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Ramón Vera



A lot has been written about the devastation that the Spanish and Portuguese wreaked on the indigenous populations of Latin America in the 16th and 17th centuries. At times, one gets the impression that indigenous culture was nearly wiped out. But this wasn't the case, was it?

the general spaces where it grows, operates, raids, concentrates, marginalises, dislocates, produces, consumes and controls. We call these spaces cities...

So has indigenous culture been completely destroyed?

While it is true that the original European conquest wiped out many different aspects of the strong culture of thousands of indigenous communities, not only in Mexico but in all of the Americas, the destruction continued after the initial wave of annihilation. More recently, capitalism has given the process a new and aggressive impulse. The trend is global. The mega-corporations and the governments that act as their accomplices are invading ancient peasant and indigenous territories: they destroy the logic of entire regions, plunder the land and devastate their territories in a more sophisticated way than they did five hundred years ago.

The conquerors could not wipe out everything. The indigenous peoples are still alive. What we call globalisation hasn't been able to destroy all relations and their meaning. If this were the case, resistance and hope would not just be impossible, but unimaginable. In a world where the logic of globalisation has decreed that all that is not useful to capital is doomed to disappear, the miracle is that these endeavours are still alive, although scattered, and so each one of them becomes very pertinent. One shining example is the cultivation of maize, along with other "subsistence" crops. Today, these food sovereignty crops are at the core of resistance in all communities that defend and reinvent their own particular way of life (whether it is traditional or not). And this is so because, if it produces its own food, a community does not need to ask permission to be or to exist, and is able to defend its communal territory where people live, dream, revere the sacred (the dead).

The millions who are expelled from their lands have little option but to become workers in sweatshops. They are seen only as a defenceless labour force and are brutalised and despised merely for being what they have been for thousands of years. This violent takeover of their territories and their natural and human resources is becoming a planetary system of destruction. The main elements of the onslaught against them are: agribusiness and factories, transportation, unsustainable energy, "digital avenues", biopiracy, mega-projects to "urbanise", entertainment, consumerism, housing developments, railroads, privatisation of water and land, prostitution, trade in drugs and arms, and more brutal or subtle ways of coercion.

These are not the ideal communities, frozen in time, that ethnographers believed they had found. The real communities embody the ideal of communal life, for they place great value on the social realm, that of common experience and understanding. They do this without trying to go back to an idyllic pastoral life. On the contrary, communities want to have the opportunity to change, but on their own terms and in their own time, treating their history with recognition and respect.

Capital devastates, destroys, plunders and displaces people from specific territories, rearranging anew

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Has there been a growth in indigenous awareness and indigenous resistance in Mexico in recent years?

Since 1989, and especially after the Zapatista uprising of 1994, indigenous peoples and communities in Mexico have been organising themselves. At first, they struggled for the legal recognition of their rights as peoples, which meant recognising the multicultural fabric of the Mexican nation, the importance of their vision of history and the political value of their alternative cultures in the country's future.

From 1994 until 2001 the Mexican Indian Movement, including the Zapatistas, fought peacefully for their legal recognition. First, through a set of dialogues known as the San Andrés Dialogues, where many Indian representatives, joined by academics and NGOs, discussed, debated and agreed on several rights that hadn't been addressed in the past.

The Zapatistas decided not to impose any policy line on the participants, leaving them to build a legitimate project for the recognition of the collective rights and autonomy of indigenous peoples in the Constitution. For the first time in the history of Mexico, civil society (rural and urban) confronted the government directly and succeeded in making many aspects clear. Finally, the first set of accords was agreed between the Zapatistas and their allies, and government officials.

These documents, internationally known as the San Andrés Accords, are extremely important because they are legitimate: they were woven from below; they strongly commit the government no longer to take unilateral action to address the so-called problems of the indigenous peoples (the document stressed that the communities must participate fully in the whole process of decision-making, designing, implementing and evaluating policies, programmes and budgets); they recognise the right of indigenous peoples to autonomy and self-government, and to the possibility of forming regional alliances to exercise this right; and they recognised Indian territories and the Indian right to their resources.

These agreements were signed by the government in 1996, but the authorities never enforced them, and finally, in 2001, both Chambers of Congress (involving all political parties) passed a Constitutional reform that not only failed to recognise the collective rights of indigenous peoples and their communities, but was the first step in a massive attack on indigenous communities on every

front. The reform was endorsed by the Executive and the Supreme Court of Justice. As one Indian leader put it: "the whole government is embarking on a process that directly infringes all indigenous rights". This Constitutional reform was approved because transnationals and the government had already drawn up plans to invade, loot and plunder the indigenous territories that were rich in "natural resources".

When the whole political class betrayed them, the indigenous communities – although torn apart by migration, repression, official corruption, the selling-out of people, deceit and annihilation – have had the moral and political strength to pursue de facto autonomy, knowing full well that they are alone and that the whole system, including the State, is against them.

Is the Mexican experience unique?

Today hundreds or even thousand of projects and programmes designed by multilateral organisms are being imposed in every region of the world that is believed to be rich in resources. Many experts in Mexico and elsewhere talk of a new general war on peasants and indigenous peoples. Indeed, governments are spearheading a real and terrible dirty war on communities in many regions. It is leading to the militarisation of entire indigenous areas. What we are witnessing in many parts is murder, imprisonment and the disappearance of militants. Here in Mexico communities receive periodic invasions of officials who are keen to give them money in every possible way, from projects for individual families to funding for obscure schemes. But pouring money into the communities to buy consciences doesn't stop them repressing, imprisoning and killing the dissidents. Under the current government of President Felipe Calderón, the whole country is militarised under the pretext of fighting drugs, and repression is brutally harsh.

In the past few years, many laws and reforms have been passed to allow the transnationals into the life of the communities and to guarantee corporate access to many resources. These are umbrella laws not only to introduce, plant and grow genetically modified crops and to experiment with them, but also to patent plants, animals and other living species, and much of the traditional knowledge they enshrine, and to privatise water and to allow land to be negotiated on the market (renting, selling or buying it, or forming commercial links with enterprises). The territories received a particularly severe blow when the laws separated water from land, allowing special taxes to be charged on both.

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The government attacks territories through the payment of environmental services, because this paves the way to financial manoeuvring, by means of which communities lose control of these spaces that are not only land, but everything. There are also many projects to transform ancient territories into ecological reserves, preserved only to be plundered by new schemes of biotechnology, information and genetic resources.

What is the reaction of the communities?

Some groups within the Mexican Indian movement reject the outside interference, despite the resources it brings. "Money is the most expensive thing in the world because you have to pay for it in dignity, time and self-respect", people say. So many communities are refusing programmes and resources from the government. This is not an easy decision to take, because their conditions are so extreme, but they are beginning to understand what lies behind what many indigenous communities in Chiapas in the 1970s called "the sugar bullet": the trick of sweetness that kills the whole idea of resistance.

In Mexico, the Indian movement has understood that we need the broader picture, so it has started to document and dismantle the huge edifice of regulations and policies and to analyse the real motives that lie behind the actions of transnationals and government officials at all levels. Communities are no longer willing to accept "development" as an abstraction; they are suspicious of short-term welfare programmes, and they are holding a plethora of workshops, assemblies, seminars and encounters in order to share experiences and to identify causes, sources, problems, obstacles and interconnections.

Understanding the conditions that many regions suffer is the first step towards authentic prosperity, which is achieved through self-government and the strengthening of communities, so that people can think, act, work and dream together, independently of the war launched by companies and governments alike.

How do the indigenous movements in Mexico relate to other struggles in the South?

The war is being waged on many different fronts so there is a need for an overall view. Many communities understand that no individual project will solve the huge range of interconnected problems that they face. The powerful know this too and try to isolate every project so as to blur the overall framework. But, thanks to globalisation, people now understand that their struggle is not

unique. Knowing that many other people suffer in the same way triggers a whole set of strategies for fighting back. It becomes possible to link struggles fought in one region with other struggles and forms of resistance. This exchange of experience helps people to learn new ways of developing their struggle. People develop a complex view of the world and they begin to discuss history, economy and the specific problem of money. Now they fully understand the role of the institutions, the wicked ways of capitalism, the way war works, various strategies for evading the action of the State and/or the transnationals, practices that must be reinforced or remembered, and the harmful practice of many development workers, militants and NGOs, the corruption of the Mexican government at all levels.

The rural population is perhaps the most informed sector of society about the whole gamut of attacks launched by capitalism, because peasants and indigenous peoples suffer these attacks whole and unfiltered. Some sectors of an informed and non-corrupt civil society can also contribute to their understanding by using the sources to which they have access to provide hard information.

In Mexico we sense that a new flexible alliance is being built between many different people whose only aspiration is to share experiences so that they can develop better their own course of transformation – or agree to joint actions. Seen from below, this alliance is very visible, but it is invisible to those concerned only with what is happening to the powerful and those who appear on the front pages of newspapers.

Participants in this alliance, which stresses the autonomy of all who take part, include large segments of the Indian movement, the ecological movement, activists in local struggles and some parts of the peasant movement. Many young professionals are using the Internet to ferret out new sources of information that may be useful in building autonomy. These wonderful computer freaks trace the links between transnationals and the political class, working out who did what when, why and where. They uncover the dirty work of those in power, globally and locally. This information, revealed in workshops and meetings, makes it possible to make connections. Mexico is today buzzing with life as different experiences from a variety of different regions are exchanged. Perhaps for the first time in history we might build up a full picture of how capitalism actually operates in the real world.