

# **CONTESTED POWERS**

THE POLITICS OF ENERGY AND DEVELOPMENT  
IN LATIN AMERICA

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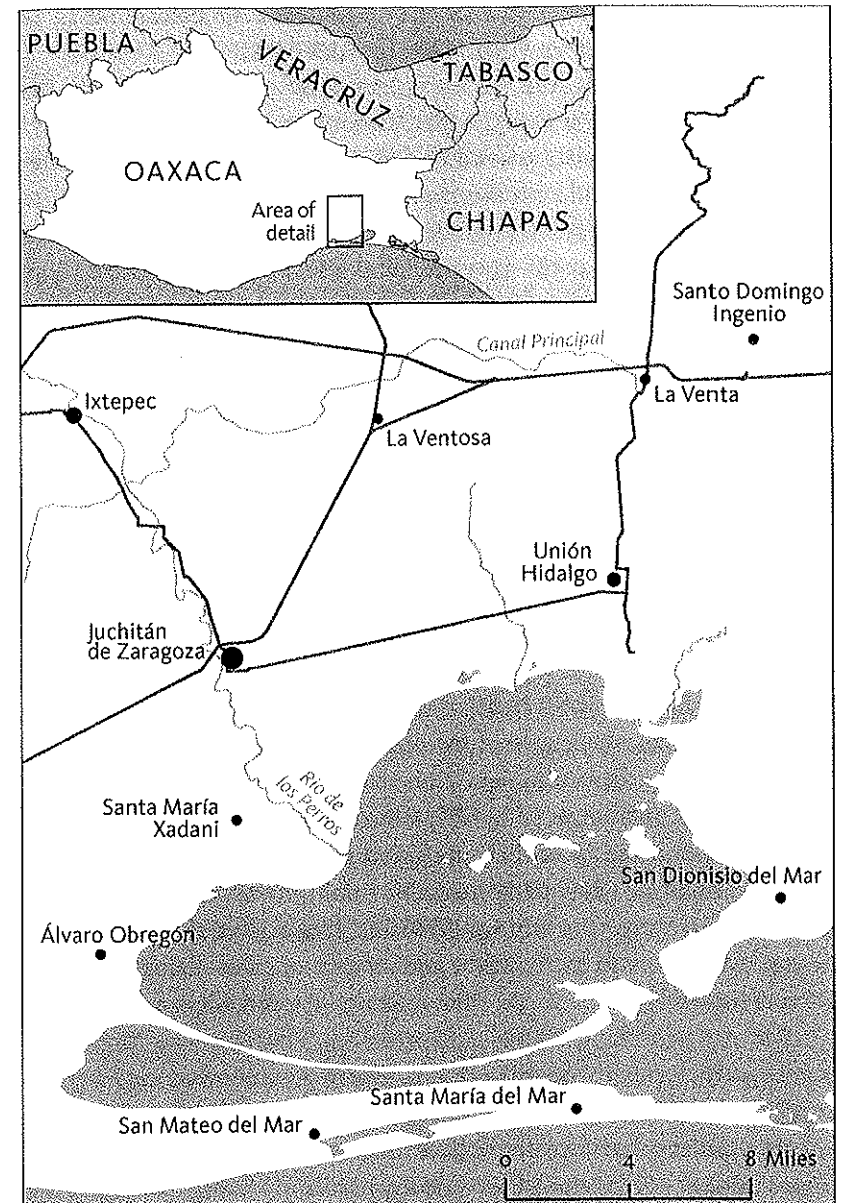
## 4 | WIND AT THE MARGINS OF THE STATE: AUTONOMY AND RENEWABLE ENERGY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

*Cymene Howe, Dominic Boyer and Edith Barrera*

### Oaxacan wind power at a crossroads

On a windy day in February 2013, we encountered transnational green capitalism on the frontier of Mexican statecraft. This happened in the isthmus of Tehuantepec, in the town of Santa Rosa de Lima, where a state police checkpoint had been set up just before the road from Juchitán turns south-east towards Álvaro Obregón. ‘Checkpoint’ somewhat overstates the formality of the situation. There were two state police trucks idling by the side of the road, across the road from several weathered wooden canoes. The canoes and the gossamer of faded fishing nets near them announced to all passers-by that they had crossed into the fishing zone of the Laguna Superior. The police half-heartedly reviewed our papers after we asked Señor Tomás, our taxi driver for the day, to stop the car. A representative of the Oaxacan government had told us that morning that the situation in Álvaro was *muy tensa* (very tense). He said the police were reporting that trucks filled with armed men were driving around the village threatening violence. Señor Tomás, by contrast, said we had nothing to worry about. Driving through the verdant ranch land south of Juchitán, he explained how politics is always tied to money in the isthmus: ‘This is how it always is, people make a lot of noise about this or the other thing. But it is just because they want to be paid. When they get paid, all this resistance will dry up. You’ll see.’

What we did not expect to see in Santa Rosa, and the reason why we asked Señor Tomás to pull over, were two gringos talking to the local police commander. The tall one turned out to be someone, Andrew Chapman, we had been pursuing without success for some time. Chapman was part of the senior management team of Mareña Renovables, a consortium seeking to build the largest single-phase wind park in all of Latin America (consisting of 132 turbines with



4.1 Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico

a production capacity of 396 MW). Mareña was, as everyone in the region knew, in deep trouble. Its park was designed to stretch across a sandbar at the southern end of the laguna from the *bim�á* (Zapotec)

community of Álvaro across to the *ikojts* (Huave) communities of Santa María del Mar and San Dionisio del Mar.

Originally on schedule for completion by the end of 2012, the project suffered several delays before becoming the focus of intensifying resistance during the second half of 2012 from popular assemblies (*asambleas populares*) across the lagoonal region. The *asambleas* are, as discussed in more detail below, community-level organizations of self-governance united against governmental and industrial *megaproyectos* (mega-projects) in the region. By the end of 2012, *bloqueos* (blockades) had been erected in both Álvaro and San Dionisio to prevent the start of Mareña's construction. Indeed, the day before, the president of Mareña's board of directors, Jonathan Davis Arzac, had announced to the press that the project and what the company calculated to be an investment of 13 billion pesos in the region would leave Oaxaca unless 'rule of law' could be guaranteed. Davis claimed there were only 'twenty well-identified people' resisting the park, what he and the Oaxacan news media characterized as a violent and unscrupulous minority of political opportunists, holding communities to ransom and blackmailing project developers. Mareña was unwilling or unable to believe that large numbers of Istmeños were organizing in resistance to a project that the consortium viewed as hugely beneficial to all stakeholders.

Even if we had come to be suspicious about the public minimization and demonization of the opposition movement, we found it hard not to sympathize with Chapman. He spoke to us openly. Shouting himself hoarse over the wind, he seemed like a man desperate to be heard. 'My job is to go in there and try to open a dialogue and to go and listen. But I can't do that with threats of violence. If it's safe to send my people in, I'll send them in. ... The only way to change minds is to listen to people. But if you're not allowed to listen to people, what do you do? [Throwing his hands up in despair] We've got this project that I really believe is good for the planet, good for the region, good for the people down here.'

The people, Chapman felt sure, would come around.

You can't help but be stunned by the beauty of this place. And then you see how the people are *living*. And I'm trying not to just impose my American values here but I don't think lousy medical care is a good thing, that lousy schools are a good thing ... So if

you can funnel resources into these communities to improve those services, imagine where they could be in five or ten years. They can still be fishing the lagoons but they'd have basic stuff, like electricity that is continuous, like transportation, like schools ... It may sound very idealistic but that's actually what we're trying to do. And to be confronted with this violence and with people who are essentially lying about what we're trying to accomplish ...

He trailed off; the resistance was wearying him and his investors. We asked how much patience he had left and he replied grimly, 'Not much.' Then, a moment later, he concluded,

I just find it frustrating, and sad, and the consequence is that the investor group that I represent ... they're sitting in their offices and they can put their money here, they can put their money there and they're just going to say to themselves, 'Why? I don't need these problems. I'm not actually in the business of saving the world, I'm in the business of earning money for my fiduciaries. And I need to do that in a low-risk way.'

More bad news came minutes later from the police – in the interests of his own safety there was no way they were going to allow Chapman to enter Álvaro that day. The risks were, as predicted, too high. The state police treat the Obregonian resistance with a great deal of caution. Memories are still fresh from the previous November when Mareña and the police last tested the Álvaro blockade during the Day of the Dead festival. With several protesters hauled off to detention in Juchitán and others subdued with pepper spray, the blockade was temporarily broken, allowing company workers to access the sandbar and begin topographic and vegetation removal work. But only hours later a much larger crowd of several hundred Obregonians rallied to chase the police and company off, overturning trucks and taking construction equipment hostage. We arrived in the aftermath to find the opposition more galvanized than ever. One of the leaders told us, machete at his hip, 'If they want to see blood, here we are, we're ready.'

As we finished our impromptu interview with Chapman, two gleaming white trucks glided up with other representatives of the company and the state government to collect him, and we parted ways at a crossroads that seemed designed by Hollywood as a symbol for the

impasse in which wind power development in Oaxaca was increasingly finding itself caught.

### **An anthropology of failure**

Construction on the Mareña park site has still not, as of the time of this writing, begun. Indeed, it seems increasingly unlikely that it will ever begin and that the project will have failed despite strong support from all levels of the Mexican government, generous financing from the Inter-American Development Bank, new national policy regimes favourable to both transnational private energy development and to renewable energy development, almost uniformly positive media coverage in the national and regional press, and a consortium of powerful international investors. The marriage of Mexico's aggressive renewable energy development campaign,<sup>1</sup> its high electricity tariffs and the world-class wind resources of the isthmus seemed to all parties to be highly auspicious. In a matter of less than a decade more than a dozen wind parks have come on-grid in the isthmus, according to industry experts the densest development of wind energy anywhere in the world. Investors continue to flock to the region while renewable energy advocates across the world have lauded Oaxacan wind power development for its positive contribution to climate change remediation. The Mareña project alone could avert the emission of up to 879,000 tons of carbon dioxide a year.

What we seek to explain in this chapter is how a project as diversely supported and ecologically timely as Mareña failed. As one might imagine, the vectors of this failure are highly complex, involving both new and old forces, relations and institutions, each of which signals contingent power relations and contested interactions between and among social and natural domains. To stay true to the complexity of the case, in lieu of a simplified argument for a single decisive causality, we explore a bundle of different issues and perspectives that help illuminate the challenges facing programmes of energy transition, especially in parts of the world like the isthmus of Tehuantepec that have long been marginalized or abandoned by their governing states. Renewable energy, very much like its carbon counterpart, provokes challenging questions about resource sovereignty, indexing the uncertain and uneven abilities of nation-states to manage territorial resources in the public interest (McNeish and Logan 2012; this volume). In the case of renewable energy, which is intended to

prevent further climatological damage in the global public interest, and concerns about whose sovereignty, what territories and which resources ought to be state managed or locally controlled, surface dramatic ethical tensions between concerns for local and global well-being.

Of course it is no secret that large-scale projects of energy development are almost always politically complicated, especially when the intense energy needs of translocal governance and industry are perceived as threatening local interests. As critical institutionalist perspectives have shown (Cleaver 2012), it is very often the case that institutions tasked with managing natural resources are rarely explicitly designed to do so, and these disjunctive origins can easily result in ambiguous and 'patched together' development and responses to resistance. Recent anthropological studies have highlighted the complex and often contentious relationship between state- and industry-led energy development schemes and indigenous peoples, especially concerning rights to land and resource use (Colombi 2012; Smith and Frehner 2010; Turner and Fajans-Turner 2006; Westman 2006). Mexico has been no stranger to conflicts surrounding energy-related modernization schemes, especially in the areas of mining (Liffman 2012) and petroleum extraction (Breglia 2013). Until the 1980s, Mexico had the largest population displaced by irrigation and hydropower projects anywhere in the world (Robinson 1999).

But the isthmus also has a long political and cultural history of resistance to the hegemony of Oaxaca Valley elites and to the nationalist overtures and arms of Mexico City. Few histories of the isthmus, formal or informal, do not invoke or reinscribe an Istmeño tradition of struggle against external power (Campbell et al. 1993). Narratives often begin before the Spanish conquest with Istmeños depicted as the last true Zapotecs after the Aztecs made the northern Zapotecs their minions, assimilating them culturally and linguistically. Then one is reminded of revolt after revolt in the nineteenth century, of how national and Oaxacan hero Benito Juárez never broke the will of Juchitán even though he burned it. One hears how brave Juchitecos later fought valiantly against the French invasion of Mexico and helped secure the victory of the Mexican Revolution. But when that revolution turned corrupt, Istmeños rose again, with the Coalition of Workers, Peasants and Students of the Isthmus (Coalición Obrera, Campesina, Estudiantil del Istmo – COCEI) helping to accelerate the dissolution of the PRI's (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) power across Mexico. In all

such stories, the isthmus is frequently identified as the place where the sovereign powers of Oaxacan state and Mexican national governance end and where, as in Álvaro Obregón, the police fear to tread.

A local history of political resistance to national and state-level governmentality in the region surely explains, in part, Mareña's impasse. But the resistance also exists for reasons quite contemporary, illuminating deeper tensions and paradoxes in the dominant model of renewable energy development worldwide. As elsewhere in neoliberalism, market- and entrepreneur-oriented policies are trumpeted as the most effective and 'rational' solutions to anthropogenic climate change. Large-scale renewable energy projects like wind parks are highly capital intensive and thus become tightly bound to finance capitalism and to expectations for a positive return on shareholder investment. Thus, even though green energy projects typically speak a language of environmental sustainability, the growth imperative of dominant models of economic health and a rational-choice ethos carry over to them. Communities, perhaps especially indigenous communities, with resources like land, water and wind that can be converted to 'mega-project'-level renewable energy projects, thus often find their own interests compromised by the growth and profit motives of states and their transnational corporate partners.

### **In the fading light of the black sun**

And there are more complications still. Oaxacan wind power development needs to be understood as a response not only to climate change but also to the vulnerability of the Mexican petrostate. Although peak oil fears have dissipated in many countries with the rise of shale oil and gas extraction, in Mexico such concerns remain both strong and empirically substantiated. Mexican heavy crude production fell by 46 per cent from 2004 to 2012. With its super-giant oilfield Cantarell running dry and the national oil monopoly *Petróleos Mexicanos* (Pemex) widely believed to lack the expertise and resources to effectively develop deep-water hydrocarbon resources, the Mexican petrostate finds itself at its own crossroads. In recent years Pemex has supplied as much as 40 per cent of the operating budget of the Mexican federal government, meaning that all aspects of Mexican statecraft depend critically upon revenue from oil sales. The crude production drop has been masked to some extent by a concomitant rise in international oil prices, which allowed Pemex to

retain high revenue. But, one might say, the current financial model for the Mexican state is only one crash in the carbon energy market away from disaster.<sup>2</sup> President Felipe Calderón's push to aggressively develop renewable energy resources was formulated in this context. As an official in the Mexican environmental ministry explained to us, 'we need to diversify the sources of our electricity production. The hydrocarbons we don't use for our own energy consumption are hydrocarbons we can sell at a good price.' As anthropologists of oil have noted in other contexts, the combination of enduring societal dependency on hydrocarbon resources and the mounting difficulties of resource extraction and environmental impact are generating intense and sometimes unpredictable political and cultural effects across the world (Behrends et al. 2011; McNeish and Logan 2012).

In the fading light of what Reza Negarestani (2008) calls 'the black sun' of oil, new energo-political models are taking shape in petrostates to support the dominant growth model (Boyer 2014; Mitchell 2011). In Mexico, interest in developing the wind resources of the isthmus of Tehuantepec dates back to the early 1990s. However, it was only during Calderón's presidency that a serious campaign to develop renewable energy began. Crucial elements of this campaign were new legislation and a regulatory framework favourable to private-public partnerships in renewable energy development. The wind power sector skyrocketed, growing from two parks producing 84.9 MW in 2008 to fifteen parks producing 1.331 gigawatts (GW) by the end of 2012 (a 1,467 per cent increase that has made Mexico the second-biggest wind power producer in Latin America after Brazil). The dominant development scheme has been industrial self-supply (*autoabastecimiento*) partnerships in which a private wind developer contracts to produce energy for a large industrial client (examples include CEMEX, Walmart and Bimbo) over a period of several years or decades. These schemes are typically portrayed as win-win-win for the government, developers and industry. Companies can lock in lower-than-market energy prices for the long term, enjoy the financial benefits of *bonos de carbono* (emission reduction credits), and guarantee themselves a secure energy supply. Developers enjoy special access to green development financing through organizations like the Inter-American Development Bank and the UN's Clean Development Mechanism. States receive infrastructural development and economic multipliers without having to invest themselves. Communities are also frequently portrayed as

winner in self-supply development in that they typically receive land rents and payments from usufructuary agreements.

But many Istmeños have come to have doubts about the benefits of *autoabastecimiento* wind development (Nahmed Sittón et al. 2011). Some have come to demand compensation for the use of their land beyond rents, some claim to have been tricked or pressured into signing contracts by agents of the government or developers, some deny the validity of mega-project-level development altogether. The Mareña project has helped to refine and to intensify resistance to the current paradigm of Mexican wind development for several reasons. First, the project is viewed by its critics as epitomizing a general lack of transparency in the development process. What is now known as the Mareña Renovables project has shifted names and forms several times since development began in 2003. Most recently, a Spanish energy firm, Grupo Preneal, which had signed contracts for land exploration and secured governmental permissions, sold the project rights (for what at that time were two separate projects) for \$89 million to FEMSA, Latin America's largest beverage company, and Macquarie Group, Australia's largest investment bank. These two companies quickly fused the two projects together and sold part of their stakes to the Mitsubishi Corporation and to the Dutch pension fund PGGM, and signed a power-purchase agreement with FEMSA-Heineken for twenty years. Little if any of this information was communicated directly to the communities that would be impacted by the park.

Speculative activity was also quite common in the early days of the Oaxacan 'wind rush'. It is difficult to reconstruct precisely the behind-the-scenes politics of the period, but there is significant evidence that some type of cartel-like organization was organized or permitted by the Oaxacan state government in which wind developers were assigned exclusive negotiation rights over choice plots in the core wind zone. Many of these plots were 'flipped' at a profit and again without informing the communities that would be impacted. This cartelism had unfortunate legacies in that communities were never allowed to entertain competitive bids from different developers, which set remuneration rates at a low level by international standards. Also, speculators, knowing they would not have to see these projects through to operation, apparently frequently cut corners in terms of community relations, with many Istmeños and communities complaining later of having been given insufficient or inaccurate information regarding

the benefits that projects would bring.<sup>3</sup> In the Mareña case, a federal judge in Salina Cruz issued an injunction (*amparo*) to halt progress on the park project in December 2012 in order to further investigate opposition claims that communal land was being expropriated without prior information and the consent of the majority of the *comuna*.

A second criticism frequently raised against Mareña is that it has sought, like many wind developers, to advance its project through manipulation of local authorities rather than through consensus-building projects with whole communities. Companies fervently deny these claims. But critics contend that contracts for exploration and land use rights were facilitated by bribes paid to *presidentes municipales* (mayors) or *comisariados* (collective land commissioners) in the form of cash or trucks. Even when these authorities are not personally implicated in embezzling funds or resources, it is said that they share these resources only within their own political network, thus taking what ought to be a social good and privatizing it. Multiple high-ranking members of the Oaxacan state government singled out Mareña as the worst offender they knew in terms of these practices. One figure described Mareña to us as a 'clear case of how things ought not to be done'. Another wondered why Mareña would pay 'loads of money' to buy off local authorities who rotate every three years in the normal course of elections.

This points to a third general area of complaint – that wind development in the isthmus has been accentuating social inequality, political polarization and violence by deprioritizing general social benefits (e.g. the very schools and healthcare mentioned by Chapman) in favour of benefits to specific landholders and authorities. For example, although it has significant backing among most political parties in the isthmus, wind development is particularly associated with the PRI party's political network. The PRI are in turn closely associated with the construction unions that benefit directly from park contracts. Across the isthmus we have heard that PRI political authorities recruit groups of *golpeadores* (thugs) from the construction unions who are utilized to intimidate, threaten and in some cases actually attack those who resist or oppose wind park developments. This dynamic has been particularly evident in San Dionisio del Mar, which has been on the front lines of the Mareña conflict. Although there is some evidence that the wind park enjoyed bilateral support in earlier phases, as the project has advanced it has clearly exacerbated

local political tensions between the long-reigning PRI and the leftist PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática). The PRD faction in San Dionisio has accused the PRI *presidente municipal* of signing a usufructuary agreement with Mareña to begin construction work without consulting them and of pocketing the fee for himself and his allies. Thus, as one San Dionisian student put it pithily, 'the whole town is divided. Basically, if you are a PRI family, you are for the park. And if you are in the PRD you are against it.'

Although many of the criticisms levied against Mareña are similar to those that all wind development in the region now faces, it is important to highlight certain singularities of the project that have helped make it a watershed case. When we asked one mid-level Mareña employee why she thought the project had generated so much controversy, she said, 'Well, for two reasons. It's a very ambitious project and it's the first one designed to occupy communal land.' The project is ambitious in that it would be the first one to impact multiple communities in the area (not only Álvaro and San Dionisio but also the many other lagoonal communities that have traditional rights of access to fishing near the sandbar). Likewise, it would indeed be the first park to occupy land actively administered in the *bienes comunales* land tenure system, which requires a majority of *comuneros* to approve any change to the use of the land. Although other wind park projects have occupied land that is formally communally owned, they have always been in cases in which communal organization had lapsed and/or a communal decision for land privatization had occurred previously, allowing current landholders the right to contract individually with developers.

Finally, we would also highlight a geographic singularity to the Mareña project: as apparently the only wind farm project in the world designed to occupy a sandbar, its environmental impacts are especially difficult to estimate. There is little evidence available to address burning questions such as whether the presence of the turbines would create vibrations and shed light that would scare fish away. The Environmental and Social Management Report published by the Inter-American Development Bank in November 2011, for example, noted the possibility of short-term 'economic displacement' from the disruption of fishing during the construction phase of the park (2011: 18–19) but curiously failed to discuss long-term impacts of the park's presence on local fish populations despite extensive analysis of possible impacts on bat, marine turtle and jackrabbit species.

Thus, to summarize, in certain respects Mareña amplifies doubts and criticism already being directed towards Oaxacan wind development (manipulation of authorities, cartelism, heightened social inequality). In other respects, the project represents a watershed event by being the first project attempted on communal land, the first project to impact multiple communities simultaneously, and the first in the region located near fishing communities instead of agrarian and ranching communities. These factors combined to create a context in which local resistance groups united in a regional and increasingly trans-regional network during the period of our fieldwork in 2012 and 2013. Since it has been by far the most immediate cause of the Mareña project's failure, we now turn to a deeper analysis of the 'anti-eolic' resistance movement in the isthmus of Tehuantepec.

### Capturing the meter

Back at the crossroads of green capitalist aspirations and the barricades of Álvaro Obregón, one is struck by the sheer quantity of dust that arises as a truck rolls down the road; it is reason enough to wrap a handkerchief or T-shirt around any and all respiratory orifices. Men in Álvaro Obregón are often outfitted this way, bare chested with a thinning T-shirt shrouding nose and mouth to keep the dust out. Maybe the protective shirt is printed with the smiling face of a bygone candidate, maybe a rock and roll concert relic; in either case, the chronic cough that is audible all over Álvaro makes it seem as though this is a losing battle. Today, in front of the abandoned hacienda that the *resistencia* has appropriated as their meeting place, T-shirts have been fashioned into masks by a group of young men with a more symbolic purpose, signalling a touch of outlaw: part Zapatista, part universal gangster. As they jump down from the back of a white pick-up truck even the T-shirt masks don't conceal their smiles. They've just returned from an excursion to the site where Mareña Renovables has its test tower, a spindly metal steeple with a three-pronged wind vane to measure the quality, duration and force of the wind. The masked men have something in hand, a prize. The crowd, numbering seventy or so, soon gathers around, eager to see what it is. Passing the booty from hand to hand with care, the object finally gets close enough for us to see that it is a gauge of some kind, with settings and indicators in English and numbers on dials. 'It fell down,' they explained to us, 'from the tower.' 'It fell down?'

we asked, incredulous. Their grins grew perceptibly wider; they had decided the bluff was not worth pursuing. ‘Well, it fell off when we pulled down the tower.’

The Mareña project may have a powerful set of allies and all the forces of transnational capital behind it. But it does not have the approval of the men in T-shirt masks. Protest against the Mareña project has political precedent from the COCEI movement and earlier anti-eolic protests in the isthmus to more pervasive concerns about mega-projects in general (Gómez Martínez 2005). Those in the resistance often connect their political affinities to these histories, such as their ideological links to the Zapatistas and an original (uncorrupted) COCEI. But the *resistencia* also shares affinities with a broader, contemporary set of political practices and protests against the status quo, from anti-globalization movements to Occupy. In the second half of this chapter, we document the antecedents of the anti-Mareña resistance, focusing on their political genealogies as well as their ideological commitment to collectivist, non-hierarchical models that aim to supersede historic ethnic and political rivalries. Often drawing from ideals of neo-indigenous horizontal organization and reinvigorated customary law, the *resistencia* has channelled opposition against the Mareña park for both its mega-project scale and its transnational financial ties. Posing an explicit critique of neoliberal forms of development and foreign financial intervention, the resistance has sought to foster collaborations between *ikojts* and *binnizá* populations and to encourage alliances across party lines, although each of these goals meets with uneven results. Finally, as we describe below, the *resistencia* has found political purchase not because it opposes renewable energy (it does not), but because it has brought to the surface concerns about the potential environmental and social consequences that might follow in the wake of the park’s construction. The *resistencia* has codified a suite of concerns ranging from the displacing and destructive potential of mega-projects to worries about the loss of land and fish. *La laguna, la pesca* and *nuestra tierra* have become affectively aligned as both elements of quotidian practice and symbols of regional patrimony. The local resistance that has effectively halted the Mareña project has led us to understand that climate change mitigation measures have indeed, as Mike Hulme predicted (Hulme 2009: xxvii), fomented new opportunities for environmental consciousness and activism. However, the environmental critique

levelled by the resistance contravenes corporate and state-sponsored sustainable energy projects that also claim to offer protections to our shared ecology. While transitions to renewable energy have the ethical potential to leverage a global climatological good, when they are seen to contravene local claims for rights, autonomy, environmental knowledge and ecological stewardship, they instead generate, as Mareña found, the conditions for failure. We have found that when renewable energy transitions and climate mitigation are coupled with neoliberal development schemes that mirror the logics of extraction, we are apt to see a reinvigoration of lateralist, collaborative and horizontal modes of activist response and resistance.

### Rescuing the land from the wind

The office of the Asamblea de los Pueblos Indígenas del Istmo de Tehuantepec en Defensa de la Tierra y el Territorio is readily identified on the streets of Juchitán; it is the one with the anti-eolic art on its façade. As we sat down one Sunday afternoon with two of the founders of the *resistencia*, it was hard not to notice our intimate physical proximity in this tiny room decorated with images of past victories and heroes from Che Guevara to Subcomandante Marcos. Roberto P. began the conversation and proceeded to detail a vast historical narrative of the *resistencia* over the course of over an hour. Roberto is one of the primary voices of the resistance; he does not, however, like to be called a ‘leader’. This is a designation that he associates with hierarchical, vanguardist and, ultimately, corrupt political forms. Roberto is a teacher by vocation and by nature, as became clear in his oration of historical events. The *resistencia* against Mareña, he explained, must be understood through a longer genealogy that spans many decades and locations. In addition to the insurrectionary politics of the isthmus – particularly the early COCEI movement – Roberto linked the *resistencia* to: the repression of the student movement in Mexico City in 1968 and a guerrilla *foco* in Chihuahua before that, the Chiapan rebellion of the Zapatistas following the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the battle over the development of an airport in Atenco in the early 2000s, the teachers’ strike and state violence in the capital of Oaxaca in 2006 guided by APPO (Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca), and Maoism itself, with its agrarian peasant insurgencies and challenges to First World imperialism. Roberto’s cartography of revolution and response to



foreign domination, urban hegemony and rebellions against neoliberal development brought us to the origins of anti-eolic resistance in 2005, founded by a group of committed teachers. He and others had protested against the installation of the La Venta wind park in the 1990s, noting that Subcomandante Marcos himself showed up and spoke in solidarity with them. Beyond symbolic gestures of the Zapatista leadership, the *asamblea* could also claim several significant victories of its own. These included nullifying contracts across the region and ‘rescuing’ 1,200 hectares of land from being contracted and thus turned into wind parks.

Roberto gives credit where credit is due; he is faithfully citational in his rendering of the *resistencia*’s insurrectionary lineage. Originally, the Juchitecan arm of the resistance worked under the name Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra y del Territorio. However, the designation ‘frente’, Roberto explained, is overly encumbered by vanguardism, hierarchical leadership and a military etymology, all qualities that they hoped to surpass. By consensus it was decided that the title of ‘*asamblea*’ better captured their ethos. An *asamblea* evokes, as Roberto put it, ‘a more indigenous notion, that of community’. With an egalitarian order and their rejection of hierarchical leadership the *resistencia* has proceeded with their platform in place.

That is how we began and how we have preserved the shape of this struggle ...

Since then, and in a concrete way, we have defined the line we have held until now, and that is, legal defence, direct action, mobilization, constant information for the communities, and founding *asambleas*.

Roberto readily adds that ‘We have traversed the entire historical process of the left in Mexico in order to be able to offer an alternative.’ The communitarian spirit of lateralist leadership and collective consensus is emphasized in both name, *asamblea*, and spirit, rejecting leaders and, implicitly, a flock of ‘followers’.

Dedication to the collective model is also manifest in the deeds of the *resistencia*, who have prioritized founding more *asambleas* as a central part of their mission. *Asambleas generales* have since multiplied across the isthmus in towns and villages supporting the anti-Mareña resistance. These working forms of *autonomista* protest and process call for collective decision-making in a reinvented use of *usos y costumbres*

(literally, practices and customs) – a legal and social system operating in parallel to state governance. *Usos y costumbres* have generally been regarded as a counterbalance to indigenous people’s marginalization in elite national projects throughout Mexico and in other Latin American countries. The *resistencia* has evoked similar neo-indigenist ideals in its organizational forms as well as discursively in its materials and pronouncements (Jackson and Warren 2005).<sup>4</sup> Lauding indigenous knowledge and evoking autochthonous environmental stewardship have been powerful and proximate logics for the resistance movement, even as they risk certain essentialist interpretations (Dove 2006: 195–8; Tsing 2003). Claims to environmental wisdom and indigenous sovereignty have also been tailored to a very specific, and novel, alliance between *binnizá* and *ikojts* communities.

The ideological traction of indigeneity draws upon millennia of *binnizá* and *ikojts* dwelling in the region, but the *resistencia* has reworked an ossified anecdote about interethnic conflicts between these two communities (Gómez Martínez 2005), regarding land, displacement and historic antagonisms. Challenging the construction of the wind park, for many people with whom we spoke, marks ‘the first time in history’ that *binnizá* and *ikojts* peoples have worked together collaboratively. Pan-indigenous movements, *neoindigenismo* and collaborative activism have a precedent in Mexico (Stephen 2002; Jung 2003), but the co-ethnic solidarity between these two populations is understood to be a singular and critical advance in co-rectifying corporate and state exploitation. Alliances between *ikojts* and *binnizá* communities, as several people in the resistance shared, still feel very new, emerging, and not fully complete. Their only common language is the colonizers’, yet working in this idiom, the *resistencia* has crafted a collective agenda of indigenous rights in the face of renewable energy incursions. A *comunero* from San Dionisio, for example, described how autonomy for first peoples and their ability to continue to occupy the lands where they have resided hold a certain power of truth and right.

Today in San Dionisio the struggle continues, just as it began with our heroes who came together to seek Mexico’s autonomy; here also, we seek autonomy for first peoples, for indigenous people, because we are the true owners of the land and the territories of the seas.

The *resistencia* has fomented and fostered collaborations that traverse historical divisions between local indigenous populations, but they have also managed to navigate party political lines. Given the historical strength and chauvinism of party politics in Mexico it is no mean feat for PRI-istas in the resistance to share meals with the PRD and the COCEI. Political rivalries have not ended – especially since PRI-istas are believed to be the primary beneficiaries of the isthmus wind boom – but within the ranks of the resistance these divisions have been muted. The political machinations of the parties continue apace in many aspects of wind park development, but because the political parties, left and right, have largely taken an official stance in favour of the Mareña project, the parties themselves have lost favour in the eyes of those resisting wind park development. The anti-Mareña resistance has, in further bids for autonomy, gone as far as summarily questioning the validity of political parties as legitimate democratic entities. Antonio L., one of the founders of the *asamblea* and one of the key voices in the *resistencia*, speaking to a crowd gathered in Álvaro Obregón, affirmed, ‘Today is a declaration of war against the political parties, against the government, against Mareña Renovables, against everyone who is allied with or affiliates with Mareña Renovables.’ Antonio and others in the *resistencia* also publicly announced that no political party candidate would be allowed to campaign for political office in the upcoming municipal elections. In June 2013 they made good on this pronouncement by prohibiting the installation of voting machines. The parties and the park have become a combined menace for those in the resistance, and so both have been given a directive and a direction: *fuera* (out).

### On fish and neoliberalism

In January 2012, San Dionisian *comuneros* were meeting in earnest to block construction of the Mareña park under a new appellation, ‘*los inconformes*’ (the nonconformists). By April *los inconformes* had initiated a permanent occupation of the town’s municipal headquarters. Allied with forces in Álvaro Obregón, Juchitán and other communities, as well as other indigenous rights organizations in the region, such as Union of Communities in the North Zone of the Isthmus (Unión de Comunidades de la Zona Norte del Istmo – UCIZONI), the San Dionisian protests found further collective force, impact and media attention. ‘*Fuera Mareña*’ (Out with Mareña) was a slogan that was

beginning to ring out, and ring out increasingly loudly, across the isthmus.

In the discourse of the *resistencia*, the potential for a ‘*despojo de nuestra tierra*’ (being robbed of our land) has been a rallying cry and an ominous reminder of colonial histories. It also operates as a reference to the thirty-year (or more) contracts that landowners, *ejidatarios* and *comuneros* sign with companies for turbine and road placement. The land, much of which was bequeathed for collective use by the federal government over the course of the last century, has a powerful patrimonial significance as well as an economic role in many Istmeños’ lives. While land has been a key concern regarding wind parks throughout the isthmus, water – and more specifically that which inhabits the water and those that subsist from the water – has been a critical subject for those resisting the Mareña project. Indeed, there has been a clear effort to ‘conjure nonhumans’ as potent forces in these political struggles (De la Cadena 2010).

The fishermen with whom we spoke in San Dionisio and across the isthmus were convinced that their lives and their livelihoods would be irrevocably impaired by the development of the wind park. The precise effect that the Mareña project might have on the fish or shrimp population was unclear, given the environmental impact report’s failure to treat this aspect of the regional conditions and the project’s unique placement on a sandbar. However, in part because of this absence of scientific analysis, fears abound. Ibrahim C., who would emerge as one of the key voices among the *inconformes* in San Dionisio, summarized the sentiments of many in the region.

The wealth of our sea, of our people, of our source of work and nourishment is vital [...] If the wind project comes in we will be buying foreign products coming from other places which will make feeding ourselves more expensive [...] and so in a sense San Dionisio now sees itself, or has transformed itself, into a courageous town that defends its lands and teaches foreigners that our lands must be respected.

It is telling that Ibrahim begins his comments with the ‘wealth of our sea’, for over time, as the resistance to the project grew and spread, we began to hear, increasingly, the expression ‘the sea is our bank’ (*el mar es nuestro banco*). This was a canny spin on the evident presence, or imposition, of banking interests and multinational capital

that have backed the Mareña project. But 'the sea is our bank' is also a factual statement to a degree. According to reports there are 5,000 indigenous families that rely upon fishing for their existence. Even if the number of fisherfolk in San Dionisio proper who survive exclusively by fishing is likely no more than a few dozen, many, if not the majority, of the population rely on fishing for a kind of security subsistence in conditions of economic and food insecurity; if all else fails the sea is there and you, and your family, can eat. Ibrahim is not naive, after all, to underscore how harm to *la pesca* will result in increased dependence on a market-based food supply and further insertion into a vast chain of imported products.

Many advocates, Ibrahim included, were clear that opposition to the wind park was not a refusal of its 'clean' capabilities and renewable energy aspirations. Rather, they wanted to mount a warning and protest against the prioritization of market-based growth models spreading across every dimension of daily life in Mexico. Berta C., one of the founders of the Juchitecan *asamblea*, underscored that it is not wind energy that is at issue, but the specific dangers of massive foreign capital investment in the region that the parks have portended. These fiscal threats come in the form of bribes, manipulation and payouts. Huge sums of financial investment, whether invested in land rents or secretly passed into the hands of local caciques, are viewed as denigrating local sovereignty, causing further 'tears in the social fabric'. If there is any parallel to be made between NIMBY (not in my backyard) complaints and the concerns being voiced by San Dionisian fishermen or those w/manning the barricades in Álvaro Obregón, it is of a qualitatively different kind. NIMBY objections that are pervasive in places such as the United States and Europe – disrupting one's view, spoiling the look of landscapes – ring hollow in comparison to those of subsistence fishermen pleading for their ability to survive. It is especially apparent when they are able to articulate the multiple ways in which neoliberalizations have changed and, from the point of view of many, endangered their ways of life and livelihoods.

### Conclusions: downed windmills

Andrew Chapman, in his baseball hat with the thrashing fish embroidered across the front, and the young man behind his makeshift mask with the absconded wind meter in his hand represent very different places, both metaphorically and physically. Chapman has long

since returned to New York, and the young man with the meter, he is likely either swapping stories with his friends or out on the water hauling shrimp-filled nets from the lagoon by moonlight. There is no reason to make speculative comparisons between the very different lives of each of these men and the economic, social and cultural worlds they represent. But it is fair to say that they do have shared expectations and parallel hopes for the future. Each of them can claim a virtuous, ethical position: the American bringing development, fomenting markets for renewable energy use, slowing the creep of global warming and producing profit for green investors; the Istmeño fighting for his future on the lagoon, challenging foreign invaders and transitional capital, ensuring 'food sovereignty' for himself, his family and the region.

Since they have a climatological impetus, mega-projects of clean energy production would seem to have an ethical edge over other mega, extractive endeavours, such as mining or oil drilling. However, the very dimensions of a mega-project, 'clean' or 'dirty', are invariably worrisome and controversial because they consume such vast tracts of space, whether land or sea (Turner and Fajans-Turner 2006; Liffman 2012). Renewable energy production may be a dramatic improvement over its carbon cousin, but in the case of the isthmus, the injection of foreign capital appears to erase much of this environmental and social potential. In this sense, the Mareña project and its failure in the face of resistance reveals more than simply another development desire gone awry. Rather, it brings to the surface ethical tensions that position local economic and environmental health against global economic and environmental health (Howe 2014). The Mareña case is a political economic calculation that attempts to balance scale against compensation. However, it also challenges the deeper logics of energy transition by demanding responses to how putative benefits and remediations will be made now, and in the future, locally and transnationally. There is likely no one in Álvaro Obregón, San Dionisio or other communities in the resistance who would declare their outright opposition to preventing further climate change or, in the broadest terms, making the world and their environment more humane and more hospitable. However, to entreat them to sacrifice their land and fishing grounds on behalf of international global protocols and climate change mitigation mandates devised in Kyoto, Durban and Copenhagen, which, in turn, benefit investors and developers at least as far afield, is a proposition that does not sit

well in the isthmus. In a place that has successfully thwarted outside influence and control for several centuries, development driven by private, foreign capital for the benefit of large corporate consumers seems like folly. Asking Istmeños to risk further precarity on behalf of global warming and an abstract 'greater global good' may appear preferable to re-enacting histories of corporate exploitation and extractivism, but this attempt to engineer climatological altruism has failed to gain much traction. As they seek to protect and defend the resource-rich places they inhabit, the *resistencia* reiterates a politics of territoriality. Their motives can be understood, in this sense, as another attempt at 'resource sovereignty', whereby autochthonous communities seek to manage their territorial resources – such as land, water and wind – with or without the sanction of the state (McNeish, Logan and Borchgrevink this volume: 3). The Mareña project has proved to be a critical referendum on the possibilities for renewable energy in Mexico, but it is not singular, nor will it be unique as renewable energy projects continue to expand in Latin America and around the world. It is a lesson, however, in how disjointed development and failed attempts at sustainability mirror other projects that have similarly taken market-based models as the only possible 'rational' solution to the threats of the Anthropocene.

Critiquing capitalist development and creating horizontal and collective political models, the anti-Mareña actions share an affinity with uprisings and protests from Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park. Horizontal networks function in place of hierarchies, consensus democracy replaces top-down direction, and principles of decentralization are prioritized (Graeber 2002). Reacting to these projects of green neoliberalism, the *resistencia* has been able to recapitulate the roots of the anti-globalization movement(s) and direct actions that, for many, originated with the Zapatistas. Like the Zapatismo formed in the Lacandon jungle, anti-WTO protests in Seattle, protests against the G8 in Geneva, to, most recently, Occupy across North Africa, North America and Europe, the *resistencia* has rejected hierarchical orders and decision-making (Jung 2003; Muñoz Ramírez 2008; Razsa and Kurnick 2012; Stephen 2002). It has made definitive critiques of neoliberal policies and the ways in which private finance capital may endanger local communities' livelihoods and well-being. In this sense, we would argue, energy protest movements in the isthmus represent an 'outpost of the new opposition' (New Left Review 2001).

However, there are at least two important distinctions to make regarding the Istmeño response to *neoliberalismo verde* that make it stand apart from Occupiers, anti-globalization actions and neo-anarchist movements that have emerged in other parts of the world. The first is their explicit incorporation of a collaborative, neo-indigenous model coupled with an adherence to a communal *asamblea* ideology; these tactics have been seen in other Latin American struggles over sovereignty and resources, to be sure (e.g. Dove 2006; Turner and Fajans-Turner 2006), but anti-eolic protest in the isthmus signals an emerging logic of resistance that rejects both green capitalist aspirations and greenhouse gas reduction as justifications for territorial displacements (see Howe 2014). The second distinction to be made is that the *resistencia* in the isthmus is, unlike Occupy, not reacting to a global financial crisis, but instead drawing attention to protracted forms of marginalization exercised by state policies and green capitalist developers. In other words, they are reminding those that will listen that they have been 'the 99%' for quite some time. The *resistencia's* critique is not aimed at the *failure* of global finance capital, but rather is a scathing commentary upon its '*successful*' propagation across the isthmus. In place of Wall Street banks that were too big to fail, the resistance has challenged a massive renewable energy installation that has also seemed – with all of its international development and corporate sponsorship – too big to fail. And yet, as of now, it has. Despite the heft of Mareña's clean energy aspirations, the occupations of roads and barricades have revealed their debilities and shortcomings. And in this sense, the refusal of the Mareña project is not simply a referendum on how renewable energy projects will proceed in Mexico, but a foreshadowing of potential resistances, North and South, where renewable energy projects may be, increasingly, objects of dissent.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Under the administration of Felipe Calderón (2006–12), Mexico made great strides towards combating climate change through *transición energética*. The country's General Law on Climate Change (signed by Calderón as he was leaving office) outlines a comprehensive strategy for climate-resilient and low-carbon economic growth. The scope of

the legislation makes it one of the most ambitious climate remediation laws in the world and it has, along with previous policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and bolster conservation, made Mexico a world leader in climate change mitigation.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, as this volume goes to press, the Mexican government has

announced 8.3 billion dollars in budget cuts reacting to the downturn in oil prices in late 2014.

3 In our recent survey of La Ventosa, an isthmus town now surrounded by active wind parks, we were surprised by how many people reported having been led to believe that the wind parks would reduce their electricity costs.

4 Although they are understood to be a pre-Columbian inheritance, *usos y costumbres* have been modified over time and have experienced a resurgence throughout Mexico (Carlsen 1999: 2; Stephen 2002; Rubin 1998).

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