

Class, Ethnicity and Community in Southern Mexico: Oaxaca's Peasantries

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In this fascinating book, Colin Clarke draws together work from a range of disciplinary traditions to produce a monograph on the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Known predominantly for its large indigenous population and its tourist industry, Clarke uses the concept of 'peasantries' to examine the processes that have shaped one of Mexico's economically-poorest states. In the Preface, he states that the two main themes of the book are the nature of the 'peasantry' in an increasingly capitalist world, and the process of identity and community construction (pp. X-xi). He claims that the first set of ideas are questions of global interest and concern, while the latter are "more specific to Mexico" (p.x). However, while the details of local customs and practices are indeed locally specific, as I will highlight later the discussions of identity construction resonate with debates in many other parts of the world.

The state of Oaxaca may not have the large-scale industrialisation of the Mexico-US border region, the enormous urban areas of Central and Northern Mexico, or the headline-grabbing political events of Chiapas, but this does not mean, as Clarke points out throughout the book, that Oaxaca remains unchanged. While the state of Oaxaca is often talked of in terms of its indigenous and colonial character, Clarke's work shows the ways in which Oaxacan society, particularly rural society, is a twentieth-century creation, built as a result of state intervention post-Revolution.

The ways in which Oaxaca's economy, society and politics are intertwined with national and international

processes are stressed and while it is not mentioned directly, it is clear that 'globalisation' in its many guises is an ever-present concern. One of the key questions implicit in the book is, therefore, what has happened to 'peasants' in an increasingly-globalised world. Cook and Binford (1990) covered some of these debates in their book *Obliging Need*, but Clarke's work has a wider scope, in both spatial and thematic terms. Cook and Binford focused on rural petty industry in Oaxaca's Central Valleys, while Clarke's discussion concerns the entire state. In addition, Clarke is concerned not only with the economic, but with broader social and political processes, providing an unusual insight into rural life.

Clarke's chosen definition of 'peasants' is "small-scale farmers or artisans, whose ancestors were geared to self-sufficiency" (p.ix). However, as the book progresses this definition is stretched, and the diversity of Oaxaca's rural residents is revealed. While Clarke acknowledges this in his use of the plural 'peasantries', the continued use of this term for the range of populations discussed is somewhat problematic. Given the emphasis on change and dynamism, I am unsure as to why there is the need to hang onto this particular social classification for almost all rural dwellers.

In Chapter 4 Clarke examines processes of commercialisation using the products of maize, mezcal and coffee to demonstrate the importance of differing state policies, global economic processes, and local social practices and environmental conditions on rural households and communities. Socio-economic differentiation is clearly a frequent outcome of this commercialisation, and despite highlighting the 'traditional' tendency towards wealth redistribution in communities through the cargo system in Chapter 6, later in the book there is an acknowledgement of the decline in equilibrium-creating mechanisms. Given the great wealth-generating processes, particularly in the context of craft production in the Oaxaca Central Valleys, is the use of the term 'peasant' appropriate for these communities, or particular wealthy households?

Another relatively recent phenomenon is that of widespread out-migration from Oaxaca state to the USA. This has led to interesting examples of transnational practices. As well as the ubiquitous sending of remittances, there are also examples of overseas Oaxaqueños/as being involved in politics 'back home'. A good example is the organisation of migrants from Tlacolula in the Central Valleys that has been set up in Los Angeles and has been involved in political lobbying in both the USA and Mexico (p.173). In addition, migration overseas is no obstacle to participation in civic duties in the home municipio. I found these discussions fascinating, but that referring to such social formations as 'transnational peasantries' was unhelpful. From the descriptions provided, it seemed that migrants to the USA, while maintaining strong links to rural Oaxaca, could not really be called 'peasants'.

The first two chapters of the book provide overviews of state-level processes in Colonial and Post-Independence Oaxaca (Chapter 1) and in Post-Revolutionary Oaxaca (Chapter 2). Both chapters highlight the importance of both the natural environment, and external events and processes on the development of the state's economy and society. This provides an excellent basis for the later thematic chapters of the book. During the colonial period Oaxaca's economy was integrated into the global system through the production and trade of cochineal for example, while post-independence Oaxaca land reform and infrastructure investment (particularly in rail and the Pan-American Highway) had far-reaching impacts on the direction and nature of development. Clarke also stresses the importance of federal state policies on the reconstitution of the Oaxacan peasantries after the Revolution, particularly through the land reform process.

This broad historical sweep was, however, difficult to follow in places, largely because of the ways in which the quantitative data are presented. In Chapter 2 Clarke is demonstrating the ways in which 'economic development' in the form of urbanisation and non-agricultural employment, are linked to social aspects such as language, dress and literacy. In an attempt to show the relationships between these different variables, Clarke adopts 'linkage diagrams' including correlation coefficients, directions of relationships and clustering of variables into 'modern' and 'traditional' ways of life. These diagrams are based on census data for 1950, 1960 and 1970 for the municipios of Oaxaca's Central Valleys. While diagrams are meant to help the understanding of complex processes, I found these diagrams far less helpful than the correlation tables which are also included. For me, the analysis of post-Revolutionary changes linked to federal and state policies, would have been better explained with greater discussion in the text, rather than the use of the confusing

diagrams. Clarke's enthusiasm for, and grasp of, the complexities shines through the later chapters, so it is unfortunate that the story of the state's history is obfuscated in this chapter because of the style of presentation.

While quantitative data are drawn on throughout the rest of the book, the author uses it far more effectively to discuss the dynamic processes in economic, social, cultural and political terms. This is especially the case in Chapter 6, where the focus is on issues of identity among the state's population, particularly in relation to ethnicity. Oaxaca, like its southern neighbours, has a large percentage of indigenous-language speakers within its population. In this chapter, Clarke considers the concept of ethnic identity, and the identities adopted by Oaxaca's 'peasants'. Using census material, personal observations and secondary sources (particularly from anthropologists) Clarke highlights the divisions within Oaxaca's indigenous population. Not only are there fifteen language groups (p.13) reflecting a range of ethnic traditions, but 'solidarity' and group ethnic identity among groups such as the Zapotecs is rare. Physical isolation and the associated fragmentation of political administrative units have created a pattern of place-based community identity.

I found this discussion intriguing, not least because of the rising literature on growing 'ethnic identities' and co-operation through transnational political organisations. As Clarke presents it, Oaxaca's rural populations identify at a very local scale and so do not necessarily regard themselves as being part of a larger ethnic group. This does not mean that 'ethnicity' is not an issue, indeed as highlighted at the start of Chapter 7 (p.217) individual communities are demanding that 'ethnicity' be recognised by state authorities, particularly in the context of local government. Since 1995 *municipios* in Oaxaca have been able to run their elections through a system of communal assembly of adult men, rather than through the ballot box. Over 70% of Oaxaca's *municipios* chose to use this *usos y costumbres* system in the 1995 elections (p.168).

Clarke claims that "It is a contradiction that, as peasant communities have modernised and their youth has become more fluent in Spanish, so demands for ethnic recognition have grown, stimulating demands for more ethnically controlled economic and social development" (p.217). However, I would argue that while this may seem a 'contradiction' if you are following a linear model of 'modernisation' where 'ethnicity' can be regarded as 'traditional' and an 'obstacle to development', a great deal of literature, not least that relating to 'globalisation and culture', has highlighted the complexities of cultural and social responses to wider economic and political change (see, for example, Tomlinson, 1999). Clarke's discussion hints at the fluidity of identity, but for most of the book 'identity shifts' are presented much more as a 'one-off' change. The mobilisation and interpretation of identity have been highlighted in other contexts by anthropologists such as Buechler and Buechler (1996) and Gill (1994) in Bolivia. In Clarke's book there are glimpses of how Oaxaqueños/as play with their identity, as in the discussion of the Mixtec mestizos in Jamiltepec or the section drawing on Stephen's 1991 work on the weaving village of Teotitlán del Valle. In the latter case the weavers have consciously constructed an ethnic identity which they can present to potential customers as 'authentic' (p.126). Despite examples such as these, the overall impression is one of fixity. This is, perhaps, a reflection of the age of the studies quoted. In this chapter many of the case studies are taken from the 1960s and 1970s, well before the recent tendency towards deconstructing concepts such as 'identity' in the social sciences.

The issue of the age of the material is certainly something that hampers an understanding of late twentieth century Oaxaca, but it is only on page 200 that Clarke explicitly recognises the limits of the data because of age. This is in the discussion of the civil-religious hierarchy in the Central Valleys. While understanding that the author can only work with the material available, it would have been useful to highlight, or perhaps put some caveats on, the earlier conclusions relating to identity and 'traditional practices' because of the age of the data. In particular, there is very little discussion of the effect of the 1980s debt crisis, or Mexico's 1994-5 peso crisis on Oaxaca's peasants. I know that this is because most of the work on these issues has been on Oaxaca City (see, for example, Selby et al., 1990; Murphy and Stepick, 1991), but a more explicit recognition of these highly-influential 'external' events would have been useful. It would also have been interesting to follow up the analysis of Central Valley *municipio* data from 1990, given that there is a detailed discussion (particularly in Chapter 2) of the 1950-1980 census material.

Chapter 8 on politics within Oaxaca State is an excellent chapter, although the reader certainly has to have an understanding of the broader Mexican political system to be able to negotiate the details. As with the 'identity' chapter, the issue of scale is key to an understanding of Oaxacan politics. While 'peasants' remain focused on the local, the state's economic elite attempt to maintain their power through thwarting federal attempts to gain footholds in the state. In addition, urban populations, particularly students, have been engaged in broader political struggles. Given the common (although understandable) focus on the 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco, Mexico City when considering student opposition in Mexico, the discussion of student protest and government responses in Oaxaca in the early 1970s was welcome. In addition, the details of Juchitán's opposition politics and the early 1980s electoral success of leftist groups in the city, again picks up on the theme of change which was highlighted at the start of the book. Opposition success was predicated on the ability to mobilise particular forms of ethnic and regional identity in a context of extreme social inequality. However, as Clarke concludes, this was an exceptional case as "Oaxaca's peasantries are no more radical now than they were prior to the Mexican Revolution" (p.241).

Continuing with the theme of 'exceptionalism', the Juchitán political opposition is clearly an example of a unique event in Mexico at that time and Oaxaca's vast number of municipios (570) is indeed worthy of note, but in other places I was less convinced about Clarke's claims for Oaxaca's exceptionalism. For example, Oaxaca's large percentage of indigenous language speakers is unusual for Mexico, but it is not unique, or can it really be claimed to be "the peculiar nature of Oaxacan society" (p.162). For example, according to the 1990 Census, 44.2% of Yucatan's population over five spoke an indigenous language, compared to 39.1% for Oaxaca, 32.2% for Quintana Roo and 26.4% for Chiapas (INEGI, 1992, p.25). When theorising social inequality in the concluding chapter, Clarke does draw on the concept of 'internal colonialism' (p.254) and stresses the similarities among the Southern Mexican states due to their ethnic and economic characteristics. How Oaxaca differs from these states could have been drawn out further in the main body of the text if the claims of Oaxacan exceptionalism are to be supported.

In relation to my own research interests, I was disappointed to see that there were no entries for 'women' or 'gender' in the index. Given the nature of the gender division of labour in Oaxaca (see, for example, Stephen 1991) and the ways in which ethnic and gender identities combine (see, for example, Chiñas 1973 on the Isthmus Zapotecs) a more specific recognition of gender debates would have been expected. However, throughout the book there is some recognition of the impact of capitalist penetration on the nature of gender relations, particularly in the field of artisan craft production, and women's involvement in formal politics. In the latter case Clarke highlights how the adoption of 'traditional' forms of politics through the *usos y costumbres* system has sidelined women. The gendered nature of community construction is hinted at in the conclusion (p.256), but this could have been developed further.

The book is well produced and has over 40 figures and tables. Apart from the rather confusing linkage diagrams discussed above, these figures, many of which are maps, complement the text and really highlight the spatial distribution of social, political and economic and natural features. While not advocating an environmental deterministic approach, it is clear that the physical environment has been a crucial factor in framing Oaxaca's development. There are also 15 photographs illustrating the variety of landscapes and human activities in the state.

For any reader interested in rural Mexico, Colin Clarke has done a great service in bringing together such a wide range of material to highlight the development of a particular state. While the insistence on the category of 'peasant' may not be appropriate in all cases, the book provides a detailed and thought-provoking insight into how national and international economic and political processes have been filtered through the local Oaxacan context. Such empirically-rich overviews are crucial for an understanding of current global processes, and the debates regarding the historical basis of 'globalisation'.

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