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## Generating Hope, Creating Change, Searching for Community: Stories of Resistance against Globalization at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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Using the community of Maclovio Rojas located east of the city of Tijuana, Baja California, as an example, this chapter outlines the ways in which the global monopoly of “empire,” as coined by M. Hardt and A. Negri (2000), is being contested and deconstructed by local communities seeking to regenerate and dignify their everyday lives. The case of the *poblado* Maclovio Rojas stands out as a powerful example of resistance to global capitalism. Rather than see the processes of globalization as totalizing, it is important to recognize that the will and agency of the people can challenge the forces that oppress them. Residents of the community articulate a right of belonging, a right to land, and a right to a dignified future.

The community of Maclovio Rojas came together in 1988 when twenty-five families, all members of an independent union of agricultural workers called the Central Independiente de Obreros Agrícolas y Campesinos (CIOAC), took over the land on kilometer twenty-nine between Tecate and Tijuana with hopes of establishing a new *ejido* (communal land). At the time, the 197 hectares (486 acres) that now make up the community were vacant. Although the area on which Maclovio Rojas was settled was officially declared national lands in 1984 by an edict of the federal Agrarian Reform Department, and their solicitation for an *ejido* grant should have been a simple open-and-shut case, their land struggle has been anything but that.

Their movement is rooted in the complicated history of agrarian reform and land-tenure issues of Mexico (Mancillas 2002). When Lázaro Cárdenas came into power as president of Mexico in 1934, he set in place the institutional mechanisms necessary to redistribute land, a goal established by the Mexican Revolution and the Agrarian Reform Law of 1917. The Mexican poor were encouraged to solicit idle national lands for *ejidos* for the

purpose of living and farming. Until the 1980s, most Mexicans believed that the Agrarian Reform made by Cárdenas was “irreversible and final.” But in 1991, President Carlos Salinas de Gortari announced his proposal to amend Article 27 to permit the privatization of ejido land. The constitutional obligation to distribute land to qualified petitioners was immediately ended. Communal land would now be available for sale or rent to either Mexican or foreign companies (Adler-Hellman 1994). This move cleared the path for the North American Free Trade Agreement (passed in 1994), which gave multinational corporations the right to own Mexican land for profit at the expense of landless and poor Mexicans, particularly indigenous communities.

While these sorts of changes were taking place at the federal level, in 1989 (a year into the Maclovio Rojas land struggle), Ernesto Ruffo-Appel, a neo-conservative from the PAN party became governor of the state of Baja California. His first edict as governor was to endorse the *No Invasiones* campaign by warning people that he would no longer tolerate land occupations. Under his regime, the state, not the federal government, would regulate land tenure. Ruffo-Appel’s approach was to criminalize and discredit the leaders of these settlements by inventing the Crime of Instigating Forced Removal.<sup>1</sup> This made being a leader of irregular settlements a crime (Lara 2003). The legal mechanisms to control and displace families seeking lands were thus set in place, feeding into the goals and pockets of the corporate and political elite.

Globalization scholars A. Appadurai (2001), D. Barkin (2001), W. Bello (2001) and S. Sassen (1998) all have made it clear that the current global market is creating increased inequalities both within and across societies, disrupting traditional ways of life, and wreaking havoc on ecological systems. In the context of the U.S.-Mexico border region, the forces of economic globalization are making not only the political boundary all the more necessary but the demarcation between rich and poor all the starker. Some state that the U.S.-Mexico border, within the North American free trade zone, may be the closest thing to South Africa under apartheid, given the internal wage inequalities within a common region (Staudt and Coronado 2002).

While the situation is bleak, my hope lies in the fact that globalization from above—the collaboration between leading states and the main agents of capital formation—is being challenged by globalization from below—globalization that is both reactive to these developments and responsive to different impulses and influences. Globalization from below “consists of an array of transnational social forces animated by environmental concerns, human rights, hostility to patriarchy, and a vision of community based action on the unity of diverse cultures seeking an end to poverty, oppression, humiliation, and collective violence” (Falk 1993, 49).

Similarly, scholar Dirlik (1996) argues that by the early 1990s local movements, or movements to save and reconstruct local societies, had emerged as the primary expressions of resistance to domination. He states that the "local" has emerged as a site of promise in the relationship between the emergence of a global capitalism and the emergence of concern with the local as a site of resistance and liberation. Stated simply, the global affects the local, but the local also affects the global.

Many examples of this have emerged in Mexico. such as the powerful debtors' movement, El Barzon, which is made up of a group of indebted small farmers and entrepreneurs who have made waves in the political and economic spectrum of Mexico. Also, in the Eastern Sierra Madre, a school called Center for Rural Training (CESDER), aims to keep *campesinos* on their land through the teaching of land-management techniques and small-scale craft production and marketing. This goal—rebuilding an independent campesino economy and community—runs directly counter to the policies of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Mexican government, which call for the development of larger, more profitable enterprises on the land. Local governments, which see the modest efforts of CESDER graduates as threatening, have tried to shut the center down (Barkin, Ortiz, and Rosen 1997).

In Cuernavaca, Morelos, the Frente Cívico Pro-Defensa del Casino de la Selva is against the building of a COSTCO in the Casino de la Selva. Their slogan, *por el derecho que tenemos a decidir la ciudad, el pais y el mundo que queremos* (for the right that we have to decide the city, the country and world that we want), is a powerful testament to the will of the people. In San Salvador de Atenco, in the state of Mexico, campesinos were able to halt the construction of an airport, among other projects, that would have invaded their communal land holdings. Finally, the communities of San Juan de Guadalupe y Tierra Blanca in the state of San Luis Potosi are in a struggle to defend their communal land, which the state government wants to take over to build a shopping center that would include the symbol of the McDonalds transnational monopoly.

One example of globalization from below is the project of autonomy. G. Esteva and M. S. Prakash (1998) argue that the struggle for autonomy seems to be but the new name of an old notion of power: people's power, exercising unprecedented impetus in its contemporary forms at the grassroots level. Maclovio Rojas is a path-breaking example of this type of movement. With the following narrative given by Hortensia, the community president, who has been involved with the struggle since its inception, one can see the community's evolution.

With time Maclovio Rojas has grown, and as a community, we decided that we couldn't wait until the lands were "officially" granted to us because the kids

growing in the community need schooling, the adults need places to grow. Our first objective was the land, to harvest it, to raise animals and since that didn't happen and we had the land, we had to do something. We decided to distribute the land and create an economic, cultural and educational infrastructure. This is when the ideas for all of our projects emerged, and in 1992 we built our first elementary school because we couldn't let the kids be without schooling. In all of these years, we have looked for ways to create better living situations for the residents of Maclovio Rojas.

Hortensia's statement attests to the transformative vision of the Maclovianos and the clarity with which they are claiming rights to the land to live and survive. Furthermore, the creation of a community-run infrastructure is apparent in the various projects that have been completed: they have constructed schools, a women's center, and a two-story cultural center called the Aguascalientes.<sup>2</sup> None of these projects received the support of the state or the federal government; thus, residents actively took matters into their own hands and created these autonomous structures. In fact, the construction of the cultural center creates a link to the Zapatista movement, and Maclovianos recognize that their struggle for land is similar. Hortensia describes the influence:

In 1994 the Chiapas movement emerged, and in 1995 Marcos invited the Mexican people to open up other Aguascalientes. We feel identified with that struggle because it's the same thing, the land struggle is the same, and we are being persecuted by the government too. So, we decided that we were going to create an Aguascalientes. It was built in 1995 soon after Subcomandante Marcos had announced it, and we invited many national and international organizations to show that this was going to be a place for all of these organizations to meet, that the space was for everybody. A representative from the FZLN of Chiapas came, and it was huge, a lot of media was here, and I was even named the Subcomandante Hortensia, so you can imagine the government's reaction. The army came into the community, invading people's homes, and made a huge mess. I was arrested soon after all of this happened. But the Aguascalientes is a symbol of struggle because, although we don't have everything we wanted, it's a symbol because that's where we have our meetings, and from there, all of our ideas for our projects emerge. I don't know if subcomandante Marcos knows or not, but we have fulfilled our commitment to building the space. By being connected to that movement, we have created more problems for ourselves for two reasons. One is that we are playing with the interests of the transnational economy; and two, we have been attacked for being luchadores who accomplish things with actions not just words. We are showing the government that the people are intelligent, that we are dignified and that we have rights.

This powerful testament brings to light the visionary skills of the leadership, and the links that Hortensia makes between the Zapatista movement in Chiapas with Maclovio Rojas demonstrate the ways in which communi-

ties across Mexico are actively responding to the conditions created by global capital. In Maclovio Rojas, the idea of autonomy emanated as a response to the denial of basic human services imposed by the state government. Continuously in my conversations with the women and other community residents, I saw that the people had come together because the government didn't provide for them; it was out of necessity, not out of an ideological political conviction that happened before they settled on the land. The idea of communes (in the United States) for example, emerged because groups of people were seeking alternative ways of life. Here, residents simply want what has been denied to them: housing, education, and health care. Their solution: doing it themselves.

For example, community resident Sylvia says,

I think it's created here out of necessity. One comes here needing land, but once you're here, you start seeing . . . it's like when you enter a kitchen, and maybe you have an idea about what you're going to cook, but once you start, you see something else, and you see another idea about what you want to make. I didn't use to have so many ideas, and now that I've been here, I've woken up. If you've never struggled in this way or lived in this way, then you are confronted with something new, but it stems from one's need, which makes one strong to face whatever may come. This is what has kept me here.

Elizabeth adds,

Because of the need that we have for somewhere to live, to be able to leave something to our children, something for the future. That's my feeling; we are in need of a place to live. That's why we have stayed so long, because we need it.

Hortensia also argues,

Necessity has made the community autonomous because, although we have the same rights as all Mexicans because we pay taxes, we are denied everything. If the government doesn't give us what we need, then they obligate us to organize ourselves. So, we built our schools, we created a sports field, and we did it all working together. This is why we are autonomous; we haven't been given absolutely anything but problems. The government treats us like delinquents, even if we are better off than other communities.

In creating this space, Maclovio Rojas has become autonomous and a model for change. However, this indignation has come with a cost. Because Maclovio Rojas sits on prime industrial real estate, the government and transnational corporations have a keen interest in gaining access to their land. Subsequently, the prolonged sixteen-year struggle has been intense. As the residents have struggled to create their community and attempted to move their projects forward, the reality of repression has been talked about

repeatedly. This has been especially felt by the leading organizers, where two leaders are currently in hiding, and two are in jail. The government has threatened to evict the community physically on a number of occasions. Luz explains why:

There are a lot of interests that the government has here. The lands have a lot of value, so we have more problems with them because they want to build state housing or factories here.

Hortensia adds,

There are millions of dollars at stake. We are in a strategic point where the boulevard 2000 is going to pass, and the interests of the transnational companies are there. Since we are an organized community, we serve as a bad example because we might wake the consciousness of the people. We can have it all if we organize ourselves, and the government doesn't want that, and that's why Nicolasa is in jail and we [the leaders] are forced to be outside of the community so that the organization can fall and the government can meet their goal of bringing us down.

Dora shares,

The government doesn't like [Maclovio Rojas] because it is an example for other communities. The governor gets paid to build schools, and here our payment has been made by the sacrifice of the people. The government doesn't want other communities to know, from our example, that they too can organize themselves. Why would we need governors or presidents then if the people came together to organize? It's all a business for the government. The governor travels from place to place using our money, and they don't do anything for us.

The reality of the repressive pressure placed by the government is reflected in the various stories shared by the residents. On one occasion, local police forcefully tried to take over the homes of several residents, and they defended their homes with their bodies. Others in the community began dragging furniture onto the highway, blocking the passageway and causing severe disruption. Teresa remembers that

the police were beating people up. I saw that. The police would grab the people's belongings and throw them into a pile of mud that had gathered from the rain. They were mad because we had blocked the highway.

Eventually, the local police were called off, but instances such as these have been common for residents. In essence, the community is the ultimate symbol of resistance, and the local and state officials are scrambling to get con-

trol of their lands to appease the interests of outside corporations vying for a place to build their maquiladoras.

What I would like to highlight in the case of Maclovio Rojas is the role of women in the struggle. Women were the ones who were *al frente*, or in front, leading the movement and actions. Various women commented on this topic. Dora says,

Women are the ones who work the most here. They are the ones who support the most. If there is a march or something, the majority are always women that attend; if there's some sort of confrontation with the government, the women are the toughest. You see more women and children out in support because they're more courageous. The majority of women who come here are courageous and daring; the men are more reserved.

Juana agrees,

There are many single moms here who work in the maquilas, and when we have sit-ins or actions, you will see that the majority are women, and I think the women here are very willing to enter (*entronas*) the struggle.

Maria offers her own thoughts:

Since I've lived in [Maclovio Rojas], I've always seen the participation of women. Women are the ones who come out to defend, especially since most of the problems emerge during the day-time, and the housewives are at home, and the men are working outside of the community. The fact that women are participating more, well, women have always been involved in the *lucha* (struggle) because it's their home that they are defending. It's not a game, and they won't allow their roof to be taken from them. Men are more involved in the construction part of the projects, the heavier work, the physical work, and women support by making food and sometimes help build too, but more than anything, women are the ones who attend the demonstrations and protests. It has always been said that la *lucha* of [Maclovio Rojas] has always belonged to the women; they are the ones who are in the forefront.

This articulation of women's leadership within the community is particularly important when one recognizes that the stories of women leading social movements often remain untold. The fact that the *casa de la mujer*, or the women's center, has been created and offers support and classes for and by women of the community is an important tribute to the womanist vision of Maclovio Rojas. Yet, as is admitted by leaders of the community, the struggle for land and the constant battle it creates often usurp the need to further engage in issues that affect women, particularly domestic violence, double workloads, and the culture of patriarchy that afflict both men and women in the community. Furthermore, while women

don't necessarily name themselves as feminists, I believe that the ways in which they articulated what they had gained by living in Maclovio Rojas gives voice to their evolution as feminist political subjects. For example, Paula states,

I've learned to defend myself so that they [the government] don't take what is ours. These lands are mine, and just because the government wants them doesn't mean they can take them away from me. I will defend them because I value everything that I have here.

Sylvia shares,

I've learned to defend myself in a certain way to vocalize myself a bit more, if I don't know something now, well, I used to know less, so I've learned a lot. I will defend my property and my children because this is something for my children.

Juana shares what she values most in Maclovio Rojas:

Well, the most important is having your land and a place to live. I see people who rent, and its terrible because I have lived it, and here I have a place to live where no one tells me how to be. Before I was like a ball jumping from place to place, and my mother-in-law always had something to say, and that's a supergain to have your own land, and you can say it's yours. I've gained a lot of confidence being here, a lot of self-confidence. *Yo sola valerme por mi misma* (I alone have to make a living for myself), with my children, and I have learned that by myself, I can get ahead. If I would have lived in another community, I wouldn't have been involved in sit-ins and marches, and so forth. In another place this wouldn't happen.

Teresa says that she's learned

to be more courageous. I'm not scared of the government anymore. I can defend myself, because in the beginning, you do get scared, but as time passes, you learn more, you have more love towards what you have, and you even start getting more angry. I feel good helping my community.

In summary, when long-time resident Teresa, who was involved in the original land takeover and endured the harsh conditions of settlement, tells me, "Thanks to god, I've been happy, and I will be satisfied with my little piece of land. This is where I am going to die," I can recognize the powerful model that residents have created. The experience of Maclovio Rojas is but one example of people collectively coming together to challenge "empire" to put an end to their repressive conditions and to courageously create an alternative for themselves. They simply want to have a piece of land to safely raise their families.



In August of 2003, the Zapatistas announced new plans for the structure of their own autonomous communities in connection with other movements working from the ground up. Their plan, Realidad-Tijuana (REALti), is described by Subcomandante Marcos:

Confronting the Plan Puebla-Panama in particular and in general against all global plans that fragment the Mexican nation, the EZLN launches the Plan Realidad-Tijuana. The plan consists of bringing together all of the resistances of our country and, with them, recreating, from below, the Mexican nation. (EZLN 2003)

Similarly, at the World Social Forum held in Mumbai, India, in January 2006, author Arundhati Roy called upon all of the intellectuals, activists, and political leaders present to create a "globalization of resistance." I believe this theme of globalizing resistance is extremely important during a time when the accelerated rate of globalization has to be met with an accelerated movement of resistance, and Maclovio Rojas is an important part of this dialogue.

## NOTES

1. Fraccion III del articulo 226 del Codigo Penal del Estado. Maclovio Rojas Fact sheet, prepared by Globalifobic@s, 2001.

2. In August 1994, the Zapatistas convened a national democratic convention to open a national dialogue with "civil society." To host the six thousand people, the Zapatistas built an "auditorium," which they called an *Aguascalientes*, evoking the convention held in that city of central Mexico during the revolution of 1910. Several more appeared throughout the communities in resistance in Chiapas. In August 2003, the EZLN announced the closure of the *Aguascalientes* and the opening of the *Caracoles*, which will be the '*Casas de la Junta de Buen Gobierno* (literally translated, this means "homes of the good government").

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