

## **El mercado de Tepito**

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With the passing of time, the rhizomatic social structure of the *barrio* or neighborhood of Tepito has ensured the commercial survival of its market. The first sketch of the Spanish colonial city, in 1521, excluded Tepito, which was recovering from the great devastation and rebuilding everyday life in its native patch of ground. In 1810, as the struggle for independence was drawing to a close, Tepito's street market competed with Spanish, Jewish, and Lebanese shopkeepers newly set up in downtown mansions, from which they monopolized the provision of consumer goods and services for the affluent classes.

In 1917, as the violence of the Mexican Revolution was waning, the liberals who drew up the Constitution claimed the new legal order would oversee a fair redistribution of the nation's wealth. In the end, the *pueblo*—the people—having fought for an equality of opportunities, were only granted rain-dependent agriculture, regional crafts, and petty commerce.

In the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, as a low-rent area, Tepito received families from across the country who had lost everything, and who brought nothing with them but their customs and their traditional crafts. Soon, the street market evolved to become the source of clothing for the poorest, who called it *La Bola* and *El Baratillo*.

So intense was the artisanal and commercial activity that in the new nomenclature of the city, Tepito gained the additional name *Colonia de la Bolsa*—Colony of the Exchange—for the offerings of employment generated by its workshop/housing compounds and in its streets. The streets still bear the names of the trades practiced in them: Bakers' street, Tailors' Street, Watchmakers' Street, etc.

The first government offensive against street commerce came in 1957, with the construction of four indoor public markets in the heart of the area, to which many street vendors were relocated. During that period, the other old working-class neighborhoods that circled the downtown were eliminated. Ten years later, many Tepiteños abandoned the government-controlled markets to retake the same streets.

The 1985 earthquake severely compromised the local urban system. Official reconstruction efforts were carried out in strict conformity with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), following conventional architectural models designed to fracture urban centers. In particular, new housing projects allowed for nuclear family housing only, and

eliminated the former pattern of integrated workshops and extended family dwelling, which eroded the quality of community life. Along with deindustrialization, this fueled an intensification of strictly commercial activities, so that *La Bola* and *El Baratillo* melded into a single immense *tianguis*, or open-air market, including some ten thousand vendors specialized in buying and selling new, used, recycled, and imported goods; overstocks and other items whose only defect was that they had been stolen.

From 1995, new urban pathologies bloomed. They were the product of a *tugurización*—“slummification”—of everyday life, as well as of the new government strategy of simply leaving the *barrio* to its fate, allowing it to become a sanctuary of impunity. As part of the process, we were stigmatized collectively as probable delinquents. Our response has been to fight this stigma by making our collective charisma well known.

Tepito’s market lies within the official “Perimeter B” of the UNESCO-anointed *Centro Histórico*—the historic downtown. We are barely a stone’s throw from the specially-zoned “Perimeter A”, which is being gentrified into what Tepiteños call “Slim Village”, in honor of the area’s most powerful investor. Gentrification entails the displacement of many activities, especially ambulant vendors who either don’t want to pay, or cannot pay rents on tiny storefronts in the new shopping centers nicknamed *Plazas Maruchan*, after the instant and ultimately inadequate noodle soup.

In downtown Mexico City, Tepito is the one neighborhood that holds onto its urban scale, its historical roots, its identity, and its culture. In a metropolitan context, what positions Tepito are its location, its legend, its prestige as a laboratory for combining work and culture, and its function as a kind of urban “hinge” (*bisagra*), recycling and reassembling not only goods but discarded populations, metabolizing the consequences of each intervention in the *Centro Histórico*.

Here, we integrate old neighborhood strategies with *lo mexicano* and with the global, reimagining ourselves as a postmodern urban tribe, taking a certain distance from official nationalism, to create our own imaginary. In our selections and mutations, the Tepiteños have come to identify more with our own solutions than with imposed ones; more with the territory and less with the map.

Tepito is recognized as being one of the city’s original quarters, and although consecutive governments cannot use us as a model, Mexicans do identify us as emblematic, for the strength, fighting spirit, and resistance with which we have defended ourselves.

This spirit is grounded in our *arraigo*—rootedness—and sense of belonging to this place that was a part of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, of being the heirs to the *tianguis* of Tlatelolco, the Aztec’s commercial center. In those times, Tepito was called Mecamalínco, because it was the *barrio* of the *mecapaleros*, the people who transported merchandise.

Our barrio **identity** is recognizable through our forms of working and living, by our distinctive mood, by our way of being, and by our state of mind. Tepito's **cultural matrix** is a survival school, where the teachers are Lady Poverty and the Muse of the Streets. That is why, in the history of Mexico City, Tepito has seen it all and been everything: modest indigenous quarter, miserable colonial enclave, slum in the City of Palaces, and territory in obstinate resistance to predatory urbanism.

With my presentation, I want to explain how we define and understand ourselves, and give an idea of the creative and generative potential of the cultural referents most representative of Tepito. My *barrio* is a repository where energy accumulates, where the streets are social synapses for exercising and learning traditional skills, where we invent new formulas for recycling goods and try out new recipes for nourishing sociability, to better withstand the ruinous processes of the system.

From the story of Adam, and the writings of Adam Smith, to the peddling of *Adams* chewing gum, wage labor and alienated labor are defined and reproduced in tandem, with no respect for the non-capitalist survival strategies of people in every social space. Because so many factories have closed in Mexico City, work is now being done everywhere. To most of us, self-employment in the informal economy is preferable to working in the booming criminal economy. In the *barrio*, community forms of knowledge assist in the rebirth of the trades, and preserve traditional services, giving us opportunities and

credibility, so that we can continue to be known for our way of working in our vital space.

In our commercial niche, we are competing with the well-heeled buccaneers of the “Pirate Republic”, against the Korean commercial mission, and against an oddly Fordist narco-industry. The pirated audio and video that supply the society of the spectacle also function, politically, as a social shock absorber. At the same time, they impoverish commerce, because the seller earns only a fraction of a peso, and they continue the drive away from being a *pueblo* of cultural participants and toward a public of cultural consumers. This is why, in the Tepito market, we vindicate an informal economy structured as a modest social fabric that holds against the powerful crime industry. And that threshold is ever more narrow...

In the secret machinations of the world economy, the formal and the informal evolve in parallel. Though “politics” has become a loaded word, we can't limit ourselves to explaining this evolution in exclusively economic terms. In the *barrio* and in the market, one works from the rooster's crow to the call of the cricket, doing business until dark. Tepito's work is coordinated through sixty-two guild organizations, legally constituted as civil associations, whose main purpose is to secure the social, economic and cultural well being of its members.

Some historians say the protagonist of the eighteenth-century revolutions was the citizen; that of the nineteenth was the

proletarian; and the protagonist of the twentieth was the consumer. The worth of a person is now measured in terms of what he or she can buy; the consumer has eclipsed the citizen. In our century, surely, the crisis will only bring more unemployment, swelling the informal economy. We will have to reinforce our commercial scaffolding, so that it can withstand the demographic waves the future will no doubt bring.

In “Prosperity Theology,” it is easier to preach about the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. For Herodotus and Plato, the active population was distributed into seven categories. Of these, the category of the warrior was no less important than the lineage of the merchants, given the way that they appropriated and remade space. The great financial virtue of informality is that it put money in the hands and pockets of “informal” people, without having to be redeemed by any crooked banking institution.

Our best clientele will always be the populations harmed by, and indignant about, the recurrent economic crises, those who cannot float safely above the boom-and-bust carousel. That is our commitment to them, and to our selves. In the global monetary system, in order for NAFTA to have results, there

must be some kind of border between the formal and the informal. Nevertheless, the critical path of the popular markets, with their multiple invisible structures, has entailed a sharing of the information and knowledge required to preserve their culture, economy, and social capital.

Researchers who study a lot, but know little, and whose dialect is called Theory, can see informality as something exotic or nostalgic. But this perspective misses how informality is part of the popular classes’ process of searching for and experimenting with solutions as it faces recurrent crises.

Our inherited crafts extend the useful life of things. The global logic of waste is met with strategies of reuse and recycling. The sprawl that produces material and human detritus ceases to be a para-site and becomes a para-city. Tepito’s market exists because it resists: because it is articulated with a *barrio*; because it is part of a historical process; because it recovers the creativity and value of local work.

To everything that is called informal, we must assign proper names. Because by now, informality is our way of holding onto a semblance of citizenship and sovereignty.

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