



Oaxaca Times

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Taste of Oaxaca!

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The Myth of Property

By Sam Lowry

I heard a story recently that took place in Oaxaca but that might have happened anywhere (and probably has). An American lady wanting to buy a house before she had received residency asked a Mexican friend (or so she thought) to help out by putting the property in her name. Naïve to the point of idiotic, you might say; but aren't we all? Happy with her new abode, the *Americana* went back home for a few weeks, and came back to find her Mexican *comadre* living in the house, as its legal owner. Without a leg to stand on, the American lady wound up out in the cold; or rather (since this is Mexico), out in the hot.

The above occurrence may strike the reader as a dirty trick played upon a hapless *gringa*, and indeed it was; but does it really come as any great surprise? This little tale (which I am assured is authentic) nicely underlines the strange, faintly absurd way in which, when it comes to possessions that won't fit in the back of a pick-up, it is only a piece of paper that determines ownership. Of course, nations are founded on pieces of paper too, and it's only paper (cash or check, birth certificate or title deed) that enables us to take ownership of anything at all in this world. Once it was all about territory: the patch of earth one chose to live on and/or cultivate. Now it's all about paper, or more precisely, the letters and numbers written down on it.

Once upon a time, land was something that "belonged" to no one, and in such a bygone past, the idea of personal property on such a grand scale was inconceivable. From such a "primitive" or tribal perspective, logically (as with animals), Earth or any part of it couldn't ever belong to the creatures that lived on it. On the contrary, the creatures belonged to Earth, just as fleas belong to a dog, and not the dog to the fleas (admittedly the fleas may hold a different perspective!).

But then, the idea of claiming a piece of Earth as one's own (in terms of actual property, owner's rights, etc) was irrelevant, and territory was "claimed" by the simple

act of living on it. One built one's habitation there, and it went without saying that such habitations belonged to the person who built them, just as an egg belongs to the chicken that lays it. The land beneath and around that habitation might have had to be constantly defended, but there was no higher law (besides that of nature) to protect or compensate the inhabitant in the event of a stronger outside force taking it from him. It was simply survival of the fittest, and the best way to stay fit and survive in such a world was to remain in constant vigilance, and in harmony with the Earth; specifically, one's own little corner of it.

The spanking new, absurdly post-modernist zócalo is an example of this dark principle at work — desperately insecure, unsophisticated and profoundly ungenerous people in positions of power deliberately deface something that ought to belong to everyone.

Nowadays, since tribes have given way to dysfunctional families and to the greater "tribe" of society, our loyalty and dependence has gone with it, and the Earth has become a commodity for people (and governments) to fight over — not out of any basic survival drive but in a never-ending bid for power and social status. To many native indigenous people (American Indians or Australian aborigines), the land was something to respect and nurture, to live off, learn from and commune with. To the modern sensibility, land is something to conquer and claim. It's roughly the difference between courtship and rape.

Since "primitive" peoples were married

to their land, in a deep, psychological sense, when the terrain they lived off was conquered, they were conquered along with it. They couldn't simply be shoved aside and relocated, they had to be eradicated, or at least (more to the point) their awareness of and respect for the sacred, living Earth had to be. Such respect was a supreme impediment to the capitalist drive for property, a strange and relentless drive, to say the least: the will to conquer. Since humans are animals however, it is presumably a "natural" drive, albeit one distorted beyond recognition; it suggests the territorial instinct gone wild, as, for example, when a sexually insecure male seeks to seduce and bed down (or rape and murder, in extreme cases) as many women as possible in order to repress the incipient terror of impotency, or worse, homosexuality. Likewise, the insecurity of the male ego demands not merely that he protect his own territory, but that he conquer and pillage everyone else's too.

Dogs like to urinate on every post they pass to leave their mark, so extending their "status" in the most basic, geographical fashion. Dogs are also known to urinate on food when they are too full to eat any more, thereby ensuring that no one else gets it



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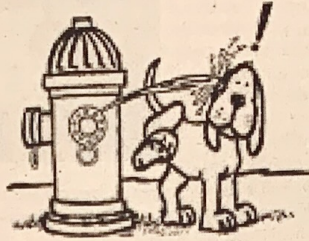
either. Humans have much in common with their canine brothers, so it's perhaps no surprise they are the best of friends (though not in Mexico).

The spanking new, absurdly post-modernist zócalo may be an example of this same dark principle at work. It shows desperately insecure, unsophisticated and profoundly ungenerous people in positions of power (Oaxaca's "top dogs"), who set out to deliberately deface something that, by rights, ought to belong to everyone. Why? Perhaps simply to stake their claim upon it, and mark it as their territory.

Once upon a time, there was no need for such shenanigans. A hunter-gatherer man was happy to satisfy his wife and raise his family alongside her, secure at the center of his little world, in his role as its prime provider and co-creator. There was no need (besides battling neighboring tribes) for the husband-father to prove his worth or prowess, outside of his capacity to provide for his family, and his ability to work the Earth, bringing forth her bounty and enjoying it.

These days, we have created a much bigger world (society) to come between ourselves and the Earth, and all our atten-

tion is taken up in service of (or struggle against) that society. Our aspirations are now immeasurably higher, but they are none the nobler for it. It's hard to imagine a worse husband/father than Elvis must have been — unless it be Michael Jackson — but these are the people that are adulated by



our society, and which many young people aspire to become. These individuals became the center of attention for the whole world, and lost their own centers in the process. The less sense of inner worth we have, the more desperately we seek validation from outside.

Where once upon a time a man's value was measured by his connectedness to the Earth, now it is measured by his "independence" from it, by his estrangement. Riches that were once embodied by the mountains and trees are now stamped onto scraps of paper and stuck in filing cabinets. Where once we had roots that went deep into the Earth, now the slightest breeze can carry us away.

In olden times, they used to say that the king, the land, and the people were one. The king served his people, the people served the land, and the Earth bestowed its riches on them all. Nowadays, in a dog-eat-dog world of industry, in which the Earth is just real estate for development, it seems as if the "real king" is the guy who gets to piss over everything, so no one else can enjoy it. ■

Sam Lowry is currently living in Oaxaca and is content with his underdog status. He welcomes your feedback.

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The Zocalo and Other Topics of Discord

by Rafael Bucio

"The damage is already done," said Maestro Francisco Toledo, commenting on the recent changes to the city's center during a July 23rd protest against the zocalo renovations. After the still unfinished town square was opened to the public during the Guelaguëtza, many people were shocked to see the gray stone floor, giant metal sculptures and unwieldy cement benches. It also appeared some trees were missing. Toledo was quick to give an artist's opinion of the statues: horrible junk in terrible taste. The benches he called heavy, awkward and uncomfortable. "These works shouldn't be in the hands of bureaucrats, they should be supervised by a citizen council of experts," he said. In a previous speech, he threatened to tie himself to a statue in the Alameda if the authorities attempted to do the same style of renovation with the plaza next to the Cathedral.

Toledo petitioned the government to destroy the concrete benches (he brought a wooden bench to show an alternate aesthetic), to remove the sculptures and to do something about Hotel Marquez del Valle, a business has been built on the Cathedral property. He quipped, "What's next? Putting lights and sound in Monte Alban?"

Toledo's concern for preserving historic and cultural sites is justified: the 16th century ex-convent Santa Catalina de Siena is presently the temporary abode of wealthy tourists: not as a tourist attraction as such, but as the five-star hotel Camino Real. 12 years ago, ProOAX (Patrónato Pro Defensa del Patrimonio Cultural de Oaxca, A.C.), an organization Toledo started to protect the natural and cultural assets of Oaxaca, prevented the government from selling this convent to the hotel chain. Soon after, FONATUR, a semi-private tourist interest group that has been involved in scandals concerning the sale of national parks, found a

loophole. This organization used its partially public status to take ownership of the convent, then turned over its use to Camino Real for a contract of 12 years, which are almost up. FONATUR was able to do this by claiming it would boost the local economy by helping the tourist industry. Of course, Camino Real keeps all its profits.

On July 15th, ProOax petitioned the leader of the local congress, Bulmaro Rito Salinas, to help recover two of the nation's treasures: the Santa Catalina ex-convent as well as the Huatulco Bays National Park, which was converted into a grand tourist resort with cruise ship docks and golf courses during the mid 80s. This land, which belonged to the people of Huatulco, was sold in exchange for the promise of development, abundant job opportunities and ever-flowing streams of wealth. However, not



Interior of the former Santa Catalina de Siena Convent, now the Camino Real hotel

only have the promises gone unkept, Huatulco is suffering the ecological consequences. The maintenance of a golf course, for instance, uses up water supplies that residents need, while polluting the city with run-off chemicals from



Maestro Francisco Toledo speaking with the press during the July 23rd protest against the restoration of the Zócalo and particularly the concrete benches.

the treated lawns. Instead of improving the standards of living for residents, quality of life has deteriorated.

According to Mexican Law, the government owns all federal buildings, such as airports, administrative offices and hospitals, retaining the rights to buy and sell them. National property, however, meaning cultural, historic or natural sites, can never be sold legally, for any reason. It is the ambiguous definition of what constitutes national, versus federal property that has allowed such culturally valuable places to be compromised.

There is much controversy over what defines tradition, and its worth in modern society. It is also debatable whether the Earth belongs to humans, or we to it. However, there is no question that in the realm of public interest, cultural/historic sites and natural treasures, to privatize such areas for the sole benefit of a few is against common sense. ■

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