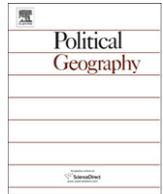




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Guest Editorial

A living space: The relationship between land and property in the community

“Perhaps all of my hopes are nothing more than unfounded dreams.”

Letter From Ricardo Flores Magón to Miss Ellen White

I belong to the community of Santa Cruz Yagavila, in the Sierra de Juárez in Oaxaca. My umbilical cord is buried there, as are those of my grandparents. Perhaps I should say: I am the community. It is true that I belong to it as it belongs to me. But each and every one of us is the community. The community is nothing more than we ourselves, it only exists in what we are.

We are a culturally specific collective, structured in a fabric (*tejido*) of social relations that is based on the principle of reciprocity. It is a collective that occupies its own territory in a permanent manner. The web of our relations becomes even more dense and complex through our participation in *tequios* – communal labor, assemblies and celebrations. It is an open but obligatory participation, one that affirms us as members of the community. In this way, we are a community in a communal territory, cyclically reiterating our belonging by participating in the collective, and by fulfilling our responsibilities and obligations to it.

Land has been disputed across history because it is a communal good and one of the most important means of production and life. To speak of the land means to think about how over the last few decades capital has sought to appropriate the forests, the land, the water, and minerals in a way that can only be compared to the age of colonial extraction. In colonial times, we offered continued resistance. Domination came packaged in a new religion and new political institutions. For us, both the packaging and its contents were expressions of strange foreign powers that tried to exercise their dominion over us. We endured them for centuries as they occupied our territories in different ways.

Our territory constitutes the natural space of life and is conceived as the ecological base for the construction of various expressions and political practices. Territory is the foundation of self-determination for our peoples, this natural space of life is the source of wisdom and knowledge, of culture, identity, traditions and rights. Because of this, our vision of our territory is intimately tied to the enactment of our collective rights and our self-determination.

In the community we distinguish between two ways of understanding and using natural resources: one is for the production of communal or subsistence goods and the other is for the production of those capitalist goods on which modern life depends. Today we stand before a process of worldwide reorganization, where land is first measured and then alienated, where its resources are first

documented and then appropriated, to be used for a new cycle of investment and accumulation. Facing this situation, it is important to ask: what do these new processes of accumulation offer us and what good, if any, can come of them? What progress and development have we received from them? What are the cultural, social, technological and economic benefits for our people? These are some of the many questions we can ask in an attempt to understand the interests behind the *México Indígena: Bowman Expeditions* project that came to work in our community of Yagavila in 2006.

The researchers and students led by Peter Herlihy came before the General Assembly of our community in August 2006, claiming that the objective of *México Indígena* was to conduct participatory mapping in order to understand the impacts of PROCEDE (the Program for Certification of Rights to Ejido Lands) in indigenous communities. They assured us that “our purpose is to improve understanding in the United States of foreign territories and populations with the goal of reducing disagreements and for the peaceful resolution of conflicts.” After hearing these claims, many people asked specifically about the project’s financing, to which the researchers replied “The financing of the AGS Bowman Expeditions can come from any source, public or private.” It was not explicitly stated that financing came from the Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) and we were not informed that the data they obtained would be given to the FMSO of the U.S. Army.

Aside from the rumors of inappropriate conduct or the lack of informed consent from the communities, this situation worries us because we have always seen a strong link between geography and the interests of the military industrial complex, especially in recent attempts to create worldwide property databases. The *México Indígena* project subscribes to a political–military strategy. We cannot forget that this mapping occurs in the midst of the debate over a package of military financing from the United States known as the Mérida Initiative. The control and displacement of indigenous communities is intended to prevent potential conflicts in “hot spots”, contribute to the military control of the region, and finally free up natural resources for the benefit of the government and its transnational allies.

A good example of this is the state of Chiapas with its “rural cities,” where, in the most faithful rendition of the colonial tradition, the state government, under the pretext of providing services, has evicted indigenous communities from their lands and concentrated them in new areas so that the government can freely exploit their resources. Today the police serve the function of guardians of these natural riches, making it more difficult to recover them as the communal goods they once were. But before relocation and

exploitation, there is always a plan, a plan which today requires digital data. The purpose of the *México Indígena* project is to take local knowledge from the community and convert it into the prime material needed to model geographic information systems, which are then used as tools for this type of planning.

We know that maps are powerful tools that can be used to exploit or to facilitate various projects, however they have long been the cause of agrarian conflicts in the region. “How long will these documents serve us?” representatives of the committee of Bienes Comunes (Communal Goods) of Yagavila asked when on the 30th of March 1995 they received the ruling from the recently created United Agrarian Tribunal of Oaxaca that officially recognized and gave title to collective “property.” I had never before recognized the utter relativism of our local institutions, particularly the judicial ones, and paradoxically the capacity that such institutions and the ‘law’ have to bestow meaning upon those institutions under their regulation. The *México Indígena* case makes us ask the same question.

This initial question engenders more questions: whether the document we have in our hands is truly efficient; if such a ruling puts an end to agrarian conflicts and enables us to have security over our lands; or if on the contrary, the ruling and the title superimpose plans and types of land use or mark new boundaries not based on previous landmarks (*mojoneras*) which could create problems or revive old conflicts with neighboring communities.

In the beginning, we were involved in *México Indígena* because we support the appropriation of tools for our own use and for the reproduction of our own knowledge through new means; this is why we showed interest in learning to use coordinate systems, cartographic plans and GPS devices. Nonetheless, we are firmly convinced that it is necessary for indigenous communities to be directly involved in the production of maps of their lands, instead of being ignored in processes and having their land interpreted as “empty” space available for other ends. Who or what does it serve that this local knowledge is in a public database? Who is interested in this knowledge?

These maps not only represent the transfer or collection of data, but also their *creation*. By placing information into empirical categories, a map serves to define a certain spatial reality, one that does not necessarily correspond to the reality of those who experience it. It creates an abstract idea of a space that is not part of a lived landscape, and fails to acknowledge flows, movement, and ways of being. In addition, the creation of public information ironically privatizes the production of this knowledge. Publishing this information on a webpage does not make it more accessible to members of a local community, but rather allows that knowledge to escape local control and be used by anyone. The community is thus in danger of potential external manipulation, appropriation and alienation. Our people cannot recognize or accept these maps as being “open source” because their codes are foreign to our knowledge and our communal spaces, those parts of our surroundings that move beyond the physical territory of the community and its possessions.

This situation merits an official response by the authors of *México Indígena* so that others like them do not intervene in indigenous decisions related to the right to autonomy, land and territory. Projects like *México Indígena* are public policies that represent a grave threat to the autonomy of many indigenous peoples. The

geographical ignorance of the United States is the biggest weakness within its regime, a regime whose foundation lies in its military policies and not in cultural knowledge. No explanation by *México Indígena* will be satisfactory unless it takes into account this aspect of American foreign policy. The matter should be clear: how to oppose the usurpation – conducted through the use of new devices and electronic systems – of the communal goods which are most intimate and important to our being. The defense of communal goods constitutes the crucial public task of contemporary political action. This task must be approached with urgency, given that often the forced transformation of communal goods into natural resources is a process which utilizes state-sanctioned violence.

Trying to unify these two types of information – that which emerges from the community of Yagavila and that which is created by the project *México Indígena* – is complicated. However, despite the fact that they emerge from two separate delineated spaces, the two systems are connected through a certain political geography. One hundred years ago, my grandparents were part of a revolutionary battle for land and liberty, whereby they opposed the policies of territorial demarcation imposed by the liberal policies of the Porfiriato regimen. The *Bowman Expeditions* seem to represent a modern-day version of this policy of demarcating indigenous territories in a moment of political and economic crises in Mexico. Current developments seem to have been predicted by the death of Ricardo Flores Magón, a Oaxacan intellectual who combined communitarian beliefs of indigenous peoples, the liberal Mexican tradition of the nineteenth century, and the thought of European anarchist philosophers, and who ironically died in the Leavenworth Penitentiary in Kansas. We hope that a similar fate does not await the knowledge of our community through its imprisonment in computers from the same place.

Today, it is urgent that we recreate spaces of freedom and justice that recognize our full rights to our territory, the entire habitat (ground, subsurface, and sky) that was expropriated from us since the constitution of our country. This re-creation will allow us the autonomy to design the institutions that best correspond to our understandings of land and territory, and enable us to resolve conflicts through a methodology of *conciliation* that neither the law nor geography reflects upon or understands.

My argument in this essay expresses a personal position that emerges from my communal roots rather than from a theoretical or academic discourse. My vision is determined by the world that I live in, a world of people, a web of knots and relations. Based on our history, experience and the conditions that surround us, we give form to our own thoughts and knowledge. We rescue our history, which lives on in the memories of our grandparents, and we revalue what we know about ourselves. We appreciate anew our customs by confirming their vitality, their strength, their advantages. Communitarianity is the structure of our organization. Through it we inform ourselves and raise new generations. In it we are inspired to act.

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