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Rural Responses to Political Unrest in Oaxaca City, Mexico: Preliminary Findings*

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Abstract

Strikes, violence and economic crisis characterized life in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico from the spring through late fall of 2006. Demonstrations began around the efforts of striking teachers and grew throughout the summer to include many groups critical of the state's governor. The confrontations led to blockades, violence and several acts of murder along with the cancellation of important events that had negative implications for the city's tourism economy. Nevertheless, little has been said about the rural response to these events. In this paper I present preliminary results interviews in three rural villages to better understand the impacts of political and economic unrest on rural communities.

Keywords

Political unrest, rural Oaxaca, Mexico, rural economics, migration, APPO

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Introduction

Strikes, violence and economic crisis characterized life in Oaxaca City, Oaxaca, Mexico from the spring through late fall of 2006. Demonstrations began around the efforts of striking teachers from section 22 of the teacher's union (Sindicato Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación or the SNTE) and grew throughout the summer and into the fall to include many groups critical of the state's governor (El Universal 2006). In response to the state's intransigence and in part to resolve the stand-off between protestors and the state, the APPO (Asamblea Popular del Pueblo Oaxaqueño) was organized. The APPO, a voice for peaceful protest in the state's capital also acted as an umbrella group and included support from many local human rights organizations in opposition to the administration of the state's governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (Vergara, Gil Olmos, and Matías 2006; Waterbury 2007).¹ The confrontation between protestors and the state led to street blockades, violence and several acts of murder along with the cancellation of the important Guelaguetza festival by the governor. Oaxaca's economy suffered greatly with many hotels and restaurants closing (some permanently) and tourism, a critical component to the state's economic health, collapsed (Maciel 2006; Matías 2007; Rivas 2007).

Throughout the social and political upheaval of the last year little has been said about the rural villages that surround the city. Furthermore, the impact of last year's events on rural Oaxacans remains poorly understood (although see Gutierrez-Najera 2007; Hernández Díaz 2007). In this paper I present preliminary results of 192 interviews in three rural villages.² The communities include a town that depends upon tourism and the export of crafts for much of its income, El Arbol del Valle; a semi-urban community that is linked to Oaxaca City through jobs and serves as a bedroom community for a growing number of relocated urban Oaxacans, Vista del Rio; and a rural, agrarian, Zapotec community that has seen much migration to the US over the last decade called La Milpa. Following standard anthropological practices, I renamed each community and informants have new identities to protect them from any repercussions as opinions in the three communities ranged from those that were highly critical of both APPO and the governor, to supportive of either the governor or APPO.

The villages, one from each of the three main branches of Oaxaca's central valleys are all within approximately 35 kilometers of state's capital, Oaxaca City. Each is served by bus, taxi and colectivos (taxi's that transport people in groups between specific destinations); and each has paved access to a highway. The towns, Vista del Rio, El Arbol del Valle and La Milpa include populations from approximately 1600 (El Arbol) to nearly 3000 (La Milpa). According to DIGEPO (Dirección General de Población de Oaxaca y el Consejo Nacional de Población, Oaxaca) these towns display low (Vista del Rio) to medium high marginality (El Arbol and La Milpa) and each has experienced fairly consistent and high rates of out-migration to internal and international migration through the 1990s and into the early years of the 21st century (for background on Oaxacan migration see Cohen 2004b).

¹ APPO's most recent statement on events in the city followed the July 2007 Guelaguetza. It described the popular, alternative Guelaguetza that was staged in contrast to the state's events that were described as a "blood bath," and a setting where supporters of the APPO were arrested and jailed (Ecoportal 2007).

² The random sample represents approximately 15% of the households in the three communities. The interviews included closed and open ended questions that probed household organization, work and education history, migration experience, opinions on the strikes, support for strikers and APPO, the impacts of strikes on local economics, schooling and mental health. While the data are presented in a largely quantitative fashion, their original format is qualitative. We have assigned numerical quantities, ranks and scale to summarize outcomes for this paper.

El Arbol, a mestizo town, is home to craftsmen and women who produce goods for Oaxaca's tourists and exporters/importers who sell their wares throughout the world. Vista del Rio is also a mestizo town and quite near Oaxaca City. Approximately 20% of its population depends upon the city for jobs and there are a growing number of Oaxacans who are relocating to Vista del Rio in an effort to escape crowding in the city and find a more bucolic life. La Milpa is an indigenous, Zapotec speaking community 35 kilometers from Oaxaca City and is characterized by the continued importance of subsistence agriculture (primarily maize and alfalfa) and a high rate of migration to the United States.

While the towns selected for this study are similar, for example each is an independent rural municipio, and each is linked to Oaxaca City by public transportation and roads, they responded to events in Oaxaca City quite differently. While the responses of each community are detailed below, it is important to remember that first, there is a range of responses in each community and in each community we encountered individuals whose opinions went from those who had no idea anything had taken place in the city to those who were quite knowledgeable of events and their outcomes. Second, I am reporting on ethnographic, qualitative responses to questions about life in rural Oaxaca; however, here I have quantified responses to quickly capture what is occurring in the communities; finally, while responses ranged from highly critical to supportive, nearly everyone I interviewed wanted to see the city and region returned to the status quo. Nevertheless, interviewees were quite clear that the state of the local economy and the lack of local jobs are two profoundly powerful forces that will continue to drive out migration.

Communities

Households averaged 5 members with a range from 1 (several widows who lived alone) to 12 (a three generation household including 4 minors and 8 adults—two household heads, several grown children and the parents of the female household head). A total of 60% of the households we contacted included children attending school and approximately 93% of the people described in our interviews had completed at least 5 years of primaria (primary school, first through sixth grades) and 55% had completed at least one year of secundaria (seventh-ninth grades). A little less than ¼ of the individuals in these households had some additional schooling and professional training (accounting, technical and secretarial training) and 16% had attended some college and typically studied medicine and law.

The majority of the people we interviewed spoke Spanish at home (71%) while 40% were bilingual and spoke both Spanish and Zapotec. We also encountered a handful of individuals who spoke Spanish and English or English, Spanish and Zapotec. This last group typically included young speakers born in the US (most often Los Angeles) with bilingual parents. Additionally, 95% of individuals identified through our interviews were born in their community of residence. The remainder was individuals who married into their communities or children born outside of the community, including the United States.

Work histories were varied among the communities; however, 40% of all of the homes we contacted included at least some agricultural work and 79% of the adult women interviewed divided their time between house work and informal labor including the production and sale of tortillas, taking in laundry, ironing and caring for children. Additionally, 20% of the men encountered participated in informal, part-time labor; approximately 53% of men and 31% of women were involved in formal labor (construction, transportation, restaurant/hospitality, office work, etc). A little less than 3% of the adults working were teachers and 10% were crafts makers.

Reactions

To gauge the impact of violence on local households we asked several questions concerning migration decisions, support of strikers, and the impacts of the strikes on work and schooling. It is interesting to note that 64% of the households interviewed described the strikes, violence and economic decline in the city as a motivating factor for migration. Of the 94 families with relatives living in Oaxaca City currently, 72% noted that those relatives had encountered one or another form of difficulty due to the strikes. Often, this meant that relatives lost jobs, or could not find transportation to reach the jobs they held. I also discovered that a smaller group of families (15 or just under 8% of the total interviewed) had relatives that left the city in the last year and about two thirds of those people maintained that the decline in the city's economy and rise in violence were responsible for the moves.

Of course, migration was an option in Oaxaca long before 2006. In an earlier analysis of the central valleys, I discovered that migration included from 22% to 62% of a community's households and averaged about 45% of a community's households (Cohen 2004a). The smaller sample for this project found that an average of 53% of a community's households were involved in migration to the US and that generally one individual was sent to the US to help financially support the sending household.³ Migrants and their sending households gave several different reasons for crossing the border, however, 73% noted they migrated because jobs were scarce in Oaxaca and pay for the jobs that were available was extremely low. Only 11% of those people we interviewed suggested a member of their household migrated because they lost their job. Several migrant families noted the lack of adequate rains locally has also motivated Oaxacans to leave. However, everyone complained about the weather and even this spring, when ample rains fell, the complaints had changed from too little rain to too much rain that came and too early.

I asked interviewees if they supported the teachers who had first protested against the state for better wages and support. We also asked if interviewees supported the APPO (Asamblea Popular del Pueblo Oaxaqueño) and if they could describe the APPO. What I found was somewhat of a surprise; 19% of the households visited supported the teachers and their demands. In fact, the goals of the teachers and the APPO were quite popular among villagers; nevertheless, most citizens were very critical of the actions of both the teacher's union and the APPO. We found few people who supported the APPO (11%) and only about 1/3 of the household members interviewed knew what APPO meant. Answers about what the APPO stood for ranged from the identification of the APPO as equal to the teachers' union to quite elaborate statements on the role and meaning of the APPO as a critical, civil group uniting Oaxacans from various economic strata and backgrounds in opposition to the governor and state apparatus.

The impacts of the strikes, violence and economic downturn were obvious in the answers to questions we posed concerning education, work and perceptions of the strikes. I found that 55% of the households visited included children who had missed at least some schooling due to the strikes by area teachers. When asked if an interviewee knew of children (his or her own or others) who had missed school due to the strikes, the total responding positively reached 90%. Work was also impacted by the strikes, the city's economic crisis and the decline in tourism. Several journalists note that Oaxaca's economy lost several billion dollars as hotels and restaurants closed and events including the Guelaguetza were cancelled (El Universal 2006; Matías 2007; Rivas 2007).

³ No more than 3 migrants were sent to the U.S. by 96% of central valley households.

Of the interviewees we talked with, 48% described the strikes and violence in the city as contributing to the closure of businesses, 35% said they had personally lost work or knew of someone who had lost work and 54% noted that sales had dropped in places of business (whether their business or the business of others). Finally, we asked interviewees to describe the overall impact of events in Oaxaca over the last year. Rural Oaxacans are clearly mindful of events in the city and 15% of those people interviewed said they were unaware of what had occurred. However, not all responses were equal. I found that of those rural Oaxacans that were aware of events in the city, 45% had only a cursory understanding. In other words, they told an interviewer that they were aware something was happening in the city that it included teachers but beyond that they could supply little additional information. A smaller group of rural Oaxacans (19%) recognized the players and events that were occurring in the city, and they were cognizant of how those events impacted their lives. Finally, I found that 7% of our interviewees were strongly aware of what was going on in the city; in other words, this small group knew of events in Oaxaca City, understood that events in the city were impacting their lives and their communities and took an active role to support the teacher’s union, the APPO or the governor.

A final area of questioning asked our interviewees to tell us the number of people in their households over the last year. We asked the number of individuals in the household at the time of the interview, the number of individuals in the household a week ago, a month ago, at Christmas (when many migrants return to their sending homes), last summer and a year ago, just as the Section 22 of the SNTE was beginning to organize its protests. What we discovered is that over the year, there was a decline in the size of households and a loss of members (see figure 1). A year ago, interviewees described households with a total of 907 members present. By this year, the total had declined by 100 individuals and stood at 807 in total. The Christmas holidays brought an increase of approximately 20% from the totals in the spring of 2007, however, those visitors quickly disappeared, and by early April of 2007 over 10% of the population present last May was missing.

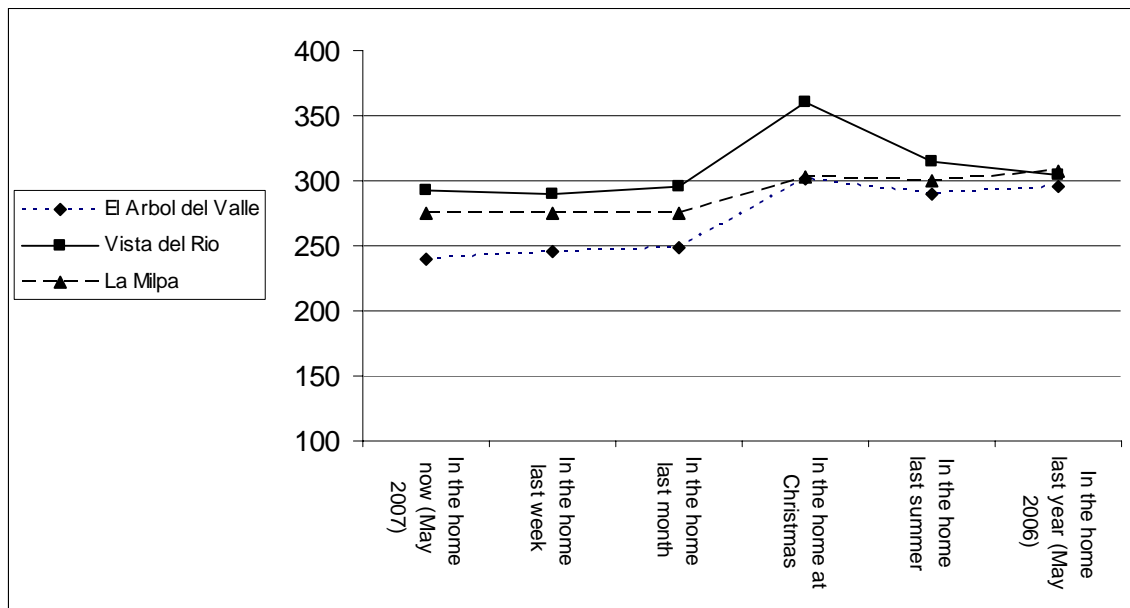


Figure 1: total populations in surveyed households 2006-2007

Discussion

It is clear from figure 1 and the data presented that the outcomes of the protests and violence in Oaxaca City has changed rural life, yet, the impacts vary by community. El Arbol del Valle saw a larger decline in population than did Vista del Rio or La Milpa, nevertheless, the differences go beyond the size of the households over time and reflect the distinctive features of each community. In this section I describe some of the key differences between the three communities.

El Arbol del Valle is home to 93% of the crafts producers encountered during our interviews. These craft producers are dependent upon tourism for direct sales and exporters to whom the bulk of their work is sold. Interviewees noted that the decline in tourism in the city has led to a collapse in the local market for goods as tour buses no longer visit the village. More importantly, exporters are also avoiding Oaxaca and the central valleys region including El Arbol.⁴ Finally, and of critical importance, the fluctuations of the market, its rise and fall in response to changing demands far from Oaxaca have led to an overall decline in the sale and export of goods (Chibnik 2003; Cohen and Browning 2007; Stephen 2005; Wood 2000). In fact, it may well be that the declines in the market due to changing tastes among consumers are far more important as a contributing factor to drop in local sales. However, it is quite easy for craft producers to blame the protestors and violence in the city than to admit that the entire market may be shifting away from the goods made locally. In any case, it shouldn't be a surprise that the citizens of El Arbol del Valle were extremely critical of the both the strikers and the government. In fact, 70% of crafts men and women interviewed said that they have lost work due to events in the city and overall, 83% of the households in El Arbol del Valle felt that the strikes contributed to a rapid increase in migration.

The declines in the market reach beyond El Arbol to impact communities that surround El Arbol and supply craft producing households with hired labor. Several interviewees noted that over 100 women had been laid off from jobs in area workshops in response to declines in demand. Additionally, the community's *presidente municipal* maintained that over 250 people had left the community in the last 6 months. The supporters of the teachers and APPO (just under 10% of the population) in El Arbol were typically smaller families (3 members instead of 5) and include fewer students but more elderly members. Only 20% of the supporters were craft makers and four of the five families supporting APPO included members who were retired and at least 66 years of age.

In Vista del Rio I found the support for the teachers and their goals was stronger than in either El Arbol del Valle or La Milpa. Nevertheless, that support also came with the realization that the strikes and violence had a negative impact on the local economy with 40% of households noting that businesses were in decline and sales were down due to events in the city.⁵

⁴ The US State department issued a warning for travelers to Oaxaca in the fall of 2006 which will continue through April of 2008 (US State department 2007).

⁵ The 40% of households in Vista del Rio that noted a decline in the economy compares with 33% of the households in El Arbol del Valle and 28% of the households in La Milpa. Furthermore, many of the respondents in La Milpa noted the economic declines that they acknowledged were not local; rather they were occurring in Oaxaca City.

Supporters of the teachers and their goals were evident in about ¼ of the community's households. In other words, about ¼ of the interviewees described themselves as supportive of the teachers' goals. Nevertheless, support for APPO and its objections to the state's governor while stronger than in either El Arbol or La Milpa was still limited with only 11% of the households supporting the movement's goals.

The support of the teachers that we encountered in Vista del Rio is due to several factors. First, the economic impact of the strikes was not as great in Vista del Rio as it was in El Arbol. In Vista del Rio, only 26% of the household heads interviewed maintaining they had lost work due to the strikes. Many of these individuals said the problem was largely one of transportation and that they could not get to their jobs when protestors blockaded the major roads into Oaxaca City. Second, Vista del Rio has the highest percentage of formally employed and skilled individuals (38%). Third, the community is also home to 65% of all of the individuals with professional degrees and many of these individuals have found work in businesses and state institutions. The desire for higher wages and better working conditions that are core issues for the area's teachers are also critical to many of Vista del Rio's citizens and are important connections when the teachers are asking for support. Nevertheless, the actions of the APPO confront the state and many of the area businesses where these individuals work and it may contribute to the lack of support for APPO locally.

La Milpa, an agrarian, Zapotec community with a high rate of migration even before the strikes, displayed interesting reactions to the protests, violence and APPO. I had expected that the citizens of La Milpa would be critical of APPO and the strikes. In fact, in interviews we found that knowledge of APPO and of the strikes as well as the goals of the teachers was lower than in Vista del Rio or Arbol del Valle, with only 22% of the population aware of what APPO stood for and only 6% in support of APPO (approximately 10% of the households interviewed supported the teachers). The responses to questions about whether the protests encouraged migration and impacted negatively on work were also quite interesting. While 35% of the citizens we interviewed described the protests as a motivator for migration, the community has such a large migrant population that most people did not see a large change due to the strikes. Many of the people we interviewed blamed Oaxaca's lack of good, regular rain fall as a more important cause of migration than the strikes. For the citizens of La Milpa, the real issue is schooling and 92% of the household contacted for this study were home to children who had missed months of school due to the protests or the interviewees with no school aged children of their own, knew of children who missed school.

Conclusions

Strikes by teachers are nothing new to Oaxaca and Waterbury notes that in 1946, 1952 and 1977, protests led to the resignation of the state's governor (Waterbury 2007). Nevertheless, the past year saw the governor and the state dig in their heels and refuse to negotiate with the teachers (a process that only continued through the spring and summer of 2007, see for example Cano and Velez 2007). In response, in June APPO was organized and non-violent protests and marches were mounted. The economy of the state was impacted severely by the combination of state violence that was directed largely at the protestors, the US state department travel warnings and the cancellation of state celebrations like the guelaguetza. And while the APPO and protesters often invoke the state's poor and indigenous peoples in their calls for action (Hernández Díaz 2007), there has been little coordination with rural folks around the city.

What I have shown here is that while rural citizens are often sympathetic or supportive of the teachers, the APPO and their goals and highly critical of the governor, they are also critical of the actions the teachers and APPO have taken. The citizens of El Arbol del Valle hold the strikers responsible for the collapse of their craft economy; in Vista del Rio citizens are more supportive of the striker's goals, yet still quite critical of the actions strikers and the APPO have taken. Again, we want to stress, most rural people we interviewed are committed to improving the political climate in Oaxaca. However, at the same time, these very same citizens believe the state, APPO and the teachers have turned their backs from the real needs and interests of Oaxaca's rural, indigenous, poor. The inability of the protestors and APPO to connect with the interests of Oaxaca's rural population was perhaps most clear in our interviews with people in La Milpa. In La Milpa support for the goals of APPO and the teachers were strong, nevertheless, this translated to very little real support. Instead, the citizens of La Milpa felt there were other more pressing problems facing the community – not the least of which was the continued deterioration of farm lands. Local children missed months of school because of the strikes by members of section 22 of the SNTE. This more than anything else angered the people we interviewed. Most believe a good education is one of the best ways out of the poverty that characterizes Oaxaca, yet the strikes set many children back and the time they missed in the classroom will be hard to recapture. The unfortunate reality is then, that rural Oaxacans will likely continue to oppose the strikers and APPO even as they support the goals of these movements.

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