashes with police, last of barricades destroyed, all radio stations turned over, many APPO members either arrested or in hiding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3.1: Chronology of key events in 2006

Over the next several days demonstrators set up barricades around the *zócalo* to protect against possible future police actions and also began forming coalitions with other civil organizations. On June 17 the first meeting of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO) was held. The Assembly was composed of over eighty different political and civil organizations, including Section 22, and dedicated itself to removing Governor Ulises Ruiz from power. The APPO expanded rapidly, eventually bringing
together nearly 250 organizations, with the largest being Section 22. During the subsequent weeks the Popular Assembly held discussions on strategies for leading a campaign to oust the governor and how they would approach the upcoming federal elections. After entertaining the possibility of a boycott of the elections, the APPO decided to instead support a vote against the PRI, with a resulting tacit support of the PRD.

The July 2 elections became an early victory for the APPO with the poor performance of the PRI in the state of Oaxaca. Accomplishments for the incipient movement continued through the summer with the organization of an alternative cultural festival to replace the government’s canceled Guelaguetza celebration and the appropriation of television and radio stations to broadcast messages in support of the teachers and the Popular Assembly.

On the tail of these accomplishments, however, came a renewed wave of violence that began in late July. APPO leaders had their homes attacked with Molotov cocktails, APPO radio stations were fired upon, and, in early August, nighttime armed raids against the barricades became common. August thus saw the first deaths associated with the conflict, with police and PRI-supporters shooting movement participants at barricades, radio stations, protests and meetings. These acts of violence continued sporadically through the fall, culminating in the October 29 occupation of the city by federal police that followed the federal Senate’s refusal to revoke Governor Ruiz’s power. With the city’s zócalo now in the hands of federal police, APPO supporters continued to control some areas of the city, primarily the university, and continued to formulate a long-term

---

7 As of the time of this writing, there have been twenty-six confirmed deaths since August (Olivares Alonso 2007).
political role and structure for the Popular Assembly, marked by November’s Constitutive Congress. The barricades at the university became the focus for government action, and protestors clashed with federal police several times before eventually ceding control on November 25. Following this final police mobilization the last of the city’s barricades were removed and all APPO radio stations were shut down. Scores of movement leaders and participants were arrested and many others went into hiding.

The events of late November marked the end of the occupation of Oaxaca by supporters of the teachers’ movement. The ensuing months have seen a shift toward advocating for the release of political prisoners and decentralized community organizing throughout the state. The continuation of APPO’s organizing suggests that it, in some form, will be a force in Oaxacan politics for some time to come and is not simply a relic from the most intensive periods of social mobilization.
IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Street Politics

From the start of the conflict, the teachers’ strike and the Popular Assembly were visually defined by the plantón – the large encampment in the center of Oaxaca. This remained a vital force as the movement to depose the governor took two related paths that can be broadly thought of as the street politics of the encampments, barricades, and seizures of communication media, and the organizational politics of the Popular Assembly. The proximate goal of both of these features was to make apparent a “crisis of ungovernability” in Oaxaca and show that state authorities had ceased to function.

Figure 4.1, Partial barricade in the city center of Oaxaca (photo by author).

The use of encampments and barricades gave the movement a degree of mobility as well as a means by which to secure territory in the city, as seen in Figure 4.1. The strike transformed the city’s zócalo from what had become an increasingly commercial and surveilled space under the Ruiz administration, to one that restored its function as a public space, complete with informational signs, political discussion, graffiti, speeches, and a return of the formerly banned street venders. Thus the commercial, cultural, and
social activities within the zócalo took on a highly politicized nature. Frequently, the encampments would shift to various locations throughout Oaxaca, forming roadblocks, impeding construction, and blockading government offices. These mobile blockades were a dynamic tool of activists in their attempts to respond to an ever changing political situation and the nearly constant rumors of renewed police actions. The targeting of public works became an important feature of the movement largely due to the contentious nature of the governor’s urban renovation projects. Members of the Popular Assembly accused the government of corruption in the completion of construction projects, and many saw these as a destruction of traditional public spaces of Oaxaca at the expense of “modernization” (APPO 2006a; Leonel Juan 2005). The ongoing construction sites were thus major targets of the blockades, one of the most important being that of the Guelaguetza Auditorium. Overlooking the city, this stage is the site of the annual Guelaguetza summer cultural festival. The blockades stopped renovation on the auditorium, delaying the finalization of construction and causing the event to be canceled. This move allowed for the APPO to hold a hastily organized “alternative and popular” festival in its stead in the final weeks of July. Many movement supporters viewed the alternative festival as an effort to reclaim Oaxacan cultural heritage for “the people,” rather than ceding it to private and commercial parties that were only interested in tourist income.

Supporters of the APPO identified themselves as being in “pie de lucha,” or struggling on foot. This took the form of “mega marches” in the streets of Oaxaca that

---

8 This focus on mobility and shifting protests was not new for the teachers’ movement. In past strikes Section 22 would take advantage of a moving encampment that would shift from one region to another, allowing for some teachers to be in the classroom while others were striking. This tactic was labeled, “working while struggling” (Noticias, 5/16/01).
brought together thousands of supporters of the teachers and the Popular Assembly. Beginning on June 16, at least seven of these marches were held, with the largest being estimated by some as surpassing 100,000 people. At the end of September, several thousand activists, mainly teachers, began a march destined for Mexico City in an attempt to spread awareness about the conflict and to petition the federal government to support the ouster of Governor Ruiz.

As the conflict lengthened, the importance of the street barricades as sites of contention grew. These barricades varied throughout the city, with some having a relative permanent status, and others being constructed in the evenings and dismantled during the day. Initially built to ward off future police raids, the barricades became sites for community and neighborhood gathering, as individuals volunteered to staff the constructions of sheet metal, rocks, cars, tires and sequestered buses. However, they also became sites of violence as cars of gunmen began nighttime shootings on the barricades during the month of August. APPO supporters responded to these attacks by forming neighborhood watch patrols consisting of small groups of men armed with sticks and pipes, echoing the topil patrols found in indigenous communities. A system of alarms was formed using firecrackers and church bells: one explosion would be a warning, two would signal unusual movements, and three would announce a confrontation in progress.

As the conflict extended into the fall, the attacks against barricades became bolder, as PRI-supporters (many identified as party members and local police officers) increasingly operated during daylight hours. These attacks resulted in a number of deaths and injuries (over twenty deaths have been reported during the length of the conflict), and they also contributed to the frequent rumors that spread throughout the city. The daily circulation
of rumors of new plans for police actions, snipers at marches, and the presence of the military in the city took a psychological, and arguably a political, toll on the movement. Activists were subjected to both physical violence and to the constant threat of violence. In the words of one activist, “the people of Oaxaca are afraid. We were brave, but now they want us to cower down” (interview with APPO Activist D, 7/12/06). This was especially arduous given the fact that many of the teachers’ had been sleeping outside in the zócalo for weeks on end with no material gains to be seen from their sacrifices. As one teacher said prior to the drive-by attacks on the barricades:

   We are tired, psychologically tired. We have been here more than forty days, and those of us who spend the night do not sleep - one or two hours and we are awake. So we are tired, and for this we have won nothing (interview with Teacher B, 7/5/06).

The barricades gave the movement something of a rhizomatic, decentralized territorial structure. Initially a disruption of the mundane, everyday life of the city and the protestors, the barricades began to take on their own rhythms and schedules, to form what could be called an everyday life of resistance. The barricades had little central organization and an often indirect relationship with the assembly meetings of the APPO. They were usually formed outside of the assembly’s consensus decision making, and many barricadistas identified with the APPO in name only, without participating in formal assembly meetings. This relative autonomy of the barricades was altered in the fall when the APPO set up a sub-committee composed of representatives of the barricades (APPO 2006a).

While the different barricades were linked through communication via cell phone and radio broadcasts, the formation of individual barricades was a decentralized process. Neighborhoods would construct and station their own blockades on main roads, small
organizing committees would arrange to block highways and access roads to the city. This decentralization and uneven dispersal of the barricades led to acts of violence being uneven across the city. In certain localities pro-PRI groups would be hostile to the barricade keepers, while other neighborhoods were largely opposed to the governor. Conflicts over patches of territory, the ease with which movement activists moved about the city, and the limited mobility of police forces, all contributed to the relative deterritorialization of the city. It was not transformed into one smooth space, but did exhibit differential mobilities and accesses to certain areas, with state officials being constrained in their abilities to occupy parts of Oaxaca and demonstrators having a relative spatial freedom. For example, police presence was not seen often in the city center, save for the rare sighting of a traffic patroller. Police were forced to only come out at night, and even then the guerilla-style attacks on the barricades were mostly accomplished by plain-clothed police. Given this absence of police patrols in the city, APPO activists used alternative forms of justice to punish and deter crime. Those accused of crimes, whether violent crimes or spying on movement activities, would be tied up in the zócalo in order to expose them to public scrutiny. In some cases activists would strip off men’s shirts and hang signs around their necks that read, “I am a thief,” or, “I am a rapist.”

As the movement persisted, the seeming lack of “normalcy” in the city was addressed through these types of actions. Services and activities previously provided by the state were accomplished by groups of individuals. While somewhat inconsistent, these tasks, such as street cleaning, were sources of pride and helped to show that the
state government in its current form was not needed nor desired. The creation of these alternatives grew as the movement progressed, and quickly spread around the state. Examples include Taxi APPO, a taxi service that attempted to free itself from the traditionally PRI-dominated taxi industry in Oaxaca, free medical booths set up in the city, primarily to treat injuries from police confrontations, and also alternative markets that were formed in communities.

Perhaps one of the most important developments of the movement, and one that gave movement activists something to show for their efforts, was the occupation of radio and television stations. Movement participants appropriated both public and private stations, including the university radio, as well as a public television station. The striking teachers originally had a radio station of their own, Radio Plantón, whose equipment was destroyed during the June 14 police operation. Following the demise of Radio Plantón, teachers set up more stations and appropriations multiplied. Many of these takeovers, and the following broadcasts, were accomplished by groups of women who have been extremely active in the teachers’ movement and the Popular Assembly. Beginning with the occupation of the state-run COR TV and radio station (renamed Radio Cacerola, or saucepan radio), activists soon took over a dozen private stations (Stephen 2006). The new radio operators decried the abuses of the Ulises Ruiz administration, called for the release of political prisoners, and warned of police activities. The occupied stations became critical sources for spreading information about the movement, creating dialogue with the public, and also raising awareness about broader socio-political issues facing Oaxaca and Mexico. In the words of one movement supporter, these experiments in

---

9 Street cleaning itself was contentious. The amount of garbage created by the months-long encampment was a highly visible result, which opponents could point to in order to disparage the movement.
independent media have helped create “a new critical conscience about what has been happening in Oaxaca” that will help spur social change in the state (interview with APPO Activist C, 7/12/06).

The use of radio also gave the APPO a much vaster spatial extensiveness by publicizing activities in the capital city to the surrounding state and, through Internet broadcasts, to the international community. APPO supporters in communities around the state followed the example of Radio Cacerola by taking over and broadcasting from local stations, contributing to the rise of stations like Radio Plantón (reestablished after the June 14 police raid), Radio APPO, Radio La Ley, and Radio Universidad, with each operating independently. Much like the barricades, the radio facilities became sites of contention and occasional violence. Beginning in late July the installations of the university radio station were attacked in drive-by-shootings. Again in mid-August men identified as plain-clothed police fired upon the transmission equipment for Radio Cacerola and COR TV, located on Cerro Fortín (site of the Guelaguetza auditorium). Many involved in the movement recognized communication as a powerful tool (echoing the Zapatista’s claim that “our word in our weapon”) especially in a movement that called itself nonviolent. Indeed, non-violence was regularly promoted on the airwaves, especially during times of expected confrontation with federal police.

The combination of the differing groups of demonstrators and barricadistas formed a good example of what Routledge (1996) termed “terrains of resistance.” Consisting of the diverse participants, as well as the inorganic barricade materials, radio broadcasts, and political graffiti, these terrains created an assemblage that was a powerful

---

10 Additionally, there was a pro-government station, Radio Ciudadana, which began operating in the later period of the conflict.
force in opposition to the governing elite of Oaxaca. The power relations were relatively non-hierarchical and decentralized, allowing for both broad participation and adaptability. Thus, through shutting down transportation, government offices, and official communication outlets, the street politics of movement participants had a fair degree of success creating the conditions of ungovernability deemed necessary to bring about the governor’s demise. However, given that the barricades and encampments were the most visible aspects of the movement, they gained a large amount of ire from residents who were opposed to the teachers and the APPO.

Anti-movement Discourses
The escalation and expansion of the teachers strike proved to be a highly contentious issue within the Oaxacan populace. While the movement received widespread support as manifested by the tens of thousands of participants in the periodic “mega-marches” held by Section 22 and the Popular Assembly, a sizable portion of the population remained critical of the activities of activists. These attitudes seemed to stem from a variety of sources: a perceived disenfranchisement from the movement, the unevenness of access to information throughout the state, the experiences of the annual education strikes, and the transformation of downtown Oaxaca resulting from the months-long encampment.

One woman from the town of Teotitlán del Valle, near Oaxaca City, expressed skepticism of the movement’s intentions and actions, saying that, “we are against the teachers. They have been telling lies, and the leaders are corrupt. They benefit while others suffer” (interview with community member, July 12, 2007). She went on to say that,
[the teachers] say that six people died [on June 14], but they were not teachers or with the government. The people who died were indigenous people brought in by the teachers to add to their numbers. The teachers have the responsibility [for the deaths].”

These types of rumors that accused the teachers’ of bringing in indigenous people to pad their numbers and act as fodder for the police were not the only accusations that depicted the movement leaders as corrupt and the teachers as self-serving. They were viewed by some as being against the people, especially the people from rural and indigenous regions of the state. The teachers were described as being from the city, as opposed to the communities in which they taught, leading to accusations that they had little connection to indigenous people and the teaching of indigenous languages.

The lack of respect for teachers stood in contrast to movement attempts to paint them as self-sacrificing and beneficial members of the community. Movement supporters described the teachers as willing to venture out into rural communities lacking electricity and running water. Not only did they endure these hardships while teaching out in the country, but they were then treated with violence while on strike demanding more respect for their contributions and service. Nevertheless, the frequent strikes on the part of the education union gave the teachers an alternate reputation as lazy and combative. Thus opposition to the teachers and the Popular Assembly came from more than just pro-PRI and pro-government sources. As one man active in community development in Oaxaca said, the teachers were more interested in chanting slogans than in fixing the many problems in the state (interview with Community Organizer).

11 While no confirmed deaths occurred in the June 14 police attempted eviction, reports of several deaths did circulate in the weeks following the raid.
Following this belief, many Oaxacans also opposed the movement not due to (or at least, not only due to) support for Governor Ulises Ruiz, but rather stemming from an opposition to the act of mobilization itself. The graffiti, tents, marches, and blockades were to some a stain on their beautiful city. News outlets argued that the APPO and its supporters were harming the city due to a decline in tourism and were destroying the cultural patrimony by spray-painting graffiti on many buildings in the city center.

Anti-APPO forces took their most organized form in the Section 22 offshoot Consejo Central de Lucha (Central Council of Struggle, CCL). Formed in January of 2006, the CCL was composed of several thousand Oaxacan teachers that opposed the tactics and main political currents in the union. This dissident organization was largely supportive of the national SNTE leadership and opposed the May 2006 strike. Movement members often disparaged these “PRI teachers” as co-opted by the government, but they did represent a sizable counter-force to the Popular Assembly supporters in Section 22. While this group did oppose the strike, they also spoke out against the June 14 police action, arguing that it was a result of both political corruption and incompetent union leadership. The CCL argued that the Section 22 leaders, specifically secretary general Enrique Rueda Pacheco, were corrupt and were misleading the bases for their own ends. Much of the blame was placed on “radicals” and “the attitudes of the political currents … that have tied the hands of the State Assembly [of Section 22] and have carried their comrades to such undesirable extremes due to a sole concern with increasing their benefits and the level of influence for their political groups” (Rapp Soto et al. 2006). The conflict between the two factions came to a head when CCL teachers attempted to resume classes prior to the strike ending. Eventually forming an alternative organization, Section
the pro-PRI teachers then clashed with the returning strikers as they attempted to reclaim some community schools in the winter of 2007.

The Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca

From its inception following the June 14 police raid, the Popular Assembly became the representative body of the movement. It was initially structured as a loose coalition of a wide variety of groups active in Oaxaca, including trade unions, community development organizations, radical political groups and representatives from the state’s municipalities. Absent were political parties, although many individuals involved were supporters of the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD). The meetings of the Assembly replicated those of the municipalities that operated under usos y costumbres, where decisions are made through extended debate followed by votes on specific proposals.

Figure 4.2, Public meeting in the zócalo
July 7, 2006 (photo by author).

In the first meetings of the Popular Assembly the members sought to establish the guiding principles and goals of the organization. These meetings were relatively unstructured affairs (and both private and public, as seen in Figure 4.2), with leaders of the constituent organizations speaking at length about their ideas for the success of the
movement and their visions of the future of the Popular Assembly. The central demand to come out of these initial meetings was the condemnation and removal of Governor Ulises Ruiz. Beyond this goal, however, the APPO activists wished to build a permanent and integral place for the assembly within the state’s political, economic and social spheres. More precisely, the movement to eliminate the governor was framed as a conflict with more than one man:

The central demand, for the departure of Ulises Ruiz, does not signify a struggle against a person, but against an economic and political structure, for which the reply will be a State decision. Only massive mobilized participation, as much at the national level as the local, will achieve our strategic objective (APPO 2006e).

To further this end, many participants spoke of making the assembly a “popular” movement. In an early meeting, one organizer said:

This needs to be an encampment (plantón) of the people, with all of your support, to construct a truly popular movement. … We need a basic agreement for all of the regions and all of the communities - a basic agreement in a definitive manner for all the people of Oaxaca.

Others spoke of the inclusiveness of the present assembly and the novelty of the teachers’ movement gaining support from wide sectors of Oaxacan civil society, given the context of growing dissatisfaction with the annual teacher strikes. The formation of the APPO was seen by many as the first time that the movement had coalesced into a broad based coalition for a common aim. As an APPO supporter said, “this is no longer just a teachers’ movement, it is a popular movement. And it was a rapid change. It only took one day on the 14th of June” (interview with APPO supporter B, 7/12/06).

Overcoming political differences and fractious organizations, the members of the Popular Assembly were able to echo Day’s (2005) call for an affinity and solidarity-based political pragmatism that is predicated on common goals and surpasses identity
differences, rather than using them as organizing principles. Despite the opposition some sectors of Oaxacan society, the APPO billed itself as the voice of the people of the state, arguing for an interest common to all Oaxacans in the removal of the governor and the transformation of the state’s political system. These attempts to represent the whole of the “People of Oaxaca” grated against autonomous groups within the movement, such as the barricadistas and indigenous groups from outside the capital city. While willing to use the name of the APPO, many groups had differing views on the role and political position of the coalition.

Despite these differences, the Assembly has proposed wide-ranging alterations to the state’s political, social and economic institutions that far surpass the removal of the current government. These proposals range from general demands for social equality, ending political authoritarianism, creation of an alternative education, opposition to neoliberalism, and constructing communally based social institutions, to proposals for specific political projects for creating economic self-sufficiency and sovereignty (APPO 2006a).

The Assembly gradually instituted a more formal organizational structure, replacing provisional leaders with an elected state council. The formalization of the APPO represented a furtherance of participants’ goals to extend their influence throughout the state. One APPO member described these goals in the following manner:

The APPO functions as a coordinating body. It is formed of people from all parts of society: workers, teachers, campesinos. It has sectors in each region of the state: el Istmo, la Costa, las Valles Centrales, and each sector acts as a coordinator (interview with APPO student organizer B, July 23, 2006).

In the first meeting of the State Assembly of the APPO (2006g), held in September 2006, the organization documented its concerns for securing internal democracy, the potential
for the revocation of elected positions, equality and autonomy of members, political independence, and service (taking on the Zapatista slogan of leading by obeying). The state meetings were comprised of sub-committees organized around thematic areas (e.g. organized labor, indigenous peoples, education, human rights) that had a relative autonomy from the larger coalition. The committees operate independently and reported findings and decisions back to the assembly to have their work integrated into APPO statements and reports.

Not unexpectedly, it has proven more difficult to implement these principles than it has been to approve them. The tradition of the assembly structure in many of the state’s municipalities has been that of all-male meetings and votes (Clarke 2000). While the Popular Assembly is open to female participation, gender inequalities remain as many female APPO members are struggling to be included in decisions as equal members. The November Constitutive Congress of the APPO (2006a) instituted policies to address these demands, requiring committee membership to be divided equally between males and females and setting a minimum of 30% female membership in the State Council. The meetings and decision-making process were not then, solely a means by which to transform politics outside of the assembly, but also to construct and alter relations of inequality within the movement itself. As Sharp et al. (2000) argue, “resisting power is constantly in danger of replicating the structures of the dominant.” They go on to say that

To be cognizant of such entanglements is to be able to enact resistance while being critical and vigilant to its internal oppressions, and it is to be able to confront, negotiate and enter into dialogue with the manifestations of dominating power from a sensitivity to the ‘feeling space’ of domination (Sharp et al. 2000).
The social space formed by the Popular Assembly meetings was a site for contesting patriarchy within Oaxacan society at large, and within specific social movement organizations. The dominance of male voices early in the life of the assembly and the lack of attention paid to gender relations should not be seen as merely the reproduction of relations of repression, but rather as points of articulation and change within the Popular Assembly. According to Laclau and Mouffe (1985), articulation occurs when identities are modified through changing social relations, especially in moments of heightened antagonism and conflict. In terms of gender relations, these articulatory practices occurred outside of Assembly meetings as well, especially in light of women’s leadership in the occupation and maintenance of movement radio stations. The women’s seizure and defense of Radio Cacerola was seen both as an act in support of the APPO as well as a rejection of traditional machismo in Oaxaca that silenced women’s voices (Stephen 2006).

Additionally, the large role played by the teachers’ union within the Assembly has resulted in disputes as union members became increasingly divided over the question of when to end their strike and return to classes. The traditional decision-making structure in Section 22 (that came out of the struggle for union democracy in the 1980s) is to hold local consultations in communities in which propositions are put to a vote. A representative from each delegation then attends the union’s state assembly to pass along the decision. During the strike this process occurred in the encampment, rather than in the actual communities, nevertheless, there were still accusations that the union leadership was making vital decisions outside of this institutional structure.
These accusations became clear when many movement supporters and teachers viewed a return to the schools, while Ulises Ruiz was still in power, as a betrayal. However, popular support of the movement began to falter as more of the school year was lost due to the length of the strike, and teachers felt strained due to the growing period of time they had gone without paychecks. Likewise, teacher support of the union leadership of Section 22 began to wane. Some saw the return to classes in July to finish the school year as a retreat that was dictated without proper consultation. One teacher claimed that she was “not in agreement. We do not see [the leaders] because they do not talk to us. We are not consulted” (interview with teacher A, 7/5/06).

These grievances were centered on the Section 22 secretary general Enrique Rueda Pacheco, accused by many APPO supporters of corruption. One newsletter published by a socialist-leaning faction of Section 22 leveled the charge that Rueda Pacheco was intentionally scheduling union meetings at inconvenient times in order to decrease participation in decisions (Regeneración Magisterial 2006). The secretary general also expressed dissatisfaction about many APPO actions in an attempt to distance Section 22 from the graffiti that covered the central city and the damage done to the Guelaguetza auditorium (Noticias, 7/25/06). The lingering corruption and authoritarianism in Section 22 stood at odds with the mission of APPO, and Rueda Pacheco’s presence and influence in the assembly gradually waned, cumulating in his February 2007 resignation as union head.
APPO and the State
Throughout its brief existence, the Assembly has formed a complex relationship with the state. They explicitly reject the legitimacy of the Oaxacan state government, a move that has led to frequent negotiations with the federal government. These negotiations have repeatedly failed - due to the refusal and/or inability of the Mexican government to act on the “non-negotiable” demand of Ulises Ruiz’s removal – but have represented a recognition on the part of the Mexican government of the APPO as a legitimate actor and representative in the conflict.

Yet the federal government has still existed as a threat to the Assembly, given the repeated use of federal police to remove encampments and barricades from Oaxaca City and their participation in widespread arrests of movement supporters. Government agents have been responsible for the deaths of over twenty individuals since killings first began in August of 2006 (Red Oaxaqueña de Derechos Humanos 2006; Olivares Alonso 2007). Many other APPO supporters have been arrested and physically harassed and tortured while in state custody (Misión Civil de Observación 2006; Comisión Civil Internacional 2007). Thus, the APPO has had to look to the Mexican government as an arbiter in the conflict with the governor while at the same time acknowledging the repressive capabilities that it possesses and has deployed. While activists clashed with state and federal police in the streets of Oaxaca, APPO organizers periodically met with Secretary of Government Carlos Abascal in Mexico City to attempt a resolution to the conflict. These attempts formed a legalistic strategy by the movement that accused Ulises Ruiz of violating the Mexican Constitution through:

1) Illegal detentions of political opponents.
2) Violating the freedom of speech and of the press.
3) Interfering with free elections in the municipalities.
4) Violating territorial rights in land disputes.
5) Violating the rights of women.
6) Violating the right of workers to strike. (APPO 2006g)

Moving beyond these appeals to past and present crimes of the governor, the Popular Assembly also tried to take advantage of the ability to remove political leaders during crises of ungovernability. This took the form of petitions to the federal Senate to declare the lack of governance in the state (as evident by the absence of state officials, the lack of police, and the blockades that shut down government offices) and officially remove Ulises Ruiz from office. The timeline of this decision by the Senate was important as well: if the governor were to be removed prior to December 2 (two years into his term) new elections would be held, but if Ruiz were to be removed after that date he would have the power to appoint an interim successor. The failure of the Senate to declare a state of ungovernability was viewed by the APPO as a sign of an alliance between the PRI and the PAN, both of which opposed the PRD’s desire to revoke Ulises Ruiz’s mandate.

The question of governability thus became a major focus of the movement. While attempting to create an officially recognized lack of governance, the APPO was also deeply concerned with creating conditions of governability, as shown in the multiple forums entitled, “Constructing democracy and governability in Oaxaca.” Their argument was that Oaxaca was in a crisis of ungovernability even prior to the conflict, given the lack of the rule of law evident from rising political violence and impunity in previous years, and the lack of respect of the state government for municipal political structures and practices (APPO 2006c). A member of the Oaxacan Human Rights Network argued
that, “the government of Oaxaca does not have separation of powers. We know that the senators and deputies are controlled by the executive power” (interview with APPO activist C, 7/12/06). With the populace having little respect or trust in governmental institutions, the APPO called for a return to the founding values of the Mexican state:

The Mexican Constitution of 1917 is a historic document that endorses the tradition of emancipation of our people and shelters in great measure the aspirations of a new nation with justice, liberties, social rights and national independence. Today the Constitution of 1917, and the Project of the Nation drawn up in it, has been abandoned; in exchange, the oligarchy and its political class offer us a future without social rights, of subordination without independence (APPO 2006e).

In the words of one APPO member, the goal was, “to create a new sovereignty based on popular democracy” (interview with APPO activist B, 7/12/06).

Beyond negotiations with the government, internal divisions exist surrounding the future of the Popular Assembly and its relationship with the state. Some members felt that APPO’s sole purpose was the removal of the governor, while others saw it as having a longer life. As one member said, “our central goal is the removal of the current governmental powers: judicial, executive, etc. When the government is removed, the APPO will replace it as the governing body of Oaxaca” (interview with student organizer A, 7/23/06). Others explicitly rejected taking state or governmental power, whether the APPO lived on after the expected fall of the governor or not. This was expressed as a desire for the Assembly to stay permanently within civil society and “change the world without taking power” (Holloway 2002). Due to the wide social and ideological divergences of APPO members, there have been corresponding divisions within the Assembly over its role in the movement and within Oaxacan politics more generally.
The agreements to come out of assembly meetings have generally been skeptical of taking state power. Instead, the “official” position has been to attempt a reform of social institutions in the state and also to build up autonomous political structures throughout the state. Popular Assemblies have been formed in many communities, neighborhoods, and municipalities, thus the APPO has become more of a form of political organizing, rather than a single organization itself. As Gustavo Esteva (2006: 18) explained:

The ultimate goal is to move from community and municipal autonomy to an autonomous coordination of groups of municipalities, from there to regions, and eventually to an autonomous form of government for the entire state... The people of Oaxaca are not waiting for the inevitable departure of Ulises Ruiz to put these ideas into action; there are already many APPOs operating around the state on community, neighborhood, municipal, and regional levels.

But the APPO is not pushing a form of “pure” autonomy from Mexican political and economic structures. Rather it is promoting local autonomy through the reform of the Oaxacan political system. As stated in the Declaration of the People of Oaxaca:

We call for building New Forms of Political Conduct that respect human rights; that respect the life of the communities and the autonomy of the municipal governments; that behave with equality, justness and transparency. In sum, we call for building the state of laws, democracy and the governability by setting up a New Constitution for our state that includes the voices of the Oaxaqueño people (APPO 2006b).

The definition of a democratic state became one centered around participatory politics and guarantees of autonomous governance. In Day’s (2005) terms, this certainly includes placing demands on the state, but these demands are centered on ensuring economic and political autonomy, thus the demands are enacted in order to give more space for a politics of the act, in which people can self-govern and cooperate to solve problems.
This concern for autonomy grew gradually during the conflict. Initially, the provisional leadership of the APPO leaned toward a traditional style of promoting social change, even speaking of the teachers’ union as the “vanguard” of the movement (APPO 2006d). As the conflict progressed, and the influence of indigenous groups grew, the desire for political autonomy became one of the assembly’s central positions (APPO 2006f).

The discussions of the APPO’s role in relation to the state have come to a head in regard to electoral politics. In the run-up to the July 2006 Mexican national elections APPO activists debated their desired course of action. In the preceding weeks many felt that a boycott of the election was desirable (which may have been combined with blocking access to polling stations, an action that would have escalated tensions between the movement and the government), but the final decision was to support a voto de castigo – a punishment vote – against the PRI and the PAN. This decision represented a tacit support of the PRD despite claims that political parties were not welcome within the Popular Assembly. As a result of the conflict and the punishment vote, the PRI suffered a defeat in Oaxaca, providing few votes for presidential candidate Roberto Madrazo, and giving the PRD legislative victories. While Oaxaca largely went in favor of PRD candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador in his failed (yet contested) bid for president, this support was ambivalent. Movement activists generally expressed lukewarm reactions to the national politics of the PRD, and support for López Obrador was largely absent from the speeches, marches, graffiti, and banners of the movement. Some APPO leaders did view the election as strategically important and a potential López Obrador victory as a helpful national rejection of both the PRI and the PAN (APPO 2006d).
While he did garner some fervent supporters, many Oaxacans in the city echoed the beliefs of one shopkeeper who claimed that in Oaxaca “it is not important who will win [the presidency]” (interview with shop owner, 7/4/06).

Nevertheless, the poor performance of the PRI in the federal elections in Oaxaca was a major shift from the history of that party’s political dominance in the state. This defeat has put pressure on Governor Ulises Ruiz to hold onto the remaining PRI power in the state, clinging to the party’s strategy of holding onto regional power centers following the 2000 presidential loss (Dresser 2003). How these forces play out will be seen in the coming state elections in Fall 2007 in which the APPO will once again support a punishment vote against the PRI and PAN. This pragmatism of the Popular Assembly in using elections as a political tool, and its tentative alliance with the PRD, are in some ways a temporary concession used in spite of the APPO’s disapproval of the Mexican political system. This ambiguous arrangement continues with the Popular Assembly’s refusal to act as a political party by fielding candidates: any member of APPO’s State Council who wishes to run for public office must resign (APPO 2007).

The ability of the APPO to maneuver this complex political scene will be seen in the coming months, and possibly years. Without a highly mobilized populace, will the APPO be able to sustain high levels of participation and support? The Popular Assembly is both a political organization and a form of organizing. Many assemblies have sprouted up throughout Oaxaca, in various regions, municipalities and neighborhoods. Organizations have been formed in other Mexican states, such as Puebla and Guerrero, and a national Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Mexico was created. The ability of this model to obtain its desired transformations is unclear. The intensive period of the
Oaxacan conflict is over, and Governor Ulises Ruiz remains in power. It would be misleading to simply call the movement a failure, however. APPO activists continue to organize for the release of political prisoners, against human rights abuses, against neoliberal development projects, and for political autonomy and democracy. The ramifications of the movement may never be entirely clear, yet we can draw out some important implications of the conflict for future political projects in Oaxaca and elsewhere.
This work has attempted to draw together various theories of space and power, resistance and social movements, and autonomous social change to better understand recent political events in Oaxaca, Mexico. The diverse nature of the social movement fits well with a decentralized notion of power. With Foucault and Deleuze we see that power is spread through the minutiae of everyday life, and not simply a “top-down” process. The relations created within the Popular Assembly show this well. The APPO made decisions through consensus, thus while there were leaders within the organization, their authority was relegated to carrying out decisions of the group, not dictating orders. Likewise, the decentralized nature of the street barricades and encampments removed them from hierarchical control. Those participating in the mobilization organized these sites directly in their own locales. These actions contributed to the broader goal and strategy of the movement (to remove the governor through the creation of ungovernability), but acted autonomously toward that end.

Thus the relations created through the movement’s urban spatial practices in the city replicated many of the movement’s goals, in a way collapsing the means vs. ends distinction. Gender inequalities were confronted through the assembly meetings and through direct action on the part of female participants, democratic decision-making was introduced in the assembly and encampments, and autonomy from the state was preserved through the maintenance of the barricades. While the end goals of the APPO have not yet been met, these transformations within the movement still stand as an accomplishment. By and large the APPO fit in with Day’s (2005) suggestion that groups
striving for radical change do not fragment along identity lines, but rather transcend those to obtain a solidarity or affinity across identities. Given the diversity of participants within the movement, there was surprisingly little infighting and division. Individual groups remained relatively independent, but were able to put ideological differences aside in order to come together toward a common end. The major conflicts that arose were around union leaders who did not fit in with the APPO’s new decision-making style.

The desire for autonomy created an interesting relationship between the movement and the Mexican state. This took a variety of forms, but the movement did not eschew pragmatic negotiation with the federal government in an attempt to combat the state government, although these negotiations repeatedly broke down. Most movement members rejected the goal of taking state power, despite the possible appearance of “revolutionary” conditions. The desire was for a (possibly slower) form of non-state-centered change. Despite this attempt to slip away from state power, the movement frequently dealt with a repressive state response, whether from Oaxacan plain-clothes police, or large numbers of Federal Preventative Police sent to restore “order” and control to the city, in effect, to reterritorialize. Despite the horizontal and productive power relations developed by movement participants, the state remained a large source of power, even if it was rarely visible in the city. The state remains, then, an obstacle to many forms of social change due to its desire and ability to preserve status quo social relations and the appearance of normalcy through repressive force.
Further Questions

The study and praxis of social movements is at an interesting juncture. With many lamenting the demise of faith and participation in electoral democracy, the question of the future of democratic politics remains open (Mair 2006). Even in Mexico, with its much-hyped recent transition to democratic governance, social movements are questioning the legitimacy of the state’s claim of upholding the ideals of democracy. What does this hollowing out of liberal democracy bode for the continuation of autonomous politics? This may call for the redefinition of democratic political practices away from the state and toward social movements and civil society. Ensuring democratic organization within social movements is, as we have seen, a struggle in itself, yet many theorists and activists in today’s movements seem ready to abandon the reduction of means to ends and construct more egalitarian bonds within mobilizations for social change.

The APPO has wide-ranging goals of economic and political transformation in Oaxaca, composed both of politics of demand and of the act. What are we to make of Day’s claim that there is no force to which these demands can be addressed? Take the Zapatista’s cry of “dignity!” Can a dignified life be gained through governmental negotiations, or must it be forged through autonomous struggle? The utility of such high-minded goals has been seen in terms of the meaning and values placed on social struggle by social movement participants but has not been shown in terms of material success and gains. With abstract goals such as this, are autonomous spaces doomed to be merely spatial and temporal enclaves, limited to specific, temporary sites?
With regard to Oaxaca, will the APPO be able to build from its present state, or has the end of the conflict doomed it to a slow withering? Will the gains that it made in terms of its organization structure be maintained, and what will their effects be within Oaxacan politics writ large? This question ties into a general comment about social movements, especially those concerned with means over ends. We still have little indication of how the forms of organization within movements impact social relations outside the movement. I would suggest that they may at least have an impact on the places in which they are situated, but the exact linkages remain unclear.

Given the primacy of a Lefebvrian spatial analysis in social movement research within geography, work remains to be done on the differences between a Deleuzian inspired spatial vision, and a socio-spatial dialectical model. We have seen tentative results that suggest a movement away from the spatial dialectic opens us to a more expansive view of power that focuses less on contradictions, and more on the diverse, shifting, and productive social assemblages that resist capture by spatial categories. The importance is then placed on mobility and the resistance to spatial coding and representation, rather than simply altering the representations of space.

The complexity of social movements in Oaxaca is also indicative of another issue for researchers. Drawing the boundaries around a single movement remains difficult. How are we to create a social movement as an object of study? The movement in Oaxaca cannot simply be defined as the Popular Assembly, as many participants had little care to be involved in a formal organization. Additionally, while centered around a common goal, participants had diverging views on the overarching role of the movement, should it simply strive for the removal of the governor, or expand its project to address other
political problems? The APPO came down solidly in favor of the latter, but this was not a universal view. So we are left sorting out different roles, goals, practices, and identifications of participants in order to determine what actually constitutes a “movement.” Deleuze may be helpful here as well, with movements as temporary assemblages composed of multiplicitous identity formations that defy fixed boundaries. This makes study difficult, but also leads to further research into how movements become constituted through the material practices that define social assemblages.

The Future of the APPO

Even more questions remain for the resolution of the conflict that spurred the Popular Assembly’s formation. The conditions that brought on the Oaxacan conflict largely remain in place, and, while not as visible as the 2006 mobilization, APPO members continue to organize. This is evident in the opposition to development projects associated with the neoliberal Plan Puebla Panamá, and in the continued documentation of human rights abuses in Oaxaca. Meanwhile, Section 22 is scheduled to go on strike again in May of 2007, as the teachers have done since the early 1980s. The state’s response to the strike and the union’s demands will most likely be tempered by the effects of the 2006 response. It will be interesting to see how Section 22 manages its relationship with the Popular Assembly as it goes into another round of mobilization. Will the teachers limit themselves to labor demands, or renew the struggle for broader political reforms in the state?

With the loss of the PRD’s López Obrador, Mexico failed to follow in the electoral footsteps of other Latin American countries that have formed what has been
called a left-wing resurgence in the region (Castañeda 2006). With the rise of left-leaning governments in various countries, this would seem to suggest a comfort with viewing the state as an agent of progressive social change. Given that the conservative PAN has retained power in Mexico, will non-state projects be the prime movers in terms of progressive political projects? With the spread of popular assemblies throughout the country, and the expansion of the Zapatista’s Other Campaign, it would seem that Mexico is at the forefront of autonomous politics.
REFERENCES


—. 2006b. Declaración Política de la Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca. November 17


—. 2006g. Resolutorios de la Primera Asamblea Estatal de los Pueblos de Oaxaca. September 29.

—. 2007. Acuerdos Ratificados por la Asamblea Extraordinaria de la APPO. March.


Castañeda, Jorge G. 2006. "Latin America's Left Turn." Foreign Affairs 85:3.


—. 2005. ¡No que no, sí que sí! Testimonios y Crónicas del Movimiento Magisterial Oaxaqueño. Oaxaca: Carteles Editores.


Rapp Soto, Erika, José Luis García Zárate, and Alejandro Osorio Solórzano. 2006. "Consejo Central de Lucha del Magisterio Oaxaqueño." *Noticias* June 30:4A


Seoane, José. 2004. "Rebellion, Dignity, Autonomy and Democracy: Shared Voices from


Slater, David. 1985. *New Social Movements and the State in Latin America*. Amsterdam: CEDLA.


Yescas Martínez, Isidoro, and Gloria Zafra. 2006. La Insurgencia Magisterial en Oaxaca. Oaxaca: Fondo Editorial IEEPO.
