



# Popular marketplaces

*Experiences and reflections for their  
preservation and improvement*

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Popular marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement  
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# Introduction

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In 2018, when I was doing my fieldwork with market trader organisations in Mexico City, I frequently came upon an unexpected question. When talking with traders, they often asked me if I could share materials with them concerning international experiences for the preservation and improvement of popular marketplaces.\* It could be said that there is a social need to look, think and act through other people's experiences, especially for a community of traders such as that of Mexico City, which has more than 72,000 members and a wide network of 336 public markets. And so it was that the regularity with which this question cropped up made me realise that there is an avid interest in finding out what is happening in other marketplaces and that, despite the existence of a great body of knowledge, this does not always reach the hands of the traders and their organisations.

This compilation, entitled *Popular Marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement*, is a response to this collective interest, which was confirmed to us during the works of the *International meeting-workshop on marketplace governance* (May 23-24, 2022). This online meeting was attended by traders' representatives, officials, marketplaces' activists, and

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\* In this work, we use the adjective "popular" to describe marketplaces. We have opted for this term to highlight a connection between its common use in the Latin American context and its second and third connotations in English. "Popular," thus, refers to what "belongs to," "refers to," "is peculiar to," or "stems from" the people. "Popular" allows us to emphasise that these marketplaces are intended for the general public and, in particular, suited to the needs and means of the less well off. Moreover, we use the term to refer to the fact that these marketplaces are the result of activities carried on by the people, in this case, a diversity of trader communities (see RAE, n.d; Lexico, n.d.).

academics from Ecuador, Peru, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Spain, Bulgaria, and the United Kingdom. Their presence and participation reaffirmed the need for and importance of creating and maintaining spaces to share knowledge and experiences leading to the preservation and improvement of popular marketplaces. Also published in Spanish, this work collects experiences of pro-marketplace activism, in which each contribution functions as an entry point to different stories whose protagonists are the trader communities and their allies.

In putting these pieces together, we have sought to highlight the unwavering work involved in preserving and improving popular marketplaces in the face of economic, political and cultural policies that have tended to undermine their role as public goods and services. We have also sought to highlight the way in which the fight for popular marketplaces relates to struggles for the right to work, to the city, to decent living conditions, functioning infrastructure and political recognition. In this regard, this compilation draws inspiration from works such as *Contested markets, contested cities: Gentrification and urban justice in retail spaces* (2018), edited by Sara González, and *Traditional markets under threat: Why it's happening and what traders and customers can do* (2015), co-authored by Sara González y Gloria Dawson. Their international critical approach and their interest in providing useful tools for action helped lay the foundations for this work. *Popular Marketplaces: Experiences and reflections for their preservation and improvement* is, then, our contribution to a genre that continues to be enriched thanks to the trader communities' generous willingness to share their stories with new generations of researchers.

It is important to note that here, we understand the notion of popular marketplaces in a broad sense, that is, as socio-spatial configurations specialising in the distribution of goods and services, and whose forms, composition and political and legal identities are diverse. Thus, each contribution is an entry point into the diversity of struggles undertaken by trader communities and their allies. We hope that they will increase the body of collective knowledge that has made it possible to preserve and improve popular marketplaces in recent decades despite the processes that threaten and marginalise them. We hope that these texts will also serve as an inspiration for what they teach us about the trader communities' struggles for: 1) their right to stay and legal certainty and security; 2) the improvement of popular marketplaces as spaces of work and consumption for local communities; and 3) the preservation of their public nature and community focus.



The contributions are organised into four thematic clusters. Each contribution focuses on unique research and activist experiences for the preservation and improvement of popular marketplaces, which the authors have studied over several years. Each piece is written in a different style and draws on different sources of information, but they all have put market traders' experiences and the recognition of their long-standing struggles at the centre of the analysis.

In *Resistance and political adaptation*, Angus McNelly and Claudia Teresa Gasca Moreno focus on the challenges that trader organisations and popular marketplaces face in changing political contexts. The cases of La Rotonda in Bolivia and Mercado República in Mexico reveal the resilience of these communities in competing political networks. In *Organisation, alliances and initiative*, Felipe Rangel, Ana Lidia O. Aguiar, Fernanda de Gobbi, María Florencia Marcos, and León Felipe Téllez Contreras highlight the commitment of trader-producer communities to creating and promoting alliances and initiatives that underpin the preservation and improvement of traditional and alternative distribution channels.

In *Learning from the micro scale*, Jack Pickering and Elvira Mateos Carmona invite us to look at markets' time and space management from a micro scale perspective and in relation to their social meanings. Their rich descriptions of Cardiff Market and Mercado de Barceló raise questions about what is necessary to encourage desirable encounters and reduce tensions in popular marketplaces. Lastly, in *Recognition and new fronts*, Diana Loja Chalco, José Luis León, Luis Emilio Martínez, and Stoyanka Andreeva Eneva highlight the central role played by women in the preservation of popular marketplaces and the persistence of processes that threaten their existence and the traders' livelihoods.

Thus, in this work, we celebrate the economic, social, cultural, and political contributions of popular marketplaces and the traders' initiative to keep organising and building the networks that help to preserve and improve this critical social infrastructure.

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The authors wish to express their deepest thanks to those who took part in their respective research and helped them to understand the dynamics of their organisations and marketplaces. We would also like to thank all those who took part in the *International meeting-workshop on marketplace governance*, held online on 23 and 24 May 2022. Their contributions to the debate were essential to shape the style and content of this work.

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# **Resistance and political adaptation**



## **Agency, strategy and resilience: Vendors' quest to move a market in Plan 3000, Bolivia**

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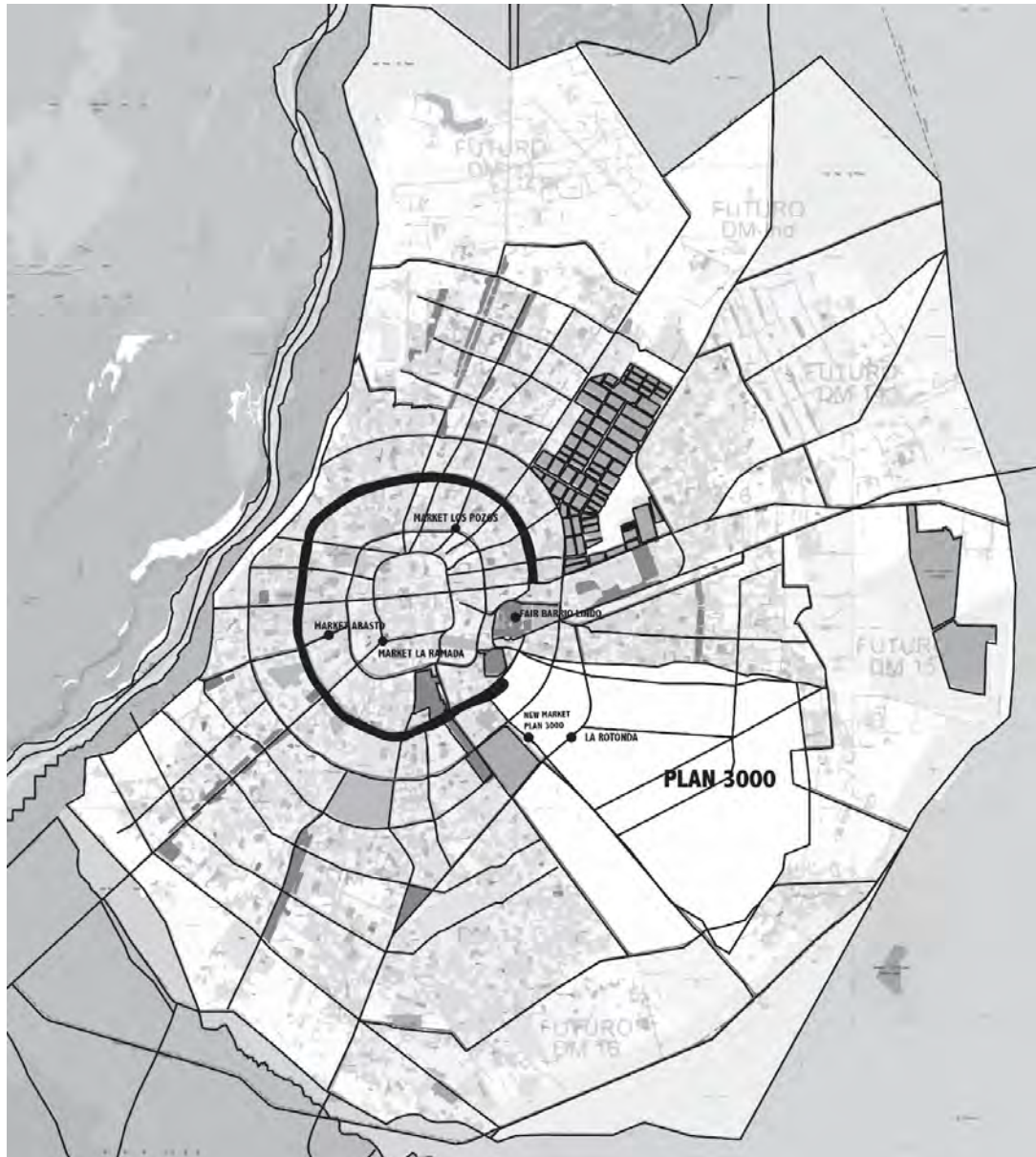
Here, I present the process of moving the informal La Rotonda (the Roundabout) market situated at the heart of the shantytown Plan 3000 in the city of Santa Cruz, Bolivia, to a new purpose-built site, the Mercado Modelo Plan 3000 (see Figure 1). This process spanned thirteen years between 2004 and 2017 and largely occurred during a period when Evo Morales and the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement Towards Socialism, MAS) was in power nationally (2006–2019) and opposition parties controlled the municipal and department governments in Santa Cruz. It demonstrates how the tensions between different layers of the State can be used by market vendors and their organisations to achieve set goals, something that, in turn, reveals the agency informalised market vendors possess and the ways they employ a variety of strategies—from using legislation and government funds to protest and self-construction—to achieve their ends.

La Rotonda was organised through 19 associations with some 2,500 affiliated members, which had a central elected committee that was, in turn, affiliated with the citywide Federación Departamental Única de Santa Cruz (Unique Departmental Federation of Santa Cruz).<sup>1</sup> La Rotonda was formed as the central market of 'Andrés Ibáñez' in July 1988 with one association, the Asociación de Comerciantes Minoristas del Mercado Central 'Andrés Ibáñez' (The Association of Retail Merchants of the Central Market 'Andrés Ibáñez') (Vaca Añez, 2016: 232). It was originally built on the site of the hospital 'Virgen Milagrosa', so was forced to move across the road when the hospital was built, spreading along the other roads off the roundabout over time until its move to the new market in December 2017 (Vaca Añez, 2016: 231). Over the years, as the market expanded, the Association has repeatedly split—largely due to the limited ability of larger associations to represent all of their members, in part due to political differences, struggles and divides—forming the 19 associations that existed when the market moved in 2017.

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<sup>1</sup> Juan Escalera, President, 18 de marzo, interview, Plan 3000, 30/01/2017.

**Figure 1.** Map of Santa Cruz



Map: Alejandra Rocabado, 2018.

## **Moving La Rotonda Market**

Moving La Rotonda Market took thirteen years in total, during which time, vendors demonstrated enormous resilience and proved adept at adjusting their strategies to changing political contexts. During the first stage of the construction of the new market (2004-2007), the market guilds of Plan 3000 struck a deal with the municipal government, which donated six hectares of land to the north-west of La Rotonda on Avenue San Aurelio for the market (El Deber, 2017). The donation of this land was hard-won after a protracted battle between the vendors of La Rotonda, local State officials and neoliberal government ministers.<sup>2</sup> This accord was finalised and formalised into a thirty-year lease in September 2007 (Vaca Añez, 2016: 233).

The market guilds initially signed a 4-million-dollar contract with the construction firm ETIA. However, this contract was cancelled in 2007 following the inadequate progress of the project and ETIA's inability to produce building plans that could be approved by the Secretaría Municipal de Planificación (Municipal Planning Secretary, SEMPLA). There was briefly an agreement with the company ROIDEL, but when they proved unable to overcome the problems experienced by ETIA, a new deal was signed with the Colombian construction company Urbanizamos SRL, worth 6.7 million dollars (Patria Insurgente, 2012).<sup>3</sup> This marked the beginning of the second phase of construction, with the involvement of the Ministerio de Desarrollo Productivo (Ministry of Productive Development) and reported government financing through the Evo Cumple, Bolivia Cambia (Evo Fulfils, Bolivia Changes) project, with additional funding of 3.5 million dollars from the Venezuelan Banco de Desarrollo Social (Social Development Bank, BANDES) (El Día, 2012).

However, construction work halted at 75% completion in 2010 following accusations of mismanagement by the supervisor of the project, Edgar Montaña Rojas (Página Siete, 2017). Delays were blamed on the malpractice and corruption of three local leaders, leading to this phase of the project being marked by suspicion and confusion. The plans drawn up by the architects and engi-

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<sup>2</sup> Initially the vendors wanted to transform Plaza Merchero, about one and a half kilometres south-east of La Rotonda. However, they had to settle for a plot next to the Cañaveral (sugarcane plantation). Daniel Suárez, President, Association Copacabana, interview, Plan 3000, 06/04/2017.

<sup>3</sup> Juan Escalera, 30/01/2017.

neers were found to be structurally unsound, and many of the pillars already constructed had to be rebuilt. The construction work itself was often shoddy and local leaders turned on one another. Amid this confusion, it remains unclear what happened to the funding from the Bolivian and Venezuelan governments.

Indeed, the leader of the 19 associations, Enrique Gonzalo Alba, was adamant that the Evo Cuple's money was returned almost immediately when I spoke to him in 2017, pointing out that opposition to the final construction plans used stories about these funds to try and block the new market's construction. According to Gonzalo Alba, local oppositional leaders wanted to stymie the construction of the market; the central government wanted ownership of the market to gain *de facto* power over the market vendors of the city's largest district (some 300,000 people in total); and the political opposition to the MAS national government wanted to underscore the ties between government investment and the difficulties in constructing the market in order to be able to hold up the Mercado Modelo Plan 3000 as a political weapon to wield against Evo Morales.<sup>4</sup>

Both the municipal government, owners of the land upon which the market is built, and the central government, through the input of the Ministry of Productive Development (and potentially Evo Cuple's money), attempted to influence the project for their benefit. This interference was a source of much frustration for the leaders of the 19 associations, who felt that they were caught in the crossfire of relations between different State actors. The tensions with and between different layers of the State consistently changed over the Morales years, influenced not only by local relationships and concerns, but also by the broader dynamics of national politics.

In the first stage of the project (2004–2007), there were growing tensions between different social groups in Bolivian society. However, the 19 associations of La Rotonda were largely unaffected by these dynamics, as was the relationship between the municipal government and central government. Nonetheless, when the autonomy movement—the conservative opposition to Morales articulated on the departmental scale between 2004 and 2008—ramped up, so did the tensions between the central government and the departmental authorities of Santa Cruz. In this context, the 19 associations found themselves in the centre of a power

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<sup>4</sup> Enrique Gonzalo Alba, Executive Secretary, Association 24 de Mayo (19 associations of La Rotonda), interview, Plan 3000, 04/04/2017.



struggle between different levels of the State. It was during this period when the tensions between receiving land from the municipal government and technical and financial support from the national government were at their highest.

Quarrels with the State over the market did not disappear after the warming of relations between Santa Cruz and the MAS in 2010. On the contrary, tensions entered a new phase when the Ministry of Productive Development brokered a deal with the municipal government designed to re-appropriate the market for the local authority's benefit. The end of the political conflicts of the previous period saw the 19 associations move from being in the crossfire of conflict between different layers of the State to being in outright opposition with multiple layers of the State. The attempt to appropriate the new Mercado Modelo de Plan 3000 was halted only through legal challenges mounted by the 19 associations in the juridical capital Sucre.<sup>5</sup>

In the final configuration of relations with the State during this period, the 19 associations broke ties with the MAS central government and their interests have subsequently aligned with the municipal government. In September 2015, the local government of Percy Fernández laid out its integrated municipal policy for catering and services of Santa Cruz in Law 136, a manoeuvre which started the arduous process of moving the markets inside the first ring of the city (see Figure 1) to newly constructed municipal markets on ring-roads and central arteries further outside the city centre (Consejo Municipal de Santa Cruz, 2015).

Although this policy targeted the more central markets, including the Mercado Abasto, Los Pozos and La Ramada, Law 136 provided the legal framework for the market vendors of La Rotonda to demand the municipal government fulfil its promises. The 19 associations of La Rotonda were able to use Law 136—particularly articles 5 and 6—to demand that the government pave the roads around their market and lay the necessary water and electricity infrastructure for the market to function properly. For their part, the municipal government was happy to comply as it was more concerned with breaking the resistance of market vendors at the other, more centrality located markets who were reluctant to move. This strategic support for municipal legislation provided the final pieces to the puzzle and facilitated the move of the vendors into their new market in August 2017.

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel Suárez, 06/04/2017.

## Conclusion

The process of moving the market in Plan 3000 demonstrates how the ebbs and flows of politics, both at the national and municipal levels, shapes local infrastructure projects. The different phases of construction roughly mapped onto political developments during this period and reveals how tensions between different political agendas are experienced on a local level. The process also highlights how the scalar fragmentation of the State, far from making it omnipotent, creates interstitial spaces to pursue political goals. Market vendors were able to use a range of strategies—from cooperating with the State, legal challenges, and protests to self-construction—in order to meet their goal of moving to a new, purpose-built market. They demonstrated remarkable resilience in the face of shifting political tides, changing strategies to adapt to changing political climates over their thirteen-year quest to move their market.

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## **Adaptation, networks and strategies: Mercado República, San Luis Potosí, Mexico**

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*Dedicated to the memory of Arturo Pérez Alonso for his tireless struggle for the improvement of municipal markets.*

Mercado República, located north of the Historic Centre of the city of San Luis Potosí, is a meeting place for traders, customers, and musicians, among others. In this space, which is home to more than 1,300 businesses, a variety of products required by city residents is offered every day. Throughout the year, the market supplies basic staples such as fruit and vegetables as well as a broad range of seasonal products. Despite its important role in supplying the city, the market has suffered for over three decades from a lack of maintenance and day-to-day care. Faced with this, its traders—through their organisations and networks—have engaged in struggles and generated alliances from which they have secured agreements to maintain the market's basic conditions of operation. The history of these actions also reflects the political transformations of San Luis Potosí and of Mexico, particularly the change of political actors with whom the traders interact. One thing that this history shows is the links between traders and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI) and, years later, their coordination with other civil society actors. This text describes the long road and change of focus of traders' struggles in San Luis Potosí, which are still not recognised as a key component in public markets' governance in the municipal agenda.

### **Changing political networks**

Mercado República's trader organisations pursue the common objective of defending their members' interests and negotiating collective benefits that help to improve conditions within and around the market (Gasca, 2013). In this sense, they act as mediators between the needs of the traders and the authorities re-

sponsible of responding to their demands. These groups mainly consist of male traders. Although women have never been excluded from these organisations, their participation is more limited, as they usually only attend meetings and public events and take care their logistics, such as welcoming guests.

**Figure 2.** Main corridor, Mercado República



Photo: Claudia Teresa Gasca Moreno, 2019.

Throughout the history of the market, trader organisations have played a central role in negotiating benefits and improvements for it. Traders recall that in the late 1980s and into the mid-1990s, their organisation was one of the strongest in the city of San Luis Potosí, with an important presence in the local political context. This was possible because its leadership had established links with various public officials and was affiliated to the Confederación Nacional de Organizaciones Populares (National Confederation of Popular Organizations, CNOP) and, thus, to the then-hegemonic PRI. The leaders of that strong organisation successfully called on a large group of traders to participate in the PRI's polit-

ical activities. Linked to these political networks, the market benefited from infrastructure improvements and the needs posed by traders and consumers were resolved. At that time, politicians, public officials and personalities went to Mercado República, where they shared big meals and events with traders and customers. In this way, the market was at the heart of the local political action (Gasca, 2007).

The organisation's political alliances with the authorities and local politicians made it possible to channel a range of resources to the market. Based on a logic of mutual benefit, local political groups became stronger while commercial activity in Mercado República benefited from a greater media and political presence in the city. The organisation, however, experienced internal conflicts related to its finances and, ultimately, it weakened and disappeared, with the effect of diluting the presence of those leaders in local political life. In the decades since then, other organisations have emerged, some stronger than others. Although they have launched initiatives and actions inside and outside the market, none of them has managed to position itself on the political scene in the same way. The reasons for this are diverse, but foremost among them are the change in the ruling party, the implementation of new mechanisms for political participation and the emergence of new retail actors, such as supermarket chains financed with transnational capital. And so, Mercado República and its traders have faced a new and challenging political and economic scenario in which the organisations' centrality in local politics has declined as have the market's material conditions.

This situation has not diminished the role that the organisations have in various aspects of their members' lives. The organisations continue to support traders on an ongoing basis in dealing with bureaucratic procedures and providing information on the use of the market, the acquisition of stalls and the claiming of their inheritance rights. Their role as intermediaries remains a key element in the construction of alliances and undertaking collective strategies to defend the market with external groups. Their new experiences as organisations include their affiliation to the Frente Unido de Mercados Municipales (United Front of Municipal Markets) and their links with associations like Nuestro Centro (Our Centre), an association for the businesses owners in the Historic Centre of San Luis Potosí. These groups have also strengthened ties with different local media actors in order to publicise their problems, demands and proposals and establish new connections with the public and the government.



**Figure 3.** Renovated floor, Mercado República



Photo: Claudia Teresa Gasca Moreno, 2019.

Some of the focal points of the public presence of trader organisations and their allies revolve around specific problems. One central theme has been to present the market as a site of the city's commercial tradition, which the authorities have abandoned and is in need of support to stay in good shape to compete against other retail businesses. Another theme has been their displeasure at the proliferation of informal street vending in the market's vicinity, which is considered a threat to market traders' economy. The lack of security and cleaning and the persistence of problems such as traffic congestion, sex trade, homelessness and the general unkemptness of urban infrastructure around the market are also central to their agenda. These points act as a unifying force for the traders and their allies, both in the defence of the market and in the demand for a better urban environment.

The mediation and management work done by trader organisations with government and through partnerships with civil society groups have resulted in a

number of improvements for the market. Ceilings and floors have been renewed at different times and maintenance work has been carried out, including drainage repairs, painting and general cleaning (see, for example, Mora, 2022). Thanks to the coordination between traders, authorities, and citizen organisations, the government has implemented security programmes and public works in the market's surrounding areas, which have partially transformed the socio-spatial dynamics of this commercial area in the Historic Centre of San Luis Potosí.

## Conclusion

The work of trader organisations has taken shape by interacting with different networks, participating in negotiations and developing strategies aiming at resolving conflicts and improving Mercado República. The political differences between trader organisations that have emerged in the market since the 1970s have not amounted to an insurmountable obstacle, and it still remains necessary to recognise their capacity to promote participation, solidarity, community ties and mutual support among their members and allies. Here, new citizen alliances emerge as a solution to the adverse situations faced by Mercado República, particularly those resulting from the lack of maintenance and ordinary care. These alliances should be taken into account given their ability to drive forward market improvement projects in the medium and long terms (Hernández, 2022). These collective actions work as catalysts for opportunities to promote a comprehensive renewal of the market and its commercial environment through agreements between traders, citizens and authorities.

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# **Organisation, alliances and initiative**



## **The right to work, political visibility and the city: Street vendors in São Paulo, Brazil**

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In Brazil, popular commercial activities are historical symbols of the process through which cities and urban job markets were formed. Despite their social and economic importance, these markets are defined by their informal activities and treated by the State as an urban, tax and safety problem. In this sense, the popular economy is, repeatedly, the target of control and repression strategies through processes that range from “urban cleansing” to regularisation policies.

Even though the popular economy is a source of income for thousands of workers who are poorly integrated into the structure of formal employment, it has been seen that the policies to regulate it are insufficient and they generally produce exclusionary effects. Furthermore, over the last few years, we have witnessed territorial disputes for popular economy spaces which, due to their constant increase in value, are attractive to large property investors that enjoy a good relationship with the municipal government. These factors, added to a context of a sizeable economic crisis, entail worsening working and living conditions for traders, in particular, informal ones.

However, people working in these spaces have organised and created networks that seek to provide political visibility to their existence (beyond stigmas), including their demands into the public agenda and sowing resilience even in the face of the deepening economic crisis, urban cleansing and exclusion. In this section, we will present a brief overview of how this popular economy is managed in the city of São Paulo and some of the actions promoted by informal workers and their allies over the past ten years.

## **A fight for recognition and visibility**

In the city of São Paulo, a certain level of ambiguity can be identified in the perception that the State and society have of popular economies and the workers who earn a living by selling products in the public space. Sometimes, they are seen with certain tolerance, identifying them as victims of an unequal socioeconomic structure and who, lacking more feasible options, need to survive through informal and precarious work. Other times, they are seen as lawbreakers involved in illegal practices who allegedly cause chaos by taking over public spaces irregularly to pursue private ends, affecting the general interest.

In the midst of the tension between these two perspectives, public authorities have been engaging in different actions to regulate and control their activities since the early 20th century. In general, these policies have focused on regulating the sale of certain products (e.g. food), prohibiting others (e.g. piracy) and, in particular, controlling the use of urban spaces. The issue of temporary and revocable licences is one of the main resources used to manage them.

Over the past decade, we have identified a new and increasingly popular way of managing informal street vending in the city, which involves moving large investments to “modernise” popular marketplaces. The main strategy consists in confining street vending to *shoppings populares* (popular shopping centres) managed by the private sector, thus combining urban cleansing with the possibility of profiting from activities marked by the sign of poverty and precariousness. This strategy, legitimised by the promise of formalisation, consists of a process of entrepreneurialisation of popular marketplaces (Rangel, 2021).

In this sense, it is not surprising that the process of formalisation through marketing technologies (such as opening individual micro-businesses and relocating commercial activities inside private shopping centres) is accompanied by tensions, conflicts and negotiations between street vendors, entrepreneurs and the government. As a result, this entrepreneurial management model for popular economies—with its high rents for sellers—has resulted in an increase in inequality, evictions and repression towards street vendors, as formalising some of them deepens the stigmatisation and criminalisation of those not yet formalised or unwilling to formalise. This situation is visible among street vendors in the São Paulo central region, who suffer daily seizures of their goods and everyday violence from the Military Police and city council inspectors.

**Figure 4.** Street vending in Brás, São Paulo



Photo: Felipe Rangel, 2019.

Notwithstanding these policies, of both a repressive and regulatory nature, a large contingent of workers continues to carry out their activities in tension with the law, transforming the need to obtain a licence into an existential concern on which the chance to earn a living on the streets depends. In this sense, Hirata's idea (2014) that, in São Paulo, the regulation of street vending is primarily focused on the creation of norms for public space usage rather than on norms that ensure the right to work underpins and frames these workers' struggles, both for the use of the city and the legitimation of their activities.

In light of the above, the political actions of informal vendors in São Paulo, especially over the past few years, have focused on the approval of legislative initiatives that guarantee the issuance of new permits for street vendors. Their objective has been to incorporate the work of street vendors into the municipal master plan and to influence debates regarding police violence, to which they fall victim on a daily basis (Aguiar *et al.*, 2022; Gobbi *et al.*, 2021).

In this context, the **Fórum dos Ambulantes** (Forum of Street Vendors) has consolidated. This is an exceptional organisation of vendors, which brings together most associations and sectorial unions in the city. Since 2013, the Forum has been promoting **different tools to defend informal workers**, which are linked with actions by the government, universities and social movements, especially those fighting for housing, immigrants and refugees.<sup>6</sup>

Showing their strength through **public actions** at the municipal level and participating in **public hearings**, these vendors have demanded an increase in the number of permits to work on the street and **denounced abuses of power during evictions**, as well as public servants' **bribing and extortion practices**.

**Figure 5.** Street vendors protesting against evictions



Photo: Benedito Roberto Barbosa, 2021.

<sup>6</sup> In 2021, street vendors and groups of migrants and refugees pushed the campaign **Liberdade para Falilatou** (Free Falilatou), a Black female street vendor from the central region of Brás, who was unjustly imprisoned for around six months.

However, one of the challenges found while fighting for recognition is the illegibility of these workers' category, which is related to the lack of statistical information about street vendors. Rather than inefficient management, we could consider, as does Roy (2009), that the lack of information about informal workers in popular economies in São Paulo is the result of a management model that uses informality and illegibility to maintain arbitrary government practices.

In light of the importance of providing political visibility for popular economies, the organisation of informal workers obtained resources to map out street vending in São Paulo through a parliamentary amendment at the municipal chamber. Even though it is work in progress, this research has already generated significant advances in the fight to increase visibility and public recognition for informal workers, as it sets the bases for a future census of street vendors. The expectation is that this mapping contributes to the approval and implementation of a legislative initiative that, with the vendors' input, regulates street vending in the city. This project—the debates over which resumed in 2022 after being approved by the Municipal Chamber of São Paulo—is the result of a long discussion and coordination process with street-vending organisations. This project is awaiting a second vote and approval by the municipal executive power.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the combined efforts of organisations and movements, there is still no urban policy that includes the different manifestations of the popular economy in the city of São Paulo, especially those promoted by informal workers. The absence or insufficiency of State policies results in the delegitimisation and criminalisation of vendors who, despite of their informal nature, contribute to generating incomes for their families and the city. The situation of informal workers in São Paulo and their fight for political visibility and better working conditions are proof of this.

The organisation of the sector and its articulation with other social movements, universities and parliamentary actors has been essential in placing their living conditions in the public debate and include their demands in the State agenda. One of the most recent and important achievements of this organisation is the mapping of street vending in São Paulo and the possibility of a future census, both of which are part of the strategy of legibility and recognition. The political



reasoning behind this agenda acknowledges that statistical information is not only used as an instrument to control populations but also as a tool to raise the visibility of marginalised groups and to legitimise their demands through targeted public policies.

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## Partnerships for a local agroecological market network in Buenos Aires, Argentina

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This case seeks to make a contribution to the knowledge of strategies to distribute agroecologically produced vegetables in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region, Argentina. Specifically, the marketing experience of *bolsones* (bags of seasonal vegetables) will be discussed. This is an extensive practice among many organisations of vegetable producers working under an agroecological framework in different places throughout Argentina. The marketing of these *bolsones* is carried out by an organisation of producers who base their work in Florencio Varela, Province of Buenos Aires: the Asociación de Productores Hortícolas 1610. Its members began their collective construction process over ten years ago and, in transitioning from conventional production to agroecology, they have implemented this novel marketing method. This strategy is an example of partnership-building for exchanges between producers/traders, national universities and State rural development agencies.

### Alliances for distribution

The Asociación de Productores Hortícolas 1610 started its work to transition to agroecology in 2012. This production method, an alternative to commodity agriculture, has a long and varied history, in terms of its practice and its theoretical development.<sup>7</sup> This organisation's experience offers us an example of agroecological production at work. A distinctive component of this practice is that no chemical or synthetic supplies are used. However, the richness of agroecological production strategies does not end there, as experiments are also carried out with biological preparations for pest control and flower edges

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<sup>7</sup> In this context, we interpret the emergence of agroecology as a form of resistance against the industrial agriculture model. Santiago Sarandón and Claudia Flores (2014) understand agroecology as an alternative paradigm that responds to the negative effects of the Green Revolution. Agroecology does not focus on a simple replacement of production techniques but on a different way of thinking of agriculture and the environment. This focus takes into account environmental aspects as well as social and cultural ones.

are planted to attract good insects and repel those not beneficial to production. It also entails building an alternative form of production through a diversity of crops, where it is essential to analyse the relationship between crops before each sowing period. Thus, agroecological production is a form of collective action that enables members of the Association to share their experiences about what works and what does not.

**Figure 6.** Assembly of producers, consumers and node coordinators



Photo: María Florencia Marcos, 2018.

Those participating in the Association have extensive experience working in the field. A considerable number of its members have been leasing the fields where they currently work for over twenty years. Leasing is the landholding method for most partners; fields have an average surface area of 1.5 hectares and the workforce is made up of families. It should be noted that these subordination conditions are shared by a large number of fresh food producers throughout Argentina, where, unlike other countries in Latin America, there has been no land reform.

Asociación 1610 used to carry out agricultural activities with conventional methods, using synthetic chemicals for pest and weed control and selling at food-distribution markets. The possibility of engaging in agroecology arose from the

web of relationships that the Association has built with State institutions for rural development and it could deepen through new partnerships with national universities, specifically the National University of Quilmes (UNQUI), the National University of La Plata (UNLP) and the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) (Berger *et al.*, 2019).

Engaging in agroecology as a production strategy responded to a series of criteria. On the one hand, avoiding the use of synthetic chemicals, which entails savings in terms of the purchase of supplies, the cost of which is tied to the exchange rate between the Argentinian peso and the US dollar. On the other hand, farmers are not exposed to these chemicals, which are potentially harmful to health. In this manner, agroecology made it possible to implement new visions and new practices, one related to product marketing and the search and development of other markets through partnerships. The form of marketing made possible by the agroecological practices of Asociación 1610 is the result of the need to find a specific market for these products, which stand out from their form of production and which, until now, were sold at the same locations as conventional agriculture products.

From the relationship with university research and outreach groups, a novel marketing model emerged, the bolsones. In this, academic institutions play a key role since, and for many years, they have had relationships of trust with Association members. These links developed thanks to academic courses, field visits for soil analysis and the implementation of added-value strategies, among other things.

The bolsones contain seasonal vegetables of up to ten different varieties and they weigh approximately 8 kilogrammes. In the autumn and winter months, leafy vegetables, such as chard, turnip greens and spinach, are abundant as well as leeks, olives, sweet potatoes and pumpkins. In the summer, diversity is provided by courgettes, tomatoes, peppers and aubergines. The contents are determined by the harvest and members of the organisation participate individually, delivering an amount of vegetables agreed in advance during a meeting. On the next day, the assembly and distribution of bolsones is arranged at the Association's facilities.

The price of the bolsones, which is currently 1,050 Argentinian pesos (8 US dollars), is the result of an agreement between producers and consumers, who

meet to assess the actual cost of the following items: the vegetables, freight, bags, hubs, technical assistance, general management and storage. The cost of the vegetables is equivalent to 60% of the total cost of the bolsones. At the meeting to establish the price, distribution networks such as Mercado Territorial (UNQUI), Bolsón Soberano (UBA) and Mercado de Economía Popular Me.Co.Po., also participate. They concentrate the demand for the Association's products, as those who wish to consume them can place their orders through their websites and social networks.<sup>8</sup>

Hubs can be established by anyone interested in managing the demand of at least ten bolsones. This person acts as an intermediary between consumers and the institutions involved in distribution. A hub can operate from a home, a cultural centre or a student centre, for example. The only condition is to manage the demand of the minimum number of bolsones. When management and distribution takes place directly through the organisation, the bolsones' price goes down, as some of the factors mentioned above do not apply.

## **Conclusion**

The selling of bolsones represents an alternative for the distribution of food through an alternative network. In the case of Asociación de Productores Hortícolas 1610, we can see how an agroecological strategy led to the creation of a new way of distribution. One of the key aspects in this case is that it shows how this distribution method created new relationships with consumers based on trust and solidarity, which, in turn, have supported an alternative form of production. In terms of the assembly and sale of bolsones, partnerships have been developed to shorten traditional chains in agricultural production and distribution. This has entailed hard work for the members of the Association and the people managing these short distribution chains in different parts of Buenos Aires, including the universities mentioned above. The sale of the bolsones involves alternative methods for production and distribution, creates new spaces for interaction and opens up the possibility to access food at fair

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<sup>8</sup> For further reference: Mercado Territorial, <https://es-la.facebook.com/MercadoTerritorial/> and <https://www.instagram.com/mercado.territorial/?hl=es>; Me.Co.Po, <https://mecopo.org/product-tag/coop-dario-santillan> and <https://www.instagram.com/me.co.po/>; Bolsón Soberano, <https://www.instagram.com/bolsonsoberano/?hl=es> and <https://es-la.facebook.com/bolson.soberano/>.

prices. However, agroecological production faces different challenges, including constraints for the distribution of their products to a wider consumer base, since, until now, it lacks proper State recognition like the one achieved by other forms of agricultural production, such as organic agriculture, which is recognised and regulated by the State.

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## **Legislative activism and the inclusion of the public markets in the Constitution of Mexico City**

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Legislation is a key area in the fight to preserve and improve traditional and popular marketplaces. To different extent, it sets the foundations that define the value and the economic and social functions of marketplaces. It also establishes the principle that shape the specific plans, strategies and actions underlying the reproduction of trader communities and their different commercial infrastructures. Likewise, the definitions established in these legislations contribute to maintaining the benefits that these commercial spaces provide to local population. This is particularly true and important in Mexico City, which currently has over 72,000 traders and 336 public markets, which have been built since the 1950s throughout the city.

The inclusion of Mexico City's public markets in the local Constitution published in 2017 is a clear example of this. The explicit mention of the public markets in its articles recognises the contribution that markets and traders make to the city in terms of heritage, social welfare and distributive economy. This is a breakthrough that consolidates the right to work and the right to decent infrastructure for both traders and the communities they serve. This achievement is the product of the traders' organisation and initiative, after they sought to influence the drawing up of the new constitutional text for Mexico City in 2016. In this way, they highlight the importance of legislative activism in the preservation of public supply systems and the improvement of traders' working conditions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Inscribe the markets in the Constitution**

Public markets in Mexico City are shaped by a wide range of regulations that govern their everyday activities. The Markets Bylaw (Gobierno de la República, 1951) and the Norms for the regulation and operation of public markets in Mexico City (Gobierno de la Ciudad de México, 2022) are two of their cornerstones. To

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<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to the board of directors of Movimiento Nacional del Contribuyente Social, A.C., in particular, its chairman, Alberto Vargas Lucio, for sharing documentation and telling me about their experience participating in this legislative process.

these, we can add countless more concerning how traders engage with taxation or health and safety but, especially, the Mexican Constitution, which enshrines the markets' public nature and the responsibility of municipal authorities in providing them in articles 115 and 123 (Cámara de Diputados, 2021).

Throughout their history, public market traders have participated in legislative and regulatory processes, and over the past two decades, they have engaged in intense political and legal activism (Téllez, 2020). This activism includes defending the 1951 Markets Bylaw and Norm 29, which in 2011 sought to regulate the construction of self-service shops in the markets' vicinity. It also includes promoting the 2016 Decree to safeguard the intangible heritage of public markets and creating four articles for the Constitution of the City of Mexico promulgated in 2017. In the context of this political and legal activism, the latest initiative to reform the local Constitution represents one of the most recent successes in defending the public markets and their trader communities.

**Figure 7.** Article 10, Constitution of the City of Mexico



Author: León Felipe Téllez Contreras, 2022.

In January 2016, a constitutional reform was published, opening the way to rename the Federal District as Mexico City and to provide it with more autonomy vis-à-vis federal powers. This led to the establishment of a Constituent Assembly in September that year, which would be responsible for drawing up the city's Constitution. In this context, public market traders affiliated to Movimiento



Nacional del Contribuyente Social 17 de Marzo A.C. (MONACOSO) drew up and presented, to the Assembly, a document explaining the importance and the need to include public markets in the new Constitution (MONACOSO, 2016). This was one of the 978 citizen proposals presented to the members of the Constituent Assembly (Senado de la República, 2018) and the only one that focused on public markets.

On 29 October 2016, MONACOSO's board of directors raised three key points with the Constituent Assembly. They demanded the inclusion of Mexico City's markets in the new Constitution; the creation of a Markets Law that includes penalties for public servants and a plan for the markets' preservation and development; and the harmonisation of Public Markets Bylaws to be drawn up by local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Markets Law. These proposals are the result of MONACOSO's extensive experience fighting for the markets and, in this case, they provided in a concise way the rationale to include the markets in the Constitution. Their primary goal was to take advantage of this unique opportunity in the city's history to bring the public markets into the debates to take place between November 2016 and February 2017.

From MONACOSO's perspective, the members of the Constituent Assembly that took the case of public markets during the debates were sensitive to the proposal, as they gave it attention and sought to integrate it in the constitutional text. For the proponents, this meant constantly monitoring the deliberations and, in particular, the drawing up of the articles where markets were to be mentioned, as this took place behind closed door and with no direct participation from traders. To achieve this, they turned to their allies within the Constituent Assembly, where citizens and politicians from different parties ensured that the proposal was approved by consensus, thereby benefiting the group of public market traders in the new legislation.

As a result, public markets and traders are featured in four articles of the new Constitution, which was published in February 2017 (Gobierno de la Ciudad de México, 2017). Article 10 (B-12) protects the traders' right to work in public markets as self-employed workers. It also establishes the authorities' obligation to guarantee appropriate sanitary conditions as well as legal certainty for traders, thus acknowledging their acquired rights. Article 17 (B-11) puts public markets at the centre of the city's food supply system and states that the government must promote their activities as part of its social economy framework.

For its part, article 18 (A-4) recognises the public markets' contribution to cultural and historical heritage and emphasises that protection must be harmonised with the city's economic and social development. Finally, article 53 (B-b-VI) states that local and city governments must coordinate to build, rehabilitate, maintain and, where appropriate, manage public markets with the objective of keeping them in good condition.

**Figure 8.** Article 17, Constitution of the City of Mexico



Author: León Felipe Téllez Contreras, 2022.

## **Conclusion**

The inclusion of public markets in the new Constitution of the City of Mexico represents a traders' victory in the legislative sphere. This achievement consolidates the legal tools that traders and their allies have available to preserve and improve public markets. The drawing up and presentation of the proposal before the Constituent Assembly is an example of organisation and negotiation to build collective rights. This not only provides a legal foundation to give rights to traders in public markets but also to their customers. In this case, it is a matter of pushing forward the right to work and the right to decent infrastructure within the framework of a public supply system valued for its economic, social and cultural contributions to Mexico City and to the country. Even though this legislative advance is still marked by a series of pending issues on the regulatory field (Jiménez, 2019), it also represents an opportunity to drive strategies and actions founded on constitutional principles.

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# **Learning from the micro scale**



## **Stall renovation: The mundane management of precious time and space in Cardiff Market, UK**

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Apart from its grand entrances, Cardiff Market is relatively hidden within Cardiff city centre, enfolded within buildings and two major shopping streets. Multiple generations of traders have done business under the pitched glass roof erected in the 1890s, although the site is associated with market trading as far back as the 1700s. The market has a balcony level with stalls accessible by the stairs which rise from either side of the two main entrances. Along the ground floor, stalls constructed from white-painted wood line the bottom of the cavernous space produced by this encircling balcony. This airy chamber reverberates with noise, and different sounds swell and recede as you move around the aisles; music is often playing loudly from the record store on the balcony above and hammering and pounding pulses from the butchers below. The scents of cooked onions and spices waft across the hall while others linger in particular places, like the rich, salty smell around the fishmonger. You can always tell what the weather is outside by the light filtering through the glass above. This taste of the complexity and richness of the sensory landscape of the market does little to communicate the visual impact of the bulging, colourful displays or the possible meaning and significance of these presences.

Each stall in the market contributes towards the typical complexity described above. Some of the bustle and buzz comes from the aisles, from customers and traders making their way through and interacting with the market, but much of the sensory richness comes from the stalls themselves. Marketplaces of this type in the UK are celebrated for their unique vibrancy, but also for their quotidian charm. The festive spectacle of a marketplace provides a unique backdrop for conviviality and comfortable relations (Watson, 2009), but they also contain economic and social relations and the potential for difficulty and disquiet. My ethnographic research took place in Cardiff Market from November 2017 to May 2018 (Pickering, 2020), and I spent time there as something between a regular customer, an observer, and an acquaintance of the market traders. I will draw on an example of a market stall undergoing a lengthy renovation, to show how

places like Cardiff Market function on a more mundane, practical level, and how tensions can develop around the same compactness and density that makes the unique buzz and bustle possible. Market management can respond to the spatial and temporal limitations of marketplaces to ease possible tensions and lines of conflict that can develop.

**Figure 9.** Corridor, Cardiff Market



Photo: Jack Pickering, 2018.

## **A slow renovation**

As part of my research, I interviewed John, a butcher and owner of the stall AF Williams in February 2018. He had recently taken over a stall next to his own, which used to be a competing butcher's stall, and planned to renovate it so that he could use the additional freezer storage space, and for selling budget and bulk items. He needed to replace the wall panelling, refurbish some old equipment, and install some pre-used fridges. He had also gotten permission to do this from an informal group of traders that regulate competition amongst themselves in the market.



For a while after the interview, the stall was still not finished, but it was doing something else. Miscellaneous odds and ends that did not fit into particular categories were placed in the stall. One of the butchers put his bicycle in there a few times throughout March. Sheets of white plastic were leaning in stacks against the back wall, and black plastic shelving units stood at the rear of the shop with a few potted plants placed on them. Eventually, a sign was placed on a pillar near the stall telling people not to put things in the half-finished stall. Eventually, the gradual removal and replacement of furniture, wall panels, lighting and equipment produced a functioning butcher's stall, but before this, the empty space invited other uses. Before the specialised equipment of a butcher's stall could make it into what it was becoming, there are many possible interpretations of what the empty space was, and the pressure on storage space within market stalls made it an appealing resource.

Soon after this, the renovation progressed more quickly. Through March, it was possible to see the evidence. Parts of the stall looked significantly cleaner and brighter thanks to new panelling on some sections of wall and newly installed fluorescent tube lighting. One afternoon, the staff of AF Williams along with one of the market attendants emerged from the Trinity Street entrance close to their stall, wheeling a large upright display fridge towards the empty butchers' stall on a cart. They spent a moment discussing how to move it into the stall between them. A trader from a stall across the aisle shouted over sarcastically asking if it was new. It was visibly rusted in places, and the metal plating at the rear moved around, making a resonant banging as they maneuvered place. By filling in some of this empty space, the installation of the fridge seemed to end this uncertain performance, and no more miscellaneous items were stored there.

At the end of March, I asked one of the butchers about the still empty stall after chatting to one of them for a while. Not much had happened with it recently, but he told me that they had been in the market working on it over a few 'open Sundays'. I asked what 'open Sundays' were and he explained that they were days when the market opened for traders to come in and do maintenance and repair work without customers. Since the possible noise, dust and dirt from renovation work would likely discourage customers or prevent the rest of the stall from operating, periods of market access with no customers present are needed for market traders. Such periods are also required in order for the renovation to progress quickly, and their infrequency means the market stall owner has

to coordinate his available time, the time of his staff, the opening times, with the delivery and purchasing of materials, alongside his usual operations and plans. Many traders when asked, said they would like the market to open to them along, in the weekday evenings.

The problem with this proposition is that it could be expensive for the market management, which is a part of the local government, due to the potential safety and security issues. The market has two large entrances that opened onto busy pedestrian streets outside the market, and these streets were frequently full of sports fans and people partying, which makes it difficult to cheaply guarantee public safety. It is technically a public space of sorts, and the features that underpin this make keeping people out while preserving trader access particularly difficult. The 'open Sundays' allow traders to get this work done and represent a kind of compromise between the traders and the management, but traders still wanted evening access to their stalls after closing time.

## **Conclusion**

Marketplaces are generally busy and crowded, packed with both stalls and customers. This is in fact one of the things that people like about them, why markets are described as having a special 'buzz'. The spatial configuration of markets, and especially the contrast between markets and their surrounding areas also means that that space and time are at a premium for traders. Storage space is very difficult to come by, and while traders often design stalls to maximise storage space, this has limits. As this case has demonstrated, a lack of space, and a lack of time, can interact in particularly troubling, yet interesting ways. The lack of time without customers to work on stalls made the renovation longer than it would otherwise had been. This created a spatial pressure on the empty stall, for it to be used, filled, as an otherwise empty space. Market life is communal and traders follow informal rules to help each other out and also try their best to avoid conflicts over most other issues, but having ample time to complete renovations, repairs and accessibly space to store stock and miscellaneous items would most likely significantly improve the functioning and operations of many stalls, and therefore the markets they make. The 'open Sundays' in Cardiff Market are only a partial solution to this problem that arises from the particular spatial arrangement of indoor marketplaces. Ensuring that these

additional times and spaces are provided consistently for traders, especially when renovation or changes in stall ownership are happening, is likely to result in less friction in marketplaces, and much less frustration among traders.

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## **Of everyday objects and their social and economic potential: Mercado de Barceló, Madrid**

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The actions taken in respect of Madrid's municipal markets network have constituted a process of uneven modernisation. To a greater or lesser extent, through the extraction and commodification of its particularities, this process has resulted in widespread dispossession. Thus, this 46-market network still has some markets that remain in a state of decline, which struggle to serve their local communities, while others have been converted to serve leisure and touristic purposes (Mateos, 2017; Salinas, 2016).

Faced with a scenario replete with stories of dismantling and privatisation, it is difficult to find positive and even hopeful experiences in and for the Madrid markets and those in other parts of the world. The drafting of this text came up against the challenge of identifying actions that confront these trends and place the markets' social function at the centre of the question of their "modernisation". To do this, I have decided to look at a different scale of action that I noted during the fieldwork that I carried out in Mercado de Barceló. When I returned to my field diary, I found something whose importance I could only sketch out at the time: the case of a table that, placed in a corner of Mercado de Barceló, now serves as an example of the potential attached to the construction of daily neighbourhood meeting points in the markets. This case reflects the importance of providing markets with infrastructure that facilitates the daily interactions of their users and, in particular, of those who live nearby.<sup>10</sup>

### **One table and five chairs in the market**

The processes mentioned above have adversely affected traders and customers alike, who have seen their local, everyday practices and knowledge displaced

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<sup>10</sup> This text is based on fieldwork carried out over four years for my doctoral thesis defended in 2021 at the Autonomous University of Madrid, entitled *En nombre de la modernización: Una historia de desposesión en los mercados municipales de Madrid* (In the name of modernisation: A history of dispossession in the municipal markets of Madrid), directed by Marie José Devillard, Professor of Social Anthropology.

and, in some cases, erased from public life. Neighbours' relationships, that have been in decline due to the current urban dynamics in Madrid's central areas, have been damaged by the loss of communities' attachment to their markets.

Mercado de Barceló, located between the neighbourhoods of Chueca and Malasaña, was opened in 1956 and completely rebuilt and reopened in 2014. This was one of the few markets that retained much of its previous trade after its renovation. Perhaps for this reason, its ties to the neighbourhood have not been completely broken and, consequently, some of its habitual daily encounters—the result of commercial and social knowledge and customs—have kept, for longer, a character similar to that of its beginnings.

Ever since the opening of the gift and utensils stall El Rinconcito Feliz (Happy Corner), its owners Miguel and Marilé, a married couple with children and a 33-year history in Mercado de Barceló, have been well known and much loved. When they opened their shop, one of their first actions was to place a stool in front of it, thus, following a very common practice in traditional markets of providing a seat for its mainly-women customers, who might need to wait to be served or feel tired. That stool became two, and then three and four, so that, little by little, a stable place was built and made available for people to come for a chat. To these seats, Miguel and Marilé added a table and, standing at the centre of the seats, made it possible for the market café waiter to bring customers their morning coffee. When the market was torn down and the new market was built, Miguel recalls, this table "was the first thing we put back". And since then, it has always been ready, with its linen tablecloth, a new bench running along the wall and its chairs on the sides.

And so, it was that a true meeting place took shape. Over time, it became a firm destination in itself for the market's regular visitors. It was not intended to be contingent on making a purchase, nor was it a mere complement to the market stalls. The table and its five chairs enabled encounters of a different nature in the market—spontaneous, frequent—just like a local resident once told me: "I often go; I don't have to buy anything, but I go in and say hello to Manuela, or to someone else..." This led to the creation of a group locally called Las Chicas (The Girls), formed by a group of doughty women who came every morning. Having a coffee or sharing sweet treats, Las Chicas chatted about themselves and everyone else, with love and much laughter. One of them once jocularly

said, "We come [and] at least we take a walk and see our friends. Does that seem OK to you?" reminding us that these everyday objects were nothing less than the epicentre of a whole mutual support network.

**Figure 10.** Meeting points in Mercado de Barceló



Photo: Elvira Mateos Carmona, 2017.

Las Chicas are not the only ones to have described the market as a "second home" or as an important institution in their lives. And yet, this basic meeting infrastructure helped to create a community of care that linked the neighbourhood with the market and the market with the neighbourhood. These involved bonds that were made over that little table, bonds that were renewed every day when people asked, "What's up with her? She hasn't been for two days", or "I'm going away, can anyone water my plants?", or when sharing María's knitting skills or passing the job details of one of their children. Thanks to the existence of a place that every morning invites, celebrates and revalidates sociability, Las Chicas became a social institution in the market, a group around which grew other encounters, other exchanges and other connections.

That table was a key asset for the market's health. Its infallible presence set its social life in motion and constituted a safe place that supported its commercial operation. Local businesses are part of a culture based on local exchanges

and the construction of a loyal customer base. Systematicity, frequency and regularity are all variables that the market needs to operate, variables that can be supported with interventions that are not based on commercial dealings only, such as the table and the chairs. That table provided an everyday space that fed the market. Miguel and Marilé have retired and their shop has closed. They are leaving, like so many others, against a background of dismantlement and the relentless encroachment of gourmetised formats into the markets of Madrid. Las Chicas, thus, lost their space, but the reality is that it is the market which has been left without them and their Happy Corner.

## **Conclusion**

The table and its chairs were part of a diversity of practices that arise in markets and that ultimately acquire a social meaning of their own. The culture of the market is linked to and is strengthened by these meeting spaces forged in the interstices of popular economies and the close proximity between the markets and the communities they serve. At the micro and local scales, these type of everyday practices facilitated by a meeting infrastructure ultimately strengthens local businesses. The table's value consisted in boosting both the market's commercial function and the social pulse of the neighbourhood, by encouraging people to visit it and interact with each other, reducing social distances and creating opportunities for care and mutual support.

Despite its fragility in a context of dismantlement and privatisation, these bottom-up interventions and local actions highlight the role of markets in the strengthening of community ties. Such practices as the setting up of a table and chairs ultimately become an antidote to the erosion of community ties. It is, therefore, crucial to recognise and incentivise such sociability-promoting initiatives because of their capacity to boost the formation and preservation of informal neighbourhood support networks and the health and functioning of markets. I hope that this reflection serves to recover and pay homage to the singular experience of the "Rinconcito" and to reveal the importance of these seemingly small but far-reaching actions. Their importance can only be assessed against the background of Madrid's renovated markets, where these community spaces seem to be missing or lost to purely commercial interests.



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## **Recognition and new fronts**



## Women, markets and the economic life of the urban poor in Cuenca, Ecuador

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**Sale.** It is nine in the morning in the area around Mercado 10 de Agosto, the municipal market in the Historic Centre of Cuenca, and Señora Irma is offering fresh grains to the women who approach her—maize, beans and peas, the basic ingredients in the Andean region diet. The women check the grains for freshness and size and then haggle over the sale. Señora Irma has, like her mother and three sisters, been a trader in the 10 de Agosto Market for over 30 years.

**Purchase.** It is Wednesday, fair day in the very busy and crowded Mercado El Arenal, just outside the city's Historic Centre. Señora Elvira is a mother and, in her bag, she is carrying all kinds of fruit and vegetables just bought in the market. These are the basic ingredients of her family's diet. She finds them "cheaper and fresher", and this why she prefers to do her shopping in El Arenal, because "the traders are from the countryside and they sell what they harvest themselves", which, she believes, guarantees the freshness of the food.

The daily economic activity of women like Irma and Elvira, selling and buying food in municipal markets is, on the surface, a trivial activity in the urban life of Cuenca. In the collective imagination, the *materfamilias* and the *chola cuencana*, or traditionally-dressed rural woman—the folkloric representation of the market trader—are figures traditionally linked to the municipal markets. Despite their central role, these women's commercial activities have faced stigma and prejudices that reproduce inequalities and devalue the practices of the distribution, exchange, valuation and consumption of food. In this text, we aim to highlight how the economic life of lower-income women, which goes on every day in the municipal markets, confronts the moral structure of Cuencan society.

## **The work that women do in the markets and the city**

Nestled in the southern Andean zone of Ecuador, Cuenca is a medium-sized city with a population of around 600,000. It is an important hub for industrial and tourist development, but is also characterised by its strong attachment to tradition and its close relationship with the rural world. Historically, the municipal markets have been linked to the city's Historic Centre, placing them in a constant tension with urban dynamics, particularly over the last 40 years. With the 1990 declaration of the city as a World Heritage Site, its markets have gone through a process of renovation and displacement that has sought to move commercial activity to the periphery of the city. For the markets that remain in the Centre, this has meant an iron grip on their activities.

**Figure 11.** Traders and consumers, 10 de Agosto Market



Photo: The authors, 2022.

The markets of the city of Cuenca form a system with about 2,500 formally-established tenants, 80% of whom are women. The markets are formed of many family units that can provide employment for 1-5 people per stall. It is estimated that around 12,000 street vendors operate in the markets and their

surroundings (Directorate of Markets and Autonomous Trade, Decentralized Autonomous Government of Cuenca). Built in the period from the 1930s to the 1950s, the markets of *9 de Octubre*, *10 de Agosto* and *3 de Noviembre* (9 of October, 10 of August and 3 of November) have been a constitutive part of the urban and economic life of the city's Historic Centre. However, the government's policy, from the 1980s onward, of *ferias libres* (free fairs) and wholesale food trading displaced the markets system to the outskirts of the Historic Centre, with the opening of the 27 de Febrero, 12 de Abril y El Arenal markets. Of these, El Arenal has become the city's wholesale market and the most important in the southern region of the country.

The relationship between the municipal markets and women is long-standing in the Andean region. The economic activity of women traders, of market women, plays a leading role in sustaining the agri-food market and the family economy in cities such as Cuenca. Likewise, women consumers have a central role in activities associated with the acquisition, preparation and consumption of food, which simultaneously reproduces the sexual division of work and highlights the place of women in care economies (León and Loja, 2021).

Despite the above, women, markets and the urban poor's monetary practices are marked by stigma and prejudices that, as Ariel Wilkis (2017) points out, occur due to the intertwining of and tensions between the economic lives of the less-well-off and the moral dynamics of society. The markets are often viewed as spaces of violence and disorder, characteristics that are ultimately associated with those who work in them, that render invisible and subordinate not only the trading activity of women, but also their roles as mothers, as heads of households and even as leaders of trader associations. In the case of Cuenca, it is the women who, through their day-by-day trading activity, are asserting the importance of the markets for the operation of the city.

In the markets of Cuenca, the *chola cuencana* stands out as a traditional representation of women merchants in the Andean region (Weismantel, 2001). These women traders condense the image of the mestizo woman who migrates from the countryside to the city to trade. Although the clothing varies, they are generally conceived of with their traditional dress, of wide, colourful skirts and white straw hats. Their role in the Cuencan market system places *chola cuencana* traders at the centre of urban life and highlights their importance in

the support of many less-well-off households. This has been possible because these women traders—grandmothers, mothers and aunts—have been able to inherit their stalls generation after generation (Mancero, 2016).

**Figure 12.** Mural of a chola cuencana, 10 de Agosto Market



Photo: The authors, 2022.

As spaces for low-income families to do their shopping, municipal markets and free fairs capture 27% of urban household spending nationwide (2012 Urban and Rural Household Income and Expenditure Survey). It is the women of Cuenca who are mostly responsible for managing the food purchasing budget and food preparation (León and Loja, 2021). As mentioned elsewhere (Scarafoni, 2016; Zelizer, 2004), this is a response to the social and economic dynamics that link food-related work with women and limit it to the private sphere. For the women of Cuenca's lower-income families, the markets are one of their main supply centres, for a variety of reasons including the range, price, quality and freshness of its products. But also due to the possibility of haggling, choosing



products and obtaining *yapas*, that is, an extra amount given free of charge by the market trader to her customers. As one shopper told us:

You have a variety of vegetables and greens. People bring them from the fields the same day that you are going to eat them. [...] In other words, it's not like in a supermarket. Instead, the people who come from the countryside sell their products that same day, they bring their crop and sell it the same day. (Interview, 03/04/2021).

## Conclusion

The municipal markets of the city of Cuenca are spaces of a vibrant economic life in which women play a leading role in food trade, purchase and preparation. In Cuenca, the processes of planning, procuring and preparing food place women traders and consumers at the centre of the municipal markets, since it is through these daily practices that they support these shopping spaces for the less-well-off. For its part, the public character of the municipal markets helps to highlight the centrality of women in the reproduction of life in the city. In light of this economic and urban prominence, this case raises the need to recognise the daily work of women traders and consumers and to think about gender-focused governance strategies and public policies for municipal markets.

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## **Transformation, simulation and imitation of markets in Madrid, Spain, and Sofia, Bulgaria**

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In recent decades, traditional food markets have faced a series of challenges that threaten their survival as public services, from the privatisation of their management through to the monopolisation of basic food shopping by supermarket and hypermarket chains. These companies have been displacing markets from the supply of day-to-day foodstuffs, creating marketing strategies that end up differentiating them. However, more recently, a different type of establishments has been emerging; one that seeks not only to displace but to supplant markets. These are gastro-businesses or pop-up markets that use or recreate the market infrastructure to promote their own model of commercial space.

These businesses take the place of traditional markets or occupy new places, but do so by unilaterally declaring themselves to be "markets". In this way, they appropriate the vocabulary and imagery that have traditionally been associated with markets, which they combine with ideas of innovation and modernisation that ultimately serve to justify the transformation and displacement of traditional markets. This text presents two cases that illustrate these processes of transformation and supplantation. The first case, that of Mercado de San Miguel in Madrid, is the example *par excellence* of the conversion of a traditional market into a "gastronomic temple". The second case is that of the pop-up market held some weekends in the grounds of Sofia's Central Market, popularly known as the Women's Market.

### **Mercado San Miguel: From municipal market to gourmet temple**

Mercado de San Miguel, located in the historic centre of Madrid, has set a precedent in respect of the transformation of a traditional market into a gourmet temple. This has been made possible through a combination of legal tools, the appropriation of traditional imaginaries and practices, and the use of narratives of modernisation and progress (Hernández and Eneva, 2016). A strategy has been in place since 2005 to convert the market into a gastronomic centre. This

strategy operates by one company gradually buying up the traditional stalls, which then closes them as a mechanism to pressurise traders who are reluctant to sell or are against the transformation of the market. This accelerates the decline of the traditional market. Local government is involved in this process, facilitating changes to the regulations for the sale of public goods and the urban planning procedures needed for the success of the project.

This gastro-hall opened its doors in 2009 in the building occupied by the old Mercado San Miguel. Although inspired by Barcelona's Boquería Market, which was already undergoing gentrification, Madrid's new gastronomic temple ultimately surpassed it and established itself as a model for gourmetised markets both within Spain and internationally. Its economic success as a leisure destination predominantly devoted to tourism had several far-reaching effects. At the local level, it accelerated the gentrification and touristification of the area, thus, reinforcing the image of Madrid and, particularly, its centre, as a destination for tourists with high purchasing power. It also fed into real estate speculation, as the market was sold for 70 million euros in 2017, reaching the exorbitant price of 60,000 euros per square metre. Lastly, at the international level, it established the model of privatised gastronomic and gourmet markets as a formula for the "conversion" of municipal markets, thus, appropriating the collective representations of the traditional market built by many generations of traders.<sup>11</sup>

In particular, these privatised spaces dedicated to gastronomy and leisure mimic the traditional image of markets. One of the ways in which they do this is by recreating the traditional markets' spatial distribution, especially their diversity of stalls around a central square. However, these stalls are not devoted to the supply of basic staples, but to gourmet restaurants and products. This contributes to the creation of a new imaginary of markets as leisure spaces whose products often do not meet the needs of local communities. The spread of this model turns into a tourist spectacle that expels the original market traders and deprives local residents of access to small shops and affordable products. In this way, Mercado San Miguel, now converted into a gourmet temple, has contributed to changing the imaginary of what a market is, devaluing the model of the popular marketplace as a sustainable form of trade and socialisation in contemporary cities.

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<sup>11</sup> An example of the extent of this conversion can be seen at: <https://www.plateamadrid.com/>

**Figure 13.** The pop-up market's borders



Photo: Deliana Simeonova, 2022.

## **Georgi Kirkov: Pop-up markets and stigmatization**

Georgi Kirkov Market, popularly known as the Women's Market, has a long tradition as a central market in Sofia. The area has been associated with the market since the late 19th century, taking various forms over the years. In the 1990s, during the economic crisis that characterised Bulgaria's transition to capitalism, with its shortages and high inflation, the market grew due to high demand for low-cost products and the opportunities that trading gave for informal employment. In 2014, however, the joint actions of the local government and the area's property owners resulted in the implementation of a renovation plan that limited the space occupied by the market and the number of its stalls. This meant that part of its surface was converted into kiosks dedicated to sell products "representative" of Bulgaria's tradition, folklore and cultural and artisanal heritage.

This reform drove up rents for those traders in the renovated parts of the market, drove other traders out and sought to displace from the area the homeless people and those with irregular migration status or from ethnic minorities. This first stage in the market's gentrification process bolstered its dual image in which the cheap, the traditional and the quotidian combined with the stigma and contempt imposed on a place described in political and media discourses as dirty, undeveloped and dangerous (Venkov, 2022). In line with trends in other urban centres in decline, this dual image had a power of attraction for urban "pioneers" and "adventurers" in whose eyes, the market possesses a certain Balkan exoticism and a mix between the known and the unknown.

This explains the ambitions of some business and cultural entrepreneurs to rediscover, recover and transform that part of the "Old Sofia" that lies within and around the market. In recent years, some cultural associations and companies have organised a range of gastronomy and art festivals and some pop-up markets within the grounds of the market. Contradictorily, the area's residents put up no opposition to these short-life stalls that stretched beyond the market's limits, just as those stalls that they sought to get rid of would have done in the past.

In the spring of 2022, for example, working in collaboration with the public-private company that manages the market space, these entrepreneurs held the so-called Weekend Pazar (Weekend Market) and the Baco food magazine's "StrEAT Fest". On both occasions, the venue was fenced off, an entry price was set and the organisers' rules stated that only card payments were accepted.



This physically and symbolically excluded the habitual shoppers and foot traffic who go to the market in search of affordable food. At the same time, the event's wide dissemination on the social networks and in the media multiplied an image that was beautified and contained activities atypical for this traditional market. All this dressed up as an opportunity to transform the area.

## Conclusion

Despite their geographical, social and economic particularities, the changes to the San Miguel and Georgi Kirkov markets show similar patterns. One of these is that privatised markets occupy a publicly-owned space and benefit from the name "market," which they transform to their favour and profit. In this way, the private use of the architectural and non-tangible heritage accumulated in the markets is also realised by means of voiding them of their original content (Franquesa, 2007). This means that the transformation, simulation and imitation of markets operates as a dual process: markets have their "identities stolen" through the appropriation of the traditional that is in turn given a coating of modernisation and progress. This is facilitated through public-private agreements in which the public administration plays a central role, since it argues the obsolescence of the market model as an excuse for its gradual destruction. Likewise, we need to recall that displacement is not merely an expression of financial power, but also of the cultural power that the new imitations and staging of markets have. This raises the need to warn about the effects of economic and cultural capital that delegitimise and stigmatise traditional forms of trade, while inviting us to ask ourselves questions about the impact that gourmetisation and touristification have on the infrastructure and imaginary of the market.

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# Popular marketplaces

