Social movements in Mexico: local roots, global struggles

Geoffrey Pleyers and Sergio Tamayo

This series sheds a light on a range of struggles rooted in local communities and daily life that oppose violence and never reach the headlines. Español

The openMovements series invites leading social scientists to share their research results and perspectives on contemporary social struggles.

Police repress peaceful rally for 43 missing students in Mexico. Débora Poo Soto/Demotix. All rights reserved.

Mexico is considered the best case scenario by Joseph Stiglitz for studying the impact of free trade agreements and a neoliberal economy on a developing country[1]. It is definitively also one of the most insightful countries when it comes to social movements - and these two insights are not unconnected.

The historian Eric Hobsbawm considered the Mexican Revolution (started in 1910) « the first revolution of the 20th century »[2]. One of its main legacies, the 1917 Constitution, still stands as one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. As far as social movements are concerned, the twenty-first century also started in Mexico. The uprising of indigenous communities in the southern state of Chiapas on January 1, 1994 opened up a new cycle of global protests, becoming a major inspiration for social movements around the world.

Dramatic context

Today, progressive movements face difficult times in Mexico. The country is embedded in mass violence, drug
cartels, extra-judicial executions by the army and a situation of general impunity. In the last 10 years, over 150,000 people have been murdered by drug cartels and by the militaries and over 26,000 cases of forced disappearance have been registered by the government[3]. In such a context, activism and independent journalism has become a “high-risk activity”.

As the authors of this series show, teachers, parents who search for the bodies of their disappeared children, indigenous communities and peasants are under constant threat. 26 journalists have been assassinated in the last four years. The forced disappearance of 43 students of the Rural Teachers’ School of Ayotzinapa and the murder of 3 of them on September 26· 2014, with the assassination of two other students of that same school on October 4 2016, is far from an isolated case. As in so many similar cases, these disappearances and murders remain unresolved.

This dramatic context gave a particular relevance to the first National Congress of Social Movement Students, that gathered over 800 participants in Mexico City from 17 – 21 October 2016, following an initiative of the ISA47 (Research Committee 47 “Social Movements” of the International Sociological Association) and the Metropolitan Autonomous University (UAM). The 600 papers presented during these five days provided a panorama of repression but also of the creativity and strengths of movements in different parts of the country, both in cities and in rural communities.

**Panorama of resistance**

Resistance and the construction of concrete alternatives to the dominant model go far beyond the few Mexican movements that reach out to international media. This series sheds a light on a range of struggles rooted in local communities and daily life that oppose violence and neoliberalism and develop concrete alternative practices.

It follows *Open Movements* commitment to provide “critical and empirically-based outlooks on social movements and cultural transformations that do not strike media headlines but discreetly contribute to transforming daily life and to building a better world”.

The situation of mass violence is deeply connected with other aspects of the multidimensional crisis that affects Mexico. It includes an economic crisis (reduced economic growth, increasing poverty) and a deep crisis of democracy, with high corruption, a collusion between political, economic and media elites and a widespread mistrust in the institutions and actors of formal democracy. René Torres’ overview of democracy and social movements in the early twenty-first century, with which we begin publication today, shows that little if anything remains from the hopes of the formal “transition to democracy” in 2000. His analysis suggests that the case of Mexico obliges us to question the very nature of democracy, in a manner which reaches out far beyond that country.

Various texts of this series testify that in Mexico as elsewhere, resistance often finds its roots at the local scales, in communities, neighbourhood or affinity networks. Since 2011, the indigenous rural community of Cherán has become one of the brightest symbols of the possibility to resist violence by drug cartels and deforestation of their territory through rebuilding an autonomous community organization. As Alejandra González and Víctor Zertuche show, the movement builds its success on the unity of the community, local solidarity and strategies based on mobilization for new laws.

There are over 420 ongoing environmental conflicts in the country. Communities defend their livelihood and their territory against infrastructure projects (dams, airports, highways…) and extractivist industries (mines, oil…). By analysing how local communities organize to resist global corporations in four environmental conflicts, Alice Poma and Tomaso Gravante unveil how local autonomy and self-organisation are the result of past experiences and cultures. They configure also a process that allow actors to deal with their emotions and replace fear and desperation by hope and solidarity.

Education is another major battlefield where the neoliberal model promoted by the state is confronted by a range of
local alternatives. Guadalupe Olivier and Sergio Tamayo show how innovative educational projects emerge in the waves of social movements in different parts of the country. They show that different schools and different educational projects are possible when they are rooted in social struggles, even in a context of violence and rising inequalities.

The values of community and local solidarity and pedagogies oriented toward individual and collective emancipation have become the roots of emancipatory alternatives. Mexico is the second most unequal country of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, after Chile. The lastest OCDE report on inequalities indicates that the poorest 10% of the population only get 1,7% of the wealth generated in the country. The values of community and local solidarity and pedagogies oriented toward individual and collective emancipation have become the roots of emancipatory alternatives. They are also at the core of the struggles in Oaxaca, the most indigenous state of the country, as Manuel Garza shows. The 2006 popular revolt in Oaxaca was the most significant movement of the first decade of the 21st century and remains in all memories. 10 years later, its heritage lies in multiple protest action and even more in a different relationship with the state and the promotion of stronger social relations among the population.

Dorismilda Flores shows how social media provide important tools to foster a more open public space in a country shaped by media and political asymmetries. Local struggles and online activism are far from opposed. From the Zapatista uprising to current movements, emancipatory struggles articulate online and offline activism.

Women are particularly threatened by the combination of mass impunity, human traffic and a massive illegal economy. 6500 women have been murdered since 2013. This “femicide” is notably strong in the urban area surrounding Mexico City and in parts of the Northern states. In this context, sex workers are even more at risk. Leading feminist scholar and activist Marta Lamas explains in her article how sex workers have managed to reverse the stigma and assert that efficient policies to prevent violence do not consist in prohibiting sex workers from doing this job but rather require changing the structural conditions that lead them to pursue it.

While deeply rooted in their local and national culture, history and struggles, social movements in Mexico are profoundly global. The actors depicted in this series tackle key sectors of the fight between the global capitalist model and emancipatory projects: natural resources, education, information and the right for people to decide their own fate. Their challenges and successes are thus full of lessons for those who, in Mexico and around the world, build innovative paths towards emancipation in their own country and community.

Geoffrey Pleyers & Sergio Tamayo are the coordinators for this article series.


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