

Representative Democracy versus Participatory Democracy

The Paradigm of Voting for the “Lesser of Two Evils”

June 21, 2009

Have you voted for the “lesser of two evils” in the “democracy” where you reside? I always resented that I was supposed to do that, with the same arguments we hear now in Mexico: if one does not vote for the lesser evil, the worst will win.

Indeed, the worst did win in the last Oaxaca election, where a mere 14% of the electorate came out and voted for the bad guys of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, the PRI. This was in contrast to the Oaxaca “Punishment Vote” in 2006, when nine of the eleven PRI senators were voted out, as a punishment for their role in the government-sponsored repression of that year. For whom shall one vote now? In 2007 the Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD, its Spanish initials) in Oaxaca looked reasonable. Now it has been corrupted both nationally and locally by a group of PRI men, referred to as the Chuchos. Why vote for the PRD when in fact one is merely voting for the PRI? As a result, many PRD people went out to campaign for the Workers Party (PT, in its Spanish initials). That switch exasperated small Oaxaca towns which for years struggled to oust the PRI and install the PRD, whom they thought were the good guys. Well, the PRD might be the good guys again next year.

One argument goes as follows: if you don't vote for the lesser of various evils, you will end up with the PRI or the

National Action Party, the PAN. The contrary argument is, “send a message.” Indeed, the three major parties and the three minor ones already heard the message, because it’s being editorialized about by local and national commentators, pro and con. There are those who say one’s duty is to vote, and the best vote is “None of the Above,” or a large X; or if you prefer a write-in, a dead Mexican movie star like Cantiflas or Pedro Infante, or the APPO. The only group urging that citizens must vote for a party candidate are party candidates. Then there are those who say why waste your time standing in line on a hot day, don’t bother to vote at all. But the Church says you should vote. The Church editorials in Oaxaca follow the Church line, but with a longer message implicit because if liberation theology is alive anywhere in Mexico, it is here in Oaxaca. Editorials written by local priests always explain, right after telling us to vote, that of course none of the parties are worth a kilo of beans.

The political class is frightened. They will have to evaluate what it means when a large portion of the national population — not only Oaxacans — one way or another say, I won’t play your game anymore. What to do, who to blame? Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador and Jesús Ortega (one of the Chuchos) blame the Right. The PAN blames the PRI because its traditional hardcore voters are also historically the most repressive. The PRI blames the new conservative bent of the federal government. The Catholic hierarchy fears the failure of democracy and the triumph of totalitarianism. The Federal Election Committee blames the long cherished habit of stuffing the ballot boxes.

In Oaxaca it’s easier to figure out. The system stinks and the rulers are thieves, murderers, and reckless despoilers. Since Section 22 of the National Education Workers Union (SNTE in its Spanish initials) first began to battle for internal reform in the 1980s, more than the union has changed, and changed slow-

ly and painfully: a step backward for two steps forward. Now Mexico, including Oaxaca, has both electronic and radio information networks. It encompasses an urban poor, especially of youngsters who create barricades as their space, and defend it. Work and good jobs have become fragile or vanished; in Oaxaca the most frightening sight is the number of men pushing pop-sicle carts. The productive agricultural base was brought down by neoliberal policies so that Mexico is no longer food self-sufficient. As people left the countryside, identities changed and reformed on new territory — the territory of poverty, slums, and anger. For those who remained in the countryside, the eternal promises could no longer be believed. Every day the local newspaper Noticias runs a feature called “Voice of the Community,” and it offers pictures of crumbling roads, heaped garbage and sewage water running in unpaved streets. No politician can still mobilize voters for promises.

Protests are two-edged: they bring out the radicalized and they radicalize those still observing. The repression in 2006 radicalized women and housewives along with students and social organizations: the repression was equivalent to letting the genie out of the bottle. The genie refuses to turn to smoke and return to the container. In every corner the people identify their home battle and fight it.

No matter how often the TV repeats political spots, fewer and fewer people respond, not the middle class, not the intellectuals. Instead, a new model came up from Latin America and swept along with it the Zapatista autonomy, replacing European-based Marxism. There is no proletariat. There is no leader of the proletariat.

Does this upheaval sound like a “failed state,” as the USA line suggests? Or like a righteous surge of national citizen indignation? If one accepts the “failed state” diagnosis, one ought to

ask, In whose interest is it to label Mexico a failed state?

Let's start listing: the dismal resemblance between Plan Columbia (also a failed state) and Plan Mexico, bringing the latest incursion of USA money, helicopters and guns to fight the narco-traffickers. Like Columbia, to fully militarize the nation of Mexico so that social struggles can be repressed under the disguise of narco wars. What social struggles are those? The anti-neoliberal, anti-transnational, anti-privatization of land and resources, all waged by the poor, and almost all by indigenous populations.

In Oaxaca, we see mines, wind generators, woods, natural preserves, and water wars, especially against Coca-Cola bottling plants. Oaxaca is a documented site for the Bowman Project, funded by the US government's military Foreign Service office. This project, under the guise of land-mapping, or collecting geographic or anthropological information, is actually military information-gathering for on-the-ground combat and control. It also assists the Mexican government's project to privatize communal land. Private land can be sold or leased; communal land cannot be sold or leased without community consent. All of this falls into the category of neoliberal insult to indigenous and poor peoples.

This year the teachers' marches in Oaxaca began Friday, June 5. About 30,000 marched; the secretary of the union Gabriel Lopez Chiñas announced from the podium at the zócalo's kiosk that the Isthmus marchers had phoned to say "presente." As I looked at the marchers gathered in the center, I guessed 20,00 had come from Valles Centrales and the Sierra.

Numbers per se don't signify much right now. The APPO and the teachers create a force which today, for the first time, I

heard shout “The teachers and the people will never be defeated.” The APPO is whoever identifies as pueblo, and pueblo is whoever identifies with this particular struggle, which the teachers named “Education and Justice for Oaxaca.”

Chiñas reviewed the union demands which include a possible boycott of the government Guelaguetza. I’ve spoken with Emeterio Merino Cruz, a human rights victim during the people’s attempt to occupy the Guelaguetza stadium in 2007. He attends Oaxaca activist events; he speaks pretty coherently and walks with a limp, after two years. On May 6 in San José del Progreso police equally damaged Augustín Ríos, the local activist against the mines.

That day I met up with the marchers and talked with a teacher. I asked her what she thought the union will settle for — money? or environment (this is the environment weekend, and the stance against Canadian-owned gold and silver mines is hardening), or is it freeing the prisoners? She replied, “Money is not so important any more, for me.” Justice is important.

Secretary general Santiago Chepi on June 5 was in DF, negotiating. Here, it was a day to shout Free The Political Prisoners! Two in fact were freed this week, Miguel Ángel García and Víctor Hugo Martínez Toledo. Victor Hugo was unconditionally released Thursday afternoon, and on Friday he stood on the kiosk, telling truth to power. The union devotes a lot of effort and union funds to freeing prisoners. On May 6, twenty-three San José people were arrested at the police breakup of the mine blockade. Section 22 took to the streets, paid the legal fees, and got the final four released by May 12. I guess the government will hold Juan Manuel Martínez Moreno (accused of shooting Brad Will) as the last negotiating morsel. But it won’t be much longer (today is June 20); the latest court order says fish or cut bait, and it’s probable Martínez Moreno will be freed.

So what has this all to do with participatory democracy and the voto en blanco? SNTE's Section 22 placed itself in the unenviable position of being either savior and scourge, depending on whom you ask. For some citizens, Section 22 is both: a crusading force which also makes ordinary life extremely uncomfortable. On May 28 teachers on a work stoppage took over state and federal public buildings and transnational businesses; they ripped down election propaganda. On the 29th they blocked roads and highways statewide; traffic varied from stopped to slow. Depending on buses and taxis was risky. Meanwhile the kids stayed home from school.

The traditional negotiating month of May segued into June. Section 22 made its demands on the federal and state governments, with its new inclusion of "social justice" as well as traditional union demands. Teachers demanded release of political prisoners, repeal of arrest warrants against activists, and respect for the rights of people to protect their lands against mining and highways.

The union demands listed education infrastructure to the amount of a 100% budget increase, a request estimated to cost (according to the state public education director), six billion pesos. The reply: "for the present fiscal year 200 million has been budgeted to cover priority needs." The Chamber of Deputies approved the budget at the close of 2008. Thus the present budget level for infrastructure would require thirty years, if no storm brings down a roof, to bring all school buildings up to the necessary level.

The union asked for an 100% increase in the budget for school furnishings like sanitary facilities, playing fields, and kitchens. The reply: for 2009 the budget is 75 million pesos, to take care of the most urgent needs in the state.

If 10,000 schools are uninhabitable, the 7,000+ pesos (\$700

on the best exchange rate) for each would be a pittance. School equipment has been a bargaining chip since forever, so the negative reply to the teachers' is not unexpected.

State income from taxes goes elsewhere. In real terms, the union demands not a budget increase, but transparent management of federal funds available, and obligatory state government transparency. For example, in the last six months people living in Oaxaca coped with interminable re-paving with cement rectangles laid nicely in patterns on center city streets. I creep alongside sidewalk excavations. The workers extend their hands to balance me. But who needs this work? It's bound to last right up until July 5 election day. Where did the money come from, and to whom is it going? How many temporary jobs were created and how many contractors take their share? The union's money "demands" are shorthand for accountability.

Each of three successive government offers to the teachers was rejected, and the beat goes on. The government successfully fractured the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO, in its Spanish initials) into snarky factions: left, and more-left-than-you, with the result that its function within the city (distinct from the people/APPO outside the city) is to hang at the elbow of Section 22, and march when called on. The committee to defend the rights of the peoples (CODEP, in its Spanish initials) remains in better internal shape, but counts on no more than 800-1,000 activists, (one murdered this week). On June first I stopped at the CODEP encampment table adorned with banners to talk with Cástulo Lopez, a young Oaxacan five years out of university with a law degree for a profession he's never practiced. He's been an activist the entire five years, with CODEP and with the APPO. I asked him how things look and he told me that Augustín Rios, the leader of the anti-mine movement, is now hiding outside the state after being beaten by

the police; and Father Martin of Ocotlán conducts his homilies with great discretion. Lopez says thirty-three mines are planned for the state. CODEP goes on educating people with dogged patience.

Then came the third anniversary of the repression of the union on June 14, 2006. Nothing very spectacular, unless you count a truck-full of fireworks blowing up, killing one teacher and wounding twenty. But action-wise, what? More of the same. More marching, more blockades, more slogans, more speeches. The true message appeared on the walls, hung from the trees, and was pegged to the front of the buildings: Social Justice.

Is this participative democracy? Well, 70,000 teachers ain't nuthin', but no; this is the education preceding participative democracy. That's what teachers do in Oaxaca, they raise consciousness: Why vote for political parties which are corrupt and incorrigible? Why recycle the political elite who only bleed Oaxaca? What will Plan Mexico do to any future protests, why are natural resources being sold to foreign transnationals, why are police and military deployed around the state?

Last week Section 22 hoisted a flag in the breeze for the voto en blanco. We'll see in the next two weeks which way the wind blows. And then comes 2010.