Relational positionality: Conceptualizing research, power, and the everyday politics of neoliberalization in Mexico City

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Abstract

In this paper, I engage in the critically reflexive exercise of thinking about positionality relationally and as a multi-faceted process that incorporates the fieldwork stage, but extends to other dimensions of the research endeavor. Drawing from my experience as a PhD student studying neoliberal policy efforts to change the image of Mexico City, I show how my positionality affected the development of my theoretical framework, which in turn framed the design and conduct of field research. The perspective I present is based on my position as a white, relatively affluent, woman with a Marxist-nourished background, engaging with post-structural perspectives and conducting ethnographic fieldwork with street vendors in Mexico City. Using the notion of relational positionality, I discuss how the multiple trajectories and relations that influence researchers' subject formation affect different aspects of research, from the ontological to the methodological.

Introduction

When my family and I left Uruguay, in 1976, the country was experiencing the first stages of what became a decade-long dictatorship. My parents' political inclination – embedded within a Marxist ideology – placed them in a vulnerable position and made their everyday life increasingly difficult. Given their political

views, they, together with thousands of other activists, were threatened and constrained by the military regime. My family was able to move to Mexico because it welcomed political migrants from the rest of Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s. I was very young when we left Uruguay, so it is largely through my parents' memories that I have learned about the conditions of our departure. These stories have shaped my life: my thoughts or perceptions, how I carry myself in different contexts, how I associate with others, and how others associate with me. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, they laid the foundations for my intellectual development and became the initial interpretative window through which I came to understand my surroundings.

This aspect of my background shaped the theoretical framework and fieldwork interactions of my PhD research, which examined struggles resulting from the implementation of a revitalization policy in the Historic Center of Mexico City called the *Programa de Rescate* (The Rescue Program). The *Programa*, which was launched in August 2001 by a coalition of federal and city authorities and promoted by some of Mexico's wealthiest capitalists, sought to beautify Mexico City's Historic Center by altering the area's physical and social shape through the removal of particular practices and interactions in its numerous public spaces. Although the policy was discursively constructed as an avenue for improving the quality of life of the local population, it systematically excluded some forms of social interaction that were central to the well-being of a large sector of the population, particularly street vendors and artisans who rely on public space for their daily survival.

As my research project developed, I noticed that different aspects of my background were affecting my fieldwork, and I began to reflect more seriously about the epistemological implications of my own positionality, and the partiality that implies (Hartsock, 1987; Rose, 1997). In this paper, I adopt an autoethnographic voice (Butz, 2001; Butz and Besio, 2009) to explore how both my field experience and its theoretical/epistemological framing were shaped by my positionality and the process of reflecting on it. Using what I call *relational positionality*, which emphasizes the relational nature of our positioning as researchers, I show how multiple dimensions of my positionality overlapped in sometimes conflicting ways and how that made a difference to my research project.

The paper has two main sections. First, I discuss positionality from a relational perspective in terms of the interrelations between my race and class positioning in Mexican social structure and my fieldwork experience. I explore how key aspects of my life shaped my multiple identities and how that permeated my field research. My position as a white, young, relatively affluent women provided me with opportunities in Mexico that at the same time overlapped in problematic ways with some of the objectives of my fieldwork. In the second section, I explore issues of positionality in relation to the theoretical framework I initially used to understand the case of the *Programa*. I show how my positionality shifted during preliminary fieldwork, leading to new sets of concerns and research

questions. This section explores the implications of a shifting theoretical framework for the fieldwork process, the resultant dissertation, and subsequent research and writing. Prior to fieldwork, my research questions were informed and shaped by urban structuralist theory, which attracted me because of my background and positionality. I show how the theoretical foundation for my fieldwork was challenged during my pre-dissertation work.

This paper draws from feminist theorizations on the importance of engaging in critical self-reflexive practices for making visible what positivist epistemologies have rendered invisible; that is, the epistemological implications of positionality (Rose, 1997). I build on this literature to show how critical reflexivity helps understand how positionality affects the theoretical framework that informs empirical research. I interrogate my position as a white, relatively affluent, young woman with a Marxist background engaging with post-structural perspectives, in order to achieve what England (1994, 87) describes as the "need to locate ourselves in our work and to reflect on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research". This process is messy because my position is not fixed, uniform, or homogeneous. I use my own experience as a doctoral student conducting work on socio-spatial exclusion in Mexico City to provide a multifaceted approach to reflexivity.

Relational Positionality

"When I met you I thought: 'what's a good girl doing in these streets?'… We don't see people like you here. Only the gringos who sometimes wander around these areas, lost or exploring the exotic…" (Interview with street vendor, April 23, 2004)

As a white Uruguayan raised in Mexico I have often felt different. I spoke Spanish with a 'strange' accent (depending on who I was speaking to). I did not have a Mexican passport. Still, my light skin and blond hair made me a privileged 'other' within a particular socio-racial hierarchy. Racial categories in Mexico date to the colonial period when racial distinctions were made based on ties with the Spanish power structures (Saldaña-Portillo, 2001). In the Spanish colonies, the *peninsulares* were Spanish-born who held the most important colonial offices. Next to these positions were the *criollos* (creoles), people of Spanish descent born in the colony. Below the *criollos* were the *mestizos* – mixed Spanish and Indian – while the *indio* and the blacks held the lowest position in the socio/racial hierarchy. Such racial categories remain fundamentally important in forming and reproducing class structures across Latin America, albeit in different ways depending on particular contexts (de la Fuente, 1999).

In central and southern Mexico, race is commonly used as a reference point in social relations (Bazan, 2004). Pejorative racial slangs are frequently used among Mexican middle classes. For example the notion of 'being an Indian' ('*Eres un indio*') is sometimes used by mestizo and white populations to refer to someone who is stupid, backward, or behaves in inappropriate ways. I have often heard the

expression "no seas *indio*" (don't be an Indian) to refer to a silly or vulgar behavior. Disregard for 'the *indio'* can be seen and experienced in everyday life. In popular culture, 'the Indian', when visible, is often portrayed as slow, stupid, socially inadequate, devious and is rarely placed in positions of power (material or symbolic). Racial categories have an everyday geography in Mexico City. Public transportation, which is stigmatized as the poor-person's means of mobility, is used primarily by *indios* and *mestizos*. Similarly, customers of street vendors are rarely white. The disruption of these racialised geographies can lead to the sort of confusion expressed by the street vendor in the above quote. What was a white, "good-girl" doing on the streets of the Historic Center?

As the quote also indicates, race in Mexico intersects with other axes of difference, particularly class, which reinforces historically constructed labels of domination, exploitation and privilege (Sundberg, 2003). Race and class tensions exist throughout Latin America, but their nature varies significantly depending on geo-historical context. In Uruguay the eradication of indigenous communities by the colonial powers together with high rates of relatively recent European immigration has meant that being white in Uruguay does not have the same socio-economic connotations as it does in central Mexico. For instance, it is not uncommon to see white children begging on the streets and sidewalks of Montevideo; I have never encountered such a sight in Mexico City.

Growing up in a context where class must be understood in the context of race, I was conscious that my whiteness could be an obstacle to my research, particularly in the field, also my 'home' (Fournillier, 2009; Mandiyanike, 2009; Sultana, 2007; Till, 2001). The implications of my positionality crystallized one month after my arrival in Mexico City to start my fieldwork. I had found a small and pleasant apartment in one of the historic areas in the city; an independent studio attached to a large old colonial house owned by Irma, a 74 year old woman. One day Irma knocked on my door and asked me to accompany her to the market. As we walked out of the house, she began speaking to me in English. She noticed my immediate discomfort and explained to me that:

> "…people here are clever. They observe everything that takes place on the streets and sidewalks, houses, stores. They already know you live here, so we have to pretend that you are my granddaughter from the United States who is staying with me for a couple of months. That way they will respect you more…" (Irma, July 2003)

By people, she meant those who spend the day working on the street, like street vendors, car parkers, and car sitters. I understood the subtleties of white privilege that naturalize the meaning of race/class and reinforce dominant representations of material inequality. While I was making all possible efforts to avoid being noticed as an outsider, Irma's repeated insistence in talking to me in English on the streets made me realize that I was fighting a battle that would be difficult to resolve. Her comment disturbed me because I believed that the only

way to build trust with street vendors was by not being perceived as part of the privileged class. While Irma was trying to protect me and make me feel like an insider by passing me off as her granddaughter, I felt that addressing me in English undermined her efforts. I thought that 'respect' would more likely arise if I were not perceived as a complete outsider. I too feared that my whiteness would become a barrier to my fieldwork, given the tendency to associate whiteness with the United States (*gringa*) or with a privileged sector within the Mexican social hierarchy usually associated with economic, political, and social power. As Sundberg (2003, 181) has argued "histories of state violence and U.S. intervention in particular Latin American countries make the process of building trust with 'research subjects' very difficult". I was concerned that by being a 'white' outsider, I would be incapable of accessing critical aspects of socio-spatial exclusion. I had not absorbed Mullings' (1999, 340) lesson that "the insider/outsider binary in reality is a boundary that is not only highly unstable but also one that ignore the dynamism of positionalities in time and through space". I thought that only as an insider of the groups experiencing exclusion would I understand the processes I was interested in exploring. But I myself had never experienced exclusion in the way I thought mattered. I grew up in a privileged and relatively affluent household in a small town located at the outskirts of Mexico City. My father's job at an international agricultural research center brought with it a number of benefits that I enjoyed: free housing, free education, and health benefits. We lived in a residential area within the research center: an enclave that separated 'us', physically and socially, from the rest of Mexico. Furthermore, I was bussed each day to an international, private school in Mexico City. Thus, at home and in school, I mostly interacted with transnational migrants who had arrived in Mexico under privileged conditions. I grew up in a gated community where my knowledge of the streets of Mexico was limited to a daily three-hour bus journey from home to school and back. The spatiality of my positionality rendered much of Mexico's inequality invisible.

Literature on positionality in geography has critically addressed the silences embedded within positivist notions of objective science, from a methodological and epistemological standpoint (Bondi, 1997; Chacko, 2004; England, 1994; Hartsock, 1987; McDowell, 1998; Moss, 1995; Nast, 1994; Rose, 1997; Swanson, 2008). Recognizing positionality as a central component in the production of knowledge entails a self-introspective or critical reflexive exercise which is necessary to identify power relations embedded in the research process. A researchers' positioning in a web of power relations shapes how subjects engage with them, and therefore informs all aspects of field research (Nast, 1994). For some authors, the complex relationship between the researcher and the research participants is viewed as a "gap" (Moss, 1995), which points to the social and political distance between the two. For others (e.g., Rose, 1997) that gap is only one of the many types of uncertainty that researchers face while engaging in critical reflexive methodologies. How to understand this distance has been the subject of much debate within feminist scholarship, with calls for researchers to reflect on their privileged

position *vis-à-vis* marginalized research subjects (McDowell, 1992; Turner, 2010), and others to think through the difficulties of engaging in research with elite groups (Herod, 1999; Rice, 2010).

The complexity of power relations implicit in the research process is characterized by Nast (1994) as a state of "betweenness", which captures the unavoidable negotiation of difference when engaging with others. As she claims, "difference is an essential characteristic of all social interactions that requires that we are always and everywhere in between or negotiating the worlds of me and not-me" (Nast, 1994, 57). When the state of betweenness entails uneven and asymmetrical power relations, Butz and Besio (2004), drawing on Pratt's (1992; 1994) notion of autoethnography, call for an autoethnographic sensibility. This involves thinking through the ways research subjects represent themselves and how those representations are mediated by differential and changing power relations between the researcher and the subject. An autoethnographic sensibility seeks opportunities to think of the researcher-subject relation from the perspective of the subject, recognizing the "subjects' struggle to create themselves for themselves while also creating themselves for us" (Butz and Besio, 2004, 358).

The literature on positionality and reflexivity usefully highlights the complex positionalities of researchers in relation to 'others', most notably research subjects. In this paper, I emphasize the *relational* nature of the researcher's position. I introduce the term *relational positionality* in an attempt to consider how researchers' identities are shaped by multiple mobile and flexible relations and how that makes a difference to the research process. Relational thinking has emerged as influential in Geography (Ettlinger, 2001; 2003; Jones, 2009), where it places emphasis on the interconnections that shape people and places. Rather than accepting pre-constituted identities, relational thinking emphasizes the connections, interrelations, and power relations through which identities are constructed (Massey with the collective, 1999). Therefore, it is not that I am a white, Uruguayan, female, student or *güerita*[2], in itself that made a difference to my research; rather, it is how these multiple selves differentially affect and are affected by my relationships and engagements with others who are busy negotiating their multiple identities in their interactions with me.

Relational positionality highlights that one's position as a researcher is "constructed out of the articulation of trajectories" (Massey, 2005, 179). The relational element stresses the process-based nature of positionality, developed through the coming together of old and new trajectories. Researchers enter the research process with a constitution and positionality that shapes and is shaped by our relations to other subjects. Many of those relations anchor us in particular epistemologies and ontologies, while others mobilize us in sometimes different directions. Relational positionality therefore seeks to consider the multiple

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[2] "*Güerita*" is a racial slang used in Mexico to refer to anyone who is white (pale-skinned and/or blond).

trajectories and relations that influence our subject formation, and show how that multiplicity can affect different aspects of our research, from the ontological to the methodological, from the theoretical to the empirical.

Thinking about my positionality in relational terms sheds light on how the research process was differentially affected by mobile elements of my position. My status as a white, young, relatively affluent, Mexican-Spanish speaking woman placed me in a whole host of positions, all of which were constituted in relation to others. Those spatial and temporal relations overlap in potentially problematic ways. For example, when I arrived in Mexico to begin field research, I went to meet friends and colleagues working at *El Colegio de México* (COLMEX). Given my experience as an MA student at COLMEX and my ABD status at Ohio State University, I was offered a research position at COLMEX for seven months on a project funded by the World Bank and the government of Mexico City. I accepted the position because I thought it would situate me favorably for my own fieldwork. And it did. My association with COLMEX enabled me to approach shop owners and government officials with some authority. My position as a researcher in the project also gave me the opportunity to enter networks of information and knowledge about the Historic Center that would have otherwise been very difficult to obtain. I experienced the spatiality of power in policy circles: deciding other people's lives, behind closed doors in publicly inaccessible government buildings. Participation in the project offered valuable insights into the way the local state functions.

The spatiality of this position, however, overlapped in conflicting ways with the reality of street vendors facing displacement. As my research in COLMEX unfolded, government officials from the city and the Historic Center gave me several walking tours of the area, discussing elements of the *Programa*. These experiences were valuable for letting me see the area through the eyes of government officials and policy circles, they also immediately exposed me as an 'outsider' to street vendors who saw me walk through the streets of the Historic Center with their antagonistic counterparts. Seeing me with government officials added another boundary to my interactions with street vendors. Some leaders wanted to know who I was and exactly what my intentions were, particularly those who were threatened by the practices of the *Programa* and who had seen me with city officials. Many organizations refused to grant me interviews, and those that did asked probing questions about my research; on many occasions I was asked for evidence that I was in fact a student conducting dissertation fieldwork.

I appreciated street vending organizations' cautious attitude toward me, as many were in a vulnerable position in the context of the *Programa*. However, I was troubled by how to define myself in front of them. What aspect of my multiple identities should I emphasize? Would they trust me more if I say I am Mexican, a student, even a foreigner? Although much has been said about the privileged 'gaze' of the researcher (Jacobs-Huey, 2002), I was also the object of their gaze. Some vendors quickly constructed an image of who I was. One day the leader of an

organization introduced me to a dozen vendors gathered on the street, saying "Comrades, this is Veronica. She is a journalist who is doing a report on the *Programa de Rescate* and she is interested in knowing how we are dealing with this difficult situation. Please be kind to her and offer her your help in anything she might need". Despite my efforts to explain who I was and what I was doing, many street vendors saw me as a journalist. I was a "conceptual anomaly" (Kondo, 1990) to many of the people with whom I interacted. During the multiple interviews I had with different vendors, I self-consciously avoided asking questions that would reinforce my privileged subjectivities. I found it difficult to push vendors to answer what I thought would be difficult or revealing questions, because I centered my racial subjectivity within constructed discourses of class privilege.

My story so far emphasizes the relational nature of research, through the notion of relational positionality. As I have argued, although aspects of my positionality placed me in an advantageous position relative to my fieldwork, there were others that simultaneously hindered particular connections and ties. The credibility I obtained by virtue of my links with COLMEX and my graduate credentials were critical for understanding how the local state operates from within, while also undermining the potential to establish trustworthy relations with street vendors who were facing displacement. In the following section, I shift attention to how relational positionality affected the theoretical background that framed my original research questions. The literature on positionality says little about how the selection of a research topic and theoretical framework is also a positionality issue. I continue my analysis of relational positionality by tracing how my theoretical approach to understanding the *Programa* changed throughout the course of my Doctoral degree, in order to show how my personal experiences interweave with my intellectual development.

Relational positionality in academia: Trying to be 'post' with a Marxist background

Having been raised in a left-wing household, I was disturbed by the injustice, inequality, and poverty that I observed on the streets of Mexico City. My parents made sure their children grew up sensitive to the structural inequalities produced and enhanced by the capitalist system. As a young girl, I remember flipping through some of my parents' books about the Sandinista movement, the Cuban revolution, the '68 student movements, and feeling awed by the photographs of massive mobilizations in public squares. My parents' ideas of how to go about generating social change were also embedded in our everyday life, as my brothers and I saw my parents participate in protests, union mobilizations, communist party gatherings, and so forth. The notion of social change I developed was based on strategies of massive mobilization. My political perspective was further enhanced during my first years as a Masters student in Mexico when I was encouraged to think about social inequality, urban segregation, and socio-spatial exclusion through a structuralist/Marxist perspective. The Marxist literature I engaged with drew extensively from dependency and new dependency theory. Whereas many

Anglo American Marxists derive inspiration from French regulation theory, Marxist literature in Latin America today is often discussed in terms of new dependency theory (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979).

Regulation theory explains the changing structure of capitalist economies by focusing on the rise and fall of the Fordist mode of production (Amin, 1994). According to regulation theory, the Fordist era of mass production and consumption was made possible through a wide set of governing institutions responsible for collective bargaining, wage determination, and social welfare functions. These institutions were critical for supporting consumption of mass produced industrial products by linking increases in annual wage to the productivity increases being realized from mass-production. Although regulation theory sought to explain the changing structure of the capitalist system at large, it was empirically grounded in the experiences of advanced industrialized economies, specifically those of western Europe and the United States. The existing institutional arrangements set up to support the consumption of mass-produced goods in the context of the Keynesian welfare state were thus a characteristic of advanced industrialized capitalist economies, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom. However, in many Latin American contexts, such as Mexico, the national institutional arrangement established to allow social reproduction – for instance, through collective bargaining and wage determination – provided economic leverage only to small sectors of the population. Collective bargaining was enjoyed mainly by formal unions (usually members of the governing party), agrarian elites, and in certain cases non-elite groups who formed part of the popular sector. The governing institutions that encouraged collective bargaining were far from 'collective', providing space for negotiation only among sectors of the population who supported the ruling political party. Hence, in Mexico the social and institutional arrangements that supported the reproduction of the working class through collective consumption did not share the same characteristics as the governing institutions of the Fordist period in the advanced capitalist economies.

Differences in the way capitalism operates in different contexts – Latin America, the United States and Britain – help explain why Marxist scholars from different places derive inspiration from different theoretical perspectives. As Ettlinger (1999, 352n) suggests:

> Scholars from the first world who write about the first world typically do not invoke or even reference new dependency theory; conversely, the political, economic and social realities in contexts such as Latin America are often intelligible in terms of new dependency theory and, accordingly, there are few if any references to regulation theory.

According to Cardoso, one of the leading figures in the new dependency theory, "theoretical schemes concerning the formation of capitalist society in present day developed countries are of little use in understanding the situation in Latin American countries. Not only the historical moments but also the structural

conditions of development and society are different" (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979, 172). New dependency theory developed as an intellectual project among many Latin American social scientists, and shaped the political ideology of a generation of Latin American leftists in the 1960s and 1970s, including my parents. Marxist perspectives have not been confined to the academic sphere; rather, they have permeated much of the political, religious and even artistic arena in Latin America.

My initial interpretation of the *Programa* was through this particular Marxist lens. When the policy was launched in 2001, I developed an interest in issues pertaining to the relationship between urban public spaces and the changing politics of the local state. Part of my interest in urban public space stemmed from growing up in a city where public spaces were central to the life and multiple rhythms of the city. Many of my memories are located in the city's public spaces – especially the central plaza (*Zócalo*). As a child I visited the *Zocalo* and enjoyed the chaos and noise of people and activities. Then as a teenager the plaza became a meeting point where my friends and I enjoyed walking, eating, gazing and buying trinkets from the thousands of street vendors. Later as a student I participated in public protests, and marches in or through the *Zócalo* reminded me of the photographs I had seen of massive mobilizations and protests. When the *Programa* was launched, I became interested in understanding the implications and consequences of this policy for the city's most important public space.

Much of the literature that I read initially discussed the relationship between the changing global economy and the management of urban space (Cox, 1995; Judd and Ready, 1986). This work argued that, with the declining fiscal power of the nation state (Jessop, 1998), the changing order of economic competition (Ruppert, 2000), and the new hypermobility of capital (Harvey, 1989a), cities were beginning to be governed differently (Graham, 1995; Mayer, 1994). I was attracted by the literature on new urban politics and "entrepreneurial urban governance" (Harvey, 1989b), a term used to capture the outward-oriented look that urban governments have been forced to take in the last twenty years in the context of a changing global economy. These outward-oriented strategies prioritize pro-growth policies aimed at enhancing and fostering local economic development through attracting inward investment (Hubbard and Hall, 1998; Judd and Ready, 1986). Urban governments' main concern no longer lies in the provision of welfare and services but rather in creating the necessary conditions for attracting mobile capital. Many of the outward policies are financed by institutions that go beyond the traditional scope of the public domain, resulting in what Harvey called the shift from govern*ment* to govern*ance* (Harvey, 1989b). What is noticeable about this shift is the increasing role of the private sector in financing and regulating pro-growth strategies (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990).

The public-private partnership element and the notion of urban governance intrigued me in the context of my interest in Mexico City's Historic Center and its *Programa de Rescate*. Although the *Programa* was not the first attempt made by a city government to revitalize the Historic Center, it was the first time that a major

businessman with the status and reputation of Carlos Slim had become involved in a policy of such magnitude. [3] Past failed attempts to 'rescue' the Historic Center placed mayor Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador in a challenging position. To achieve the planned objectives of 'rescuing' the Historic Center, Carlos Slim's involvement was considered critical. Urban structuralist literature was my first window to understanding the *Programa*. I was intrigued by the parallels between the processes that many urban theorists identified taking place in US and European urban politics and the case of Mexico City's Historic Center.

As I studied the urban structuralist literature, I was captivated by arguments regarding urban governments' devotion to transforming the image of the city. I read extensively on how cities around the world had adopted policies aimed at representing the city as an attractive place for local and global investment, and how these policies were embedded within material and discursive practices. In the case of Mexico City, urban authorities had recently developed a new city slogan with the objective of representing the city as a good place to live, visit, and ultimately as "an attractive city for investors" (Programa de Rescate, 2001). According to numerous authors (Chang, 1997; Cochrane and Jonas, 1999; Ghannam, 1997; Hiller, 2000; Nagel, 2000; Neill, 2001; Stewart, 1999; Ward, 1998; Ward, 2000) these policies followed particular models or 'international standards' of how a city should look and function (Olds, 1997). Such was the case of cities like Shanghai, where the planning of its new financial district was linked to modern imaginaries of "mushrooming skyscrapers" (Wu, 2000, 1360). These images were imported from European cities or from "well-planned downtowns such as San Francisco's and the Parisian La Défense project" (Olds, 1997, 116). Authors stressed that notions of attractiveness embedded in image making strategies were in many cases confined to particular normative visions or standards imported from places perceived as modern, global and hence desirable.

What became most attractive about this literature – beyond the insights offered regarding the different ways in which cities engage in competition for investment – were the described *effects* of these changes in urban public space. In particular, they tended to produce new forms of socio-spatial exclusion. Although city authorities and private investors sought to re-produce a desired vision of urban life, certain social groups and practices seemed to stand in the way. I therefore became especially interested in understanding how these strategies were experienced by the marginalized, the excluded. I started to ask: What are the consequences of entrepreneurial practices? Who benefits? How and why?

These questions drew my attention to a strand of urban structuralist literature that focused on urban public spaces as where entrepreneurial strategies were materialized. For some authors, this involved a 'Disneyfication' of urban public

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[3] Carlos Slim is a Mexican entrepreneur and Latin America's wealthiest businessman (Forbes Magazine, 2005). His most well-known business is TELMEX (former state-owned telephone company).

space that celebrates consumption and recreation over other forms of social interaction (Zukin, 1991; Sorkin, 1992). As with Disneyland, some urban public spaces are said to be controlled, privatized, and purified through the implementation of explicitly exclusionary policies that regulate intruders, "whose appearance, conduct and moral codes may not fit in with the imageable city" (MacLeod, 2001, 1). It was claimed that city governments, urban elites, and private investors collaborated to develop *commercial* public spaces in which daily interactions and practices were carefully planned to foster business and consumption activities (Christopherson, 1994; Mitchell, 2001). The privatization of public space was also an integral element of the *Programa,* and one that I observed while I conducted preliminary work in Mexico City in 2002. I noticed that the *Programa* sought to alter the multiple practices and interactions in the Historic Center's streets and central *plaza* through the implementation of two interrelated strategies: first, increasing security and safety; and second, removing street vendors, artisans, and other participants of the so-called informal economy from the different public spaces of the Historic Center. During interviews with state representatives involved in the development of the *Programa*, a common discourse portrayed the Historic Center and its *plaza* as an empty space. One official claimed that, "This land belongs to no-one" (Interview, November, 2003). The Historic Center was envisioned both as a space in need of rescuing from emptiness and as a place plagued by street crime and violence. Street vendors were perceived as the main actors involved in its deterioration. Fighting insecurity meant fighting street vending practices. The local Secretary of Public Security created a new legal body called the *Puesto de Mando* (Control Post) to deal with street vendors. Its responsibility was "to ensure the safety of the 1.5 million daily visitors" (Interview, November, 2003). More than 100 Closed Circuit Television cameras were installed in the numerous streets and corners of the Historic Center, all of these controlled by a group of 30 personnel located in the central offices of the Control Post. A new security system was developed in different strategic areas of the Historic Center. Additionally, a new police body was created with 400 additional elements, and a 'traditional' police force was trained to maintain order on the multiple public spaces. These are bilingual police, dressed in traditional Mexican clothing, riding on horses, whose aim is to help tourists find their way, and feel safe and comfortable in the Historic Center.

As I learned more about the strategies of the *Programa* in the Historic Center's public spaces, I was reminded of Mike Davis' (1990; 1992) account of Los Angeles' public spaces as arenas of mass consumption rather than spaces of democratic interaction, where individuals are seen as consumers rather than citizens. I was compelled by the arguments of authors concerned with fundamental questions of justice, and the rights of urban marginalized citizens (Katz, 2001; MacLeod, 2002; Smith, 1996; 2002). I was therefore excited about the time-space I was in; I felt I was at the heart of the implementation of what urban scholars have long identified happening in the US and European cities. The *Programa* seemed to lie squarely within a broader set of neoliberal policies and programs with the goal

of promoting Mexico as a site for inward investment. My proposed dissertation research sought to explore the politics around the implementation of programs aimed at re-shaping the city's image and economy and its connections to the regulation of social practices and interactions in public space. I went to Mexico City to conduct pre-dissertation fieldwork with questions that directed my 'data collection' toward these interests. My concerns regarding the *Programa* centered on the role of the state and private capital in shaping urban public spaces.

The structural theoretical perspective that framed my curiosities about the *Programa* was (re)produced by my diverse personal and professional trajectories, some of them part of my upbringing, and others actively sought. My relationship with my parents was influential in shaping my ontological foundations. Hence, the sorts of questions I asked regarding the *Programa* were based on particular understandings of power, justice, and change consistent with the urban structuralist perspective. I viewed power as a force located within particular groups such as the central state, the government of Mexico City, the "winners" (Svampa, 2001) such as local entrepreneurs, and private investors like Carlos Slim. I assumed power to be possessed by these groups and exercised over others. This perspective was shaped by my subjectivity as constituted in relation to my parents' experience and my upbringing. However, an approach that understands positionality relationally highlights other trajectories that overlapped with elements of my upbringing. This overlap, as I will discuss, fundamentally altered the nature of my questions and the direction of my research.

When I returned to Mexico to conduct preliminary research in June 2002 a number of events pushed me to re-evaluate my theoretical framework. The *Programa* had been initiated in thirteen streets of the Historic Center. While some of these were still in the middle of the revitalization process, four of the busiest streets had already been 'rescued'. They had new and wider sidewalks, new lighting, new public phones; the buildings had refurbished facades and balconies; the streets had a new police force, and new CCTV's. Furthermore, according to government discourses, the streets were now "free from street vendors" (Reforma, 2003). As I walked along one of the rescued streets thinking that I would no longer find vendors, to my surprise the street seemed unchanged: hundreds of street vendors selling all manner of items, shouting out different prices trying to attract customers, stereos at full volume filling the space with *cumbia*, *salsa* and *regueton*.

I was uneasy with this encounter. At this time I was not concerned with questioning structuralist theories of urban politics materialized in policies like the *Programa*. The workings of the state and private investors such as Carlos Slim occupied a very obvious and secure place within my theoretical lens. Much of the structuralist urban literature interprets policies like the *Programa* as inevitable aspects of cities' tendencies towards "structured coherence" (Harvey, 1989a) under urban (entrepreneurial) governance. Hence, the *Programa* as an inevitable reflection of the neoliberalization of urban life (Smith, 2002) came as a 'natural' way of understanding Mexico City's context. My encounter with street vendors on

the so-called rescued street of the Historic Center undermined this inevitability and led me to question many of my original ideas about the *Programa*, the state, public space, governance and socio-spatial exclusion.

These sorts of unexpected events can be turning points in the fieldwork experience, leading to fundamental changes in the research process. As Massey (2005, 178) claims, "the beauty of empirical work is that you have no sooner reached such neat and satisfying conclusions that they start to exhibit cracks and queries". In my case, the process of theoretical reevaluation did not happen until I spoke with my advisor, who encouraged me to ask questions I had not asked before. I realized that my understanding of the *Programa* was shaped by a particular form of knowledge: by what state officials were announcing on television, newspapers and so forth. Furthermore, my perspectives on the *Programa* were being informed only by a structuralist perspective. I had been listening to selective voices. The story was of *The* city, *The* state, *The* powerful, *The* global economy. I had not encountered the multiple stories and experiences of people on the streets who were dealing – in different ways – with the changes brought about by the policy. I had not encountered state officials debating amongst themselves over how to go about implementing the *Programa*. I had not considered the possibility of street vendors struggling among themselves over who gets to maintain a livelihood on the streets of the Historic Center. I realized that although I was interested in understanding how entrepreneurial strategies were affecting different people 'on the ground', I had not recognized how the implementation of the *Programa* was undermined by people's everyday practices. I had too narrow an understanding of agency, and therefore too crude and dualistic a theory of power.

Many of these structuralist ideas were slowly challenged as I returned from conducting pre-dissertation work and began writing my dissertation proposal. A conjunction of personal and professional elements made me reevaluate my research questions and reframe my theoretical perspective. This intellectual path has not been linear or tidy. It is taking a substantial amount of time to come to terms with, assimilate and reconsider my embeddedness in structuralist literature. Before my pre-dissertation fieldwork, my engagements with post-structural literature remained in the 'academic' sphere and I maintained a separation between what I learned in the seminar room and my personal life, thoughts, and on-the-ground observations. As I began to confront new sets of questions, my reading focused on post-structural literature on urban space and governance. Drawing on epistemologies from cultural studies, I engaged with work that highlights how entrepreneurial, revanchist and neoliberal policies have been transgressed and struggled over (Bayat, 2000). This brought an entirely different dimension to the *Programa*. I began including 'the excluded' in my analysis of the *Programa*. As Deutsche (1996, 53) argues, describing urban spaces as products of multiple social practices and interactions "affirms the right of currently excluded groups to have access to the city – to make decisions about the spaces they use, to be attached to the places where they live, [and] to refuse marginalization".

I wanted to apply my slowly acquired knowledge of poststructuralism to the case of Mexico City, arguing for the importance of theorizing power not as a force, located within individuals but as a set of practices, strategies, and techniques rooted in the whole network of society (Foucault, 1994). This reevaluation started making sense, but was not easy to internalize and apply. I kept asking myself: but even if street vendors are back on the streets despite the *Programa*, does that really mean they have power? Was I not running the risk of reproducing neo-liberal discourses of the informal sector as comprised of self-empowered and self-driven entrepreneurs who are the gateway for progress and development? (de Soto, 1990). But the point I recognized was that power is practiced in many ways. Thinking about power in purely structuralist terms overlooks other practices that have the potential to undermine structures of constraints. My understanding of power did not suddenly shift from the hands of the state and the private sector to the hands of street vendors, artisans, and displaced residents, but I made an effort to think about the complexities of the *Programa* and the multiple ways in which the policy was being struggled over and negotiated. I wanted to de-essentialize groups of people by avoiding categories such as the 'winners' and the 'losers'. Not all street vendors were being removed from the streets of the Historic Center; the movement of street vending activities out of the *plaza* was embedded within a highly complex set of power relations between and within different social groups. I became interested in understanding the existing heterogeneity among those who were being excluded and whether those differences were important for understanding different avenues of resistance.

Drawing from Latin American subaltern studies (Alvarez, 1998; Canclini, 1989; 1999; Dagnino, 1998; Escobar, 1995), I focused on the ways that excluded groups struggle over certain forms of injustice, and how in that process they create alternative ways of being and doing. By illustrating how Mexico City's *Programa* developed and the struggles resulting from its implementation, I wanted to argue that socio-spatial exclusion, in the context of entrepreneurial urban governance, entailed differential power relations that were more complex and dynamic than the simple removal of particular social groups from urban spaces. What post-structural literature illustrated was that the state, city governments, entrepreneurs, even marginalized groups all *practice* power. Furthermore, socio-spatial exclusion of particular groups and activities from urban public spaces produce complex and multidimensional modes of power relations. At issue then was how power was practiced and negotiated within and among all actors, such that transformations in urban public space could be understood in a dynamic manner.

What I found was that some street vendors continued selling their products and interacting with other vendors and buyers by returning to the streets in a more mobile way. Rather than setting up their metal stand they practice what is known as *torear*, which is a mobile form of teasing or deceiving the police (Crossa, 2009). Mobility became a practice of power that helped vendors struggle against the exclusionary practices of the *Programa*, and it intertwined with other forms of

power through interactions and relations with other groups in day-to-day activities. Street vendors have an antagonistic relationship with local entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, despite the claims of local entrepreneurs that street vendors are an "urban cancer" (Interview, November 23, 2003), many have recognized that vending activities help increase their sales (Interview, March 22, 2004). Moreover, many of the street vendors I worked with left their belongings inside established shops over night. Rather than paying extra money for a storage room, some vendors negotiated with shop owners to pay them a fee and keep their material safely stored in the local establishments. Similarly, when police performed their daily routine of removing street vendors from particular areas, vendors grabbed their belongings and ran inside the local stores in order to avoid being caught and detained. Everyday practices such as these, which I originally paid little attention to, are the basis for strengthening ties among individuals who shared similar concerns regarding the *Programa*.

Although I was able to identify multidimensional modes of power relations, there were other practices of power that I overlooked because my earlier embeddedness in structural literature and my education more generally continued to constrain my interpretations. My approach to understanding multiple voices was originally targeted only to groups that I perceived as "the excluded" (e.g., street vendors, artisans, and displaced residents). However, I had not considered the possibility of multiplicity among those who I believed were benefiting from the practices of the *Programa*. For example, I had failed to acknowledge the existence of many different 'private investors' with different positions and interests regarding the implementation of the policy. Not only were some investors excluded from the decision making process, but some felt the *Programa* was harmful for their business. Many were dissatisfied with the way the *Programa* had been implemented. In this context, more than 2000 local businesses came together and formed what is now called the *Union de Comerciantes del Centro Histórico* (UCCH - Union of Business people of the Historic Center) with the purpose of "establishing channels of communication with the government and having a voice in the decisions that are made regarding the Historic Center" (Interview December, 2003). My engagement with UCCH members and my encounters with different organizations of local shop owners in the Historic Center made me realize the multiplicity of voices and struggles among those whose economic status locate them in positions of relative power. My newly developed post-structural theoretical approach provided me with nuanced insights that allowed me to de-essentialize people and their location within power structures.

These transformations to my theoretical position are still in process. I often find myself swinging back and forth from one perspective to another, contradicting myself, and sometimes making a real effort to see and listen to the heterogeneity underlying research experience. As I have argued, my initial theoretical positions were increasingly challenged throughout the course of my graduate experience generating a number of seemingly contradictory standpoints that have had

important impacts on my field experience and on the substantive issues that I engaged with throughout my PhD dissertation. Part of that struggle was a theoretical quarrel between a notion of change based on structural transformations that I had nurtured, and a conception of change that finds transformative power in people's daily actions. As I have discussed in the preceding section, my embeddedness in structuralist literature and education had prevented me from thinking though the multiplicity of ways different people practice and negotiate power. My point is not that a structuralist epistemology must be abandoned to see the sorts of practices of power that groups like street vendors exercise. But some theoretical positions make particular geographies of power more visible, and their adoption is a matter of positionality. A relational perspective on positionality brings to the fore the process whereby our underlying assumptions and theoretical perspectives are shaped, (re)produced, and in some cases reconstituted.

Conclusion

As postcolonial and feminist scholars have long argued, the position of the author affects the stories that are told. Thinking about positionality in relational terms can be a powerful way of understanding the problems and opportunities that arise when engaging in different dimensions of the research process. Through the use of relational positionality I have tried to describe the fluid and mobile nature of positionality in relation to its context. In this paper I have engaged in a critically reflexive exercise to show how positionality is not only an epistemological matter that shapes how we see and know the world, but also an ontological matter in terms of what we see. Relational positionality is thus an attempt to bring these dimensions together in a more explicit fashion. I have argued that positionality should not just be considered as an issue arising in the field; rather, how I accessed literature and related to ideas was as much a question of positionality as my fieldwork.

I have shown that my identity as a white, middle class woman with a Marxist background shaped different aspects of my PhD research. My embeddedness in structuralist literature and education barred me from thinking though and even seeing the multiplicity of ways in which people practice and negotiate power, including my own power to understand the circumstances of street vendors' everyday lives. My sensitivity to the relational nature of my positionality was a process that emerged from a conjunction of events, including the realization of other people's power over my own positionality in the field. The relations established with city authorities based on my involvement in a project with my former university proved fruitful in many ways, but also curtailed the development of networks of trust with members of street vending organizations. This aspect of my relational positionality, together with my unexpected encounter with street vendors in the so-called 'rescued' streets of the Historic Center, disturbed my theoretical certainties and initiated a process of theoretical reevaluation, which resulted in a framework that emphasizes the active agency of excluded groups such as street vendors. Thinking about positionality relationally allowed me to recognize

other people's agency in my positionality, and the agency of those I had perceived as marginalized and at the receiving end of power.

Acknowledgments:

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