

Book Review

– *Kuxlejal Politics. Indigenous Autonomy, Race, and Decolonizing Research in Zapatista communities*, by Mariana Mora. University of Texas, 2017.

One of the most repetitive critiques of indigenous studies in Latin America during the twentieth century was that a paternalistic voice controlled the amplitude and diversity of ways in which the “indigenous subjects” were studied by urban intellectuals. However, the de-colonial vision developed in recent years in the academy has not just stimulated a multiplicity of points of view but also has contributed to deactivating the old paternalist/colonial relationship between researchers and “subjects of study”. *Kuxlejal Politics* is one of the most remarkable examples because Mora does not limit her analysis to examine Zapatista indigenous autonomy from a de-colonial framework, but also decolonizes her own research methods. This epistemological procedure plays a crucial role because it reinforces the contributions of this study to the understanding of Zapatista communities.

After offering in the first chapter a brief but substantial historical frame of the development of the Zapatista communities in Chiapas (Mexico) since the uprising in 1994 to 2003 when they changed their socio-political organization from Aguascalientes, which will be renamed as Caracoles within the new system of *Juntas del Buen Gobierno*, Mora explains in Chapter 2 how and why she implements a decolonizing logic in her research. Firstly, she illustrates how the standard anthropological approaches to indigenous communities from Chiapas have failed by following thoughts attached to the notion of an inclusive Nation-State and a Eurocentric Marxist way of thinking. Secondly, and maybe the most important achievement of this chapter, she becomes aware of the impact that her research could have on Zapatista communities (pp. 48-49). Having clarified this, Mora displayed the negotiations, interviews and collective talks that she participated in with some Zapatista communities to understand the motivations, contributions, and solidarities that lie behind the movement and its organization. Witnessing a collective talk in which women share their past experiences that made them join the Zapatista struggle, Mora observes how these women become agents of their own history through their *testimonios* and more beyond being victims of an oppressive legacy.

In Chapter 3, Mora introduces her analysis into the *testimonios* as a source to expose complaints about distributive injustice, mechanisms of subjugation through racialization and sexual violence. Using testimonies, Mora reconstructs how the dehumanization of the indigenous population continued operating as an oppressive system promoted by the *mestizo* Nation-building project in the post-1910 revolutionary period. As in most of the book, the author moves her examination from a denunciatory position towards a proactive one. This is how the author presents the Diocesan Women's Group (CODIMUJ) and Mexican Association of Women (AMMAC) as entities that not only try to help women subjugated by racialization and sexual violence but also turn them into agents of their own change.

In Chapter 4, Mora extends her analysis of the link between autonomous communities and land. Providing a historical frame of *Zapatista* agrarian reform and the function of the state program PROCEDA which since 1992 helped in the process of individual land titling, Mora theorizes around the notion of *likel kuxlejal* which is the integration among subjects, communities and land. After recounting specific stories of dispossessions, the author arrives at the main point of the chapter, which is the construction of a territorial sense of belonging. According to the indigenous viewpoint, belonging to the land and the right to inhabit it is a notion that the individuals developed through working with the land for their own livelihood and to support the community. The autonomous municipalities shape a strong territorial sense of belonging through communal assistance related to a legacy of dispossessions and racialized systems. This is how the *Zapatista* communities continue remembering that they fought for these lands. As Mora pointed out: “the action of working the land is embedded in *kuxlejal* politics and plays a central role in the production of meanings associated with indigeneity among Tzeltal and Tojolabal support bases” (p. 144).

In Chapter 5, Mora analyses from a feminist perspective female participation not just in domestic life but also in the organization's political decision making. The author introduces an examination of the struggle of the feminine collective as a confrontation with gendered coloniality. For that purpose, Mora develops the notion of politicization of domestic life facing “traditions” or “customs” that gendered that identity formation and limited a more authentic autonomy. A good example of a process of decolonization of daily life is provided when the author explains the notion of *parejo* applied to couples (p. 164). This idea consists of a Mayan Tzeltal philosophical concept that reshapes the conventional power relations between men and women from the construction of a particular duality around the couples and their domestic life which erases stereotyped gender inequalities.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Mora explains in detail the structure of government used by various *Zapatista* communities. Under the concept of *mandar obedeciendo* (lead by obeying, a concept also described by Grisaffi in his book on participatory democracy in Bolivia), she illustrates how the notion of

authority through the members of the councils and assemblies is conceived. According to this notion, chosen people hold authority rather than become authority. Following this idea, they are disrupting the old system of official authorities who, with airs of superiority, used to reproduce racialized dynamics on the indigenous towns, configuring them as people born to obey. Therefore, *mandar obedeciendo* implies listening to the people to fulfil their needs. Under this logic, governing is also an act of learning, in this case, learning the problems of the people. “To obey while governing implies complying with the needs communicated by these divine powers, the earth as well as those who inhabit it”, argues the author (p. 189). By interviewing people and witnessing local disputes in Tseltal and Tojolabal communities, Mora concludes that *mandar obedeciendo* implies the capacity to listen to what *Zapatista* community members express or like the elder Tseltal, Ernestino, calls the capacity of opening your heart to learn. Since governing is learning, the author of this book introduces an analysis of the education system in *Zapatista* communities where the same autonomous logics are applied. Showing the example of how the educational system was configured, through an assembly decision process where even children participated, Mora illuminates the praxis of *mandar obedeciendo*, one of the main novelties of this book. Undoubtedly, *Kuxlejal Politics* contributes to expand the discussion on the various autonomous projects underway in Latin America and to challenge the research methodology of the anthropology in contact with indigenous peoples.

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