

Title of the thesis: *From the everyday to the extraordinary: Cherán as a story of hope in the midst of war*

Research question: *How have community practices, in a context of generalised violence, contributed to counter and reverse 'collective disruption' in Cherán?*

Purpose of the research

In the context of Mexico's war on drugs, a conflict that has had devastating consequences for the population and a toll of over 262,007 deaths (Rojo, 2020), the story of Cherán, an indigenous P'urhépecha community, has become a paradigmatic case of local peace and resistance.

Located in the violence-torn state of Michoacán, Cherán had been heavily affected by the activities of illegal loggers that collaborated with groups of organised crime, a condition that was further aggravated by institutional inefficiency and collusion between criminals and local authorities (Gasparello, 2018; Gómez, 2012; Atilano, 2014). In 2011, in a movement initiated by women, citizens of Cherán blockaded the town and expelled political figures and illegal loggers (Gómez, 2012). Since then, citizens have established a government of uses and customs that in 2012 was recognised constitutional by the Mexican Supreme Court (Gómez, 2012). From the creation of collective bonfires where citizens gathered during the uprising, to the development of local institutions based on P'urhépecha traditions, and the organisation of community initiatives of reforestation and artistic and educational practices, Cherán has managed to produce and successfully sustain throughout time a local form of peace (Gasparello, 2018).

The guiding concern of this dissertation was to explore the role of community practices and everyday actions in the formation and maintenance of local peace in a context of overarching active conflict. This exploration was conducted on the basis of the proposed concepts of 'collective disruption' and 'collective recovery', which aim to encompass transformations related to the experiences of war and peace along the moral, social, and legal spheres of human interaction. The underlying hypothesis of this thesis was that prolonged violence

profoundly affects society's legal, social and moral orders, and that efforts to collectively "rescue" these spheres -in the form of community practices, in the case of Cherán- contributed to overcome violence.

Research method

The epistemological stance of this study was guided by Burawoy's (1989) proposed reflexive model of science, with the use of the extended case method, while also drawing from Stake (1995) and Merriam's (1998) contributions to the qualitative approach to case studies. For data collection, narrative and semi-structured interviews were conducted, as well as document analysis.

Conclusions

Findings confirmed the hypothesis that the recovery of the social, legal, and moral spheres - together with collective agency- played a key role in the formation and maintenance of peace in Cherán. This included the creation of spaces and moments of encounter, of micro-solidarities and of seeing one another, the experience of engaging in fear collectively and in action, rather than in isolation. Moreover, in the legal sphere it involved eliciting rooted institutions in direct communication with neighborhood assemblies, the act of working collectively on tasks, and establishing a legal order on the basis of community consensus and legitimate authorities. Equally important, it found the experience of moral outrage, indignation, and the role of community mobilisers and acts of courage, as enablers of change in a community that was initially paralysed by violence.

Findings conclude the importance of context rootedness, as Cherán further highlights the strengths of peace processes "from the bottom". Moreover, this research signals the relevance of strengthening collective agency in response to the feelings of impotence and hopelessness that result from the experiences of violence and collective disruption. The recovery of small, local spaces of action can help modify the everyday experience of war, and engage citizens in

the context and with the people most immediate to them, and thus that they are more likely to have influence over. The importance of this is to experience in action the possibility to modify the local scenario they inhabit and the way in which they inhabit it, which is a crucial effort to foster feelings of hope and thus ignite action.

In this sense, Cherán not only signals that enclaves of peace can be locally created whilst in a context of overarching conflict, but rather that important steps for collective recovery can start before security and tranquility are effectively achieved in a community. In Cherán they were set in motion, among others, by experiencing fear collectively, by organising and eliciting a common front, and by making each other feel protected through joint action and acts of care. The case of Cherán offers a testimony that strengthening the social fabric, increasing spaces of civic participation, or moments of engaging with others, of expressing care and concern with one's community, are not efforts that can or should only take place after security has been achieved. These are not idyllic actions to be implemented solely in post-conflict scenarios, but rather essential efforts worth taking even as the conflict remains active. Creating however small or brief respites from violence can strengthen a community's sense of agency and of hope.

Social and scientific relevance

On the basis of this research we can argue that is of great importance to continue exploring alternatives of peace formation that engage citizens in their local contexts and that contribute to establish dynamics of peace rooted in their context, history, traditions and culture. This is particularly relevant in contexts where militarised strategies have been proven to be ineffective for the reduction of violence, or where an end of overarching conflicts does not appear in the near future. Moreover, it also highlights the value of indigenous philosophy and practices and its lessons for peacebuilding on the basis of community participation, communality, mutual help, and solidarity.

References

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