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The Populist City

Mexico City is a highly complex urban organism. Sophisticated and harsh at the same time, the city poses different political challenges on every front. Since the city functions as the country's financial, cultural, and political heart, every action, every protest, every deed that takes place within its streets resonates nationally. The political complexity in the city makes up a complex scene where emerging political figures from different corners of the country react to growing civilian engagement, the latter organized into many independent organizations working towards wider public scrutiny over the former.¹ This was already beginning before 1997, under the PRI's regime,² but it became even more evident after the elections that year,³ when the leftist opposition party PRD took control of the city with ample support.⁴

The political reform that led to those elections, the first for the capital city, was bolstered by the economic changes brought in with NAFTA in 1994. But this did not occur as part of a natural political evolution. After the 1995 economic crisis (caused by internal economic and political complications), politicians were not fully aware of the political implications of the economic structural adjustments demanded by the international lending institutions financing the indebted nation. The economic treaty created a vastly different relationship with the US and the international community, to whom Mexican authorities wanted to appear more legitimate. Following the increasing liberalization of the economy, the government began accepting restrictions on its behaviour, allowing Mexico to be subject to the continuous scrutiny of the international community. The new economic environment thus granted new political

freedoms as an involuntary consequence, rather than reasoned choice. As one analyst argued: "Fearing international repercussions, the Mexican government could no longer afford to repress a political movement, as [president] Salinas did in early 1994 with the Zapatistas, nor keep political participation an exclusive and exclusionary game, run unfair and predictable elections or offer loyalty and accountability in exchange for benefits."⁵

It could be said that, in a way, democracy was involuntarily imported into the city. Without a deep-rooted tradition of democratic practices, nor the existence of strong democratic institutions that could channel disagreements, conflict, or dissent, the newly elected officials faced a much different political landscape. On the one hand, this implied an exercise in fine-tuning democratic objectives at the level of discourse, and sometimes even in concrete actions.⁶ On the other, it also encouraged politicians to master the use of the political tools at hand for their own survival, such as the construction and operation of new political platforms, the promotion of majority concerns, and the political use of economic resources. However, these arrangements departed at the same time from a simple and clear-cut understanding of transparent democratic practice, leading to the intrusion of a rather different political logic: a form of populism within democracy as a political rationale that, as we will see, focuses on discourse and the dynamic formation of identities through new forms and uses of local policies.⁷ In what follows, we will delve into these configurations to better understand how they have constructed a tangible political mechanism; specifically we will examine two case studies where this political rationale has resulted in a consistent policy with concrete urban consequences.

Understanding populism and the nature of the populist demand

Populism is a controversial term, and the diversity of its definitions is staggering. With

Walmarts in Mexico City



Laclau, we'll assume that populism is a way of constructing the political.⁸ As many cases show, it has indeed become the leading form of politics in contemporary democracy under the logic of late capitalism. As we know, it is a phenomenon that can be traced to antiquity, but its precise definition has been until very recently attributed to common traits among different social movements and moments. Populism has also typically been associated with an excess of political rationale. Laclau's analysis is pertinent here because it attends to the problem of an ideological formation as the mechanism of identity formation, which can

be mobilized for political purposes. In other words, for Laclau, the formation of an identity as a trigger for political action and engagement is the key factor for understanding populist impulses.

Within his thinking, at least two sets of categories, which he considers as ontological, acquire the utmost importance. The first is the notion of discourse,⁹ and the second is that of the constitution of an empty signifier and a hegemony.¹⁰ Hegemony is an operation of identity formation with a political purpose.¹¹ These are two sets of categories that struggle over a single field of dispute. In

fact, Laclau's analysis, based on the operation of an internal antagonism out of which a certain hegemony arises, provides a critical understanding of the creation and negotiation of meaning by way of different clashes between those opposing forces. For us, this implies a productive theoretical alternative to the classical Marxist proposition of class struggle, resignified under a different logic. Thus, if the hegemony is worked out by educated elites, the differential, unifying arguments will tend to be based on logics, mathematics, reason, or history. If, on the other hand, the hegemony is arranged around the uneducated masses, the differential arguments will tend to elaborate around injustice, inequality, exclusion itself, or unfairness of different sorts.¹² A certain label will stem from those hegemonic identities: "intelligentsia," a typical hegemonic formation in classical analysis, in the first case, or "the people," the populist derivation, in the second case. However, these identities are not merely simple and oppositional; they can be multiple and dynamic.¹³

By understanding how the linkage of different terms works in the political domain, we can then start tracing the mechanism of the political through its simplest elements: political actions and political demands. A political action is an action that in any way shifts the existing relations among participating agents in any field. A political demand is a request or claim that can only be enounced as such because it is played out in what is understood as the political field, where the enunciator projects it onto a receiver who is perceived as able to respond to it in one of the channels (legal or not) structured in that same field. In a democratic system, an isolated demand, by an individual or group, is a democratic demand. If a plurality of democratic demands is unmet, the demands may be regrouped together under an equivalent articulation (the "not-yet being fulfilled" factor), which can constitute a broader social subjectivity. In this case, we see the emergence of a popular demand, and the incipient constitution of the collective subjectivity that enounces it,

"the people", as a potential historical agent. According to Laclau, these are the pre-conditions for populist configuration. We will now turn to two concrete examples of these forms of populist policy within the Mexican political system, concentrating on the political and geographical ramifications for Mexico City.

Case Studies

In this section, we analyze two cases of government action and policy in Mexico City dealing with two of the most important urban and political dynamics: housing and the informal commercial sector of the economy. We will outline the issues that specific policies were claiming to solve, the ways they were implemented, and their outcomes. Through them, we expect to show how a peculiar political reason develops and demonstrates its rationality. We also attempt to explain how political discourse follows a logic of its own, how it behaves as an objective, seemingly self-sufficient, and self-explanatory element, and how it has a pragmatic effect on the functioning of a fragile democratic system.

Furthermore, we will also show how there is a dominant discourse that eclipses other claims, and which seems to operate flawlessly despite its intrinsic ambiguity. We refer here to the discourse of the "social," a convenient label under which many policies find shelter. The cases we selected imply a frequent use of this marker, and we will try to convey what is at stake behind its use and abuse.

Case 1: The Return and Rescue of Mexico City's Historical Downtown

Mexico City is the largest megalopolis in the Western Hemisphere,¹⁴ a city with multiple centres and a high degree of social and political fragmentation. This growth has been accompanied by serious ecological damage and the continuous deterioration of the urban social fabric.¹⁵ One of the main trends that has accompanied this growth has been the depopulation and abandonment

of central areas.¹⁶ The last major cause for this decrease in population was the 1985 earthquake, particularly due to the widespread devastation that left many buildings in central areas unusable. The extensive emigration and diminishing birthrate that followed the natural catastrophe contributed much to aggravate this phenomenon.

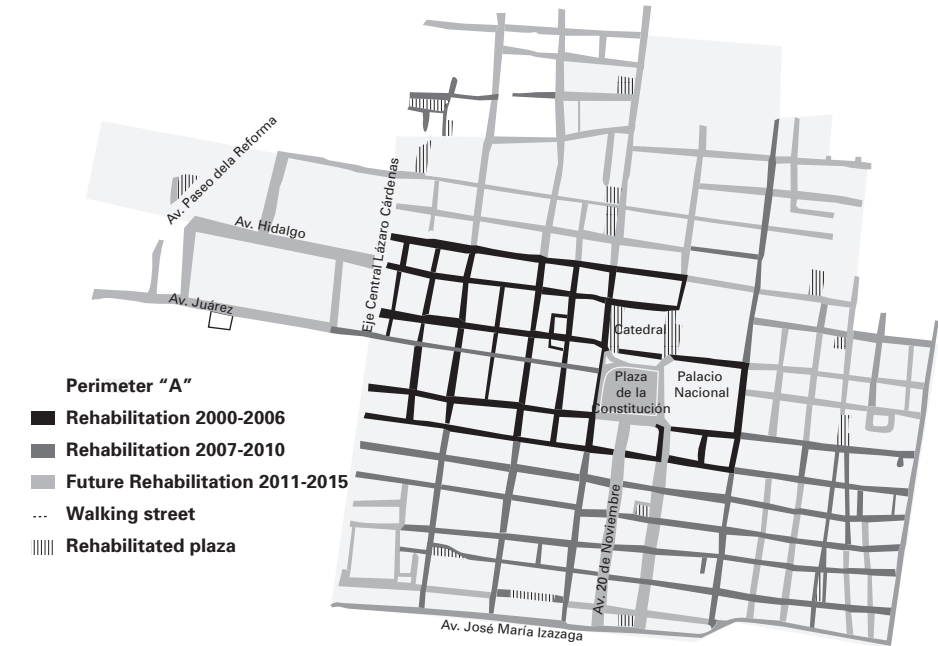
Residents in Mexico City's Historical Downtown have deeply resented these processes, and two interrelated problems in the area have proven to be key factors: the receding quality of housing and the declining condition of the architecture that forms part of the city's historical heritage. Many historical buildings were abandoned due to degrading conditions; the deserted sites were then taken over by poor families or used as warehouses for a buoyant informal commerce. But in the years between the earthquake and the mid-1990s, the situation had become unsustainable. Many voices called for the preservation of the city's architectural heritage, but government resources were never sufficient, and poor families could not assume the restoration costs.

By the beginning of the new century, several events and demands pushed the agenda towards the rehabilitation of the area.¹⁷ The most important among these included: 1) the fact that this part of the city was declared Human Patrimony by UNESCO in 1987; 2) the "democratic" turn of the city in 1997, and the need by the newly elected government to produce its own landmarks and urban symbols; 3) the symbolic provision of locating Mexico City's Historical Downtown at the core of an urban repopulation strategy, which on the one hand promoted the reuse of existing urban infrastructure by re-densifying the central regions, and on the other was a perfect opportunity to bring back a number of inhabitants-as-voters who had left the city for adjacent urban and electoral territories governed by the PRI; and 4) the opportunity to reorganize the commercial structure of the area, granting renewed spatial attributions to *ambulantes* (informal street vendors), *tianguistas* (travelling urban markets), and other informal

types of commerce (political clientele to both the PRI and the PRD).

The definitive rescue of the city centre, inscribed in a program that started in 2000–2002 (under the government of the second democratically elected mayor, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, 2000-2006), emerged as a political discourse promoting two main arguments: the importance of securing the cultural heritage, and providing the socially disadvantaged with opportunities to improve their housing and environment. The first argument was taken as evident, sustained by the UNESCO declaration of 1987, while the second was propelled by López Obrador with the publication of the Bando no. 2., a sort of manifesto or political enunciation. Based on questionable and arbitrary technical specificities, organized in a capricious form, and initially applied outside the legal framework,¹⁸ the document presented in a synthetic way the means to stop the unorganized growth of the city through sustainable redensification.¹⁹

The Bando no. 2 was a partial answer to previous political demands. For example, in Mexico City's Historical Downtown, a 1997 public survey showed the community's request to apply integral strategies,²⁰ where the cultural heritage was not the only item to be protected. Considering the urban functions of the area, social and economic transformations were expected (and they were supported, to a certain extent, during the government of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas). But in fact, the main demand from the survey was the active participation of society through the presence of groups that lived in the area or had a direct relation to it. The Bando no. 2 simply neglected this type of output in favour of a centralist political interpretation of these democratic demands.²¹ This edict was never legitimized by specialists due to the lack of vision, integral solutions, and urban studies. According to many of them, the main limitations of the Bando no. 2 were: 1) the Central City was defined according to the political-administrative division of only four delegations (of the 16 political delegations that comprise the Federal District); 2) geographical,

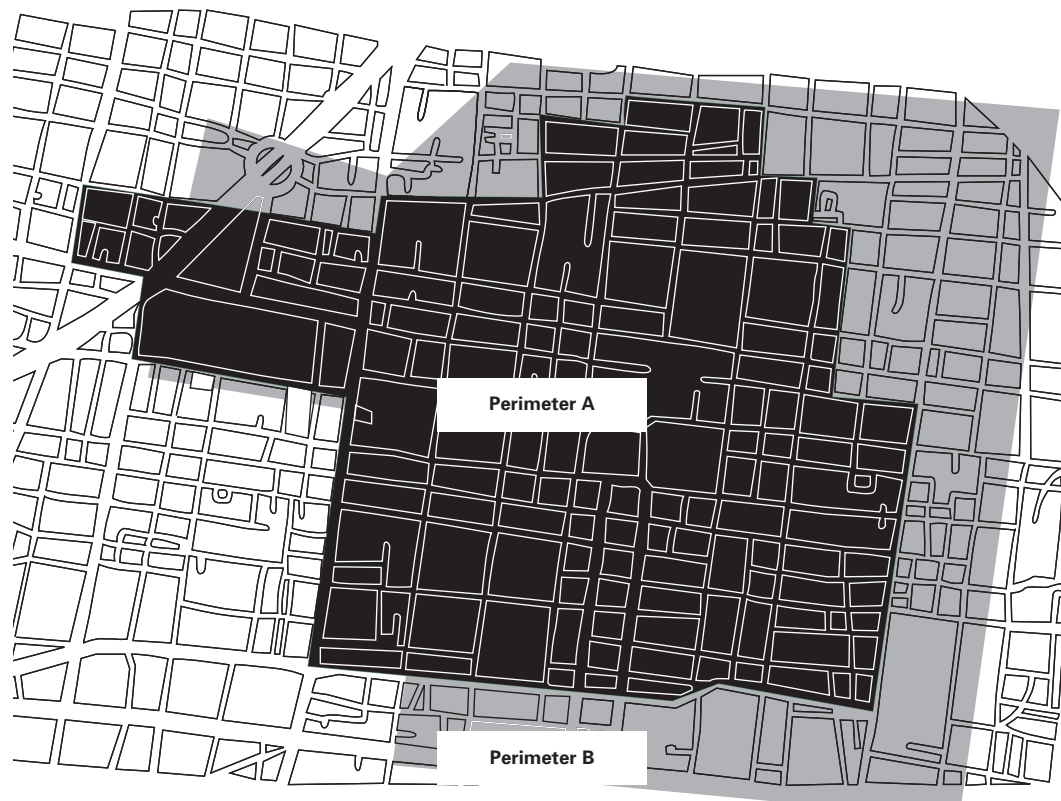


demographic, ecological, and urban characteristics, not to mention the cultural and historic ones, were largely ignored, or poorly developed; 3) a general and over-simplified solution was sketched, even though each area was comprised of specific regions with individual needs and political requirements;²² 4) the phenomenon of depopulation was not only happening in the central areas and, although a relevant housing program was proposed, it was not sufficient to prevent the population loss; 5) the approach to existent infrastructure did not contemplate its overuse or inherent limitations; and 6) during the city's expansion no land was reserved for social housing, a problem that would eventually lead to the rise of land prices.²³

Furthermore, the economic logic active behind the Bando no. 2 was anything but socially re-distributive,²⁴ as the rescue of the Historical Downtown seemed to have obeyed different forces. From a distance, two very important political incentives can be perceived. On one hand, it is evident that it became a pragmatic operation based on the role played by a key financial backer—Carlos Slim, one of

the world's wealthiest people—through the manoeuvres of his real estate business unit. The association between López Obrador and Slim allowed the former, a Marxist suspicious of structural institutions, to win a certain credibility as a democrat and pragmatic negotiator among the middle classes, while it granted the latter a certain reputation as a philanthropist and sponsor of cultural causes. The operation included a set of local and federal tax exemptions (of which Slim's corporation, the Carso group, was the main entity to benefit), a non-recoverable and public investment of 500 million pesos assigned by the local government via the Historic Centre Trust in 2002,²⁵ and a promise for possible investment of 1 billion pesos by the Carso group to rescue the zone.²⁶

On the other hand, the operation helped to shift the balance on the *ambulantes'* political clientele, so that the PRD-associated merchants would have a stronger and wider presence compared to PRI ones. Their relocation to new buildings provided the frame for partisan reassignments, as well as for a tighter grip on the fees transferred directly to PRD groups.²⁷ The role and influence of informal



vendors in the rescuing of Mexico's City Historic Downtown have been overlooked by most analysts. Nevertheless, this is a very important element if we wish to understand the case as a whole. A credible estimation of the size of the informal sector in Mexico locates it at around 25 percent of GDP,²⁸ and amounts to around 60 percent of total employment. This implies also a floating population of around 12,000–35,000 in Mexico City's Historic Downtown alone.²⁹ Despite its size—and the fact that, according to a structuralist, neo-Marxist analysis,³⁰ the informal sector is a constitutive and unavoidable part of contemporary forms of production—there have been very few attempts to integrate it into the rest of the economy. One of the reasons why a so-called leftist government has done so little regarding this problem is that the fees paid by informal vendors go directly to local administrations and party groups, without having to be accounted for, as is the case with taxes. These economic incentives

lead to a continuity of the current system, and creates tension among groups fighting for quotas and political affiliations.³¹ There are no precise studies that can calculate the amount of resources political parties and other organizations have received, but some journalistic research estimates that since the rescue of the Historical Downtown, the PRD has received about \$1.3 million (USD) a month from the activities in that area alone.³² This gives an idea of the size and importance of the political operation of the so-called rescue of the Historical Downtown.

As this shows, both the López Obrador-Slim arrangement and the informal commercial political connections proved to be more fundamental than the stated discourse, which emphasized the historical, cultural, and social aspects of the renovation.³³ However, as a public policy, the operation ended up being quite popular and fairly credible. Indeed, the discourse of “cultural” and “social”

engagement proper to a modern leftist party prevailed over the need for a deep scrutiny of the operation.³⁴ Politically speaking, it was manifestly profitable, and by 2006 López Obrador was the uncontested leftist (PRD) candidate for the presidential election. The identity-formation process behind the label of the “social” proved here to be an effective device for agglutinating substantial positive opinions. The translation process of different democratic demands into popular policies shows an efficient reconfiguration mechanism that seemed to address a series of claims and demands, while transmuting or neutralizing their actual effects to take advantage of them—without any risk of losing political control. Discourse alone became its own event, its own name for a complex structure of public decisions. The interpretation of facts was subsumed to a specific, narrow reading provided by the communicative discursive machine, via a process of edition and omission of the details, facts, and social objectives and responsibilities. A democratic demand lost sight of itself, only to become a populist arrangement offered by a charismatic political character.

Case no. 2: Regulation 29, or Walmart vs. A (Certain Kind of) People

The narrative of how an urban norm was criticized and then suspended opens up a different process of interpretation on how discursive formations and economic dynamics relate to one another. Regulation 29 refers to an attempt by another charismatic character, Marcelo Ebrard (the third democratically elected mayor in the city, 2006–2012), to control and restrain the construction of large retail businesses. Allegedly, they engage in economic practices that were damaging to independent retailers, small neighbourhood shops, and *tianguistas*. The political discourse behind the administrative effort was clear from the naming of the regulation itself: Norm 29, Improvement of Equality and Competition Conditions for Public Good Supplying.³⁵ This

ambiguous yet socially oriented discourse was pervasive among government officials, especially when they spoke out to defend the regulation as it went under judicial attack by the retail market association. Some high-ranking officials described it as “a norm with a social function, whose purpose is to protect public markets from the disloyal economic competition brought in by huge retail stores and major self-service chains.”³⁶ The immediate consequence of the norm was the prohibition on large retail companies to construct new stores/warehouses, except on sites close to city highways with a specific regulation on land use. Practically, this meant constraining the construction of new premises to about 2.5 percent of the city.³⁷ Before the Federal Court suspended the regulation in June 2013, on the grounds of blatant unconstitutionality, an analysis of the arguments and the existing socio-economic dynamics reveals three very important discourse-configuring practices.

To begin with, city officials presented the norm as a consistent response to previous citizen claims.³⁸ But a closer look at the documents reveals that all past citizen complaints filed against such commercial entities were made on the basis of environmental discomfort (noise, vibrations, impact on green areas, residual treatments, water waste, odours, etc.³⁹), and none made on the grounds of economic disloyalty or commercial hostility. Therefore, one perceives from the start the transformation of a legitimate democratic demand into a political discourse with a different agenda.

Another scheme in which we can perceive a discursive operation is the claim that the norm encouraged economic fairness. However, there is no evidence to support this assertion; in fact, when it comes to the economic performance of the sector, reality shows quite a different picture. One specific sociological study convincingly demonstrates a steady increase, from the 1990s onwards, in the number of retail stores, both small and large, and that this trend has included every region and neighbourhood of the city.⁴⁰ This same study provides evidence

on how small and large stores complement one another, in terms of both consumer choice (a composite made up of different variables: goods, distance to stores, use of time, etc.) and market share, when this market reduced to basic goods. As a matter of fact, low-income families have benefited from the lower-price goods that only large-scale retail stores can provide, based on their application of economies of scale. At the same time, smaller retail-stores, *tianguistas*, and public markets provide specific goods and other advantages such as schedule flexibility and proximity to clients that the larger competitors cannot sustain. Therefore, the legal claim that charged large retail stores with disloyal economic practices and other impingements appears evidently false.⁴¹

The third discursive practice implies a quite explicit use of empty signifiers. This dynamic revolves around two specific names and their ideological attachment. On one side, we have the brand “Walmart,” the name of the American multinational retail corporation, the second largest global corporation as of 2013 (according to *Fortune* magazine), and the biggest retail chain in Mexico. On the other side, we have the use of the word *tianguis*, which usually describes informal travelling markets that exist all over urban areas. *Tianguis* is a current term in Mexican Spanish that comes from the Náhuatl (the language of the ancient Aztecs) *tianquiztli*, or “marketplace.” But what for the pre-Hispanic cultures stood for a stationary bazaar of diverse products has now become a local description for nomadic displays of informal vendors where consumers can find fruits, vegetables, spices, seasonal produce and all kinds of groceries, as well as clothing, medicine, shoes, imported goods, personal care items, household cleaning products, CDs, DVDs, etc. It is easy to perceive how the Walmart brand could become the icon of globalized capitalist practices (as “Coca-Cola” once was, from the 1960s to the 1990s), while the *tianguis* gets the imprint of local flavour. This opposition seemed to perfectly account for the symbolic, antagonistic dispute, but the reality is quite complex, and the simplification unfair.

If one were to attack the first on the grounds of providing precarious jobs and buying from producers at highly discounted prices (a charge that is true, but not illegal), one could not ignore the fact that these same employment practices drive also smaller, semi-formal, and informal retailers and vendors, not to mention the fact they end up distributing homogenous products from a couple of major companies that have championed the logistics of small-retail distribution (for example, Bimbo, a Mexican company, deemed in 2012 the largest bread manufacturer worldwide, Femsá, the Coca-Cola bottling company in Mexico, and PepsiCo itself). Additionally, it is not surprising to find stolen and pirated items in the *tianguis*, two felonies that have found a certain tolerance among authorities. Despite these well-known facts, city officials did not hesitate to name and publicize their regulation as the “Walmart” regulation, a norm that would help the defenseless against the retail giant.⁴² Both “Walmart” and *tianguis* are names that evidently function as empty signifiers the government uses to channel a certain discontent, an undeniable social unease; they do not dare to confront its actual, profound causes, but rather they transmute it into an ideological antagonism out of which an hegemony is more easily crafted for political purposes.

What these discursive practices obscure is the actual economic dimension of the whole manoeuvre. If, as we have seen, the market share for the consumption of goods is divided between two systems of distribution, a decrease in one would cause an increase in the other. While this move affects consumers, by both limiting the options for consumption and increasing the prices of goods, it expands the share of the informal sector, which is linked to smaller-sized retail stores and *tianguis*, from which, as we have already mentioned, PRD groups obtain economic benefits.

In the end, the government’s action claiming to protect “traditional” forms of commerce⁴³ is rightly proved to be unsustainable. However, the judicial battle that made it all the way to the Federal Supreme Court shows the government’s

flagrant use of socially oriented claims that obscure both the complexities of the case and a veiled political economic agenda.

Conclusions: What Is Left of the Left?

The cases we have presented here demonstrate some symptoms of an emerging political rationale, a different logic brought in with the feeble democratic expansion that followed the adoption of NAFTA. A populist impulse quietly grew as an imminent accompaniment to the given political structure, but it eluded the classical notion of populism, where one frequently finds a squandering of resources to pay for popular but unnecessary demands and a swarm of mass-culture forms of entertainment. And yet, these formulas have not been absent from the leftist agenda either. The city has seen the construction of a frivolous ice-rink in the *Zócalo* (central plaza) in the winter, pools spread out in popular parks for the spring heat waves, and a horde of Guinness-record-breaking events that attract the curious by the thousands.⁴⁴ But these popular trifles lack the scale, sophistication, and stakes implied in the production of a specific discourse with the specific aim of conforming the current political hegemony.

Therefore, with the arrival of an “open” and allegedly more competitive democratic municipal political configuration, we have witnessed the articulation of a political logic based on a populist structure founded on a certain pragmatic reason. Accordingly, political leaders assign hegemonic labels (the “pueblo,” the people, for example) to give meaning to a set of policies (“social justice,” etc.); such empty signifiers in fact hide another dynamic based on economic advantages for groups closely related to the political party in office. Does this mean there is no “social” agenda remaining that can be considered functional or trustworthy? In some ways, the policies regarding health and education are the only remnants of a long-gone ideal among social democrats. Even issues of public transportation, garbage collection, culture,

and gender equality fall short of promoting effective policies. Deeply entangled economic and cultural inertia dominates these fields, and politicians have found through the pragmatic effects of discourse formation an ideal form for circumventing the actual treatment of complex social problems—while simultaneously benefiting from them. Discourse effectiveness, especially in the alliance between politics and the media, has proven to be a surrogate for efficient and direct political action, especially in an era where the short-term is the sovereign and absolute time frame for public accomplishment. Without a general and detailed understanding by the citizenry of what is at stake, discourse formation practices will continue to dominate both the simulated formation of reality and the monopoly of economic advantages for those who that control these same practices. Wider citizen participation in policy-design and urban programs promoted by the left should be proposed, and probably even enforced. For only publicity, transparency, and accessibility can diminish the blinding power of current political discursive practices, and balance out and democratize the decision-making process. Indeed, as we have seen, these political practices have concrete effects on the alteration of the urban geography, the common spaces where we share our everyday activities. We have tried here to follow two cases where this is most evident, as an initial contribution towards the urgent need to locate populist practices and other traces that are left behind among the debris of an ever-growing, opaque, and irresponsible form of politics.

Notes

1 This paper is also an effort in this direction.

2 The Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI, Institutionalized Revolutionary Party) had been the major, and sometimes the only, party participating in allegedly open elections between 1929 and 2000, when it lost the presidential election to the right-wing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN, National Action Party), only to regain power in 2012.

3 Before these elections, the city was a Federal Zone (Distrito Federal) home to the three powers of the State; the City Mayor, the regente, was appointed by the President. In 1997, the first constitutional Mayor of the Federal Zone was elected together with the first group of legislators of the new Legislative Assembly, which combined legislative functions and administrative duties. With an individual participation of 8 political parties, the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD, Democratic Revolutionary Party) triumphed over the rest by an ample margin of 87.88 percent. (Electoral results, Local elections 1997, Instituto Electoral de Distrito Federal: <http://www.iedf.org.mx/>

sites/Sistema ElectoralDF/es06.php?cadena=content/es/0601.php.)

4 The PRD was founded in 1989 following a leftist defection from the ruling PRI, combined with other minor socialist organizations. It has functioned ever since as the main leftist opposition party to the PRI and PAN, gaining enormous influence in the capital city and some adjacent states.

5 Mara Steffan, "The Political Impact of NAFTA on the Mexican Transition to Democracy, 1988-2000," *Bologna Center Journal of International Affairs* 10 (Spring 2007): <http://bcjournal.org/volume-10/the-political-impact-of-nafta-on-the-mexican-transition-to-d-1.html>.

6 John Ross notably narrates many of the trial-and-error actions that the first elected PRD mayor, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, made while he was in office. He describes many of these as candid mistakes which indicated a process of political learning. Ross, *El Monstruo: Dread and Redemption in Mexico City* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 377-383.

7 The arrival of an open form of democracy within the context of fragile democratic institutions resembles

a peculiar form of populism, not a totalitarian type, but instead a democratic variation.

8 Ernesto Laclau, *The Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), xi.

9 For Laclau, discourse is not restricted to speech and writing, but to any complex of elements in which the constitutive roles are relational. This means that the important elements of any given system do not pre-exist the relational complex, but are constituted through it. It also implies that "relation" and "objectivity" are synonymous. This calls for a re-consideration of rhetoric as a central analytical element. To put it briefly, forms of language become objects of discourse, and thus within objective constitutions through relations, there can be no positive terms; everything is what it is through difference. Nothing is posited, everything is related, and its importance brought about by residue. The quality of anything is then grasped as a residual parameter, its difference to anything else then becomes the meaningful component.

10 The totality of any given ensemble of differential elements can only be present in each individual act of signification. For it is in its totality that we find its sheer possibility

of signification. In other words, individual difference will always be related to something else, and will therefore lose its importance as an individual, and as a difference, altogether. Only in a conglomerate where this difference becomes an absolute difference, will a trait acquire importance and meaning. Furthermore, this totality of differentials can only be defined via a limit to what lies "beyond" it, in an act of exclusion of another difference, apparently external to it. Since this totality claims to embrace all differences, this limit as another difference ends up being internal, not external. This internal limit functions only by excluding a certain part of itself, an exclusion that works as an operation of equivalence for the rest of the differential elements: they are now all equivalent in the rejection of the excluded element. In a relational tension, this equivalence constructs an identity. The resulting totality is then both necessary for signification, but at the same time impossible, since it is only a relation. However, for operative purposes, this incommensurable totality represents the one difference ("exclusion") through which all other differences are rendered equivalent. The operation by which a single difference takes hold of the representation of an

otherwise "failed" or "irretrievable" totality is what Laclau calls a hegemony.

11 The counterpart to such an hegemony is an impossible object, and so the operation displayed by the hegemonic identity becomes of the order of an empty signifier, the embodiment of an unachievable wholeness, a totality that serves as a projection, an horizon, but never a ground or a foundation.

12 This does not mean that claims for justice are populist in every case. It only means that, as a general demand, without ontic content, justice, equality, and fairness are names for an undifferentiated fullness that lacks a conceptual reference. They serve as empty signifiers in the strictest sense of the word. Laclau, *The Populist Reason*, 97.

13 For Laclau, the fact that some particular struggle is elevated into the "universal equivalent" of all struggles is not a predetermined fact but itself the result of the contingent political struggle for hegemony. In one constellation this struggle can be the workers' struggle, in another constellation the patriotic anticolonialist struggle, in yet another constellation, the antiracist struggle for cultural tolerance.

14 Around 98 percent of the population was settled in the city centre in the 1930s. By the 1950s, the territorial growth of the city was defined based on modern industrial and infrastructural practices, and many rural areas were absorbed. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the uncontrolled expansion of the city led to an increase three times its size. ("Programa General de Desarrollo Urbano del Distrito Federal," *Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal* 103-Bis, 31 December 2003, http://www.consejeria.df.gob.mx/portal_old/uploads/gacetadiciembre03_31_103_bis.pdf.)

15 Víctor Manuel Delgado-Polanco, "Repopulation and Rescuing of Mexico City's Historic Centre: A Hybrid Public Action, 2001-2006," *Economía, Sociedad y Territorio* 7, no. 28 (2008): 817-845.

16 According to the General Census of Population and Housing, in 2000 only 19 percent of the population (around 8.6 million) was located in the centre, with 81 percent in the rest of the city ("Programa General," *Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal*, 2003). This eccentric growth has represented a waste of the existent infrastructure, as housing construction lacked

an urban plan that considered the tendency (context) of each place. An immediate success of the real-estate strategy seemed to be a win-win for everybody: the government built social housing, the developers huge housing blocks, the rich big mansions, and the poor got plots without facilities for low prices (Rojas et. al. cited in Delgado-Polanco, "Repopulation and rescuing.")

17 Indeed, this was not the first time that the historic centre was slated for rescue. During the 1968 Cultural Olympiad, some of the main roads and plazas were restored. After the earthquake in 1985, around 800 buildings were renovated, and 109 were designated as historic monuments. The restoration of the buildings was an exclusive responsibility of the state, dependent on limited economic resources and restricted to public use, offices, and museums. (Victor Ballinas and Alonso Urrutia, "Paralizado el rescate del Centro Histórico," *La Jornada*, 14 October 1996, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/1996/10/14/centro.html>). The first major partial program of reorganization took place under president Carlos Salinas during the 1990s, the Potential Transfer scheme. In any case, as a neoliberal program, high costs and low profitability of the buildings, in addition to complicated bureaucratic processes, repelled the interest of private investors. Furthermore, during

the 1994 crisis, some work was paralyzed due to the high interest rates and risks for private capital. In 1997-2000, Mexico City's first mayor, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, led the Integral Development of the Historic Center, which consisted of a participative planning and management program more than any relevant work of construction. It was not until 2002-2006, under López Obrador, that the Rescuing Plan of the Historic Center was implemented. It implied an unprecedented and quite controversial union of the private and the public sectors to rescue the area known as the "A" perimeter, were the main avenues, commercial corridors, monumental and governmental buildings lie, representing only five percent of Mexico City's Historical Downtown.

18 The General Plan of Urban Development 2001-2006, which legally supported the Rescuing Plan of the Historic Center, adopted and gave legal recognition to an informational edict from the local government called Bando no. 2 (Margarita González Gamio, "La redensificación y las zonas especiales de desarrollo controlado (ZEDEC's)," *Ciudadanos en Red*, http://ciudadanosenred.com.mx/htm/areas/0/Redensificacion_ZEDecs.pdf).

19 Technically, the housing policy during

this period was mainly supported by two documents: the Bando no. 2 and the Agreement on housing policy (Acuerdo sobre Política Habitacional). The latter established the construction of 25,000 housing units in central areas, while only maintenance would take place in the rest of the zones. The Bando no. 2 restricted the construction of housing units and commercial developments in the periphery zones, promoting the reuse of the city's infrastructure and services in order to repopulate the centre. In addition, the drastic change in land use, from residential to commercial activities, and the substitution of old buildings for new constructions, led to new displacements of the population. However, some changes in the social housing construction plan were unexpectedly positive, although limited. In 2003, the Emergency Housing Program benefitted families who inhabited high-risk buildings unattractive for real-estate development or substitution of abandoned buildings to occupied ones (Delgado-Polanco, "Repopulation and Rescuing," 833).

20 "Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México," *CENVI*, http://www.cenvi.org.mx/programa_CH.html.

21 Cardenas' government promoted an embryonic

scale the practice of participatory urban planning as a means of legitimizing policy proposals for urban development ("Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano.") This program was based on a previous participatory instrument called ZEDEC (Special Zones of Controlled Development), and it served to organize and control the use of land, the height of constructions and other restrictions and norms to preserve 85% of urban territory for residential use. The ZEDEC was the first example of participatory planning and working, where neighbours, residential associations, city authorities, and the private sector were involved. (See more in González, "La redensificación.") Cardenas' participatory urban strategy became an important part of the general outline of the Partial Program of Urban Development of the Historic Downtown, promoted by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development in neighbourhoods that presented social and urban conflicts, and with the collaboration of NGOs, universities, and social and civil organizations. In 2000, under López Obrador, the Ministry cancelled this program in favour of the creation of the Territory Integral Program for Social Development (PIT) and the implementation of the Bando no. 2, which more strictly defined the areas of action and decisions of the central apparatus of the city governance. City delegations, which represent the local citizenship,

received little participation in these new processes. (Alicia Ziccardi, "Políticas de inclusión social de la Ciudad de México," in *Retos para la integración social de los pobres en América Latina*, ed. Carlos Barbo Solano (Buenos Aires: Clasco, 2009), 247, <http://biblioteca.clasco.edu.ar/ar/libros/grupos/barba/16zicca.pdf>).

22 See González, "La redensificación."

23 It could be said that the Bando no. 2, even if more visible, was regressive from a participatory point of view; even though López Obrador promised a direct, accessible, and open style of governance, "La redensificación.") Cardenas' participatory urban strategy became an important part of the general outline of the Partial Program of Urban Development of the Historic Downtown, promoted by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development in neighbourhoods that presented social and urban conflicts, and with the collaboration of NGOs, universities, and social and civil organizations. In 2000, under López Obrador, the Ministry cancelled this program in favour of the creation of the Territory Integral Program for Social Development (PIT) and the implementation of the Bando no. 2, which more strictly defined the areas of action and decisions of the central apparatus of the city governance. City delegations, which represent the local citizenship,

24 See Emilio Pradilla Cobos, "Ciudad de México: Los caminos de privatización de lo urbano," *Ciudades* 64, (October-December 2004): 56-62.

25 The Trust was established as a public-private entity in 1991 and adopted by the State in 2002 (Delgado-Polanco, "Repopulation and Rescuing," 835). The public fund was destined mainly for the maintenance of façades, the repair of urban furniture, and the relocation of ambulantes markets. Additionally, modern infrastructure and

fibre-optic cables were installed, along with a partially implemented security system based on the recommendations of New York's Giuliani Partners (Daniela Gerson "In Mexico City, Few Cheers for Giuliani," *The New York Sun*, 11 April 2005, <http://www.nysun.com/new-york/in-mexico-city-few-cheers-for-giuliani/11973>).

26 The Rescuing Plan comprised only 34 blocks, from which council president Carlos Slim purchased 63 buildings between 2002 and 2004. On the other hand, there are not enough available data to account for the extent of the tax exemptions, or the resulting final profit of the real-estate operations. In any case, it has become clear that the government fund was mainly spent on infrastructure, while the private funding was destined for privately owned real-estate developments.

27 Very few studies take into account the importance of party affiliations and relations among the ambulantes and tianguistas in the policies that the city proposes. An exception is a peculiar study by Duhau and Giglia. They openly state that, in Mexico City, "the political system plays a relevant role in the organizations that add up and control those who participate in the diversity of informal economic activities, and even on the illegal ones" (Emilio Duhau and Angela Giglia, "Nuevas

centralidades y prácticas de consumo en la Ciudad de México: Del microcomercio al hipermercado," *Eure* 33, no. 98 (May 2007): 77–95.).

28

Depending on the variables included, roughly between 24–26%. (See Daniel Flores et. al., "El sector informal en México: Medición y cálculo para la recaudación potencial", *Ciencia UANL* 8, no. 4 (October-December 2005): 490–494, http://eprints.uanl.mx/650/1/art_recaudacion.pdf).

29

Héctor Castillo Berthier, Comercio ambulante y políticas públicas en la Ciudad de México, http://www.humanindex.unam.mx/humanindex/fichas_pdf/genera_ficha_pdf_capitulo.php?id=11504.

30

See Alejandro Portes, En torno a la informalidad: Ensayos sobre teoría y medición de la economía no regulada, (Mexico: Porrúa, 1995).

31

According to Guillermo de la Peña, "the definition of the most powerful actors [among the informal vendors] imply an agreement with authorities and representatives; that of the least powerful is conditioned by the necessity to reduce uncertainty and to find substitutive forms of political representation." De la Peña, "Corrupción e informalidad," *Espiral: Estudios sobre Estado y Sociedad*, 3,

no. 7 (September–December 1996): 109–127, <http://148.202.18.157/sitios/publicacion-site/pperiod/esprial/esprialpdf/Espiral7/109-127.pdf>.

32

For two trustworthy journalistic works, see Cynthia Ramírez, "Ambulantes," *Letras Libres*, January 2007, <http://letraslibres.com/revista/convivio/ambulantes>, and Raymundo Sánchez, "Ambulantes pagan al PRD \$15 millones al mes," *La Crónica*, 11 February 2013, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2005/197062.html>.

33

Between October and November 2007, an event demonstrated the real weight of the intervention. Already under Mayor Marcelo Ebrard, three historic buildings that were part of the Cultural Heritage acknowledged by the National Institute of History and Anthropology (INAH) were altogether demolished, along with 14 others, in order to "give way to some space to relocate street vendors." (See <http://www.recorri2.com/portal/index.php/mco-df-ciudades-75/488-demuele-gdf-edificios-considerados-monumentos-histos.html>).

34

According to some specialists, despite the minor recovery of the zone's habitability, the claims of residents and the alleviation of poverty had little to do with the Rescue Plan for the Historic Centre. The housing actions

corresponded to a different public management policy and targeted population, although the territory is also named Historic Downtown (Delgadillo-Polanco, "Repopulation and Rescuing," 837).

35

Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal, no. 1099, 20 May 2011, http://www.seduvi.df.gob.mx/portal/docs/normas/2011may20_GODF.pdf.

36

Aleida Álvarez, (Government Commissioner), quoted in Gabriela Romero, Rocío González and Laura Gómez, "Busca el GDF sustentar la función social de la Norma 29," *La Jornada*, 6 July 2011, <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2011/07/06/capital/040n1cap>.

37

According to the president of the Urban Infrastructure and Development Commission, Guillermo Sánchez Torres, quoted in "Aprobó ALDF norma pro mercados públicos: Minisúpers sólo podrán instalarse en zonas con uso de suelo habitacional mixto," 14 April 2011, *La Crónica*, <http://www.lapoli-ciaca.com/nota-roja/aprobo-aldf-norma-pro-mercados-publicos-minisupers-solo-podran-instalarse-en-zonas-con-uso-de-suelo-habitacional-mixto>.

38

Such as the judicial counselor of the city, Leticia Bonifaz, quoted in Jessica Castillejos, "Los barrios contra el

super: se amparan por Norma 29," *Excélsior*, 2 August 2011, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/2011/08/02/comunidad/757824>.

39

Ibid.

40

Duhau and Giglia, "Nuevas centralidades y prácticas."

41

One could also argue that large retail stores provide only low-quality jobs, and that the quality of their products can be sometimes questioned, but in this respect, too, their smaller counterparts do not fare much better. See *Ibid.*

42

This does not mean that there are no grounds for regulation of large retail stores in urban areas, but it is a field which cannot be treated under such simple signifiers as the "social" or so-called "economic justice," and it certainly implies a different urban order, precisely of the type that would end the ambiguity, and the intrusiveness of government officials with their discretionary interpretations.

43

As Leopoldo González, quoted in Guillermo Pimentel Balderas, "ALDF e Industria Panificadora acusan a SCJN de proteger a Walmart," *Mensaje Político*, 25 June 2013, [\[dos-p%C3%BABlicos.html\]\(http://www.mensajepolitico.com/index.php/firmas/opinan/juan-martinez-veloz/item/9312-aldf-e-industria-panificadora-acusan-a-scn-de-proteger-a-walmart-y-dar-puntilla-a-merca-\).](http://www.mensajepolitico.com/index.php/firmas/opinan/juan-martinez-veloz/item/9312-aldf-e-industria-panificadora-acusan-a-scn-de-proteger-a-walmart-y-dar-puntilla-a-merca-</p>
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44

John Ross mentions that "enhanced budgets have more than tripled in the past 10 years, from 37 billion pesos under Cárdenas in 1997 to 122 billion in 2009," giving City mayors "the extra wherewithal to entertain Left City in the style to which it has become accustomed." As Ross mentions, during Marcelo Ebrard's administration alone, "Mexico has climbed into the top 10 in the Guinness Book of Records for countries trying to set Guinness Book of Records records. Among other achievements: the world's largest quinceañera, or girl's sweet 15 birthday party [...], the world's largest danzón competition [...], the world's most enormous fleur-de-lis [...], the biggest kiss-a-thon on Earth, etc." Ross, *El Monstruo*, 442.