Liberation pedagogy in Mexico’s social movements

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Education understood as a pillar of political activity, on the basis of criticism and resistance, becomes a fundamental means for struggling to end poverty, marginalization, slavery and exploitation.

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

A primary school in the Zapatista village of Oventic, the southern state of Chiapas Mexico, August 2004. Wikicommons. Some rights reserved.

Mexico offers a clear illustration of the impact of globalization. It affects some more than others and is implemented by structural reforms, notably privatization in areas such as education and the dismantling of labor rights[1].

Teachers, indigenous Zapatista communities and young people who have graduated from teacher training schools have created citizen-based projects and established education as the solid foundation for the pedagogical construction of alternative futures — although not without difficulties. Education brings together symbolic proposals for emancipation and social transformation. Schools, as the concrete, formal arena of education, become triggers for forming consciousness, and creating new political subjects, with an identity based on community work. Schools, as the concrete, formal arena of education, become triggers for forming consciousness, and creating new political subjects, with an identity based on community work.

Here we focus on four Mexican states where alternative education projects have gained momentum in recent years: Oaxaca, with its Education Transformation Plan (Plan para la Transformación de la Educación en Oaxaca—PTEO);
Michoacan, with its Integral Schools (Escuelas Integrales); Chiapas, with the Zapatista Autonomous Education (Educación Autónoma Zapatista) project; and Guerrero, with the University of the Peoples of the South (Universidad de los Pueblos del Sur—UNISUR). The first two have arisen from local teachers’ struggles, based on dissident sectors of the national teachers’ union (Coordinadora Nacional de Trabajadores de la Educación—CNTE). The last two result from community struggles mostly waged by indigenous populations.

**Oaxaca’s Education Transformation Plan (PTEO)**

The PTEO was created when local actors decided to move from a socio-political insurgency to a cultural, pedagogical and ideological strategy for emancipation. The Plan’s key aspect is the re-signification of the cultural roots of Oaxaca’s peoples. The popular teachers’ movement promotes education as a mode of resistance and fosters discussion around a different educational model within the Oaxaca State Public Education Institute (Instituto Estatal de Educación Pública del Oaxaca).

The Oaxaca teachers’ movement took the idea of communality as the guiding principle in their proposals for elementary education. Against the dominant model of education and the worldview and social structures that support it, they create a space in which participants’ knowledge and action is legitimate. Participants are encouraged to claim their identity on the basis of their own cultural and historic roots[2].

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**Occupy Oaxaca city. Village teachers came every year to set up camp, kitchens, information tents, discussion groups, and to protest the lack of resources for education. Flickr/betweenprojects. Some rights reserved.**

As W Mignolo[3] states, to “un-learn” hegemonic knowledge, which has been imposed and colonizes peoples’ mind, an inverse process is necessary. A re-learning process takes place by valuing lessons that are not necessarily new but are rooted in the very substance of community life.

Oaxaca’s education transformation project is focused on collective experience and on the resistance to cultural, linguistic and epistemic colonization. Therefore, knowledge conceived only from one particular perspective is rejected. Therefore, knowledge conceived only from one particular perspective is rejected. “Communality” is defined as the cultural construction in which native peoples live and socialize, and which serves as the basis of collective action.
Rather then a curriculum imposed by external experts and state agents, autonomous and specific curricula are created in a participative way at each school, based on the interests and particularities of communities, its culture and its interaction with the territory in order to “transform the reality of educational practice”[4]. This educational transformation involves social change that not only confronts the official discourse of the national curriculum but implements a concrete educational reform opposed to the way in which the neoliberal capitalist world and asymmetrical relations of power are managed and interpreted.

The teachers’ movement emphasizes an educational content defined by the reality experienced by those living in the communities, and subjects’ feelings around re-learning a principle of collective living that “signifies unity for resisting processes of cultural deconstruction”[5]. In this perspective, ancestral identity can be turned into a tool for resistance.

**Integral Schools in- Michoacan**

In the western state of Michoacan, *Integral Basic Education Schools* is a project for elementary education promoted by the local section of the teacher union. The labor union political project considers the construction of an alternative education project as one of its fundamental tasks. It defends public education and is inspired by “The pedagogy of indignation” by Paolo Freire that proposes a new form of organizing schools on the basis of collectivity. It is inspired by “The pedagogy of indignation” by Paolo Freire that proposes a new form of organizing schools on the basis of collectivity.

In Michoacan the fight to change the official education project began in the 1990s. A political agreement was reached with the state to create an alternative pedagogical space with the installation of eight experimental schools in different regions.

The Integral Schools model is based on a theoretical-practical relationship. It focuses on preparing the social subject in a comprehensive manner, with work as a central aspect. Work is understood as the factor that links the individual with the community, and integration with the community through work is very important in this project’s configuration.

This educational proposal criticizes the neoliberal model of schools, and considers these as closed spaces that legitimize the capitalist state’s perspective while ignoring society’s genuine needs. By contrast, promoters of the alternative education project consider that schools should be constructed as triggers for a process of emancipation, and they are explicitly recognized as political institutions for social change. This rationale is based on the theory of “resistance in education”[6].

The “New School” is a space for democratic education, with joint participation by the community, faculty and students. The goal is a democratic culture built by the people from the bottom up:

“In the school we envision, a new rationality of life will be promoted, one that recuperates the joy and hope in which new forms of operating strengthen the exercise of popular self-government, a rationality that emancipates us from capitalist ideology. The intention is to dignify man as a rational, transformative, creative and supportive being” (Proyecto General de las Escuelas Experimentales Integrales. Escuelas Integrales de Educación Básica, unpublished). Michoacan’s education project proposes the transformation of inequality, at least at the local level. It also aspires to a global impact.

Utopia takes shape in a new conception of a transformative, liberating school. The need to strengthen identity is established, based on the recuperation of community cultural roots. The project is also rooted in the recuperation of some principles of public education specified in Article 3 of the nation’s Constitution, including: free, secular education, against servitude, against all types of religious dogma and fanaticism, and based on science. Tracing back to the Revolution of 1910, the goal of achieving popular education is based on the interests of the people, with teachers who serve as both workers and popular educators.
Michoacan’s education project proposes the transformation of inequality, at least at the local level. It also aspires to a global impact. Educational content must not be constructed in a particular social setting. This project has as its model a democratic, popular school linked to social transformation processes with a close school-work relationship. The goal of integral schools is to transgress the social structures of domination. For R. Rodriguez, integral schools are nothing less than a tool for revolution[7].

Guerrero and the University of the Peoples of the South (UNISUR)

This project’s antecedents can be traced back to the 1980s, with the convergence of two movements in the region: the teachers’ struggle, primarily rooted in the indigenous sector, and the struggle known as Council of 500 years of indigenous, black and popular resistance in Guerrero, which demanded recognition of the rights and culture of indigenous and Afro-Mexican peoples.

In response to the lack of opportunities for native peoples, they decided to set up an education project with a humanistic, ethical focus, and with the intention of presenting an option for higher education.

A university institution, UNISUR aims at training professionals who will contribute to solving community problems and promoting the regions, currently one of the poorest and the most unequal in the country. UNISUR is totally independent of governmental authorities. It entails three entities:

1. The Community Authority, formed by the Intercultural Council, community members who are prominent due to their integrity, commitment and social struggle.
2. The Board, formed by community members who are known for their wise use of resources.
3. The Academic Association, formed by University professors.

In 2007 UNISUR began with four Bachelor’s degrees in: Community Development and Management; Governance of Municipalities and Territories; Memory, Culture and History; and Justice and Human Rights. UNISUR’s program is partially on-site, and is based on practices linked to communities.

The idea is to constantly question the reality experienced by students. The idea is to constantly question the reality experienced by students. It offers a four-year program and includes research. Since 2007, some 300 professors from other Mexican higher education institutions have taught at UNISUR. The teaching staff does not receive a salary and makes its contribution to the project in solidarity. UNISUR has survived due to the work carried out by communities and the Academic Association.

UNISUR is seeking an official recognition of the study careers it offers. They maintain that the state has a political and moral obligation to offer public university education (free and secular) to indigenous peoples. The UNISUR model is connected to its surroundings, its culture and needs. It is a proposal for intercultural education that was made long before the government’s proposal for intercultural universities. The UNISUR project was approved following an extensive process of consultation and decision-making, with 250 community assemblies and state councils of intercultural education.

The Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System of National Liberation in Chiapas

The Zapatista Rebel Autonomous Education System of National Liberation (SERAZ-LN) emerged from armed conflict and the Zapatista movement. It results from the displacement of people following the 1994 uprising, which included many teachers who had left their schools. Between 1995 and 1997, a Zapatista education strategy was used to prepare dozens of educational promoters, with assistance from civil organizations and students from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).
Since then, the proposal established in the village of Oventik has set up an education project focused on indigenous autonomy, fully independent from the government. Various assemblies with peoples’ representatives outlined a proposal for education originating in communities and responding to their needs. No arbitrary education imposed top-down would be allowed. In 2000, the Zapatista Autonomous Rebel Secondary School began its operations with a three-year plan. After an evaluation of the initial pedagogical experiences at the secondary school, it was agreed that a single plan would be defined for the entire Los Altos region.

The Zapatista System is organized around three educational levels in multi-level groups, and its pedagogy is based on praxis. The SERAZ-LN is coordinated by ten promoters, who are responsible for organizing activities and for training promoters. The system prioritizes the peoples’ own culture, and this means placing all aspects associated with indigenous culture at the center of the pedagogy used. Areas of learning are designed on the basis of the communities’ demands: languages, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, humanism and production, and caring for the environment[8].

Teachers are members of Zapatista Support Bases. Courses begin with an introduction to the life of the peoples, with an explanation of their internal rules. The next course begins with an initial level of four topics: Autonomous Governance I, Autonomous Governance II, Women’s Participation in Autonomous Governance, and Resistance.

While each community evolves in its own way, all of the communities share the basic demands stated in the San Andrés Agreements: land, housing, work, food, health, culture, independence, democracy, liberty, justice, peace, the right to information, and education.

Today, there are 62 elementary schools distributed throughout the region with 3,300 students, over 135 in middle school education, and also adult education, with some 300 promoters. Teaching is on a volunteer basis, and is understood as: “what must be constructed to change the world.” This reflects a definition of principles as established in 1997, as a “strategy of resistance”. They don’t accept any funds from the national government, maintaining that accepting the “bad government’s” participation would jeopardize the movement’s and the communities’ autonomy.

A strong impulse has been given to the autonomy of elementary schools in Zapatista zones since 1998. Autonomy implies the strengthening of the political, ethnic and peasant identity with an eye toward the construction of a new collective identity. It also aims at facilitating direct democracy rooted in indigenous and peasant culture. It is based on a liberating teaching ethic with the intention to educate reflective and critical individuals. It is based on a liberating teaching ethic with the intention to educate reflective and critical individuals. There are no traditional plans or programmes per se, but the principles, values and practices linked to peasant culture and the perspective of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) are evident. The pedagogical-political methodology used is rooted in experience. In pedagogical terms, the methodology is formulated as “to walk asking questions”. In political terms, it is constituted as “lead by obeying.” Both aspects are established in Municipal Agreements for Zapatista Autonomous Education plans and programs.

Education is understood as a pillar of political activity. It transforms itself, as it transforms reality, on the basis of criticism and resistance. It becomes a fundamental means for struggling to end poverty, marginalization, slavery and exploitation.

**Final Remarks**

Today’s education struggle in Mexico is at its highest point of mobilization and resistance, but unrestrained violence and complex mechanisms of state repression are at the same high level.

In the four cases analyzed, education is established as the basis for resistance and the creation of an alternative future. It is a mean for fighting against poverty and exploitation and achieving a future with liberty and equality. Education is understood as a pillar for constructing the utopia that will motivate those dominated to work for political change.
These projects are based on critical pedagogies. They are anti-capitalist in nature, based on each one’s particular perspective, depending on their connections to social and political organizations. The movements in Oaxaca and Michoacan are maintained within the State’s margins, generating agreements with authorities, and seeking to open up spaces for formalizing their projects. These projects are maintained through public financing, although precariously. By contrast, the UNISUR movement in Guerrero and the Zapatista movement in Chiapas assert their political autonomy. However, the education reform approved in 2013 by the current government is placing the survival of these projects at more risk than ever.

Today’s education struggle in Mexico is at its highest point of mobilization and resistance, but unrestrained violence and complex mechanisms of state repression are at the same high level. Utopia faces a stormy path ahead.


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