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Introduction

In this book we present a contemporary ethnography of social inequality in the Mexican city of Oaxaca, capital of the state of the same name. The city lies at the nexus of the three arms of the valley of Oaxaca, about 300 kilometers (186 miles) south of Mexico City. Outside Mexico, Oaxaca is known primarily to those interested in either illicit drugs or prehispanic ruins. The region allegedly produces some of the best marijuana and hallucinogenic mushrooms in North America and waves and waves of *jipis* (pronounced *hee-pees*) have descended upon the area since the mid 1960s. Archaeological mounds literally dot the countryside, and perched just above the contemporary city of Oaxaca are the magnificent ruins of Monte Albán.[1]

Within Mexico, Oaxaca is noted predominantly as a city of pleasant colonial charm surrounded by seemingly bucolic peasant villages inhabited by Indians, many of whom still maintain native dress and language. The valley's altitude of 1,550 meters (5,075 feet) moderates what would otherwise be hot tropical temperatures, producing a pleasant climate with a mean temperature of 65 degrees Fahrenheit and low humidity. The concurrence of the summer rains with the year's highest temperatures cools even the hottest days (Rodrigo 1983).[2]

None of these famous features however, constitutes the core of this book. Rather, we the authors have come to appreciate and understand Oaxaca as a set of seeming paradoxes. Behind its attractive appearance and quaint charm the city and the valley are a crucible collecting all the forces buffeting modern Mexico, the forces of change and continuity, conflict and peace, and most important, rising and falling material standards of living and evolving socioeconomic inequality. The vast majority of its inhabitants earn an inadequate wage, a small minority earn a comfortable living, and an increasing proportion lie between these two extremes. Protest and violence have repeatedly engulfed the city as local

elites have sought to isolate it from change while the masses have demanded their concerns be addressed.

All of these forces mix in one of Mexico's most isolated, least developed cities and regions. The very features of old-fashioned quaintness reflect Oaxaca's separation and underdevelopment. Early this century, after nearly four hundred years among Mexico's preeminent cities, Oaxaca fell from the list of the nation's top twenty urban settlements. It is now a secondary city in every respect. It is not among Mexico's top twenty cities in population, its level of economic output and industrialization are among the lowest of all Mexican cities, and it has produced virtually no notable national political figures in the twentieth century, nor does it possess a significant voice in national political affairs.

It is also a city in which thousands of households quietly and resolutely try to adapt, to survive, and to pass on something of themselves to their children. In this respect, as anthropologists, we have witnessed a remarkable continuity and sameness in the daily lives of the majority of families, households, and neighborhoods. Poor neighborhood communities, called *colonias* or *colonias populares* in Mexican Spanish, continue to work to obtain potable water, convenient bus service, and recognition of legal status by the municipal authorities. Each Sunday, here and there in the city, *tequios* (communal work parties) meet and with pick and shovel undertake the process of building roads, pathways, and stairways up mountainsides that seem impassable to the North American observer. All in all, the colonias change so slowly that it may take a decade for an outsider to notice. Mexico's economic boom of the late 1970s touched and improved the lives of many, while the crisis of the 1980s struck everyone. Yet in many respects the lives of ordinary people seem little different from the way they were when we first arrived in the early 1970s.

These conditions and contrasts form the thrust of this book. Our intent is to describe and understand the conditions of social inequality in Oaxaca and Oaxacans' effort to adapt to them. We focus on social inequality because it has characterized the region's society for more than two millennia and we believe that in one form or another it is one of the most fundamental problems that its inhabitants confront daily. We define social inequality straightforwardly as differential access to and possession of material goods, that is, material hierarchical stratification. By this definition, increased inequality can occur at the same time that everyone is materially improving; in that case, some may simply increase their possession of material goods at a faster rate than others. We argue that this has been the recurring case in Oaxaca. At certain times in history, the city and region have produced more goods in the absolute and everyone's standard of living has increased, but some have become disproportionately better off, capturing a higher proportion of the increased wealth.

By focusing on social inequality, we do not imply that material goods form the sole basis for human existence or social analysis. Indeed, social,

cultural, political, and economic variables are important, too, both in themselves and in their relationship to inequality. Many of them accordingly enter into our analysis. We describe family relations, gender roles, political struggles and strikes, and the history of Oaxaca's relationship to the national and international economies, among other topics.

Our approach to social inequality has been strongly influenced by our experiences in Oaxaca. Both of us have developed strong emotional and personal ties to the city. We have seen our own godchildren grow from preschool toddlers to parents with their own offspring. We have seen families struggle to survive, fight and bicker, love each other, and generously and graciously extend hospitality and share their lives with us. Because of the nature of our academic careers, we have spent almost as much time in Oaxaca since 1971 as in any other city and have deep friendships with people of all classes in the urban area. We have lived and worked among the poorest of Oaxaca's poor and at other times have lived in middle-class areas, working and establishing friendships with members of the local bureaucratic elite.

These experiences have taught us a lot. We came to know intimately the struggles of Oaxacans to survive and improve their living conditions, and we came to appreciate and understand the impediments they confront. We shared many people's frustrations and failures to overcome material deprivation. We marveled at and admired their ability to continue the struggle in spite of the ravages of inflation or the more particular tragedies of unemployment or sickness and death. Above all, we developed a deep appreciation of the dignity and sincerity of the Oaxacans we know, a dignity and sincerity that has persisted through and risen above poverty and strife.

Our fieldwork led us to understand the profound meaning in an Oaxacan cliché, *uno tiene que aguantarse* (one has to adapt, to withstand). Inequality, poverty, or personal tragedy are not viewed by the Oaxacans we know as products of their own failures. Rather, they are conditions externally imposed, enduring and pervasive conditions that few are likely to escape. Some indeed may rise above their poverty to enjoy a life of less pain and struggle, and individuals must work hard if they are to succeed. But poverty itself is not an individual's responsibility, and social inequality is neither a superficial nor a passing phenomenon.

To accomplish our analysis of Oaxacan social inequality, we attempt to wed the two primary foci of urban anthropology, the broad macro perspective and the micro, in-depth investigation. The macro provides an anthropology *of* the city; the micro, an anthropology *in* the city. The approaches are, or at least should be, complementary in the study of a particular urban society such as Oaxaca. The macro approach furnishes the conditions, the forces influencing the micro, while the micro gives life and substance to the macro.[3]

The macro approach best captures the holistic view, the city as a

critical unit with specific functions within a wider complex society. In urban anthropology's macro approach, the city and the people in it are not so much of intrinsic interest as they are a reflection of regional and global socioeconomic forces in complex societies, both historic and contemporary. The focus is on the wider context and the effects that context has on a particular urban system and the residents in it.[4]

The macro approach of urban anthropology, however, is not sufficiently developed to provide a specific focus on particular factors. In examining Oaxaca's linkages to its surrounding environment and the effects those linkages have on the city, we take our direction from political economy, which also asserts that a city's internal structure and events in local communities cannot be explained entirely by variables peculiar to the locality.[5] In exploring the precise nature of that impoverishment we also draw guidance from the numerous studies of urban Latin America that focus on political mobilization, urbanization and squatter settlements, and the informal economy.[6]

We employ the macro approach in the book's first half to establish the historical foundations and contemporary structure of Oaxaca's socioeconomic inequality. We conceive of the history and structure of socioeconomic inequality described in the book's first half as both creating and limiting the resources and forms of adaptation available to those residing in Oaxaca. They are what Anthony Leeds (1968) termed the "locality," the sum total of all forces with which a population contends.

We begin our macro analysis of Oaxaca in Chapter 2 by constructing the city's social history. Based on the extensive work by archaeologists and historians of Oaxaca, we discover two constant themes and two cycles that have conditioned Oaxaca's present social system:

Constant Themes

Urban centers in Oaxaca have endured for over two millennia.
Marked stratification has consistently characterized these societies.

Cycles

Recurringly, the urban centers have been engaged and disengaged with a broader system.

During periods of engagement, social inequality increases along with externally induced efforts (usually only partially successful) to reduce Oaxaca's political autonomy. With disengagement, social equality and political autonomy increase.

We conclude that on the eve of the contemporary era, the pattern and structure of socioeconomic inequality had changed little since the end of the colonial era.

The remainder of the book, based upon data we collected ourselves, examines the contemporary era, which we define as beginning about 1950. Chapter 3 explores the structure and differences among Oaxaca's distinct neighborhoods. The city's landscape most obviously and visibly reflects the city's historical and contemporary social inequality. In the contemporary era the central state, that is, the federal government, has assumed an increasingly important role in determining Oaxaca's social geography.

Chapter 4 examines the recent partial transformation of Oaxaca's socioeconomic structure of inequality. We survey Oaxaca's economy from three complementary perspectives: the kind of economic activities present, the conditions of work in those activities, and the results for individuals and households of that work. We conclude by discussing the implications of current conditions for Oaxaca's social class structure.

The second half of the book, beginning with Chapter 5, presents our description and analysis of Oaxacans' reactions and adaptations to the contemporary structure of inequality. Urban anthropology's micro approach focuses narrowly, examining an individual, a well-defined subpopulation, a set of networks, or a problem such as migration. Our task in the second half is to delineate the range of specific activities and the particular conditions that provoke Oaxacans' social responses to inequality.

In Chapter 5 we begin the micro approach by examining collective responses to Oaxaca's social inequalities. We find two distinct types of class-based activities: intraclass responses, particularly local elite efforts to resist the central state's incursions, and interclass conflict focusing on working conditions. We also address voluntary organizations, concentrating on a less sensational, but for Oaxaca's masses a more broadly important form, neighborhood political organizations. Throughout we emphasize four themes: (1) cycles of core–periphery conflict, first between the local elite and the central state, then between the masses and the central state; (2) cycles of regime tolerance and repression of challenges to the structure of inequality; (3) the trend toward the increasingly important role of the state in managing conflict and in attempting to address some of its causes; and (4) the constant pragmatic instrumentality of the participants in political activities, that is, how their activities take into account the structural realities of local inequality.[7] This awareness of structural realities includes, most importantly, assessing the real power of the central state and its tolerance of challenges.

We devote Chapter 6 to the role of the family and household in Oaxacans' adaptation to social inequality. We seek to establish that the

household and family, not the individual, form the cornerstones of Oaxacan social life. We then examine the role of *compadrazgo* (godparenthood) in incorporating others into the family and household through a web of reciprocal rights and obligations. The final section analyzes the similarities and differences among households in each of Oaxaca's four income groups.

Chapter 7 presents four life histories, one from each of Oaxaca's four income groups. The life histories fill out the broader picture painted in the preceding chapters, describing each family's material conditions, migration history, employment, the dynamics of family and household structure, gender relations, and political involvement. They reveal the struggles and accomplishments of four families, the obstacles and opportunities each has faced, and their responses and efforts to adapt to Oaxaca's socioeconomic inequality.

In the concluding chapter we reexamine and reflect on the overall nature of Oaxaca's socioeconomic inequality and the relevance it has for understanding urban Latin America. We are modest in our theoretical intentions; while our descriptive sweep is broad, we do not attempt to create new theories or even test existing ones. Our thrust remains ethnographic, that is, descriptive and concrete, to convey to the reader the most important realities of life in the city of Oaxaca.

Methodology

This book is based on three types of data: previously published information; a 1977 random-sample survey of city households directed by Murphy, and another in 1987 codirected by Murphy, Earl W. Morris, and Mary Winter; and extensive participant observation and interviewing by both authors. The wealth of study of the area has allowed us to rely heavily on the primary work of others, including the Mexican government particularly and the innumerable social scientists who have studied in the Oaxaca region—beginning in 1929 when a road was cut to the top of Monte Albán and Alfonso Caso began work on that magnificent archaeological site. The famous anthropologists Bronislaw Malinowski and Julio de la Fuente went to Oaxaca in 1940 to study the indigenous marketing system. Over the past forty years John Paddock and the University of the Americas and the National Institute of Anthropology and History have served to integrate the activities of various institutions, including the Stanford Field School, the University of Texas at Austin, and the University of Michigan Museum. The investigators also collaborated with Mexico's National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH), the School of Sociology at the University of Benito Juárez (UABJO), the Center for Advanced Studies in Social Anthropology (CIESAS) and the Office of