JOURNAL OF
CONTEMPORARY ANTHROPOLOGY

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Analyzing the Meshwork as an Emerging Social Movement Formation: An Ethnographic Account of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO)

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary social movements operate not only as actors in local affairs, but as nodes in interlinked social networks that often cross myriad borders. This paper offers an ethnographic account of one such movement based in Oaxaca, Mexico—the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO). Incorporating the notion of "meshworks," this paper demonstrates not only how the APPO exhibits definitive characteristics of a meshwork, such as being self-organized and highly heterogeneous, but also how these very factors have been both the movement's greatest strength and the source of some of its greatest internal tensions.

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

During the final five months of 2006, police in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca made more than 450 political arrests, paramilitary forces murdered at least 25 people and disappeared another 30 (Stephen 2007b; CCIODH 2008:212). Countless more men and women were beaten in the streets, in police custody, and in their own homes. Women were raped, others suffered miscarriages, and both men and women were forced to flee the country, seeking asylum in other Latin and North American countries. These are some of the brutal consequences suffered by the nonviolent social movement, the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (herein APPO for its Spanish acronym). Other results of the 2006 uprising are both renewed and novel alliances between hundreds of community organizations, NGOs, labor unions, and opposition parties; the proliferation of community-run radio stations and other grassroots media such as street art and video collectives; the reclaiming of the state's main cultural festival and tourist attraction by the popular movement; and a generally more politicized, conscious, and fearless citizenry who have survived state repression.

The ongoing social movement in Oaxaca and the government's response are far from isolated incidences, although they certainly do contain unique cultural, social, and historical particularities such as the movement's assembly-style decision-making structure and the corporatist governing system in Mexico that Jonathan Fox (1994) describes as authoritarian clientelism. Yet, while the conflict in Oaxaca does have its own particularities, it also occurs within a global context where challenges to formal electoral democracies by broad-based social movements are replacing challenges by more narrowly defined movements. Such movements often combine different kinds of rights claims—human, women's, indigenous, and worker rights for example—with novel forms of political organizing and governance—such as creating networks of alternative and democratic grassroots institutions and media. These broad-based movements experiment with how to create political unity out of diversity and how to develop new forms of leadership and political participation.

Some of these movements emerge from self-organizing and overlapping networks that are characterized by heterogeneous compositions and non-hierarchical and decentralized decision-making structures. Arturo Escobar, borrowing from Manuel de Landa (1997), has termed such movements "meshworks" (2008). These formations are notable in that their ontologies are not fixed or rigid. Instead, they represent the diversity of which they are products, resulting in especially fluid and adaptable formations. They engage in both vertical and horizontal networking, are interlinked with other hierarchies and meshworks, and yet maintain their characteristic plurality without imposing uniformity (Escobar 2008; Stephen 2007a). Meshworking is an increasingly practical and necessary form of engagement between various sectors of civil society; regional, national, and international institutions; activists; and discourses in an era where the hegemony of neoliberalism is increasingly shattering the illusion that social and political change can be achieved by local actors via traditional forms of political engagement with the state, such as formal electoral politics.

For social movement scholars, utilizing the meshwork concept is especially useful because it allows them to benefit from the flexibility of the network concept, which is better suited than structuralist approaches to account for phenomena of change (Diani and McAdam 2003), while also allowing them to emphasize the unique organizational (i.e., structural), strategic and membership characteristics that make meshworks distinguishable from more narrowly defined movements whose agendas can be defined in terms of changes to specific policies or political structures. The meshwork concept provides the researcher with a framework

through which to follow the various currents that may be operating simultaneously at any given moment within a social movement. In this way, the meshwork goes beyond the focus of the network, which tends to privilege one node (an actor, organization, etc.) and work outward from there. In contrast to these approaches, the meshwork concept recognizes the "multilayered entanglement" that occurs in social movements like the APPO, thus accounting for the various interlinked networks that bridge scale and difference, while not losing sight of the total effect they produce (Escobar 2008).

There are several other theoretical approaches that recognize the importance of networks in social movements; however, the meshwork is more useful in analyzing contemporary social movements such as the APPO. Resource Mobilization (RM) theorists, for example, have long recognized that social networks are key to social movement *success.*[1] They view networks as resources to be mobilized by rational actors, as "facilitators of participation," and as "social capital" (Jasper 1997; Diani and McAdam 2003). This view is helpful in as much as it recognizes the utility of networks; however, RM privileges the role of leaders and takes for granted that social movements' primary objective is incorporation to current political structures (Canel 1997). So, while RM is well suited to explain the "How" of social movement emergence it is not so useful in accounting for movements with a non-hierarchical structure or those whose goals are not reformist. Critics of this approach argue that such an instrumentalist view of protest misses the complexity of what actually happens within social networks and social movements, and how they impact society vis-à-vis "broader processes of cultural transformation" (Edelman 2001:290).

Other approaches to activism and networks focus on the transnationalization of activism (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Scholars in this field tend to see networks as separate from social movements. They focus on reformist advocacy groups who make alliances in order to accomplish policy changes or raise awareness around specific issue campaigns. Such studies are useful in helping us understand transnational alliance-building, but are ultimately interested in networks based on the liberal ideal of the importance of the individual (Escobar 2008). Therefore, this approach is less relevant in analyzing movements that are more collective in nature, that are primarily place-based, and that are non-reformist.

Instead of viewing networks as objects (as in RM) or as separate from social movements (Fox 2000; Keck and Sikkink 1998), networks can be recognized as both a tool and a goal for social movements. Anthropologists such as Jeffrey Juris (2008) and David Graeber (2009) highlight the prefigurative nature of current social movements. By underscoring the horizontal logic of networking, they acknowledge that through networking activists are enacting the social change they want to see by creating non-hegemonic connections with other activists. These relations are not based on domination or exploitation; rather, they are based on decentralized coordination and consensus-based decision-making. Juris acknowledges that this horizontal logic is the ideal, and that in practice the reality is much more complex and contentious.

This is where the meshwork concept proves useful because it allows us to follow these tensions between competing logics in broad-based social movements such as the APPO. By emphasizing the fluidity and heterogeneity of social movements, the meshwork concept goes beyond the network concept by treating the dynamic tensions within social movements as part-

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[1] Evaluating social movement success or failure, often based on the institutional/policy impact of movements, has preoccupied social movement scholars for decades. I am more worried about what social movements can tell us about how "ordinary people" are resisting their oppression, especially in light of the increasing militarization of North America.

and-parcel of movements instead of as failures. As such, the job of the researcher becomes to track these different currents while highlighting the total effect that they yield.

APPO IN CONTEXT

In this paper, I explore how some of the definitive characteristics of meshworks can simultaneously be sources of strength as well as challenges to the maintenance, mobilizing efficacy, and impact of social movements. Specifically, I show how various kinds of power structures can coexist within a given meshwork. Similarly, I highlight how various currents can simultaneously move in different and unplanned directions, yet in the process produce a total effect. Here I do not mean to insinuate that this internal diversity and flexibility always, or even usually, result in coherence and consensus. Instead, I demonstrate how these dynamics play out on the ground, both triumphantly and contentiously. I do this by offering examples from my fieldwork in Oaxaca, focusing primarily on the period when the movement was most active and had the greatest impact on the Oaxacan socio-political landscape (June-December 2006). While the APPO continues to mobilize, and continues to influence and be influenced by local politics, taking a snapshot of the movement's emergence and tracking the ebb and flow of mobilization during this initial six-month period is ideal for offering a brief yet fruitful analysis of the meshwork's strengths and vulnerabilities. However, before discussing these aspects of the APPO I offer some background information on Oaxaca and on the movement itself.

Oaxaca is a mostly rural state in Southern Mexico, rich in natural resources and ethnic diversity. It is home to 16 indigenous groups, each with its own language and culture, making it both the most diverse state in Mexico and home to the most indigenous language speakers in the country. The state has long been a cultural hub, attracting artists and tourists from around the world as well as being home to world-renowned artists such as painter Francisco Toledo and the late Rodolfo Morales. This rich ethnic and cultural landscape is complemented by Oaxaca's biodiversity and geopolitical importance—southeastern Oaxaca is located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which represents the shortest distance between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean. The isthmus has been an important site for interoceanic trade dating back to the times of the Spanish colonialism. More recently, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has been targeted by international capitalism for its natural resources, including wind energy, which is converted into wind power. However, this great natural and ethnic wealth stands in stark contrast to the socioeconomic reality of most Oaxacans who live in the second poorest state in the republic and suffer from the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) and the highest rates of infant and maternal mortality and domestic violence in the nation.[2] Oaxaca's illiteracy rates are 65 percent among women and 35 percent among men.[3]

It is important to recognize that the contradiction between the state's wealth and the poverty of (the majority of) its people is part-and-parcel of a long and complex history of conquest, colonialism, *caciquismo,* and racism. When seeking to place Oaxaca in its regional, national, and international contexts, it is useful to consider the notion of *coloniality*, whereby the rigid system of colonial hierarchies that proclaims the ethnic, racial, and cognitive superiority of the colonizer is perpetuated even in the "post" colonial moment (Mignolo 2000; Quijano 2000). In the case of Oaxaca and the Mexican South more generally, coloniality has (re)produced the region in the Mexican national imaginary as part of the backwards *Indianness* of the uncivilized past,

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[2] Information from interview with Concepción Nuñez, March 10, 2007.
[3] Information from interview with Margarita Dalton, July 16, 2007.

effectively "Othering" the South and blaming its people for their own poverty and marginalization (Chassen-López 2004).

While the Mexican government has long neglected Oaxaca and the majority of its inhabitants, a national and global shift toward neoliberal economic reforms has exacerbated the long-standing social and economic despair in the state. As a result of this shift in economic philosophy, regional elites with holdings in the tourism and development-related industries have benefited the most, while the large percentage of Oaxacans who have long counted on some combination of subsistence farming and small-scale commercial agriculture are worse off now than they were ten years ago. Many peasants have been forced to migrate north, to other regions in Mexico and to the United States, in search of wage labor. In fact, Oaxaca has the fourth highest level of out-migration in Mexico.[4] Over this same difficult period of economic adjustments, Oaxaca has seen a proliferation of grassroots, indigenous, women's, peasant, student, and labor organizing. Notable among these have been struggles to democratize labor unions (Cook 1996; Zafra et al. 2002), the right to indigenous self-determination (Campbell 1994; Rubin 1997), and access to education (Rénique 2007; Zafra et al. 2002). These organizing efforts by civil society have been met by increasingly authoritarian state and national regimes that enforce unpopular policies and repress dissenting voices. Especially important when considering the APPO is the fact that political violence and political arrests in Oaxaca have increased under the current governor, Ulises Ruiz, and his predecessor, José Múrat (Martínez Vásquez 2007).[5]

It is in this context of ongoing struggle that the APPO emerged, giving surprising coherence to the grievances of an incredibly diverse segment of Oaxacan society. The final action that triggered the formation of this ongoing social movement occurred during the very early morning hours of June 14, 2006, when police forces numbering anywhere from 870 to 3,000 officers (Osorno 2007; Martínez Vásquez 2007) violently removed sleeping teachers and their families from the *zócalo* (town square) where they had set up a peaceful encampment following weeks of stalled contract negotiation between their union—Local 22 of the National Educational Workers Union (SNTE)—and Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. Police used batons, dogs, and guns, and launched tear gas from privately owned helicopters on the sleeping teachers (Martínez Vásquez 2007:66). The indiscriminate bombing of the area with tear gas left hundreds of people seeking refuge and medical assistance—including many non-teachers who live, work, or had other business in the busy downtown area that morning; 113 people registered at local hospitals with injuries resulting from the police repression, ranging from gunshot wounds to miscarriages and perforated lungs (Martínez Vásquez 2007:66). In addition to these indiscriminate attacks on people's bodies, the police destroyed all in their path, burning the teachers' tents, tarps, and personal belongings.

The governor's decision to repress the teachers immediately backfired. Many people who were not otherwise sympathetic to the teachers' union (as well as many who already supported the union such as allied labor unions, university students, and friends and family) rushed to the teachers' aid that morning. For example, a retired nurse I spoke with named Doña Ines[6] lent her medical services to those in need on June 14 by helping out at an impromptu medical clinic that

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[4] See Cohen 2004, Kearney 1996, and Stephen 2007a for more on Oaxacan migration.
[5] See also CCIODH 2008, LASA 2007, and Stephen 2007b.
[6] I gave everyone who participated in this research the option of using pseudonyms to protect their identity. Many of the people I spoke with in 2007, including "Doña Ines," opted to use a pseudonym, while others choice to have only their first name used since repression of anyone suspected of participating in the APPO was widespread.

was set up at a nearby church. She told me that she has never been "political" nor does she agree with the teachers' union's tactics (i.e., work stoppages, encampments, and marches) because she finds them disruptive to the daily lives of people in the capital city, as well as to the education of students, but Ruiz's decision to attack the teachers and anyone else who happened to be in the way that morning enraged her. Rage at the governor's actions propelled this otherwise "apolitical" senior citizen to lend her support to protesters throughout the tense months that followed.

By midday the teachers regrouped, and along with thousands of fellow citizens, they retook the *zócalo* (Sotelo Marbén 2008). Overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people who mobilized against them, the police returned to their barracks and refused to take further action against the peaceful protesters. Two days later hundreds of thousands of Oaxacans participated in a massive march demanding the governor's removal. On June 17, 2006, the teachers' union convened a public assembly, inviting more than 300 organizations and movements who were active in Oaxaca in order to discuss how to best capitalize on the momentum generated over the past days. The teachers proposed extending the structure of their union's assembly-style decision-making body, the State Assembly of Local 22 Delegates, to greater Oaxacan society (Martínez Vásquez 2007). The assembly, of course, is by no means a union invention. It has a long and dynamic history in Oaxaca as it is practiced by hundreds of indigenous communities in the state. After the first meeting, the assembly agreed on the resignation of Ruiz as their principal demand—though it would be a mistake to limit the grievances of the APPO to this singular goal (Osorno 2007). From July through November 2006, the APPO effectively controlled the capital city; they coordinated cultural events and massive mobilizations, they executed state functions, and they transmitted original grassroots radio and television programming throughout the state (and internationally via the internet). Through these actions, the movement reclaimed, reconfigured, and redefined public spaces.

APPO AS MESHWORK

With this context and background in mind, I now demonstrate how the APPO is illustrative of the strengths and vulnerabilities of the meshwork. Specifically, I focus on how the meshwork's ontology makes the formation especially flexible and resilient. For example, two definitive elements of meshworks are that they grow in unplanned directions and can have various currents moving simultaneously in different directions. In the case of the APPO, this fluidity made initial government efforts to disarticulate the movement through selective repression and co-optation largely unsuccessful.[7] However, this same fluidity has, at times, also made the movement susceptible to internal division and incoherence[8] since the directions in which different currents move can be contradictory. Drawing on examples from my fieldwork in Oaxaca, I also show how the meshwork's emphasis on engaging in both vertical and horizontal networking allow it to have unrivaled networking capabilities. Ultimately, I emphasize how the

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[7] At least until November 2006, when the military-trained federal preventative police (PFP) were deployed to crush the nonviolent movement in Oaxaca. The APPO still managed to stave off the siege of Oaxaca by hundreds of PFP for a month through creative nonviolent means until they were finally overwhelmed by the sheer force of the PFP in late November.

[8] Here I do not mean to suggest that other social movement formations are not vulnerable to internal divisions. Rather, I will argue that the meshwork's ontology can have the unintended consequence of allowing unmediated difference to grow, perhaps more so than other social movement formations. This aspect of the meshwork can be both productive and detrimental.

diversity and flexibility of the meshwork can yield a total effect that has the potential to have a broader, more sustained impact than a more rigid and narrowly defined social movement can.

The APPO demonstrates the heterogeneity inherent in the meshwork, since at its height it was composed of more than 300 member organizations and movements representing a diverse spectrum of groups, such as the powerful teachers' union; human rights groups; NGOs; multidisciplinary artist collectives; dozens of indigenous, student, women's and peasant organizations; anarchist youth collectives; the Communist Party of Mexico; and supporters of Mexico's mainstream parties. To this day, members are of all ages and genders and come from diverse ethnic and class backgrounds. As it follows, the APPO's decision-making structure is a hybrid of the institutionalized vertical form inherited from the teachers' union and other labor unions and "old left" political organizations; a reinterpretation of the assembly form of governance found in many indigenous communities; and a more flexible horizontal self-organized form that is found at the grassroots level of the movement. This fusing of elements from previous movements is what some scholars have referred to as "movement spill-over"—a concept that allows us to emphasize what is both new and old about current social movements like the APPO (Brown et al. 2004). The parallel forms of vertical and horizontal organizing and networking found in the APPO are definitive of the meshwork and allow for a much greater mobilizing potential and flexibility than a movement engaged in only one form of networking and organizing.

Due to the fact that various kinds of power structures may be operating simultaneously within a given meshwork, these movements can be especially difficult to co-opt or otherwise disarticulate since there is not a formal leadership class that can be targeted. This proved to be the case in Oaxaca as government efforts to disarticulate the movement failed during the initial six months of APPO mobilizations. During this time, the movement controlled much of the capital city, as most government functionaries had abandoned Oaxaca City. From early on in the emergence of the APPO, the state government pursued a strategy of simultaneously negotiating with the teachers' union leadership and repressing the movement. The likely reason for this is that the government of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz was counting on three things: (1) that the teachers' union leadership commanded the APPO, (2) that the union leadership could be co-opted, and (3) that what it saw as rank-and-file *appistas* would be intimidated by the repression and abandon the movement. Ruiz's government was wrong on at least two of these counts, since entering into negotiations with the teachers' union and repressing the APPO did not deter, or even slow down, mobilizations by the APPO. However, this example does illustrate how various currents of a meshwork can move in different, and sometimes contradictory directions since Local 22 entered into negotiations with the government in spite of the fact that many in the APPO were vehemently opposed to any negotiations until Ruiz was removed from office.

In spite of "advancements" between Local 22 and the government of Ulises Ruiz, repression of *appistas* and presumed sympathizers, including many teachers, continued to be widespread. Political arrests (often carried out without arrest warrants), disappearances, and beatings were and continue to be perpetrated by local and federal police, as well as by paramilitary forces throughout Oaxaca (CCIODH 2008; Sotelo Marbén 2008). Widespread (often indiscriminate) repression can be one of the unintended consequences of the meshwork's resistance to cooptation and selective repression. These tactics of "low-intensity" warfare were meant to intimidate and disarticulate the movement but instead resulted in greater momentum and support for the APPO. In July 2006, the movement held a march that drew somewhere between 500,000 and 1 million participants (Osorno 2007; Martínez Vásquez 2007), which

represents anywhere from 15 to 30 percent of the state's entire and mostly rural population marching through the capital city. The marchers demanded the resignation of the governor, a new state constitution, and an end to the illegal government repression of the movement. The ability to mobilize such a huge percentage of the state's population demonstrates the meshwork's impressive mobilizing capabilities, especially the ability to articulate networks, which bridge significant difference.

Following this massive show of mobilizing power, various currents continued to move in contradictory directions, yet the meshwork's hybrid structure proved to be both highly flexible and resilient, as these contradictions were again overshadowed, at least momentarily, by successful direct actions. As a result of continued negotiations with the government, the teachers' union agreed to temporarily return to classes. This was a contentious agreement. Many teachers and parents agreed to the temporary return to classes, at least so that students could finish the school year, but others in the APPO felt compromising with the government was unacceptable until Ulises Ruiz was removed from office. However, at the same time as the teachers were negotiating their return to classes, other networks within the movement were actively and creatively engaged in acts of civil disobedience meant to force Ruiz to cancel the annual Guelaguetza festival, which is the state's main tourist attraction.

The Guelaguetza is a cultural festival celebrated in communities throughout the state but the government has its own version, which it holds in the capital city. Folk-artists come from around the state to perform free-of-charge at the state-sponsored Guelaguetza, which is marketed as a celebration of Oaxaca's great ethnic diversity. Paradoxically, the majority of Oaxacans cannot afford the inflated price of admission (400 pesos through Ticketmaster), thus most Oaxacans have never been to the government-sponsored Guelaguetza. The APPO claimed that the Guelaguetza belonged to Oaxacans and not the government or capitalist interests. Thus they launched their campaign to force the cancellation of the for-profit, state-sponsored festival. During this campaign of civil disobedience, the main stage at the venue was set on fire. Union leadership and other public figures were quick to denounce these acts of vandalism, seeking to distance themselves from more radical currents within the movement. The more militant APPO networks, including radical youths, continued their campaign and eventually succeeded in forcing Ruiz to cancel the commercialized festival. As an alternative to this festival, the APPO held their own free-of-charge Guelaguetza a few weeks later. Thousands of Oaxacans who had never attended the state-sponsored festival attended the "Popular Guelaguetza" in 2006. The Popular Guelaguetza has been held again every year since, and has been one of the more visible and lasting legacies of the APPO.

The tension within the APPO surrounding the tactics used in this campaign of civil disobedience is a great example of one of the main tensions in the APPO—that between the more "traditional" actors in the movement, such as heads of established organizations with more vertical structures on the one hand, and the more radical, autonomous activists who operate horizontally on the other. Anarchist, punk, and Leninist youth represent one extreme and the teachers' union leadership and NGO professionals represent the other. It is important to recognize that while actors on both ends of this spectrum act without "permission" or prior approval from the APPO assembly, the youth tend to be more publicly ostracized for their actions. Also, it is important to note that many rank-and-file teachers participated and continue to participate with youth in direct actions. When I asked a teacher named Abril about the relationship between the teachers and the radical youth she summed up her feelings like this:[9]

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[9] Interview conducted by author on August 5, 2008.

> I would rather fight alongside these kids (*chavos*) than many of my fellow teachers who denounce them. They tell the youth that they don't want them in the movement, they tell them to take off their bandannas, to show their faces and go home. But I tell them that I'd rather be behind these kids than next to them because the kids are the ones who get their heads cracked open by the police. They are the ones who defend us teachers and older people. They tell us "Teachers, go get out of here. We will hold them off." And they do, they launch rocks at the police with slingshots. These kids are amazing with those slingshots. And I would rather have them next to me than many of my fellow teachers who are only at the marches because of union obligations.

Abril's explanation reveals the tension between competing logics and ideologies that are found in broad-based movements such as the APPO. In the case of the APPO, there continues to be a gulf between Abril's generation, whose political formation has followed a more Orthodox Marxist ideology, which assumes the importance of a vanguard, and the younger generation, whose political formation has occurred in the wake of the Zapatista uprising in the neighboring state of Chiapas. These activists revere autonomy and horizontalism and many fuse elements of Marxism, *Zapatismo, neo-Zapatismo,* and *Magonismo*, which their older counterparts do not always understand or agree with. These ideological differences can cause tension, but activists on both sides of this divide, and those somewhere in between, have for the most part been able to set aside these differences and focus on the goals they have in common.

      Another characteristic of meshworks is that they grow in unplanned directions. An example of this came on August 1, 2006, when more than 10,000 women marched through the city in protest against escalating government repression of the movement. Mid-march, an impromptu meeting was held and about 2,000 of the women decided to redirect the march to the state-owned television station, Canal 9, to request an hour of airtime to counter the pro-government views that dominated the national and local airwaves. When the television director denied their request for airtime on the public station, they decided to peacefully overtake the building, which also housed a state-owned FM radio station (Freidberg 2007; Stephen 2007b). The movement now had a television and high-powered radio station under their control. A teacher named Maribel explained the conditions leading up to their decision to take over the station like this:

> Unfortunately, the media always says that nothing is happening in Oaxaca—this is because they are all bribed by the government. This is why we women took Canal 9. We had to tell our side of the story. We had to show that yes, there is something happening in Oaxaca and it is not what the bad government or its media say. We Oaxacan women had to take the TV and radio to prove that in our state the *pueblo* stood up and said "Enough, we have had enough of this corruption, of this violence, of these bad politicians." [10]

The women renamed the radio and TV stations Radio Caserola (Casserole Radio). Radio Caserola became a conduit for the voiceless in Oaxaca and a powerful organizing tool for the movement. The station aired grassroots programming in at least six different indigenous

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[10] Interview conducted by author on August 5, 2008.

languages and included programming that linked local events to macro-processes such as the murders of women in Oaxaca in relation to the murder of women in Cuidad Juárez; the poverty in Oaxaca in relation to neoliberalism; and the heightened authoritarianism of recent years in relation to Plan Puebla-Panama (Stephen 2008). According to Lynn Stephen, the new radio and TV stations became "the chief means for people to voice their opinions, receive news, and have debates" (Stephen 2008:4). The programming content of Radio Caserola is a great example of how social movements can act as producers of counter-hegemonic knowledge.

The women's knowledge-producing apparatus represented a new pillar in the movement's organizing structure, again exemplary of the flexibility and unplanned growth of the meshwork. The station was also crucial in aiding community-based self-defense. After local police refused to leave their barracks to attack the movement, the head of Oaxacan Security and Transportation, Aristeo López Martínez,[11] assembled a force of undercover police, rumored to include out-of-state paramilitaries, to repress the movement (Stephen 2008). This national network of paramilitaries entered neighborhoods at night in convoys of trucks full of highly armed and masked men, made illegal arrests, and fired on APPO installations and encampments. Radio Caserola announced the location of these forces, and when illegal arrests were made, the radio broadcast a description of the vehicle(s) used and encouraged people to find and stop the vehicles (Stephen 2008). The stations were also used to mobilize people to reinforce occupied government buildings.

In the middle of the night on August 20, 2006, paramilitary forces opened fire on and destroyed the transmission tower for the station. *Appistas* reacted immediately and by the morning of August 21, they had already taken over the remaining 12 radio stations in the city.[12] These takeovers are prime examples of how meshworks grow in unplanned directions and they signal the strength of the flexibility and adaptability of these social movement formations since activists do not have to wait for decisions to pass through a bureaucratic apparatus before taking action. Instead, people in the movement are accustomed to making decisions and taking actions autonomously, as needed, which is very important when faced with the unpredictability of combined military and paramilitary repression.

On the same night as the round of radio station takeovers, convoys of up to 40 trucks of undercover police and paramilitaries covered much of the city, shooting at APPO encampments and murdering the unarmed Lorenzo San Pablo Cervantes who was guarding one of the radio towers. The APPO again proved highly adaptable in the face of government repression by initiating the construction of neighborhood barricades, or *barricadas*. David Venegas, an APPO activist and former political prisoner, describes the situation in Oaxaca:

> When police attacked and destroyed the occupied state television and radio and the people reacted by seizing twelve commercial radio stations . . . (this) marks the birth of the barricades. Many of us took to the streets that night to seize the commercial radio stations, and we had succeeded, we asked ourselves, "How can we defend these takeovers and protect the people inside?" That's how the barricades are born. (Quoted in Denham 2008:290)

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[11] Aristeo López Martínez was executed in the middle of the day in downtown Oaxaca in January 2009. At the time of his death he was a protected witness of the Procuraduría General de la República (Office of the General Prosecutor) in the investigation against allegations that police forces participated in paramilitary operations against the APPO in 2006.

[12] See Poole 2007 and Stephen 2007b for more on the takeover of the radio in Oaxaca.

The barricades were erected from 8 pm to 6 am everyday as a means of preventing the "caravans of death" from entering neighborhoods, the Historic Downtown section of the city, and other areas that were under APPO control. The construction of barricades began at the grassroots level and was then promoted through APPO channels such as radio and the assembly. In this way we again see the efficiency and flexibility of the meshwork's parallel power structures.

Las barricadas became community spaces where neighbors who may have never spoken before would spend all night drinking coffee, eating, dancing, and talking while reclaiming their neighborhoods and their right to be free from violence. Again, I turn to the words of David Venegas to describe the importance of the barricades:

> That's when my participation, along with the participation of hundreds of thousands of others, began to make a more substantial difference. Because the movement stopped being defined by announcements or events or calls for support made by the teachers' union and began to be about the physical, territorial control of communities by those communities, by way of the barricades . . . Most of us who formed the barricades were from the surrounding neighborhoods. We were women and men, small children and old people, professionals and not, and with different amounts of money in our pockets . . . We eventually started discussing agreements and decisions made by the APPO Council and the teachers' union. There were a number of occasions when the barricades chose actions that went against those agreements, which in my view, only strengthened our capacity for organized resistance. In this way, the barricades reestablished and modified the social fabric of the neighborhoods, of the communities where they were. Our relationships with our neighbors changed. Many people who we considered to be friends or imagined we had things in common with weren't there, while other people who we hadn't spoken to before or hadn't had a voice in the neighborhood were active in the barricades. So at the barricades we formed new networks, new friendships, and new relationships of trust in our own communities . . . and Oaxaca remains changed by those experiences. (Quoted in Denham 2008:290-291)

Through this lengthy quote, we see that the barricades exemplify the importance of place, community, and horizontalism in the APPO. David identifies the creation of non-hegemonic relationships, based on trust within the communities as an important legacy of 2006—this is exactly the kind of broad social transformation that other approaches to social movements (i.e., resource mobilization theories) miss.

Many activists I have spoken with over the years echo David's sentiments on the significance of the barricades. Many have stated that participation in the *barricadas* was their introduction to the APPO. Silvia, an active youth in the APPO, explains her involvement:[13]

> Many of us met for the first time in the *barricadas* in 2006 . . . (after federal police entered the city on November 2, 2006) the *barricadas* became part of my daily life but they were also part of a greater strategy. That was how we protected

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[13] Interview conducted by author and Lynn Stephen, August 9, 2010.

ourselves and the radio, but also how we showed, through our civil disobedience, that the government could not govern the city.

Silvia began her involvement with the movement as a researcher; she was working toward her bachelor's degree at the state university. One of the more important barricades in the city, Cinco Señores, blocked the entrance to her neighborhood so she passed through it every day. As she began spending more time there with her neighbors, her participation soon changed from researcher to activist.[14] From late August until late November 2006, these grassroots barricades protected communities and APPO installations from attacks by paramilitary and police forces.

DISARTICULATION

The APPO's control over the capital city of Oaxaca came to end in late November when the outgoing administration of President Vicente Fox sent hundreds of military-trained Federal Preventative Police (PFP) to lay siege on the city. Throughout the month, *appistas* defended their installations from the PFP, but on November 25, they were forced to surrender their principal remaining radio station and their encampment. These losses were symbolic of the disarticulation of the movement. The brute force used by the PFP was too much for the nonviolent APPO to overcome, no matter how flexible and adaptable. In one week at least 192 people were taken prisoner by the PFP, many of them shipped to a maximum security prison in the Northern state of Nayarit (Stephen 2007b:108). One of the women I interviewed told me about a friend who was among those arrested and shipped to Nayarit. While in police custody, she was tortured and humiliated. She received electric shocks to the nipples and vagina, was photographed naked by police, and was hung from a helicopter where she was told to scream like she did in the marches. Between June 14 and December 10, the social conflict in Oaxaca resulted in 26 murders, 450 arrests, countless injuries, and almost 30 people "disappeared" (CCIODH 2008:212-214; Stephen 2007b). According to the International Civil Commission for Human Rights Observation's most recent report, the number of politically motivated murders in Oaxaca between the summer of 2006 and April 2008 was 62 (209). The APPO remains active in Oaxaca, holding marches, cultural events, direct actions, and other mobilizations although it operates with a much lower profile than it did in 2006.

CONCLUSION

The APPO emerged from overlapping social movements and networks that incorporated novel forms of political organizing and governance. These included operating community radio stations, following the assembly form of governance, creating a network of alternative institutions, as well as reclaiming and redefining public spaces and cultural festivals. Many of these successes can be attributed to the APPO's ontology as a meshwork. Being a meshwork, the APPO is the fluid, self-organizing product of a heterogeneous mixture of various material, social, cultural, and political elements. This mixture, in turn, defines the movement's ontology. For example, the various power and decision-making structures within the APPO made efforts to disarticulate the movement very difficult. These aspects also allowed the movement to grow in unplanned directions, as with the reclaiming of public airwaves that resulted from the impromptu takeover of Canal 9 and the reclaiming of neighborhoods through the construction of grassroots barricades. However, these same factors combined with the characteristic heterogeneity of the

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[14] More about Silvia can be found in an interview she did that was published in Denham 2008. See the references section for full citation.

meshwork created some vulnerabilities, such as when the teachers' union and other groups within the APPO began to move in contradictory directions. The danger of course, is that these contradictions have the potential to exacerbate division within the movement and that they may become irreconcilable. Ultimately, however, through the case of the APPO we can appreciate how diverse currents act to yield a total effect. Here the utility of the meshwork concept is especially notable as its flexibility allows us to follow these dynamic currents over time, accounting for alternative forms of participation that structural approaches to social movements often overlook or dismiss.

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