Energopolitics

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5. Guidxiguie’ (Juchitán de Zaragoza)

It would take great deal of time to describe to you the state of immorality and disorder in which the residents of Juchitán have lived since very ancient times. You know well their great excesses. You are not unaware of their depredations under the colonial regime and their attacks against the agents of the Spanish government. You know that during the centralized government they mocked the armed forces that the central power sent to repress their crimes, defeating and causing damage to it, making fun of its leaders, and scorning the local authorities. You have been witnesses to these scenes of blood and horror. — Benito Juárez, Governor of Oaxaca, addressing the State Congress (1850)

Juchitan contains about 10,000 inhabitants, being the most populous community in southern Mexico. Its inhabitants have the reputation of being a very unruly set, turbulent politicians and revolutionists. In the south, no political movement is made without weighing its opinion in the balance of success, which nearly always turns in favour of the side the Juchitecos are on. They have been in Oaxaca often, as well as in Tehuantepec, enforcing their opinions at the point of the bayonet. — Gustav Ferdinand von Tempsky, “Mitla” (1858)

Juchitán, the second town on the southern division of the isthmus, is situated on the left bank of the Dog River, 4 miles from Espinal, and 18 miles from Tehuantepec. It possesses three stores but very few substantial buildings. Its inhabitants, in number nearly 6000, are industrious and laborious; at the same time they are a warlike people, and meddle in all political struggles; which occur constantly in this unhappy country. — M. G. Hermesdorff, “On the Isthmus of Tehuantepec” (1862)

The juchitecos are renowned as the most ferocious, untamable fighters in Mexico when it comes to the defense of their own rights against petty tyrants. They are proud of their unbroken record of loyalty to the causes of democracy, equality and justice throughout
the turbulent history of Mexico. . . . Juchitecos never call themselves mexicanos or even oaxaqueños; they are first and always juchitecos. —Miguel Covarrubias, Mexico South (1946)

Tecos Valientes

March 10, 2013. In the bright light and rising heat of late morning, friends and supporters of the Asamblea Popular del Pueblo Juchiteco (APPJ) are gathering in the square that commemorates the Battle of Juchitán on September 5, 1866.¹ That battle remains legendary in the city today: the men and women of Juchitán—many armed with little more than machetes, palos, and stones—rallied to drive an invading force of 2,500 well-armed French troops out of the city, slaughtering hundreds as they retreatd through rains and swamps toward their garrison in Tehuantepec.² The battle ended the French intervention in the isthmus and also helped to extend an already well-seasoned Juchiteco reputation for fierceness in battle against “petty tyrants” and foreign invaders.

People are gathered in small groups chatting; the mood is upbeat and charged. The APPJ is the newest of the asambleas (popular assemblies) that have formed in response to el proyecto eólico (“the wind project,” as it sometimes called), in this case specifically to resist the Gas Natural Fenosa wind park project being built in Playa Vicente.³ Two weeks ago, on February 25, they inaugurated their resistance by means of a blockade along the highway between Juchitán and Playa Vicente, cutting off one of the major access roads for equipment and construction personnel to move. Today is the asamblea’s first major march and rally, and many of the most active members of the resistance to wind development, the inconformes or antiéolicos, as they call themselves, are circulating. Alejandro López and Mariano López Gómez, who have often been identified in the local media as the leaders of the movement (though they fervently disown the title “leader”), are there talking to a group of men from Álvaro Obregón. Carlos Sánchez, a founder of community radio station Radio Totopo,⁴ who is known locally as Beedxe’ (jaguar), is speaking with some compañeros from UCIZONI, including Nacho, one of Carlos Beas’s lieutenants, whom we have met on several other occasions. The organizers of the local #YoSoy132 chapter are present as well.⁵ But the majority of those gathering, perhaps numbering two hundred and growing, seem to be normal working-class Juchitec@s—men, women, and children of all ages, many obviously campesin@s, fisherfolk, and obreros.

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We talk with the Álvaro Obregón delegation for a while. Although this march is nominally focused against Gas Natural Fenosa, the standoff with Mareña Renovables is still very much on people’s minds in Juchitán. A fisherman named José tells us that everything is very calm at the Álvaro blockade now. The company and the police are staying away.

He shrugs, “Maybe they’ve given up. I don’t know.”

Nacho shakes his head. He thinks this is all just part of Mareña’s strategy. “They won’t try force again for a while because they failed last time. They’ll try diplomacy instead and involve the politicians. They are already talking about doing a public consulta [consultation], but it’s just more deception. If they do it, they’ll be sure to conclude there is no opposition to the park projects.”

He goes on to tell us that the Mareña conflict has been accentuating a rift within the Cué regime between the allies of former governors Carrasco and Murat. The Murat faction wants a diplomatic solution; the Carrasco faction is reputedly ready to use violence to displace those protesting the park and blockading the access roads. “So we’ll see.”

Nacho shrugs. He says, “ucizoni is just working to keep the communities informed and morale high and to alert people not to participate in any false consultas.”

Around eleven o’clock the group begins to assemble into parade form. A line of children lead the way, holding up handwritten yellow-and-white signs with slogans such as “We were never consulted and do not want the proyecto eólico. Get out Union Fenosa!”; “We are building autonomía not wind parks”; “Out with the political parties and the leaders who sell our patria”; and “Viva Juchitán, death to the bad government, no to the proyecto eólico.” They are followed by a campesino holding a large Mexican flag. Other, larger antieólico banners follow, as do more children with signs. A small red Ford with an enormous speaker strapped to its roof leads chants in Zapotec and Spanish, for instance the ever-popular “Zapata vive, vive! La lucha sigue, sigue!” Some men ride bicycles and motorbikes; some women carry sticks and machetes, others carry children. We are even joined for a while by another flag carrier on horseback.

And so we march through the heart of Juchitán to the Zócalo and the Palacio Municipal, the ucizoni members handing out colorful posters to passersby, which read, “No al Saqueo Trasnacional!” and depict a caricatured red-haired Spanish conquistador, with a Mareña flag fluttering behind him, offering a hand mirror to three istmeño campesinos in exchange for their land.

“And where have I heard that before?” one of the campesinos muses.
FIGURE 5.1. Antieólica march, Juchitán

FIGURE 5.2. Antieólica march, Juchitán
By the time the parade pauses at the Palacio, its numbers have perhaps doubled. Several speakers take turns denouncing Gas Fenosa and the wind parks in general. But just as much venom is directed toward the political parties and their local leaders, “these cowards and traitors, who have deceived the people and sold the land of Juchitán to the foreign invaders.”

The march proceeds into the heat of the afternoon through the Séptima Sección (seventh district), the heart of indigenous, working-class Juchitán, where the men fish and the women clean and sell fish. It, too, is a social space of legend, the crucible of countless uprisings, relentless in its radiation of indigenous identity and sovereignty, a place where, we have been told, “middle-class Juchitecos are afraid to go.”

On the way, we discover there is another anthropologist among us, Melanie McComsey, a PhD candidate from the University of California San Diego, who is doing her dissertation research on bilingualism in Juchitán. Melanie confesses that she did not really know what the march was about, but two of her neighbors in the Séptima asked her to attend. She senses that the neighborhood is very divided over the parks. Many of the fisherfolk are strongly critical of the parks, but there are vocal supporters as well, including a woman
whose aunt lives in La Ventosa and rented her land to the wind companies and who has instilled a lot of proeólico thinking in her niece. And then there are others who took money from Gas Fenosa early on who now feel guilty about it.

Around two o’clock we arrive at the point on the highway where the road branches off east toward Playa Vicente. About fifty meters before that, we pass five pieces of wood neatly spaced across the road. While the chunks of wood are sizable, they are not so big as to prevent car traffic. This is a symbolic boundary as much as a physical barrier.

Ten meters past that, there are a number of vehicles, some of which are more permanent elements of the blockade, which can be moved into position quickly. There are also vehicular trophies from previous skirmishes with the wind companies in Álvaro and Juchitán, including a large Caterpillar tractor and a white Toyota truck emblazoned with the logo of a Veracruz-based geotechnical services company. Other vehicles are there for the occasion, including one that is dispensing plates of food to the tired marchers.

As the wind whips around us, men take turns hammering away at the truck with palos while the crowd watches and eats lunch. First the windows are broken, then the front windshield is caved in. The front bumper is pulled partly off. There are some calls from the crowd of “¡Fuego! ¡Fuego!” but we come to understand from chatting with other marchers that a decision has already been made that the truck is too valuable to burn. At the least, some of the men want to strip it of its engine before burning it. Some boys throw rocks at the truck’s
already-caved-in windows, which ricochet dangerously, earning the disapproval of an older woman, who chases them off, much to the mirth of their friends.

Just when the older men seem to have tired of battering the truck, a wiry young man wearing sunglasses, a tight blue shirt, and jeans rolled to midcalf seize the largest palo available, a rusted metal bar more than half his height. Wielding it with both hands and cursing in Zapotec, he deals the truck such blows as it has never felt before, launching himself off the ground with some of his strikes. It is a magnificent performance of the guerrero (warrior) Juchiteco. A dozen or so swings later, one of the older men decides the truck has had enough and disarms his young comrade, tossing the palo into the truck’s bed without further ceremony.

“Those Scenes of Blood and Horror”

Both essentialist and constructivist readings of Juchiteco ferocity are tempting. On the one hand, it is not just in Oaxaca City and Mexico City that one hears frequent talk of the fierce, ungovernable istmeños of whom the
Juchitecan warrior is the exemplary figure. This subjectivity is actively indexed and performed locally as well. The image of Juchitán as a city of heroic freedom fighters—home of the last pure Zapotecs, of the Amazon-like matriarchs who invert the patriarcho-colonial hierarchy, of people who have never accepted the imposition of any foreign power whether imperial or governmental or capitalist—is an identitarian discourse that echoes in the restaurants and cantinas, in the mototaxis, at the velas, in the market, everywhere across the bustling city of seventy thousand people. Sometimes it is invoked ironically or with detached amusement; but it is also very often articulated sincerely as a way of making sense of the peculiar political (dis)order of the city, which remains openly, if unevenly, defiant of Mexican and Oaxacan authorities. The Juchitecan political elite today, regardless of faction, seem entirely ready to strike bargains with external powers over land and resources in order to bring themselves revenue and leverage. On the other hand, their status exists in a delicate ecology of neighborhood-level and labor union political networks that militate against national and transnational elite alliances, occupying land and blockading roads as a constant friction against flows of capital and influence.

At the same time, many scholars in Mexico and elsewhere have rightly observed that ethnotypes of lawless and violent indigenous disposition elaborate a colonial politics that validates both the surveillance and repression of indigenous peoples and the law, justice, and modernity of settler governance. As Povinelli has argued, even more recent postcolonial politics of “multicultural” governance—which promise recognition of indigenous subjectivity within the confines of national law and culture—continue to police and hierarchize tolerated and nontolerated modes of indigeneity. Mexico’s mestizaje nationalism has exemplified this paradox since the revolutionary Constitution of 1917, a document that promises extensive political entitlements to Mexico’s indigenous peoples, including rights to ancestral land and to self-governance. Yet these entitlements have always borne the mark of settler paternalism, have been at best partially institutionalized, and have always coexisted with both violent and nonviolent suppressions of indigenous culture, identity, and authority. Indeed, in a certain sense, Mexican mestizaje nationalism foreshadowed the contradictions of multicultural recognition well in advance of other settler liberalisms. Juchitán’s particular position on the fringe of colonial and postcolonial empires helps to illuminate those contradictions and to make sense of how indigenous resistencia (resistance) and refusal has come to be made the ethnological soul of the city.
That soul has been many centuries in the shaping according to historical and archaeological accounts. Zapotec presence in the isthmus is generally dated to the mid-fourteenth century as part of a migration/invasion that was likely driven by violent encroachment from Mixtec (and later, Aztec) populations into the Valley of Oaxaca. The Zapotecs, in turn, warred with and partly displaced the Huaves, Chontales, and Zoques, who already inhabited the isthmus. Between roughly 1350 and 1450, Zapotec civilization had two major political centers among its city-states, with the fortress at Guiengola (just north of contemporary Tehuantepec) coming to rival and eventually surpass Zaachila’s prominence in the Oaxacan Valley. In 1490 the Zapotec lord Cosijoeza moved his capital from Zaachila to Guiengola, in part because of pressure from Aztecs and highland Mixtecs, which completed the transfer of political and cultural authority to the south. Still, the pull of the isthmus was likely as strong as the push from the valley. The resource-rich southern isthmus was already a trading center, and Tehuantepec had established economic importance, supplying the rest of Oaxaca with salt. Historians and archaeologists of precolonial Oaxaca suggest that the Aztecs’ move to dominate the Oaxacan Valley at the turn of the sixteenth century and to extend their empire as far as Tehuantepec was motivated principally by a desire to guarantee control over the Central American trade routes passing through the isthmus. Still, it is remembered in Juchitán that Guiengola never fell to the Aztecs’ siege, and only a marriage between the Aztec and Zapotec ruling lineages ended the conflict. Only two decades later, the Spanish invasion rapidly unmade the Aztec empire, and so it remains the local sentiment in the isthmus that they were never truly subjects of the Aztecs.

The Spanish arrived in the isthmus soon thereafter, chasing gold and war. Hernán Cortés’s brutal lieutenant Pedro de Alvarado arrived in Tehuantepec in 1522—fresh from leading the destruction of Tenochtitlan less than a year beforehand—and organized the Christian conversion of the last Zapotec kings of Guiengola—Cosijoeza and his son, Cosijopii—along with nominal Zapotec acceptance of Spanish hegemony. But the local authority of Zapotec caciques remained relatively undisturbed insofar as they were willing to assist the Spanish in their efforts of wealth extraction; Cosijopii, for example, remained the cacique of Tehuantepec until his death in 1563. Cortés quickly identified the isthmus as one of the most potentially profitable parts of New Spain, and he maneuvered to have the encomiendas awarded to him when he was granted the position of Marquis del Valle centered there. In addition to gold and silver mining, by 1528 Cortés had built in Tehuantepec the
largest shipbuilding enterprise anywhere in New Spain to help export the livestock raised on his several *haciendas marquesanas*.

As elsewhere in the Spanish colonies, disease, corvée labor, resource extraction, and Christianity had massive effects on precolonial cultures, forcefully dissolving precolonial social institutions; challenging worldviews, cultural practices, and languages; and helping to generate *el indio* as a composite subject of salvation, labor, and violence. Based on records of indigenous tributaries to the Spanish crown, John Tutino calculates that there was an 85 percent decrease in the indigenous population in the isthmus between 1520 and 1570, a population that would continue to shrink until the middle of the seventeenth century. Yet, at the same time, the Spanish cultural presence remained limited in the isthmus, which reduced the pressure of assimilation. As many of the Spaniards’ colonial economic ventures failed over the course of the sixteenth century, the direct exploitation of istmeño resources abated as well. Tutino writes:

By 1560 the force of the conquistadorial incursion into the Isthmus had diminished. The placer deposits of gold were not generating profit. The shipyards were closed. Other interests guaranteed that Acapulco would become the principal Pacific port north of Panama. For a time, heavy cargos were transported ocean-to-ocean across the Isthmus, but in fifty years, even this previously important sector became a vestige of its former self. The region became increasingly marginal, and the heirs of Cortés renounced their legal rights over Tehuantepec almost without protest.

Following the abatement of the conquistadors’ intervention in the Isthmus, a limited Spanish presence and a much-diminished indigenous population remained. In the city of Tehuantepec there was a royal judge and some Dominican friars, and they were surrounded by a small Spanish community. In 1598 this enclave included only twenty-five families. It grew to about one hundred families in the first decades of the seventeenth century but never supported a very large Spanish population. In 1742 there were no more than fifty Spanish and mestizo families in all of Tehuantepec.

Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the repartimiento system of forced labor became, as elsewhere in Mexico, the dominant form of social relation between the Spanish/mestizo and indigenous populations of the isthmus. In it, los indios were expected to deliver periodic tribute to the local Spanish alcalde mayor, a “creole functionary” position of...
According to historian Judith Francis Zeitlin, the alcaldes mayores of Tehuantepec typically demanded three repartimientos of manufactured clothing during their two years in office. This seems to have been tolerated by the Zapotecs; tributary relations to northern lords were familiar, dating to the late Aztec period. But when individual alcaldes and their indigenous cacique allies intensified their demands, violence often ensued.

The paradigmatic case was the Rebellion of Tehuantepec in 1660, when unusually harsh repartimiento demands for cotton cloth led to a protest by several thousand in Tehuantepec. The Casas Reales were set ablaze; the alcalde mayor, don Juan de Avellán, was stoned to death along with a cacique ally; and the local indigenous authorities were removed from office. For more than a year, Tehuantepec stayed in open rebellion against the crown until the forces of Oaxaca City and Mexico City were able to capture the leaders of the rebellion and subject them to a variety of brutal punishments.

The violence surrounding repartimiento was real and dramatic. Yet historians argue that repartimiento was not simply a relation of naked oppression but was also imbued with a complex moral economy involving notions of acceptable tribute and patronage. At least some Spanish religious and secular authorities were also concerned about abuse of Native labor power. The istmeños in turn contested Spanish authority continuously throughout the repartimiento era and seemed to maintain a strong commitment to traditional political communalism. There were many cases of indigenous cabildos (councils) being overturned when it was felt that they had become too complicit with the Spanish.

As the indigenous population finally began to rebound in the early eighteenth century, demands for indigenous political and economic autonomy became stronger. Another major riot in Tehuantepec in 1715 led to increased anxiety about Native revolt, extending to the viceroy himself. Fearing also that the Natives might simply flee their pueblos to avoid further taxation, the viceroy allowed the indigenous political leaders of Tehuantepec more voice in selecting their local cabildo authorities. As elsewhere in Mexico, the scarcity of labor and the fragility of its domination also lent Oaxaca’s indigenous peoples some agency in their negotiations with the crown.

Tehuantepec was indisputably the locus of Spanish-indigenous relations and conflict in the isthmus during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Its status as a center of colonial administration, the presence of the only Spanish and mestizo enclaves of any size in the southern isthmus, and the close working relationship between indigenous and Spanish authorities eventually
made Tehuantepec relatively state oriented and politically conservative relative to neighboring communities in the isthmus. By the time of Mexican independence, it was clear that Juchitán—a growing market hub benefiting from its proximity to the ranching haciendas, the salt flats, and abundant hunting and fishing resources as well as from longer distance trade from Chiapas and Central America—had become the more animated center of Zapotec autonomy, one increasingly known for its resistencia to external political and economic impositions. Although Benito Juárez would accuse the Juchitecos of “immorality and disorder” since “very ancient times,” it seems more likely that Juchitán became the center of Zapotec autonomism and resistance only in the first half of the nineteenth century as Tehuantepec became acculturated to conservative political forces and as Juchitán’s own size and regional economic power grew. European travelers’ accounts throughout the nineteenth century uniformly depict Juchitán as a space of especially strong indio traditions, identity, and political unity. It is also not difficult to imagine that Juchitán had been for some time precisely the sort of place that istmeños might escape to if they were dissatisfied with the hegemony of the Spanish and their cacique allies in Tehuantepec.

The image of the guerrero Juchiteco was then honed in a series of revolts led by a prosperous Juchitecan rancher, Che Gorio Melendre (José Gregorio Meléndez to the Mexicans), who fought against the efforts of the Oaxacan state and the Mexican government to raise income by privatizing and monopolizing isthmian salt deposits. Beginning in 1834, and continuing episodically until 1853, Che Gorio and his supporters fought to maintain traditional communal rights to salt extraction. He attacked the state military garrison at Tehuantepec in 1847 and declared the separation of the isthmus from the state of Oaxaca. The uprising became perhaps the greatest challenge to the authority of Governor Benito Juárez’s administration. Although Juárez sought conciliation, claiming that traditional communal use rights would not be disturbed by the new salt monopolies, neither his promises nor military action—including the possibly inadvertent burning of Juchitán in 1850—seemed able to quell Melendre’s rebellion and guarantee istmeño acceptance of Oaxacan authority. State militia victories would see Melendre and his allies drift back into the forest only to reappear weeks or months later as guerilla fighters, burning haciendas and encouraging Juchitecos to “rob” the salt flats. In January 1853, the rebels again occupied Tehuantepec and contributed forces to the occupation of Oaxaca City in February. When in April of the same year Antonio López de Santa Anna returned for his eighth and final stint as Mexican president, he quickly signed a decree creating the
Isthmus of Tehuantepec as its own federal territory separate from Oaxaca and Veracruz. Melendre, though, was found mysteriously poisoned the very same morning. His dream of istmeño political independence was realized, but it only lasted two years, the length of Santa Anna’s last term.

Viewed in the context of Mexican governmental efforts to license a rail corridor across the isthmus to foreign developers (as early as 1842) and the Gadsen Purchase Treaty of 1853—which established in the isthmus what amounted to a free trade and movement zone for US persons and property—Santa Anna’s support for istmeño independence has to be viewed as something more than a capitulation of state authority to unruly indigeneity. Santa Anna and his successors (including Juárez) faced crippling foreign debts, uncertain incomes, and political unrest across the country. Transit rights across the isthmus seemed a safe bet to attract international interest and capital of a scale that dwarfed colonial repartimiento incomes and privatized salt and ranching schemes. Throughout the 1850s, until the McLane-Ocampo Treaty of 1859—which would have guaranteed the United States full use “in perpetuity” of the isthmus—failed to pass the US Senate, the promise of a railroad or a canal corridor across the isthmus brought a slew of northern explorers, surveyors, engineers, and investors to explore the possibility of transoceanic passage. Among the antieólica resistance, we heard the canal plan frequently invoked as the first invasion of transnational capitalism into the isthmus and as the harbinger of all megaproyectos to come.

Historian Francie Chassen- López argues that the period from the 1830s to the 1850s was critical for the formation of a radicalized indigenous identity in the region: “The isthmian wars demonstrated how far the Zapotecs of Juchitán were willing to go in defense of their usos y costumbres, particularly access to land and natural resources. The Juchitecos, and their allies in other local ethnic groups, refused to accept defeat, and devised numerous forms of contestation (violence, land invasions, destruction of property, and armed rebellion), which forced the government and military leaders to negotiate with them.”

During the Reforma period (1854–76), the Juchitecans’ reputation for violent independence bordering on savagery only grew as they became more directly and visibly involved in national political conflicts, such as the French intervention and then in the battles that led to Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship. In the struggle between Díaz and Juárez for the Mexican presidency, Juchiteco guerreros captured, flayed, castrated, and killed Porfirio’s brother, Felix, for having viciously attacked Juchitán while he was governor of Oaxaca. According to local legend, the particularly violent nature of Díaz’s death was meant to repay his mutilation of the statue of Juchitecos’ patron saint San Vicente.
as he sought to pacify the popular local Zapotec leader, Albino Jiménez, better known as “Binu Gada” (nine lives).

When Porfirio Díaz became governor of Oaxaca in 1881, this set off another wave of repression and resistance. Federal forces sought to bring Juchitán under control by fighting rebels, burning villages, and installing their own preferred political leader. But the next year a new Juchiteco rebel movement arose, killing the jefe politico and inciting Díaz to lead troops from Oaxaca City in 1882 to lay siege to Juchitán and kill or exile a large part of the male population. As Colby Ristow writes, “For the next thirty years Díaz maintained control in Juchitán by appointing handpicked jefes políticos, and transforming nearby San Gerónimo Ixtepec into ‘one of the biggest garrison towns in Mexico.’”

But the political tensions between the rojos (reds) and verdes (greens) in the last decades of the nineteenth century endured— with the reds identifying with more elite urban political, economic, and religious interests, including the Porfirista científicos (scientists), and the greens identifying more closely with local ranching and campesino interests— simmering throughout the Porfiriato. Another native Juchiteco leader, José “Che” Gómez, rose to local prominence, representing the verdes. As Díaz’s regime collapsed in 1911, Gómez led another large rebellion against Oaxaca City. Although the uprising cost Gómez his life, the uprising became a new “cornerstone of Juchiteco exceptionalism.”

Colby Ristow writes: “As the democratic-nationalist revolution threatened to open up the domain of the political in Mexico, agents of the center developed a discursive repertoire of marginalization that represented the people of Juchitán as particularly dangerous to civilization. Travel narratives, political addresses and newspapers represented the Juchitecos as insufficiently civilized to manage political life, despite their relative economic prosperity and active participation in the political conflicts of the period. Specifically, elite representations of Juchitecos portrayed them as pre-political, insular and violently contentious. . . . These representations mobilized recognizable symbols of barbarism—Indianness, unchecked women and the Orient—to underscore the unsuitability of the Juchitecos for inclusion in the political life of the nation.”

At the same time that Juchitán’s political exclusion became a license for various forms of governmental violence and expropriation during the
Porfirato, Ristow argues, Juchiteco exceptionalism also prompted a more significant incorporation of regional, indigenous interests into Mexican national and Oaxacan state politics. “The Juchitecos’ insistence on the political and patriotic nature of their contentious politics challenged future revolutionary regimes to expand the national political sphere to include the poor and indigenous peoples of the periphery. As national power shifted during the revolution, Juchiteco demands for political incorporation found more open responses from the federal government, culminating with the regime of Lázaro Cárdenas.”

The pivotal figure in this process was General Heliodoro Charis (see chapter 2), the dominant political figure in Juchitán for much of the mid-twentieth century, an illiterate Juchiteco campesino who rose through the ranks to lead the first authorized battalion of istmeño soldiers in the Mexican National Army. A trusted ally of President Álvaro Obregón, Charis became an esteemed veteran commander in the postrevolutionary army, and during the 1920s his Thirteenth Battalion helped repress a number of uprisings, including indigenous uprisings, in other states. Despite pressure from the Mexican military hierarchy, Charis maintained Zapotec as the operational language of his unit and recruited only in the isthmus for new soldiers. Indeed, only the Yaquis supplied more indigenous soldiers to the Mexican army during this period, and Charis’s was the only indigenous battalion willing and trusted to operate outside its native region. Benjamin T. Smith concludes, “By cultivating [a] clear-eyed ethos of sacrifice underpinned by the expressed expectation of government reward, Charis and his men gradually forged an alternative to the threatening stereotype of the armed Indian: the obedient, loyal, self-sacrificing Juchiteco.”

Political inclusion finally beckoned. In exchange for his loyalty to the revolutionary nation, Charis was allowed to create a secure verde power base for himself in Juchitán that endured largely without conflict with Mexico City until his death in 1964. In May 1930, Charis marched hundreds of his demobilized soldiers onto six thousand hectares southwest of Juchitán and established the Colonia Militar of Álvaro Obregón, named for Charis’s federal patron. For the next thirty-five years, Álvaro materialized the power of Charis’s network in Juchitán and the isthmus. Smith writes: “The armed men, stationed a few kilometers from the city of Juchitán, provided the local boss with the realistic threat of armed force if opposition politicians sought to take control of the district. . . . Some troops also doubled as extra-legal pistoleros (gunmen) ordered to assassinate or intimidate particularly recalcitrant enemies. Finally, the former members
of the Thirteenth Battalion regularly provided Charis with a group of mobile and willing voters.”

Since 2012, the town has become a notable site of resistance to wind power development. The town of Álvaro Obregón—capturing both the accommodation of revolutionary indigeneity to mestizaje nationalism and the perduring Juchiteco commitment to maintaining local Zapotec autonomy and power in the face of extranjero threats of every scale and type—epitomizes how much the complex and contentious history of the isthmus overdetermines contemporary support for and rejection of wind power development. The work of contemporary asambleas like the APPJ echoes across time, summoning the grinding repartimiento relations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the contested plans to privatize and cede istmeño land to foreign elites in the nineteenth century, the decades-long cycle of violent repression and rebellion experienced in the isthmus between the 1840s and the 1920s.

The lesson of this history is that Guidxiguie’—“city of flowers” in diidxazá—both does and does not belong to Mexico. Never fully assimilated to empire, Juchitán has long served as a powerful thorn in the side of Oaxacan and Mexican governance. It has represented the violent ungovernable foil against which Mexican settler liberalism has measured its capacity for justice. In the twentieth century, both during the revolution and again during the COCEI uprising of the 1970s—which many regard as the first major crack in the apparatus of the postrevolutionary PRI party-state—Juchitán has helped to give substance, fire, and purpose to opponents of Mexican mestizaje nationalism. Even resisting the urge to mythologize the revolutionary spirit of Juchitán, it seems fair to characterize the city and the isthmus as a whole as an especially important site of political potentiality within Mexico.

The coming of aeolian politics to Juchitán over the past decade has re-ignited these past potentialities and catalyzed what seem to be new political possibilities, a communitarianism that resonates as vibrantly with the global resurgence of neoanarchist, neoautonomist, and indigenist politics as it does with Zapotec traditions of political communalism. For some, wind power will give Juchitán and its environs long-sought-after autochthonous economic power with which to match its political fervor. For others, the proyecto eólico threatens a final sacrifice of Juchiteco independence to the infrastructures of national and transnational governance and capital, a capitulation to el megaproyecto that has been more than two centuries in the making. The argument between these positions—with two different views of Juchiteco power vying with one another for prominence, inflected
by experience, class, profession, gender—burns brightly in Juchitán today, echoing the red/green conflicts of the past.

La Séptima

This was true above all in la Séptima, for decades the epicenter of non-elite, indigenous politics in Juchitán. We found that arguments concerning the future were at their most sensitive and were raw in the barrios whose livelihood—fishing and field labor—seemed most at risk from the proliferation of wind turbines across the landscape. In these neighborhoods, despite increasing worries about “cultural homogenization,” the language of the markets and street remains diidxazá, and the strength of binnizá identity and culture is not doubted. We go, for example, to meet with Melanie’s friend, Na María Tecu, the one whose La Ventosan aunt had convinced her of the merits of wind power. But, just a few days later, we find that she has reversed her opinion, at least in speaking with a couple of extranjer@s.

Na Maria is cleaning fish in her courtyard with the help of her two daughters. Several relatives and neighbors poke their heads in to have a look because they have heard that there are gringos here. There is a shrill whis-

FIGURE 5.6. Asamblea Popular del Pueblo Juchiteco
ting and cackling chorus of zanates in the trees that shade the courtyard, almost loud enough to make human conversation difficult. The courtyard has been created by the cinderblock homes surrounding it, decorated with a number of crucifixes painted on the walls, dominated by three large fish-drying racks made of the naked rusted-metal frames and springs of mattresses. Na María continues working as we talk, sharpening a small dull knife on a whetstone, gutting the fish, cutting it in half from head to tail, and putting the fish on a drying rack. From time to time a zanate will circle down from the trees above to tear a hunk of flesh free before retreating swiftly back to the skies. A rooster pecks around below the cleaning station, looking for scraps. Later in the day Na María smokes the dried fish in a clay oven fired with charcoal and covered with thin pieces of metal.

Na María says that the whole Séptima is against the eólicos and, emphatically, that she has always been against them too. “We don’t want any of that here. Nothing else will grow once they take the land. They will take everything! They will take the sea! They will create a sound that will scare away the fish!”

Melanie tells us later that she is surprised by how fast Na María has changed her mind; but charged information is circulating quickly through the barrio, inciting opinion first in one direction, then in the other. Melanie suspects shame as a partial motivator as well since Na María is known locally to have accepted a payment from Gas Natural Fenosa in exchange for her support.
We ask Na María cautiously about her aunt, the proponent of wind power from La Ventosa.

Perhaps suspecting our motives, Na María does not acknowledge having family there. But she does say, “In La Ventosa, there’s no fishing, that’s why they have the eólicos there. Here we are puro pescador y campesino [purely fisherfolk and campesinos]. That’s why we are going to resist in this pueblo, none of us want these eólicos. What will our children eat if they ruin the fishing?”

We mention that there was a march in favor of the Playa Vicente project just a week before.

Again, she waves this off with conviction. “Just the sindicatos [union people], all the campesinos are against it. Even in La Ventosa it is just the gente de dinero [people with means] and the maestros [teachers/intellectuals] who want the eólicos. All the poor people are against it.”

At a house down the street, we talk with Rosa and her sister Candida, who express much the same concerns about the eólicos. The people of the Séptima have been fisherfolk and campesinos as long as anyone can re-
member. The sea is the ultimate safety net, where one can always turn for sustenance when all other sources of work and food run out. Rosa and Candida are deeply concerned about putting their relationship to the sea at risk with noisy turbines; the loss of security is not worth whatever dinerito (little money) the landholders would pay them to stay quiet.

“They want to take our beach, they want to take the food from our children. We don’t want the eólicos,” Candida says. She says she has heard that the trees die when the eólicos are placed near them, they kill the coconuts and the mangoes by drying the land. And the aeroes (turbines) also make the water hot driving the fish away.

Rosa tells us that the mayor of Playa Vicente is giving money to many people to accept the park, money he has received in turn from the wind companies. She has heard that some people there support the park but not the majority. “Every party in power sells out to the eólicos.”

But Candida’s husband, Luís, who works on an oil platform off Campeche and who is enjoying a brief vacation at home, is not so sure about this resistance in the barrio. He worries about the lack of work in Juchitán, and he blames this on the líderes (political leaders) who scare away businesses. Those líderes, regardless of whether they are PRI or COCEI, “are dedicated only to themselves.” The one invests in large ranches, the other in a transportation company, and another has purchased a hotel in Huatulco. “Probably more people would invest in Juchitán if they didn’t worry that these políticos would steal their things.”

Luís thinks that the fishing in Juchitán is slowly dying. He says that it still supplies the livelihood of thousands of people in the region, but over time their numbers have been declining. People are looking for other kinds of work, and they are traveling away to find it. He is one of those people and says that working on the platform is a good job; it pays well. He wishes there were more factories in the isthmus. Again, the líderes are responsible, having driven them away both south and north. “Look at how well even Chiapas is doing now!” So, in the end, the wind parks are “OK by him,” although he laughs and acknowledges that he is not in the majority in the Séptima. Some people think the parks will cause radiation, he says, others fear the eólicos will heat the land or cause cancer. He’s doubtful of those effects, but he knows fishing well and avers, “Noise contamination is a real thing! The fish will flee it, especially when the noise is constant, not just like a jet plane passing.” The fish want nothing more to do with the eólicos than the campesinos do.
The outlook is very different at Café Santa Fé, which has been described to us as the place “where business gets done in Juchitán.” These days the wind parks represent a big chunk of that business. The Santa Fé is an oddly unassuming roadside restaurant on the Panamerican Highway just west of where it crosses the highway to Ixtepec. Its artificial brick walls and bright-white tablecloths contrast the grit and scent and wind of much of the city, a world away from the convoys of truck trailers hauling goods, materials, and equipment down the highway and from the packs of gaunt stray dogs patrolling its shoulders. The food is simple but definitely not rústico and is served on quality tableware. The staff of the Santa Fé are professional and discreet, gliding in and out as needed, but giving a respectfully wide berth to the groups of men (and more rarely women) hunkered down for serious conversations, often lasting hours. The Sante Fé’s back room can be cordoned off for larger, private meetings and occasionally becomes the site of press conferences. Its location is ideal for individuals transiting across the region. All this contributes to an atmosphere of an important crossroads where people can easily come and go, do their business, and remain strangely invisible in a transitory publicity. The Santa Fé’s clientele is diverse, but there will always be at least one table, and often several, occupied by people working in or with the wind industry. Local politicians also often circulate through, pressing hands and slapping backs. If one wishes to see the politics of istmeño wind development in action, then one must visit the Santa Fé.
And we did spend countless hours there, observing quietly, chatting with friends, making new ones, hearing the latest rumors, doing impromptu interviews whenever we had the chance. Talk often focused on local political alliances and rivalries, where the latest blockades and land occupations were and why, how various wind park projects were faring, what new contracts might be in the offing. At times the rumors were bolder and more unsettling, like the one that the members of the powerful PRIista Gurrión family were laundering money for the Beltrán-Leyva cartel. Less frequently, one could also meet key figures among the antieólicos at the Santa Fé. Although the café’s aesthetics did not suit them, like us, they found it a convenient meeting place and a valuable information hub.

In one encounter, we were asked to organize a fake interview with an APPJ member so that he could surreptitiously observe another table where, the asamblea suspected, the infamous PRI state congressman Francisco García López (a.k.a. Paco Pisa, see chapter 3) was planning to bribe two San Dionisio del Mar comuneros to buy their support for the Mareña project. Our friend in the APPJ wanted to make sure that our recording equipment was very visible so that “it doesn’t look like I am taking money from gringos myself.” The comuneros arrived along with a man whom our friend described as the broker who had set up the meeting. He hoped even to capture Paco Pisa on camera with the bolsa (bag of money) in his hand. For about twenty minutes we taped an interview in which our friend discussed the judicial amparo against the Mareña project and how little faith the inconformes had in receiving justice through any arm of the Mexican government. But the San Dionisians left, and Paco Pisa never showed; either the information was bad or “perhaps they changed the meeting place once they saw we were there.” Such were the intrigues that could unfold at the Santa Fé.

For that very reason, the Santa Fé is haunted by local journalists keeping a finger on the pulse of local politics. There is always at least one press table there, sometimes two, with laptops out, cell phones spread across the table. Mostly they chat with one another as they write up their stories; sometimes they are lucky, and an itinerant politician or prominent citizen will offer impromptu interviews and statements. Our friend Rusvel from La Ventosa was often at the Santa Fé. On one occasion he introduced us to several of his colleagues who write on wind power often and thoughtfully, including David Henestrosa and Faustino Romo.31

David writes independently for a number of periodicals in the isthmus and publishes his own weekly paper. He studied engineering “but was a bad engineer,” he says laughing. He does not consider himself a periodista (journalist)
because of his lack of training, but he enjoys practicing journalism all the same. Members of his family are actively involved in the PAN party in Salina Cruz. The PAN is very weak in the isthmus compared to other parts of Mexico, he explains, but it gives him insight into how local power operates.

David is highly critical of how wind power development has taken place in the isthmus and only becomes more so over the months as we speak with him. He says the companies have largely been acting like “conquistadors.” He is, however, a supporter of clean energy and would like to see Mexico’s renewable energy transition advance, only in a more equitable way for all parties involved. He says he would even support the Mareña project “if they could guarantee real benefits to the communities whose lands they are occupying.” He does not think forcing the companies to provide social development projects is the right strategy since “that is the responsibility of the government.” What he would like to see instead is real profit sharing with the communities who are currently only getting a fraction of what they are due.

He says one of the most striking things about the eólicos is how they have brought the bitter rivals of the PRI and COCEI together in a common cause. “They are at each other’s throats about almost everything else, but they come together to support the wind parks.” David had more respect for “the Left” in Juchitán before the parks came. “COCEI has become devaluada [devalued] more and more; they are oriented by money rather than by leftist ideology. And the wind parks have brought the opposing factions of COCEI together like nothing else. The factions led by Héctor Sánchez and by Leopoldo de Gyves, Alberto Reyna, Mariano Santana, they are all involved in the parks. It’s difficult these days to differentiate between pure PRIismo and the social líderes of the Left and their children: Emilio de Gyves, Lenin López Nelio, Pavel López. They respond only to political and monetary interests; they have no true connection to leftist ideology.”

We ask him how much journalists have themselves become involved in promoting or criticizing the wind parks. “It’s very hard to be independent in Mexico,” he says and shakes his head. “The local media need to eat too, and the biggest papers in the region, El Sur and El Sol del Istmo, are controlled by the Gurrión family. There is a lot of coverage that is bought here either directly by the wind companies or by the interests that support them.” David sees himself as one of the few journalists willing to take seriously the inconformes’ resistance and their concerns about wind development. “With some of them, like UCIZONI, you sense an ulterior motive, a desire to create trouble and get attention for themselves. But then you meet people like Mariano [López Gómez of the APPJ], and he’s
such an honest guy, a good kid; he’s from a humble background and just is very passionate about his politics.”

David reiterates this opinion again, when, in late March and early April 2013, the political situation in Juchitán turns very ugly. The dual blockades of the Mareña and Gas Natural Fenosa construction sites are countered by a wave of violent intervention from the park’s supporters. Radio Totopo’s broadcast equipment is stolen, and Beedxe’s arm is broken. Mariano is detained by the police on the suspicion of having demanded ransom money for construction equipment taken by the APPJ. Anonymous threatening phone calls and less anonymous visits from grupos de choque (groups of thugs) cause some leading APIDIIT and APPJ members to go into hiding.

David says he thinks the APPJ has a just cause and is all the more sure after receiving a veiled threat at a traffic stop by state police, saying that he should consider “toning down” his coverage of what is happening in Álvaro. He sends us a message on Facebook, asking us to take note in case something happens.

We ask whether he thinks all this is happening because the supporters are getting scared.

He replies, “The people who play politics around here are probably used to threats. But for me, this is something new.”

Faustino meanwhile works for the Noticias network, a news organization with a historical reputation of being anti-PRI and a current reputation of being pro-Cué. Faustino seems neither, more a patient analyst of the complexities of istmeño politics than an advocate himself. He softly criticizes David for being “too one-sided” in his coverage of the wind parks. “He seems to favor the resistance. I think you always need to see both sides of it.”

For Faustino, that means reckoning with the real benefits these parks might bring. “As I see it, wind power has a global benefit, and Mexico is a strategic site for the development of this potential. And Oaxaca, particularly the isthmus, is a strategic site within Mexico because of its resources. So far, so good. But what benefit will it bring to the communities upon whose land the parks will be built? They talk about a $1.2 billion investment. That could be very significant, something important for this region that hasn’t received those magnitudes of investment until now. But, OK, then you also have to ask, ‘Investment for whom? What part of those resources might directly or indirectly benefit people here? And what is going to the turbine manufacturers, the cable makers? What part of it will end up staying in Oaxaca [City]?’ They never break that information down.”

He winces at the attitudes of some wind developers. “When we asked the representative of [the Mexican wind energy lobby organization] AMDEE
why the projects did not incorporate community-wide benefits, he gave a
nasty laugh and said, ‘Well, when they invest in and build their own proyecto
eólico, they can do what they like with the profits.’” At the same time, he sees
the opposition being steered by disreputable political groups like UCIZONI
and the blockade on the road to Playa Vicente being run “by gangs of delin-
quents who just like to go out and fight with the police.”

In his journalism, he becomes increasingly critical of the inconformes
during the time we are in Mexico, and it is not clear to us whether pressure
is being exerted on him to do so or whether he, too, has just become frus-
trated by the retardation of economic progress in Juchitán. Faustino is no
campesino, rather a Spanish-speaking middle-class professional who is not
obviously committed to any ideological agenda. He talks to us about the land
invasions that have been accelerating as another heated mayoral campaign
between the COCEI and PRI looms. The rival factions of the political parties
are positioning themselves for advantage in the primary elections and estab-
lishing “vote banks,” much as Heliodoro Charis once did in Álvaro Obregón.

In late April he tells us, “Last week alone there were six new land inva-
sions. The municipio estimates there are twenty-five invasions total going

FIGURE 5.10. Land invasions, Juchitán
on now. That’s a lot of land! In the old days, the invasions were about getting homes for people with no homes. But now most of the invaders already have homes. They’re doing this professionally for one faction or another. It’s about securing votes, bribes, extortion.”

Faustino greets all this with a mixture of resignation and wry humor; he is also fond of jokes and pranks. When the alleged Mayan “end of the world” prophecy fails to materialize in December 2012, he issues a fake news bulletin via his Facebook page: “Breaking news: the Mayans have announced that nothing will happen in the isthmus because COCEI, Sección 22, the mototaxistas, the taxistas, PRD, PRI, PT, the construction workers, the campesinos, the sorghum farmers, all of the above are blockading the highways, conspiring to prevent the end of the world.”

How Caciques Think

Our journalist friends like Faustino, David, and Rusvel did not exactly say that the líderes would lie to us, but they did not seem hopeful that we would learn any truths from them either. So much of the politics of Juchitán takes place at the street level—in the barrios, in the occupied lands—where different networks operate their own fleets of mototaxis and vie for territory and alliances. No líder would admit to a gringo what it really takes to maintain power in Juchitán. Still, it would not hurt to ask. You might glean insights into the view from liderazgo as to how a cacique might think about things.

Our efforts to make contact with local Juchiteco PRI and COCEI leaders bear little fruit overall. We acquire their phone numbers easily enough, but cold calls prove ineffective, and occasional promises of personal contacts do not pan out. The líderes never seem to be where they are supposed to be. But we have met Daniel Gurrión—the mayor of Juchitán, scion of the Gurrión construction empire—at the fier event in Oaxaca City (see chapter 3), and he has offered to meet with us on our next visit to the isthmus.

Gurrión and his entourage (a burly driver and two underlings who say not a word through our entire trip) come to collect us in a brand-new white Chevrolet Suburban. Since the winds are high, he suggests we drive out to see one of the wind parks near La Ventosa. Gurrión is nothing if not a charmer, wielding power in a velvet glove. He establishes his elite, cosmopolitan credentials quickly by sprinkling a little English into his discourse, telling us about his former life as a dentist, his vacations in Europe and the United States. He also has, thankfully, the nothing-at-stake candor of an oligarch.
As the car winds its way through the heart of Juchitán, Gurrión gestures through the wind toward the crowds of vendors, rewriting the indigenous essence of the city not as warrior but as trader.

“Basically, our ethnic group, the isthmus Zapotecs, is a group characterized by its commercial activity. We have been comerciantes desde siempre [merchants since forever].” Although he recognizes that there is still much poverty in Juchitán, he attributes what wealth the Zapotecs have to their commercial resourcefulness.

His crown weighs heavy at the moment. He speaks at length about how difficult it is to manage Juchitán. “It’s hard.” Gurrión makes an airy motion with his hands. “We don’t have recreation areas for children or parks for sports. And we have a lot of trouble with alcoholism and drug addiction here. That is true elsewhere in the country, but I believe the statistics say that our consumption of beer is among the highest in the country.”

We pass several stands of mototaxistas, whom we know count among the most predictably unruly political presence in the city; they are foot soldiers for various networks, some licensed, some unlicensed, skirmishing also with the normal taxi drivers for the legitimacy to move passengers across Juchitán’s streetscape. Gurrión gestures to them as well.

“The state government made a bad decision recently to give out two thousand new permits for the mototaxistas. It’s made things even more difficult here in terms of the traffic, and they constantly fight with one another.”

By the time we are on the highway heading east toward La Ventosa, the conversation has shifted toward COCEI. In the beginning, Gurrión says, the movement was united and muy bonito, muy bueno. He even participated a little in its fringes when he was young. Then he picks up a piece of paper and begins to draw what looks like a pizza, a circle with wedges filled with dots.

“Over time,” he says, “it began to be contaminated, distorted; it subdivided into various líderes, and each líder had his own group, his own little group, and taken together, they represent a huge problem here now. Every one of them wants to maintain strength, to maintain people, and what they do is they seize some plots of land, they take them, invade them, and they found colonias [colonies] and give them to their followers who then vote for them in the elections. It’s their modus vivendi: they blackmail people, block the highway . . .” He trails off, not frustrated, just lost in his thoughts.

“You know, maybe two or three days ago, I met with the people from Wal-Mart, they were interested in investing here, but I don’t know whether it will go ahead. With the politics, someone would blockade the construction site, blackmail them, if the store opened, more chantaje político.”
He speaks at length about *chantaje* (blackmail), how it has become an industry itself, the spirit of comercio in predatory lawless form. “Yes, well, Juchitán *es muy bonito, pero es muy complejo* [it’s very nice, but it’s very complicated].”

We stop at an overpass overlooking a wind park, but the winds are so strong that we can scarcely speak to one another. We are blown back and forth by gusts as Gurrión gestures at the expanse of the turbines, which stretch far into the distance; he is telling us some stories about how the park came into being, but we cannot even hear him. A massive Grupo Bimbo tractor trailer whooshes past, more proof of Juchitán’s robust commercial life. On the ride back, in the mobile quiet of the Suburban, Gurrión talks about the proyecto eólico, and he shares again the concerns he articulated in Oaxaca City. The federal authorities do not seem to be regulating the industry effectively, or rather they “regulate them in an arbitrary manner” and some projects—he mentions Acciona again specifically—seem to have been allowed to avoid paying their legally required cambio del uso del suelo (change of land use) fees to the municipal government.

“Here in our downtown market, there isn’t a single vendor, even the ones who are practically sitting in the street with a tiny stand, the nopales vendors, the egg vendors, every single one of them pays their city taxes. So why not these wind companies?”

He remains troubled by the elusive benefits of the parks as well. The question of equitable exchange persists. Why should the commitment of land to electricity not be rewarded with cheaper electricity?

“The people who live in this region had great expectations about these parks and the benefits they would bring. And I am not saying there is no benefit because there obviously is a benefit. But, honestly, it hasn’t lived up to the expectations. The electricity is still very expensive even though we are now creating all the electricity for the region.”

We ask him about the Ixtepec model of community-owned wind power, whether that is something he could imagine supporting in Juchitán.

He says it would be ideal, but he wonders whether it would be legally and economically viable. He would be happy, he reiterates, with just a few turbines to call Juchitán’s own. “Just two or three, that would be enough, to provide the municipality electricity, to offset the bills from CFE.”

By now we are having coffee at—where else?—the Santa Fé. Gurrión is in his element, leaving us to circulate from table to table, at home with the comerciantes.

In April, we are also able to meet with the COCEI candidate for mayor, Saúl Vicente Vázquez, who will eventually become Gurrión’s successor when
he wins the 2013 election. Vázquez has a strong background in human rights and indigenous rights issues; he is even a member of the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues and enjoys considerable support from Juchitán’s binnizá intelligentsia as well as from Héctor Sánchez López’s faction of the COCEI. His campaign office, however, is very humble, just a table and a few chairs and a single piece of white paper taped to the wall outlining strategy. Our meeting is compact and formal, and we get the sense that Vázquez is actively trying to avoid committing himself to any particular position regarding wind development, saying curtly, “It means a lot and there are different opinions.”

He says he has not seen any of the wind park contracts personally, but those who have seen them tell him they are quite unbalanced in favor of the companies. He also says that he believes the companies did not inform people fairly and sufficiently in advance of signing the contracts and that there has been corruption at all levels of government, with bribes given to purchase consent. On the other hand, he sees nothing wrong with the parks in principle; from an environmental standpoint they are an improvement over how Mexico currently gets its electricity.

“With all this criticism of the eólicos, I wonder why you never hear people protesting Pemex with the same vigor.” He also notes with a slight smile that people have a habit of complaining about forms of development whose products they happily use. “Like mining, no one likes it. But then look at this fork. Its metal came from some kind of mining somewhere.” Still, he says, wind developers should ultimately bear the responsibility for the protests. “It is their failures that have allowed doubts to grow into opposition.”

Vázquez will not concede that the eólicos are a campaign issue, however. Shrugging, he says, “It would depend on whether that person felt the municipio could address his feelings about the parks in some way.”

Perhaps Vázquez is being evasive or honestly reporting the herculean effort required to unite COCEI’s many factions on any single issue.

This is the fact he wants to impress upon us most strongly: “One can’t really speak of the COCEI. It doesn’t exist in that way. It has never been a united political party. It’s a social movement composed of many different autonomous organizations that coordinate with each other. And it includes the guy down the street who is COCEI but doesn’t belong to any group. At last count, there are forty-eight different organizations involved in COCEI; all the ex-mayors have their own, and then are many more besides. So, with a wind park, for example, it could be that one part of COCEI is for it and another against it. That’s how it is with us.”
The inconformes are many and multiple in their backgrounds too, ranging from workers, campesinos, and fisherfolk to maestros and other intellectuals who have been drawn to the cause. The range of actors mirrors the elements of the COCEI movement in the 1970s, which fought street battles against political and economic priísmo for much of the decade before finally taking control of the city government in 1981, and then continued to fight against repression from federal priísmo for the next decade and a half. In the isthmus, as noted above, the PRI had only a relatively weak network until the mid-1960s, which left it susceptible to contentious politics. But while the inconformes who have organized against wind megaprojects today may identify themselves with the COCEIístas of the 1970s and 1980s and their struggle, they utterly reject what COCEI has become today. Their assessments are indeed more savage than those we heard from a blood-enemy priísta like Daniel Gurrión. When we attend the asambleas and marches organized by the resistance, we rarely hear a sentence about the COCEI uttered without a snarling reference to the movement’s degeneration and betrayal of the common Juchiteco. Leading COCEIístas’ support for the wind parks, for the transfer of land to extranjeros, seems to have been something of a last straw culminating two decades of abuse, lies, and manipulation.

This is the perspective shared with us by Bettina Cruz Velázquez, one of the cofounders of the Asamblea de Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio (APIIDTT) and quite possibly the most famous binnizá activist in the world today. She is not only lionized and vilified by turns in the Mexican national press but has also received substantial attention from international human rights organizations. Cruz has travelled widely in North America and Europe, including once testifying before the European Parliament, speaking against megaproyectos and for binnizá rights in the isthmus. But Cruz began her activist life as a teenager in Juchitán within COCEI; members of her family are still deeply involved in the movement. She scowls when she talks about COCEI today, its leaders “seduced by money and power,” a caricature of its former self.

Cruz’s husband, Rodrigo Peñaloza, is another APIIDTT cofounder, and he sees in COCEI a cautionary lesson for all “vanguard movements,” saying, “Any movement carries within itself the germ of its institutionalization, and for COCEI, that germ was Stalinism.”

The purpose of APIIDTT, according to both Cruz and Peñaloza, has been to help nurture a different kind of political movement in the isthmus, one
that is decentralized and antihierarchical and more strongly rooted in indigenous traditions of self-governance. “At first we were calling ourselves a frente [front] but that was too vanguardist; we realized that the better model was the asamblea [assembly].”

We have lunch with Cruz and her daughter, who is studying anthropology herself, early on in our fieldwork. This is before the violence around the Mareña and Gas Fenosa projects erupts and Cruz is forced to go into hiding with her family after receiving a number of death threats she deemed credible. We spend the afternoon in the Donaji restaurant, next door to the APIIDTT office. The office is itself remarkable for having been the last functioning office of Juchitán’s bienes comunales before the COCEI leader and last president of the comuna, Victor Pineda Henestrosa (Victor “Yodo”), was kidnapped on July 11, 1978, by a group of men dressed in military uniform and disappeared. The removal of the comuna leadership paved the way for the expansion of private property in the region.

Cruz and Peñaloza view this as a form of land occupation itself, one in which the wind parks have been directly implicated. “All of the contracts that have been written to lease what was once communal land for wind parks are illegal. You cannot write a private contract over communal land.” Rebuilding the leadership of the bienes comunales is one of the most controversial campaigns the APIIDTT is working for; another is their campaign against CFE’s electricity tariffs.

Cruz believes that the APIIDTT is as close to a functioning asamblea as Juchitán has: “We began here in Juchitán, and here anyone is free to join and become incorporated in the asamblea. Every pueblo, every community, every committee, has its own rules and dynamics, though. What we do here is distribute information, research legal questions, deal with the media, engaging issues which benefit all the members of the asamblea. Our ultimate goal is to stop el proyecto eólico in our communities and on our land.”

Cruz is disturbed by how the eólicos have contributed to the emptying of the primary economy of agriculture, driving campesin@s of their land to search for scarce work in the cities or abroad. “Working the land—farming, fishing, producing—is a way of life that has been abandoned and degraded in this country. But it is the heart of everything.”

She is dubious of the wind companies not only as beacons of a white-collar future for the region but also as to whether they are in fact realizing positive change at a global level. “The same companies that are creating supposedly renewable energy here are producing thermoelectric power plants in other places. So what is this change they are talking about? I don’t see
change here other than in the discourse, and they are utilizing global sentiment [sentimiento mundial] to further their exploitation. What they are doing is monetizing climate change.”

And she believes that the land, once taken for the wind parks, will belong to these companies forever. “When will they return the land? These are usufructuary contracts for thirty years or more. This will be their land forever; it will be ruined anyway for agriculture. So where is the advantage for the people here? There is no advantage. It is only for the government functionaries, for the caciques who have massive landholdings. The campesino is losing his way of life.”

It turned out that the apiidtt would win its greatest victory during the period of our field research when a federal judge upheld the amparo complaint of the inconformes in San Dionisio del Mar to block the Mareña Renovables project pending an investigation, an act that contributed eventually to the failure and relocation of the project. Meanwhile, getting Cruz’s blessing proved invaluable for our research; connecting us to other asambleas comunitarias and asambleas populares across the region. Over the course of 2012 and 2013, with her help, we got to know key figures in the assemblies of Álvaro Obregón, Juchitán, and San Dionisio del Mar well.

Alejandro López López, a cofounder of the asamblea comunitaria of Álvaro, says he has known Rodrigo and Bettina since secondary school. They had all been doing different things, but the megaproyectos brought them together in defense of natural resources, especially land, “which is nature’s mother, what connects the present to the future. Land is part of the family, it has a special meaning for the campesinos.” Alejandro is not a campesino, but rather a maestro, and is very active in CNTE 22 in Oaxaca City. He helps the inconformes to draw upon the resources of the teachers’ union to support their cause, which he says is not only to prevent wind parks from destroying the land and livelihood around Álvaro, it is also to wrest Álvaro out from under the control of the líderes altogether.

The asamblea’s blockade of the access road to the Mareña Renovables wind park in November 2012 evolved over the next year into a challenge to the structure of political authority that had blanketed the town since the days of Charis. In August 2013 the asamblea voted to institute usos y costumbres law and to prevent the participation of political parties in municipal elections. Voting booths were burned, which in turn intensified acts of violence against the asamblea by its political opponents, and new municipal authorities from Juchitán were imposed in August 2014. The conflict remains unresolved today, but the asamblea comunitaria is, its members say,
The asamblea has organized its own community police force and its own community radio, both named for General Charis, who remains a powerful symbol of binnizá futurity and autonomy.

Alejandro foresaw much of this conflict when we interviewed him formally in early January 2013. “The betrayal and selling out of Álvaro Obregón has been going on for decades. COCEI has taken the force of Álvaro Obregón and treated it like a gold mine because Álvaro Obregón has always been muy valiente (very brave). Álvaro Obregón are a people of few words, but a decisive people, and decisive with their machetes. That is why all the leaders of COCEI—Santana, Héctor, Leopoldo—they are all coming at us like rabid dogs because we are depriving them of their gold mine.”

He explains, “They used to split the government of Álvaro Obregón like a cake; Santana would pick the president, Héctor the treasurer, and so on. But that is all over now. We are done with selling out to the líderes. They are all rich, and it doesn’t matter what party they represent, whether the PRI or the PRD or the PT (labor party) or the PAN. They have just worked to the divide the pueblo for their own gain. We are retaking Álvaro Obregón and looking for unity. That’s why we call ourselves an asamblea, not a front, not a group.”

The struggle against the líderes and the struggle against the előlicos merge together in Alejandro’s discourse. The heart of the resistance to both forces, he says, is the sacred triangle of San Mateo, San Dionisio, and Álvaro Obregón because that is where the asambleas are still held in the indigenous language, where even Spanish is resisted. “It’s all about history, about origins,” he says. These asambleas are working together to spread their fuerza (force) across the region, to fight against the transnational companies and their political allies.

In several visits to Álvaro, we spend a good deal of time talking to members of the assembly, and the vast majority are not maestr@s but rather fisherfolk and campesin@s, and there are many women among them. Some are motivated by an ideological commitment to the politics of land and sea, some wish simply to safeguard their livelihood, but all remember the day when the company began its vegetation removal work on the nearby sandbar and began asking fishermen for ID cards to gain access to the place where they have put in their boats for as long as anyone can remember. That was the moment, they told us, when the community realized something was going wrong, that this project was threatening to take their land and sea away from them. Their anger was still palpable months later.

“We are the people of Charis!” one man said. “If they want to see blood in the sand, let them come. We are ready.”
In the summer of 2013 we begin to see the slogan “Somos Viento” (we are the wind) spray-painted across Juchitán. The idea of the resistance occupying the wind is growing.

Mariano López Gómez, one of key organizers of the APPJ, posts on his Facebook page, “Somos viento y juntos seremos huracán.” (We are the wind, and together we will become a hurricane.)

Carlos Sánchez, the jaguar, founder of Radio Totopo, embraces the wind too, helping to cofound a new collective, Binisá, “which means the wind from the south, the soft wind that brings rain. But sometimes it turns into a strong wind, a wind that only begins slowly and then comes with force and destroys what lies in its path. Here what we will destroy is the silence, the silence that has fallen over the people of Mexico.”

We also meet with the youngest generation of Juchiteco activists, the #YoSoy132 kids. Even though they speak Spanish, organize through social media, and offer detailed critiques of global neoliberalism, they continue to speak the language of an istmeño history of resistance.

Dali Martínez explains to us, “The lucha [struggle] has been going on in the isthmus since before the time of the Mexican Revolution. There has been wave after wave of rebellion over the years. This is a tradition that we are proud of, and we want to carry it forward to the next generation. It is part of our identity, this history of lucha, so we want to defend it. When we heard about the eólicos, these transnational projects with negative social and
environmental consequences, we became worried about them and wanted to fight them. We want to achieve the autonomy of the isthmus, that is the ultimate goal.”

When we ask Dalí and his friends whether Occupy and the Arab Spring influenced them in any way, they say no; this is really about their cultural tradition of rebellion reinventing itself for each generation across time. This is about los tecos valientes (the brave Juchitecos) “the way it always has been.”

The ways things have been in Juchitán will undoubtedly influence the future of aeolian politics in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. But things have not only been one way; both the red politics of urban elites, landowners, and the commercial class and the green politics of campesin@s, fisherfolk, and migrants have shaped the history of the region in equal parts. Both greens and reds have been and continue to be further fractured into dozens of political networks defined by kinship, liderazgo, charisma, and ideology. Sometimes these networks affiliate with existing political parties or aspire to create new ones. Often they claim land, whether a mototaxista stand or a new colonia occupation on the outskirts of town. The anthropopolitical terrain of Juchitán is immensely complex, a subject demanding detailed political ethnography and political geography far beyond the scope of the present volume. But in the zone where aeolian politics and anthropopolitics intersect, we have seen how wind development has been avidly embraced by some as a means of concentrating wealth and power in the constant game of positional advantage in the city. In some sense, wind parks are the ultimate form of land occupation, land claimed by concrete and steel and fencing, bringing income to buy votes, trucks, new homes, and so much else besides. For others, meanwhile, we have seen how wind parks are excoriated as worst kind of megaproyecto development, the sinister collaboration of local caciques and transnational capitalists to complete a centuries-long project of capturing and expropriating the wealth of the isthmus. At the same time, even wind power’s worst critics would acknowledge that the proliferation of wind turbines across the lands around Juchitán has galvanized political opposition and catalyzed a recommitment to asambleas and usos y costumbres the likes of which have been unknown for decades.

The reason to end this journey across Mexico in Guidxigue’s/Juchitán is that it epitomizes the analytic limits of universalizing power concepts like “capital,” “biopower,” and “energopower” for defining the political terroir of istmeño wind. Yes, these concepts have considerable value. Those who push private property, factories, wage labor, and consumerism in the region clearly desire to constitute the frontier ecology of alienated land, labor, and
value that “capital” denotes so well.56 “Biopower” is seemingly more remote to the everyday politics of the city, but when a political leader like Gurrión talks about cheap electricity and turbines dedicated to municipal energy supply, he is not just thinking of his budgetary bottom line. Although deeply and fiercely contested, the biopolitical aspirations of “development”—good jobs, good health, prosperity, growth—hang in the air both in the city hall and in the Séptima. “Energopower,” too, can offer insight into istmeño aeolian politics, both in electricity’s capacitation of biopolitical projects and in the infrastructures—grid, pipelines, highways—that crisscross the city and enable its many projects of modernizing and indigenizing. My point is simply that these concepts are minima not maxima. The aeolian politics of the isthmus are powerfully, powerfully shaped by identities and institutions that are not reducible to either instantiations of or reactions to capital, biopolitics, and energopolitics. Caciquismo and liderazgo belong to this spectrum, as do asambleas, usos y costumbres, and indigenismo, as do ways of life and forms of knowledge replete with soil and sea.

If we wish to imagine and discuss aeolian futures in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec—or, for that matter, anywhere else in the world—what is needed are more and better ethnographies of the multiplicity of forces (historical and contemporary, material and anthropopolitical) that are generating, inflecting, and obstructing potential futures. It never ceased to amaze us how little the proponents of “Oaxacan wind power” in places like New York, Mexico City, and Oaxaca City seemed or cared to understand the reasons for its contentious politics in the isthmus itself. The depth and seriousness of contention meanwhile made perfect sense to anyone who had spent a few weeks talking to people in Juchitán. Part of building a future that does not endlessly repeat the Anthropocene trajectory is caring about forms of enablement that exceed those with which we are familiar, disabling our engines of epistemic and political universalization and rebalancing our analytical attentions and worldly engagements in favor of what is meaningful and valuable in the localities where the wind blows. How we can make new and better aeolian futures is the subject of our conclusion.