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Comunalidad, Development and Indigenous Rights in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract

In the 1980s, in the Southern State of Oaxaca in Mexico, a group of civil society organisations, anthropologists and indigenous intellectuals posed a challenge to state-led development. They engaged with the long history of colonialism and injustices faced by indigenous Mexicans, analysed the changing nature of the relationship between local indigenous and rural communities and the state, and proposed a renovation of communal practice and the development of autonomous government based on consensual decision making as a basis for an alternative anti-poverty strategy. They called this *Comunalidad, and* supporters of *Comunalidad* engaged with the emerging indigenous rights legislation. *Comunalidad* can be understood in the context of the Latin American anti-development, anti-capitalist tradition. The movements and projects established as part of the movement have been effective in developing community identity and defending the cultural autonomy of communities in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca. Understanding Oaxacan Comunalidad is important for getting at the 'narrative behind the numbers' of contemporary development policy. Comunalidad anti-poverty strategies revolved around community development rather than economic development and serve as a useful example of a local approach to development.

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Introduction

From the 1980s, the ideas of *Comunalidad*, developed by anthropologists, indigenous intellectuals and activists in the Sierra Norte de Oaxaca in Southern Mexico, posed a challenge to state-led development policies.[1] It proposed alternative anti-poverty strategies based on the renovation of communal practice and the mobilisation of alternative historical narratives to defend the culture, lifeways and land of rural and indigenous communities in the region.[2] Activists in the region sought to defend their interests and access to resources and challenge narratives on modernity and development that excluded indigenous and rural communities.

Approaches to poverty alleviation and community development as discussed in the ideas of *Comunalidad,* particularly in the writings of Floriberto Díaz and Sofía Robles from Santa Maria de Tlahuitoltepec and Jaime Martínez Luna from San Pablo Guelatao, challenged regional, national and international development projects and engaged with the emerging indigenous rights framework. Activists and intellectuals associated with *Comunalidad* aimed to reimagine 'language, social organization and institutions' for the new context of globalisation and neoliberalism. Their writings were critical of international development and the use of universalising ideas of human rights.[3]

Publications associated with *Comunalidad*, including edited collections of the writings of Díaz, Robles and Martínez, a local history of Guelatao, by Martínez and a number of political manifestos and statements about *Comunalidad* published in the last decades of the twentieth century[4] all demonstrate how *Comunalidad* was a result of changing attitudes to development and indigeneity from the late 1960s onwards. The *Comunalidad* response to the neoliberal development policies and multi-cultural constitutional reform of the Oaxacan state government, the one-party state national government of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the international system, were grounded in a renovation of communal decision-making practice and the civil-religious authorities. The defining features of communities included the relationship to land, the importance of voluntary service on community authorities and in the *tequio* rotational labour system, communal decision making through *asambleas* and the development of education within the community.[5] Civil society organisations and activists associated with *Comunalidad*, legitimised this renovation of communal practice and structures autonomous from the state through engagement with the emerging indigenous rights legislation which protected the right to self-determination and *usos y costumbres* government.[6] *Comunalidad* thinkers wrote their own historical narrative relating to wealth, development and good government in opposition to the official narrative on history, development and modernity in Oaxaca. They juxtaposed what they saw as the exploitative, capitalist, centralising tendencies of the

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[1] This article was written as part of the activities of the Poverty Research Network. I would like to thank Dr Julia McClure for her invitation to participate and Prof. Benjamin T. Smith for arranging the meeting and contacts in Oaxaca.

[2] For examples of writing on comunalidad see, Jaime Martínez Luna (2009), 'Eso que llaman comunalidad,' Oaxaca, Mexico: CONACULTA, Secretaría de Cultura Gobierno de Oaxaca, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú; Juan José Rendón Mozón (2003) 'La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios', Tomo I. Mexico: CONACULTA; Sofía Robles Hernández and Rafael Cardoso Jiménez eds. (2018) 'Floriberto Díaz Escrito: Comunalidad, energía viva del pensamiento mixe', Mexico: UNAM.

[3] Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash. *Grassroots Postmodernism: Remaking the Soil of Cultures*, Zed Books, 2014, 110-151.

[4] Jaime Martínez Luna (2006) *Guelatao: enasyo de historia sobre una comunidad serana.* Mexico: CONACULTA; Jaime Martínez Luna (2009) *Eso que llaman comunalidad,* Oaxaca, Mexico: CONACULTA, Secretaría de Cultura Gobierno de Oaxaca, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú; Juan José Rendón Mozón (2003) *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios. Tomo I.* Mexico: CONACULTA; Sofía Robles Hernández and Rafael Cardoso Jiménez eds. (2018) *Floriberto Díaz Escrito: Comunalidad, energía viva del pensamiento mixe,* Mexico: UNAM. 'Declaración de Tlahuitoltepec sobre los derechos fundamentales de las naciones, nacionalidades y pueblos indígenas de indolatinoamérica, 1995', *ISTMICA* 2, 1995, 194-128; and 'La lucha de los pueblos autóctonos, su organización y las alternativas de su alianza con los demás sectores sociales', in María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros and Sergio Sarmiento Silva (1987) *La lucha indígena: un reto a la ortodoxia.* Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales.

[5] Floriberto Díaz, 'Comunidad y comunalidad' in Sofía Robles Hernández and Rafael Cardoso Jiménez eds. (2007) Floriberto Díaz Escrito. Mexico: UAM : 31-39, 35.

[6] 'Declaración de Tlahuitoltepec sobre los derechos fundamentales de las naciones, nacionalidades y pueblos indígenas de indolatinoamérica, 1995', *ISTMICA* 2 (1995): 194-128.

government and broader *mestizo*[7] society with what they believed to be the democratic tendencies and fairer attitudes to land and wealth associated with indigenous forms of government and consensual decision making.

Oaxacan *Comunalidad* was far from the only challenge of its kind to the neoliberal state in late twentieth century Mexico. It has received less attention in the anglophone research on development, indigenous rights, and social movements than the neo-Zapatistas and Mayan organisations in the neighbouring state of Chiapas[8] or even indigenous rights groups in Michoacan.[9] However, the variation in historical experience in Mexico from state to state, or from region to region, means that a range of case studies are needed to obtain a fuller picture of the history of human rights and development. *Comunalidad* is of particular interest because writings associated with the movement self-consciously engaged with and challenged national development policies. The ideas of *Comunalidad* can be understood in the context of the tradition of anti-development, anti-colonial thinking and anti-imperialism, that were particularly strong in twentieth-century Latin America. The anthropologists and thinkers involved were part of a broader movement that, from the 1970s began to challenge the *indigenista* policies of the

revolutionary state. They also engaged with the regional challenge to the nation-state and calls for autonomy of indigenous rights movements.

The Emergence of Comunalidad in the Sierra Norte de Oaxaca

Oaxacan *Comunalidad* is an important case study for looking at the relationship between indigenous rights and development. Oaxaca has one of the highest and most varied indigenous populations of any state in Mexico. According to recent statistics 65.7 percent of the population of Oaxaca consider themselves to be indigenous, making it the state in Mexico with the largest indigenous population.[10] 7,382,785 of the population over three years old speak an indigenous language. The vast majority speak Zapotec or Mixe but there are also Ikoots or Kunajts (often called Huave) communities who speak Ikoots, and speakers of Chontal, Chatino, Ixcalteo, Mazateco, Chinanteco and Zoque along with some Nahuatl speakers. There are 245 municipalities in the state where more than 40 percent of the population speak an indigenous language.[11]

Tlahuitoltepec is a Ajuuk or Mixe municipality of just under 10,000 inhabitants[12] and a large proportion of native Ajuuk speakers and known in the region for its youth orchestra. Guelatao, is a Zapotec town with a population of 657,[13] where the lengua franca is Spanish and many locals identify as *serranos* [mountain people] rather than as one of the local indigenous groups. It was the birthplace of the liberal, reformist, secularising, nineteenth-century president of Zapotec descent, Benito Juárez (1806-1872). It is home to a number of community radio stations that broadcast in local languages and a visual summer school and community cinema, Cine Too, that aims to put local people at the centre of how they are

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[7] An ethnic identity denoting individuals of mxed European and indigenous descent.

[8] See, for example, Michel Giovannini, 'Alternatives to Development: The Contribution of Indigenous Community Enterprises in Chiapas', Journal of International Development, 28:7, 1138-54; Umberto Cao and Frigo Giovanni, 'Of Social Movements, Human Rights and Electricity Access: Exploring an Indigenous Civil Resistance in Chiapas, Mexico', Energy Research and Social Science, 75 2021; John Burstein, 'Learning from Innovation: Implications of an Integrated Development Project in Chiapas, Mexico', Development in Practice. 19:3, 2009, 371-380; Christopher Gundersen, 'Cycles of Accumulation, Cycles of Struggle: The Zapatista Revolt in World-Systemic Perspective' Critical Sociology, 45:4/5, 2019, 667-681 and Neil Harvey. *The Chiapas Rebellion: The Struggle for Land and Democracy*. Durham/ London: Duke, 1998.

[9] See, for example, José Antonio Hernández Moreno;Miriam Aidé Núñez-Vera, 'Conservation, forest resources and gender, under sustainable development. The case of the indigenous community barrio de San Miguel, Michoacan, Mexico', Revista Cubana de Ciencias Forestales, 2:2, 2014, 128-140; Teodoro Aguilar-Ortega 'Economic Development and Emigration in the Lerma-Chapala region of Michoacan', Ra Ximhai, 10:2, 2014, 63-87; and Josefina María Cendejas, Omar Arroyo and Angélica Sánchez, 'Comunalidad y buen vivir como estrategias indígenas frente a la violencia en michoacán: los casos de cherán y san miguel de aquila,' Revista Pueblos y Fronteras Digital, 10:19, 2015.

[10] Lenin A García, *Radiografía demográfica de la población indígena en Oaxaca. Nueva Epoca* 41, 2018, 7-20.

[11] Ibid.

[12] https://www.citypopulation.de/en/mexico/oaxaca/20437__santa_mar%C3%ADa_tlahuitoltep/

[13] https://www.citypopulation.de/en/mexico/oaxaca/20035__guelatao_de_ju%C3%A1rez/

represented and develop alternative narratives to dominant media.[14]

In the 1980s, a movement emerged by which a group of indigenous intellectuals and activists in Oaxaca aimed to identify the features of indigenous and rural communities in the region for the purpose of both academic analysis but also to campaign for rights, defend the interests of communities in the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca. The movement was a result of the endeavours of indigenous intellectuals, anthropologists and linguists such as Floriberto Díaz and Sofía Robles, Ajuuk or Mixe, from Tlahuitoltepec, Jamie Martinez Luna a Zapotec from Guelatao, to identify and analyse the nature of communities within the state.

A number of organisations were formed in the region to defend the rights and interests of indigenous and rural people. These included the *Organización para la Defensa de los Recursos Naturales y Desarrollo Social de la Sierra Juárez* (ODRENASIJ) [The Organisation for the Defense of Natural Resources and Social Development of the Sierra Juárez], *Comité de Defensa de los Recursos Naturales y Humanos Mixe* (CODEMI) [Committee for the Defence of Natural and Human Resources] and the *Comité Organizador y de Consulta para la unión de los Pueblos de la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca* (CODECO) [Organizing and Consultation/ Negotiating Committee for the Union of Peoples and Towns of the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca]. In addition to these organisations a community radio, XEGLO, *La voz de la Sierra Juárez* [The Voice of the Sierra Juárez], based in Guelatao,was established in 1989. It broadcasts in Zapotec, Mixe and Chinantec. The Comunalidad Foundation, was established in 2000 and another radio station XHGZ, Communal Stereo was also set up. An audio-visual summer school and a cinema has also been established under the auspices of *Agenda Guelatao*, which runs a range of cultural projects aimed at providing a space for different voices in cinematic and cultural production and providing communal spaces for enjoying art, photography

and film produced by children and young people.[15] The organisations and media projects established, then, aimed to defend access to land and how it was used, reserve and develop the use of local languages and ensure that local people had a say in the way that their communities were organised and represented. They would do this through an engagement with indigenous rights, a renovation of civil-religious authorities and through the rewriting of the narrative on development, poverty and indigeneity.

Indigenous Rights in Oaxaca

Engagement with regional, national and international legislation on indigenous rights was one of the tools in the armoury of resistance for thinkers on *Comunalidad* and a legitimising force for the renovation of communal practice. A 1982 document outlined the ideas and aims of this group of civil society organisations, proponents of *Comunalidad*. It declared their aim to 'determine appropriate strategies to achieve alliance and mutual support in the fight against a common enemy: the oppressive systems of power at both the national and international levels.'[16] This group of organisations identified a range of demands including, respect for community self-determination with a particular focus on rights regarding control of land and resources. Specifically, they opposed 'national development', which, they argued, made their land into areas of experimentation or supply of raw materials to state-run or private companies. They argued that it was impossible to justify the, "destruction of what belongs to us either in the name of the "nation" or for the so-called "social redistribution of wealth".[17] This document was framed in the language of rights at a time when the indigenous rights movement was emerging and the language of human rights began to create a vocabulary to

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[14] Luna Marán, Presentation at the workshop "Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty." Poverty Research Network, San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca, Mexico, 9 July 2018.

[15] Luna Marán, Presentation at the workshop "Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty." Poverty Research Network, San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca, Mexico, 9 July 2018.

[16] 'La lucha de los pueblos autóctonos, su organización y las alternativas de su alianza con los demás sectores sociales', reproduced in María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros and Sergio Sarmiento Silva, *La lucha indígena: un reto a la ortodoxía,* Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1987, 267-274.

[17] Ibid., 274.

compete with that of social justice and Third World solidarity popular in the 1970s, post-Cuban Revolution. Indigenous rights legislation, in particular, had significant impact on the potential for access to land and for the autonomy of communities within the state.

Changing Understandings of Indigeneity and Development after Mid-Century: the historical context for the emergence of *Comunalidad*

To understand *Comunalidad* we need first to understand the gradual shift in thinking about indigenous and agrarian communities, poverty alleviation and development that happened from the 1970s to the end of the century. Particularly, the way that these changes led to indigenous rights legislation, gave Mexicans who identified as indigenous rights to land and some autonomy in local government practice and gave official recognition to a range of existing practice of civil and religious government that became known as *usos y costumbres* government — and in a way that the early-twentieth-century state had not. Mexican government policy towards indigenous groups after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) from the 1940s until the late 1960s at least, had been one of acculturation that encouraged the integration of indigenous people into *mestizo* society. The new citizen, as imagined by the post-revolutionary state, was a *mestizo* citizen. The one-party state of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) and the institutions it introduced discouraged participation in the local civil religious authorities, their *asambleas* and the *cargo* system.

The *mestizo* and agrarian or *campesino* identity had been central to the idea of the new, Mexican, revolutionary citizen. The call for the fair redistribution of land had been one of the major demands of the agrarian or *agrarista* movement of the Mexican Revolution and Article 27 of the 1917 constitution introduced extensive land reform measures, that gave agrarian communities access to small plots of land that would be farmed and owned by the community, or *ejidos.* Since the revolution was principally an agrarian one, *mestizo, campesino* [peasant or agrarian worker]

identity and membership of the state-sponsored peasant unions was what gave agrarian communities access to land and rights.[18] The Indigenous past was glorified by the post-revolutionary state (1940-1968), but contemporary, indigenous Mexicans were associated with poverty and their lifeways were seen as anti-modern, 'backwards' and in need of reform and integration into the modern state.[19] The *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI) was established in 1948 with this purpose in mind. The aim was to oversee the transition of Mexico's indigenous peoples to 'complete Mexicanness'.[20] The INI was staffed by anthropologists and social scientists who worked with other ministries such as the education ministry to integrate indigenous people into Mexican *mestizo* culture. The INI encouraged participation in local municipal politics and the sectoral organisations of the one-party state (the popular sector, the peasant sector, the unions) of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI) and discouraged participation in the local civil religious authorities, their *asambleas* and the *cargo* system.[21] The INI had played a central, albeit underfunded, role in the state development programme.[22]

By the early 1970s, opposition was developing to the policies of the INI often from anthropologists and indigenous people who had been schooled in their institutions, including some of the thinkers behind *Comunalidad*. They opposed the INI as an oppressive institution that had failed to put an end to the exploitation of indigenous communities. They aimed to create new spaces,

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[18] Alan Shane Dillingham, 'Mexico's Turn Toward the Third World: Rural Development under President Luis Echeverría", in Jaime M. Pensado and Enrique C. Ochoa eds *México Beyond 1968: Revolutionaries, Radicals, and Repression During the Global Sixties and Subversive Seventies*, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2018, 113-133.

[19] Alan Knight, "Racism, Revolution and Indigenismo in Mexico, 1910-1940" in Richard Graham et al. eds. *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, 71-114. José Vasconcelos. *The Cosmic Race: a bilingual edition* (translated and annotated by Didier T. Jaén; afterword by Joseba Gabilondo), Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997.
[20] Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El proceso de aculturación,* Mexico: UNAM, 1958.

[21] Aguirre Beltrán, *Formas de gobierno indígena,* Mexico: Imprenta Universitaria, 1953.

[22] Dillingham, "Mexico's Turn," 2018, 125.

outside the state, that would give more agency and a voice to indigenous people. In response, the government of Luis Echeverría (1970-1976) reformed the INI and organised conferences on the future of *indigenismo* with the participation of indigenous groups. As a response there was a shift in government policy away from acculturation towards indigenous development.[23] In 1974 Indigenous Congress held in San Cristobal de las Casas in Chiapas, organised by the Bishop of Chiapas, Samuel Ruiz some Marist priests, nuns and catechists and the Maoist People's Union (UP) the first of its kind, gathered indigenous communities from more than 300 communities across the state and became one of the first forums in which these new ideas were publicly discussed.

The Echeverría government established the *Consejo Nacional de los Pueblos Indigenas* (National Council for Indigenous People) in 1975. Some activists saw this as an institution developed to help incorporate indigenous communities into the corporate state. A direct reaction to this was the establishment of *Coordinadora Nacional Plan de Ayala* by a group of independent indigenous and peasant organisations who aimed to establish an organizing framework independent of the state[24] Supporters of *Comunalidad* became associated with the *Coordinadora* as they suspected the intentions of the government as being to co-opt the movement.[25]

These shifts were paralleled by changes in the development policy of the Mexican state. Writers on *Comunalidad*, criticised the development agenda of these administrations, their predecessors and its successors. As we will see, *Comunalidad* thinkers saw colonialism, developmentalism and later neoliberal

development policies as part of a continuum. Between 1940 and 1970 successive administrations of the PRI state promoted a development policy known as "stabilizing development" which aimed to stimulate growth through industrialisation. It involved promoting commercial agriculture, growing industry by raising tariffs on imports and keeping food prices low to feed the cities. The subsequent growth rates of up to 7% up until the late 1960s came at the expense of rural Mexico which suffered from outmigration to the capital or to the commercial farms in Northern Mexico or in the United States.[26] Outmigration from the Sierra Norte of Oaxaca was particularly high.

Some rural communities were singled out for rural development funding, often in the form of mega-projects, like damns and rural development, and was all about introducing the latest technology with little consultation with local communities.[27] In the post Cuban Revolution Cold War context, the government of Echeverría became interested in promoting a policy of Third Worldism internationally through, among other things, proposing the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of states that was adopted by the UN in 1974[28]. This spoke to contests over the meaning of development. The development of the Economic and Social Rights Convention was championed by 'the east' as a challenge to the political and civil rights focus of 'the west'. A 'third world' critique emerged to challenge existing development policies. Domestically, the government aimed to promote 'democratic opening' and 'shared development' which meant a significant reform of the PRI development agenda. New institutions were established with the help of funds from the World Bank. Existing institutions were expanded and reformed. The new approach aimed to empower the rural poor to take part in the development programmes and created spaces for rural communities to make demands against the state.

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[23] Leonel Durán, 'El Proyecto nacional y las culturas populares: una aproximación', in *México: 75 años de la revolución.* Mexico: FCE/ Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 1987, 245-302.

[24] Floriberto Díaz, 'Derechos indígenas', in Sofía Robles Hernández and Rafael Cardoso Jiménez eds. *Floriberto Díaz Escrito: Comunalidad, energía viva del pensamiento mixe,* Mexico: UNAM, 2018.

[25] Sofía Robles Hernández and Rafael Cardoso Jiménez eds., *Floriberto Díaz Escrito: Comunalidad, energía viva del pensamiento mixe,* Mexico: UNAM, 2018. Cf. Presentation.

[26] Dillingham, "Mexico's Turn," 2018, 125.

[27] Ibid.

[28] *Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States General Assembly resolution 3281 (XXIX)*, New York, 12 December 1974 at https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/cerds/cerds.html

The reforms were not without their critics. *Comunalidad* thinkers from the Sierra Norte, singled out for particular criticism, the building of a paved highway in the region in the 1970s which, while presented as progress by the government, made it more urgent for indigenous people to protect their land from the encroachment of the state and private landlords.[29]

Developmentalism to Rights-Based Development
The 1970s and 80s, then, saw the emergence of new indigenous organisations, sometimes defined as social movements, that were independent of the state and challenged the assimilationist and developmentalist policies of the one-party-state. This, in addition to international legal measures and conventions responding to decolonisation and the recognition of indigenous communities and their right to self-determination and to practice customary law on the part of the national and regional governments in Mexico. New public spaces opened up within the national space and new ideas of citizenship emerged from the demands of groups who, in the 1970s and 1980s, began to use their indigeneity as a form of resistance. The state response was to initiate projects in ethno-development and introduce multicultural reforms.[30] Thinkers associated with *Comunalidad* were being educated at this time and their ideas emerged alongside social movements that formed in the early 1980s in Oaxaca.

During the 1980s and early 1990s international, national and state level measures and institutions were established to defend indigenous rights. Mexico was early to adopt the concept of multiculturalism into its constitution, but the State of Oaxaca engaged with indigenous rights, even before the national state. One of the most influential international instruments on indigenous rights was the International Labour Organisation (ILO) *Convention 169 on the Rights of*

Indigenous and Tribal Peoples which was ratified in 1989 and came into force in 1991. It provided the framework for self-determination of formerly-colonised peoples in independent countries "who, irrespective of their legal status, retain some or all of their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions."[31] It included titles on land, employment, vocational training and rural industries, education and means of communication and contacts and cooperation across borders. The emphasis throughout was on consultation with communities regarding any governmental development, educational or cultural project impacting their lives.[32]

ILO Convention 169 was ratified by the Mexican government in 1990. The ratification of the convention, which was binding for signatory states, was followed by a period of reform known as the 'politics of recognition' in Mexico; judicial and legislative reform and grass roots mobilization aimed at recognising the identity and rights of indigenous people.[33] The State of Oaxaca was early to adopt the politics of recognition. In 1990 the state constitution of Oaxaca recognised the multi-ethnic nature of the state, two years later the national constitution was reformed along similar lines. In 1992 a paragraph was added to Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution recognising the 'pluricultural composition' of the Mexican nation 'founded in her indigenous peoples'.[34] It included a commitment that 'The Law will protect and promote the development of their languages, cultures, customary law, customs, resources and specific forms of social organisation'.[35] This article implicitly recognised legal pluralism in the form of

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[29] Presentation by Sofía Robles Hernández at the Poverty Research Network Workshop, 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance', San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca, Mexico. 9 July 2018. And *Guelatao*

[30] Guilermo de la Peña, 'La ciudadanía étnica y la construcción de los indios en el México contemporaneo', *Revista Internacional de Filosofía Política*, 6 (1995), 116–40.

[31] "C169 - Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169)", *International Labour Organization.* 1989 at https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C169 [Accessed 25 June 2021]
[32] Ibid.

[33] Rachel Seider, Judicialization of Politics. Juan etc. Charles Taylor et al. *Multiculturalism : Expanded Paperback Edition*, edited by Amy Gutmann, Princeton University Press, 1994.

[34] 'Decreto por el que se reforma el Artículo 4o. de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos', *Diario Oficial de la Federación,* 28 January 1992 At http://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=4646755&fecha=28/01/1992 [Accessed 25 June 2021]

[35] Ibid.

state recognition of customary law and communal government in some indigenous communities. There was a federal legislature, 32 state legislatures and, at the time, 60 indigenous authorities recognised by the state as being governed by *usos y costumbres* (customary law and governance). It guaranteed recourse to the law and access to justice for indigenous communities, including the promise to respect their right to establish their own systems of justice. In 1995 the state government of Oaxaca recognised customary law or *usos y costumbres* for indigenous communities in Oaxaca, for the first time. The Law on the Rights of Pueblos and Indigenous Communities, which came into force in August of that year, recognised the rights of indigenous communities to self-administration.[36] This created space for rural and indigenous communities and social movements like those associated with *Comunalidad* to challenge state hegemony and became a powerful legitimising force for the use of customary law and the resurrection or and recognition of traditional civil-religious authorities. In the 1990s, for example, in order to engage with the state on the issue of indigenous rights, thinkers on *comunalidad* in *Tlahuitoltepec,* issued a declaration and a proposed law to oversee autonomy for communities in the *Sierra Alta*. They drew on the articles related to indigenous rights and ILO Convention 169 to support their demands for self-determination and the right to control their lands, education, decision-making processes, and community legal system.[37] This was mobilised in opposition to state development and the alternative proposed was the renovation of communal government in *asambleas*, the civil-military authorities and the systems of rotational labour (the *cargo* system and *tequio*).

The expansion of indigenous rights and the politics of recognition coincided with neoliberal reform at the national and international level. In 1991 Article 27 on land reform that was so central to the Mexican Revolution was reformed and the government of Salinas de Gortari (1988-94) began to oversee the privatisation of the *ejidos*.[38] This had a detrimental effect on both indigenous and *mestizo* rural communities. The politics of recognition and how it worked with neoliberal reform and later rights-based development has been criticised in the literature and by activists including *Comunaliad* activists, for favouring particular groups, avoiding more radical propositions, for empowering unequal actors equally and forcing indigenous groups to work within the logic of the neoliberal state.[39]

In this context, an analysis of the past and the shortcomings of post-revolutionary government became an important aspect of the work of *Comunalidad activists.* In the writings on *Comunalidad,* an alternative narrative to the official national story on development was framed. Communities and their values were presented in direct opposition to those of the nation state and particularly in opposition to national development projects. As Floriberto Díaz wrote, 'Egotistical, privatising, despotic and monetarising society is the best way to understand community because it is the direct opposite'.[40] The social movements in their 1982 document argued that indigenous communities had been involved in a long struggle against, 'the plundering/ take over by either violent or legal means of communal lands and renewable or non-renewable natural resources […] since usufruct of

[36] http://www.diputados.gob.mx/comisiones/asunindi/oaxregla.pdf and https://www.cndh.org.mx/sites/default/files/doc/Programas/Indigenas/OtrasNormas/Estatal/Oaxaca/Ley_DPCIOax.pdf

[37] 'Declaración de Tlahuitoltepec sobre los derechos fundamentales de las naciones, nacionalidades y pueblos indígenas de indolatinoamérica, 1995', *ISTMICA* 2, 1995, 194-128; 'Declaración de los Pueblos Serranos, Zapotecos y Chinantecos de la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca, 1994', and 'Autonomía para los Pueblos de la Sierra Norte de Oaxaca. Propuesta de Decreto, 1994', in Jaime Martínez Luna. *Eso que llaman comunalidad.* Oaxaca, Mexico: CONACULTA, Secretaría de Cultura Gobierno de Oaxaca, Fundación Alfredo Harp Helú, 2009, 167-183.

[38] John Gledhill, 'Liberalism, Socio-economic Rights and the Politics of Identity: From Moral Economy to Indigenous Rights', in Richard A. Wilson ed. London: Pluto Press, 1988. 70-110, 96.

[39] See for example, John Gledhill, 'Liberalism, Socio-ceonomic Rights and the Politics of Identity: From Moral Economy to Indigenous Rights', in Richard A. Wilson ed. London: Pluto Press, 1988. 70-110; John Gledhill, 'The Rights of the Rich versus the Rights of the Poor', in Sam Hickley and Diana Mitlin eds. *Rights-Based Approaches to Development* Stirling, VA, Kumarian Press: 2009; Charles Hale, 'Does Multiculturalism Menace? Governance, Cultural Rights and the Politics of Identity in Guatemala', *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34:1, 2002.

[40] Floriberto Díaz Gómez, 'Principios comunitarios y derechos indios', in Juan José Rendón Mozón, *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios,* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 108-120.

the resources only benefits a tiny group referred to as "the nation"'.[41] The shifts in thinking about indigeneity and development, indigenous rights and the politics of recognition provided a powerful imaginary that allowed activists and thinkers associated with *Comunalidad* to reclaim the narrative about their role in national development and legitimation for the renovation of civil-religious authorities and communal government.

Comunalidad Writings on History and Development

How did *Comunalidad* writers frame their opposition to national development projects? Where did they place their movement in the history of development in Mexico? *Comunalidad* writers and activists provided a thorough analysis of the shortcomings of some of state-led development projects, that they put down to a lack of local understanding and a fundamentally different worldview in relation to wealth and development in indigenous communities. They did not start their critique in the twentieth-century. *Comunalidad* used the long history of the relationship between the state and indigenous communities stretching back to the colonial period to mobilise people around contemporary issues regarding resource distribution, challenging the relationships of rural communities, particularly indigenous communities, to the nation state, opposing state development projects and building communities and cultural and social capital. They saw colonialism, liberalism, developmentalism and neoliberalism as a continuum, all of which excluded and exploited indigenous and rural communities in Oaxaca. The 1982 document, '*La lucha de los pueblos',* signed by the civil society organisations who founded *Comunalidad,* identified the aim, 'To learn from history and the experience of the ancestors to ensure that communities cannot be used by another power-hungry group whose ideology does

not respect indigenous peoples' human rights and rights to the land and its natural resources.'[42] The way that writers on *Comunalidad* wrote their history provided a direct challenge to the national development narrative by challenging the association between indigeneity, rural communities and poverty and by underlining the importance of drawing on local knowledge and cultural capital. The general aims of the group, according to their initial 1982 document, were the same as those that indigenous communities had been fighting for over 450 years; to stand against the dispossession of lands and natural resources that if claimed would be used only for the benefit of a minority within what was known in official rhetoric as 'the nation.'[43] The conscious reclaiming of the historical narrative is evident in this critical 1982 document. It challenged the official history, which sees the colonial period as central to developing *mestizo* or mixed culture through the fusion of Spanish and indigenous cultures, which made a heroes of the leaders of the nineteenth-century independence movements and liberal reformers, like the president Benito Juárez (1806-1972), who was from Guelatao, for establishing the modern, secular, liberal state and celebrating the early twentieth-century Mexican Revolutionaries for redistributing land. The civil society organisations explained in this document how the colonisation of indigenous communities and the dispossession of their lands began with Spanish conquest but continued through independence and reform and into the revolutionary period.[44]

The document started with a historical preamble illustrating the gradual and often violent displacement of Oaxacan communities from their lands, starting with the Conquest in 1519, which led to the erasure of 'our intellectual memory and cosmovision'. Conquest replaced the existing communal forms of social organisation and close

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[41] 'La lucha de los pueblos autóctonos, su organización y las alternativas de su alianza con los demás sectores sociales', reproduced in María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros and Sergio Sarmiento Silva, *La lucha indígena: un reto a la ortodoxía,* Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1987, 267-274, 270

[42] Ibid.

[43] 'La lucha de los pueblos autóctonos, su organización y las alternativas de su alianza con los demás sectores sociales', reproduced in María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros and Sergio Sarmiento Silva, *La lucha indígena: un reto a la ortodoxía,* Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1987, 267-274.

[44] Ibid.

relationship with Mother Earth with an 'egotistical, authoritarian and despotic' way of life centred on man, who was supposed to appropriate everything that surrounded him for his own profit.[45] The document continued its historical account across the early-independence and reformist governments of the nineteenth century, arguing that they simply replaced or renamed the oppressors with the creole (Spanish origin) élite and made indigenous communities cannon fodder. It singled out the liberal president Benito Juárez (in government from 1858-1872), from Guelatao in Oaxaca, as an indigenous man who had betrayed his identity and whose reformist policies only served to systematically privatise land and worsen the lot of indigenous Mexicans. The document referred to the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 as a *mestizo*[46] revolution whose power-hungry leaders co-opted indigenous demands for communal lands. The revolutionary state oversaw a false racial homogenisation, left Mixes, Zapotecs and other indigenous groups with the same long-running problems and created and empowered a new breed of corrupt local strongmen and landowners.[47]

Writers on *Comunalidad* juxtaposed indigenous communal practice to the individualist ideas of the liberal system that emerged after independence and was not, in their opinion, significantly reformed by the revolution. Jaime Martínez suggests that communities in the Sierra Norte did not benefit from the politics of the post-independence and post-revolutionary government.

> The various revolutionary struggles that we have participated in over the years […] has taught us that none of the revolutionary processes, independence revolutions, liberal revolution or national anti-imperialist revolution have brought an end to the

pressure and injustice imposed upon indigenous people.[48]

Jaime Martínez Luna's history of Guelatao explains why *Comunalidad*, self-determination and the *asamblea, tequio* and *cargo* systems were better alternatives than the centralised state approach to development. Much of the narrative was dedicated to demonstrating how the twentieth-century state in particular, made Guelatao dependent and stifled the economic and cultural development of *serranos.* He argued that, as the birthplace of the nineteenth-century reformist president, Benito Juárez, Guelatao was often singled out for education and development projects by the post-revolutionary governments. Martínez Luna identified the construction of a boarding school in 1938 and the accompanying electricity, health centre and primary school as a turning point by which Guelatao became a hub for coffee workers in the local region. In the 1950s government development projects introduced new types of tree and crops to the region. Irrigation systems were introduced, and primary schools were built. Highways were extended and the road to the town was tarmacked. Increased exploitation of the forest in the region also had an indirect impact on Guelatao, that provided food, accommodation and a home for the headquarters of logging companies.[49]

In 1967, the government of Gustavo Díaz Ordaz, established an extensive development project in Guelatao that involved improving domestic housing by building barns and planting fruit trees and introduced a range of public services, the centrepiece of which was a modern irrigation system. According to Martínez Luna, the aim of this project was to make Guelatao an example of development and, by investing in agriculture, ensure the survival of Guelatao as a community and as a historic town. However, the project had detrimental effects on community life. Spaces of

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[45] Ibid., 267.

[46] a racial category defined as of mixed Spanish and indigenous descent.

[47] Ibid. 268-9

[48] Jaime Martínez Luna, 'Comunalidad as the Axis of Oaxacan Thought in Mexico', in Lois Meyer and Benjamín Maldonaldo eds. *New World of Indigenous Resistance: Noam Chomsky and Voices from North, South and Central America.* San Francisco CA.: City Lights Open Media, 2010.

[49] Jaime Martínez Luna, *Guelatao: enasyo de historia sobre una comunidad serana,* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2006.

sociability, like the communal well, were closed. The rapid pace of the construction work meant that communal labour disappeared. The plans were carried out by technicians from government departments and locals and *comuneros* had very little say in how it would work. Mainly, the irrigation never worked to supply drinking water as the steepness of the terrain had been misjudged and the move away from beans and maize as a crop meant that people no longer produced food for local consumption. Martínez wrote, 'A change of image or clothes does not mean that you can feed yourself. A more individualistic approach to housing had an impact on community relations.' [50]

Martínez Luna identifies a successful 1980-83 campaign against a proposed government concession of land to a Canadian and later Mexican State paper company launched by 'a new generation of citizens with more regional sensibilities' as a turning point in making Guelatao a centre of autonomous regional development.[51] Sofia Robles Hernández also sees the 1980s as an important moment and argued that it was a response to intrusive government approaches to development that encouraged some of the early social organizing in the Mixe region. The resulting *Asamblea Regional de Autoridades Mixe* which became the Civil Association, *Servicios del Pueblo Mixe* (SER) in 1988 worked and continues to work to defend Mixe community interests against state intervention.[52] In the history of development since the colonial period *Comunalidad* writers identify their movement with alternative attitudes to wealth and autonomous governing structures as constituting a watershed moment.

Wealth, Poverty and Alternatives to State Led Development

Thinkers on *Comunalidad* stood against the idea of the nation and national development but also

aimed to move beyond class-based organising. The Oaxacan civil society organisations who developed and explored *comunalidad* aimed to make connections with class-based organisations of workers and peasants and the student movement. However, they differentiated the indigenous way of life from that of workers in their attitude to capital and labour and to political power in the following way: 'We are not fighting for a better salary. As original peoples […] we do not recognise salaries. Nor are we fighting for political power because as original peoples and members of communities (*comuneros*) we do not share the idea of authoritarian power because in our communities we are called upon equally to take up representative cargos as a service to the whole community and not for the benefit of one group or another."[53]

Research on Mixe concepts of good and bad money and the connection between commercial businesses and ritual demonstrates how ritual has a role in resistance to the capitalist market economy that aims to convert indigenous land and labour into goods for sale. Good money is earned through hard work and a relationship with nature. Bad money is earned without having to work for it, through capitalist exchange and contracts with ranchers from outside the community, for example. Rituals play a role in redistributing wealth within the community. Mixe society fetishizes nature rather than money.[54] The writings on *comunalidad* provide examples of this thinking. Floriberto Díaz wrote in one of the declarations from Tlahuitepec, "The Land, as our Mother is not prone to be converted into private property, because in that case we would not be able to ensure the collective future of our peoples."[55] Jaime Martínez Luna wrote,

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[50] Martínez Luna, *Guelatao,* 2006, 50-55

[51] Ibid, 58

[52] Sofia Robles Hernández, Presentation at the workshop 'Beyond Development: Local Visions of Global Poverty', Poverty Research Network, San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca, Mexico, 9 July 2018.

[53] 'La lucha de los pueblos autóctonos, su organización y las alternativas de su alianza con los demás sectores sociales', reproduced in María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros and Sergio Sarmiento Silva, *La lucha indígena: un reto a la ortodoxía,* Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1987, 167-168 [my translation].

[54] James B. Greenberg, 'El capital, los rituales y las fronteras de la comunidad corporativa cerrada', *Destacatos* 9, 2002.

[55] Declaración de Tlahuitepec, October 1993. In Sofía Robles Hernández and Rafael Cardoso Jiménez eds., *Floriberto Díaz Escrito: Comunalidad, energía viva del pensamiento mixe,* Mexico: UNAM, 2018. [My translation].

In *comunalidad*, land is not seen as merchandise but as a deep expression of the community's worldview. Land is not an object but rather the mother of the community. Territory is sacred and is also the space for the reproduction of difference. For mestizo society, land is merchandise and another element of uniformity, individualism and economic security. For indigenous peoples this is not the case, land belongs to everyone and is for future generations.[56]

This juxtaposition of *mestizo* or national culture with that of indigenous groups is typical of the writings on *Comunalidad* as is the focus on the land as part of a worldview rather than a resource. According to *Comunalidad* writers this means that notions of wealth and poverty in indigenous communities differ from that of *mestizo* society. This has implications for the way that indigenous groups and rural communities inspired by *Comunalidad* see development projects. *Comunalidad* critiques government development projects, for their consumerist attitude to wealth and capital accumulation and lack of consultation, consideration and understanding of local needs. Much of the work of *Comunalidad* is to ensure that new generations are aware of these local values in the face of increased consumerism, for example.

Activists discuss changing ideas of wealth that come with changes in local communities brought about by government development projects, consumer culture, media, and increasing outmigration. Robles Hernández, from the civil society organisation SER working in the Sierra Mixe, identified the tensions between the perspectives of local communities regarding poverty and those of the mainstream national and international development programmes. She identified the 1970s when a new highway was built in the Sierra Norte, as a period of changing attitudes to wealth in communities caused by consumer culture and opportunities brought about by outmigration to the cities or the US. She argued that in the past people would have considered themselves rich if they were able to feed themselves and support their families through growing crops and keeping livestock. Members of the community with cattle would have been considered particularly wealthy. Nowadays, Robles suggests that rural people are considered poor even though they can still provide for themselves. This is because they do this without a salary and the capacity to buy material goods.[57] Martínez Luna argued that the indigenous economic system is about:

> [..] personal use and accumulation for sharing with the community. We consider that the land gives us what we need and if it gives us more than we need we should share it mainly through the fiestas and celebrations of our area or our families. Therefore, accumulation does not mean capitalisation. On the contrary, it means an opportunity to develop the community. People might say, "How stupid! When are you going to stop being poor?" Of course, this is where the difference lies. We are not poor, they have made us feel poor and as a consequence we have actually become poor.[58]

These attitudes became part of the activism to protect communities from state-run development projects and push for community ownership of development. Martínez Luna openly denounced development projects like the Programa Nacional de Solidaridad the World Bank — funded national development programme running from 1989-1994 under Salinas de Gortari's Government designed to improve public services and ostensibly involving active citizen participation, as *asistentialismo* or encouraging dependency on

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[56] Jaime Martínez Luna, 'Discriminación y democracia en un Estado multiétnico', in Juan José Rendón Monzón, *La comunialidad: modo de vida en los pueblos indios,* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003. [My translation].

[57] Presentation by Sofía Robles Hernández at the Poverty Research Network Workshop, 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance', San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca, Mexico. 9 July 2018.

[58] Jaime Martínez Luna, 'Discriminación y democracia en un Estado multiétnico', in Juan José Rendón Mozón, *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios,* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 133-141, 136. [My translation].

welfare and handouts.[59] Robles Hernández criticised Inter-American Development Bank-funded Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programme PROSPERA (established as PROGRESA in 1997, becoming PROSPERA in 2014), for handing out financial support to women without involving them in a process of awareness raising and training.[60] The aim of CCTs was to reduce poverty and develop human capital.

Comunalidad proposed practical alternatives to the state-run projects funded by the The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. The work of SER, aimed to raise awareness of the limitations of these kinds of projects and propose alternatives. In the face of government projects like the 1989-90 *Plan de Desarrollo Agrario* (Agrarian Development Plan)*,* SER organised around the need to protect local seeds and crops that were endangered by commercial agriculture, monoculture, and the use of fertilizers. In the lower Mixe region, commercial agriculture is prevalent and maize is grown for wholesale. The challenge was to maintain conventional agriculture and use local seeds and plants. There was a move to develop and defend food sovereignty and a local economy that was not so dependent on external forces. This was achieved through the development of local markets. SER also works closely with the local indigenous authorities or *asambleas* mediating land disputes with neighbouring communities as well as helping local indigenous authorities defend their lands against extractivist projects. State development projects tended to choose strategic communities for development with little understanding of long-run disputes over land between communities.[61] *Comunalidad* and its civil society organisations and activists then, propose alternatives to state led development based on different ideas of wealth and closer connection to the communities. These alternatives take into account local needs

and depend on autonomous local structure and also rituals.

Community, Autonomy and Consensual Decision-Making: civil-religious authorities and *Comunalidad*

The preservation and renovation of the *cargo* system, *asambleas* and consensual decision-making were perhaps the most important elements of *Comunalidad* activism*.* The demand for the right to establish and develop their own forms of organisation,[62] and the renovation of the Civil-Religious authorities and communal forms of labour and government were central to the methods that groups associated with *Comunalidad* used to forward an alternative to state-led development. Civil-religious authorities and practices like the system of rotating service to the community or *cargo* system, labour owed to the community or *tequio* and consensual decision-making processes through community assemblies or *asambleas* were adapted. *Cargos* or service to the community might be as security (*topils*) or fundraiser and organiser of fiestas (*mayordomo*), for example. Community members or *comuneros* could gain prestige through involvement in the *cargo* system. This was seen as an alternative to becoming involved in local politics associated with the one-party-state of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) or any of the other political parties that were beginning to be part of the political system from the 1970s.[63] Research suggests that the integration of civil and political authorities which mediate between the community and wider society was something that happened in the nineteenth century although many of the corporate forms of organisation were inherited from the colonial period.[64] Religious and

[59] Ibid.

[60] Presentation by Sofia Robles Hernández at the conference, 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance', Mexico, San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca City, 9 July 2018

[61] Presentation by Sofia Robles Hernández at the conference, 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance', Mexico, San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca City, 9 July 2018

[62] 'La lucha de los pueblos autóctonos, su organización y las alternativas de su alianza con los demás sectores sociales', reproduced in María Consuelo Mejía Piñeros and Sergio Sarmiento Silva, *La lucha indígena: un reto a la ortodoxía,* Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, 1987, 267-274.

[63] Jaime Martínez Luna, 'Autonomía y autodeterminación. Pasado y Futuro de y Para los Pueblos', in Juan José Rendón Mozón ed., *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios, Tomo I.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 121-131, 122.

[64] John K. Chance and William B. Taylor, 'Cofradías and Cargos: An Historical Perspective on the Mesoamerican Civil-Religious Hierarchy', *American Ethnologist*, vol. 12, no. 1, 1985, pp. 1–26.

civil authorities have changed in response to major social and political changes. Changes in the twentieth century have been put down to the anti-clerical measures of the early post-revolutionary governments, the assimilationist policies towards indigenous communities and changes in commercial relations between communities and wider society.[65] These changes differed from community to community in Oaxaca. In some regions the fiesta system was continued for the celebration of life events like marriages.[66] In Juchitan, for example, some elements of the *vela* or fiesta system were used to garner support for the *Coalición de Obradores, Campesinos y Estudiantes del Isthmo* (COCEI, Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students of the Isthmus), a social movement-turned-political party, as they defended lands against encroachment of development projects. In the Chatino region, the civil and political hierarchy and particularly the politics of consensus allowed communities to make decisions without the interference of political parties even before the recognition of *usos y costumbres* in the late twentieth century.[67] There were therefore, continuities then in the functioning of civil-religious authorities and the cargo system in Oaxaca as part of a long process of mediation between the community and wider society that at once resists and adapts to that wider capitalist society.[68] The introduction of the politics of recognition and legal pluralism in the late twentieth century meant that the civil-religious authorities and customary law were formally recognised and legitimised and this was the

context for the renovation of the civil and religious authorities in the Sierra Norte de Oaxaca. In Tlahuitolltepec and Guelatao there was some continuity in the workings of civil-religious authorities, *asambleas* and the *tequio* but there was also a conscious renovation of community practice and a reflection on the positive and negative elements as part of the process of making claims for self-determination or autonomy. An important part of this was identifying the nature of communal practice. Floriberto Díaz established that there were various forms of *tequio* (voluntary labour for the community) in Tlahuitoltepec. These included, for example, labour involved in public works like the building of roads and public buildings, or mutual aid or *mano vuelta,* by which neighbours agree to help build a house for a family in exchange for a promise of returning the favour in future. Other forms of *tequio* include taking care of guests at a community *fiesta,* playing with the town band for neighbouring communities and placing skills learnt through education beyond the community at the service of the community.[69] The current structure of the hierarchy of positions in the system of voluntary service to the community in Tlahuitoltepec has thirteen ranks including *vocal, secretario, topiles, sluplente regidor, suplente alcalde, alcalde mas alto*. Being a *capitan* or *vocal* gives individuals access to the political association of the authorities.[70]

In Tlahuitoltepec, consensual decision-making in the *asamblea* is central to the way the authorities work and in the early 1990s there was a conscious attempt to return to this form of decision making that was being replaced by a voting system. Consensual decisions were made via a process called the *cuchicheo*. After opinions of the issues facing the community were laid out, all the citizens gathered at the assembly would mingle in the courtyard and the elders would report back. Opinions would be gathered and categorised and

[65] John K. Chance, 'Changes in Twentieth-Century Mexican Cargo Systems', in Lynn Stephen and James Dow eds., *Class, Politics and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America,* Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1990, 27-42.

[66] Lynn Stephen, 'The Politics of Ritual: The Mexican State and Zapotec Autonomy, 1926-1989', in Lynn Stephen and James Dow eds., *Class, Politics and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America,* Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1990, 43-62.

[67] James B. Greenberg, 'Sanctity and Resistance in Closed Corporate Communities: Coffee Money Violence and Ritual Organization in Chatino Communities in Oaxaca', in Lynn Stephen and James Dow eds. *Class, Politics and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America.* Washington: American Anthropological Association, 1990, 95-114.

[68] James B. Greenberg, 'El capital, los rituales y las fronteras de la comunidad corporative cerrada', *Destacatos* 9, 2002.

[69] Floriberto Díaz Gómez, 'Principios comunitarios y derechos indios', in Juan José Rendón Mozón, *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios,* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 108-120, 112-113.

[70] As explained by Konk Díaz Robles atthe conference, 'Communities of Social Assistance and Resistance', Mexico, San Pablo Centre, Oaxaca City, 9 July 2018.

decisions would be made that took into account the range of opinions.[71] Martínez Luna, suggests that Guelatao would have had some form of representation or *asamblea* since colonial times but it only gained the status of municipality in 1937, with a president, three *regidores* and a leader with the support of a mayor, a secretary, a treasurer, *topiles* and other administrators. Then small committees take on responsibilities in particular areas such as education etc. Martínez Luna emphasized the importance of the consensual nature of the decision making processes of *asambleas* and describes community organisation in Guelatao the following way:

> The *asamblea* is the highest authority in the community. It is the meeting of all of the heads of household, in which women are also involved. Both *silentes* and *parlantes* participate in the *asamblea* as do agrarian workers, artisans and professionals. Work in the *asamblea* is always achieved by consensus [...] The election of the authorities has no party- political alignment, it is based on prestige earned through work.[72]

Comunalidad activists highlight these community-based structures as evidence of the naturally communal and democratic nature of indigenous societies against the individualist, centralising and authoritarian nature of the wider *mestizo* society and the state.[73] Indigenous practices are considered to be opposed to the capitalism of broader society, in harmony with nature where the dominant, extractivist culture is not and, communal rather than individualistic.[74] Floriberto

Díaz identifies the following features of *Comunalidad*; 'Land as mother and territory. Consensual decision-making in *asambleas.* Voluntary service to the community authorities. Collective work as an act of rebirth. Rites and ceremonies as an expression of the communal gift.'[75] Autonomy and the lack of association with the party system is central to the ideas of *Comunalidad.* As Martínez Luna writes, 'Political representation in a community is the result of living together directly on a daily basis, it is about the deep knowledge of each citizen.'[76] Most importantly *mestizo* society and national governments have much to learn about rights, social justice but mainly, development from the practice of *Comunalidad*. Martínez Luna argues that 'The *asamblea,* like the *cargo,* as the community representative is colloquially known, are essential elements that define the nature of citizenship.'[77] He also argues that *asambleas* and particularly the *tequio* system of voluntary labour, 'could be an example of development for the whole country [but] has been relegated to an interpretation of an endangered indigenous practice.'[78]

Conclusion

According to Martínez Luna, in the 1980s *Comunalidad* social movements, 'achieved their goal of controlling their own development by conceptualizing their actions'.[79] The work of those who developed and engaged with *Comunalidad* as

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[71] Floriberto Díaz Gómez, "Comunidad y comunalidad." In in Juan José Rendón Mozón. *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 91-107, 102-103.

[72] Jaime Martínez Luna, "Discriminación y democracia en un Estado multiétnico," in Juan José Rendón Mozón. *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 133-141.

[73] Jaime Martínez Luna, "Discriminación y democracia en un Estado multiétnico," in Juan José Rendón Mozón. *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 133-141.

[74] Floriberto Díaz Gómez, "Comunidad y comunalidad," and "Principios comunitarios y derechos indios," in Juan José Rendón Mozón. *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 91-120 and Jaime Martínez Luna, "Autonomía y autodeterminación. Pasado y future de y para nuestros pueblos," and "Discriminación y

democracia en un Estado multiétnico," in Juan José Rendón Mozón. *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 121-141.

[75] Ibid

[76] Jaime Martínez Luna, "Autonomía y autodeterminación. Pasado y future de y para nuestros pueblos," in Juan José Rendón Mozón. *La comunalidad: Modo de vida en los pueblos indios.* Mexico: CONACULTA, 2003, 121-131, 125.

[77] Martínez Luna. *Guelatao: Ensayo de historia,* 71-73

[78] Ibid, 74

[79] Jaime Martínez Luna "Comunalidad as the Axis of Oaxacan Thought in Mexico" in Lois Meyer and Benjamín Maldonaldo (eds.) *New World of Indigenous Resistance: Noam Chomsky and Voices from North, South and Central America.* San Francisco CA.: City Lights Open Media, 2010.

a form of resistance and activism with the conscious opposition to the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank- funded development projects of the Mexican state, the use of indigenous rights reform to legitimise and further develop autonomous local government constitutes an important case study for understanding the broader indigenous rights, anti-development and anti-globalisation social movements emerging in Mexico in the late twentieth century. It is an example of how activists in Oaxaca were able to engage with the emerging national and international indigenous rights framework to challenge the narrative about indigenous and rural communities and poverty and to propose practical alternatives to national development projects grounded in the renovation of the civil-religious authorities, rotational labour to the community (*tequio*) and consensual decision-making through *asambleas*. More research is needed regarding the relationship with other social movements. What is clear is that writers and activists associated with *Comunaidad*, proposed an alternative historical narrative to the state narrative on development, made practical claims for autonomy and established networks of social movements, which, to a certain extent, defended and continue to defend communities from the inadequacy of state-led development projects. At the same time *Comunalidad* poses a challenge to ideas of economic development and is an example of locally-based development based on social and cultural capital and community.

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