

## OPENNESS, HUMILITY, AND TRUST: CONDITIONS TO ACHIEVE COMMUNITY DEMOCRACY

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*In the nineteenth century, slavery, racism, and colonizing processes increased in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the twentieth century, the ambition and arrogance of the rich countries became patent through the two World Wars and the Cold War. The last two decades have been witnesses of the development of human degradation and planetary devastation as new malignant fruits of abuse of nature, devaluation of human work, idolatry for money, and overvaluation of knowledge in itself. The possibilities for a dignified life have now to be looked for at the levels, styles and quality of life that have survived in the life of solidarity, resilience, and audacity of the poor. Our proposal is to analyze and organize the struggles towards the building of a new social fabric of community democracy. The proposal comes from our 40 years of community life and work amongst a poor, despised and native people: an indigenous population in the mountains of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, Mexico, and from the awareness of the deleterious effects of globalization and neoliberalism. To carry out social transformations, we have noticed that community integration and democratic commitment require the implementation of three elements: the creation of a structural basis, rather than a territorial one, through processes of long interaction; a social cohesion resulting from confronting conflicts and developing subjective conscience of dignity; and the search for a world of fraternity. These are characteristics that are visible in an experience of a lifetime if there is openness in the interactions, humility in confronting conflicts, and trust in journeying towards the utopian horizons of a dignified life.*

**Keywords:** community, openness, humility, trust

### 1. Introduction

The great expectations created by the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century in the Western World, with the three magnificent words of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity that proclaimed a dignified life for all human beings, were gradually evaporated in the subsequent centuries. The existence of privileges for a small number of certain sectors of humanity were confirmed and perpetuated by old-fashioned and new aristocracies, and by a bourgeoisie that concentrated the general wealth through work overexploitation, nature devastation, money

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accumulation, and appropriation of knowledge by the elites. The progressive industrialization and urbanization of Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were the landmarks of the arrogant modernity of those people. In the nineteenth century, slavery, racism and contempt for the non-European peoples remained active, and the abusive colonizing processes increased in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. In the twentieth century, the enormous ambition and immense arrogance of Europe and the Anglo-Saxon world became patent through two World Wars and a Cold War, which was the outcome of political errors of the countries that prevailed after those wars, and which dominated the world scene. The last two decades of the twentieth century and the three five year periods of the beginning of the twenty-first have been witnesses of the development of human degradation and planetary devastation. Mexico has been undergoing an enormous natural and social devastation. The situation has become almost unbearable in the last thirty-five years.

The purpose of our article, sustained by a life and practice of more than 40 years intended to build a counter-current community experience, at a small scale, is the proposal not to cease in the exertion to create the social fabric of a life leading to the satisfaction of human needs; not only of the basic ones, when we think about existence. We try to tend to the enjoyment of life, facing life adversities as a community.

This is a proposal to analyze and organize the struggles towards the construction of a new social fabric for a dignified life as a community. It comes from community life and work amongst a poor, despised and indigenous people and from the awareness of the deleterious social effects of globalization. To carry out social transformations in this damaged world community, integration and democratic commitment have now to be looked for at the levels, styles and quality of life that have survived in the life of solidarity, resilience and audacity of the indigenous populations.

## **2. The Contents of a Book. “Community: Interaction, Conflict and Utopia”**

The book “Community: Interaction, Conflict and Utopia” was written as a follow up of the book “Las veredas de la incertidumbre: Relaciones interculturales y supervivencia digna” (Sánchez & Almeida, 2005). Both texts intend to communicate the labors and the learning during four decades of a life experience and community action carried out since 1973 in an indigenous region of Mexico, between an NGO conformed by urban activists (PRADE, A.C. or Proyecto de Animación y Desarrollo) and members of the indigenous community of San Miguel Tzinacapan, Cuetzálán, Puebla in Mexico. The relevance of the book is related to the learning outcomes that have led to the formulation of criteria – not about a model – on how to face the difficult task of achieving the construction of intercultural relations and conjoint efforts to confront situations of discrimination and exploitation of long standing. The book is also the outcome of a debate on the relevance or not of keeping the discussions about community, and on the relevance or not of keeping the discussions about society. These two concepts refer to realities immersed in the present civilizational breakdown, in the modernity/colonial crisis, that have made patent and acute – to the extreme – the destruction that the speculative financial capital, the transnational corporations, and the organized crime are doing to human life and to its possibilities of reproduction. These three monsters have also generated religious and political fundamentalist responses that alienate minds and detonate new forms of violence. They have

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conformed a climate of helplessness, a reality of inability that frequently produces cynicism or indifference. Several recent events make visible, from our point of view, the beginning of the modernity/colonial breakdown, the civilizational collapse: the forced disappearance of 43 students on September 2014 in Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, Mexico, by a plot between organized crime and the State; the criminal assaults to defenseless people in France and Belgium; and the fundamentalist traits of racism, classism, and sexism in Trump's America.

The present article is the continuation of the reflection initiated by the authors in the book.

The remaking of socio-communitarian links is underway all over the world. They are being created in different latitudes as reactions to the changes happening in our civilization. Some examples are fundamentalist communitarianisms and emancipatory processes; depression and resilience; resistance and creativity facing barbarian identities; predator individualism and subjectifying individualism. We have tried to listen to different sociology and social psychology theoreticians. We have studied the trajectory of the concept of community from an evolutionist and lineal point of view, going from the traditional to the modern, from the affective, compulsory, imposed, instinctive, and natural, to the concept of society as the rational, contractual, free association of citizens. Such vision ignores that modernity was achieved thanks to the spoliation and stigma of colonialism, and to the idea of progress that is now falling into pieces. We noticed that there is an area of community psychology that strives for the people's adaptation of imposed regulations, and also an area of community psychology that looks for people's liberation. We presented three theoretical approaches that can be useful in understanding community and society in our times.

Globalization/post-globalization dynamics have been creating an increased *apartheid* process at the macro-social level. There are new phenomena of exclusion-expulsion (Sassen, 2014). In this context, the building of new community fabrics is taking place under different approaches. Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar (2011) points towards a situation of increasing antagonism between the capitalist world and the communities. In our recent research work, we have noticed there are new types of community trusses: immigrant transnational communities (Sánchez and Hernández, 2012); indigenous populations reorganization, particularly in the Zapatista territory (Sánchez, 2016; Almeida, 2016), and in the Tancitaro municipality (Mendoza and González, 2016); and also, from our own experience, in the Sierra Norte de Puebla, a region actually defending its territory against the mining companies' aggressions.

Alain Touraine's (2010) idea on the concept of "*sujet*" (social actor), his actual main center of thinking, takes place in these new contexts. According to him, the new social actor comes from a double resistance: against market totalitarianism, even when useful technologies are being utilized; and against the fundamentalist communitarianism, even when trying to build a new sense of life. These new forms of group and individual subjectivity appear in the aforementioned new community processes.

Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002) points out that the crisis of the colonial common sense is provoking the construction of an Ecology of Knowledge that links the Western knowledge based on the illustrated reason, to the cultural knowledge that has been made invisible and has been denied by the process he calls epistemicide. The evidence of the interaction between existing knowledge and the possibility of new knowledge becomes exemplified by the relationship between the urban team and the indigenous people of Tzinacapan. This is the central experience as it is addressed in the book

We agree that trying to articulate theories from different lineages is difficult. However, trying to make sense of the actual civilizational problems, and doing something about them, has forced

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us to look for guiding paths from different thinkers.

The experience of San Miguel Tzinacapan, already described and analyzed in the book “The paths of incertitude” (Sánchez & Almeida, 2005), was brought up again rethinking it as the inter-communitarian process of intercultural relations that has afforded life experiences and illuminations to go through this obscure night of history. We summarize the whole enterprise as a solidarity pilgrimage of countercurrent tendency consisting of interacting in the thickness of life, recognizing conflicting vulnerabilities, and struggling to build utopian horizontal relationships of reciprocal recognition among human beings. The pilgrimage started in the rural region of the Sierra Norte de Puebla and has been continued in academic settings connecting the two scenarios.

Chapter III from the book “Community: Interaction, Conflict and Utopia” is devoted to the detailed presentation of the experience in San Miguel Tzinacapan. We would like to clarify that our life and work there was not thought of as related in particular to any of the three standard types of community psychology, although we do recognize that it shows traits of community adaptation, community resistance and community liberation. We must say so because in our team, there was only one social psychologist, a disciple of Urie Bronfenbrenner, a developmental psychologist. The other members of our team were educators, sociologists, chemists, social workers, and numerous people from the indigenous community: housewives, artisans, peasants, healers, merchants, etc. The most important theoretical influences we had were from Bronfenbrenner (1979), Desroche (1971), Freire (1982), Montessori (1971), Marx (1971), Fromm and Maccoby (1973), and also from the rich Oral Tradition of the village. The key concepts that were more frequently repeated in the experience at San Miguel Tzinacapan were community, fraternity, literacy, child development, exploitation, physical health, human rights, and oral tradition. We hardly knew of the work of Sylvia Lane Maurer (1981), Fals Borda (1981), James Kelly (1961) or J. Rappaport (1984). There was even some tendency to disregard and criticize academic thinking. It was only during the nineties that we tried to relate more with national community psychology colleagues, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century that we approached international community psychologists.

We intend now to give a very brief account of the San Miguel intercultural experience and describe the two collective partners. Firstly, the indigenous community, a population of some 3,000 inhabitants whose art of life can be characterized as “surviving and celebrating”. Secondly, the art of living on part of the urban team that can be conceptualized as “journey and shelter”. The interaction that has been taking place can be summarized in five big steps:

- a) From 1973 to 1976. The beginning of the shared intercultural experience: Five women and some 30 indigenous people.
- b) From 1976 to 1981. The time when a Society of Rural Production, a Society of Social Solidarity and a local Cooperative were organized.
- c) From 1981 to 1984. When the local organizations became consolidated and a regional influence started.
- d) From 1985 to 1994. A time of crisis, very much related to the local effects of national globalization policies; also a time of readjustments and new options of life and work for the village and the team.
- e) From 1994 to 2017. New approaches to action and different ways of life for the actors: San Miguel, a village revitalized and apt to resist the illusory promises of neoliberalism; the team, a group in diaspora, some members still sharing the life and happenings of the

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village, some others having academic influence and receiving recognition mostly in the urban world.

The conducting thread of our book is the idea of a communitarian pilgrimage to a meaningful humanity, a pilgrimage to life productiveness, countercurrent to promises of individual success.

### **3. Twenty-seven Premises for Understanding and Becoming Involved in the Community as Interaction, Conflict and Utopia**

In the book, we have made an effort to understand how the social links have been restructured through globalization and neoliberalism in Mexico since 1982, what kind of community and society are emerging, and how they can be conceptualized. The experience of San Miguel Tzinacapan, one among many others, but one in which we have actively participated, brings several paths of analysis that can be useful. From this experience, we propose the concepts of Interaction, Conflict and Utopia as the characteristics to elucidate the new and old community-links dynamics and their micro-macro societal relation. Hence, from the San Miguel Tzinacapan experience springs out a tone or atmosphere with which to confront the contemporary world breakdown: enter into the thickness of life as a specific form to develop interaction; recognize vulnerabilities as the strategy to identify and confront conflicts; and strive to build horizontal relationships of reciprocal recognition as utopian perspective. How are the practices of convivial intimacy and those of external relations progressing? How does the daily territorial existence take place? How does the symbolic daily experience evolve?

The structural axes adopted to analyze our proposed community concepts come from Castells (2000). He describes the community links in our world, articulating the global interaction in which the time/space dimensions are overturned as a product of globalization, and he refers to the multidimensional politics that are modifying power relations. Besides, we assume the Marxist perspective of class in relation to the restructuring of the material conditions of life.

For the psychosocial axes, we look at the understanding brought about by the intersubjective realities; at the deep consideration of human reality observed from the unconscious; and at the diversity recognition-differentiation that have conformed new social identities and also new reification processes.

As a methodological approach, we have emphasized in our book the psychosocial axes inserting each one of them into the structural axes. In the intercrossing of these two dimensions we offer categories of reconfiguration, empowerment, property restructuring; mental health and unconscious, social unconscious, division of work; identification, social character, and social class. We offer three tables to visualize the way these elements are structured for each of the three main concepts of interaction, conflict and utopia. These concepts emerged throughout the communal life during the first eighteen years of living and working together among the team of outsiders that came to San Miguel and from the wealth of indigenous ways to confront and deal with life events, good and bad. To give deeper understanding to the three concepts, Maria Eugenia, a sociologist, proposed to look at them from the categories of time/space, power relations, and material conditions. Eduardo, a social psychologist proposed to look at them from the categories of intersubjectivity, unconscious and identity. Then, the categories for each concept were intercrossed, and the twenty-seven premises were found.

### 3.1 *The Nine Premises of Interaction*

How to enter into the thickness of life?

- a. Creating a flexible dynamic intersubjectivity in a community experience between insiders and outsiders and considering spatial and temporal variations.
- b. In both, internal and external participants, the conscience of their own dignity conditions the potentiality of the intersubjectivity.
- c. The material circumstances of both social actors are key to the construction of a dignified intersubjectivity.
- d. Both agents need to be aware of the obscure aspects of daily life that damage personal and collective mental health.
- e. Confronting repressed desires, interests, and realities that prevent the conscience of hidden away potentialities.
- f. Confronting the unconscious legitimations of inequalities in the material conditions of existence.
- g. Facilitating for both agents a positive identity dynamics, personal and collective, strong and flexible.
- h. Facilitating personal and collective resistance and defiance that are needed for qualified identity processes.
- i. Facilitating the effort to break away from classist identities, personal and collective.

Structural Axes Psychosocial Axes	Time/space dimensions	Power relations	Material relations.
Interaction.			
Intersubjectivity.	a. Space/time changes and their influences on intersubjectivity	b. Strengthening or weakening of intersubjectivity	c. Material relations, polarization of property and intersubjectivity
Unconscious	d. Unconscious and mental health or deterioration	e. Enlightning or repressions of the social unconscious	f. Unconscious and inequality legitimation
Recognition/Differentiation forms.	g. Identifications and identities reconfigurations	h. Subversion or adaptation of social character	i. Identity processes of inclusion/exclusion

**Fig. 1. Interaction : Nine structural- psychosocial inter-crossings.**

Source: Almeida and Sánchez(2014,p. 132).

### 3.2 *The Nine Premises of Conflict*

How can one's own recognition of vulnerabilities and the ones of the others be propitiated?

- a. Breaking away from the entrenchments in time and space that hinder the common creation of a different style of life.
- b. Recognizing and confronting asymmetries of power that cripple reinforcing the joint vision and action processes.
- c. Rebelling against any personal and collective despoilment suffered and produced by predators, past and present.
- d. Searching for hidden sources of ambiguity and cruelty in our daily dealings.
- e. Unmaking yearnings for personal and collective power.
- f. Deconstructing colonial and racist traits that have been introjected along our trajectories and that appear in current global and local oppressions all over the world.
- g. Recognizing the identity hatred in which we move and which we have assimilated.
- h. Recognizing the scars and injuries that have been provoked by an endured self-denigration.
- i. Struggling against the social absurd, the reification, alienation, spoliation and scorn abysses in which we have been submerged by the capitalist hydra.

Structural Axes Psychosocial Axes	Time/space dimensions	Power relations	Material relations.
Conflict			
Intersubjectivity.	a. Conformism or resistance confronting the new planetary conflictivity	b. Inertia or resilience confronting conflict	c. Spoliation or reappropriation in conflictive processes
Unconscious	d. Negativity or confrontation of conflict in mental health	e. Servitude or autonomy	f. Autonomous solidarity or coloniality- alienation
Recognition/Differentiation forms.	g. Identifications reconfiguration or violent identity rejections	h. Social character, submission or resistance and organization	i. Struggle and recognition or depredation and contempt

**Fig. 2. Conflict: nine structural-psychosocial inter-crossings.**

Source: Almeida and Sánchez(2014, p. 172)

### 3.3 *The Nine Premises of Utopia*

How can be taken the road towards horizontal relations of reciprocal recognition?

- a. Taking into consideration the collective memory and social imaginaries of the future from both agents in the building of social fabric.
- b. Approaching with flexibility the conditions to avoid social fascism and create neo-community: minority groups, commitment degrees, multi-localizations.

Structural Axes Psychosocial Axes	Time/space dimensions	Power relations	Material relations.
Utopia.			
Intersubjectivity.	a. Shared conviviality vs individualist skepticism	b. Neocommunity vs Social fascism	c. Social and affective inclusion without inequality vs neoliberal mediations of exclusion
Unconscious	d. Growth and interdependence syndrome vs deterioration and passive spectator syndrome	e. Archaic traits of cruelty vs luminous archetypes of goodness and androgyny	f. Openness to historic options without privileges vs denial of contradictions and evil
Recognition/Differentiation forms.	g. Horizontal recognition of diversities vs substitutive reifying universalism	h. Lived typical human experiences vs reifying indifference	i. Dignity and solidarity in communal spaces vs accumulation logics by spoliation

**Fig. 3. Utopia: nine structural-psychosocial inter-crossings.**

Source: Almeida and Sánchez (2014, p.213)

- c. Being alert to the unexpected of depredation logistics, and without looking away from the suffering, the injustice and the miserable life of those excluded.
- d. Collaborating to close the Jungian abyss of consciousness-unconsciousness, becoming

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- aware of the mental deterioration which living a life as a spectator implies.
- e. Being alert to the depredator collective unconscious and, without lowering the guard, confronting the perpetrators of violence.
  - f. Being conscious that “the only resistance against evil resides in the weak and indispensable forces of friendship, cooperation, caring and love” (Morin, 2005, p. 289), the ones that create and sustain hope. Building a dynamic intersubjective “us”, rendering each human being towards himself/herself, and recognizing that we are all political beings.
  - g. Learning the stamina of language of feelings, the own experiences, and the weakness of indifference in building social character.
  - h. Living in a constant countercurrent pilgrimage in a close rapport. This is the art of constructing that which capital destroys.

#### **4. The Path to Community Democracy**

Mexico is going through a historical period characterized by violence, devastation, and discrimination for the majority of its population. It is a nightmarish, dreadful, appalling, socio - historical context. It is a situation where the corruption of those who capitalized the power generates an ambiance of revulsion. It is a social ecology in which the impunity, of those who control the economy, creates an atmosphere of shame. It is a social space in which the “lawful State” means a constant threat to the life of its dwellers, a society of fear. In these conditions, the social fabric has been destroyed and it is urgent to think and act to stop such disaster.

Interaction refers to a community life that is a practice of liberty. We have learned that this approach needs people who are decided to enter into the thickness of life of the groups with whom they live and work, and not as a freelance social actor, but as the member of a team. The task is to create community conscience; of shaping an intersubjectivity able to understand and share texts and contexts; of establishing a structural basis where one may question the belief and practices in which domination is supported. The matter is to learn to read and write collectively, to strengthen critical and lucid thinking, and to destroy the phantom of the predators. This structural basis is the task of creating community team groups; about never being alone again. Having company is important to learning to live.

Conflict refers to a community life that is a practice of equality. Any community experience implies a polyvalent social space infested with asymmetries of culture, age, class, ethnic groups, gender and economy. The social actors should be attentive to face and confront social differences, striving to create social cohesion and avoiding confinement and fundamentalism. The recognition of one’s vulnerabilities, those from the team, and those from the population in which one has been involved, is the condition to learn from the conflicts, to accept the right of any human being of being human. The practice of narrating the own experiences lead to acquire a solid thought, full of affectivity, of social support, to deal with oppressions from an ambiance emotionally rich in the joyous struggle. To have company, make alliances, and support one another, reinforces the intentionality of creating community conscience.

Utopia is the most critical and neglected aspect of community psychology. It is the one that fosters it as a practice of fraternity. When one strives to be conscious of one’s own dignity and that of others, one cannot tolerate, out of apathy and conformism, the abomination of corruption, the shame of impunity, and the ostentation of injustice. Critical Community Psychology (Burton,

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Duckett, Lawthom, Siddiquee, & Kagan, 2011) requires the constant effort to democratize the democracy, and the promotion of the utopia of horizontal relations of reciprocal recognition. The source of strong and flexible thinking to combat privileges is reading, writing, and narrating texts and contexts of daily life. Having company is the way to have a life and a dignified project supported by autonomous solidarity.

## 5. Final Reflection

The actual uncertainties of social life compel us, without complacency, to rethink and reconsider our trajectories. In our particular case, it is the one about a group of friends who started to live together and to look for a new style of life among all and with the people of a Nahua (Aztec) region in the mountainous Northern part of the State of Puebla, 40 years ago. We have tried to build an “us” as self-dispossession, as assumption, and as commitment. We have been and are in a conviviality of long years among us and among the indigenous and urban groups with which we have shared living situations and possibilities. The intention of self-dispossession has consisted on putting under a critical perspective our vision of the world and of the events, to create mental and vital openness in our everyday life towards everything that is alive. It is not and has not been easy to stand in such way, being attentive to everything that life has been requiring of us and trying to live together, sharing and caring.

The intention to assume the day-to-day living and the historical events has consisted on being present to search for the way to liberate, educate and transform ourselves as a whole and bonded group. As can be understood, this intention of assuming has been frequently contaminated by urgencies of acting, fighting, intervening, going out of the anonymous standing, and of self-appropriating the prolific actions achieved. The intention to commit ourselves has been manifested by our decision and effort to enter into the thickness of life with all of our vulnerabilities and with the utopia of reciprocally recognizing ourselves as singular subjects in the community of a common world.

Summarizing, this is a proposal to achieve community democracy as a political action supported by the building of a social intersubjectivity created by openness and freedom; by reinforcing a social cohesion consolidated by humble attitudes and the search for equality; by struggling for a dignified life for everybody, with trust in a fraternity.

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