BEYOND RESISTANCE:
RAISING UTOPIAS FROM THE DEAD
IN MEXICO CITY AND OAXACA

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“Is radical transformation no longer imaginable, or is it the fantasy of human control over human destiny that has vanished?”

Wendy Brown (2005:100)

Compliant Defiance

In writing about democratic citizenship in a working class neighborhood of Mexico City, I have employed the phrase *compliant defiance* in order to help decipher the roller-coaster politics there and more generally in the Mexican capital.\(^1\) In 2002, residents of Colonia Santo Domingo, the neighborhood in question, were clearly not happy with many aspects of political life and for decades had showed their defiance in all manner of open and silent protests against governmental abuse and neglect. At the same time, most people most of the time tolerated political life with a resigned, compliant shrug and a knowing wink: What could you do about political life stacked against *la gente humilde*?

The term compliant defiance in part is meant to capture a widespread sentiment among my friends and neighbors in Santo Domingo that directly associated political knowledge and actions with something far less positive: the responsibility and, more, the culpability ordinary citizens in Colonia Santo Domingo shared in their own social problems. My intent was to explore issues of power and knowledge and to more forthrightly acknowledge what my friends and neighbors in Santo Domingo repeatedly emphasized to me when they held themselves and other residents of the colonia accountable for their political thoughts and actions, regardless who they were or how little power they evidently had.
One aspect of this exploration of the concept of compliant defiance was to critique the term *agency* as it had come to be used in the previous two decades in scholarly writing, for instance, with regard to social movements.\(^2\) Agency often stands in contrast to culpability and as such has been a useful concept in challenging determinist thinking in the social sciences, giving the dispossessed a fuller voice in deciding their own fates, victories, and tragedies. As often than not, however, agency has referred rather exclusively to the politically progressive efforts of *los de abajo* only when they are able to substantially break free of what are often held to be preexisting structural and systemic constraints. How one understands failures or situations when the poor dare not even attempt to break out are subjects many analysts have been more reluctant to address. At the least, agency has been absent as a concept when the issue of compliance arises, if it is entertained as a characterization at all. For whatever reason, then, agency is used to capture aspects of defiance but has been less useful in helping us conceptualize compliance.

As John Monteiro (elsewhere in this volume) demonstrates so carefully and clearly, the meanings and implications of indigenous “collaboration” with colonial powers and projects in Brazil, have broader ramifications for scholars of social movements, protests, and resistance. Yet lopsided and often wooden analysis of those who would resist remains common. Thus the propensity to romance the politically successful among the dispossessed, as shown in many a barren homage to resistance theory, has unfortunately resulted in feeble analysis with respect to the politically unsuccessful – those who are not successful, those who try but fail, or those not interested, or those who are just not aware. Even to mention the possibility of poor people who may not be “aware,” of course, conjures up illicit images of false consciousness and other censured concepts that are themselves abjured today. Yet
political passivity, whether considered an aspect of agency or not, remains paradoxically uncharted territory.

What, we might ask with tongue only slightly in-cheek, is wrong with “blaming the victim”? If agency is a wonderful thing to behold and defend, then the implications of agency for situations in which the powerless are less than brilliantly successful must be explored. If agency is the term for successful incursions of los olvidados into the arenas of power, we need to know more about agency’s opposites. If agency comes about, in part, through an understanding of Manuel Azuela’s (1938) legendary social underdogs of their plight and how to lessen at least to some degree their misery, we need to understand the implications of misunderstandings and missteps as well.

One reason for the popularity of the concept of agency relates to the historical context in which the term became popular among academics, a time indeed that saw the advent of resistance theory as well. Agency and resistance both arose in the 1980s, a time in which thinking about large-scale social change, at least in Europe and the United States, seemed to nearly all observers as obsolete, archaic, fool headed, possibly suspect, and indubitably dangerous. As John Gledhill (2004:341) has written, “In a world in which the triumph of the market economy is taken for granted, it seems increasingly difficult to specify ‘realistic’ strategies for those at the bottom of global society that do not entail enhancing their capacity to function in market society.” It is thus not surprising that, grasping every opportunity to find any positive political developments amid a torrent of globalized, neoliberalized, and militarized politics in nations large and small, the ideas of political thinkers like James Scott (1985, 1990) seemed all the more appealing precisely because they were proudly grounded in goals that seemed more feasible, small-scale, and pragmatic.
Weapons of the Politically Demoralized

As is well known, James Scott counsels that we should learn to better appreciate covert and unorganized forms of resistance. This part of his argument is the one usually and positively utilized by scholars of Mexico, Brazil, and throughout the world. The other half of his thinking, however, needs to be addressed as well: that covert and unorganized forms of resistance have become the only viable ones for the exploited and oppressed in the world today, and therefore the most reasonable focus of scholarly attention. It could be thought that Scott does not discount overt resistance but merely calls attention to the fact that covert resistance is more frequent and effective. In fact he does frequently and explicitly oppose the two forms. Despite disclaimers, he pits gradual, incremental, and all but hidden change against self-consciously directed and radical change: “Petty acts of resistance . . . [have] thus changed or narrowed the policy options of the state. It is in this fashion, and not through revolts, let alone legal political pressure, that the peasantry has classically made its political presence felt” (1985:35-36, emphasis added). Scott says that “persistent practice of everyday forms of resistance underwritten by a subculture of complicity can achieve many, if not all, of the results aimed at by social movements” (1987:422).

It is perhaps no accident that Scott’s star rose precisely in a period of retrenched conservatism in the United States, the Reagan years of the 1980s. This was a time when the permanence of certain capitalist social orders seemed more realistic than it did in the 1960s, which was a period Scott has dismissed as inspiring inappropriate romanticism for national liberation movements and the like from Eric Wolf and others. Preferring “pragmatic adaptation to the realities” of their lives
(1985:246), Scott cautioned that peasants, for example, must recognize that these realities set “limits that only the foolhardy would transgress” (1985:247). Overt resistance (much less rebellion) thus was reckless and unwarranted in these conditions. This is an economistic line of reasoning, whereby one’s social position determines one’s understanding and pragmatic resignation.

In redressing perceived past ills, Scott swings too far in the other direction, making hidden forms not simply the most common but the totality of political life under “conditions of tyranny and persecution in which most historical subjects live” (Scott 1990:201). The only valid approach in Latin America today, however, with ongoing and new social struggles (open and hidden) is to examine and not discount all forms of resistance and rebellion. Rather than write off organized forms of popular struggle as passé and romantic, we should pay more and particular attention today to all the diverse forms being employed every day by millions of people in the region who are still living largely under conditions of tyranny and persecution.

At the same time in the United States, when many left-leaning intellectuals were licking their wounds in the wake of the antiwar and civil rights movements in the United States, and later with the collapse of the Soviet empire and soul-searching possible and desirable alternatives to capitalism, theories of resistance emerged that seemed to offer a panacea for those no longer able to believe in capacious theories, much less titanic social change, once known as socialism. Gone were the days, such as those described by Luis Nicolau Parés (elsewhere in this volume) with respect to Salvador, Brazil, in which intellectuals played an open and influential role in the political debates and events of the day, with respect to resistance against oppression.

Like some of the new social movement analysis, resistance theory represented another theoretical current, often more based on identity than on class categories. In
an age and climate of Reaganism, retrenched political conservatism, and a fetishized diminution of expectations for substantial social transformations in the United States, theories of everyday forms of resistance became very popular in scholarly publications in the 1980s. As the new century approached, resistance theory also began to attract attention in Latin America as well (see discussion in Coronado Malagón 2000).

Undoubtedly, resistance theory attracted disenchanted postsocialist converts in part because it spoke to the desire of many intellectuals to maintain their support for social underdogs and their hope that change would eventually come about and greater social equality could be realized. Yet with respect to theories and approaches to agency, much of the allure of resistance is romantic in nature (see Abu-Lughod 1990; Kearney 1996). In developing his analysis of the quixotic qualities of resistance theory, Harry Sanabria suggests instead that “we center more of our efforts on ineffective and unsuccessful resistance in order to understand better the contexts in which successful resistance can be achieved” (2000:57). In other words, as with theories of agency, so too with theories of resistance, we need to account for both successes and failures, both activism and passivity, if these concepts are to be made truly helpful in understanding the twists and turns of social change.

For a variety of reasons, including periodic economic crises and frustrations with electoral politics, progressive change has appeared to be less realizable to many in Mexico in the first decade of the twenty-first century than in the 1980s, especially as inequalities of all kinds seemed only to multiply. Many scholars in Mexico, as elsewhere, began to reconceptualize the working classes and their ability to alter their political worlds. Analytically, resistance theories complemented newly translated documents fresh from French poststructuralist theory that attributed power (and
culpability) to everyone everywhere and not just to dominant groups. Nonetheless, as John Gledhill suggests (elsewhere in this volume), Foucault did contribute in important ways to offering “a more complex kind of account in which ‘resistance’ can be recognized but its effects on power relations more subtly diagnosed.” Thus, scholars utilizing resistance theories could continue to focus their attention on the poor and oppressed while redirecting their energies to micro-encounters of inequality, conflict, and subterfuge, within the context of greatly diminished expectations for the men and women unburdened by material and intellectual riches.

In academic circles in Mexico late modern realism has included a shift away from “class analysis,” as illustrated in many of the influential books published by Néstor García Canclini in this period (see, for example, 1982, 1987, 1989, 1995). The parallels are striking between the wholesale replacement of working class theories with others focused on “popular classes” and the rise in status of theories of resistance in the same period. Predominant, universalist theories of classes and class struggle, often of an economist tinge, were to be replaced with more standard sociological categories of “urban citizenry” and “popular consumers.” The ambiguities of delineating lines of demarcation for those suffering from grinding inequalities and those who perpetrate such cruelty became, for a growing number of scholars, more difficult to discern.

In an insightful paper on political culture, Guillermo de la Peña (1990:105) insists that we treat the concept of class as profoundly historical. We must cease to view class as a magic wand used to catalog groups of people into categories in order to predict social behavior. Instead, de la Peña argues, if class is to retain any of its salience, it must be utilized as a concept alive with the possibility of real people constructing real (and really) complex interpretations of their daily lives. It is
obviously more than coincidence that such reevaluation of the constitution and consequence of classes occurred at the same time as angst-ridden doubt and ironic uncertainty were on the rise, and as modernist (meta)truth and teleology were met with unchecked uncertainty or even scorn. As if this were all merely a game of speculative gymnastics. Although there is much to be altered and amended in class analysis, the key problem for those who would shuffle off to ironic oblivion may be that, like their overdetermining ancestors, they have too little insight into and no plan to help resolve poverty, disease, and raging inequalities and misery in the world.

With these thoughts as a backdrop, and keeping in mind the dialectical versus dichotomous concept of compliant defiance, I would now like to turn to several ethnographic encounters in order to highlight, first, people in Colonia Santo Domingo, Mexico City, who implicate themselves in discussions of political activity and immobility, and, next, critical approaches to political consciousness and consensus in both Santo Domingo and in the southern Mexican city of Oaxaca, where in 2006 an enormous social movement erupted aimed at toppling the state government.

To start with, a discussion about blame.

**Resistance and Burros**

“A lot of people talk these days about democracy as the goal of all kinds of social struggle,” I commented one day in 1997 to Gabriel, a mechanic friend.

“But ask those wise guys if they go to the marches, if they go to the meetings. ‘Do you go out and raise hell?’ Everyone talks about democracy,” Gabi complained.

“The Zapatistas, too?” I asked him.
“The Zapatistas practice democracy more because the groups who are prepared are the ones who are marginalized. Why? Because they are the groups who actually can see to it that democracy functions. But that’s when people get together and analyze things so democracy doesn’t become, as I was saying, ten burros and a genius.”

Which of course raised for me the obvious question: “And who’s to say who are the burros and who are the geniuses?”

“But the burros are the ones who talk about democracy and don’t practice it,” Gabriel responded, just barely managing to keep a straight face.

“Are you a genius or a burro?” I needled him.

“A burro,” he replied, laughing. Then, recovering his composure, he added in a half-serious, half-playful tone, “But I’m not a mountain burro, because even burros have hierarchies. There are burros who are more burros than I am and there are burros less burros than I am. What I do think is that there’s a lack of educación and that the level of educación in our country is very low.”

“But even in countries where the level of formal education is very high there are assholes all over,” I commented.

To which Gabi retorted, “And in the end, who’s to blame?”

“I don’t know,” I lied, because I knew where this line of argument was leading. “Tell me,” I requested, so I would not have to write words into his mouth.

“The people,” Gabriel told me, just as he had on so many other occasions in the years we had been talking about politics and change in Mexico. “The people” bore some responsibility for their own misery, because only the people could, if they became “educated” in the broadest sense of conscious of their situation, do something to rectify their lives.
Who is responsible for what conditions on earth is a persistent theme that has often seemed to plague Gabriel and one that has definitely colored many of our discussions over period of almost two decades. Whether at the level of social misery and conflict or in more intimate ways when confronting personal foibles and proclivities, to me Gabriel has always been among my most intellectually restless of friends. His commentary is regularly spiced with assignment of blame in which no one escapes unscathed, yet in his estimation, not everyone is equally at fault.

Years earlier, in 1993, Gabriel and I had sat in the warm June sun on a wall atop the extinct volcano Xitle in the mountains ringing southern Mexico City talking politics and his problem with las copas.

“‘You must have begun drinking when you were six,’” I teased Gabriel.

“No, even before that,” he corrected me. “‘You know why I began before?’ Because maybe I’ve inherited something from my father. Maybe I began when I was conceived. That’s when I began to drink. It might be. It might be something inherited.’

“Genes?”

“Might be. Maybe an escape; it’s the most likely. Sometimes, because of the way I think, I feel like I don’t fit, in my family or in society. Maybe I don’t have the channels for me to realize my potential. Sometimes I end up saying that only drunk and asleep can I forget how screwed up things are, because sometimes I don’t have anyone to talk to about all my experiences, my worries, my traumas, my complexes. Because in my family, I feel…. In my marriage, I am not understood.’

“And your friends? Can’t you talk to them?’ I asked.

“Sometimes we clash. I like to talk about everything, and I can’t do it with them. Like religion. And when I make them see some mistake in their way of
looking at it. I figure if they weren’t my friends, I wouldn’t tell them about their mistakes. I could give a shit. But that’s why we fight sometimes.”

Gabriel’s thirst for knowledge and learning and for engaged debate on questions philosophical and political is largely intellectual. He has participated in some marches to support the Chiapas Zapatistas, and he continues to argue against voting as a means to fundamental change in Mexican society. But mainly, in the almost twenty years I have known him, Gabriel talks. He talks openly, sarcastically, and sometimes vehemently about current events, music, indigenous protests, agnosticism, student politics, snake tacos, the naming of children. He talks with friends, family, acquaintances, and basically anyone he can stop on Huehuetzin Street – in Colonia Santo Domingo in the Mexican capital – who happens to be wandering by during the twelve- to fourteen-hour shifts Gabriel works six days a week. There, from eight in the morning, throughout the day, and often until nearly midnight with flashlights, a lamp, and even cigarette lighters, Gabriel repairs all manner of cars, vans, and trucks in the street and sidewalk in front of the cubbyhole workshop where he keeps his tools.

Colonia Santo Domingo on the south side of Mexico City was settled by “parachutist” squatters beginning in September 1971. Almost forty years later, there were well over 150,000 people living in Colonia Santo Domingo, only a fraction of whom can find gainful employment in the colonia. Since the land invasion of 1971, settlers built the streets, brought in electricity, water lines, and more recently helped lay the pipes for sewage lines. In many respects, Santo Domingo is typical of other colonias in the Mexican capital, in that it is populated overwhelmingly by poor men and women living close together, sharing and fighting over whatever they have. In other ways, however, Santo Domingo is a more unique neighborhood, because of its
particular history, especially that experienced by women in their capacities as organizers and leaders in the physical and moral construction of the area.

In her illuminating discussion of agency and resistance in Michoacán, Margarita Zárate (elsewhere in this volume) similarly underscores the relationship of broad social divisions – such as ethnicity and gender – to very local political turmoil and change, while at the same time referencing broader world events that have seemingly nothing to do with the immediate political struggles at hand, such as the naming of a neighborhood Colonia Kuwait, during the time of the First Gulf War in 1990-1991. So, too, in Colonia Santo Domingo, the participation of women in neighborhood, citywide, and national political events was both a source of constant debate in homes and families, as well as a clear indication of transformations that were occurring in profound ways with respect to gender relations more broadly. In a related fashion, Patience Schell (elsewhere this volume) shows how in the 1920s the activities of elite conservative Catholic women fit as well under the rubric of resistance. With regard to both gender and religion, Schell argues, these women faced bona fide opprobrium and exclusion that can only be understood in a larger fabric of social inequalities.

One of the fascinating aspects of studying Colonia Santo Domingo has been precisely the fact that, compared to many other neighborhoods in Mexico and other countries, often women and men have personal experience participating in various forms of social protest and resistance broadly construed. Yet if one were inclined to seek representative samples and describe a “typical” resident of the colonia, doubtless most people most of the time want absolutely nothing to do with protest or to participate in any form of public politics for that matter. In the very fluctuations between political activity and passivity, and the contradictory analyses that my friends
and neighbors offer as to their involvement or that of others, I find solace in the conclusion that few people if anyone in Santo Domingo is ever truly indifferent with respect to social change large and small. How they express their concerns regarding issues as diverse as the cost of sewer pipes being laid beneath their streets, the visit of Rigoberta Menchu to a nearby liberation theology church, or municipal and federal elections are, of course, lessons in diversity and contradiction. No matter, their political horizons extend far beyond mere resistance, holding the line against mounting humiliation and subjugation.

In part this reflects a Gramscian (1971:333) notion of “contradictory consciousness,” whereby the popular understandings, identities, and practices of the members of subordinate classes simultaneously embody that which has been inherited from past generations and that which unite them in contemporary struggle against dominant social classes. Such conditions are indeed more than merely ideational and, to paraphrase Crehan (2002:192), stem from the very contradictions between classes themselves. From this understanding we may in turn grasp distinctions between social resistance as a form of protest against insurmountable odds and rebellion that challenges preexisting class relations.

Talking about Cosmic Significance

One recurring theme in my discussions with Gabriel over the years has concerned the question of significance: the significance of parents and how children inherit certain traits from them; the significance of political events and movements in effecting real change in society, especially as that change might relate to the inequality between rich and poor, Indian and mestizo; the significance of what people say in relation to what they think and what they do; and, perhaps on the grandest of all
possible scales, the ephemeral significance of humans in a cosmic universe. This last
topic had led us to a conversation that warm spring morning in 1993 about the
television series *Cosmos*.

“I watch Carl Sagan in the documentaries. He seems very good. This is one
intelligent guy. Now, I haven’t studied what I have learned. [Working] people don’t
have access to the kind of learning he does… there’s no information… it’s a small
nucleus [of people who can do this kind of studying]. For people who work and
sometimes don’t have time or are tired, it’s easier to have a documentary to watch.
It’s more practical and you can learn. I think it would be good to propose to the
University [UNAM] something like this for the people.

“I know there exists a book, but I haven’t had the opportunity to read it. It’s
translated into Spanish, and, truth is, I think it’s got some really interesting things.
It’s helped me to understand more. When you understand what we are, well, you
learn everything.

“Unfortunately people aren’t attracted to the program, at least the youth aren’t.
How come? Actually, there’s a lot of interest. I’ve read some astronomy books that
have fallen into my hands, and everything Sagan says I have read in other books.
These are the books they sell over there [on the streets surrounding the National
University], and as they’re less expensive, I buy them. Sometimes I find them tossed
away. I’ve found really good books in the garbage, and the truth is that a book is a
treasure.”

Gabriel talked of acquaintances who were employed at UNAM who had
argued with him about Sagan. They told Gabi that in the University they had already
learned everything Sagan was talking about in his program, that he really had nothing
new to offer.4 Gabriel continued,
“So I know more about Sagan than about the University. The University gives classes at one in the afternoon, at two, and no worker can attend them. So, I told these people I was arguing with, ‘Do you know what the value of Sagan is? For me, the value is that he’s giving information, that you can learn from him. That’s his value, and that’s why I defend him.’ What’s a university worth if it’s out of reach? And the truth is that you need a lot, a lot of time to learn, because there’s so much to learn. And there’s not enough time in the schedules of the workers.

“I have the cassettes” of Cosmos, Gabriel told me. “I had them taped. You don’t see the picture well, but you can more or less make it out. It’s really interesting because at any given moment it makes you feel like a flea, and at the same time it makes you feel important. Because I’m realizing what it is all about. I’m realizing that I’m learning things that I never even thought I was going to learn, learning about the nature of life. And I think, ‘Even though it’s no more than a passing fancy, I’ve learned a lot.’ We want to have this capacidad [ability, knowledge]; I would like to have this capacidad.”

In Santo Domingo, as elsewhere in the world in the twenty-first century, popular theories of genetic inheritance have become a type of secular cosmology, imbuing those in the know with the capacity to explain the deepest and most perplexing of enigmas about human existence and cosmic infinity. For instance, Gabriel discusses his penchant for alcohol in terms of inherited traits, as a way of linking his proclivities to biological roots and in the process of deriving some sense of absolution for his sins. Although his remarks are often offered offhandedly, half-jokingly, nonetheless Gabi is not alone in attributing drinking proclivities to genes (see Gutmann 1999). In this way, problems like alcoholism may be characterized by those who suffer from this affliction as beyond the reach of rational remedies; if they
are caused by “inside forces” that are amenable only to evolutionary mutations, then what is a poor problem drinker to do but accept with equanimity his or her biologically derived fate?

At the same time, Gabriel discusses both his pursuit of knowledge and his anger at those who demean such learning as unsophisticated, insinuating therefore that Gabriel is less truly well informed. What constitutes correct understanding, when has someone achieved a real, conscious grasp on an issue or topic, and how are these things measured? Far from being confined to epistemological and cloistered scholarly towers, these questions make up the stuff of daily street discussions – at least if Gabriel has anything to say about the course of a conversation.

It is easy enough to support Gabriel’s personal claims to the right to knowledge. And we may and should admire Gabi’s refusal to bow to the snobbishness of those who argue that Sagan dumbed down his program for the masses. If such determination and thirst for learning is not simply a good in itself, then when men like Gabriel become more learned, even more self-aware, this can have implications for political life more broadly. And surely they may learn without seeking the permission of condescending saviors. But if this kind of self-awareness is led further than the romantic valorization of poor people and their ability to break through unflattering portraits of themselves, such knowledge must be measured in some sense against ignorance and complicity. Again, John Monteiro’s paper elsewhere in this volume is relevant with respect to understanding the meaning and applicability of collaboration between subject peoples and those in socially dominant circumstances. No matter how loathe theorists of change may be to attribute to the dispossessed any responsibility for their misery, co-optation, and duplicity, the recognition of knowledge in the sense of self-awareness requires it.
Historical Motivations and Social Expectations

Let us now turn to Oaxaca, where a major social conflict developed in 2006 that holds lessons for the contemporary study of social expectations, agency and apathy, and resistance.

As they had every year for more than two decades, 70,000 teachers in Oaxaca, Mexico, occupied the Zócalo in the city center in May 2006. They declared that their sit-in would persist until demands for better pay and working conditions were met by the state government. The *plantón* had become a regular part of negotiations each year between the teachers’ union, Sección 22, and the governor. That year, however, it was different. In the middle of the night on 14th June 2006, state police were ordered by the governor to dismantle the sit-in and clear the teachers out of the downtown.

What ensued in the next five months was a massive social conflict unprecedented in the history of Oaxaca. As was evident in a series of *megamarchas*, eventually hundreds of thousands of citizens, including thousands of university students and a smaller number of professors, became involved in public ways to demand that the governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, resign from office. During this time opposition forces formed a broad coalition known as the Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca (APPO), protesters occupied and broadcast from 12 radio stations, others erected barricades throughout the city, and, at the end of October 2006, President Fox sent over 4000 members of the Federal Preventative Police (PFP) to quell the upheaval.

The governor never resigned. Instead, 23 persons were assassinated by government supporters and none of the killers were brought to trial. Hundreds of
protesters were illegally arrested, with over 140 of them sent to a distant prison in the state of Nayarit, over 20 hours drive from Oaxaca. And over 1200 complaints were filed with human rights commissions – including by students, professors, and others from Oaxaca universities and other institutions of higher learning – alleging torture and harassment at the hands of the authorities.\footnote{1}

Universities and institutions of higher learning in Oaxaca were significant sites for conflict and social movement organizing, while students and to a lesser extent professors from these academic centers were important participants in APPO and other forms of protest for many months in 2006. This was especially true of the Universidad Autónoma “Benito Juárez” de Oaxaca (UABJO), where on 14 June 2006, with the express desire to “democratize the media,” university students and faculty took over the radio station of the UABJO, Radio Universidad. Throughout the conflict they continued to used the station to broadcast messages and information for several months. Pitched street fighting took place just outside the campus from June through November that year.

The UABJO Rector Francisco Martínez Neri made concerted attempts throughout the conflict to preserve the autonomy of the university, declaring, “We would defend the participation of any professor and any student” in the social protests. After university students took over Radio Universidad, there were personal attacks on him such as announcements on a radio station associated with the government that persons were headed to his house to burn it down.

The events of 2 November 2006 were especially complex. As he later recounted, after hearing on the radio that the police was trying to enter the university, Martínez Neri called the Mexican President, the Secretary of the Interior, and the Federal Police that had entered Oaxaca days before. He demanded that “they
withdraw from the university.” When he arrived at the university himself, “I observed that a group of state police was trying to force a door to enter” the university and helicopters from the Federal police were dropping tear gas within the university that had become, in his words, “a war zone.” Nonetheless, despite pressure from the government, the Rector defended the autonomy of the university and the police were unable to occupy the university grounds.

In the last twenty years, when Mexico has experienced a “democratization” of political processes, the party that long controlled virtually every political office at federal and local levels for several decades, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), has lost one election after another, including the last two presidential elections. In contrast, in the last decade, Oaxaca has witnessed a retrenched political authoritarianism controlled by the PRI. The conflict in 2006 stems in good measure from the PRI’s politics of corruption, cronyism, and corporatism that today are prevalent in Oaxaca, where the political climate in Oaxaca is characterized by the state government’s intolerance, intimidation, and violent suppression of independent social movements. The social polarization that occurred in the course of events in Oaxaca in 2006 was the result of generalized conflict in Oaxaca society reflecting obvious and extreme social inequalities and was the product of a social movement whose scale and impact was extraordinary.

“The repression against the popular movement in Oaxaca,” notes Salomon Nahmad (2007:24), “provides evidence of state terrorism.” He continues, “a deep chasm in Mexican society is leading to great polarization.” Certainly “polarization” was a term heard repeatedly in Oaxaca in 2007. There were systematic attempts by the government and police of Oaxaca, and later by federal authorities and police, to intimidate, threaten, punish, and even murder those who expressed themselves in
opposition to the governor and to the violent state repression. All this led to a general climate of fear, polarization, and impunity that was fomented and sponsored by the government’s out-of-control “dirty war” in Oaxaca in 2006. In a sense, of course, such polarization is nothing new in Oaxaca, with the indigenous peoples of the state today and historically excluded from seats of power, just as in Jalisco, Guillermo de la Peña (elsewhere this volume) documents that “the form in which power is produced and exercised involves the creation and reproduction of indigenous and non-indigenous subjects.”

Although the percentage of university professors who openly supported the social movements to oust the governor was small, the state government’s persecution of these individuals served to intimidate intellectuals more generally.

In the years leading up to the conflict Dr. Víctor Raúl Martínez, a professor-researcher at the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociológicas of the UABJO, was well known in the city for his activities with a variety of academic, civic, and religious organizations. He was also a well-known columnist for the newspaper Noticias and a regular commentator on Radio HIT.7 Because Dr. Martinez was active in the APPO and the Forum on Pueblos Indígenas in November 2006, he received threats on his life and against his family. These threats were received by telephone calls to him, his wife, and two of his brothers (whom the delegation also interviewed). His photograph was published on an anonymous website with 25 others that announced: “These are the delinquents who have kidnapped your city. Grab them wherever you see them or go find them in their homes!” Five of the 25 persons reportedly had been killed by July 2007. Dr. Martinez was threatened repeatedly on Radio Ciudadana.

The role of women in the protest activities of 2006 was enormous and fundamental. One reason for the participation of many women as leaders and
activists was the fact that despite having passed a legislative agenda in Oaxaca in 2003 and 2004 pledging gender equality – issues as diverse as the inclusion of women candidates in elections, free childbirth, and justice for indigenous women prisoners – the state government had done nothing to fulfill these promises. From the beginning of the social upheaval following the events of 14 June 2006, women were at the forefront of marches, forums, and decision-making of all kinds in the movement, though unlike in the case of the Unión de Damas Católicas Mexicanas discussed by Patience Schell (elsewhere this volume), in Oaxaca in 2006, the women activists were overwhelmingly poor and indigenous. On 1 August, over 2000 women took over the state-run television Canal 9 saying “we are tired of hearing lies.” On 21 August, in the middle of the night, the transmission tower was destroyed. In response, the women and others from APPO took over twelve radio stations. Also on that day, the Coordinadora de Mujeres de Oaxaca Primero de Agosto was formed to promote and protect women’s presence in the social protests.

It is in the context of such state terrorism and the ensuing social upheaval that we may well ask ourselves what it means to “be reasonable” about the chances for large-scale social change. Or, to paraphrase the query of political philosopher Wendy Brown (2005:99), what does it mean for scholars to be working in a time when we have lost the belief in the possibility and the viability of a radical overthrow of existing social relations? In particular Brown calls for scholars to “recuperate a utopian imaginary,” and it is this vision that I wish to contrast to the dreary realism of so much resistance writing.

Roger Bartra noted that in the 1980s and 1990s in Mexico, although many people believed that the new social movements would provide the necessary impulse from below for “the great transformation” that would incorporate nationalist and
populist social programs first demanded by these movements, and notwithstanding the fact that these movements successfully mobilized tens of thousands of citizens to achieve certain reforms, social disparities of nearly every kind continued to widen during this same period (1999:70-71).

The conflict and social movement in Oaxaca in 2006 took place at a time of brutal government repression against social protest. Yet also noteworthy is the fact that this repression was met with what the director of UABJO’s Radio Universidad described as “an effervescence of popular initiative.” And for everyone in Oaxaca regardless of political viewpoint, the changes that occurred were seen as producing a “a before and an after”, a sense that “Oaxaca will never be the same.” A reflection perhaps of this effervescence and transformation is found in the flourishing artistic workshops of youth from the universities and in the surrounding villages, and in the “rebeldía oaxaqueña” as evidenced in the new “music from the barricades.”

In June 2007, among those who called themselves “the opposition,” there was still an effervescence of utopian feelings about the accomplishments of the previous year. In interviews with over two dozen intellectuals, artists, human rights workers, liberation theology clergy, and students, with youth still stinging from their first tear gas canisters and venerable veterans of social struggles in the Américas over the last forty years, I witnessed a remarkable optimism and celebratory mood. People talked about APPO as a “movement of movements,” an acephalous coalition that embodied what some considered the ancient virtues of indigenous community assemblies, usos y costumbres, instead of corrupt electoral politics. Others simply pointed to the social mobilization against the governor and government that was unprecedented in the history of the state.
During the conflict in 2006 in Oaxaca, universities and institutions of higher learning and individual researchers, teachers, cultural workers, and intellectuals associated with universities, schools, nongovernmental organizations, and similar institutions in Oaxaca performed a vital role in establishing a civic space for information, debate, and an independent social protest. This space was crucial for intellectuals and other academics who wished to participate alongside other citizens to articulate the demands of various social actors, including indigenous peoples and women.

The Universidad Autónoma “Benito Juárez” de Oaxaca (UABJO) and its Rector, Francisco Martínez Neri, in particular were at the center of the conflict on an almost daily basis. The UABJO played a critical role in maintaining the dignity and autonomy of scholarly debate, engagement with social problems and participation in social affairs, dissemination of views and news otherwise unavailable in society, and a refuge from police and parapolicía attacks that occurred routinely throughout the city during the period of conflict. The administration, faculty, and students of the university ensured that autonomy and efforts to seek peaceful resolution to the conflict were in evidence.

Nonetheless, this optimism was conspicuously weaker by the end of 2007, as the PRI again won virtually every state election that year, the protesting teachers seemed far less visible, and the APPO no longer was able to maintain a cohesive and constant presence in the city and countryside of Oaxaca. Avenues of significant social change once again seemed blocked, unnavigable, or nowhere to be found. So how are we to take stock of the final outcome of the struggle and resistance in Oaxaca during those months of 2006?
In her analysis of what she terms “post-utopian” Quilombos in Brazil, Ilka Boaventura Leite (elsewhere this volume) shows how double meanings have operated in recent times as one element of resistance. The meanings in question are utilized by Quilombo organizations as rebellion has itself “become a social pact” and social antagonisms have become masked. In this way, perhaps, the Quilombo experience stands both in contrast to the utopian goals of APPO and many of the Oaxaca activists in the summer of 2006, yet notably parallel in the end, as the idea of resistance replaced “the slow rhythm of actual changes.”

The attempts to move beyond resistance to utopian social transformations seemed ultimately beyond reach in Oaxaca as among the Quilombos of Brazil. So, finally, there seemed for the moment to be no political space beyond resistance.

**Activism and Apathy**

Yet, I hasten to add, none of the events in Oaxaca in 2006 should be taken to mean that scholars should focus exclusively on activists, on rebellions, or on intentional forms of opposition to various status quo. Among other things, in the very “apolitical” and “apathetic” interstices beloved by historians and anthropologists one may find that the uninvolved and uninformed are never quite so, and that visions of better worlds can also be the stuff of daily life for those who seem to shun public politics.

Jumping back in time, and returning to the Mexican capital, following the 1994-95 financial crisis in Mexico, a particularly heated topic of debate in Colonia Santo Domingo in Mexico City concerned the *marchas* and *plantones* (demonstrations and occupations) that were being carried out by one or another group protesting austerity measures. Invariably, the opinion a person in the colonia may
have held about the protests that blocked traffic in the downtown Centro area was determined more by his or her general political sympathies than by how much and how often he or she had been personally inconvenienced by the events. Whether or not the protests were viewed with contemptuous scorn or accepted as a necessary nuisance, such political activities were undoubtedly seen as one of the only means that poor people had at their disposal if they wanted to change social policies. Or more precisely, marchas and plantones were among the few options available for open street protests (*política de la calle*). As such, such street politics are exemplary of a defiant politics, in which defiance “presumes intent,” in the words of Susan Eckstein (1989:11).

Obviously, marches, sit-ins and other occupations did not begin in 1994. In fact, in Santo Domingo, such protests constitute an important part of the colonia’s history, going back to its earliest days after the original invasion. Since the first days of the invasion of Santo Domingo in September 1971, when men and women gathered around rock piles and discussed how to contend with municipal authorities and the periodic incursions of police into their makeshift squatter camps, it has been similarly difficult to distinguish between activity that constitutes hidden forms of resistance and that which represents overt kinds of confrontational politics.

In January 1997, Juan and Héctor offered to give me a ride to the north side of the city. We tried heading in their car straight through downtown but quickly found ourselves in a traffic jam several kilometers south of the Centro. We never figured out for sure what had caused all the traffic, but as we sat there going nowhere, both Juan and Héctor launched into a spirited condemnation of marches, protests, and occupations in general. It did not matter, Héctor insisted as he leaned over to look at me in the back seat, who might be demonstrating—students, campesinos, workers, or
some other trouble makers—the demonstrations were futile, disruptive, and most annoying. Juan, who was driving, added that all I had to do to learn about the ineffectiveness of protests like these was listen to the television news. Weren’t the TV announcers correct that so many stopped cars greatly exacerbated the already high levels of wintertime pollution in the city? They explained it all quite clearly on television, Juan said, and he was convinced that the media’s analysis of protesters who were out of synch with the population overall was overwhelmingly accurate and fair.

Such contrarian opinions about protests, marches, and sit-ins among residents of Santo Domingo, and their even more varied practical relationship to such activities, are integral to the political processes and struggles in the colonia. As Marc Abélès has written, political meetings and street demonstrations are major rituals in many societies. That street demonstrators “brandish symbols of antagonism,” such as slogans and banners, amid shouts and heckles, serves to illustrate “an undercurrent of violence.” And such rites “punctuate circumstances in which political life takes a more agitated turn” (1997:324). For those like Juan and Héctor who usually disapprove of marching and demonstrating, these rituals of protest have become a lightning rod spurring them to further resentment. For the protesters themselves, their understanding of the significance of their actions is undoubtedly more varied. For some, participation in these activities is seen as the only option left them. Others, however, may suspect that even the more agitated rituals represent sometimes little more than another means by which to legitimize those whose policies are the target of the protest.

Moreover, odd as it may seem, protest does not always entail actual opposition to the target of dissent. Protests can also be ritualized and used to legitimize the
powers of the status quo. Paraphrasing Max Gluckman’s (1960) famous discussion of rites of rebellion, David Kertzer has shown that, “in spite of their apparent delegitimating intent, such rites can serve to reinforce existing power inequalities… [as] people are able to ventilate their natural resentments of occupying inferior places in society and, in so doing, allow the system to continue” (1988:54-55). Acting as safety valves and sops, protests can validate the powers that be, as Stanley Brandes has shown in his 1988 analysis of fiestas in rural Mexico: but insofar as protests actually defy existing social relations, they can upset them. Either way, however, rarely is resistance in the form of public protest so one-sided and clearly delineated that it represents some kind of pure political action which is thoroughly absent any significant countervailing impulses and effects.

In Mexico City and Oaxaca, in colonias populares like Santo Domingo and citadels of higher learning like the UABJO, in the 1990s the term “socialism” ceased to be discussed or even contemplated as a way of radically reorganizing society. Instead, it seemed, “democracy” became the watchword of social change, *the* ethical endpoint and *the* aim of social struggle. Like its socialist forebear, democracy has the virtue of offering utopian visions of a world in which poverty, racism, militarization, and inequality are progressively eradicated by participating citizens in free elections and civic organizations. And though overused and underdefined today, democracy, like the concept of agency, can be very useful in describing aspects of defiant assertions on the part of citizens of their political rights. That is, despite the fact there are libraries full of definitions of democracy, most of the time the term is employed very loosely, resulting in multiple meanings and approaches to what constitutes civil rule and governance.
The other side of the coin, political compliance and resignation to the status quo, is less easily conceptualized with standard understandings of democracy, agency, or in the case at hand, resistance. As with the concept of democracy, if theories of resistance can help us to address novel ways of resolving such late modern plagues like poverty, racism, and militarization they are to be encouraged and embraced. If on the contrary theories about the rituals of resistance offer no more than blanket critiques of utopian attempts to raise from the dead the dream of human control over human destiny, then they are part of the problem and not part of the solution.

Notes

1 Gutmann 2002.

2 My thanks to John Gledhill for his comments at every stage of my thinking regarding resistance and related concepts (see especially Gutmann 1993 and 2002), to my colleagues in the Rethinking Histories of Resistance in Brazil and Mexico Seminar for their painstaking engagement with the place of resistance in the history of social change, and to Catherine Lutz for her magic blue pen.

3 By educación Gabriel was talking about formal schooling, but also more generally referring to an awareness of social relations, a social consciousness and conscience.

4 The criticisms directed against Sagan for saying nothing new were echoed in the United States at the time, especially in certain quarters of academia where, it was alleged, Sagan dumbed down complex astronomy for the masses. No doubt there were editorial decisions involved in explaining the cosmos to a wide audience, most of whose members did not have postgraduate training in astrophysics. Still, I wonder how much rancor stemmed (in addition to puerile jealousy) from patronizing views
that if millions of people appreciate astronomy it must be bad or at least badly presented.

5 The direction of our conversation then shifted as Gabriel asked me, “Did you already do your [doctoral] thesis? Do you have theses there [Berkeley]?” I told him we did, and that I still had to do it after returning to Gringolandia. He wanted to know what I was going to call it, so we spent some time discussing various titles for the thesis.

6 In June 2007, I led a Fact-Finding Delegation of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) to Oaxaca, where we interviewed over 30 people from academic institutions, the state government, human rights and other non-governmental organizations, the church, and artists and intellectuals about the impact of the 2006 conflict on academic freedom and expression. The views expressed in this paper are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the delegation or LASA. The Delegation Report about the conflict is available in English and Spanish versions (LASA 2007).

7 Dr. Martínez (2007) also has provided one of the first scholarly studies of the conflict and protests. On the events of 2006 in Oaxaca, see also CCIODH 2007; Esteva 2007a, 2007b; Osorno 2007; Gutmann 2008.

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