

Anti-Ulises

A Day In the Life of a Simmering City

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“History is a nightmare from which I am trying to wake.”
Stephen Daedalus, in *Ulysses*, James Joyce 1922

Midnight in Oaxaca, and walking around the historic center, its almost as if nothing had ever happened here. The bourgeoisie sit around under the colonial arches in the long stretch of French-style outdoor cafes lining the central plaza. Aside from being beset by a small army of ambulant trinket vendors and beggars, the well-heeled citizens sipping cappuccinos seem very at ease with the world. A few late night tourists wander about the pleasant old streets under the starry sky, and the industrious hum of the sultry cosmopolitan city invokes an eternal calm.

It's as if there had never been a riotous peoples' insurrection in these same streets just 2 years ago. As if the rebel citizenry had never erected one thousand and one barricades to defend their city from the marauding police forces of the despised and despotic state government. And as if the tens of thousands of rebels and insurrectionists had not been this close to winning the great battle for Oaxaca in the heady summer days and nights at the barricades of 2006. The famous subversive graffiti that painted the whole town red and black is removed, whitewashed, as is the blood in the streets of the 26 fallen comrades shot down by the police and state paramilitaries.

“Since all of this, we will not be the same at all as before; we can't be and we don't want to be.” said a resident shortly after the quelled uprising.

But at this moment, to a visitor just having stepped off the bus from Chiapas, the strange normality of the place gives the appearance that everything has not changed, that everything remains the same as pre-2006.

Sometimes hope comes from the most unexpected quarters. Walking away from the sanitized Zocalo we chance upon a moribund vista. Shuffling around in the half shadows of a street corner, about a hundred tooled-up riot cops loiter with menace – as if itching for something to happen. The phalanx of troops, an ominous dark mass of helmets, riot shields and shiny black boots, clank their long metal sticks on the somewhat medieval flagstones. It is an incongruous sight at this time of night, amidst this placid ambiance, without the slightest disturbance to be ascertained of any kind anywhere.

Paradoxically, their presence signifies a welcome sign – where there are riot police there is generally trouble, and trouble in the Oaxaca context, means... resistance.

I have followed the movements of police riot squads with close interest for many years. So I approach the last cop in the line – a young indigenous man clad in state-of-the-art modern armor – with all the sweet innocence of a visiting tourist, and ask him as to why there are here. Is there a problem, officer?

He tenses up, grips his metal baton and stares at the distant wall, not at me.

“We are here for your protection” he says sternly – and somewhat comically.

We have heard that one before. Back in the day, during the war in Ireland, this is how the occupying British troops behaved – nervous, uncertain and trigger-happy. So this is it – as people had forewarned – this tremulous peace in the city is one overseen by riot cops lingering in the shadows. Like Oaxaca is a city under stealthy occupation.

The March of the Umbrellas

Around midday, under the glare of the blazing tropical sun, some 50,000 protesting teachers start flooding into downtown Oaxaca. Today, May 15 is Teachers Day, and the states educators

have downed chalk on-mass, and declared a strike as they have done religiously every year for the last 25 years.

It's a remarkable sight, the arrival of the teacher hordes. Teachers anywhere in the world are a most innocuous bunch of people, and the members of this particular branch of the national teachers union, known as Section 22, are the most unlikely street revolutionaries imaginable. Yet these same humble unionists were the solid backbone of the 2006 insurrection. Here they come, this sea of teachers under the midday sun, these revolutionary hordes and... they are not masked up, nor linking arms, nor pumping fists. No, they are strolling along gaily under a roof of colorful bobbing umbrellas, singing songs and being generally full of revelry and joy. Having marched for 3 hours one would expect a certain fatigue, but no, the teachers are boisterous and upbeat and the enticing chaos is more mad hatters tea party than militant discipline.

"The teachers struggling," they sing, "celebrating their day of the teachers!"

But it would be a mistake to underestimate their militant resolve. Maria, an indigenous Zapotec teacher from the isthmus is carrying her one-year-old child Victoria in her arms as she marches.

"Victoria?" I ask.

"Hasta la victoria siempre!" she laughs, towards victory always, quoting Che.

Maria had been part of the uprising in 2006.

"Wow, lots of tear gas and running," she says, looking back, "but...we almost made it, we almost won."

"Do you have fear," I ask, "returning here two years later, to Oaxaca city center, after the brutal repression?"

"Not unless I don't have a stone or a stick in my hand to protect myself, no, then I am not afraid," she says with a laugh, this 20-something-year-old mother who defines herself as "a Christian teacher".

From the central platform on the kiosk in the Zocalo, the teacher's leaders spell out their demands for higher salaries, increased funding for rural schools and the resignation of the state governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz.

"We won't negotiate with the government of Ulises," says Domingo Cabera, secretary general of the Section 22 of the Teachers Union, "because we don't recognize the legitimacy of his government, we will only negotiate with the federal government."

"Here today with this massive turnout," says the speaker, "we demonstrate that the movement is more consolidated than ever."

Sort of. It's common knowledge that Section 22 of the Teacher Union is in a state of disarray. Maria, the rural teacher, doesn't trust the words or intentions of her union leadership.

"While striking teachers were selling their cars and their houses in 2006 to support the strike, the corrupt leaders were accepting bribes and selling out the grassroots," she tells me. "It is a tragedy, but now we are re-organizing."

Flavio Sosa takes the microphone and it is a significant moment. Recently released from jail, he is one of the most recognized figures of the Oaxaca Peoples Popular Assembly (APPO). As the organizing body of the uprising, APPO brought together a myriad of social and political groupings and could mobilize hundreds of thousands at the height of the rebellion. Flavio is of the faction of the APPO state council who favors negotiation with the authorities and political participation in state and municipal elections – a very contentious issue within the rebel movement.

"We demand the release the remaining political prisoners," says Flavio over the microphone, outlining the political demands of the movement, "[and] the cancellation of the outstanding arrest

warrants (several hundred), punishment for those responsible for the deadly repression committed during 2006 and the resignation of state governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz. Fuera Ulises – Ulises out!”

Ulises, Ulysses, is a most aptly named tyrant – whom Virgil refers to famously in the Aeneid, as “a cruel and deceitful man”. The much hated latter-day Ulises minor continues to be the focus of the protesters ire. Representing the PRI party who ruled Mexico for 70 years, he was elected in 2004 under very dubious circumstances, and marked the beginning of his tenure with a campaign of brutal repression against his opponents. While previous Governors had negotiated or tolerated the widespread and deeply ingrained opposition movement in Oaxaca, Ulises oversaw the criminalization of protest. But he underestimated the strength and determination of the opposition, who responded with the total takeover of Oaxaca. Exiled for most of 2006, his administration was only able to return after a bloody offensive by some 6,500 militarized cops against APPO on October 29 of that same year- leading to 200 arrests, hundreds hospitalized and the city center resembling a battlefield.

A Cantina Full of Anarchists

We – two Irish visitors – have come to Oaxaca to talk with the comrades from Oaxacan Voices Constructing Autonomy and Freedom (VOCAL), a sizable anti-authoritarian grouping that forms part of APPO. Anarchists and libertarians had played a prominent role in the defense of the city in 2006, and remain an important voice in the movement. In a traditional cantina, a group of grassroots teachers and Vocal-istas engage in a the post-march analysis.

A big march somewhat empty of content, appears to be the general agreement.

We meet with David Venegas Reyes, a 25-year-old local resident who emerged as one of the more charismatic and articulate young voices on the street in 2006. For his trouble, the state issued an arrest warrant and in April 2007 he was abducted from a city park, and thrown in jail. After a campaign for his release, in which even Amnesty International voiced concern for the manner of his detention, he walked in February 2007, all charges dropped.

“On the one hand here in the city,” explains David, “the government has been able to partially dismantle the Section 22 which was the largest of the unions and the center of the movement in 2006. But at the same time there is a lot of discontent in the ranks, and the leadership has been totally discredited by the base. So while the government has managed to corrupt the union leadership by buying them off, the base has become more conscientious and is therefore more difficult to cheat or hoodwink.”

First off, David is not a leader, nor a spokesperson for VOCAL. But it seems by general consensus of the various Vocal-istas here, that he will be the one to talk to us visitors – maybe because he is the affable and chatty one of the group.

The owner of the cantina overhears the table talk, and voicing support for the teachers and APPO, sends over a round of beers. I am impressed by how open and conspicuous are the activists despite the general atmosphere of repression in the city. Several of the people here have outstanding arrest warrants from 2006 still hanging over their heads, yet this does not stop them going out and joining the protests, or simply going about their lives unbowed.

“What about APPO?,” I ask. “Is it affected by the same kind of disarray as the Section 22?”

David responds carefully and comprehensively; I think its worth quoting him at length:

“APPO has basically being the unity of the different organizations of the peoples of Oaxaca. The interesting thing, the transcendental thing about APPO is that it has managed to bring together a broad representation of the various peoples of the state with a wide convergence of different ideologies and visions of the world – all under the one assembly. Then came the great wave of actions that took place in 2006, the great advance towards realizing our collective aspirations – first demanding the exit of Ulises, and much more than that, also demanding a radical and profound change in the society in which we live in .”

“So in 2006 our APPO assemblies reflected the assemblies of the indigenous communities in so much as that there were no leaders and it is the assembly which decides things. We tried to act like this but sadly there was a gap between how we acted in assembly and the verticalism practiced by some of the social organizations. So there was this tension within APPO as how people wanted to organize and how to practice.”

“The spontaneous combative spirit that arose in the streets was not the result of some bureaucratic orders from some leaders up on top; no, they came from the people in the streets themselves, and the spirit remains there.”

“When the brutal repression against us began, the mobilizations weakened, firstly because of fear at the ferocity of the repression. But alongside this, people felt dispirited and demoralized by the opportunistic actions at this critical moment of some of the considered leaders of a few social movements. The important point of this story is that in February 2007, some social movements decided that the movement couldn’t achieve the demand of removing Ulises from government and so proposed that APPO make an alliance with the supposed left-wing political parties in Oaxaca and to compete for power in the local municipal and congressional elections. During this discussion, an important group of companeros defined themselves by opposing this proposal and we managed to stop this attempt to institutionalize our movement. And so emerged strong divisions within the movement, provoked mainly by those whose aspirations for taking power were frustrated.”

“So a group of us libertarian companeros and those who didn’t believe in political parties and various ideologies, agreed that for the movement to enter into the electoral route was to merely play the states game in this context in Oaxaca and so we opposed it. VOCAL doesn’t aspire to become the leadership of APPO. VOCAL is a space of unity for those who think the autonomy of our diverse and multicultural peoples is a political proposal for our reality. We stayed with the APPO because the unity of the people is important. And its important to remain true to the words that were said in 2006 that the APPO is a movement of bases and not of leaders. Although it was said, many did not act like this and began to invest their confidence in false leaders.”

Other voices around the table are more forthright in their criticism of the PRD (opposition political party) and Marxist-type elements which took control of the APPO, but David remains staunchly non-sectarian.

“So there are many of us, not just VOCAL, the Magonistas and some Marxists, but many of the base who believe that we have to re-organize the movement from below, not from the top down. Because the truth is that APPO is in the communities and in the union bases – not just in the leadership. In Mexico there is a long history of leaders becoming compromised – anybody who knows a little of the union history knows how often this has happened – the leadership always becomes compromised, recuperated by power. And the leadership in APPO has similar tendencies.”

So what are the lessons, I ask, that have been taken away from 2006.

As in, you almost had it, APPO was in control of the city like a modern day Paris Commune and Ulises was on his way out the door; victory was so close. And then after holding the city for eight long, glorious months, came the huge wave of repression and the movement was beaten off the streets. What went wrong? I ask.

“There are some who say we made tactical errors in 2006, but I don’t think it was an error or mistake to defend our territory in a physical form against the assassins of Ulises and the militarized Federal police of (Presidents) Vincente Fox and Felipe Calderon. For me that was not the error – to defend ourselves, no, the error that was made was when people started to believe in false leaders,” said David.

Another comrade chimes into the discussion. “And there are those who say that the movement brought repression upon themselves by upping the ante of resistance, that they got what they deserved! Nonsense!”

“The prisoners and the dead aren’t guilty!” says David. “The guilty are those who imprisoned and murdered them.”

It’s now late afternoon and everyone disperses for various meetings. The political energy is perceivable and the days’ march has got people upbeat. The spirit of resistance is simmering once more in the streets of Oaxaca.

Of Police and Streets

Sometime after dusk, we reunite with David under the portal of the great old central Cathedral in the Zocalo. Despite the days events, the police presence in the center is negligible – mostly undercover agents discreetly monitoring the proceedings. The authorities have decided upon a non-aggressive strategy and the city is teeming with teachers in repose. It must be surreal for them to be confronted with this veil of normality in the city they once occupied. One noticeable difference from even the night before is the clandestine presence of graffiti all over the place. The ubiquitous APPO slogans and Fuera Ulises! are back on the walls of the city again.

Walking the darkening city thoroughfare, a police car slowly passes by, and David involuntarily glances over his shoulder. I imagine he has his fears – after all, it was in these very streets that he was suddenly lifted by an undercover snatch squad in broad daylight, and abruptly removed to the nightmare of indefinite incarceration.

“Fear? Yeah,” he says, “of course we have fear. But fear should not impede us from moving forward. People continue to struggle just as they did in 2006 without stepping back, or wobbling. People are coming together again, to make sure that Ulises’s assassins or the abductions don’t continue.”

“I was a prisoner held for 11 months, just a caprice for the authorities. And then I was released for lack of evidence.” he added.

It wasn't that justice was done, more that the pressure from outside meant it was politically untenable for the state to hold him hostage any longer. David recognizes the role national and international solidarity played in his release, and in the struggle in general.

“A really important part in detaining the repression was the level of national and international observation that took place from outside. If this hadn't happened, I think that the repression would have been even much worse.”

“But it shouldn't be thought that suddenly we live in a just state now,” emphasizes David. “We still live under a state of daily repression and harassment. It's unbearable, and we can't have some government telling us that we must accept living under this state of oppression, as if it was some kind of normalcy. We don't accept it, because we are a free people, free we are born and free we were brought up. And since the resistance hasn't stopped, so the repression continues. I think that whatever happens in Oaxaca in the next while it's really important that people from outside don't stop the vigilance, and continue pressurizing the government to limit their use of reactionary violence.”

A new Amnesty International report echoes his concerns, denouncing the repression on the social movement and the general impunity that exists for security forces in the country in general, and the abuse of citizen's rights in Oaxaca in particular.

But this climate of fear engendered by the authorities doesn't stop David traversing these streets which he has known all his life. Indeed, the going is slow as he meets and greets all and sundry along the way – like this middle-aged indigenous man who stops him randomly and wishes him well, knowing of his unjust imprisonment. It's like the movement, even if it doesn't hold the center, still has the street.

We are going to a social center where a bunch of musicians and activists are gathered for a night of Son Jarocho, a traditional popular song and dance. It's an autonomous space, familiar to other cultural and political spaces in different parts of the globe – self-managed, a shebeen of sorts, where people come and go, and the mood is friendly. Between ardent musical performances, people give brief presentations, like this from a representative of the Universidad de la Tierra (UniTierra), a peoples' university based here in the city. Another is a report back from the caravan of the isthmus region undertaken by a group of VOCAL activists, including David, who returned early this morning. The Trail of the Jaguar political tour of the rural isthmus consolidated links with indigenous communities under the theme “for the regeneration of our collective memory”.

In a quiet moment we drag David away for the gathering and continue with our interrogation. On the flat roof of the social center, the city stretches out far and wide, the lights shimmering across the vast valley. Oaxaca is a much bigger place than it seems when wandering around the historic center.

“What's going on with the movement in the city, and in the countryside,” I ask, “Where do we stand now?”

“Here in the city, there has been a strong militarization and a heavy police presence to repress the movement. Meanwhile the government has somewhat ignored the indigenous communities and it is there, in the rural community that some very important organizing is happening. I'm not saying that the movement in the city has finished and now the movement is only in the countryside, no. It is more that the government, while focusing all their attention on defeating the movement in the city, has allowed discontent to flourish in the countryside,” says David.

While of course simultaneously letting the paramilitaries have a free hand to do their dirty work in the communities – including the April ambush murder of two women journalists working for La Voz que Rompe el Silencio (“The Voice that Breaks the Silence”), a community radio station serving the Trique indigenous community. But the kind of police and military saturation within the City has not occurred in the communities.

“And so today in Oaxaca City there is a tense calm. The councilors and officials of the APPO and Section 22 leadership are being conciliatory and opportunistic. Groups of Stalinists and PRD-istas of the electoral persuasion are making a pact with the business leaders to get permission to mobilize. But the others, like us in VOCAL and other groups, the majority of the movement, are in constant confrontation with the authorities because our mobilizations are not seen gladly by the state – and the line between repression and tolerance is barely visible,” says David.

A Oaxaca Commune

The Son Jarocho session is wrapping up and people are homeward bound. We pile into a van going out to the outskirts of town where a bunch of people are staying. There’s about a dozen of us in this beat up van, rattling along the highway out of town. There’s a certain spirit of abandonment about these people and its contagious. I’m thinking if the cops stop this thing, they will net a good dirty dozen desperadoes of veteran anarchists.

The van arrives at a feral warehouse on a sprawling lot, cluttered with machines, tools and a big old bus just back from the Trail of the Jaguar tour. The collective living space is populated by a group of weary and sonambulant activists. A tattered, faded image of the Virgin of the Barricades adorns a wall, the ironic patron saint who presided over those at the barricades in 2006. Her image, with her iconic gas mask and cloak of burning tires reminds me of Calamidad’s words, the last gringa on the last barricade on the last night of the Oaxaca commune.

“A lot of people have been fucked in the head ever since November 25, 2006, ” she lamented, “when it was all lost in a flurry of bullets—but damn was it a close fight for awhile. In a sense people are just as traumatized by the tragic implications of what victory might have been- and how close people were to it, so close they could taste it for the first time in their lives- as they were by the violence. When I returned to Oaxaca, I would walk into a party, and comrades would come up to me and say – ‘she remembers! We almost did it, we had the city! All the barricades! The city was ours!’ So its not only the repression that people remember, but also the memory of holding the streets for so long is a bitter one.....because they lost them.”

Here in this chaotic, creative space, among the barricadistas who have not given up, there is a palpable feeling that, despite the loss in 2006, there is still hope and people are now organizing harder than ever.

“And,” David Venegas reminds us, “as the Mexican saying goes – ‘There is no evil that can last a hundred years, and there’s no body that can’t resist it’, meaning that everything has its own time, and this straight-jacket of a state has come to its end. That the time has come.”

Up and down the country people are invoking the centennial memory of the first Mexican revolution – 1910 – to herald a new revolution in 2010. “What’s the feeling here,” I ask David, “about this quasi-mystical belief in revolutionary change on a sanctified date?”

“Well many Mexicans are resigned to the fatality of the idea of 2010,” he says with a smile, “and as you know, Mexico is profound and millenarian. But for me, its not important that the

deed happens on this very date, but more importantly that it occurs! And I can feel it in the air in Mexico – a longing for revolution. But revolutions don't just occur on a certain date – they are prepared. And what I'm seeing is an growing insurgent spirit, alongside an increase in the brutality of the government. There is a great indignation felt by the communities and movements against whom the bad government has declared war.”

“I hope a revolutionary change occurs in this country because there can be no half solutions, reforms are not going to end the injustice and exploitation. A change from the bottom is necessary, a profound and truthful change. This is what millions are demanding, and this is what the government are trying to deny us. The government has failed to reform the state constitutionally, to comply to our aspirations. That is why it is we, the people who must make those changes – because the government has lost its opportunity. So now its our responsibility to make those changes.”

It's midnight once more in Oaxaca, and this long plenteous day, May 15, 2008, is over. We bed down in the loft cosy with about 20 other companer@s and dreams come easily. History is a nightmare from which Oaxaca, like Mexico, is trying to wake up from and maybe 2006 was just a primer.

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