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. This was already beginning before 1997, under the PRI’s regime, but it became even more evident after the elections that year, when the leftist opposition party PRD took control of the city with ample support.

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 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 politicians 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.”

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. 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. 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
Laclau, we’ll assume that populism is a way of constructing the political. As many cases show, it has indeed become the leading form of political discourse 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.

In classical analysis, in the first case, or “the uneducated masses, the unorganized, the uncontrolled,” the populist derivation, in the second case, “the people,” the populist derivation, in the second case. However, these identities are not merely simple and oppositional; they can be multiple and dynamic. 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.

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, and the second is that of the constitution of an empty signifier and a hegemony. Hegemony is an operation of identity formation with a political purpose. 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. 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.

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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, 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. One of the main trends that has accompanied this growth has been the depopulation and abandonment...
of central areas. 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. 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 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-vestors 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 clienteles 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, the document presented in a synthetic way the means to stop the unorganized growth of the city through sustainable redensification.

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, 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 supposed to extend, 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.

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; 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.

Furthermore, the economic logic active behind the Bando no. 2 was anything but socially re-distributive, 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, and a promise for possible investment of 1 billion pesos by the Carso group to rescue the zone.

On the other hand, the operation helped to shift the balance on the ambulantes’ political clienteles, 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. The role and influence of informal
engagement proper to a modern leftist party prevailed over the need for a deep scrutiny of the operation. 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 discourse 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. 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.” 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. 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. 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.), and none made on the grounds of lack of direct, or indirect, 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. This same study provides evidence 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, 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. Despite its size—and the fact that, according to structuralist, neo-Marxist analysis, there have been very few attempts to integrate informal sector is a constitutive and unavoidable element if we wish to understand the case as a whole. A credible estimation of the size of the informal sector, the fee 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. 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. 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. However, as a public policy, the operation ended up being quite popular and fairly credible. Indeed, the discourse of “cultural” and “social”...
on how small and large stores complement one another, in terms of both consumer choice (a composite variable: 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.

As a matter of fact, low-income families have championed the logistics of small-retail distribution (for example, Biombo, a Mexican company, deemed in 2012 the largest bread manufacturer worldwide, Femsa, 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. 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 scale, sophistication, and stakes implied in the constructed political logic built on the feeble democratic expansion that followed the adoption of NAFTA. A populist impulse quietly grew as an imminent accomplishment 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. But these populist 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 model, the actual configuration of the current political practices have concrete effects on the alteration of the urban geography, the common spaces and democratize the decision-making process. 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 the simulated formation of reality and properly account for 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.

Flags and empty signifiers have never been more popular, but the deeper question is whether they effectively promote the semblance of populism, or they can diminish the blinding power of current political discursive practices, and balance out the simulated formation of reality. If the simulation is more apparent than real, it means that the current social and political conditions are not conducive to the development of new forms of political practice. If, on the other hand, the simulation is more real than apparent, it means that the current social and political conditions are conducive to the development of new forms of political practice.
El PRD fue fundado en 1989 después de un levantamiento popular contra el PRI, el partido gobernante de México en ese momento. Inicialmente era un partido de oposición, pero con el tiempo se convirtió en un grupo doméstico de laflatten.*

La llegada de un nuevo Partido, el Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), marcó el fin del Partido Socialista Mexicano y el inicio de la exclusión política de otras opciones políticas. Sin embargo, el PRI no fue capaz de garantizar la estabilidad democrática del país y en 1997, el Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD) se convirtió en la mayor fuerza política en el país, y en 2000, el PRD ganó las elecciones presidenciales con Víctor Manuel Díaz de León como presidente.

El PRD es conocido por su postura progresista y sus esfuerzos por mejorar el bienestar de los ciudadanos. En términos de infraestructura, también ha trabajado para mejorar el acceso a la vivienda y servicios públicos. Sin embargo, el PRD ha sido criticado por su falta de transparencia y corrupción en la administración pública.

En resumen, el Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) fue el partido gobernante de México durante varios años, pero en 1997, el Partido Revolucionario Democrático (PRD) se convirtió en la mayor fuerza política en el país. El PRD ha trabajado para mejorar el bienestar de los ciudadanos y ha sido criticado por su falta de transparencia y corrupción en la administración pública.

**Notas**

12. Various studies indicate that the real-estate market prices have increased significantly since the 1990s.
It is illegal for a resident of Mexico City to put furniture on the sidewalk in front of his or her property, unless the property is a shop that sells food and beverages. If that is the case, one can get a “permit for placement of furniture on public roads,” as long as the furniture is not fastened to the street. The local government charges annual rent for the area in use, and the total cost per square metre—almost as high as commercial rent—depends on the price of real estate in the neighbourhood.

By paying rent, businesses effectively acquire semi-exclusive rights to public space. Because owners need to maximize the productive area in order to recover the investment, this sidewalk furniture is typically reserved for paying customers. While the city could use this collected money to improve public space, the privatization of sidewalks has a larger negative impact on the public realm. What would happen if instead of allowing shops to pay rent and take possession of the sidewalk, any person could donate furniture for the public in a joint venture with the city?

**Furniture for Public Use** is a project that rethinks the use of sidewalks through a public-private program where anybody can purchase and place concrete plant pots and furniture on their sidewalks. The goal of this easy-access program is to incentivize and actively contribute to the use of public space at a local scale.

This project is currently in a pilot phase in Mexico City, where it aims to partner with the local government to provide affordable sidewalk furniture and create relationships with individuals to improve sidewalks. Within this model, anybody can transform