

# Expecting the Unexpected in a Culture of Protest (Almost Always) Civil Disobedience in Oaxaca, Mexico

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“You have to expect the unexpected or you won’t be able to survive here,” said one of the ex-pat Americans during our interview about Spanish language learning in Oaxaca, Mexico. “When you get frustrated, you just have to let things go and know that everything will work out. It always does.”



She may have meant to expect the electricity to suddenly stop working (and to expect it will start soon enough), or she may have meant to expect roadblocks at any moment due to an enormous parade replete with ribboned and flowered folk dancers, canon-like firework booms, and 15 foot dancing puppets. In my two months here I have begun to learn to adjust to endless surprises—even to expect the earth to jiggle from regular earthquakes in this region. But I am also endlessly challenged when these surprises disrupt my plans for teaching.

As visiting faculty in *La Facultad de Idiomas* (The World Languages Institute), I’ve learned that just getting to class can be a challenge. I regularly check to make sure there are no protestors shutting down my path to the university, no roadblocks from the state teachers’ union, no regional or national holidays, no indigenous uprisings. And of course, in light of hurricane season on both coasts, I always leave the house with an umbrella.

But there are only so many ways to prepare for the unexpected. For example, while I knew about a massacre against student protestors that took place on October 2, 1968 in Mexico City, I didn’t know that University students in Oaxaca (6 hours from Mexico City by bus) commemorate that day every year, shutting down roads and universities--but I quickly learned

when I failed to make my way to class. As I contemplated my own limited participation in educational movements of protest and memory, I learned about several Facebook groups that would help keep me aware of such actions in Oaxaca.

Two days ago, October 23, 2013, this message arrived in my *facultad* Facebook account:

*C U tomada.*

*[U.C. (University City) taken]*

*Tomada.* “Taken,” as in taken over, overcome, occupied, under arrest, at a standstill. Though I often consider myself fluent in Spanish, I learn diction’s nuances daily—where one verb like “tomar” can mean “to take” as in a photograph or alternatively “to drink” in the context of a lemonade or beer, it can also refer to civil disobedience and *taking over* entire institutions. *What was it this time?* I asked colleagues and students by email. Nurses. *Nurses?*

On October 23 nursing students brought a University of 10,000 to a halt. Why? As I understand it, there was an unfair decision made to extend an out-of-favor Nursing School Director in her position for another six months. Today, Friday October 25, the University still remains closed.



One of the many advantages of having a Facebook group with one’s students, is that I get to learn about university school culture from their

perspective. Some students brag about “perfect breakfasts” of hot chocolate and tamales they had because of unexpected free time instead of class due to the University shut down. Cynical about Mexicans using protests as an excuse not to work, one student sarcastically wrote: ¿Por qué nunca sábado? ¿No les gusta ese día o se toman el "Sabbath"? [*Why are the strikes never on Saturday? They don't like that day or do they observe ("take") Sabbath.*]

Many are proud of their rich history and contemporary culture of protest but often bemoan that the injustices never really change. But when Mexican teachers (mostly from Oaxaca) recently shut down the regional school system for 40 days to protest new national teacher exams and shut down major intersections in the capital and businesses around the country, the effect on the public was enormous.

The culture here seems to be replete with contradictions—when the water or electricity stop working, don't sweat it. *Tranquilo*, calm down, have patience. It will all work out. But their tranquil reception of the unexpected, crescendos to full force confrontation against larger social injustices: teachers' rights, students' rights, indigenous rights, ecological concerns, government corruption.

As a professor in the College of Education, I reflect on the many unjust actions in our local, regional, and national educational institutions but I have yet to see any part of our UGA campus be shut down, let alone the whole institution or any part of our city be “tomada” or taken over as occurs regularly throughout my new institutional and civic home (the Occupy movement, a thrilling exception as it took over a few Broad street blocks). Maybe we in Athens, GA are all too cynical—what good would it do? Would anything really change? Wouldn't we just get in trouble that we just don't want?

Of my many lessons in language and culture during my sabbatical in Oaxaca, perhaps foremost is my learning the definition and experience of protest and “*tomar*,” the public taking of responsibility for social change. I've wondered “out loud” to my own Facebook community in the U.S. about why we parents and educators tolerate so many unjust actions in our school systems, the forced cultures of testing, monolingualism, and STEM (Science Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) funding at the expense of art. What would happen if as CRCT (Criterion Referenced Competency Tests)

preparations begin, a community of protestors shut down Atlanta Highway or even just the Varsity Drive-In, drawing community awareness to the barbarity of testing culture in our schools, and perhaps providing opportunities for dialogue and change? We have [models of success](#) from such a movement among Seattle teachers, students and parents—what might we do to effect positive educational change?

As I look around at the colorful street parades bursting with hand painted souvenirs, I wonder what aspects of language and culture I'll bring back in my bags. What will I allow my Mexican *compadres* and *commadres* to teach me about what it means to be a citizen with a social conscience, an educator, a professor, a parent? Among many precious finds, I hope to carry back this new ecstatic sense of the unexpected: someone who expects to be surprised by what is possible, to sustain what is inevitable, to wonder at fireworks that sound like double barrel cannons bursting for change.





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