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**SEARCHING FOR ORDER ON THE 'DIRTY' STREETS  
OF THE CITY  
DISPLACEMENT OF STREET VENDORS IN COLONIAL  
AND POSTCOLONIAL MEXICO CITY**

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## **SEARCHING FOR ORDER ON THE `DIRTY` STREETS OF THE CITY**

### **Displacement of street vendors in colonial and postcolonial Mexico City**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The displacement of street vending activities from the streets of Mexico City is nothing new. It's a practice exercised by city authorities that date back to the XVIII, and arguably the XVII century. This paper provides an account of the multiple ways in which street vendors' removal has been carried out and justified by urban authorities in different moments in the history of the city. Special attention will be placed on four key dimensions of such efforts, which include: normative rationalities, imaginaries, practices, and spatial references constructed around these activities during key historic moments in the political life of the city. Through a historical perspective, the objective of the paper is to shed light on the seemingly new ways in which contemporary beautification policies implicated around the politics of the street unfold. A historical account of the different ways in which the displacement of street vending activities have been made legitimate by urban authorities and struggled over is important to shed light on contemporary practices of displacement and current normative visions of the street. Historically, while urban authorities efforts to remove street vendors from the city's public spaces might seem to be carried out in similar ways, it is important to look at the different rationalities, imaginaries and practices underlying these efforts. Such differences might shed light on the significance of the street – as one of the most emblematic forms of what might be defined as public – in contemporary urban politics.

As its empirical departure point, this paper draws on recent widespread efforts to clear and "clean" the streets of Mexico City's historic center as an avenue to understand the material and symbolic practices which have historically shaped the governance of the street in colonial and postcolonial Mexico, particularly through the re-organization and management of street vending activities.

**KEYWORDS:** street vending, urban (dis)order, informality/formality, urban neoliberalism, Mexico City.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

A wide range of studies by geographers and other urban scholars has recently paid close attention to the exclusionary nature of neoliberal policies aimed at re-imagining particular spaces of the city. Much of this literature has argued that new urban middle classes across the urban global south are subscribing to, and inscribing urban space with an aesthetic of 'world classis' that evidently does not include the urban poor. These perspectives have been valuable and important in highlighting the multiple ways in which the relationship between power and space are mutually constitutive resulting from global neoliberal processes that shape cities in its own image. This literature has demonstrated that urban neoliberalism has multiple manifestations in urban space and that in many contexts has led to increased levels of marginality, poverty and disenfranchisement. Indeed, these perspectives have provided important insights into "actually existing neoliberalism" as it reorganizes cities in accordance to particular notions of order, beauty, cleanliness and desirability. However, I want to suggest that these perspectives, which I myself have contributed to (Crossa 2009), are incomplete and partial. Part of the problem lies in the fact that much of this works subsumes complex, messy and extraordinarily untidy urban processes and transformations to the neoliberal agenda. That is, they take as the theoretical epicenter the taken-for granted existence of neoliberalism to then explain the particular urban phenomenon at hand. As such, the complexity of urban change is shaped by and in some cases shadowed by the grand category of "the neoliberal project", with all of its consequences and implications. Drawing from Parnell and Robinson's (2012) recent call for the provincialization of urban studies as a means of "creating intellectual space for alternative ideas", in this paper I argue that one way of achieving this more "provincial" analytical lens is by taking local urban history and histories more seriously.

At this point it is important to clarify that I am by no means dismissing the importance of structures of constraints which are in many cases imposed by a political-economic project which has, at its heart, the deregulation of urban services, the implementation of austerity measures and cost-reduction efforts by the state with profound socio-spatial consequences, particularly to the most marginalized sectors of the population. In this paper, I want to explore the political and politicized nature of the street through a historical lens. I draw on widespread efforts to clear and "clean" the streets of the city as an avenue to understand the material and symbolic practices which have historically shaped the governance of the street in colonial and postcolonial Mexico, particularly through the re-organization and management of street vending activities.

## **2. THE STREET IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL MEXICO CITY**

For centuries, the street has operated as the facade of governmental power, and in many cases the space of public life. This of course is not unique to colonial cities nor is it an exclusive characteristic of contemporary urban realities. Understanding the street through a historical perspective, requires focusing on the constellation of political, economic, social and environmental forces which come together in a particular time-space in the construction of normative rationalities, imaginaries, ideologies and practices underlying the multiplicity of social relations that make up the everyday life of the street. Historically, underlying most efforts to remove vendors from the streets and public space of the city has been multiple and contradictory discourses around order, sanitation, and civility.

## 2.1 The city of risks and opportunities: Early colonial city

When the Spanish conquistadores arrived to the valley of Mexico in 1519, they faced, with astonishment, a magnificent and complex urban structure built over an extensive lacustrine system. A particular source of fascination was the vast openness of urban spaces and the highly regular order of streets and canals. Accustomed to the closure of the medieval city, with small irregular spaces, and windy narrow streets, the openness of the city of Tenochtitlan became a feature of admiration and idealization. Tenochtitlán was designed for collective participation in rituals and was the stage for sacred ceremonies (Toussaint, et. al. 1990: 71). It was the heart of public, social, religious, and economic functions.

By 1521, two centuries after its foundation, devastated by a bloody war, México Tenochtitlán (today Mexico City) was defeated by the Spanish and its allies, becoming an inhospitable space for immediate settlement. Hernán Cortés, the Spanish Conquistador, retracted to the then outskirts of the city to plan the location and consolidation of the power-center of New Spain. According to historians, Cortés understood the symbolic weight of Tenochtitlán, and decide that the new city “had to be where they had won and where the old city of Mexico stood” (Obregón, 1922: 244). The construction of the new city adopted a Renaissance model of urban design based on a rectangular grid system (*la traza*), which was juxtaposed to the few remains of the old Tenochtitlan. The grid system came to signify an important urban project among Renaissance humanists who sought to reach the idealized and utopian models of the Greek-Roman city (Canchola, 2003: 12). Respecting some existing physical features of what remained from the old Tenochtitlán – such as its four principal axes, leading to the central religious precinct (the plaza), and a few important palaces, which Cortés emphatically reclaimed – the master plan resulted in a central city characterized by rectilinear streets that lead to a central square, which housed the political and religious powers (government building and church) of the Spanish crown (León Cázares, 1982). Furthermore, equal-sized plots of land, some of which were granted by Cortés himself to his friends, surrounded the central square. (León Cázares, 1982: 74).

One of the most important characteristics of the new colonial city was the consolidation of the central Spanish city, which consisted of a relatively small area, surrounded by spaces which were designated to indigenous populations (O’Gorman, 1960:19; Torres, 2012: 74). The rationale behind the new racialized geography of the city is widely contested among historians. For some, the reorganization of space followed logics of segregation (Torres, 2012; O’Gorman, 1960: 16). For others, the rationale behind this urban geography was primarily linked to concerns over security for both populations. As León Cázares (1982) argues, the spatial separation of Spanish and Indians obeyed the urgency for ensuring safety and security from and for each other. That is, the Spanish needed to protect their city against the potential attacks of the native populations, while the natives needed protection from the possibility of infection from the Europeans, which could potentially slow down the evangelization agenda (León Cázares, 1982: 80). Indeed, an essential rationale behind the spatial binary of the original colonial city was the evangelization project, which was made easier through the spatial confinement of native populations into delimited peripheral areas. Registration, taxation, record keeping, census, were all processes favoured by geographic concentration that gave way for an economic, political and religious project that lay at the heart of Spanish colonialism.

The Spanish central city recovered not only certain pre-colonial spaces, but also their uses. The central plaza (Plaza Mayor), in the old Tenochtitlán housed a main *tianguis* or market, which functioned as the focal point for the exchange of products, attracting large crowds from nearby and far away localities. Exchange played a central role in the organization of urban life. The plaza embodied the conflictive and cooperative merger of two cultures,

each with particular underlying assumptions around the value of public life and collective events. Hence, while the construction of an idealized city, based on the original colonial urban plan (*traza*) sought to spatially divide the city into the world of the Spanish and those of the native populations, the reality of everyday life necessarily entailed spaces of interaction which fundamentally challenged the notion of order through separation. Indeed, the alleged spatial segregation between the Spanish and the indigenous city was never fully realized.

Such contact became through the commercial interactions within the central Plaza. The Plaza was the most important space of exchange. The economic geographies within the Plaza were also highly regulated to ensure a commercial organization based primarily on the nature of the products sold. Given that production was also linked to particular groups, the plaza was organized in such a way to ensure an internal socio-racial-economic divide.

At issue is that the morphological consolidation of the urban grid system had important underlying rationales connected to the development of an economic, religious and political project, which lay at the heart of the colonial agenda. Furthermore, and more importantly for purposes of this paper, the rectilinear urban plan became a source of admiration and desire in years, and indeed centuries to come. The grid system, as a morphological venture, was an emblematic figure in the consolidation of an idealized city, based on notions of order, progress, and more importantly, of colonial power. For the newly established colonial powers, the urban grid system exhibited the theatrical nature of power, which was judged as indispensable for the legitimation and consolidation of the new Spanish socio-political order. However, this system was very quickly challenged by the everyday life necessities of both the Spanish and the indigenous populations, leading to a continuous movement and interactions between the areas. Towards the start of the eighteenth century, urban elites and authorities saw the blurring of boundaries as a primary threat to the natural order sought by the original colonial powers. Indeed, a second critical moment in the urban life of the street in colonial Mexico City is that of the reconfiguration of socio-spatial relations based on the concerns of the Bourbons over rising levels of chaos, “popular practices”, and disorder as a reflection of a weakened colonial state.

## **2.2 The inhospitable and chaotic city: The Bourbon reforms**

Even though the desired utopian model of the ordered city was never fully realized, other forms of order reigned during the XVII and XVIII centuries. For many, this new order represented a form of anarchy and chaos that needed to be eliminated as a means of establishing a “real” order based on rational principles drawn from the Enlightenment, which had among its objectives the reinstatement of the power of the colonial state at a time when it was being put into question both locally and internationally (in Europe). During this time, and particularly towards the end of the XVIII century, during the administration of Viceroy Revillagigedo (1789-1794), the authorities “became increasingly concerned with reshaping the city’s image and structure to reflect a more modern environment, in keeping with the Bourbon’s policy of a streamlined and efficient colonial system” (Baily, 2010: 5).

During the Bourbon reforms of the XVIII century the street played an essential role in the reorganization of urban space, becoming the icon and facade of political power. A chaotic, dirty, disorganized, and anarchic street showed the power of private interests over the more legitimate public power of the state, at a time when the ideas of the Enlightenment celebrated the value of progress, reason, universality, and equality among human beings. Such rationales were translated into logics surrounding natural order, moral utilitarianism, and pragmatism, which in turn materialized spatially through a mechanistic and circulationist approach very much tied to neoclassical urbanism (Hernandez, 1994: 117).

During this period, normative rationalities around the governance of the street were driven by a sense of urgency around a constructed notion of widespread insalubrious conditions. Drawing from notions of circulation based on principles of anatomy, movement became a critical category that permeated discourses and practices around sanitation and hygiene. A modern city was conceived as a totality. Normatively, the city became a functional mechanism based on the movement and circulation of people, goods, water, waste, smells, and so on. As was the case in other colonial cities, Mexico City during the mid 1700s experienced a growing enthusiasm for the “new science” of urbanization, which was spatialized on the street through functionalist notions of urban life in accordance with accepted activities defined by the colonial and urban elites. Many Spanish visitors in the mid XVIII were at awe by the structure, shape, and overall morphology of the city. Its original early colonial grid system (*traza*), its perfect geometrical shape, together with its wide, open spaces, was enough for visitors to feel a profound admiration for the latent order displayed by its morphology. However, such order and potential beauty was quickly challenged by the daily use of these spaces. Indeed, as Fernandez states “Mexico is an organized city in line with the Bourbon sentiments. But it is also a disgusting city, full of garbage, poverty, where the water becomes stagnant and people are corrupted in all sorts of bad habits (71).

Many of the residents dumped filth and excrement onto the street, converting public spaces into open sewage system. Private residents were in charge of maintaining their own section of the street, which produced an irregular and asymmetrical design. The street became the visible space where colonial law and regulations did not meet local social practices, particularly those performed by the poorest sectors of the population. For Mexico City’s elites, anxieties around these sorts of practices called for an urgent intervention in order to civilize the population by setting principles as to what was considered appropriate practices and behaviour, particular within the city’s public spaces. As Baily states “Executing private acts in public, such as urinating and defecating, other “polluting” activities such as dumping garbage in public space, bathing in public fountains, sleeping in the street, markets and abandoned structures, public drunkenness, and public nudity were the antithesis of civilized behaviours” (Baily, 2010: 99-100).

In 1743 a new directive was put in place which brought together most of the normative visions of a new urban order (Sánchez de Tagle, 1997). Such proclamation divided the city administratively into four cohorts. Each one was to become systematically responsible for the cleaning of streets – through a daily collection of garbage and manure –, of levelling the pavements, and of changing the quality of the sewage system (p. 97). None of these initiatives were in and of themselves novel. What was particularly unique was the systematization of these tasks. They were no longer performed on an irregular basis, but rather required the ordinary responsibilities of the urban authorities. With this, the state gains the status of a permanent regulatory body. Street work was also marked by a series of rules, which entailed freeing access to movement. Shops could not extend their products onto the streets. Street workers – such as carpenters, coachbuilders, cobblers, silversmiths, chair-makers – had to be moved to the outskirts of the city. Vendors, who placed their stalls on the street had to be moved to small plazas, and were only allowed to use two small umbrellas to protect them from the sun and rain (Sánchez de Tagle, 1997: 118). This new order was based on the eradication of daily popular customs, which had characterized the street of the colonial city, leading to a sense of chaos, anarchy, and above all an insalubrious city among the urban elites that urgently needed intervention.

In 1791, the first ordinance was published which sought to regulate commerce on the street by relocating the central market, located always in the Plaza Mayor, to the *Plaza del Volador*, a smaller space with less symbolic weight. The *Reglamento de Mercados* of 1791 set a number

of important rules regarding what could be sold, when, and where (Gortari & Hernández, 1988: 165). The underlying purpose was to bring order to commercial activities in public space. To allow for easy access and circulation of people, stalls were required to have particular characteristics and were to follow a rectilinear order. Meanwhile the Plaza Mayor was emptied of people and daily practices, reorganized, and resurfaced. The objective was to transform the nature of the plaza from one, which served as the display of colonial diversity, to one governed by circulation and movement. Similarly, through a new police ordinance the street and other public spaces faced a series of new regulations, which prohibited the setting of tables, stands, kiosks or stalls to sell any product. Stalls were to be located only in the allocated areas within the market-plaza only (Gortari & Hernández, 1988: 171).

The poorest sectors of the population were disproportionately affected by the measures taken by the Bourbon authorities. For instance, while the illicit acts of upper classes were conceived only as actions that needed tweaking through minor interventions, the practices of the poorer sectors of the population were perceived as behavioural wrongdoings that were much more difficult to alter. This meant that punishment for illicit acts were differentially implemented. Upper classes received monetary fines for the illicit dumping of waste onto the streets. But the popular sectors' transgressions, which involved defecation and urination on the street, were considered much more severe because these practices pointed to a profound lack of bodily control. Hence, they needed to be re-educated, rather than fined. This process of re-education entailed humiliation and physical fierceness in public spaces (beating and lashing in plazas for everyone to see).

For many scholars who have conducted extensive work on the impact of the Bourbon Reforms in the consolidation of Mexico City, the alterations experienced especially during the last few decades of the XVIII century were not substantive, but rather aesthetically oriented. On the one hand, the criminalization of poor people's behaviours were believed to be potentially altered through the transformation and regulation of space itself. New urban forms were believed to alter conducts in space. As Sanchez de Tagle (1997) states, "the restructuring of space obeyed principles of form, of appearance" (243). The objective was to modify behaviour and particular habits in people's everyday practices by transforming the morphology of space. Spatial transformations were seen as the means to a broader end, that being a civilizing project. Many of the practices performed by the state remained at the level of behavioural changes, but not at the level of structural inequalities which in many ways gave way to many of the practices that the state itself sought to alter (Baily, 2010). The desired force of the state in modifying the shape and function of the city and its streets set the stage for subsequent changes in the XIX and XX century, as will be discussed in the next sections.

### **2.3 The wordly city: urban geographies of liberalism and progress**

Mexico was involved in a bloody war of independence from 1810 to 1824, which created an immediate state of political, economic, and social instability. Many of the problems produced by this war were heightened in Mexico City, as the capital of the viceroyalty and the centre of regional power. It was not until the mid-XIX century, with the liberal reforms that the country experienced important economic, political and social transformations that would have effects over the life of Mexico City. The reformists of Mexico saw the need to modernize the country following the classic pillars of liberalism, which included republicanism, capital liberalization and individualism (Vanderwood, 1986: 63). For purposes of this paper, what is notorious about this period, in relation particularly to the ways in which the street entered the political agenda, is the impact of two interrelated processes. On the one hand, a strong urge for secularization as means of creating,

strengthening and consolidating an independent and modern state. On the other hand, the notion of progress and modernity as a powerful discourse embedded within many of the practices of the state.

The secularization project needed the street as a path towards political redemption. The monumental structures of monasteries and convents – surrounded by their colossal and impenetrable walls and doors – were conceived as structures, which distorted and abused the openness of society and the liberal values of a new public life. Convents and other ecclesiastic spaces were discursively constructed as obstructions to circulation and movement. They were the impediment to a political project. The expropriation of ecclesiastic spaces for the recovery of a rectilinear street system was justified through a morphed liberal discourse of public interest, which allowed the State to interfere in a number of urban practices for the benefit of particular private interests (property owners and construction businesses).

During the second half of the XIX and early XX centuries the city experienced a series of important physical transformations modelled in part by idealized notions of modern European and garden cities. Hussmann's Paris of spacious boulevards and avenues, splendid corridors, symmetrically paved roads, and urban parks, was partially imported to Mexico City. Underlying the morphological transformations of urban space was a particular notion of progress embedded in discourses of modernization.

However, such ideas, did not match the everyday realities of the streets and public spaces of the city. As the French traveller Augusto Génin described after his visit to Mexico City in the early XX century “Few cities in the world are so infested by street vendors as Mexico City. Despite the existence of public markets, everything is sold on the street, and while a few vendors are useful, most of them are truly annoying, never leaving the pedestrian for a minute in peace<sup>1</sup>” (Gortari & Hernández, 1988: 203).

During this period, vendors were once again located in the political agenda as one of the drivers of public problems connected to urban sanitation and hygiene. While the underlying ideology was similar to the Bourbon rationale in that it drew from a growing concern of the street as dirty, disordered, and unhygienic, the source of the concern was somewhat different. For urban elites during this period the major problem was connected to the high rates of immigration into the city and the densification of its central areas. Indeed, most rural migrants, who worked as vendors, lived in overcrowded houses in which the socio-spatial practices of residents was the source of multiple anxieties around issues of civility, modernity and of course, hygiene.

The geography of street vending in the city tended to concentrate in areas of high pedestrian flows, such as outside markets, stations, schools, churches, as well as in plazas and parks. The conditions of the stalls and the process of selling varied significantly depending on the geographies of the location and the changing regulatory circumstances of the time. As Barbosa (2008: 90) reminds us, despite the increasing rejection by urban authorities and elites towards this activity, on occasions temporary licences were given to vendors and also revoked on an indiscriminate basis. Hence, by modifying their stalls, vendors adapted to the uncertain shifting regulatory circumstances. Some vendors placed a simple mat on the floor; others used a wooden table, or boxes to position their products. Despite the multiplicity of actors, products, stalls, and general conditions of street vending, the activity as a whole caused repudiation among urban authorities and particularly elites who saw vendors as corrupt, parasitic, and a social disease (Barbosa, 2008). Under the value of hygiene and sanitation, vendors represented the primary impediment towards achieving

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<sup>1</sup> Translation done by author



a healthy city; one based on a scientific enthusiasm for circulation on the street as a means to achieving cleanliness and progress.

The regulation of street vending necessarily entailed the regulation of public markets. Porfirio Díaz formed the Commission for the Improvement and Construction of Markets between 1901 and 1903 (Barbosa, 2008: 139). One of the major concerns was the lack of available space within the markets to house and contain all the vendors. Licences were given for vendors within the market area as well as outside of its delimitations. Internal fees tended to be higher than those given to vendors located in stalls outside markets. Interestingly enough, the revenue generated through the provision of licences became an important income for the city. This provoked conflicting views over how to deal with, on the one hand, an income generating practice, and on the other hand, an activity which, according to urban elites, broke all the codes of sanitation and hygiene. As Barbosa (2008) narrates, in 1907, the Board of Health forced the removal of stalls within the market of the *Lagunilla* for its insalubrious conditions (selling on the floor). However, the Administration of Markets expressed concern over the reduction in revenue as a consequence of such removals (Barbosa, 2008: 153). During this period, the concern over revenue on multiple occasions superseded discourses and practices around sanitation and hygiene.

Despite the numerous regulations put in place towards the end of Díaz' regime, vendors found multiple ways of evading, negotiating, and resisting such enforcements. As Barbosa (2008) shows, vendors' ability to remain on the streets of the city was facilitated by two mutually reinforcing processes. The *first* had to do with the living conditions of the working poor. Most street vendors lived very close to their working spaces. Their living conditions were extremely precarious, characterized by overcrowded tenement spaces (*vecindades*) in the centre of the city. Barbosa (2008) suggests that the divisions between the private space of the home and the public space of the street were less prominent among many of the urban poor. For those working on the street, there was a very narrow gap between their geographies of work-home. Furthermore, the living conditions of many of the urban poor facilitated the development of networks of solidarity, which enabled protective measures within their working spaces (Barbosa, 2008: 166). The *second* element that helps explain the difficulties involved in the regulation of street vendors has to do with administrative failures of local authorities. The lack of clarity and the discretionary nature with which regulations were applied by civil servants meant that the rule of law depended on the power and pressure exercised by different urban actors. While some residents and established commercial businesses expressed repudiation over street vending, others welcomed the activity, particularly when economic agreements were established between vendors and shop owners. Urban authorities were thus faced with diverse sorts of pressures and acted upon them based on the nature of the conflict and the circumstances (Barbosa, 2008).

These arbitrary practices were by no means limited to the regime of Porfirio Díaz. The post-revolutionary years also saw a number of arbitrary measures taken by the state to regulate street vending practices. The first years after the Mexican revolution (1910-1920) was characterized by a series of administrative reconfigurations that led to a confusing state in the implementation of laws pertaining to the regulation of the street in Mexico City. Such administrative confusion, according to Barbosa (2008) was due to a number of factors. First, while the number and functions of the urban bureaucrats in charge of inspecting the streets and collecting taxes increased significantly during the revolutionary years, the specific nature of their duties was disorganized and unclear. Second, despite the confusion in the everyday governance of the street, many of the street level bureaucrats struggled to embrace some of the principles of modernity and civility imposed by urban elites.

Barbosa (2008) suggests that part of the difficulty to commit to the enforcement of street-level regulations by civil servants was due to the socio-economic proximity of these individuals to street vendors themselves. In other words, it was easier for many bureaucrats to empathize with the survival needs of vendors, because they experienced similar conditions and experiences. They bought products, they ate food sold by vendors on the street, and they used their services. They might have even been neighbours with vendors. Indeed, street level bureaucrats were just as “uncivilized” as street vendors. This social proximity was translated into a type of street solidarity whereby inspectors, tax collectors and police officers simply evaded the law (Barbosa, 2008: 239-247).

The Revolution, as a context for the development and enactment of national discourses linked to necessity, poverty, equality, and “mexicanism” were also critical resources mobilized by vendors themselves as a way to gain leverage over the regulations imposed against their economic activity. Street vendors appealed to the state by using many of the revolutionary and liberal rationalities. They did so by drawing particularly on three aspects of the revolutionary discourse. First, vendors, in their negotiations with the state evoked a sense of responsibility on behalf of the new liberal state towards the necessities of the poor and disenfranchised. Second, a nationalist discourse was also used as a way of appealing to the “Mexicaness” of their activity. Third, discourses of modernity and civility developed by urban elites when characterizing street order and behaviour were used by vendors themselves as a way of making legitimate their presence on the street. By ensuring that they do not dirty the streets, nor do they obstruct the circulation of people or goods, vendors sought to appeal to urban authorities using a familiar language of public order and common good.

## **2.4 The post-revolutionary city**

The street during the post-revolutionary years saw the active creation of legal instruments – both laws and regulations – to clean the streets of vendors, particularly since the 1930s. According to Meneses (2001), these instruments not only had regulatory objectives, but also symbolic aims, as a way of creating an image of the city and the state that would distinguish it from past political regimes. Once again, urban public space became the political facade of the post-revolutionary regime. In less than two decades (from 1935 to 1945) approximately seven new regulations were created with the objective of prohibiting street vending in the central areas of the city. Licences were granted under very specific spatial conditions. For example, the 1931 Regulation of Semi-fixed and Ambulante Commerce gave specifications very concrete spatial boundaries in relation to the place on the street where a stall could be located and the products that could be sold. Permissive conditions for trade on the street required uniform stalls – designed by city authorities – made by mobile materials and located in areas with low pedestrian flow.

Widespread discontent among Mexico City’s small industrialists, middle-class residents, shop-keepers, and self-employed artisans and street vendors led to the formation in 1943 of the *Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares* (CNOP)<sup>2</sup> as a way of incorporating the urban popular sector and middle class into the party’s governing structure. Thus, CNOP became the third axis of the ruling alliance. It gave a voice to the Mexican urban popular sector, which included a wide range of social groups (street vendors, artisans, shop

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<sup>2</sup> The 1930, specifically under Cárdenas, is identified as the period that gave rise to the PRI corporatist state structure, with “popular movements collaborating in and encouraging the spread of clientelist and patrimonial lines of control” (Foweraker, 1990: 8).

and other self employed groups) who had been excluded from the organized labour groups (CTM) and peasant groups (CNC).

The rapid growth of the capital city in the 1950s and 60s further bolstered the urban bias of policies. For its part, the CNOP began “devoting its energies to coordinating urban-specific demands of its broad-based Mexico City” support (Davis, 1997). Salient urban problems included the growing number of squatter settlements and irregular housing on the fringes of the city, and increasing street vending activities resulting from an excess labour supply in a context of rapid rural-urban migration (Tokman, 1995). An important change – and one that is critical for understanding the current situation in Mexico City – occurred in 1952 when Uruchurtu was appointed Mayor (between 1955 and 1960). His first priority was to regain legitimacy among CNOP members who viewed the PRI with suspicion because industrial-led economic development marginalized the popular sector. One way was to address the interests of street vendors by constructing covered market buildings to house the vendors.

Street vendors had to align with organizations affiliated with the CNOP to receive permits to enter the new market spaces. Consequently, these organizations grew in significance; they became an important source of support for the party and they gained political leverage to negotiate with state institutions. By no means did all street vendors want to move from the streets. Those who refused and who had no legal representation or alliance with the PRI were subjected to violence. The formation and consolidation of street vending organizations during this time led to a significantly different way of dealing with, managing and organizing the streets in years to come.

## **2.5 The neoliberal city?**

The economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s led to rising unemployment and triggered the growth of street-vending activities in many parts of Mexico City, particularly the Historic center. The excessive increase of street vending during this period led to a new wave of programs to organize the streets and public spaces of the city. Thus, in 1992 it developed the Improvement of Popular Commerce, which entailed the construction of 27 malls or markets for the relocation of more than 10 thousand vendors located on the streets of the city’s Historic Centre. Under the same logic, a new Bando was introduced in 1993, which prohibited street vending in the central area of the city.

With the entrance of the new government of the Federal District , the problem of street trading is approached from a different angle. With the intention of breaking with the clientelist legacy of the PRI, the new city government introduced the Program for the Reorganization of Popular Commerce. Unlike previous practices, this program seeks to reverse the administrative process whereby vendors obtain licences for sale. Rather than giving licences to vending organizations – through their leader – it was the individual vendor who had to deal directly with city authorities in order to obtain a selling permit. The original idea was to break clientelist relations and disempower the strength of large vending organizations.

From the year 2000, efforts to regulate street vending occur in conjunction with other policies which seek the material and symbolic transformation of specific spaces of the city. Under the rationale of “rescuing urban public space”, both national and urban authorities develop a series of instruments with the goal of transforming particular public spaces of the city. The first was the recovery program implemented in Mexico City’s symbolic heart, the Historic Centre. The “*Programa de Rescate*” (the Rescue Program) entailed the beautification of the historic area’s streets, sidewalks, plazas and other public spaces with the objective of attracting population and investment. The *Programa* was first announced in 2001 to address

what the city government called the ‘crisis of the Historic Centre’, a crisis defined by a so-called economic, demographic and architectural deterioration of the area. Hence, the goal was to reactive the area’s economy and stimulate new housing and commercial investment. A fundamental part of this involved the removal of thousands of street vendors from public spaces. The *Programa’s* underlying vision, then, was to reconstruct a Historic Centre devoid of street vending activities; an area clean, tidy and safe, and “mirroring the Soho of Mexico City”. Whether the success of the policy endures and the streets of the Historic Centre remain ‘free’ of vending activities is questionable to this day.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Today, Mexico City’s political and economic elites continue to show concern over order, hygiene and civility on the streets of the city, locating much of the blame on street vendors themselves. One concluding reflection that I would like to start developing is that while the politics of the street in the XVIII, XIX and early XX century were permeated with normative rationalities of public health linked to sanitation and disease, contemporary efforts have also been linked to health, but more importantly to a form of what I want to call *economic sanitation*. That is, an economic health structured and defined by notions of legality, formality, and particular notions of legal order. Street vendors today represent chaos in an imaginary driven by an apparent order defined around a manufactured understanding of formal economic activities. Hence, discourses around the formal and the informal are key in understanding how street vendors are represented in contemporary normative and idealized public spaces in Mexico City.

A historical account of the different ways in which the displacement of street vending activities have been made legitimate by urban authorities and struggled over is important to shed light on contemporary practices of displacement and current normative visions of the street. Historically, while urban authorities efforts to remove street vendors from the city’s public spaces might seem to be carried out in similar ways, it is important to look at the different rationalities, imaginaries and practices underlying these efforts. Such differences might shed light on the significance of the street – as one of the most emblematic forms of what might be defined as public – in contemporary urban politics.

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