

“High Tension” An ethnographic monograph about an indigenous social resistance movement fighting for and through electricity



Umberto Cao | AP-HM Marseille – France

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Rationale

I engaged in the writing of this book based on my doctoral research because a significant corpus of ethnographic information in my possession (mainly qualitative face-to-face interviews with field actors) remained largely unexploited. My main goal was to present a case study to a wide audience, not only specialists, that reveals a lot about energy poverty in the so-called Global South, and specifically in Mexico. Within energy studies we still know very little about what users in the Global South do with energy, as well as what strategies, forms of organisation, and practices they can mobilise to gain access to it.

Research Aims

Through the monographic study of the Indigenous and peasant-based civil resistance movement “Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo” [translation: “People’s Light and Power”] in Chiapas, Mexico, which fights for universal and non-discriminatory access to electricity, at the aim of the research was to:

1. Enrich knowledge on strategies, forms of organisation, and practices related to energy, and in particular electricity, in the Global South (Gupta 2015).
2. Contribute to the evolving, yet crucial debate about the relationship between energy poverty and the broader sphere of poverty (see Faiella and Lavecchia 2021; Middlemiss et al. 2019), which has major implications, not only from a theoretical and conceptual point of view, but also for policies and concrete actions.
3. Explore local and Indigenous conceptions of energy (Cao and Frigo 2021).
4. Propose new meanings and uses of electricity in terms of energo-power (Boyer 2015).
5. Stimulate discussions on energy transitions in the Global South, and in particular on how to ensure that these are just, and do not replicate colonial patterns that the poor in particular would bear the expense of.

Summary of research activity

The ethnographic research behind this book was carried out in the 2016 - 2021 period. The task was therefore to organise, select, and analyse an as yet unexploited corpus of ethnographic material, and in particular to transcribe a selection of especially rich interviews. The information contained in the ethnographic data was put into perspective with some relevant developments that occurred on the ground during the writing of the book, which included a short fieldwork session in September 2023, in the state of Chiapas, Mexico.

Methodologies

- Ethnography: Participant observation, Qualitative narrative-oriented interviews, Use of audio-visual tools informed by sensory ethnography
- Content analysis: Thematic analysis, Discourse analysis, Multidisciplinary literary review

Findings

The ethnographic monograph realised through this project is about the Civil Resistance Organisation “Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo”, from the state of Chiapas, in southern Mexico. It is a social movement with about 80,000 activists, mainly Indigenous (Tojolabal, Ch’ol, Mam, Tzotzil, Q’anjob’al, Chuj) and campesinos (peasants). However, it is neither an Indigenous nor a peasant movement.

Since its foundation in 2004, Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo has aimed to provide access to electricity for the poorest members of society, namely the indigenous and peasants. Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo operates a systematic direct connection to the electric grid, thanks to the almost one thousand electricians it has trained over the years among the activists (Cao 2020). This requires activists to perform a constant surveillance over their territories to keep the Mexican electric utility and state authorities from unplugging individual users. In those areas where territory control is more effective, the Organisation implements forms of autonomy embracing many domains of the local populations' lives: politics, economy, environment, civil and human rights, education, and health (ibid.).

I qualify this autonomy as interstitial because it fills the interstices (or actual gaps) opened up by the chronic absence of the rule of law in local society, and by the position of indigenous peoples "on the margins of the State". However, the movement does not aim to take power or create independent territories. Rather, through their actions, the activists are establishing "place politics" (Escobar 2010) by creating spaces of autonomy, and proposing an idea of society, a political imaginary and a vision of nature that constitutes an alternative to the capitalist system.

While Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo is nourished by an openly anti-capitalist ideology (Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo 2014: 1), it is the Mayan cosmovisiones (worldviews), still very present and alive in the daily lives of Indigenous peoples, that have a decisive influence on its political horizon. These non-dualistic philosophies are governed by a relational ontology according to which all beings and objects exist only in interrelation to each other, and do not exist in themselves (Escobar 2016). "Our mother earth is inhabited, not owned, and all beings must be able to benefit from it; it cannot be subjected to the capitalist tyranny of private property and profit" is a phrase used by the activists. Therefore, they equally apply this principle to electricity, which also comes from nature (subsoil resources, river water, wind, sun, etc.), so everyone must be able to benefit from it. It is precisely this conception of electricity that the movement bases its demand for the recognition of universal and non-discriminatory access to electricity as a fundamental human right.

Furthermore, anthropologist Dominic Boyer argued that the grid is not just a state instrument, namely a tool invented to accomplish a government agenda (Boyer 2015). On the contrary, the grid also helps "to groove political efficacy, subjectivity, and affiliation" (idem: 533) and "must be understood as the organization of enabling power that allows any invention of statecraft to occur in the first place" (ibid.). The case of Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo shows that "any invention of statecraft" could mean not only from the state, but also autonomous statecraft from below, from the bosom of civil society. And that if - as still Boyer sustains - "electropolitics" (politics through electricity) infuse governance (idem), this latter has not necessarily to be central state's governance: it could be popular autonomous governance too. In conclusion, Luz y Fuerza del Pueblo is an expression of "energetic citizenships" (Loloum, Abram, and Ortar 2021), which includes new collective subjectivities emerging in the context of contemporary post-democracies (Crouch 2004). By opposing hegemonic "energopolitics", they aspire to transform the relationship between state and citizenship and challenge the dominant configurations of power.

The research presented in this book fits well within the field of the "energy humanities". This is an emerging field of study that aims to understand how energy shapes society and the world (Szeman and Boyer 2017). The fundamental idea behind energy humanities is that energy - technically defined as the ability to perform work - is not (or not only) a "physical thing", but rather a social relationship (Diamanti and Szeman 2020). From a disciplinary point of view, this is an anthropology study, inspired in particular by approaches from the political anthropology of energy: in fact, this revisits, refocuses and re-politicises energy issues, which are increasingly treated as socially neutral

technological processes (Larkin 2013) and deprived of any political relevance by expert discourse and “anti-political” practices (Ferguson 2009).

Recommendations

1. In social contexts characterised by severe to extreme multidimensional poverty, any energy poverty alleviation measures cannot be developed separately to broader redistributive and poverty reduction policies.
2. Avoid imposing ethnocentric perspectives when defining energy-related rights, which would result in their unenforceability, incoherence or ineffectiveness on a wide scale.
3. Consider the energy-related visions, uses, and needs of local groups, and especially minorities when determining energy strategies, policies, and projects.
4. Prevent current energy transitions from enacting predatory and re-colonisation modes towards the Global South.

Outputs

1. A book currently on press at the scientific publisher Ledizioni as a part of its collection on contemporary anthropology.
2. Forthcoming presentations of the book to a wide, non-specialist audience, including cultural, territorial, and civil society organisations concerned with energy and energy poverty, especially in Italy.

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More information: [University website](#) | [LinkedIn](#) | [Research Gate](#) | [Academia.Edu](#)

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