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## The Survival of Non-Capitalism

### ABSTRACT

This article explores the importance of non-capitalist space within the global political economy. The issue of how to categorise and understand space in so-called peripheral regions such as Latin America has been a contentious one. Whilst many radical analyses have focused on the dynamics of capitalism in relation to the geography of development, explaining how it has been able to survive and grow, this article makes the case for a more multilinear theoretical framework with which to view the socio-economic landscape. This is inspired not only by the later writings of Marx but also the specific Marxian class analysis of those involved in *Rethinking Marxism*. Via a focus on Oaxaca in southern Mexico, this article highlights both the survival and the recreation of spaces of non-capitalism, and provides an argument for why we should consider these to be important for transformative action more broadly, whilst also discussing their potential limitations.

**KEY WORDS:** Capitalism, Mexico, Oaxaca, Class, Resistance, Land

### INTRODUCTION

In his 1976 text *The Survival of Capitalism*, Henri Lefebvre grappled with the problem of how, in spite of its internal contradictions, capitalism had managed to survive and prosper. The solution to this conundrum, he reasoned, was due to the ability of capitalism to occupy, produce, and transform space. It was this feature, as Marx and Engels (2000: 248) had previously recognised, that made capitalism such a revolutionary mode of production, and it was this same feature that continued to ensure capitalism's reproduction via its drive to expand. The corollary of this was that pre-capitalist spaces and social practices were (and are) constantly being displaced. Capitalism is, after all, a system that aims at the totalisation of its social relations (Lacher 2006: 103-4). In other words, it seeks the conquering of pre-capitalist/non-capitalist space.

Marx (1974: 879-80) identified the hallmarks of capitalism as: generalised commodity production by 'formally free' wage labourers, surplus value as the 'aim and determining motive of production' and lastly competition between individual capitals leading to a continual investment in the means of production, in order to expand profit. For many

scholars, the key starting point of social analysis in our contemporary period has to be capitalism, and an understanding of its structural dynamics and contradictions (see *inter alia* Harvey 2006, Smith 2008, Robinson 2004, Wood 1995). The reason for this is the dominance of this mode of production within the global political economy. This is even more pertinent with regards to understanding agricultural societies. As Henry Bernstein (2010:1-2) has argued, we cannot understand agrarian change in the modern world, including issues of food production, inequality, or job insecurity, without an analysis of capitalism. However, an alternative viewpoint argues that focusing our attention mainly on the dynamics of capitalism – what is termed ‘capitalocentrism’ – can become a highly disempowering political project (Gibson-Graham 2006a, 2006b).

This article follows the difficult path of trying to draw insights from both theoretical positions. Nevertheless, in doing so, the primary focus is on non-capitalist spaces within the global political economy, with a particular empirical focus on Oaxaca in southern Mexico (where fieldwork was carried out in 2008, 2009 and 2015). Rather than examining how it has been that capitalism has managed to survive, grow and prosper, the article explores how non-capitalist spaces remain and why they should be considered important for transformative activity. The contention will be that the survival and reinvention of non-capitalist social practices and spaces have created a barrier to the further expansion of capital, and are now providing inspiration for alternative developmental trajectories. This has presaged intensified forms of social conflict between the state and indigenous peoples (see Hesketh, 2013). To be clear, the wider socio-economic setting in which these non-capitalist practices are situated and re-created is not dismissed. Instead, these are viewed as the dialectically-related product of unevenly exercised hegemony. Whilst non-capitalism is inevitably subjected to structural the influence of capitalism, the danger in focusing overwhelmingly on the dynamics of capital is explicitly acknowledged. The risk here is that Capital becomes the subject of study,

whereas people and places affected by this are viewed as the passive objects (Chassen-López 2004: 14; Lebowitz 2003). All too quickly they can be rendered into people without history, and concrete processes of place-based struggle are elided (Escobar, 2011; Wolf 1997). However, as Harvey (2006: 431) reminds us (although does not empirically explore), localised forms of struggle can create generalised crises, flowing out of the conditions of uneven geographical development. In his later writings, Marx specifically sought to engage with the problem of uneven development and more specifically how capitalism, with its universalising tendencies, created tension and possibilities for revolutionary outbreak in its interactions with non-capitalist space (Shanin, 1984a: 17). As Anderson (2010: 7) clarifies, Marx's concept of capitalism therefore, 'was not an abstract universal but instead was imbued with a rich and concrete social vision in which universality and particularity interacted within dialectical totality.' It is this dialectic that the article seeks to explore.

In this sense, the article draws inspiration from the Peruvian Marxist, Jose Carlos Mariátegui. When analysing post-colonial Peru, Mariátegui (1984) recognised that the driving force of the country's transformation had clearly come from colonisation and then global capitalism. Nevertheless, distinct spaces of economic activity, characterised by diverse social relations of production remained. Moreover, Mariátegui asserted that the survival of certain elements of the Indian communities could provide the basis for revolutionary transformation owing to the existence of 'practical socialism'. In similar fashion, it is asserted in this article that although Oaxaca is clearly enmeshed, or at least influenced by, the wider capitalist mode of production (discussed later), distinct forms of communal class processes remain prevalent, especially within indigenous communities. These are increasingly hostile to the furtherance of capitalist commodification and, as a result, provoke wider conflicts with the Mexican state's model of development at the current conjuncture. To repeat, while such spaces are clearly subjected to

wider capitalist influence they are not fully subsumed or determined by capitalism. It is here that the space for alternatives is provided.

The article will be organised in the following manner. First, debates around how best to characterise economic activity and socio-economic landscapes in peripheral regions of the global political economy will be discussed, drawing upon debates from the work of Andre Gunder Frank, Ernesto Laclau and Jairus Banaji. Second, utilising this prior discussion, a theoretical framework will be synthesised to analyse Oaxaca. This will draw from the work of heterodox Marxists involved with the project of *Rethinking Marxism* such as Stephen Resnick, Richard Wolff, J.K Gibson-Graham and David Ruccio, in relation to questions of socio-economic development. Such work utilises a Marxian class analysis to highlight the wider forms of economic activity taking place in addition to capitalism (Gibson-Graham, 2006a; 2006b, Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff 2001: 14). This allows us to see a plural or heterogeneous socio-economic landscape as opposed to a homogenous one, often prevalent in the current imagination. Rather than following all of their prescriptions however, this body of work is critically engaged with via Antonio Gramsci, to try to draw an approach to political economy and the geography of development that is both cognisant of the need to avoid an all-embracing conception of capitalism, yet is attentive to the wider field of force (hegemony) in which non-capitalist spaces find themselves and therefore the challenges such spaces face. The aim is, therefore, to create an approach to sites of socio-economic activity that is dialectic rather than dualistic (Modonesi, 2010: 42, 45). In other words, it does not posit two separate histories but sees these spaces and their futures as being intertwined. Finally, the example of Oaxaca in southern Mexico will be used as an ‘entry point’ into this debate to empirically highlight the theoretical points that have been made.

## **UNDERSTANDING DEVELOPMENT IN LATIN AMERICA**

The issue of how to characterise development in regions such as Latin America has been a contentious one. The key here is how to understand and theorise the continent's relationship with the wider global political economy and, as a result, whether we view internal forms of economic activity as capitalist or not (Ruccio, 2011). A vital contribution to this debate was the theory of dependency pioneered by Andre Gunder Frank (1966/2000). This was important both theoretically and in a practical sense, owing to the received wisdom that it challenged. Notable here were the assumptions shared by neo-classical economists (in the guise of modernisation theory) and the orthodox communist parties of the time. Both argued Latin America had a dualistic economy whereby a modern, capitalist sector co-existed with a backward, feudal sector. Both of these traditions, for different reasons, thought that capitalism was a necessary stage of development. The political task, therefore, was to transform the backward, feudal sectors of the economy into capitalist ones. For the neo-classical thinkers this represented the pinnacle of economic evolution, whereas for the communist parties it represented a regrettable but necessary stage in the move towards socialism (Casteñeda 1993: 72, Laclau 1971: 19, Ruccio 2011: 113). A key claim of Gunder Frank's (1966/2000) work was to reject this dual society thesis. Instead, Frank argued that we had to understand capitalism as a singular process that had penetrated every corner of the globe (ibid: 5). The so-called feudal economic spaces therefore were not pristine, untouched social forms, but rather had been shaped by their interaction with capitalism. Rather than being undeveloped, Frank argued that these spaces had witnessed the systematic 'development of under-development'. This implied that an initial process (capitalist colonisation) and the continuing ramification of the ties to global markets could account for the retarding of the productive forces and the extraction of wealth. In contrast to modernisation theory that argued that the chief problem to be solved was the isolation and pre-capitalist nature of Latin America, Gunder Frank's analysis implied the exact opposite.

There was no outside to the capitalist world system. The political import from this was that far from being a necessary stage of development, capitalism was the very social system that prevented development from occurring.

Gunder Frank's thesis has since been subjected to a number of criticisms. Seminal here was the work of Laclau (1971). Whilst agreeing with his broader contention that a dual society thesis must be rejected and the influence of the wider global political economy recognised, Laclau critiqued the idea that we could simply define the entirety of peripheral economies in Latin America as capitalist. It was claimed that Gunder Frank's definition was far too loose, and conflated relations of exchange with relations of production. For Laclau (1971: 24) defining the relationship of *exploitation* became a hallmark for understanding the mode of production. As extra-economic coercion remained in much of Latin America, Laclau concluded that various modes of production were articulated simultaneously, yet within a wider economic system in which they interacted and were reinforced. Such a view finds sympathy from Eric Wolf (1997: 97) who speaks of symbioses of modes of production. For both scholars, the defining feature of a mode of production is the manner in which human labour is deployed (Laclau 1971: 33; Wolf 1997: 76).

Jairus Banaji has, in turn, been highly critical of such a view. For Banaji (2011: 5-6, 54) modes of production cannot simply be conflated with modes of exploitation, which he derides as a "methodology of forced abstractions." According to Banaji (2011: 50-52), Marx used the term 'mode of production' (*produktionweise*) in two different senses. The first was in a narrow manner to refer only to the labour process (e.g. the form referred to by Laclau) and the second was a more expansive form to refer to whole epochs in the economic development of society. It is on this latter sense which Banaji lays emphasis. The challenge, as he sees it, is to explore sites of production in relation to 'distinct economic rhythms and movements, in

tracing their specific origins according to the conjuncture of the world-economy, and finally in grasping their deeper connections' (Banaji 2011: 62). This means searching for the ultimate 'laws of motion' determining production. For this reason, economic spaces such as haciendas, interpreted by Laclau as instances of the feudal mode of production owing to the dominant forms of exploitation, are instead seen by Banaji as fully capitalist, owing to their integration and law of motion deriving from demand in the wider global political economy (Banaji 2011: 62, 338-9).<sup>1</sup>

However, it is here that we can pause for thought and consider what social role theory plays and should play. This is a major fault line in contemporary debates on the left. As indicated in the introduction, for some scholars it is essential we focus our attention on the reality of capitalism. One of the most forceful voices in this regard has been Ellen Meiksins Wood (1995: 238) who has argued that, 'At a time when a critique of capitalism is more urgent than ever, the dominant theoretical trends on the left are busy conceptualising away the very idea of capitalism.' As demonstrative of this fact, Hetland and Goodwin (2014) have noted that the very word 'capitalism' has disappeared from many academic studies (e.g. leading journals and academic books) of social movements. On this basis, it is argued that we must adopt a capital-centric analysis (Post 2011: 2). All three of the above approaches contribute usefully to this project. Gunder Frank, although problematic in his characterisation of what capitalism is, sought to intervene directly into debates about revolutionary strategy by advocating that Latin America delink from the global capitalist economy. Laclau meanwhile highlighted the diverse forms of labour relations that exist within peripheral regions, demonstrating how the wider economic system can reinforce seemingly non-capitalist modes of appropriation.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting however, that Laclau quite clearly does seek to distinguish between how labour is organised in production and the wider economic system in which this is embedded, which would seem to approximate the second usage Banaji gives to mode of production. In his own words "an economic system can include, as constitutive elements, different modes of production, provided always that we define it as a whole, that is, by proceeding from the element or law of motion that establishes the unity of its different manifestations" (Laclau, 1971: 33).



Finally, Banaji allows us to appreciate the wider field of force under which these conditions of production and reproduction are articulated, making us question where the primary dynamism comes from. He also shows how capital can be produced from a variety of labour systems. Elements of all of these traditions thus need to be retained.

However, an opposing view argues that in constructing an alternative theoretical framework, it is vital to loosen the grip of unilinear trajectories of development that can result in a highly capitalocentric viewpoint. Capitalocentrism is defined as a ‘dominant economic discourse that attributes positive value to those activities associated with capitalist economic activity however defined, and assigns lesser value to all other processes of producing and distributing goods and services by identifying them *in relation* to capitalism’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006b: 41). Such a view allows for capital to become totalising in its power as it does not account sufficiently for the wider social forces at play. If theory is to play a part in emancipatory activity it should, in the words of Gibson-Graham (2006b: 126), ‘proliferate possibility, not foreclose it.’ Despite the radical intentions of all of the above scholars, the primary intellectual focus in nearly all of these cases is on *capital* itself (how capitalism can be defined, how capitalism exploits, how capitalism survives and grows, how capital interacts and solidifies feudal modes of exploitation). The argument here is that this overwhelming focus on capitalism can lead quickly to a problem: the assumption of subsumption. In other words, all forms of political economy, all other forms of cultural life, and all sites of socio-political activity are portrayed as being overwhelmed by, subsumed into, the dynamics of capitalism.<sup>2</sup> This is evident in all three forms of analysis to a greater or lesser degree. As Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff (2001: 15) have noted, ‘Representations of the relation

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<sup>2</sup> Marx (1974: 313, 478, draws the key distinction between formal and real subsumption. Formal subsumption implies that the markets, labour processes are under the influence of capital. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily imply any major changes in the immediate relations of production. Real subsumption on the other hand implies such a transformation in social relations, making it possible to expand the previously limited surplus value that could be extracted.

of capitalism to non-capitalist forms of economy are usually structured by a binary hierarchy of valuation that operates to demote and devalue the latter.’ Non-capitalism - defined in terms of social relations that are not mediated by an impersonal market and where collective forms of production, appropriation and distribution exist – are thus rendered unlikely or impossible. This type of theorising can naturally translate into a problematic social function. As Gibson-Graham, (2006a: 57) argue: ‘because transformative efforts are seen as directed at systemic or hegemonic objects (for example, capitalist societies in their entirety), class transformation is often portrayed as a difficult, indeed, nearly impossible task.’ Arturo Escobar (2011) has forcefully argued against a global-centric approach, claiming that it erases the identity and agency of place, and contributes to a wider sense of eurocentrism in the study of political economy.

How then, can we reconcile these two distinct projects? It will be argued we can productively build on the suggestion by David Ruccio (2009) to construct a complementary approach between the project of Rethinking Marxism (RM) and that of Antonio Gramsci. Whereas Gramsci draws our attention to the manner in which capital rules and is able to be reproduced (which is taken to be a broader synthesis of the above three approaches), the RM project informs us about specific class structures within a society and allows us to understand people as subjects rather than objects of economic development. This is an approach that is particularly apposite for understanding a region like Oaxaca, as despite wider structural influences, important localised cultural practices (with origins in prehispanic land tenure) remain. These include community assemblies, *tequios* (collective work) and communal obligations in the form of *cargos* (political posts) that are vital to the functioning of the political economy and social reproduction (Escobar, 2011, Matersbaugh, 2002). Furthermore, these are often antithetical to capitalism.

## AN ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The framework that is drawn upon here, places an emphasis on the need to understand non-capitalist practices in the present, notably as such spaces come into tension with the universal tendency of capitalism to expand, creating a clash of opposing spatial projects (Hesketh, 2013). It is an approach that explicitly rejects the above mentioned assumption of subsumption. The hypothesis advanced here is that non-capitalist spaces can be expanded and learned from (as opposed to remaining static and facing extinction). They are therefore both figurative and pre-figurative spaces. Definitions of social relations that become all-encompassing historical stages and that encapsulate all phenomena are thus rejected, as it is submitted that the dividing line between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production is more complex (Harrod 1987: 11). Key to this framework is to re-read economic landscapes/spatial topographies of social relations to see economically diverse activities (Gibson-Graham, 2006a, 2006b). This is a vital starting point as,

The co-existence of diverse forms of class processes intimates the possibility of creating non-exploitative class relations on the complex terrain of the present economy. To view the economic landscape less as dominated by capitalism than as discursively colonized by the rhetoric of capitalist dominance is to open up 'realistic' present possibilities for class transition and transformation (Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff, 2001: 15).

Although waged as part of a discursive struggle, this is not a discourse that is free-floating/idealistic, but rather is grounded in the *material reality* of economic pluralism. Based on this, an alternative strategy for thinking about resistance and transformation is to engage with what Gibson-Graham (2008) have termed 'place-based globalism'. Such a view starts from the premise that not all places are yoked into a system of meaning, and not entirely subsumed to a global order (as implied often by analyses such as Gunder Frank's and Banaji's). As Escobar (2011: 158) puts it, in spite of capitalism operating at all levels of scale, 'places and non-capitalisms are not completely defined by their relation to capitalism

and space.’ Such places thus have the potential to be something other. They offer sites of opening for different forms of politics and economics. Peoples’ experience of non-capitalism in other words can provide a basis for resistance to capitalist encroachment as well as alternative development, and can themselves be expansive. Further to this point, Gerardo Otero (1999: 22) has claimed that subaltern actors ‘in different parts of the world or in different regions within a country... may have diverse structural capacities depending on their distinctive histories and cultures, or the villages or regions where they develop.’ Such geographical sensitivity is often lost by the rush to engage in grand social theory at the macro-historical level.

However, this is not to say that the theoretical framework advanced by these scholars is itself totally unproblematic. Such ideas will now be critically engaged with via Antonio Gramsci. Whilst the call to recognise a plurality of economic forms of production and ways of social being is an important one, we also need to be attentive to the wider field of force in which these forms operate (without of course assigning such force a deterministic essence). Therefore, although multiple social relations of production may well exist within a given social formation, this by no means implies that all have equal status and power. As Glassman (2003) reminds us, we need to be aware of the existence of structural power. Thus, even where access to land may be retained by a certain group, the wider environment in which resources or infrastructure are provided and the control over the institutions of repressive force remain intact. Autonomous forms of organisation therefore remain *mediated* by the capitalist state and the wider web of social relations (Dinerstein 2015: 20). This is where the Gramscian concepts of hegemony and subalternity can be of service to understanding space. With regards to subalternity, Modonesi (2010: 45) has pointed out the very term ‘subaltern’ implies a relational character. In other words, it exists in tension with hegemonic power. This

is not to claim that the hegemonic power determines everything but rather the resources of subaltern groups acquire meaning in struggle against power. As Laclau (1977: 157-8) has argued, this means we cannot essentialise traditional paradigms of social groups, but rather examine how such views become utilised and expressed as new forms of antagonism. In this way ideas and local practices are transformed into resources for self-determination. Subaltern groups are neither fully autonomous nor fully subsumed to capitalism. However, as Gramsci (1971: 55) cautions, 'Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only 'permanent' victory breaks their subordination.' Whilst questions may be raised with regards to what would constitute a 'permanent victory', this does remind us of the necessity to be cognisant of the wider concentrations of power that may seek to challenge these differential spaces (not devoted to capitalist production). It is also necessary to consider the question of scale. Despite his optimism regarding the possibilities of revolutionary action beginning from non-capitalist sites, Marx was also profoundly aware of the problems of isolation in front of state power (Anderson, 2010: 230). This notion of scaling up activism is not fully addressed in the work of the RM scholars. Instead what we frequently find is a focus on resistance at specific sites of economic activity, whether it is the firm or a particular location (see Gibson-Graham, 2006b, Resnick and Wolff, 2006a). What this does not do adequately therefore is to consider the spatial inter-linkages of subaltern struggles, or the wider institutional form that these struggles must take. This is vital if we are to avoid a collapse into what Murray Bookchin (1995) derided as 'lifestyle anarchism', characterised by individual, unique expressions of resistance as opposed to a commitment to wider societal change. Again, drawing from Gramsci, this suggests the need to build an alternative historical bloc. For Gramsci (1971: 366, 377) this is not simply a mere alliance of forces but rather involves the interplay of structure and superstructure, whereby shared ideological convictions allow for the material transformation of social life.

To conclude this section, it is argued that the project of Rethinking Marxism is vital to exploring the empirical constitution of alternate forms of economy and class projects, and helps to avoid engaging in capitalocentric theorising. It thus helps to provide a basis for thinking about alternatives. The work of Gramsci meanwhile, allows us to understand the political problems of transforming such alternative sites of non-capitalist activity into a political project.

### **OAXACA AS AN ENTRY POINT**

The purpose of this section is to present an historical-sociology of Oaxaca, especially in relation to the persistence of communal property. As one pamphlet released by three prominent Oaxacan non-government organisations (NGOs) states, ‘it is precisely in Oaxacan territory where one can observe and study the survival of ancient agrarian structures’ (La Ventana, EDUCA, and Tequio Juridico, 2013). Ellen Meiksins Wood (2012: 75) usefully explains why such survival matters:

The freedom of so many direct producers from exploitation must be treated as an essential factor in describing and explaining the nature of social arrangements...One must ask how such a strikingly unusual arrangement came about, and precisely what in the system of social organisation, class-relations, and political power made it possible.

This section will thus demonstrate the persistence of non-capitalism in terms of the key social relations of the region and why this matters. However, as mentioned above, these non-capitalist spaces are not viewed as timeless essences, but understood dialectically in relation to wider structural sources of power (hegemony) which they contest and shape. Non-capitalist social practices, notably in the form of collective ownership or collective labour have often been reinvented as vital community resources. If we reject the assumption of

subsumption (outlined above) we can see space and place as processes of struggle whose future creation remains open-ended. Oaxaca thus provides an example of an un-conquered place (Gibler, 2009), where non-capitalist relations remains prevalent, albeit in contestation (with the region as a target for expanded accumulation). Rather than past residuals simply being displaced and overcome, the argument is that that such residuals continue and form complex instantiation and friction with global capitalism. As Lefebvre (1991: 86) rightly proclaimed, ‘the worldwide does not abolish the local.’

The aim of this section is therefore to combine a number of the theoretical premises set out above. This allows us to 1) witness here the survival and flourishing of non-capitalist spaces, 2) see these as enduring and viable and therefore as a site from which an alternative trajectory of development can be constructed, but also 3) contextualise Oaxaca with regards to the wider hegemonic field of force in which it is situated, in order to understand the generation of antagonisms and to be realistic about the problems and limitations of such forms of resistance.

To understand the importance of non-capitalism in Oaxaca, we also must be attentive to why exactly this matters at the present time (in terms of the dialectic between capitalist and non-capitalist space). In 1992, Article 27 of the Mexican constitution was revised. This Article - established in the wake of the Revolution (1910-1917) - meant that the Mexican state had responsibility to provide land for those without it. The consequence of this was the creation of communal property in the form of the ejido (a form of land that could not officially be bought or leased and which communities had usufruct rights), and agrarian communities (which was recognition of prehispanic indigenous land rights). Communal forms of land tenure thus developed in tandem with private property in 20<sup>th</sup> century Mexico and accounted for almost fifty percent of cropland after the agrarian reforms of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–

1940) (Hansen, 1971: 32). Today in Oaxaca, collectively held property (ejidos or tierras comunales) account for 74 percent of the total superficie (INEGI 2014).

The creation of communal property was a contradictory process in both plan and outcome. On the one hand, it was a method for placating peasants in order to be able to further the development of capitalism in Mexico (Otero, 1999: 33). However, on the other hand, this did mean that key sectors of land were prevented from being fully absorbed into capitalist market relations, albeit within the context of increased capitalist hegemony over national society. Thus, alongside the extension of capitalism we must recognize that concomitantly, the process of land reform also provided the site for the development and institutionalisation of peasant and indigenous territorial claims (Bobrow-Strain 2005: 752). Development in Oaxaca is far from a one-sided narrative. It is useful here to distinguish land and territory. Whereas land simply refers to a geographically demarcated area, territory has a deeper meaning tied to issues of collective identity and memory, which is the basis for the development of communal life (López Bárcenas, 2002: 126). Whilst the wider structural setting therefore may have been capitalist in orientation, communal class processes were strengthened in many areas via territorial control. When assessing the importance of non-capitalism for the present, the point to be made here is that hegemony is never stable but is always contested. Florencia Mallon (1995: 6) usefully distinguishes between hegemony as a process and hegemony as an end point. The first of these relates to the manner in which power and legitimacy are contested and redefined at all scales. The second relates to the (partial) result of this, in other words the institutionalisation of a common social project. However, Mallon (1995: 317) also cautions us to look at history over the *longue durée*, as radical ideas and discourses remain alive (even when seemingly submerged) in various localities. Once again, simplistic views based on the assumption of (complete) subsumption will not suffice. Understanding how



space and place have been created is vital if we are to understand the roots of modern conflict in Oaxaca.’

The revision to Article 27 sought to bring land reform to an end, while allowing formerly unalienable ejido land to be bought or sold, thereby paving the way for the increasing large-scale commercialisation of land in Mexico. The prime motivation behind this policy was to transform land from a social right into a commodity and forms part of the broader trend of neoliberal globalisation, (Nash, 2003). The southern states (Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero), where communal forms of property predominate, were seen as requiring major reform and, ultimately transformation, into new poles of accumulation via mega-projects such as Plan Puebla Panama (renamed the Mesoamerica Project and containing various linked initiatives). Oaxaca has long been viewed with a large degree of strategic importance due to the potential for new openings for investment in land, the natural resources contained in the region, and the strategic location of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which is not only a prime source of wind power but also has long been seen as a potential alternative to the Panama canal. It is no coincidence that it has been in southern Mexico where the most radical social movements have emerged over the last two decades (Hesketh, 2013). Whilst numerous scholars have demonstrated the wider importance of capitalist domination over ethnic peasant communities in southern Mexico (see *inter alia* Cook 1984, Clarke 2000, Rus 1995, Washbrook 2005, Wasserstrom 1983), what is emphasised here is the role of non-capitalist space within the region that has proven to be important in sometimes thwarting such an advance. As Massey (1995: 7) reminds us, ‘The world is not simply the product of capital’s requirements.’ Following Gibson-Graham (2006a), the analysis offered here serves the social function of allowing the peoples of the region to become the subject of history and to un-become the victim.

Oaxaca has an intriguing developmental history with regards to property relations. The development of land tenure here stood in contrast to the northern and central states of Mexico which have often been assumed to be paradigmatic of colonial social property relations. Instead of the hacienda developing to displace communal land, as happened widely elsewhere in Mexico, 'late colonial Oaxaca did not experience a dramatic expansion of Spanish landholdings' (Taylor 1972: 7-8). This is partly explained by the physical geographical features of the state. As Colin Clarke (1992: 152) has argued, the largely mountainous topography of Oaxaca was 'inimical to agricultural development of a hacienda or plantation type.' The fierceness of native resistance and their determination to hold on to their communal land however was also fundamental to the evolution of this property regime (Murphy and Stepick 1991: 18, Taylor 1972: 197). Spanish colonialism thus developed alongside the survival of the native nobility in the form of *cacicazgo* landholdings (noble estates). These local caciques in fact were to play a crucial mediating role for the Spanish crown, and would help facilitate the extraction of tribute (Taylor 1972: 35-7). Recognising what existed already in native practice therefore became a method for transforming it (Wainwright 2008: 53).

This is not to say that the experience of colonialism did not affect in any manner the pre-existing forms of space. Rather that the spatial terrain was shaped by asymmetrical relations of force with a particular social purpose in mind, that nevertheless was forced to recognise the power of already existing social relations at the community level. Commenting upon this, Bonfil Batalla (1996: 9) argues in relation to the colonial experience: 'geographical transformations did not take place on an empty landscape. Rather, the changes Europeans introduced affected groups of people with a cultural heritage elaborated over many centuries in the same places, where local adoptions allowed different sorts of responses.' In terms of our analysis, this means we need to be attentive to questions of exploitation, but we cannot

simply reduce this to an ill-defined global capitalism (having a one-way determinism). Rather we have to see precisely how surplus was being produced, appropriated and distributed, and what sort of relationships to land and territory pertained. Once this is attended to, we can see that, in the case of colonial Oaxaca this was far from being done in a capitalist manner, whereby direct producers are divorced from the means of production and compulsion rests on impersonal market forces with ever increasing competition between individual capitals leading to a revolutionising of the means of production. Exploitation clearly existed, but this was not *capitalist* exploitation. Oaxaca simultaneously existed inside of capitalist influence yet not subsumed entirely to its form of social relations.

Despite having only 3.4% of the national population, Oaxaca contains over a fifth of all the nations' 2438 municipalities, numbering 570 in total. Of these, 412 since 1995 have governed themselves according to their own '*usos y costumbres*' (practices and customs).<sup>3</sup> Although these communities should not be romanticised, it will be argued that this does facilitate important communal control over resources and prevent commodification. As one should be able to infer, the high number of municipalities in Oaxaca did not fall from the sky, nor was it created by chance. Rather it is the result of a long process of struggle for autonomy (Esteva 2001). The largely indigenous *campesinos* have not simply been victims who have had a new way of life imposed on them, but rather have actively contested and negotiated various state projects to refine them towards their own needs. How was this to occur?

Crucially the regime of exploitation that emerged in Oaxaca under Spanish colonialism was not one that divorced primary producers from their means of production (rather this was viewed as the essential base upon which tribute was to be produced). As Waterbury (1975: 420-1) explains in relation to this: 'removal of the Indians from their land would have been

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<sup>3</sup> However, as Chassen-López (2004: 11) argues, 'far from existing from time immemorial, their *usos y costumbres* has changed over time. The indigenous people did not reject the varied forces of modernity outright but contested resisted and negotiated, as well as innovated and translated them to their needs.'

contrary to the economic interests of the most powerful class in the province: the Spanish merchants.' Oaxaca would become integrated into the world economy through the trade of Cochineal (a red dye made from crushed insects that live parasitically on cactus). It is claimed that by the early eighteenth century over half of the state's agricultural labourers were devoted to its production (Clarke, 2000). This was undertaken for the most part as a supplement to subsistence production for household or community needs. Owing to this trade, the state became one of Mexico's principal export centres during the second half of the eighteenth century. Commercial development began to take place in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec where both cochineal and cotton were exported in response to the rising demands generated from European textile production that followed in the wake of industrial development (Waterbury 1975: 419). It is clear that class relationships that were developed or maintained in Oaxaca and in Western Europe were not independent of one another. Cook and Diskin (1976: 10,12) conclude nevertheless, that despite Oaxaca's incorporation into the emerging European capitalist system, this 'did not deprive it of its own structure and dynamic embedded in a pre-capitalist mode of production' as 'Within the colonized indigenous formation, land and labour remained substantially within the non-commodity or simple-commodity sphere of circulation.'

Even during the Porfiriato (1876-1910), the heyday of liberal modernisation in Mexico when mining flourished in the region, subsistence production was to remain dominant rather than wage labour. Whilst mining did contribute to elite class formation in the state, the proliferation of mining interests did not threaten village lands during this time, but rather was utilised by peasants as a source of wage labour to supplement their subsistence income (Waterbury 1975: 421-4). Unquestionably land speculations linked to mining and agrarian capitalism were beginning to make their mark on the state's social relations (Chassen López: 2004: 92, Waterbury 1975). Despite these changes however, Colin Clarke (2000) concludes

that ‘Oaxaca’s peasantries, though undoubtedly dominated socially and politically and exploited economically during the Porfiriato, retained much of their land and maintained their spatial distribution more or less intact.’ Clearly multiple forms of productive system (and concomitantly social identity) co-existed within Oaxaca (see also Nash, 1994). As well as recognising capitalist encroachment, we also need to give attention to localised forms of agency. As one of the most demographically indigenous states in Mexico, this often results in a different cosmovision in relation to issues of land. As Kiado Cruz, a member of the Zapotec community of Santa Cruz Yagavila (personal interview, 2009, Oaxaca) explains,

‘Land is not viewed as merchandise...To speak of our relation with land, we say it is our mother – and it cannot be exchanged for money. Territory is defined as a physical space where we live together and hold celebrations (fiestas), it is where we can reinvent our lives.’

This existence of non-capitalist space is of course precisely what makes the area ripe for transformation into a new pole of accumulation. There has been a wide-ranging consensus among global and national policy makers that the space of Oaxaca must be reshaped in line with those areas in which the state enjoys ‘comparative advantage’. Practically this translates into the exploitation of the state’s low wage base, natural resources and cultural patrimony. As mentioned above, key to this has been projects such as Plan Puebla Panama (PPP) and its various guises. These initiatives (by whatever name is currently being utilised), seek to transform the space of Oaxaca into part of a ‘southern tourist corridor’, necessitating the creation of high speed *autopistas* (highways) alongside a new maquiladora industry. As Lefebvre (1991) recognised, to transform space is to transform social relations. In the context of Oaxaca this would necessitate transforming collective property rights. However, just as non-capitalist space can provide the impetus for capitalism to expand, it also provides the territorial basis from which resistance and alternative forms of development projects can

arise. Having a radical history based on different social relations to those of capitalism provides a basis for the possibility of constructing alternative projects. As Kiado Cruz (2009, personal interview, Oaxaca) put it: ‘In Oaxaca we have thousands of hectares of communal land... This implies thousands of hectares of resistance.’ This is visibly manifested at present through resistance to mining (notably in the Sierra Norte and Valles Centrales) and hydroelectric projects (mainly in Juchitán). Both have sought to transcend individual sites of resistance to create wider regional consciousness.

### **RESISTING CAPITALISM IN OAXACA**

Organisations like the World Bank have argued that the illegibility of property rights in the southern states of Mexico is a major impediment to investment and increased prosperity (Hall and Humphrey 2003). The Mexican government sought to rectify this through the *Programa de Certificación de Derecho Ejidales y Titulación de Solares Urbanos* (PROCEDE, Program for the Certification of Agrarian Rights), now re-named *Fondo de Apoyo para los Núcleos Agrarios sin Regularizar* (FANAR, Supporting Fund for non-regularised Agrarian Nucleases). This was a supposedly voluntary program into which communities could enter to officially have their lands demarcated and a title granted. Certification of the ejidal land is a pre-condition for the decision to then privatise or rent out the land. Armando de la Cruz Cortés (personal interview, 2015 Oaxaca), from Tequio Jurídico - an NGO that promotes indigenous autonomy and collective rights to land has labelled these programmes as the ‘legalisation of dispossession.’

Oaxaca however has been far from universally acquiescent to this. In fact it is the state with the least adoption of the program, with only 20.5% of the surface area being certified (Ita 2006: 155). It is becoming clearer that the historical defence of place and the long struggle recapitalism can be resisted. Oaxacan intellectual, Benjamin Moldanado (personal interview,

2008, Oaxaca) sums this position up when he states that, ‘the community is fundamental in Oaxaca. Not only to construct a social movement that is based in it, but moreover because the struggles have been reoriented towards the recuperation of the power of the community... and the strengthening of communal life.’ Indeed, it is by virtue of the democratic control of their own communities, that the indigenous population are able to deny capital the right to expand. Numerous contemporary struggles in Oaxaca have sprung from the democratic tradition of control over territory and the survival therefore of non-capitalist relations with land (Hesketh, 2013). Examples of this include opposition to a superhighway project that threatens communal life, resistance to the expansion of large dams, mining interests and wind farms, and finally new urban movements influenced by indigenous traditions of communitarian decision making that are seeking to recover public resources, establish food sovereignty and engage with alternative energy production. Ana María García Arreola (personal interview, Oaxaca 2015) from the NGO EDUCA, an organisation with twenty years’ experience of working with social movements in the region, claims that in Oaxaca there are ‘two projects of life in conflict. The project of capital and the project of indigenous life.’ However, she argues that Oaxacan communities have a unique position compared to other places in Mexico owing to their internal structure of government, including the conservation of assemblies and the system of cargos.<sup>4</sup> Such a thesis has been recently manifested in resistance to mining. Armando de la Cruz Cortés (personal interview, 2015 Oaxaca) cites Capulalpam de Méndez and Magdalena Teitipac as the clearest examples of this, where communities have united and utilised the internal structure of their community assembly to force out mining interests.

Francisco García López (personal interview, Oaxaca 2015) who is on the *Comiseriado de Bienes Comunes* (Commission of Communal Goods) in Capulalpam validated such an

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<sup>4</sup> Cargos are political positions that are fulfilled out of obligation to the community.

analysis when responding to questions about mining in his community: ‘We have a communal regime, and we are the owners of territory. Whatever decision involves the land, the assembly has to decide.’ Based on this, the community has refused permission of a Canadian mining corporation to prospect for gold in their territory in spite of it gaining a fifty year concession from the Mexican state. Furthermore, the existence of this wider communal regime was explicitly counter-posed to the logic of capitalism: ‘while we keep our way of governing alive... we are putting a stop to the voraciousness of capitalism. Every time we have a meeting, every time we have a fiesta, the music we have, the way we live, (it) is stopping capitalism.’ Capulalpam reflects an interesting case as it has a long history based on mining and thus seeming integration to the capitalist mode of production. Such a history provides the community with a clear element of class consciousness. However, alongside this communal and non-capitalist social practices have also remained and been reinvigorated. These include collective forms of resource management and decision making which at the present juncture provide vital resources for resistance. This has been enhanced by the feeling of abandonment by the nation-state (Aquino-Centeno 2009: 155-7). As García López recounts (personal interview, 2015 Oaxaca) ‘people conserved many traditions and customs. This is a fundamental pillar because the form that we govern ourselves permits that the social fabric is not ripped or broken.’ As a result of this there is a combustible situation in Mexico whereby the state claims the right to the subsoil on behalf of the nation and has provided concessions to transnational corporations without the express consent of the affected communities. This has naturally provoked fierce forms of social conflict, and potentially provides the impetus for radical action. As Wood (1995) has argued, peripheral forms of capitalist activity tend to be where radical action is more likely to spring from:

modern revolutions have tended to occur where the capitalist mode of production has been less developed; where it has coexisted with older forms of production, notably peasant production; where ‘extra-economic’ compulsion has played a greater role in



the organisation of production and the extraction of surplus labour; and where the state has acted not only as a support for appropriating classes but as something like a pre-capitalist appropriator.

At present there are efforts among various NGOs to try to develop more thematic and regional forms of resistance, linked to issues of natural resources, notably dams and mines (García Arreola, personal interview, 2015, Oaxaca). However, a look back at the most major manifestation of social conflict in the state reveals both the potentiality and weakness of current resistance.

Oaxaca came dramatically to the world's attention in 2006. The explosion of anger directed at the authoritarian governorship of Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, was visibly manifested following the repression of the local teachers Union (Section 22). The wake of this repression led to the formation of the *Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* (APPO). The APPO quickly became the inspiration for the formation of an anti-authoritarian, socially inclusive and collective model of social movement's organisation (Martínez Vásquez, 2007: 72). Thousands of barricades were created throughout Oaxaca City in a spontaneous rejection of governmental authority. All official government activities were suspended for five months, and a state of 'ingovernability' was declared. Analysing the movement, Kristin Norget (2010: 119) makes the argument that whilst Oaxaca has had a long history of rural radicalism, 'what made the APPO unique was its *urban, very heterogeneous profile*.' Whilst this is true in relation to the place-specific location of the protests, to label the movement as merely an 'urban phenomenon' is to ignore a vital component of the historical sociology of Oaxaca, in terms of both indigenous migration to urban areas and Oaxaca City's role as a central hub for economic activity. Gareth Jones (2000: 201) has argued that for reasons such as this it does not make sense to analyse urban and rural Mexico in distinction from one another. Furthermore, in relation to Section 22 which was at the forefront of the struggle, Martínez

Vásquez, (2007: 53, 54) points out that although teachers are often characterised as urban and middle class, ‘We cannot leave out of recognition that a large number of teachers come from peasant families and indigenous communities.’ Indigenous community members he argues have not just been important to the composition of Section 22 but more fundamentally ‘in the definition of the organisational strategies, their tactics and their direction.’ The distinction between rural and urban is thus far from clear in the context of Oaxaca and demonstrates the manner in which non-capitalist spaces are able to inform radical possibilities beyond their immediate locale creating hybrid forms of resistance. One of the chief accomplishments of the APPO was to directly politicise the everyday control of social space in an urban context (Gibler 2009: 185). Nevertheless, in many respects, the APPO as a social movement proved to be ephemeral, succumbing to a mixture of state repression and internal division. Over 17 APPOs were created in the wake of 2006 yet the majority of these have collapsed. This should give us pause for thought. Harvey (2000: 234) has argued that social struggles restricted to one “theatre of action” are always liable to being rolled back, without advances in other areas. The question of how activism is ‘scaled up’ therefore remains an important question to be addressed. Gustavo Esteva (personal interview, 2009, Oaxaca), reflecting on this, argues that in spite of problems of corruption, the community structure in Oaxaca remains a vital resource for the expression of collective will. Nevertheless, scaling up this structure to the level of the federal state has proved difficult.

Historically it has been ephemeral because it represents a different power structure and powers that we have resisted this kind of democracy. So this is what we are trying to do in Oaxaca. One interesting way of saying this is to say APPO has never existed. APPO is a possibility. It is something being constructed today, it is not yet real.

Whilst this is a sober reminder about the challenges for such movements for autonomy in the face of structural power, it also highlights the potential for such movements. As Ana Dinerstein (2015: 60) reminds us, ‘The not yet occupies a significant place in the politics of

Latin America.’ Whilst awareness of structural power is vital, so too is the project of highlighting actually existing alternatives, moving them to nowhere to now here (Gibson-Graham 2006b: xxvi).

## **CONCLUSION**

The ability of capitalism to survive and prosper has been well documented. However, this article has argued that we should take equally seriously the survival of non-capitalist space. Not only does this materially reflect the reality of the global political economy in a more accurate manner, but discursively it serves to facilitate action in the present. It was argued that notions of an all-embracing capitalism by contrast serve to disempower radical action. The article explicitly sought to reject the assumption of subsumption that pertains in many radical analyses. However, this openness to consider alternative forms of economic activity should not lead us into wish-thinking, and we must remain attentive to the wider field of force in which subaltern spaces are likely to find themselves, and to consider the necessity of scaling up their activism (whilst not engaging in a summary dismissal of localised projects).

Via an historical exploration, the case of Oaxaca in southern Mexico was used to highlight a number of these key points. It demonstrated that empirically we can clearly identify multilinear pathways of development, with the strong survival of non-capitalist space that is increasingly coming into conflict with the universalising tendencies of capitalism. The potential for such non-capitalist spaces was also asserted. As Marx noted in his letter to Vera Zasulich, non-capitalist spaces can be a springboard for revolutionary action precisely because they are contemporaneous with capitalism (Anderson 2010: 228, Shanin 1984b). Of particular advantage here was, and is, the democratic control such communities were able to exercise over the means of production. However, the ultimate success of these spaces was

premised on wider linkages being forged both nationally and internationally, a theoretical point that must not be forgotten.

At the time of writing, Mexico is once again gripped by civil society activism that some are referring to as a 'second revolution' (Ackerman 2014). This has involved wide calls for the president to step down, demands for popular power and the creation of numerous local self-defence organisations (responding simultaneously to the power of narco-traffickers and failure of government to adequately protect citizens, often resulting in collusion with drug cartels). The spark for this latest unrest was the murder of forty three students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers' College in Guerrero by drug cartel Guerreros Unidos. These teachers represent an active militant social force opposing the furtherance of neoliberalism in Mexico that current president Enrique Peña Nieto is trying to push through. How this situation will develop is currently unclear. However, it is worth noting that back in 2009, John Ross (2009) argued that if revolutionary action were to begin again in Mexico, it would be Oaxaca or Guerrero that would likely be the new springboards for such action. Guerrero of course contains strong parallels with Oaxaca in terms of the contested legacies of the Revolution, the role of rural teachers seeking to defend communal spaces and the increasing clash with globalizing capital seeking to extend into the southern states. Non-capitalist spaces are thus important for thinking about the beginnings of revolutionary action rather than an end point in and of themselves. They can also be sources of inspiration for acknowledging diversity and offering alternatives in the here and now. Resistance to further capitalist encroachment can also spark wider action within society. The final point to note here is that ultimately, what begins in the periphery does not necessarily have to remain peripheral. It is in this sense, that non-capitalism retains the potential to act as the basis for societal regeneration in Mexico and beyond.

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