Defending Place, Remaking Space: Social Movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas

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Whilst Henri Lefebvre's magisterial work *The Production of Space* inspired a number of Marxist-oriented thinkers to take seriously the relationship between capitalism and the distinct geographies associated with this form of accumulation, relatively less attention has been focused on how social movements have sought to contest and remake space in a radically different image.1 This chapter seeks to address this lacuna with a focus on the novel forms of resistance that have been articulated in the southern Mexican states of Oaxaca and Chiapas. In recent years, this area has become a 'spatial target' for a new round of investment and transformation, most notably with mega-projects such as the *Plan Puebla Panama* (now renamed *Plan Mesoamerica*) but also through everyday initiatives to transform property relations so as to make them more amenable to capital accumulation. However, this has been rigorously contested by – largely indigenous – social movements. Refusing to accept the model of 'accumulation by dispossession' that has increasingly come to characterise the neoliberal phase of capitalism, these movements have, instead, sought to defend place and produce alternative forms of spatial transformation, whilst advancing novel forms of political participation. In doing so, these movements have

1. The work of David Harvey 1990; 2006; 2010; and Neil Smith 2008 is frequently (if not exclusively) ‘capitalocentric’, (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. 6). Some notable efforts have been made, however, to expand their work to engage with social movement activism: see, for example, Nilsen 2010.
posed important questions about agency, the locus for political contestation, and the meaning of democratic participation.

**Politicking space**

On 1 January 1994, in the southern-Mexican state of Chiapas, an indigenous rebel-group calling itself the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* [EZLN, ‘Zapatista Army of National Liberation’] rose up in response to the Government’s new economic orientation, most visibly signalled with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that was due to come into effect on that very day. Since then, the Zapatistas have vigorously contested state control, as well as attempts to draw them into official channels of political participation. Instead, on the land that they have taken over (or ‘recuperated’, as they put it) they have sought to construct an autonomous form of governance based on the will of their communities, not recognising state law.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2006, in Oaxaca, another southern-Mexican state, the violent dislodgement of the annual teacher’s *plantón* [encampment] led to the creation of a broad collection of social movements, trade unions and civil-society organisations coming together under the banner of the *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* [APPO, ‘Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca’]. Barricades were set up throughout the city and public buildings and symbols of power were taken over, as a state of ‘ingovernability’ was declared. The Oaxaca Commune (as it came to be known) was subsequently defeated after a protracted period of struggle, and their main demand (getting rid of the Governor) was not achieved. Nevertheless, since this time, social movement activism in the state has proliferated, centred on opposition to neoliberal development projects and localised authoritarianism. Instead, drawing on the region’s indigenous cultural practices, there have been attempts to reinvent community and reorient development towards more socially just and ecologically sustainable ends.

What both of these cases represent is an effort to craft new geographical relations of power. They call into question the legitimacy of the state as the cornerstone of political praxis as well as the efficacy and desirability of representative democracy, and its associated form of citizenship. In this way, they pose a challenge to the viability of capitalist social relations, as they have placed issues of who has the right to produce space firmly at the forefront of the political agenda.

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2. See Yashar 2005.