

‘Popular assembly’ that arose from a mass people’s movement: Why Oaxaca Matters

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For anyone interested in social progress, the ‘Oaxaca Commune’ stands out as an event worthy of attention and study. In the Mexican state of Oaxaca, the overwhelming majority of people suddenly awoke from political hibernation and became active in shaping social life. In consequence, the old apparatus of the state, dedicated as it was to the interests of the rich, was destroyed, and a new structure, based on direct representation of the many, was established.

The ‘popular assembly’ (APPO) that arose out of the mass movement of Oaxaca was not the first of its kind. History has numerous examples of similar political formations, always birthed amid a revolutionary climate.

The first modern example took place in Paris in 1871, when working-class people revolted against the policies of ‘their’ government, and created a new form of social administration to suit the needs of the average person. Like Oaxaca, the ‘Paris Commune’ consisted of delegates from a varying political/social background, working together to enact policies that reflected the demands of the majority, in contrast with the previous government that ruled according to the interests of a tiny elite.

In 1905 Russia, unmistakably similar organizations sprang into existence. These worker’s councils, called ‘Soviets’, were the organizational basis for the failed uprising in 1905, and were reconstructed anew and on a broader level for the successful revolution of 1917. For several years, the coordinated efforts of the nationwide system of Soviets acted as the backbone of organization for the successful civil-war and subsequent reconstruction. Following the successes of Russia, soviet-style organizational methods were constructed throughout Europe in response to the widespread social turbulence caused by World War I. In 1919, the working class of Germany formed soviets of their own, which were the foundation for the heroic, but failed revolution.

Years later, the Spanish Revolution made good use of the same independent method of organization, where in many towns, all the functions of normal government were revolutionized to an extent that the word ‘government’ seemed hardly applicable. After World War II, ‘worker’s committees’ and militias sprang into existence in Italy and Greece, accompanied by revolutionary upheavals.

Because of their accomplishments, the above events are the most frequently cited examples of government via ‘popular assembly’, but such occurrences have happened—albeit on a smaller scale—countless times throughout modern history. In times of crisis, the inefficient, bureaucratic methods of the elite-run state become intolerable; people feel

compelled to organize their communities themselves. The triggering event can be a variety of things: war, economic depression, a general strike (strike committees are notorious for evolving into 'popular assemblies'), natural disaster, and in the case of Oaxaca, outrage caused by state repression. In fact, popular assemblies often come into being not because of mere desire, but because the old state has completely crumbled, and people are driven towards activity and cooperation out of necessity.

The events of Oaxaca have proved, once again, that there is a better alternative to the type government we have always been taught is greatest. In any society where vast inequality prevails, the political structure that upholds the status quo inevitably gets separated from the wants of the average person. The wealthy and privileged steer government to meet their own interests by whatever means necessary— media, campaign financing, ballot restrictions, long election terms and consequent unaccountability, the police, voter disenfranchisement (especially minorities and the poor), intimidation, assassination, etc. Wherever far-reaching social progress has been achieved, the state as we know it, with its endless connections to the upper-classes, has been razed and then resurrected on a different— more democratic— foundation.

Like its organizational ancestors, Oaxaca's Popular Assembly worked to overcome the above barriers and shorten the distance between voters and delegate. Unlike the modern, accepted form of democracy, where representatives are free to back-track on their promises the minute after being elected, the Popular Assembly model relies on direct democracy, i.e., delegates must do as expected, or else they are immediately removed. This is possible because voting is done not by region, where people from vast un-connected distances come together once every couple years, but instead, democratic discussion happens in local workplaces, organizations, or neighborhoods, followed by a binding vote. In this way, people are able to respond to events quickly and decide the best way to react; rather than sitting on their hands until the next election hoping that their new 'representative' will listen to them instead of the oligarchy.

Such a system is practical on a national and even international level because the majority of people in the world have similar interests. Most of the earth's population consists of working people who desire the same things: peace, good wages and working conditions, education, health care, a decent standard of living, etc. Those opposing the more-democratic 'popular assembly' model of organization are the tiny minority who benefit from the current, vastly unequal system. Indeed, it is the predatory upper classes that ruthlessly squash all independent modes of organization, as they continue to do now in Oaxaca.

There are numerous elements of the Oaxacan movement that have international significance— people in nearly every country can relate to oppressive governments, institutionalized poverty, and barbaric dictators; Oaxaca has merely destroyed the myth that no alternative exists.

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