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## Tianguis shaping ciudad. Informal street vending as a decisive element for economy, society and culture in Mexico.

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The paper aims at showing culture as a feature capable of shaping urban environments, both promoting specific phenomena and making a stand to transformation attempts. Tianguis, the informal Mexican markets, appear as a demonstration of this shaping ability, being relevant not only for informal economy, but also for urban settings and social networks created by their presence. On the other hand, the phenomenon of Walmart spreading – now diffused in many growing countries (e.g. Brazil, China, India) – is opposing a totally different model of commerce and even lifestyle that tries to tame traditional forms of trade replacing them in their usual settings. Such a relevance is also proved by the attitude of institutions, which are unable to face the problems set in the political agenda but also passive when receiving proposals from external actors.

**Keywords:** Informal street vending, Social capital, Culture of poverty

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## Introduction

How does culture contribute to shaping cities? The first part of this paper builds a theoretical framework mainly based on the role of culture and behaviour in defining space features that - in Mexican informal markets - works on three different levels: a process of appropriation (see Lefebvre 1974), an insurgent practice (see Sandercock 1998) and a contrast to globalization. Then, there is a focus on the history of *tianguis* and the description of their social, economic and urban features: each of these elements is useful for a deep understanding of this phenomenon. Next part is dedicated to the analysis of policies developed by local institutions that try - with ambiguous results - to tame this example of informal trade. Finally, the conflicts between Walmart and *tianguis* (and their different work cultures) are outlined.

## Culture(s) in practice(s)

The influence that culture has in determining behaviours, practices and - consequently - appropriations of the space, cannot be reduced to an obvious concept. The stress on the relevance of cultural elements tries to reduce the emphasis often attributed exclusively to morphology, but still has to take into account the articulated relationships that culture has with space and society. Moreover, culture results as an element which is complex and differentiated (even internally; see Augé 2007), both for individuals and communities.

Interpretations on the significance of cultural influences differ a lot, even if it is possible to recognize some key aspects (Fukuyama 2001): it may determine production and consumption modes, but also institutions and social networks (as shown in the Mexican case). Culture appears as a feature that can shape an economic system, but also public policy (Wildawsky 1987) and individual behaviour. But behaviours, and consequently practices, influence space, too. Henri Lefebvre introduces two key concepts of space: dominated space and appropriated space. The first one is transformed by practices and technologies, which introduce shocking new forms into a pre-existing space; the second one is drawn on Marxist vocabulary and connected with the modification of natural space in order to serve the needs and possibilities of a group (Lefebvre 1974). Appropriation is the typical expression of the influences of behaviour on space, in some way it is natural and continuous phenomenon: the simple and habitual use of space implies and determines a change into the forms, functions and structures.

Taking into account different theoretical perspectives, various hints are given on the role of culture in addressing individual behaviours and collective practices, together with their spatial declinations (as can be noticed observing actions and appropriations related to the Mexican *tianguis*).

A first element is the possibility to define *tianguis* as what Sandercock defines 'insurgent practices', bottom-up situations that 'already exists, and not only in the interstices, the cracks on space and time, but in the very face of power' (Sandercock, 1998: 157). What often moves these practices is a knowledge of the places which is typical of local communities: in fact 'processes that occur in cities (...) can be understood by almost anybody. (...) Inductive reasoning is something that can be engaged by ordinary, interested citizens, and again they have the advantage over planners' (Jacobs, 1963, p. 441). Specifically, *tianguis* have a peculiar cultural background rooted in Pre-Colombian populations.

A second aspect is the attitude of institutions, which mainly rely on a technical-rational approach to planning. Planning itself originated as a tool of modernization, aimed 'to the attainment of well-established societal (modernist) goals' (Yiftachel 2002: 535), believing in 'the idea that human progress would be achieved by harnessing science to create technology for the achievement of human ends' (Schön 1991: 31).



This attitude, summarized in the Positivist philosophy, promoted technical rationality as the only suitable method for planning, 'reifying space and objectifying people' (Escobar, 1992: 133); the approach can be noticed in the way local authorities frame the issues of informal street vending.

Instead, it is more difficult to recognize cultural instances in Walmart: 'Wal-Mart locates its stores in places where it expects to be profitable' (Basker 2007); yet, the retailer shows a utilitarian and neo-liberist attitude, which is reflected both in its strategies and in the consumption model exported across many countries. The interventions of Wal-Mart, as well as those of multinational corporations, go far beyond the simple exercise of power (Sassen 1994). Therefore culture, together with other elements, prompts different perceptions of individual and collective issues, leading to different appropriations of space.

## Observing the tianguis

### *History of tianguis*

A convincing definition of *tianguis* is given by the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (2010):

Enshrouded in scents, colors, flavors and meanings, markets are more than just buying and selling space for daily supply, they are a synthesis of culture and history of a region, as well as trade relations having it with other populations.

*Tianguis* are deeply rooted in Mexican culture and history, this word probably comes from the Pre-Colombian words *tiantiztli* or *tianquiztli* used to identify the marketplace. Thanks to the memoirs of some conquerors or missionary, we can read the description of these traditional markets. One of the most beautiful illustration of *tianguis* was written by the conqueror Bernarl Diaz del Castillo in his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* (1632):

The moment we arrived in this immense market, we were perfectly astonished at the vast numbers of people, the profusion of merchandise which was there exposed for sale, and at the good police and order that reigned throughout.

In short, every species of goods which New Spain produces were here to be found; and everything put me in mind of my native town Medina del Campo during fair time, where every merchandise has a separate street assigned for its sale. After the Spanish conquest, Mexicans partially adapted their behaviour to the colonial life style. One of the main influence was in trade: at the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century a spatial division of the different types of activity was imposed mainly in Mexico City and so the traditional model of trade was weakened. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it is possible to recognize three different forms of market trade in Mexico City. The first one is a sort of 'noble' stable market in the city centre, the second one is made up of stable market spread in the periphery and the third one is the *tianguis*, that is widespread in a lot of different streets and squares also because it did not use fixed structures.

### *Social and economic features of tianguis*

According to this description, *tianguis* appear as a peculiar informal phenomenon, that tries to fill two different kinds of voids: the first one is related to the absence of strict regulation on public spaces, while the second refers to those large shares of market not absorbed by formal economic activities; in this sense, they can be considered as insurgent practices (Sandercock 1998).



This kind of experience is generally considered as an expression of the ‘culture of poverty’ that, according to Oscar Lewis (1966: 176), ‘provides human beings with the design for living, with a ready-made set of solutions for human problems, and so serves a significant adaptive function’. Informal economy appears as a negative element for the stability of developing communities because it does not guarantee the possibility of planning personal life projects and provides only short term economic perspective (Eclac 2010). This approach seems to explain *tianguis* simply as a reaction to poverty and material needs, but from a local perspective, which is able to provide a wider representation of the phenomenon, it is possible to observe the relevant role informal markets have in structuring local economies (as well as urban settings; see Vélez-Ibañez 1983).

The Mexican federal government itself recognizes the unavoidable role of *tianguis* in complementing the formal schemes for the supply of basic products (such as food, crafts, second hand goods... see Peña 1999), covering shares of markets which are ignored by the ordinary trade. Beside this commercial function, informal markets also represent a significant percentage of national economy and guarantee a large number of jobs: therefore *tianguis* do not perform only temporary survival solutions, but rather constitute an effective occupation, which in spite of being out of ordinary economy provide a stable income for about half of the Mexicans (Peña 1999; Avimael Vázquez et al., 2011). *Tianguis* appear so as a complex phenomenon that cannot be explained by simply referring to ‘culture of poverty’ because of its fundamental role in structuring Mexican economy (Sassen 1994).

According to a Mexican federal analysis of occupation (Inegi 2012), in the second trimester of 2012, informal markets are an effective occupation for 2.197.414 people (about 4.5% of total employers), of which about 32% are male and 61% are female; concerning the age, more than 7 % are under 20 years old, about 61% are between 20 and 50 years old and the remainder (32%) are over 50 years old. Many studies about Mexican informality underline that it is characterized by high social and political contents, such as the distribution and use of public space and the relationship between the actors like hawkers, their families, leaders of commercial organizations, local authorities, shopkeepers, customers and inhabitant. The presence of many actors is also consequently connected to the need of social network able to structure the relations: Gómez Méndez (2007: 42) underlines that ‘for different groups of people living in informal trade in public space by social networks appears as a fundamental constant for entry and stay in this activity without them [individual construction of interpersonal ties; A/N] access is very difficult’.

This social networks, formalized in an alliance between street informal vendors organizations (which are social networks themselves) and local authorities, are crucial for two different reasons: the first one is linked to the demand of more stability and certainty of this informal job and the second one is connected to the need of increasing economy of scale. Street vendors organizations are – probably - the most important social networks themselves, as underlined by a poll of street vendors in which the 51 % of them ‘believe they benefit from being members because the organization negotiates on their behalf with local government authorities’ and the about 30 % ‘believe that they benefit from the organization because it is a mechanism to address the problems of distribution of work spaces in the market’ (Peña 1999: 367). According to these results, the author identifies two different roles of this organization: negotiators (or deal-makers) and managers. The first key role – organizations as negotiators or deal-makers – is aimed to ease the relationship between street vendors and local government, because the organizations are able to work as a sort of trade union and have a strong power of bargaining; as Peña (1999) underlines, these benefits are not without cost: street vendors are obliged to pay a fee to the organization and they have to support the candidates from specific political party.

The second key role is connected to the management of informal property rights, which are the fixed location in the street where they operate their business; this role is played in a coercive way by the leader of the organization and mainly for the administration of the correct distribution of stalls and of justice in case of conflicts. According to Peña (1999) and Gómez Méndez (2007), street vendors organizations are the most important example of social networks in Mexican informal markets because they play a crucial role not only for the entry into this kind of job, but also for the permanency in it. Finally, street vendors organizations represent, as already said, a mediator between street vendors and local government, but also at the same time an obstacle for the diffusion of public policies concerning *tianguis*.

#### *Urban features of tianguis*

Social (and economical) relationships lead up to a certain type of urban habitat, which results as a product arising from the sum of different kind of dimensions: social, economic, political, urban, historical, etc. *Tianguis* is a form of production of space, as an appropriation (both in common and Lefebvre's sense), that gives sense, content and shape to public space, without which there is a sort of *tabula rasa*; informal markets are one of the most important public situations in popular neighborhoods that modify (giving sense, content and shape) 'the anonymous, ephemeral, transient and partial space that constitute the core of the dimension of the modern age' (Duhau and Giglia 2004: 184).

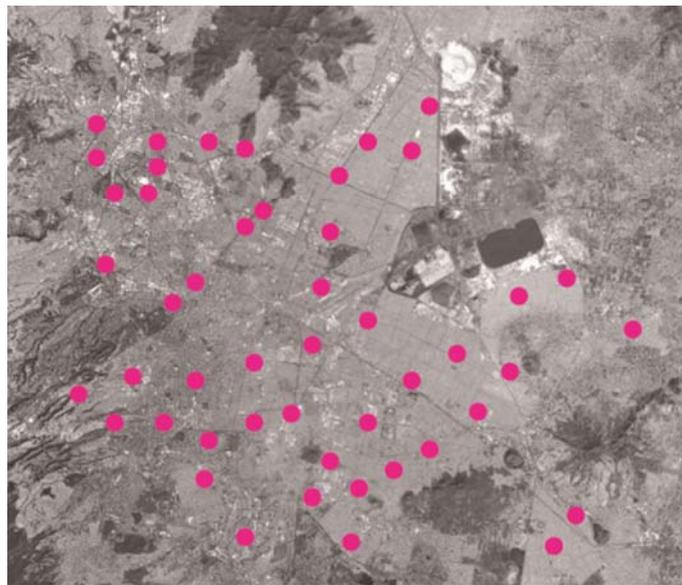


Figure 1. Tianguis in Mexico City. Distribution of tianguis in Mexico Federal District.

The first step, for an urban analysis of informal markets, is a spatial and quantitative census about the diffusion of this phenomenon in Distrito Federal (which is the main federal state of Mexico, where the capital is located). In ill. 1 (a map on 5 km scale) each pink point is a *tianguis*, it is clear that they are widespread mainly in the periphery of the urban area, where the economic and social conditions of people are less solid and therefore there is more needs of a low capital job, but with some presences in the border of historical centre, where informal markets are up for tourists and public projects (Avimael Vázquez et al. 2011). Inegi (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía) determines that in 2011 in Distrito Federal there are 1.415 *tianguis*, which are about 0,95 per 1 km (calculating, as surface, 1.485 km<sup>2</sup>).



Figure 2. Tianguis in a regular structure neighborhood. Google Maps



Figure 3. Tianguis in a regular structure neighborhood. Google Maps



Figure 4. Tianguis in an irregular structure neighborhood. Google Maps



Figure 5. Tianguis in a huge empty space. Google Maps



Figure 6. Tianguis in a little empty space. Google Maps

The importance of *tianguis* in Mexico City is more impressive in a lower scale (like 1 km). As it is possible to see in Fig. 2, informal markets are very recognizable mainly thanks to the colorful sheets (pink, red, light blue or yellow) used as cover for the counters or simply for the goods. In these illustrations it is possible to see that it is not possible to identify a unique manner of distribution of *tianguis* and precise way of relationship between *tianguis* and urban shape, mainly because they are characterized by informality that is intrinsically without precise and fixed rules. Informal markets adapt themselves to the shape of urban areas in which they are settled; it is possible to identify three main types of appropriation of space by *tianguis*:

- in *Figure 2* and *Figure 3* they follow the regular structure of neighborhood and they settle in the streets because of the absence of voids;
- in *Figure 3* in which the irregular structure is also characterized by the absence of void and so *tianguis* assume the shape of a snake;
- in *Figure 5* and *Figure 6* they fill up the empty spaces, both little (in the first one) and huge (in the second one).

## A change of the phenomenon: a question of policies

Giving a brief policy framework about interventions on the street vendors markets phenomenon, an overview linked to other similar situations can be useful. In many countries informal markets are considered as a big issue for the city, for several reasons that are well explained by scholars (Steck 2008 on West African countries). Even if these activities are crucial for the economy (a fragile economy) and contribute to the functioning of the ‘intra-systems’ of the city, more and more developing countries are now trying to tame these informal activities by using a better control, moving and possibly replacing them. Two main logics are beyond this choice: a socio-economical on one side and a spatial-environmentalist on the other. They include several issues in the city, such as inability of controlling new activities (and tax them), difficult land management, spatial disputes, complicate coexistence of resident and street vendors. These are the main themes worldwide detected, but different are the policies chosen in response of it, even though with similar uncertainties and failures.

Generally the common features of this phenomenon, and the countries where it can be identified, are disparity and total lack of spatial justice. In this case the reconsideration of such a big phenomenon should involve negotiation, attention to the special needs of the population and involvement of many actors. In the last decades, the municipal institutions of the main Mexican cities developed a number of actions and programs addressing *tianguis*. A reconstruction of the actions adopted in Mexico City can provide useful elements to understand how governments have approached informal markets and how these approaches relate with this framework.

The Federal Government of Mexico City adopted the first *Programa de Apoyo a la reubicación del comercio popular* in 1993: since then, at least seven attempts have been made to tackle informal markets (Avimael Vázquez et al. 2011).

Mexico City Federal Government	Years	Adopted programs
Manuel Camacho Solís Manuel Aguilera Gómez	1988 -1994	Programa de Apoyo a la reubicación del comercio popular (1993)
Oscar Espinosa Villarreal	1994 - 1997	Programa de Apoyo a la reubicación del comercio popular, segunda etapa (1995)
Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas Solórzano Rosario Robles Berlanga	1997 - 2000	Programa para el Comercio en Vía Pública (1997)
Andrés Manuel López Obrador	2000 - 2006	Programa de Reordenamiento del Comercio en la Vía Pública (2001) Programa Parcial de Desarrollo Urbano Centro Histórico (2003)
Marcelo Ebrard Obrador	2006 - 2011	Programa de Reordenamiento de Comerciantes Informales (2006) Programa de Apoyo para la Reubicación del Comercio Popular del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México (2007)

Table 1. Policy interventions for informal markets in Mexico city. Source: Avimael Vázquez et al. 2011

The institutional approach developed in over a decade has focused on the regularization of *tianguis*, considered as a part of the local economy needing specific legal and spatial adjustments; this attitude has characterized all the programs adopted throughout the years, even if the initial strongly repressive approach was partially and gradually replaced by a more participatory attitude.

The gradual evolution of policy thus has revolved around two main concepts: regulation and relocation (Peña 1999; Avimael Vázquez et al. 2011). On the one hand, the government tried to tighten the control on informal markets, introducing licenses for the commercial activities of street vendors and attempting them into a 'legal' business. On the other hand, a transition from the streets to more 'formal' places was promoted, introducing covered markets (called *plazas*) where to concentrate the (former) street vendors, in order to rationalize both the use of public spaces and the supply chain.

The evolution of policy interventions against *tianguis* shows an enduring element: the attitude towards urban issues (and problems in general) as conveyed in the adopted programs. The Federal Government always maintains a rationalist attitude based on problem solving. Problems are something given and clearly definable, to which specific solutions can be applied: if the issues are mainly insecurity (in a broad sense: from unauthorized uses of space to criminality) and deterioration (both of public spaces and neighborhoods), then the solutions are regulation and relocation. Policy interventions thus are moved by a technical – rational approach, according to which every problem has its solution. Yet, in order to have problems that match with the proposed solutions it is necessary to set them in a specific way, providing descriptions that depict informal markets as a problematic phenomenon which requires a specific (repressive) treatment.

The rational approach underlying this kind of institutional initiative can be observed in the simplistic descriptions of phenomena, to which correspond simplistic solutions. The presence of *tianguis* is considered just as a source of insecurity and deterioration and not as a complex socio-economical phenomenon with deep cultural roots, leading to a repressive approach aimed at reshaping informal commerce in new places and with new rules. However, despite providing clear solutions to clearly defined issues, all the institutional attempts made against informal markets (the last was the *Programa de Apoyo para la Reubicación del Comercio Popular del Centro Histórico de la Ciudad de México* dating 2007) succeeded partially only in the historical centre, failing in the intermediate and peripheral areas of the city where *tianguis* are widespread. Most of the vendors in fact occupied again the streets where they used to work just few days after the introduction of the program.

What appears from Mexico City case is that the deep background of informal commerce is decisive when facing *tianguis*, making impossible to consider only token aspects such as deterioration or insecurity. In particular, street markets are a *sui generis* form of urbanity (Duhau and Giglia 2004) characterized by complex social and economic structures in between the formal and the informal, the legal and the illegal. A partial explanation of the roots of *tianguis* may refer to the role they play in Mexican economy: informal commerce is not simply an endemic phenomenon related to a peculiar historical background, but rather an irreplaceable economic system involving (and feeding) a large number of Mexicans. Together with the economical aspects, some socio-political features are fundamental to fully understand the strength of informal commerce.

As previously described, informal commerce in Mexico is structured by vendors' organizations, that manage the distribution of work spaces and negotiate with institutions; often based on abuse and violence (Castillo Berthier 2005), their power succeeded in gathering the vendors and acting on their behalf. Organizations became thus suitable interlocutors for the corporatist Mexican government (Stamm 2007), leading to a situation of clientelism made of reciprocal practices of favouritism. On the one hand, street

vendors seek a benevolent institutional approach towards *tianguis*, while on the other hand politicians need the political support that can be provided by the critical mass of informal traders. This helps to explain why some coercive actions failed (e.g. markets relocation), while other measures were the result of a negotiation between vendors organizations and politicians (Avimael Vázquez et al. 2011).

The concurrent presence of a strong informal socio-economic system and of a weak institutional structure helps to understand why *tianguis* have been able to make a stand to institutional repressive interventions (up to now, at least). However, the structural institutional weakness and the complementary strength of the informal sector are increased by the ongoing crisis of Mexican democratic system (ascribable to corruption and drug trafficking, opposed by popular movements like Yo Soy 132; see Raveggi 2012).

### **A change of the phenomenon: a question of trading**

Using some few words by Lorenzo Meyer, 'US is shaping Mexico in economical, cultural and political terms', giving new meaning to everything that has a relationship with trading, selling, working. Two different working cultures collide and represent the expression of distant historical and socio-economical path: on one hand the global(ized) US market and on the other hand the Mexican traditional model, with its own roots and rules, considerably shaped by a tough culture of poverty. Mexican traditional model is now changing, facing global challenges and trying to increase competitiveness on other markets. The peculiar aspect of this double relationship between US and Mexico is mainly the dependence of the second to the first: indeed the vast majority of the exported goods from Mexico are generally intended for the US market and not for South America or Asia. On the other hand United States are currently not just exporting their goods to Mexico, but their market platform as well (with different rules, work strategies and concept), so that they can make the emerging markets adapting to their needs, and not the contrary. This is mainly due to the lack of strength in the emerging countries institutions or in the strength that the offer shows.

The case of Wal-Mart can easily epitomize this theoretical situation, showing the massive impact of such a different model on the Mexican economical asset, the cultural concept of work and the shape of the city. Such a diverse model can surely impact on the way the space is perceived, on the way people think and use it, on the size and perception of it on the human relationships. If *tianguis* dialogue at a low scale, Wal-Mart works on a wide range scale, considering that the company strategy is to move as much products as possible by reducing costs and times, cutting in particular external and internal costs, such as the cost of work.

On the other hand, as we have widely underlined, Mexico culture of commerce is fulfilled with sociality, close relationship with the neighborhood, self-made job and small economy, at the border with informality and a self-sustaining strategy typical of the so-called culture of poverty. In contrast with this traditional model is the wide culture of global commerce that underlies the marketing strategy of Wal-Mart, nowadays spread all over the US and in the emerging countries (for instance China and India), often in deprived neighborhoods. Its entry into the Mexican market dates back to 1991, with the name of Wal-Mex. In 2011/2012 Wal-Mex opened 441 new stores and plans to open as many in 2013, in addition to the incoming strategy of supporting the opening of small bank units all over the country, the so called *Banco Wal-Mart*, whom main aim is to offer credit to retail customers. Nowadays Wal-Mart is Mexico's largest private employer, with 200.000 staff and an increasing power perceived by its closer and closer relationships with the central and local authorities. These relationships have recently been monitored by US media with the result of serious charges against Wal-Mart of having paid bribes to speed permits for new store openings all over Mexico (The Economist 2012).



*Tianguis* in itself does not represent a model of equality, fair work and social justice, since informality is at the basis of this system, but shows the result of a cultural path linked to a self sustaining economy that has been crucial for many years in Mexico: indeed it represents a source of income for many inhabitants of Mexico City, as well as for the other cities in the country. Moreover, we can assume another important theme that links *tianguis* to culture, and we are specifically considering in this part the work culture.

We are enlarging this definition, focusing in particular on the ‘workfare system’ (Peck 2001) as a structure of welfare-to-work policies and employability, besides a wider conception of rights in the labor market. It seems paradoxical to use these issues as part of further analysis of the phenomenon and its implications, since, as stated above, it is often essentially borderline situations between informality and illegality, where there are no welfare policies, no guarantees in the workplace, no safety. By the way, is this model far enough from another new incoming model of precarious workfare? Essentially the labor culture claimed by the different strategy of Wal-Mart is the representation of a quite similar model in which there is the same perception of instability, the same ‘feeling temporary’ (Peck 2001), just enclosed in a box in the outskirts of the big Mexico City district, instead of the big *telaraña* all over the neighborhoods. Mexican institutions by using planning instruments, economical instruments and market policies operate a considerable control. Control through planning is often explicit in post-colonial societies characterized by ethnic dominations, while implicit in Western countries, where the resulting market outcomes may discriminate social classes, gender groups or ethnic minorities (Yiftachel 2002). Planning as control deals with crucial dimensions such as space, power and wealth, influencing so social and economic externalities, which Wal-Mex case could be a clear example. The controversial path pursued by Mexican institutions in facing a phenomenon widely spread in its forms and features, such as the *tianguis*, is now leaning to a form just as damaging as the previous, in terms of access to the market, self upgrade of families through small business. This consequence could lead to a stronger discrimination, in a market already largely marked by the scourge of corruption in a country that is still lacking in suitable strategies able to protect from poverty and exclusion.

## Conclusion

As showed in the previous paragraphs, *tianguis* prove to be a peculiar element of Mexico: not only because of their widespread presence, but also (and more importantly) for their deep link to the local cultural heritage. Informal street markets are more than a reaction to poverty, appearing as an expression of the popular need for an effective occupation that fits with traditional practices. The markets are thus a phenomenon with a strength of its own, capable to shape the city as a shared space (Lefebvre 1974), an economic system (Fukuyama 2001), a social structure (Sassen 1994) and a political ecosystem (Wildawsky 1987). The rootedness of *tianguis* is proved by the unsuccessful institutional attempts to tackle them; but in this sense, the strong contrast with Walmart (and globalised commerce in general) is more relevant, given that the retailer present itself as an alternative model of production and consumption (as perfectly expressed by the chosen name: Wal-Mex).

Further studies could examine in depth the relationship between culture and the socio-economic aspects previously outlined, but in conclusion the Mexican informal street commerce appears as a significant example of how culture can shape the evolution of urban contexts, fostering specific phenomena that can obstacle the dominant strategies. In a way, *tianguis* unhinge the traditional dichotomy between formal and informal, legal and illegal, showing how culture can foster alternative forms of space appropriation in competition with each other.



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