Traders in Uncertainty:

Criminal violence, law(lessness) and (dis)order in Mexico City's Central Food Market

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the effects of Mexico's current insecurity crisis on La Central de Abasto, the country's largest wholesale food market, and its provisioning networks. With the rise of neoliberalism and democratization over the last three decades, Mexico has experienced growing levels of violent crime and corruption, and an even more marked growth of perceptions of insecurity and impunity among its citizenry. Scholars describe this as a consequence, symptom, and cause of the fragmentation of sovereignty in contemporary Mexico, in which armed groups—military, police, private security, gangs, vigilantes—struggle against each other in bids for economic or political control over extraction, territory, and populations.

Due to its materiality—spread across territories, jurisdictions, temporalities, and its perishability—the food system is especially sensitive to shifting regimes of authority and power. Based on thirteen months of research among wholesale food merchants, the dissertation develops an ethnographically grounded account of fragmented sovereignty in Mexico through an approach that privileges local perceptions and understandings of the relationship between violence, power, and territorial control. As merchants in La Central navigate the everyday work of food commerce, they come again and again to the question of *who* can guarantee order and how far that guarantee can extend. The dissertation proposes calling this on-going question, in which the source of order is not assumed but is a source of speculation, *sovereign uncertainty*. The different chapters show how this sense of uncertainty emerges and is compounded in situations of conflict, large and small.

The dissertation argues that one of the consequences of sovereign uncertainty is a *resignification* of the familiar in the form of the proliferation of a generalized disposition of mistrust. This mistrust finds its articulation in the suspicion that criminal violence may lurk everywhere, even in long-standing and familiar practices, people, and networks. The familiar, in this context, becomes strange, and the strange threatening. Thus, routine delays in the food distribution chain may appear as evidence that criminal sovereigns and corrupt authorities are flexing their muscle (chapter two). Or, familiar routes of commerce and sociality may seem to be infrastructures for spreading violence (chapter three). Employees may be perceived as potential links to criminal underworlds (chapter four), while street vending unions get described as mafias, and vending permits as evidence of corruption (chapter five). Even crime reports appear as potential technologies for criminal reconnaissance (chapter six).

In this context of sovereign uncertainty people see criminal violence as traveling laterally, colonizing familiar sites, objects and relationships and turning them into vectors of contagion. As commerce takes place in such an environment, it is mistrust, rather than trust, which forms the basis for exchange and circulation of commodities.

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Violence in the Food Market

Roberto was kidnapped early one October morning in 2010 as he drove to work at La Central de Abasto, Mexico's main wholesale food market, with his mother. It was like something from a film, he later told me. Just as they pulled onto a narrow off-ramp, a car that had been tailing them pulled up right behind him. Another one pulled up in front, making them stop. Both had heavily tinted windows. Armed men came out of the car and forced Roberto out. He tried to give them his car keys and wallet, but they pushed him into the back seat of the car, put a blindfold on him, and drove him for less than an hour to a holding house where he would spend the next 42 days, fearing the worst. He knew many people who had been kidnapped, especially from around the market. The children of wholesale merchants, like himself, were especially likely targets, since the families were known to have money. One *bodega* (storefront) like the one his father owned was easily worth $500,000, and that was besides all of the money that they had in bank accounts, or bound up in fruit orders and shipments. Eventually, the kidnappers let him go, after a ransom was paid.

Roberto was telling me this story in a cafe in a leafy, middle-class neighborhood far from La Central de Abasto, where he liked to take his son on his day off. It was September 2014, just a few months into my fieldwork. Earlier that week, he had called to tell me that Norma, one of the women who sold hot beverages and sweet breads out of a grocery cart in the chilly mornings

at the market, and who always stationed herself in front of his *bodega*, had been found murdered, along with her teenage son, Diego. They had failed to show up one morning to work, and when a few days passed without word, the speculation had begun. Perhaps it was her angry ex-boyfriend. Perhaps it was a kidnapping gone wrong. Perhaps she had resisted a robbery. No answers came, no detectives were contacted, and a few days later another young woman with a shopping cart loaded with hot coffee, tea, and creamy *atole* (corn beverage) started showing up in her place. Roberto was disturbed by the murder, as was I. Norma had been the first person besides Roberto, who I had met the previous summer, who I had felt comfortable talking to in La Central when I arrived, and I had used her shopping cart as a sort of informal base during my first weeks there. It was then, somewhat impulsively, that I started honing in on violence as the focus, rather than a peripheral topic, of my dissertation.

During my time doing fieldwork in La Central, I collected innumerable stories of criminal violence. There was the son of the lime merchant, whose kidnapping ended less happily than Roberto's. There was the avocado merchant whose customer was getting robbed, and who took out his own weapon and shot his assailants. There were many stories of armed robberies in the early morning hours, many of them ending simply in empty registers, while others ended in bodily harm. Then there were stories about a former director of the market, who sent men to beat up those who tried to take complaints about his management to the media, or tried to organize to protest problems in the market, like the crumbling infrastructure and the crime. Beyond the walls of La Central, elsewhere in Mexico, where the merchants ventured to source their produce, the violence continued. There were extortions throughout the country, some of them so routine as to have simply become incorporated into the cost of doing business, others new and unexpected.

There were growers who abandoned their fields, and suspicious new characters who took their places. There were police and non-police and maybe-police who stopped trucks on the highway, inspecting paperwork with information about the destination of fruits and vegetables, and demanding payments for the shipment to proceed along its way. There were drug traffickers who hid their goods in the delivery trucks, using them as camouflage.

These snapshots are testimonies to the way in which the violence of Mexico's "age of insecurity" (Davis 2006) affects the fresh food system and the central wholesale market which stands at its center. Over the last two decades, the incidence of violent crimes has soared throughout Mexico, as it has through much of Latin America (World Bank 2008; Davis 2010; Escalante 2010). Crime, corruption and violence, more than any other themes have marked popular and political discourse, and have led to a commensurate proliferation of scholarship about 'violent democracies,' 'fragmented sovereignties,' 'criminal states,' 'citizens of fear' and so forth (Davis 2010; Arias & Goldstein 2010; Rotker 2002; Kessler 2009; Reguillo 2004). "Violence," Diane Davis said, surveying the literature, "could even arguably be considered the central—if not defining—problem in contemporary Latin America."

For wholesale fruit and vegetable merchants like Roberto, who act as intermediaries between Mexico's vast and fertile countryside and the appetites of ever-expanding cities, the food system seems fraught with peril, including armed robberies, kidnappings, and extortions. They view themselves as particularly vulnerable to violence perpetrated by petty criminals, organized crime, and corrupt authorities due to their line of work, which involves travel to sometimes remote areas, large amounts of cash, and constant interaction with strangers. To some extent, of course, their concerns are neither new nor remarkable. Criminals robbing merchants,

corrupt cops extorting truckers, and murder over money are tropes of the mercantile trade the world around. Yet, like many Mexicans, these merchants perceive the scope, intensity and frequency of the violence that they face as being qualitatively and quantitatively unlike anything they have seen before. They describe themselves as living in a time of excess, and nostalgically reminisce about days when robbers only wielded knives and rarely used lethal force, when kidnappings were virtually unheard of, and when corrupt authorities only skimmed a "reasonable" amount of money. Regardless of how accurately their perceptions reflect the findings of crime statistics and risk assessments, the pervasive "sense of insecurity" (Kessler 2009) that they experience has real consequences for their lives, and for the food system in which they are central players.

My dissertation is an ethnographic study of perceptions of insecurity and violent crime on the Mexican food system. In looking at the effects of violent crime on a food market, I seek to contribute to what is a vast and varied body of scholarship on insecurity in contemporary Mexico in two ways. First, unlike most of these studies, my focus is on a network comprised of heterogeneous actors, rather than a particular space. This is important, I believe, because so much of the research on criminal violence and insecurity has been divided in spatial terms, with urban-based scholars focusing on crime, spatial exclusion, marginalization, and police violence (Davis 2010; Caldeira 2001; Goldstein 2007, 2012; Rotker 2002), while rural and provincially-based scholars have focused more on organized crime, territorial disputes, drug trafficking, rural dispossession, and militarization (Pansters 2015; Maldonado 2010; Kernaghan 2012). This reflects a general commitment in practice if not theory, to the ontological distinction between rural and urban (Cronon 1991), and to the clear distinction between different forms of lethal

violence. Yet people, goods, and discourses circulate beyond these boundaries, and one of my goals in this study is to show how perceptions of insecurity move through systems, *reconfiguring* and *resignifying* them along the way.

I also contribute to food studies by drawing attention to a little studied phenomenon—the way in which criminal violence comes to shape the food system—in a long neglected part of the food system. Both wholesale markets and the larger networks of distribution and intermediation of food that they are part of comprise a vast and understudied middle space between the field and table. My dissertation follows in the footsteps of work such as Bestor's (2003) ethnography of fish wholesaling in Japan, Besky's (2016) work on tea markets in Sri Lanka, and Cronon's (1991) history of wheat and beef markets in Chicago in illuminating these largely ignored networks. While quite varied in approach and focus, each of these studies details the usually hidden dynamics internal to these 'in between' food supply chains, and their connections to broader social transformations—globalization, financialization, and frontier expansion/colonization, respectively. I am interested in how the rise in everyday violence that has accompanied Mexican democratization and neoliberalization has shaped the internal dynamics and discourses within the food system and market proper. Further, while studies have shown how wars and free trade agreements disrupt food production, especially in agricultural areas, my dissertation is the first to address how distribution and commercialization systems are affected by everyday forms of insecurity and criminal violence, which are increasingly common not only in Mexico, but throughout the world.

From Fragmented Sovereignty to Sovereign Uncertainty

> These days in the countryside, the situation is complicated for growers, and for us [wholesalers] as well. It depends on the region, no? But in general, what we have now is a great deal of insecurity out there. There are extortions almost everywhere, and sometimes forced take-overs of land…For example you arrive at your fields and there are guys with weapons there, machine guns, filling trucks with your crops, and they say to you, 'What, asshole? Is there a problem here?' and you really don't have any option but to say no and leave. And you can't really report them to the authorities, because you don't know if they are linked to the criminals. What's more, you know they probably are linked to the criminals, but what can be done? In [the state of] Tamaulipas, I have some orange groves, and when they started extorting me a few years back, I went to talk to an acquaintance of mine who was the governor at the time. And you know what he said to me? He said that I could either pay them the fees they were asking for, or I could file a report with the police, but that there was really nothing he could do. So that's when you just don't know what to do. Now I'm looking to see if I should buy some land in a calmer area, or if I should just retire.
> *-Lazaro, orange grower & wholesaler (interview, La Central)*

In addition to fearing for their lives and livelihoods, merchants like Lazaro express uncertainty about *who* the authorities are in a given jurisdiction, and about *where* power really lies, as the underlined portions of his narrative above reveal. Who is behind the extortion of truck drivers on a particular stretch of highway? Who were the armed men who made off with a truckload of avocados? To whom to turn if a buyer doesn't pay for a shipment of oranges or if a contract isn't fulfilled? Is it safe to report a crime to the police, or have they been bought off? How far does the "protection fee" paid in a particular village extend safety? Who guarantees it? These kinds of questions are today routine for many involved in the fresh food trade in Mexico, and they reveal a pervasive uncertainty about the contours and boundaries of sovereign power in contemporary Mexico.

Uncertainty of the sort mentioned above is a symptom of the state decentralization, proliferation of competing armed groups, and territorial conflicts that have infamously gripped

Mexico over the last two decades as a consequence of rampant neoliberalism and democratization. A body of recent scholarship has described these processes of violence and conflict in terms of a crisis of state sovereignty, using concepts such as "fragmented sovereignty" (Davis 2010), "competing sovereignties" (Pansters 2015), and "narco-sovereignty" (van Dun 2014). They describe a landscape in which armed groups—military, police, private security, gangs, vigilantes—struggle against each other, forging and rupturing alliances in bids for economic or political control over extraction, territory, and populations (see also Maldonado 2010, 2013; Cribb 2009; Arias-Vazquez 2014). As violence is exercised with apparent impunity by non-state armed actors—ranging from gangs to cartels to petty criminals to private security forces—the state's lack of monopoly on the means of coercion are rendered plainly visible, leading to an increasing crisis in legitimacy of the state itself (Davis 2010; Arias & Goldstein 2008).

Much of the literature on the Mexican state's tenuous sovereignty focuses on the history and actions of "non-state armed actors" who use violence to consolidate their power over territories and populations, often in rural areas but increasingly in urban zones as well. However, instead of focusing on the shape or nature of these conflicts among competing forces, in this dissertation I am interested in the subjective experience of living in a context of fragmented sovereignty, and on how the sense that the state's power is fragmented, corrupted, and in crisis has become a commonsense in Mexico. I conceptualize the sense of not knowing the rules and limits of authority backed by lethal violence as *sovereign uncertainty*, and trace its effects on the social and material infrastructures that make up the fresh food system. I use the formulation *sovereign uncertainty* to describe the context where the limits and rationalities of authority and

lethal power are unclear, but are held in awareness and are subject to speculation, as in contemporary Mexico. Analytically speaking, of course, the limits of sovereign power are never entirely clear, and power is never held without conflict. Yet only in certain areas or times do people feel uncertain about these limits, and actively impacted by this form of not-knowing. This is one of those times in Mexico, more generally, and in the food system in especially visible form.

I focus on sovereignty because I am following the concerns of my interlocutors in the field, but I take their expressions of uncertainty not as a challenge to uncover the 'actual' workings of power, nor as a reflection of or reaction to an objective set of conditions on the ground. Scholarship on sovereignty's permutations in Mexico and elsewhere tends to be largely a top-down affair, concerned with describing and clarifying the workings and functions of sovereign power as it exists and emerges, rather than as it is experienced or imagined by its subjects. Yet the way that power and authority are imagined has real effects and consequences; it *reconfigures* certain social and material relations, and it *resignifies* others. I therefore use uncertainty as a starting point from which to investigate the forms of power that my interlocutors see and feel as shaping their lives and surroundings, their *sovereignty imaginaries*. Where do they imagine lethal sovereign power—in the sense of the ability to kill with impunity—to lie? How do they differentiate between force and authority? How do they understand, communicate, and respond to its rules and structures? How do their accounts differ or coincide with official, legal, media, or scholarly accounts? These questions animated my research.

My starting premise, therefore, is that the question of who wields the power to decide over life and death—sovereignty's defining characteristics per Agamben—is not simply an

abstract or scholarly question in contemporary Mexico. It is a question that people like Lazaro ask themselves, explicitly or implicitly, ever day. It is also a question with which anthropologists have concerned themselves with renewed vigor over the last decade and a half, faced with the conjoined processes of globalization, neoliberalization, and rising rates of criminal violence, all of which in different ways challenged the idea of the nation-state as the embodiment of sovereign power. In one way or another, anthropological approaches to sovereignty have staked their claim to uncovering the *de facto* workings of sovereignty as a way to point to the limitations of the unitary, ideal-type national sovereignty embodied in the Westphalian imagination of politicians and political scientists alike (Latham 2000; Hanswen & Steppetut 2006; 2007). The studies of de facto sovereignties that have emerged have been illuminating in many ways, fueled by the empirical questions of what authority looks like and acts like, and how it is made and contested on the ground. The result of these studies of proliferating sovereignties has been a parallel proliferation of theoretical reconfigurations of the sovereign concept: there is "aleatory sovereignty" (Dunn & Cons 2013), "horizontal sovereignty" (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009), "fragmented sovereignty" (Davis 2010), "divided sovereignty" (Cribb 2009), "raiding sovereignty" (Lombard 2009), "criminal sovereignty" (Panseters 2015) to name a few. Each of these studies qualifies the ideal type of state sovereignty and suggests different scales and shapes of sovereign power.

The general approach animating many of these studies can be encapsulated in the Comaroffs' assertion that, "Modernist political theory, of course, allows only one sovereignty to any nation, a vertically integrated on vested in the state. *Increasingly*, however, polities consist in a horizontal tapestry of partial sovereignties: sovereignties over terrains and their inhabitants,

over people conjoined in faith or culture, over transactional spheres, networks of relations, regimes of property; sovereignties at war or peace with each other; sovereignties longer or shorter lived, protected by more or less violence (2009, 39, my emphasis)." The project of making sense of this changing tapestry of power entails tracing the historical, institutional, and social conditions under which fragmentation occurs, or becomes visible in the form of violence. Yet a key paradox at the heart of many of these studies appears in this quote as well: while critical of the unitary, centralizing sovereignty of "modernist political theory" as a theoretical construct, they are premised on the idea that idea that there is a shift towards more, or more complex, or more contested sovereignty today. Yarimar Bonilla points out that attention to these 'alternative' or pathological forms of sovereignty, is based on an ontological view of sovereignty as a *thing* rather than as what Timothy Mitchell refers to as a "structural effect" (1989, 1991). Thus, Bonilla argues, "the move to cast these political forms as mutations or exceptions problematically reinscribes the classic model of political sovereignty as an actually existing relationship—a measurable quality of states— rather than viewing it as a discursive figure produced through the colonial encounter" (2017, 332, see also Lombard 2009).

While sympathetic both to the call to "unsettle sovereignty" and to the merits of tracings the reconfigurations and relations of sovereign power in the contemporary world—a project central to legal anthropology and in particular the legal pluralism framework[1]—here I sidestep this debate somewhat by focusing on a different set of questions related to lethal power. That is, I

[1] In a text in which they suggest that the "it is towards interrogating the nature of sovereignty…that legal anthropology is inexorably being drawn" (2009), John and Jean Comaroff point to the usually unrecognized intellectual debt owed to legal pluralism studies in this literature. Indeed, the idea that there are multiple, competing configurations of legal power operating in the same field is the founding insights of the legal pluralism framework, which emerged as a challange to *legal centrism*, or the understanding of law as emanating from one governmental, state, or otherwise authoritative body (Galanter 1981; Falk Moore 1973; Merry 1988; Berman 2009).

am interested not in contrasting formal accounts of power—"law on the books," so to speak—with its de facto operation, but rather with the question of how contexts of fragmented sovereignty are *imagined and given shape* by people on the ground, a task which few studies that explicitly focus on sovereignty-making do. To be sure, the imaginaries of subjects struggling to *enact* sovereignty have been considered (Simpson 2014, Bonilla 2017, Lombard 2009), as have the "burdened subjectivities" of those who reside in "spaces of exception" such as refugee camps, borderlands, or war zones (Dunn & Cons 2013; see also Kernaghan 2009, 2012). Yet by and large the way in which the boundaries and limits of power in contexts of sovereign uncertainty are imagined, experienced and invoked by subjects, perhaps far from the sites where struggles and contestations are happening, has been largely absent.

My underlying proposal, at once methodological and theoretical, is that it is necessary to "bring down" the analysis of sovereignty to the level of the everyday[2], where the potential for lethal violence haunts the banal and quotidian. Following Hansen and Stepputat's definition of sovereignty as "a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence that is performed and designed to generate loyalty, fear, and legitimacy from the neighborhood to the summit of the state" (2007, 296), I analyze how these inchoate forms circulate, acquiring shape and affective force in routine events such as hiring workers, buying and transporting produce, reporting robberies, and talking about shipments. Doing so reveals that people have understandings of how both state and non-state forms of power operate that are partial, contradictory, and often at odds with the accounts of authorities or analysts. Yet their accounts, I argue, are not simply erroneous 'perceptions,' but rather are forms of patterned, normative and

[2] Thanks to Rihan Yeh for this formulation

productive symbolic knowledge that emerge out of a context marked by insecurity and violence. Thus, where individuals seem to express uncertainty—*wondering, questioning, doubting*, and *hedging*—I take this as "switching moments" (Gumpez 1976, Anteby 2003), an indication that competing frames, or schema, are in circulation, and I use the opportunity to try to tease out the logics which inform the action which social actors undertake. Much of my research was spent tracing such instances in talk, but also in narrative, in a decision made, in an object moved. But while I traced uncertainty in different individual and collective moments, it is not, fundamentally, an individual or situational characteristic but rather a more generalized set of discourses that emerge in a context of violence.

I am also interested in the material, social, and psychic effects of living with a constant awareness of the proximity between lethal violence and law-making, in Benjamin's (1978) formulation, and uncertainty about its rules and structures. Living with such uncertainty is ontologically destabilizing (Wittgenstein 1969; Giddens 1979). It turns seemingly routine events, like sharing one's phone number or hiring a worker, into matters of, quite literally, life and death. Yet, as I will show, while both disordering and unsettling to its subjects, such uncertainty also opens up spaces of potential accumulation, and is a resource which actors can and do exploit for personal gain. For example, merchants may cite the unclear boundaries between criminal and state as a reason to avoid transparency in their commercial transactions, or as a way to justify not complying with labor or tax laws.

The food system is a particularly fruitful, if perhaps unexpected, place in which to explore the problem of sovereign uncertainty. As a commercial network, which traverses different territories, bringing together rural, urban, and international fields, it is defined by

competing claims to jurisdiction and authority. Who has the ability (not always synonymous with who has the legal right) to regulate, levy, enforce, arbitrate, and punish are controversial and everyday concerns in the world of commerce, by definition. They are also questions in human societies more generally. Those of us who live in positions of privilege in societies where legal hegemony and political stability are greater may have the luxury of taking for granted that we know the answers to these questions, and that these are concerns only for those who belong to other, more marginal populations or regions. But while the Mexican food system is hardly the only place where uncertainties about the limits, shape, and legitimacy of lethal power comes to bear on daily life, it is particularly visible and salient there, and, importantly for my purposes, ethnographically accessible in the observation of routines and communicative practices. Luckily for my readers, it is also an incredibly interesting and important place, as I hope will become clear in the pages and chapters to come.

Uncertainty & Social Context

Central to the concept of sovereign uncertainty is the question of the relationship between criminal violence—as it is lived and imagined—its social context, and uncertainty. To begin with, what does uncertainty refer to? Where is it located? Is it a cognitive state, as the term "non-knowing" would suggest? Is it an affective state, equivalent with fear, with which it is often lumped together? Or is it a characteristic of a particular context? In *On Certainty,* Wittgenstein (1969) suggests that we need to be able to take things for granted—that we need to be certain of them—in order to be able to know anything at all. He argues that uncertainty and not-knowing are not the same, and that while any claim to knowledge can be doubted, this does not

necessarily lead to a lack of certainty, because there are fundamental propositions which are beyond the realm of doubtability (these are common sense, or that which makes communication, language use, and social life possible). We are certain of those things without which it would be impossible to express doubt or knowledge. Certainty, then, is "the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" (94). When this background is missing, or wrested away, when trust in the fit between experience and perception is lacking, we become ontologically insecure, we are unable to 'descend into the ordinary' (Das 2006; Giddens 1979). True uncertainty in this sense is highly destabilizing, but it is also, I would argue, fleeting. It is truly an affect in that it can only exist momentarily before it is interpreted and narrated.

Wittgenstein's definition of uncertainty is too narrow for my purposes—my interlocutors in the market were not on the verge of existential crisis at all times, bereft of the words to describe or make sense of the problems that they faced—but it points to the sensation that was widespread in La Central that something about the problems they were experiencing, encapsulated in the violent crime that they saw as omnipresent, exceeded their categories for parsing good from bad, moral from immoral, and legal from illegal. Uncertainty, as I understand it, therefore, is an affective state which manifests in people, but which is not a question of individual psychology or indecision. It is instead a widespread social disposition, a structure of feeling (Williams 1975, Moodie 2012). Wittgenstein's emphasis on the structural nature of certainty, on its "inherited background," helps me to define uncertainty as an affect that emerges in particular in moments of considerable transformation and instability, where existing categories for making sense of things may no longer seem adequate, and where anxieties are higher.

Uncertainty is therefore linked to *context*, and in particular to contexts of instability or

insecurity. Daniel Goldstein's research in a poor Bolivian neighborhood, for example, shows how a widespread sense of uncertainty emerged in a context of insecurity, marked by the confluence of high crime *and* lack of basic services from the neoliberal state. To live in conditions of insecurity, he suggests, is to "occupy a habitus of uncertainty and fear that is at once social, psychological, and material" (Goldstein 2012, 4). For the people with whom he works, everyday life is "highly unstable, characterized more by fragmentation and unpredictability than by order and routine" (*ibid* 15). This uncertainty born of neoliberalism-cum-insecurity is, Goldstein argued, not simply a response to violent crime, but rather a consequence of being simultaneously included and excluded by the law, or "outlawed." Ellen Moodie (2010), similarly, explores how uncertainty emerged as a dominant structure of feeling in the context of post-war violence in El Salvador. Due to soaring rates of criminal violence, and the economic insecurity brought by neoliberal transformations to the local economy, the post-war period was characterized by a sense of "not-knowing" which found its articulation in the circulation of crime stories.

More broadly, anthropologists have in recent years described amply the uncertainty and contingency of life lived under the predatory logics of neoliberalism, militarism, (post) colonialism, and austerity, a tendency Sherry Ortner (2017) has described as a turn to "dark anthropology." The Comaroffs, for example, write of "the murkiness of the late modern world, the difficulty, in it, of keeping apart il/legalities, un/certainties, un/knowns, insides from outsides, freedom from capture" (2017, xviii). Mbembe, similarly, describes contemporary Africa as characterized by a "radical uncertainty" where "life may suddenly take unbearable turns (war, extreme inflation, pandemics, etc.)…each time, reality is erased, recreated, duplicated…this

power of proliferation (and its ability to obliterate notions of truth and falsehood, of the real and the unreal, of the visible and occult)" (2002, 639-40). Many others, like these, connect periods of dizzying transformation characteristic of the contemporary moment with uncertainty. In this, they echo the arguments made by Anthony Giddens (1979) and others decades back, on the destabilizing effects of living in modernity in which the disembedding of social institutions, "the 'lifting out' of social relations from local contexts, and their rearticulations across indefinite tracts of time-space" lead to "radical doubt" and, ultimately, ontological insecurity.

Critiques of the bleakness of these "dark" approaches to anthropology notwithstanding, I build on this body of scholarship by linking my interlocutors' expressions of sovereign uncertainty to experiences of historical crisis. Since the 1980s, the Mexican food system has been radically transformed by neoliberal policies. On the production side, free trade agreements and the increased influx of subsidized American corn into the Mexican market, coupled with disinvestment from rural infrastructures meant to give small producers greater power, have led to waves of migration out of farming areas, as well as opened the space for encroachment by drug producing and trafficking organizations (Fitting 2011, Maldonado 2014, Dube et al. 2014). Concurrently, Mexico has seen an explosion of supermarkets, grocery chains, malls, and big-box stores, many of them foreign companies, who have their own supply chains that largely bypass traditional avenues such as wholesale merchants and markets like La Central, while taking customers away from the public markets who source from La Central (Torres Torres 2011; Giglia 2007). Taken together, these constitute a tremendous transformation in the terrain on which food commerce is conducted, and lead to a great deal of uncertainty for food systems actors.

More broadly, Mexico's process of democratization, like that of other places in Latin America has been associated with an increase in violence in rural and urban areas (see Arias & Goldstein 2010; Davis 2006, 2010). The break down of the Revolutionary Institutional Party's hegemonic control over Mexican politics in the 1990s created a proliferation of political actors and aspirants, and a situation of intense partisan in-fighting and conflict between different state agencies and scales of law enforcement. This has been compounded by the simultaneous expansion of the globalized drug market, and of the US-led "war on drugs" (Panseters 2015; Maldonado 2013, 2014). While scholars and experts have debated the extent to which crime is *actually* rising, the reasons for it, and what the best ways to explain it are (see Davis 2006 for a summary), it is clear that the *perception* of increased and unprecedented criminal violence itself constitutes a context of transformation which generates uncertainty (Kessler 2009). The sense that politics is hopelessly corrupted, that politicians are virtually indistinguishable from criminals, that the state is a *narcoestado*, and that people are apathetic in the face of ever rising violence are characteristic of this sense of a society deeply in crisis.

Crime and Expanding Repertoires of Misfortune

Even in the most murky and uncertain of contexts—indeed, especially where there are rapid and often devastating political, economic, and social reconfigurations—language and talk about disorder and misfortune offers a way to parse through and domesticate uncertainty. This is why true uncertainty, as an absence of structure in Wittgenstein's sense, is untenable as an enduring structure of feeling. In my research, accordingly, I followed the ways in which merchants and other food systems actors narrated and otherwise discussed incidences of crime,

misfortune, and disorder in the market, following a long tradition of anthropologists turning to the study of the dirty, disorderly, liminal, and dangerous as a way to make sense of social orders and norms (Turner1974, Douglas 1966, Schneider & Schneider 2008, Comaroff & Comaroff 2016, Anteby 2007, Kulick 1998). Whether misfortune is ultimately attributed to witches, angry gods, corrupt politicians, wild youth, or urbanization, these figures of disorder, as Durkheim (1938) suggested long ago in reference to crime, are what allows for the social body to recognize its own form and moral boundaries.

Through a range of studies spanning geographical areas, time periods, and discursive forms, anthropologists have suggested that in contexts of significant change of the sort generated by large-scale political upheaval, social transformation, technological or economic change, or conflict, people develop new (or resurgent) ways of labeling and making sense of disorder. The Comaroffs (2006, 2001, 2018), for example, have pointed to the proliferation of explanations in South Africa that posit witchcraft and the occult as lying behind misfortune, and suggest that these accounts are tied to the tremendous changes wrought by neoliberalism and post-colonial despair. Sarah Muir (2015), writing about the post-crisis in early 2000s Argentina, suggested "corruption" as the dominant idiom through which disorder was described and a national public constituted. Luise White (2001), writing about the circulation of vampire stories in colonial Africa, described these as emerging from and describing the violent and predatory nature of the colonial encounter. In each of these cases, uncertainty is given form and expression in different idioms of blame, or in Mary Douglas's formulation, within a given community, "for any misfortune there is a fixed repertoire of possible causes among which a plausible explanation is chosen, " (1984, 5).

In Mexico, stories about criminal violence and corruption represent particularly potent ways of articulating disorder and making sense of uncertainty, as the testimonies that I draw upon in this dissertation demonstrate. This is hardly unique to Mexico. In post-socialist contexts, for example, talk of "the mafia" came to circulate widely, a phenomenon which Verdery (1993) attributed to uncertainties surrounding the "transition" from communism, where the "visible hand" of the state was replaced by the "invisible hand" of the market. Differentiating between the "conceptual mafia" and the "actual mafia," Verdery argued that "mafia-talk" expressed the anxieties experienced by ordinary people faced by new and unfamiliar forms of accumulation, violence, and dispossession (see also Ries 2002). Moodie (2010), argues that sharing "crime stories" offered people a "clear way to talk about and evaluate the post-war transition in El Salvador" (2010, 2). To sum it up, in typically sweeping fashion, the Comaroffs suggest that global fascination with violence and crime, is part and parcel of the changes wrought by late modern capitalism, what they refer to as a "tectonic shift…in the triangulation of late modern capitalism, the state form, and so-called "neoliberal governance" (2017, xvii). They write:

> "Narratives of lawlessness rival other topics of talk, cutting across lines of difference: testimonies to transcendent truths, they root the they root credibility in the heft of personal experience. This endless retelling of mundane melodrama seems part of an ongoing effort to find the general in particular events, to wrest some kind of order from cacophony and chaos" (2017, 172).

Yet while the rise in insecurity fears and discourses has reached a fever pitch in recent years in Mexico and beyond, widespread concern about criminal violence is hardly new. In a recent book on the meaning of crime in mid-twentieth century Mexico, the historian Pablo Picatto (2017) points out that in the post-revolutionary years and through the mid twentieth century, crime held a central place in the public sphere. In crime fiction novels, tabloid *nota roja*

(red paper) newspapers, and in everyday gossip people poured over the more lurid details of murders, famous court cases, and criminal profiles. Despite the existence of strict penal codes and the facade of stable legality, Mexican justice was marked by slow and inefficient courts, and large degrees of extra-legal state appropriation and law-making. In this context, Picatto argues, the public sphere rather than institutions of law were where people turned to make sense of crime and justice, and through it they developed a form of "criminal literacy", a standardized set of knowledges and criteria about how the law and crime *actually* operated. Key to their criminal literacy, he argues, was the general consensus of impunity as a "basic fact of Mexican life" in which "justice was only tangentially associated with the law, and crime seldom related to punishment" (Picatto 2017, 102).

In contemporary Mexico, the idea that impunity is ubiquitous and that there is little connection between law and justice are still hegemonic. What has changed, in recent years, is the emergence of what Roberto Escalante Gozalbo (2012) has referred to as "a new language" to talk about crime and social violence in which the figure of the *narco* and organized crime have assumed a central explanatory role for all manner of disorder. Terms such as *narcos* (drug traffickers), *capos* (cartel leaders), *plazas* (market), *sicarios* (hit men), *rutas* (smuggling routes) and others have come to comprise, Escalante argues, a shared vocabulary which makes up a new common sense in which organized crime is blamed for forms of violence with little convincing evidence. That is, *all* crime is potentially organized crime and *all* forms of illegality are related to each other in chain fashion. One of the consequences of this, Escalante argues, is the increase of calls for 'zero tolerance' and *mano dura* (hard fisted) approaches to crime.

Escalante traces this new language via a detailed study of news media reporting on crime

and insecurity in the early 2000s, and argues that the Mexican state and media have adopted the language of security and terrorism from the United States in the post-9/11 era, using the figure of the *narco* in the place of the terrorist. The problem with the "excessive certitude" of these metanarratives about crime, he argues, is that they obfuscate the very nature of violence and make it impossible to understand what is *really* going on. Others have made similar positivist arguments about the mythologizing or fictionalizing nature of the organized crime narrative and its relationship to reality, largely based on analyses of media and government sources (Zavala 2018; Nestares 2005). They point to the fact that this sort of narrative, in which the criminal element stands outside of the state and requires strong (militarized) state interventions, both shifts the focus from the sort of historical and structural conditions which have given rise to violence in Mexico, and absolve the state itself for responsibility for those conditions.

As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the specter of organized crime and the violence it promises are, as Escalante argues, central to the sovereign imaginaries of violence that people in La Central draw upon. Moreover, the idea that "organized crime" can be marshaled to explain all forms of criminal disorder makes it a new and important addition to local "repertoires of misfortune"[4] which can be marshaled even in instances where criminal violence was not necessarily immediately obvious, resignifying the situation as one of *narco* violence. Yet if we look at how the "new language" is taken up in talk and interaction, rather than focusing on its production and circulation in mass media, it becomes clear that the "excessive certitude" that Escalante points to as a problem appears differently when taken as but part of a *repertoire* rather than completely hegemonic discourse. That is, this new vocabulary doesn't completely replace or trump other accounts, but rather provides another way in which to

explain disorder. It thus allows for a way of contesting existing frameworks, while potentially sowing more uncertainty about who the true authors of misfortune may be, and what their relationship to structures of sovereign power are.

Violent crime in Mexico is not a problem for which there are no words, or that cannot be named. To add a historical dimension to Douglas' functionalist notion of "fixed repertoires,"—they are shifting rather than fixed—we might say that new ways of identifying and articulating misfortune that emerge in contexts of change and uncertainty consist of *expanding repertoires of misfortune*, in that they add onto, modify, and coexist with previous frameworks rather than displace them entirely. Often these new repertoires appear in the form of rumors, which circulate at the level of everyday talk and which may stand in stark opposition to 'official accounts' of experts and authorities. Throughout this dissertation, then, I am interested in accounting for these expanding repertoires[3], the frames that my interlocutors use to make sense of misfortune in a context of change and insecurity. These expanding repertoires of misfortune are, I argue, the way in which the problem of sovereign uncertainty comes to be articulated in contemporary Mexico. In the attempts to parse through who is to blame for what, where the boundary between threat and safety lies, and to whom to turn to ensure justice, there is a great deal of uncertainty, but there is also a constant, on-going attempt to make sense, make decisions, and establish oneself as a moral actor.

In the chapters that follow, I illustrate different elements of the sovereign imaginaries that

[3] The concept of criminal literacy, and Picatto's linking of these forms of shared, practical knowledge to mediated practices (of reading, writing, watching, and talking) is useful in giving the notion of "repertoires of misfortune" a more pragmatic dimension, and to show the ways in which these repertoires can expand. I prefer, however, to use repertoires in order to emphasize the element of choice among many possibilities that I see as characteristic of the way in which blame is described in any given context. Repertoires, in my view, emphasizes the agentive act of choosing among possibilities, while maintaining the collective nature of the choices among which one can reasonably choose. If we return to the lime crisis, we can see how these repertoires were expanded and mobilized.

my interlocutors in the market drew upon, and show how they affect the decisions people take, such as choosing whether or not to report a crime, travel, confide in somebody, or continue to buy from a particular producer. Taken individually, they may appear as simply different perspectives, only some of them explicitly 'confused' or 'uncertain'; but collectively, they reveal a terrain where the boundaries between legitimate authority, force, and law are fraught and subject to speculation and redefinition[4]. Just as "everyday studies of the law" suggested looking at how the law came into effect in everyday actions, far from sites of power, I suggest that we need to look at how fragmented and contested sovereignties appear and acquire force in everyday life. Tracing how people wade through this "epistemic murk" (Taussig 1987) in the course of their daily lives, and how they imagine and negotiate the relationship between force and authority in the process, is the task of this dissertation.

Methods: The Market *in/as* the System

At 4 o'clock in the morning, when the rest of Mexico City is still, La Central de Abasto, the city's main fresh food terminal—at 327 hectares the largest such market in the world—is at peak business. Hundreds of thousands of buyers from restaurants, grocery stores, retail markets, and street food stands clog the roads that encircle the complex, filling the air with fumes and the trumpeting of impatient horns, eager to make their purchases and leave before the morning rush

[4] Recognizing themselves as part of this late modern murk, and sensitive to the epistemic violence that ordering can entail, some scholars embrace a more indeterminate approach to imposing order on disorderly contexts. Daniel Goldstein suggests that "as ethnographers of uncertain situations, we need to be circumspect in our conceptual impositions, and the ways in which we order our data—much like the state's attempts at ordering life—can obscure, marginalize, and unfairly privilege some over others. This can be particularly problematic when what we are analyzing is in itself better understood through the lens of uncertainty than order" (2012, 253-4). Penglase, similarly, explains that rather than try to "explain away contradictions, or reveal the truth hidden under such layers of ambiguity and uncertainty, I try to show how these contradictions and silences are socially created" (2014, 21).

hour begins. Inside the main produce market's large cement structure there are alphabetically-labeled aisles a kilometer long, each lined with *bodegas*, privately held storehouses worth hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars, specializing in different types of fruits and vegetables from all around Mexico and the world. There, tens of thousands of merchants and workers compete for the attention of the buyers who walk up and down the aisles looking for the best deal, shouting prices, greetings, jokes, and instructions. Inside of each *bodega*, workers scurry around, arranging produce into categories by size and quality, and filling orders for customers. At the center of each *bodega* sits a platform or booth where somebody from the merchant's family or a surrogate sits and receives payments, issues receipts, answers calls, and oversees the commotion. Tucked away in the back or up a narrow set of stairs, each *bodega* has its own small bathroom and office space, where financial documents, records, and personal items may be stored.

Figure 1. Morning Market // Photo Credit: Juan Carlos Perez

Figure 2. Morning market 2 // Photo Credit: Juan Carlos Perez

Figure 3. Truck loading area

Figure 4. A view from inside a bodega booth

It is always bone-achingly cold at these pre-dawn hours high up in the mountains, so buyers and sellers alike wear layers of thick sweatshirts, puffy down vests, and hats. Invariably, tucked inside their pockets and folds of clothing, they carry large amounts of cash, which remains the preferred medium of transaction for the majority of buyers. There are no good estimates for how much money changes hands at la Central on the average day, but authorities assert that in terms of sheer volume, it is second only to the Mexican stock exchange. Once purchases are made and cash has changed hands, goods are hauled manually by men—most of them young and poor, many of them migrants from rural areas—pulling metal dollies loaded with sacks of produce that can tower two meters high and weigh hundreds of kilos. There is no mechanized transit, no motorized dollies or conveyor belts, within the market proper, so all of the movement of goods in and out of warehouses takes place, quite literally, on the backs of

these ten thousand or so men, known as *diableros*. As they run through the market, trying to amass momentum to lighten their load, they whistle loudly, alerting pedestrians to stay out of their path. They haul purchases to the parking area, where the buyers' vehicles await. Once loaded, the produce will continue its journey to businesses and markets throughout Mexico City.

Figure 5. *Diablero* at work

La Central, those who work there like to say, is like a city within a city. And indeed, in many ways this is true. Each day, it is visited by an average of between 300,000-500,000 people[5]. It boasts its own postal code, garbage processing facility, and a modest public transportation system—two routes along which shiny green buses circuitously make their way around the sprawling complex. There are, as well, all of the usual Mexican and international corporate

[5] While the official numbers that circulate in publications put out by market administration suggest that it is at the high end of this spectrum, critics within the market suggest that these numbers don't reflect the current state of decline. Flavia Echanove, a geographer who has spent years studying the Mexican food system, agrees that the numbers are likely far lower (personal communication).

banks, a dedicated police force, a health center, prayer halls, restaurants, shops of all sorts, and even an art gallery. Throughout the market, like in most every other neighborhood in Mexico City, street vendors dot the thoroughfares, selling coffee, foods, batteries, protein shakes, the thick canvas aprons merchants and workers traditionally wear, and newspapers. Wealthy merchants and their less successful counterparts, manual laborers, truck drivers, garbage pickers, beggars, musicians, prostitutes, accountants, cleaners, waitresses, cooks, and government workers—many tens of thousands of people, all told— all earn their livings from La Central, and contribute essential labor to making the market function as it does, as the singularly most important center for food distribution in all of Mexico.

Yet no market exists as an autonomous entity. Hidden behinds La Central's frenetic and colorful energy lies its complex web of supply networks: a dense infrastructure of social relations, communicative pathways, material flows, technologies, and institutions. Workers need to be contracted to load produce onto trucks, which need drivers, who need to be trusted with documentation and money for the merchandise. The shipments need to be coordinated to arrive in the correct amounts and times at the market so as to maximize their value, they need to be conserved and sorted appropriately, and their prices set. Each of these steps and decisions involves relations of exchange and trust, and I first came to La Central interested in learning more about these networks and relationships, and the informal and formal laws that governed them.

Dispersed and heterogeneous networks, like national or transnational commodity chains, provide their own set of methodological challenges. Does one follow a particular strand of the network? Often, in food systems studies, this entails following the flow of a particular product,

such as coffee, avocado, corn, or soy. Each product, after all, has its own particularities in terms of processing and distribution, which entails different structures of intermediation and regulation. Alternately, one can focus on a particular type of actor—truck drivers, or small-scale producers, for example. Or, one can focus on a problem, as I ultimately ended up doing. Originally, I had planned for La Central to be one stop in a more multi-sited ethnography, mindful of the debates about the limits of traditional single-sited studies that artificially delimited an autonomous 'field,' removed from history and larger systems of power (Marcus 1995; Gupta & Ferguson 1997). Following Nordstrom's (2004) call to "follow the problem" and her interest in revealing the myriad (il)legal networks that comprise international supply networks, I had hoped to spend time going between field and market, following the routes of produce shipments in order to see the forms of regulatory authority that shaped the circulation of foodstuffs. I knew that I wanted to focus on wholesale merchants, who acted as the primary intermediaries between producers and consumers, coordinating everything from growing schedules to transport to pricing. As such, I had envisioned spending significant time in La Central, but also making multiple trips 'backwards' along the supply lines, following the contacts of different wholesalers. Once I arrived in Mexico City in June 2014, however, it became clear that this would be far more challenging than I had anticipated.

To begin with, I had underestimated the extent to which precisely those supply networks that I wanted to follow were carefully guarded trade secrets. Their opacity, as I discuss in chapter one, has been historically cultivated, and in its relative invisibility from the state's—and analyst's—gaze has been a source of strength (Scott 1998). This same opacity born out of residing "on the margins of the state" (Das & Poole 2004), however, is also a source of

vulnerability today. Whether because they want to protect themselves from competitors, regulators, criminals, or simply nosy anthropologists, merchants are notoriously secretive. Establishing trust, meanwhile, takes a significant investment of time, but even as I gained the trust of some merchants, I found that this didn't easily translate into more doors opening beyond their *bodega*. I had taken too seriously the adage that La Central was "like a village," and realized only later that its boundedness by cement, proximity, and regulatory infrastructure was a veneer that belied the fact that the strongest bonds of trust, transparency and circulation existed not *within* the market, but between it and its supply chains, stretching vertically out from the countryside to the city. This meant that gaining the contacts and trust necessary to network out to the countryside entailed starting virtually from scratch at every step; there was little in the way of a snowball effect possible.

Secondly, I realized upon reaching Mexico that I myself felt unsafe about what the research I was embarking upon would entail. I had not initially conceptualized my research as being about violence and insecurity, but rather questions of in/formal governance and il/legality. While I knew that these questions were ultimately inextricable from the question of violence, in its symbolic, structural and 'mythic' forms (Benjamin 1978, Gupta 2002, Bourdieu & Wacquant 2003, Farmer 2004; Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois 2004), it was only as I started talking to people in the field in more depth that I realized that the threat of lethal violence was an everyday, structuring presence rather than abstraction. Nearly everyone I met had been directly affected by extortion, kidnapping, murder, or armed robbery. My closest informant, the merchant Roberto, had been kidnapped a few years earlier; Norma, the *cafetera* with whom I spent time during my first weeks in La Central, was murdered a month or so into my research; several armed robberies,

a couple of them lethal, took place while I was doing fieldwork. Insecurity was on everyone's minds, and it was shaping their mobility (chapter three), the way that they related to their employees (chapter four), and even the way that they reported crime (chapter five). While I realized that my privileged status as a white foreigner and outsider to the market, coupled with my non-threatening status as a graduate student studying "Mexican food and markets" provided me a large degree of protection where much violence is not entirely arbitrary, it dawned on me that I didn't have the courage or bravado to go off to the unknown countryside in the company of acquaintances and friends-of-friends, most of whom were men. This is not necessarily because the violence in the countryside is quantitatively or qualitatively complete different, but rather that it would have entailed building new contacts, confidants, and sets of knowledge in each place. It felt challenging enough to carve out routines and networks within the market.

These two challenges, when I started doing fieldwork, were incredibly demoralizing. They also, I eventually realized, provided some insight into the experiences of my interlocutors in La Central, who only had direct access to observe and participate in their own, personal supply networks and contacts, and who were acutely aware of the threats that accompanied forays into areas where they were not well protected. They too were constantly trying to develop ways of knowing what was going on among their neighbors, competitors, and regulators in order to keep one step ahead of them. They were also trying to figure out where safety could be guaranteed and where danger lurked. They too had to piece together the forest from the trees, relying on hearsay and intuition about branches. Writing in a very different context, Clifford Geertz (1978) said about the bazaars of Morocco that

> the search for information—laborious, uncertain, complex, and irregular—is the central experience of life in the bazaar. Every aspect of the bazaar economy

> reflects the fact that the primary problem facing its participants is…not balancing options but finding out what they are.

This search, I believe, is not specific to the "bazar economy," but rather is characteristic of markets in general, where limited information makes gossip, rumor, and speculation essential to knowing one's way around. Those same forms of information became my data, and La Central, as a site of convergence for the actors that I mentioned above, represented a prime place in which to collect it, a centralizing node in the larger network of the food system. From there, I was able to meet, observe, and listen to people who came from and carried stories (and shipments) from all around Mexico.

Most of my fieldwork, which I conducted in the summer of 2012 and from June 2014-July 2015, thus took place in La Central de Abasto. I conducted archival research for the historical chapter in the Mexico City Archives and the National Archives, and paid a visit to the avocado producing region of the state of Michoacán to see the networks that supply the wholesale market. I also interviewed people throughout the city. The bulk of my time, however, was spent in that one sprawling central market. During my first few months there, I worked as a waitress in a restaurant frequented by wholesalers, in order to become a 'familiar face' and to have a context in which to chat, eavesdrop, and get to know the market. As I became familiar with the merchants, I started spending time at their businesses, going between *bodegas*, watching the daily routines of arrivals, storage, sorting, sales, and payments that comprised the life of the market. I accompanied *diableros* on their rounds, truck drivers on local intra-city deliveries, and tried my hand at sorting and selling avocados in one of the *bodegas* (my speed left something to be desired). I conducted formal interviews with merchants, but also with their employees, with *diableros*, with street vendors, police, truck drivers, and government administrators. I also started

attending meetings and events hosted by UNCOFYL, one of the merchants' associations. This included meetings with market authorities, law enforcement, foreign delegations of produce vendors, and consultants, as well as several parties to celebrate the association and the inauguration of La Central. Some days I came in at 4 o'clock in the morning, but many days I came a bit later, when the intense commercial bustle was past its peak and people had time to sit and talk to each other and to me.

I collected my data in a notebook, scrawled full of hasty observations and detailed accounts that I would often write in the restaurant at La Central where I first waitressed and which served as my place of respite from the bustle of the market. I carried my voice recorder with me religiously, and all of the large chunk quotations throughout the dissertation are translations of the transcriptions of recorded speech. Yet often, I was unable to record because people were reluctant to go on tape, and at other times the quality of the recording was so poor as to be unusable, especially when I tried to capture dialogues on the sales floors of *bodegas*. In such cases, I tried to reconstruct the dialogues from memory and notes as much as possible. Much of the dialogue which is embedded in narrative and not italicized is based on such approximations.

As a result of this research process, my dissertation is in part an ethnography of a wholesale market, and in part an account of the larger fresh food system in which La Central is a central node. Some of the claims that I make, accordingly, are about the effects of violence and insecurity on the fresh food system as a network, especially in chapters one, two, and three, while others are about how they related to dynamics internal to the market, such as hiring practices (chapter four), reporting crimes (chapter five) and debates over local informal street

vendors (chapter six). Throughout, however, the protagonists of my narrative are the wholesale merchants, *comerciantes mayoristas*, who straddle the countryside and urban centers of distribution.

The Merchants of La Central

The wholesale merchants of La Central are a heterogeneous group. All of them are involved in coordinating the distribution of produce from Mexico and around the world to retail markets, restaurants, and neighborhood markets, as well as some grocery stores. Most wholesalers are owners (or, more precisely, long-term leaseholders) on *bodegas* in La Central, which are worth tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on size and location in the market. Many of them come from families of merchants, and are the second, third, or even fourth generation to work in the produce trade. They often trace their family origins to a particular region of Mexico, and retain ties to that region through their trade. Of these long-standing merchant families, the vast majority have been in La Central since it first opened in 1982, having moved there when the previous wholesale district, La Merced, was shuttered by the federal government. Their businesses are formally registered, they hold leases to their properties, and they regularly, if incompletely and begrudgingly, pay taxes. In this sense, the wholesalers consider themselves to be part of the formal economy, in contrast with street vendors and informal vendors. As I will discuss further along in the dissertation, this claim is contentious at best, since the food trade is characterized by a high degree of informality.

Some of the wholesalers are producers as well as merchants, and may ship their goods to a global market, while others buy a few truckloads of goods per week from regional traders and

sell them in La Central. Some are players on the global produce scene, shipping goods to and from the USA, Europe, and Latin America, while others are strictly regional players. Some are extremely wealthy and own, in addition to their *bodegas*, large houses, nice cars, and beach homes, while others work seven days a week and have no such luxuries. Some of them have completed university, travel abroad regularly, do yoga, and possess the habitus of cosmopolitan, elite Mexicans, while others speak only Spanish, of the colorful, lilting, and swear-word filled variety that buyers in La Central often warm towards.

Figure 6. Wholesalers relaxing

While their influence has waned somewhat as a result of changes to the food system that emerged in the wake of neoliberalization, which I discuss in chapter one, the merchants are, as a whole, an important and influential group. Overall, however, they have not been studied extensively, nor have there been many ethnographic studies of similar actors in other countries. Anthropologists have extensively written about informal street vendors (Anjaria 2011, Goldstein

2015, Hayden 2014, 2018), drug dealers (Bourgois 1996), semi-formal markets (Gandolfo 2013, Goldstein 2015) indigenous market women (Behar 1990, Weismantel 2001), traditional markets (Malinowski & De La Fuente 1982, Geertz 1963), and bazaars (Geertz 1978), but relatively few have been dedicated to big players and influential groups in national or global economies. Some notable exceptions are Caitlin Zaloom's (2006) study of Chicago commodities traders, Karen Ho's (2009) study of Wall Street investment bankers, and Sarah Besky's (2016) study of tea brokers in Sri Lanka. Overall, however, studies of powerful economic actors has been sparse in anthropology.

In part, this is no doubt due to the difficulties of "studying up." In my work with the wholesalers I found it easier to gain access to the less successful merchant families as a general rule. Some of the biggest actors in La Central are virtually impossible to track down contact information for, and are rarely to be found on the sales floors of the market. When I did manage to secure an interview with one of the members of a family who runs a large fruit importing company, I had to pass through multiple bullet proof doors and barricades to access a small office tucked up in the upper floor of a *bodega* and my requests to spend some days observing trading were politely but firmly declined (on the basis of security concerns, no less). I quickly realized that nothing short of a direct, personal phone call of introduction or being physically accompanied to a first meeting by an intimate would suffice to gain even brief access to these businessmen who, as befits their vocation, prize privacy above all else.

Yet I believe that another impediment is that merchants are complex figures, narratively speaking, for anthropologists to write about and to do research with. Unlike their more subaltern counterparts in informal markets or marginalized spaces, 'formal' merchants are difficult to fit

into the "suffering slot" (Robbins 2013). They are also not easy to do activist or advocacy work on behalf of, in part because their own political interests and economic activities tend to be quite far from those of the average critical, engaged anthropologist. In food systems, in particular, merchants and traders are often seen as predatory capitalists, intermediaries whose profits clearly come at the expense of rural producers' wellbeing, food security, and legality. This perspective has certainly colored some of the major studies of the Mexican food system (Gonzalez Villarruel 2009; Echanove 2002; Bertierh 1986, 1994).

In one of the few studies ever done of wholesale food merchants in Mexico, the sociologist Hector Berthier (1986) is unsparing in his characterization of the wholesalers, who he describes as oligarchs. Breaking them into five groups according to the approximate capital they possess, he refers to the wealthiest ten percent as having "amassed their fortunes through betrayal and fraud…they stop at nothing and are obsessed with amassing power" (361). The following thirty percent he describes as "using strategies both licit and illicit to attain their goals, which are money and power" (362). The following thirty percent he describes as having succeeded in establishing some commercial success only through great sacrifice, which leads them "live in fear of anything that might threaten their capital" (362). The remaining forty percent he describes as struggling to earn a living, and often failing due to their own irresponsibility or lack of market knowledge, and their lack of acceptance by other merchants. All of them, he argues, are silent about the crimes and transgressions of others, jealously hoping to themselves amass the riches that others got through unscrupulous means.

Berthier's description, however harsh, does point to what I see as underlying characteristics of the merchants' moral economy. They value commercial success and power,

even at the expense of ruthlessness and illegality, and they have a highly ambivalent relationship to the state in its ideal-type regulatory capacity. They are unforgiving of the less successful amongst them, and strongly uphold an ideology of meritocracy in which the less fortunate are to blame for their misfortune. This ideology, which I discuss in the conclusion, is particularly potent in a neoliberal context. They are secretive and generally mistrustful of their neighbors, the authorities, and strangers, but do a great deal of phatic labor to establish networks of connection, information, and support as a way to ensure security and predicability in the midst of uncertain surroundings. Indeed, these types of mediated social networks are, I argue, the basis of Mexico's modern food distribution system, and for this reason it is important to make sense of the way that the people who form part of them understand power and authority to operate.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: The Rise and Decline of La Central's Merchant Class provides an overview and history of La Central de Abasto and the development of the fresh food system. It situates the merchants' sense of insecurity in the context of the twin processes of rising violence and the ascendance of the 'neoliberal food system' in recent decades. The central argument of this chapter is that the historic opacity of the market, which is now seen as a liability, emerged largely to the benefit of the wholesale merchants, with whom the state has had a historically fraught relationship.

Chapter 2: Disrupted Flows: Temporality and Power in the Market uses the idea of flow to describe the moral economy of the market in temporal terms, and to understand disorder as residing in delays and stagnation. I argue that the experience of sovereign uncertainty can be

grasped through the lens of temporality rather than only that of territory, as merchants interpret *delays* in terms of power whose contours are uncertain and suspect. In making sense of delays, they blur the distinction between legal, corrupt, and criminal power.

Chapter 3: From Channels to Vectors: Fear and Infrastructural Appropriation analyzes the way that insecurity fears shape the material flows and circulations of the food system, which I characterize as an infrastructure of mediated social relations, or 'grooved channels.' It does so, I argue, via a local theory of contagion in which visibility is seen as exposing one to danger, making revelation and concealment central concerns.

Chapter 4: Inverted Threats: employment and clientelism in uncertain sovereignties analyzes how insecurity fears inform hiring and firing practices at La Central. It argues that both law and the threat of criminal violence exercise important roles in regulating labor practices. Although seemingly different kinds of regulatory forces, this chapter argues that both appear as spectral, and argues for an approach which treats both as imaginaries with social effects.

Chapter 5: Authority, Legal Ambiguity & Disambiguation takes debates over the presence of street vendors in La Central as a case study to argue that legal practices, such as the issuing of permits to *ambulantes*, contributes to the sense of sovereign uncertainty. The legal ambiguity produced by state efforts at ordering public space, I show, obliges different actors to engage in a form of 'boundary-work' I call disambiguation.

Chapter 6: "La cultura de la denuncia": crime reports and culpability analyzes the paradox of low rates of crime reporting coupled with a widespread sense that crimes *should* be reported. I analyze some steps taken by authorities to increase crime reporting (through 'transparency' and 'anonymity' programs), and argue that they are largely unsuccessful because they are based on a

fundamental misrecognition of the nature of how insecurity is experienced in the market: as an absence of connections.

CHAPTER 1

The Rise and Decline of La Central's Merchant Class

A Disappointing Party

The 90th anniversary celebration of UNCOFYL, one of the main wholesale merchants' associations, took place in a nondescript hotel off of a busy road in Southern Mexico city, in the kind of events room used for wedding parties and conferences. The room had been decorated in sterile, ceremonious fashion, with flower arrangements in assorted shades of white sitting in the middle of each table, and napkins folded into flaccid origami shapes. There were unopened bottles of tequila and wine sitting on each table, and an impressive array of cutlery that suggested the arrival of multiple courses. The day's festivities had started earlier that morning, in the designated chapel room of the hotel, where a Catholic priest said a small mass and spoke to the assembled cluster of perhaps thirty merchants and their guests about the importance of being good Catholics and using their commercial networks to spread their faith rather than simply to make profits for themselves.

Later, in the banquet room, two round tables sat conspicuously empty all afternoon, near the front of the room where around two hundred people had assembled to eat. Those tables, I was told by the merchants, were reserved for important guests, including the market's administration, the city's mayor, and various government officials. Those guests used to come to UNCOFYL parties. That they didn't today was a sign of the hard times in which the merchants found themselves. As if to prove this point, near the beginning of lunch, one of the market's administrators strolled in dressed casually in a tucked in polo shirt and jeans. Without saying

much to anybody, he plucked a couple of untouched bottles of tequila from the empty tables and ducked out, not to be seen again for the rest of the afternoon. Several merchants exchanged indignant looks, disgusted at what they saw as proof of the administration's complete disregard for the merchants. While most of the guests had paid 500 pesos (around USD $35 at the time) for their banquet tickets, the administration and government officials were invited guests, so their lack of attendance added insult to injury. The administrator's appearance only to grab a bottle of tequila and run was seen as beyond the pale.

The rest of the afternoon took place uneventfully. A couple of speakers from the national wholesale merchants' association said a few words to polite applause, there were some photographs taken, and then there was food, mariachi music, and a DJ playing cumbia. Most of the tables were full of elegantly dressed merchants with their guests, and what I had expected to be a formal, networking affair instead looked like a *quinceañera*, with families and friends comprising a good number of the attendees. The food was a menu of European sophisticated foods: cream of cheese soup with grapes, bread and butter, fillet mignon in gravy with boiled carrots and mashed potatoes, and chocolate cake. The dancing lasted well into the evening and everyone seemed to enjoy themselves at the moment, but all of the gossip about the event afterwards was fairly negative.

It was an embarrassment, I heard, that so few of the invitees had arrived, and ticket sales among the merchants themselves were abysmal. Not even the secretary and treasurer of UNCOFYL had bothered to go—a sign of their disaccord with the current president of the association—and they had not made enough money to recoup the expenses of the event. All day, I heard complains about the lackluster party, usually explained as evidence that the

organization's loss of status and influence in Mexico. This narrative of decline was familiar by this point in my fieldwork. At nearly every meeting between merchants which I had sat in on during the course of the year, the anxiety about their loss of power and influence, invariably arose. Whether it was the disrepair of the market's infrastructure, or the high levels of robbery and other crime in the market itself, or the lack of friendly tax policies, merchants saw everywhere around them evidence that they were neglected and disrespected by the state, and that their best years lay firmly behind them.

"They have abandoned us," Mónica, a second-generation apple merchant told me in an interview. "We are a sector that's been very much impacted by crime and insecurity but nobody talks about that. It isn't possible to go to the countryside anymore, it's just not possible; nobody protects us. But when the time comes to collect [taxes or fees] everyone shows up, nobody missed out on the opportunity." The sensation of abandonment comes from different places. In addition to the sense that crime is on the rise and that the market is underpoliced, the infrastructure of the market itself is in disrepair. There are *bodegas* that have been without running water for years, and the neighborhood of Iztapalapa where the market is located has particularly acute water shortages, a significant issue in poorer areas of Mexico City. My very first time coming to La Central by myself, vast swaths of the market were without electricity, the passageways linking the wholesale market's corridors plunged into semi-darkness. Floors have potholes and there is a lack of proper illumination in some areas. Most importantly, perhaps, is the sense that the merchants no longer have anyone's ear, that they have nobody to whom to turn to resolve these issues. At the same time, merchants describe La Central as being a source of pure profit for corrupt politicians, who they say embezzle funds destined to repairs, outsource

management of everything from toll booth to bathroom upkeep to their cronies, and have fewer police working than are on the pay rosters. When it comes time for taxes to be paid and inspections to be conducted, they say, representatives from every imaginable ministry make their rounds, trying to extort or fine their way to the merchants' money. And yet the market crumbles, loses customers, and becomes an increasingly inhospitable place.

Situating the Sense of Insecurity

In many ways, the merchants' feeling of abandonment by the state in issues of security and order, and victimization in areas of legal taxation and illegitimate extortion mirrors the experience of "negative inclusion and perilous exclusion" that Daniel Goldstein (2012), writing of poor, largely indigenous, *barrio* dwelling Bolivians, describes as a condition of being *outlawed.* The frustration of poor, marginalized populations, their sense of abandonment by the state, is by now well documented in scholarly and journalistic accounts. Yet the merchants of La Central are not among the poorest or most marginalized of Mexico City residents by any stretch of the imagination, and some of them are in fact quite wealthy. Their feelings of insecurity stems not only from their historic marginalization or exclusion by the state, nor from the 'objective fact' of rising crime. In this chapter, I argue that their sense of vulnerability and threat in the market is also an expression of their loss of status in the context of the food system's neoliberalization, and concomitant anxiety about lack of access to relevant power brokers in La Central and beyond. The bulk of the dissertation is dedicated to tracing the contours of this sense of being outlawed, or abandoned, and not knowing to whom to turn in a context marked by criminal violence. In this chapter, however, I provide a history against which to read this sense of insecurity, which I

believe to be in part an anxiety about changes in the political economy of commerce and politics in Mexico more broadly.

In addition to orienting the reader as to the general history and contours of the food system, this chapter serves to demonstrate the ambivalent relationship with the state and legality that merchants have long held, and their interest in keeping the market illegible to others. Even as they now see themselves as victims of the criminal forces that prey on the market's marginal and opaque networks, I argue that they have been the partial architects and the primary beneficiaries of this opacity for much of the twentieth century, something which changed with the rise of the neoliberal food system. I begin by describing briefly what I refer to as the modern and neoliberal food systems, and trace the changes that the last two decades have brought to the fresh food market. I then go back in time to the post-Revolutionary period and narrate the story of the rise of Mexico's food merchants over the course of the twentieth century, as well as measures that were taken by the state to curtail their power. I argue that the merchants' control over the food system was a product of underregulation, state accommodation, and a wide degree of regional autonomy and state decentralization which are characteristic of Mexican post-revolutionary state formation (Joseph & Nugent 1994; Nuijten 2004; Ochoa 2001). At the same time, I demonstrate that a great deal of state intervention was aimed at curtailing the power of merchants and intermediaries, and that the rhetoric of merchants as 'speculators' and 'hoarders' were tropes that were frequently mobilized to this end. This contrast, between official rhetoric and institutional opposition, and actual accommodation and collusion created a speculative economy, in which rumors, personal connections, and informal agreements proliferated and indeed formed the basis of trade (Lomnitz 1995). Today, in the context of widespread violence

and sovereign uncertainty, these characteristics of the food system have been resignified as threats to merchants, even as they continue to be central to the work of coordinating commerce.

The Modern and Neoliberal Food Systems

In Mexico City today, the food distribution and commercialization infrastructure is comprised of two, interwoven systems, which I will schematically "modern" and the "neoliberal", although these are of course neither entirely separate nor internally homogeneous. Neighborhood markets and informal produce vendors share the same neighborhoods as big-box grocery stores and shopping malls. People may frequent both Sam's Clubs and their neighborhood *mercados públicos*. Nevertheless, it is clear that the neoliberal food system is ascendant, while the modern one is in decline (Torres Torres 2011; SAGARPA 2010).

In general terms, the "modern" system is comprised of the markets and institutions that developed during the mid-to-late twentieth century by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), as part of urban and national policies aimed specifically at modernizing and regulating the capital's food supply chain. Starting in the 1950s, the state subsidized the construction of a network of over 300 neighborhood markets in Mexico City, as well as certifying dozens of associations of mobile "markets on wheels" (*mercados sobre ruedas*) that switch locations daily. Each of these neighborhood markets, although housed in one building with a central administration, contains dozens of stalls run by individual small business owners. According to some estimates, in the early 1990s when the "modern" system was still dominant, there were over 80,000 independent businesses within these neighborhood markets, which provided 300,000 jobs (Sodi de la Tijera 1993: 97). While the dominance of the *mercados publicos* has suffered

significantly under neoliberal restructuring of the food system, as I will discuss shortly, these estimates probably remain accurate, although the net earnings of individual businesses is likely lower and turnover higher due to increasing economic precarity in this sector (Giglia, personal communication).

La Central is where the vast majority of the city's small-scale food vendors, including *mercado público* and street market merchants, street vendors, restaurants, and corner shops continue to buy their perishable goods, and some bulk dry goods, including beans and nuts. At its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s, over 35% of the nation's agricultural production passed through the market, which was the singularly most important source of food for Mexico City itself, as well as serving as a central distribution center for neighboring states and regions (Torres Torres 1999). In the "modern" system, producers in the Mexican (and now, international) countryside sell their goods through intermediaries or directly to wholesale merchants at the central markets from which they get redistributed to neighborhood or local markets. Until the 1990s, this was the dominant food distribution system in Mexico (Ochoa 2000; Torres Torres 1999). Today, this "modern" food system co-exists in Mexico with a "neoliberal" distribution system, which has emerged in the decades following GATT, NAFTA, and other free trade agreements that greatly affected agricultural production and rural livelihoods throughout Mexico (Torres Torres 2011; Fitting 2011).

In terms of the distribution chain, the neoliberal system is characterized by a greatly increased presence of foreign capital and large corporations—both national and transnational—in areas of packaging and commercialization, and changes wrought by the introduction of foreign imports, and increased exportation of certain, specialty products (Torres Torres 2011). What this

means, from the perspective of the merchants, is that there has been an influx of new and unfamiliar actors in many of the areas where they exerted hegemonic control. Some of these actors are foreign companies and brokers, while others are Mexican. Crops such as avocados and mangos have gained prominence, displacing other crops and creating a valuable market for investors (APEAM 2015), as has soy which is driven by the demand for biofuels (Echanove, personal communication). Even in areas where the crops being produced have remained the same, merchants report no longer knowing 'who's who,' unless they have family members stationed in growing areas.

At the urban level, neoliberalization is visible in the massive proliferation of corporate chain corner stores such as 7-11, Oxxo, and K, and large, big-box chain grocery stores such as Wal-Mart, Sumesa and Chedraui. These businesses compete directly with neighborhood markets and *tianguis*, and are found not only in the city's wealthier areas, but have encroached into some of the poorest neighborhoods such as Valle de Chalco, Iztapalapa, and Nezahuacoyotl. While some of these businesses continue to use the wholesale markets and their networks as an intermediary stop in their supply chain, they also have their own wholesale storage, packaging, and distribution facilities located throughout the country, and have created many of their own vertical supply chains through direct relations with producers and packers.

Tabla. Expansión en zonas metropolitanas de tiendas de autoservicio

Clave- zonas metropolitanas	Periodo de tiempo			
UNIDES	1970-1980	1980-1990	1990-2000	2000 a 2005
1. Zona metropolitana de Aguascalientes		3	15	75
2. Zona metropolitana de Tijuana	7	15	96	194
3. Zona metropolitana de Mexicali	32	9	51	143
4. Zona metropolitana de La Laguna	2	9	116	268
5. Zona metropolitana de Saltillo	60	6	44	200
6. Zona metropolitana de Monclova-Frontera		12	8	84
7. Zona metropolitana de Piedras Negras		6	2	74
8. Zona metropolitana de Colima-Villa de Álvarez			4	3
9. Zona metropolitana de Tecomán				
10. Zona metropolitana de Tuxtla Gutiérrez			4	56
11. Zona metropolitana de Juárez	25	61	71	175
12. Zona metropolitana de Chihuahua	37	7	48	132
13. Zona metropolitana del Valle de México	27	49	208	630
14. Zona metropolitana de León		1	32	146
15. Zona metropolitana de San Francisco del Rincón			1	8
16. Zona metropolitana de Moroleón-Uriangato				
17. Zona metropolitana de Acapulco	1	2	15	47
18. Zona metropolitana de Pachuca			4	26
19. Zona metropolitana de Tulancingo			1	
20. Zona metropolitana de Tula				
21. Zona metropolitana de Guadalajara	15	19	51	232
22. Zona metropolitana de Puerto Vallarta	1	2	6	34
23. Zona metropolitana de Ocotlán			2	2
24. Zona metropolitana de Toluca		5	29	83
25. Zona metropolitana de Morelia		2	3	49
26. Zona metropolitana de Zamora-Jacona			1	13
27. Zona metropolitana de La Piedad-Pénjamo			1	1
28. Zona metropolitana de Cuernavaca	1	1	15	47
29. Zona metropolitana de Cuautla				14
30. Zona metropolitana de Tepic		2	4	1
31. Zona metropolitana de Monterrey	95	87	180	483
32. Zona metropolitana de Oaxaca			8	1
33. Zona metropolitana de Tehuantepec				
34. Zona metropolitana de Puebla-Tlaxcala	18	3	40	151
35. Zona metropolitana de Tehuacán			2	
36. Zona metropolitana de Querétaro	9	2	26	213
37. Zona metropolitana de Cancún		2	10	118
38. Zona metropolitana de San Luis Potosí-Soledad	12	3	15	96
39. Zona metropolitana de Rioverde-Ciudad Fernández			1	
40. Zona metropolitana de Guaymas			4	27
41. Zona metropolitana de Villahermosa		2	4	45
42. Zona metropolitana de Tampico		7	28	82
43. Zona metropolitana de Reynosa-Río Bravo		20	57	96
44. Zona metropolitana de Matamoros		2	14	74
45. Zona metropolitana de Nuevo Laredo		4	4	70
46. Zona metropolitana de Tlaxcala-Apizaco			1	6
47. Zona metropolitana de Veracruz		3	17	62
48. Zona metropolitana de Xalapa		2	3	17
49. Zona metropolitana de Poza Rica	1		5	1
50. Zona metropolitana de Orizaba	2	2	3	13
51. Zona metropolitana de Minatitlán		1	2	4
52. Zona metropolitana de Coatzacoalcos		1	7	10
53. Zona metropolitana de Córdoba		2	2	4
54. Zona metropolitana de Acayucan			1	1
55. Zona metropolitana de Mérida	2	5	31	138
56. Zona metropolitana de Zacatecas-Guadalupe		1	12	107

Fuente: elaboración propia con información de la Asociación Nacional de Tiendas de Autoservicio, ANTAD, Directorio 2004-2008.

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Figure 7. Expansion in number of supermarkets // Source: Torres Torres 2001

The rise of the neoliberal food system, which I have briefly sketched here is the context in which today's merchants in La Central find themselves working. It is a situation that is in many ways quite different from that which previous generations of merchants experienced. In what remains of this chapter, I describe this history, which is very much alive in the lamentations

of those who work in La Central, and the sense that its inhabitants carry with them that they are working in hostile terrain with little sense of to whom they should turn to improve their strategic position.

Regional Networks in the Early Twentieth Century

During Mexico's Revolution (1910-1920) and the years following, the nation's capital suffered severe food shortages. There were multiple factors that contributed to this crisis in food security, including disruption to agriculture production due to conflict in the countryside, as well as the rural labor force being redirected towards fighting, and a breakdown of traditional supply networks that linked the countryside to the city. In this context of shortage and uncertainty, a familiar figure emerged as a threat to the urban food supply: Food merchants were known to take advantage of the combination of low supply and high demand in order to charge exorbitant prices for basic goods, hoarding their goods, or shuttering their stores in protest of government policies. They thus became a particularly hated group during the revolutionary years, and had frequent conflicts with revolutionary leaders (Lopez Rosado 1988; Pilcher 2008).[6] Venustiano

[6] The trope of the dishonest or underhanded merchant was not new or unique to Mexico, it had gained traction in the years following Mexico's War of Independence (1810-1821), which saw a rise in food supply issues throughout the country, a decline in regulation of the food system, and rise in the number of intermediaries and unlicensed vendors in Mexico City (Macondo Gonzalez 2013). While the colonial period had been characterized by high degrees of monopolization in the food system, and significant controls on prices and distribution, by the early republican period the rise of liberal ideas about the importance of competitions and free markets had started to gain popularity among ruling elites and ultimately came to exert significant influence over the strategies taken by the government to ensure an urban food supply. The historian Gisela Macondo Gonzalez (2013) points out that increases in prices, intermediaries, and street commerce were the result of this period in Mexican history, when debates around liberalization, together with protracted armed conflict created the conditions for the rapid proliferation of new, unregulated actors in the urban food system. We might say, then, that the rise of the "invisible hand" in nineteenth century Mexican food markets was accompanied by growing anxieties about the sudden visibility of street vendors in Mexico City, as well as concerns about the opaque and unethical networks of intermediaries who controlled the influx and prices of food to urban centers.

Carranza, the head of the preconstitutional government and president from 1917-1920, was typically harsh with merchants. Under his rule, authorities imposed and posted price lists, which merchants had to abide by or run the risk of severe punishment. When faced with resistance by merchants who did not want to accept Mexico's new currency in 1916, Carranza ordered severe punishments for all those refused to open their stores or sell their goods (Richmond 1983).

Carranza's animosity towards merchants set the tone for what would continue to be a fraught relationship between food vendors and the Mexican state throughout much of the twentieth century. Since ensuring adequate access to basic foodstuffs was a predominant concern of the leaders of the Mexican revolution and the Institutional Revolutionary Party that they spawned, the merchants and other intermediaries who earned profit off of the food system were problematic figures with whom the state alternately formed alliances and entered into conflict (Fox 1994; Ochoa 2000; Pilcher 2008). Their high degree of control over the food system and ability to influence prices and supplies made them politically important and economically powerful actors. Yet this same source of power frequently stood in tension with the state's need to ensure an adequate and affordable food supply to its population, and in particular to urban areas.

The period after the Revolution was one of general upheaval and restructuring, and the food system was no exception. Political changes and land redistribution shifted production patterns, while urbanization created new markets (Fox 1994). This translated into a situation characterized by large gaps between the countryside and the city, which wholesale merchants and other intermediaries turned to their advantage. On the one hand, waves of migration led Mexico City's population to increase, while at the same time the growing urban markets found themselves

disconnected from the countryside on which they depended for foodstuffs. Most food producing areas of Mexico were remote and difficult to access by road or otherwise, leaving producers with the problem of how to transport their goods to market, and urban consumers at the whim of those who brought the goods to the city. By 1925, for example, there were only 241 kilometers of paved roads in the country, and although there were 20,000 kilometers of railways which had been built largely during the rule of Porfirio Diaz prior to the Revolution, these were mostly used for the transport of high-priced commodities, especially for export, leaving small-scale producers in remote areas of the country at the whims of traders with access to trains (Lopez Rosado 1988; Berthier 1986).

During the 1920s and 1930s, then, the success of merchants depended largely on their connections to their hinterland, to the countryside that supplied them (Echanove 2002). Two categories of intermediary emerged as especially important in this context: Rural traders, disparagingly known as *coyotes*[7] (coyotes), consolidated the production of many small producers in the countryside and sent carloads on trains to the city, where they would be received by another coyote, or by a wholesaler. Since rural producers had to sell their goods quickly or risk losing everything to spoilage, and since few had the contacts or the capital necessary to arrange for their own transportation of goods, coyotes were able to offer low prices which peasants were forced to accept. Rural traders thus developed a reputation for taking advantage of poor peasants by offering them a pittance for their goods, which they would then hoard and sell at inflated prices in the urban markets. The dishonest *coyote* thus became one of the standard embodiments

[7] Many categories of intermediary are known as *coyotes*, including merchants and traders of different kinds, as well as human traffickers/smugglers. In general, the term coyote seems to refer disparagingly to those who act as formal intermediaries in a market (legally or illegally) in an immoral fashion.

of disorder in commercial life, a trope which continues to be used to this day (Berthier 1992; Echanove 2002).

The wholesaler, or *mayorista*, was the other important figure that gained importance in the post-Revolutionary era. Wholesalers acted to consolidate and redistribute much of the food supply in urban centers by taking advantage of their intimate knowledge of certain rural areas, usually of their own provenance or those of their kin, as well as their connections in retail and regional markets. While many wholesalers partnered with rural traders, others went directly to the countryside, and themselves acted as the primary intermediaries in the distribution chain in a variety of ways. Sometimes, wholesalers acted as creditors for rural producers who had a difficult time accessing credit in other ways. They would provide peasants with loans for seed and other inputs, in exchange for an extremely low fixed price for ensuing crops. Sometimes they would go to the countryside and act as producers themselves, buying or renting—legally or illegally—land in the countryside (Echanove 2002, Fox 1994). Other times, they would simply offer growers set prices, competing with rural traders directly. Either way, both *coyotes* and *mayoristas* were able to use their own networks in order to take advantage of limited transportation options, rural producers' lack of knowledge of urban markets, and, more fundamentally, of their inability to access them through other means due to their poverty.[8]

In 1925, UNCOFYL—the union of fruit, vegetable, and dried good merchants—was

[8] Even today in Mexico City, wholesalers can recount the stories of that early generation of merchants who went to the countryside and made their fortunes by exploiting the knowledge and transportation gap that existed between the city and the countryside at that time. During fieldwork, I heard tales of the old days, when the patriarchal heads of wholesaler families would ostentatiously display their wealth in the countryside, in order to impress poor peasants, and of other who would drink imported whiskey and smoke cigars rolled in thousand peso bills. Whether or not these stories were true, they are interesting for the image of the past—decadent, excessive, and unregulated—that they portray, as well as for the way in which they are told today—usually with a dose of nostalgia and admiration for the old days and those old ways of doing business.

founded to formally represent the interests of merchants, negotiate with the local and national government on issues related to merchants' land use, taxes, and commerce, as well as to provide insurance and support to members. UNCOFYL also provided a way for the merchants to be incorporated into the corporatist structure of the Mexican state. In spite of its lobbying efforts, however, government anti-merchant sentiment continued in the 1930s under the presidency of Lazaro Cardenas, who publicly blamed "middlemen and ruthless intermediaries" for Mexico City's ongoing food supply crises[9] (Ochoa 2000, 49). Cardenas' populist ire was directed at grain merchants, who were seen as partially responsible for the increase in grain prices in the late 1930s, and when his government established the first State Food Agency in 1937—it took the form of a Regulatory Committee for the Wheat Market (*Comité Regulador del Mercado de Trigo*). In addition to stricter price controls and oversight, Cardenas' administration introduced a sprawling chain of stores meant to compete with merchants and loosen their control over the food system, essentially taking on the role of middleman (Ochoa 2000, ch. 3). CONCANACO (Confederación de Camaras Nacionales de Comerico), a national organization of merchants from all sectors, reacted vigorously to Cardenista attempts to intervene in the food sector, and resisted characterizations of merchants as 'speculators' or 'hoarders.' They published regular articles against the State Food Agency in their weekly paper, and engaged in strong lobbying. Their main argument was that the state had no right to intervene in the economy, and that it was making shortages and speculation worse by creating a black market through its interventions (Ochoa 2000, 62).

[9] Although Cardenas' focus was on wholesalers who sold basic grains and legumes, anti-commercial sentiment and the proximity between perishable and dry goods merchants in social worlds and spatially in the main markets, led to an affinity between the two which, as Echanove (2002) points out, led UNCOFYL and other associations to consistently support the position of the grains merchants.

During the 1940s, however, food shortages and price crises once again affected the Mexican economy. Food riots occurred in several cities. The State Food Agency attempted to intervene through inspections and by importing supplemental corn from the United States, but popular sentiment was skeptical as the State Food Agency itself had developed a reputation for acting as a speculator, and colluding with unscrupulous merchants. These allegations came to a fore in 1943, when the Secretary of National Economics, Francisco Gaxiola Jr, was accused of profiteering off of price controls through the black market. According to the historian Enrique Ochoa:

> Although Gaxiola was initially publicly absolved of the charges, the affair brought out in the open what many had suspected and what the British charg d'affairs called "'an open secret' that the very agency established to control shortages was led by men who were 'cornering and selling to the black market at profits that vary in direct proportion to the artificially produced scarcity (81).

The early twentieth century, therefore, saw the rise of certain dynamics in the food system which would prove to be important for decades to come. On the one hand, in the aftermath of the revolutionary war, wholesalers and regional traders took advantage of high demand in cities and their lack of connection to the countryside to exert significant control over the food system. The state, meanwhile, blamed merchants and traders for high prices and supply problems in the nation's food system, while systematically failing to implement policies that would significantly affect the structure of power of the fresh food system, and in fact entering into illicit agreements with precisely those actors that the State Food Agency was supposed to be regulating. The resulting situation of underregulation would give birth to consolidation and monopolization at massive scales in the national produce markets in the mid-twentieth century. The figure of the *coyote* and the dishonest *comerciante*, meanwhile, would continue to be

mobilized strategically by the state in an effort to apportion blame for crises in food prices.

Underregulation & The Golden Age of Wholesaling

The Mexican state throughout the twentieth century was highly interventionist in the food system, which the historian Enrique Ochoa (2000) argues became a major site of politics, through which the government sought to reconcile the contradictions of the promise of the revolution, with the inequalities of its aftermath. The forms of intervention were varied and often contradictory, with the desire for food security and ensuring dignity and decent earnings for rural producers often coming into conflict with—and usually being sacrificed to—the demand for affordable food among largely urban consumers (Fox 1994; Ochoa 2000). A key focus, therefore, was to ensure access to the *canasta básica* (basic foodstuffs) for all citizens, and in particular urban populations who could not rely on subsistence farming. These efforts included subsidies and access to credit for small and large producers, the construction of a network of storage silos and transportation services for rural producers, subsidized state-run stores in rural and urban areas, and many more. These efforts took place under the name of various state agencies whose rise and fall tended to coincide with the assumption of power by each new president for a six year term.

This heavy degree of intervention and regulation, however, did not equally affect all edible goods. Since grains, milk and legumes, rather than fresh foods, were seen as staples which were relevant to food sovereignty and economic development, the bulk of government policy was aimed at intervening into the former. Even as the twentieth century saw a strategically and ideologically diverse array of attempts by the State Food Agency to intervene in the food system—through imposing price limits, subsidies, constructing storage infrastructure, extending

credit to rural producers, importing foodstuffs, and competing directly with merchants through state-run stores—fresh food merchants remained largely unaffected by these interventions. In fact, the years from the 1940s through the 1970s are widely considered by scholars and by merchants themselves to have been the golden years of the fresh food wholesaler, when business was thriving, competition was low, and state regulation relatively scarce (Berthier 1982; Echanove 2002). Despite the fact that anti-merchant rhetoric and regulation at this time were directed primarily at grain markets, and their impacts were little felt in the fresh food market, fruit and vegetable merchants as a whole felt aggrieved by the attacks on their colleagues in the dried goods trade, and their formal positions as articulated through UNCOFYL and other associations tended to reflect this solidarity (Echanove 2002).

It was during these years that merchants consolidated their power over the food system, leading to the situation of oligarchical control by a few families over a large percentages of the fresh produce system which continues to be characteristic of the contemporary system of produce distribution (Torres Torres 1999; Echanove 2002; Rosado Lopez 1988). By the end of this period, in the late 1980s, studies found high degrees of control by a small number of families over the fresh food system. The level of concentration varied from product to product, but Serrano chile peppers were consistently at the high end of monopolization, with four wholesalers who controlled nearly 90% of total sales (Torres Torres 1999), while just eight of the largest wholesalers controlled 62% of the daily 800 tons of tomatoes that entered the La Central daily, and the top 15 producers controlled nearly 90% of the daily import (Echanove 2002).

Several factors contributed to the rise of wholesalers during these 'golden years.' The first relates to the relative lack of regulation of the fresh food markets throughout the nineteenth

and twentieth centuries, mentioned above. One reason for underregulation is that due to their low caloric density and perishability, fresh produce simply has never had the importance of grains, legumes, or other dried goods for the *canasta básica*. Thus even Lazaro Cardenas' government, which was markedly hostile to merchants, calling them '*speculadores*' and '*acaparadores'* (speculators and hoarders), for the most part left fruit and vegetable merchants alone. Fresh foods thus by default end up falling into the category of a luxury-type product rather than a necessity to which access could and should be guaranteed by the government.

Another reason for the lack of intervention into the fresh produce system has to do precisely with the quality of perishability, which makes speculation—a key concern of authorities with regard to grain—less likely with fruits and vegetables. Perishable foods in general are harder to inspect and keep track of, and large percentages of them can be written off as spoilage or waste due to transportation. Indeed, insofar as regulation requires visibilization through enumeration and naming, produce markets proved difficult for the state to "see" (Scott 1998). Thus price controls, a favored approach of the state with regard to grain and tortilla prices, are difficult to implement with produce, since their extreme perishability makes stockpiling—a necessity for ensuring stable prices— nearly impossible. Natural seasonal variation, as well as vulnerability to climactic conditions, moreover, means that prices fluctuate greatly, often changing from day to day.

These same qualities make comprehensive tax systems for food merchants complicated, since nobody has reliable statistics about how much food is in circulation at a given time. Indeed, until a study in 1969, when the state began contemplating how to move the wholesale produce market out of Mexico City's downtown, there had not been comprehensive studies of the urban

fresh food system (Echanove 2002). One reason for this is simply that the logistics of such studies are daunting. A 1987 study of produce distribution, for example, was abandoned partway through, since it required trucks to be stopped and weighed on their way into the market, snarling traffic and resulting in disruptions to the commercial sector (Echanove 2002). Self-reporting has thus been the normal process through which scholars and the state alike have collected information on the fruit and vegetable system historically. Elderly merchants today tell stories of the 'good old days' of paying taxes through a simple process of walking into their union office, self-reporting income, and paying a lump sum with few questions asked. This was facilitated by the more or less entirely cash-based system of the market, where buyers would come to make thousands of dollars worth of purchases in cash. As one merchant laughingly reminisced, "they would come with bills rolled up in their pockets, in their hats, in their shoes. And oh my god, those bills would stink".

Specialization in the Golden Age of Wholesaling

The rise of wholesale merchant's power in the mid-twentieth century was only partially a result of underregulation, however. Other contributing factors were Green Revolution agricultural expansion in the context of the so-called "Mexican Miracle," a time of sustained economic growth and low inflation characterized by import-substitution development strategies. As both rural food supply and urban demand for food increased, the latter as a result of continuous rural-to-urban migration, merchants saw opportunities for expansion. Another factor which enabled this expansion was greater communication with the countryside, which facilitated easier incursions into more remote and distant areas. In 1940, for example, there were only 4,871 paved kilometers of road in all of Mexico, and 1,643 kilometers of large but unpaved roads,

while by 1960 these numbers had increased respectively to 27,369 and 7,398 (Berthier 1992, 162). Merchants were thus able to bypass some of the regional *coyotes* who had previous dominated particular regions, and set up their own relations with rural producers.

The increased accessibility did not, however, translate into an evened playing field for rural peasants, who still lacked the capital to send their goods to market without the help of intermediaries, and who still relied on wholesalers for loans and prepayments for crops. Lack of telecommunication, moreover, meant that information was still slow to move between rural areas and the cities, and small producers were often kept in the dark about market trends and conditions in the cities (Ochoa 2000). Merchants tended to understand the disadvantageous position of rural producers as a consequence of their ignorance, in keeping with common tropes about stupid, uneducated, or backwards peasants. A merchant interviewed by sociologist Hector Berthier in the 1980s, for example, explained the growth of monopolization in the fresh food system in precisely these terms, as a product of ignorance on the part of producers, and a laissez-faire approach on the part of the state:

> We wholesalers had a wide berth to run our businesses as we saw fit; whether it was in the countryside where many of the producers didn't have any idea or education about what doing business meant, or in the city, where the authorities almost didn't interfere with our work, there wasn't as much competition. I think that the origin of the monopolies is due to those factors…the country was so large and there were so few of us wholesalers, that the combination of ignorance, lack of information about the market, and the freedom which the government granted us in the control of the fruit and vegetable system were decisive factors in our growth in La Merced (Berthier 1992, 75).[5]

During the mid-twentieth century, moreover, wholesale merchants were able to consolidate control by switching to specialization based on products rather than regions, since improved transportation options allowed for a larger number of regions to become accessible to

those merchants with sufficient capital to penetrate them (Echanove 2002). Thus began the commercial structure which continues to this day in the wholesale markets where merchants specialize in just one or a few products. Specialization required merchants to develop on-the-ground networks in regions where they had few if any contacts, and as such posed serious challenges to merchants. Old-timers today tell the stories of spending days knocking on doors and wining and dining producers and regional traders in an effort to establish durable commercial relationships. Sometimes this would entail sending extended family members to be stationed in rural areas, from which they could monitor growing conditions and prices in a particular region. It also might entail developing networks of fictive kinship with regional actors—many wholesalers to this day have *compadres* in supplying regions.

Despite these challenges, the incentives for switching to product specialization were high, since families who succeeded in monopolizing much of a product's supply chain could work to "corner" the markets, often by buying up most of the supply before harvest through previous agreements with producers, thus controlling a large percentage of the market even before it materialized (Echanove 2002). Even for those merchants who could not dream of cornering a market, product specialization had its appeal. It simplified the logistics of ordering, evaluating, and storing produce for merchants by reducing the number of crops for which they had to keep track of growing cycles, harvest conditions, and storage conditions. Each fruit or vegetable has its own temporalities, criteria for evaluation, and market conditions, and keeping track of those is a dizzying task. Specialization also allowed merchants to engage in economies of scale, and to invest in new technologies that were specifically geared towards the preservation and storage of particular types of produce, such as refrigeration rooms, citrus cages, and ripening rooms.

As a result of underregulation, product specialization, and increased but still limited channels of communication between rural and urban areas, Mexican produce merchants were able to consolidate their control over the food system in the mid-twentieth century. The resulting structure of power, which continued for decades and into the present day, has been described by researchers and policy-makers as monopolistic and oligarchical (Echanove 2002; Berthier 1986; Ochoa 2000; Torres Torres 1999; Villarruel 2009). Yet efforts to dismantle these power structures during this time was limited, with the state's primary interventions in the fresh food system coming in the form of attempts to "modernize" commercial infrastructure and technologies, most notably through the construction of new markets and introduction of systems within those markets meant to enhance transparency, such as required price registers and public auction sections. This idea—that changes in built environments and infrastructures would solve undesirable economic practices and behaviors—has underpinned many of the major interventions into the fresh food system, including the construction of La Central de Abasto.

La Central de Abasto: Building the Modern Market for the City

During the boom years for merchants in the mid-twentieth century, Mexico City's wholesale market area, La Merced, expanded precipitously. The market, which was located in the very heart of historic Mexico City, near government institutions and important thoroughfares, sprawled eventually to take over 54 hectares of commercial and residential space in downtown, filling streets with stalls, carts, trucks, and commercial activity at all hours of the day. Although some grains and meats were sold in La Merced, around 80% of the products sold there were fruits and vegetables, which supplied not only the metropolitan area, but other states as well

(Echanove 2002). Old buildings were refurbished to serve as produce warehouses, and streets were completely subordinated to the needs of commerce (Berthier 1982; Lopez Rosado 1988). By the late 1970s, over 50,000 tons of perishable goods were sold each week in La Merced, with over 800 trucks and 15,000 workers daily coming in and out of the neighborhood. Vehicular and pedestrian traffic snarled and slowed to a sluggish average of 5-15 kilometers per hour (DDF Planificación 1983). Over 1,200 tons of garbage were collected each day from the area of just 54 city blocks, but even so the area was plagued by constant twinned problems of festering waste and rodents (*El Nacional* 24/12/1977).

The problems caused by having a large food market in a downtown neighborhood were not unique to Mexico, and starting in the 1960s, city and federal authorities actively explored the possibilities for following the footsteps of Paris, London, and other global cities in relocating their food terminals to the outskirts of the metropolitan core. Finally, in April 1970, over three hundred hectares of marshland known as *chinampas,* occupied by peasants engaged in subsistence type agriculture, were expropriated in the Iztapalapa area on the southwestern frontier of Mexico City. By September of that same year, the lands had been formally designated for use in the construction of a new food terminal, but it wasn't until six years later, during the tenure of President Lopez Portillo, that work on La Central de Abasto commenced in earnest under the authority of CODEUR, the city's urban development authority (ficeda.com *Antecedentes*).

The construction of a new food terminal was a massive infrastructural undertaking, which had significant implications for the city's urban fabric and economy. Its initial cost was estimated to be 3 billion pesos in 1977, a number which rose to nearly 13 billion, over four times

the original estimate, by the market's opening in 1982 (*El Nacional* 5.19.1982). Mexico's most famous architect, Abraham Zabludovsky, was commissioned to design the modern market, and he drew upon his involvement in the construction of Paris' modern food terminal, Rungis, just a few years earlier. La Central promised to be everything that La Merced was not, from an urbanistic perspective: It would be neatly segregated into different sectors for fresh foods, dried goods, administration, waste disposal, storage, among other areas. There was no residential space formally incorporated into the market, although from the outset many of the poorest laborers found ways to sleep in nooks and crannies of the massive space (fieldnotes). The market proper was made up of eleven wide aisles each nearly a kilometer long, which were criss-crossed by five narrower passageways that were designed as 'humps' to allow automobile traffic to flow beneath them. With its sprawling design and smooth lines, Zabludovsky's design prioritized the flow of vehicular traffic, with *flow*, *visibility*, and *movement* as central organizing principles. Surveillance and control were central to the design: there were a limited number of access points, an entire administrative complex which housed representatives from various government agencies on-site, and hundreds of surveillance cameras, watchtowers, police, and inspectors who roamed the premises, maintaining order.

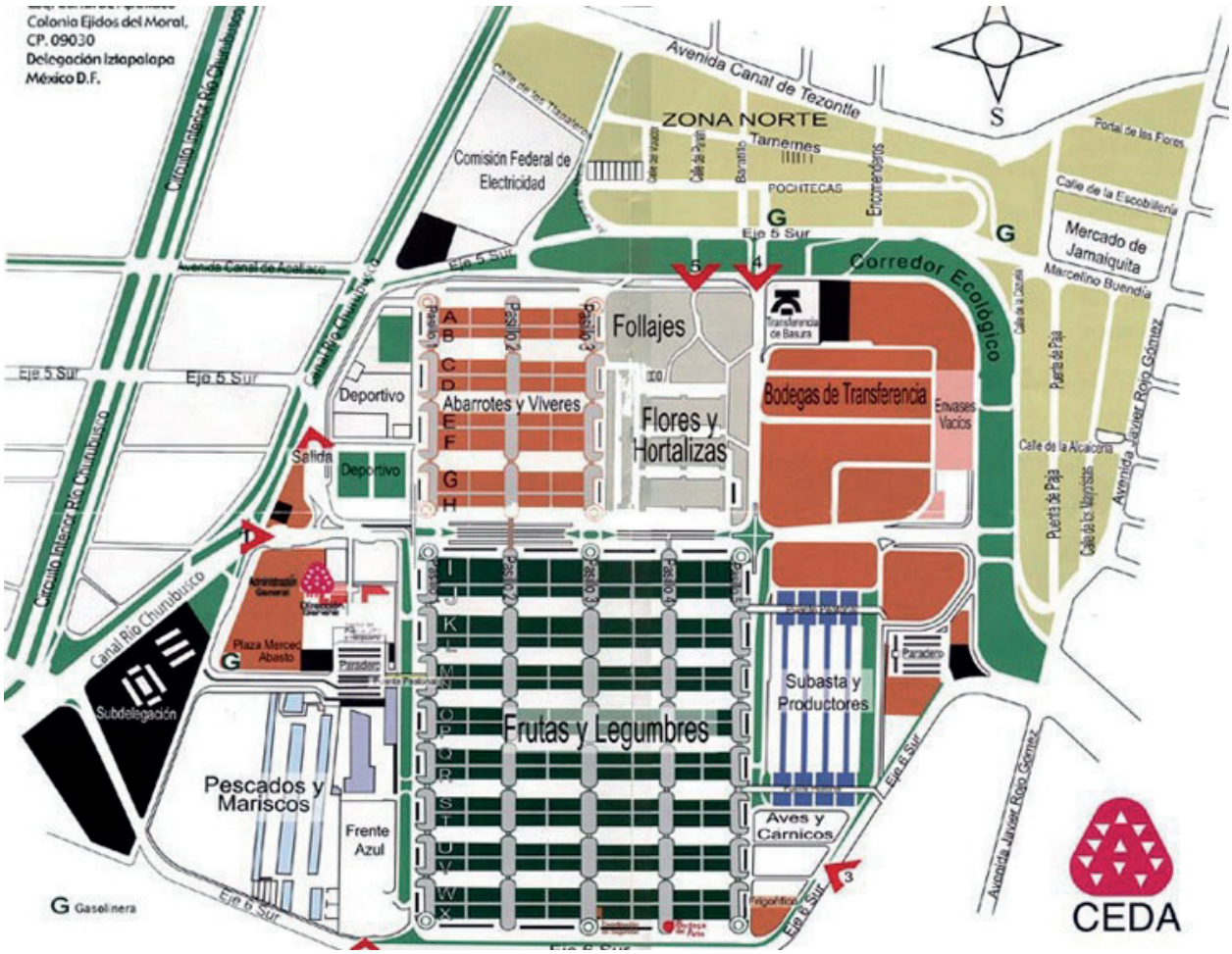

Figure 8. La Central outline // Source: ficeda.com.mx

A greater contrast to La Merced's notorious chaos and opacity could hardly be imagined. La Merced, according to one sociologist who did research there in the 1970s, was an opaque maze in which vice—from drugs, to prostitution, to robbery, to corruption— could proliferate unabated (Berthier 1986). Even the oldest generation of wholesale merchants in La Central, who got their start in La Merced and often have fond recollections of the neighborhood, admit to the grave problems of overcrowding, criminality, and traffic in their old home. In the years leading up to the decision to move the wholesale market out of the Merced neighborhood and into La

Central de Abasto, Mexican authorities and the state controlled media seized on these urban problems, and blamed them squarely on the unruly forms of commerce that had proliferated in the area. The president of CODEUR, Jesus Robles Martinez in 1977 declared La Merced to be widely viewed as a "cancerous tumor in the capital," a metaphor of disease which journalists and politicians in the following years would often repeat (*El Nacional* 8.18.1977). As the inaugural date of the expensive and controversial project neared, the headlines of the state-run newspaper, *El Nacional,* trumpeted: "Prostitution, filth, corruption, vice, and exploitation to be eliminated. La Merced, our city's old stigma, a cancerous tumor which will soon disappear" (10.28.1982).

The move to displace the wholesale market was not without its own complications, however. For decades, La Merced had been one of the first stops for rural migrants coming to the city, many of whom sought temporary employment as manual laborers in the market, or found their way to ethnic and regional networks that were based in the Merced neighborhood (Vera Alpuche 2015; Berthier 1984). Moving the market would uproot many of these communities, whose economic and social networks revolved around the area's commerce. Urbanists warned of the implications of suddenly emptying out a downtown neighborhood, and studies of La Merced in the years following the move of the wholesale market to La Central painted a bleak picture of desolate, ruined buildings rife with rats, addicts, and prostitutes and devoid of the economic bustle that had characterized it previously (DDF Proyecto de Plan Urbano La Merced). Nevertheless, the argument in favor of 'rescuing' historic downtown areas from the 'cancer' of disorderly commerce and its accompanying vices was a powerful one, which has persisted into the present day, as efforts to redevelop downtown areas including La Merced continue under the banner of neoliberal 'urban renewal' (Leal 2007, Vera Alpuche 2015). Then, as now, the effort

to uproot certain forms of commerce had profound impacts on communities that lived in and off of the downtown markets.

But the food market in the Merced was not only a problem in socio-spatial terms for the city's governing elites; Indeed, the other objective of building a modern market was the *modernization of commerce itself,* a goal which was tightly linked to building new forms of commercial infrastructure in the form of new markets. This goal, however, needs to be understood in the context of shifts in food policy in the context of food shortages in the 1970s, and Mexico's oil boom (1977-1981).

Using La Central to clean up dirty commerce

The construction of La Central took place during this period of intense job generation, loans, and investment in social programs enabled by oil revenue and international loans, on the one hand, and a priority on overhauling national food policy on the other. During the 1970s, Mexico suffered a crisis in food supply with a loss of self-sufficiency in corn and increased prices in a large number of basic products. By 1980, Mexico was importing an alarming 25% of its annual corn consumption, the backbone of the country's diet (Spalding 1985; Fox 1994). During this same decade, however, Mexico was enjoying unprecedented revenues through its state petrol agency, PEMEX, as a result of high global oil prices. From 1977 to 1981, during what would be called the "Mexican Oil Boom," PEMEX doubled its production and announced massive reserves. In this context, both liberal and populist policymakers saw food imports as the 'Achilles heel' of the oil boom years, since the massive profits and autonomy generated by oil exports were severely undercut by reliance on grain imports (Fox 1994). Achieving food

independence while bringing down food prices thus because a central focus of the Lopez Portillo administration, which used nationalist rhetoric abundantly to mobilize support for policies promoting food self-sufficiency, including resistance to US dominated trade policy, and a withdrawal from GATT in 1980 (*ibid*).

The high degree of investment and intervention into the food system in the 1970s was not only motivated, however, by a nationalist desire for food autonomy, or fiscal considerations related to the high price of reliance on food imports. The government was reacting, as well, to disaffected peasants in the Mexican countryside, who were in many regions organizing and even arming themselves in protest of state neglect and the domination of elite agribusiness interests in much of the countryside (Fox 1994: 67-68; Ochoa 2000). Rather than tackle the dominance of agribusiness through land redistribution, however, many of the reforms that were to come were aimed at changing conditions in the commercial provisioning networks. One of the figures to be resurrected in political discourse in this context was that of the predatory food merchant whose interests went against those of the people.

While most of the state's concerns about food security and predatory intermediaries were still directed at grain and legume merchants, with the push to construct La Central, anti-merchant rhetoric was aimed at fresh food merchants as well. Indeed, the modernization of the distribution system was aimed in large part at diminishing monopolization and speculation in the urban fresh food system by authorities, who were well aware of the relative lack of regulation and transparency that characterized the market. As Mexico City's mayor, Carlos Hank Gonzalez, declared in 1981, the goal of La Central would be to "decrease the possibilities for speculation in food commerce…not by beating down the wholesalers, but by creating a market in which

producers and merchants could accomplish their duties in better conditions, at lower prices [which] should reflect in lower prices and more hygienic conditions for consumers" *(El Nacional* 3.24.81). Government and media reports from the 1970s and early 1980s relentlessly circulated the official line that modernizing the wholesale food market would 'clean up' commercial practices themselves, specifically targeting unethical business practices which the state blamed for high food prices. Metaphors of illness and decay abounded in these accounts as well, with the official newspaper, *El Nacional*, describing wholesaling in La Merced as "a human mosaic with grave social problems, which can be considered a site of infection and deterioration with negative consequences for the local population, the city, and commerce as a whole (*El Nacional* 4/3/81).

Yet while "excessive intermediarism," "speculation" and "dishonest commerce" were frequently mentioned as causes of high food prices, officials were generally careful to make clear that they were not attacking merchants *per se*, but rather outmoded forms of business that had been practiced in La Merced. In a meeting with fresh food merchants in 1977, for example, President López Portillo, proclaimed that modernizing the food commercialization system through the construction of modern wholesale markets was an urgent priority for the nation. In typically circuitous language, he criticized previous commercial practices explaining that "inflationary processes have various psychological characteristics built on the potential for both licit and illicit earnings, the potential earnings from speculation thus often poison society as a whole" (*El Nacional* 5/28/77). Other reports were similarly indirect in their condemnation of La Merced's merchants or unions. This ambivalence reflected, in part, the power of the merchants themselves, who had over the years become an important group with connections high up in the

Mexican government. UNCOFYL's annual balls, for example, regularly included the mayor and other high placed officials as attendees, and leaders of the merchants' unions were known to have audiences with the president, mayor, and others. Moreover, a group of the most powerful merchants from La Merced supported the move to the new market, and they needed to convince their base that what was in question was not an attack on them but rather a change to the space in which they would conduct their business (Berthier 1986).

La Central's design incorporated several strategies which were meant to increase competition and in this way weaken the tight grip over the fresh food system which produce merchants had acquired over the years. The first was the inbuilt proximity of a large number of government agencies housed in the administrative offices on La Central's grounds. Inspectors from different agencies would be more familiar with the workings of the new market, and would be able to inspect and oversee the market's operation. In addition, the construction of an auction section, *subasta*, was designed in order to create an open market in which producers could compete with merchants and *coyotes*, all under the supervision of CONASUPO (*El Nacional* 10/30/1981). Warehouse spaces were reserved for collectives of producers from various Mexican states, in addition to an entire section of the market which was reserved for CONASUPO (Echanove 2002).

Merchants, for their part, vigorously resisted insinuations and overt allegations that they engaged in unethical business practices. "With perishable products, it's nearly impossible to have long chains of speculation or intermediarism," said Ignacio Cruz, a representative of La Merced's merchants' association, "because the very characteristic of those foods is that nobody can hide them or sell them for inflated prices" (*El Nacional,* 8/24/77). Repeating an argument

that merchants would recur to again and again, he suggested that the basic instability of food prices and inaccessibility of the *canasta basica* had everything to do with 'low spending power' of the Mexican consumer. Intervening into the food commercialization system was contrary to the national interest, and would only act to undermine the nation's economic development. Indeed, a survey of official declarations and internal memos on the part of merchants associations between the 1960s and 1980s revealed a merchant class concerned about government intervention into their affairs. Among the most common complains they had were: state-imposed price caps, excessive taxes, harassment of merchants, overuse of fines, lack of freedom of commerce, overregulation by various agencies including consumer protection, tax, city, and public health, and monopolization by CONASUPO (Echanove 2002, 212).

La Central, therefore promised to be a panacea for all of the troubles that La Merced had come to symbolize, both at an urban and national scale. Despite the state's ostensible intentions of creating greater transparency, accountability, and eliminating monopolization in the fresh food supply with the construction of La Central, however, the new market brought its own set of problems, and replicated many of those from La Merced.

A New House for the Merchants

From the outset, things at La Central didn't go as planned. On the day of the inauguration, which was rushed so as to occur before Lopez Portillo's six year term ended, construction of the market was incomplete. Some roads were unpaved, many *bodegas* were missing doors and segments of wall. "Some of us were left out there, in the forgotten aisles," the elderly Don Pedro recalled, reminiscing about La Central's earliest days. "There was no water, no nothing." Ramon

Huertas, who was a child when his father moved to the La Central from La Merced, recalls that prostitutes who were familiar figures in the old neighborhood, promptly set up shop on the grounds of the new market, as did hundreds of informal street vendors. Beyond these forms of illegality—which made La Central in the eyes of many merchants appear as more of a replica of La Merced than of the modern, European marketplace which they had been promised—the new wholesale market did little to change the dynamics of the food system as a whole.

If anything, the move to La Central consolidated power further in the hands of certain families, since the capital required to buy into the new market rendered it inaccessible for hundreds of the smaller wholesalers of La Merced (Echanove 2002; Berthier 1986). Warehouses and storage space in the new market, which was built on government owned lands, were to be leased by merchants for 99-year terms at the cost of hundreds of thousands of dollars. Although there were some incentives offered to ameliorate the tremendous initial investment in the form of low-interest loans and a five-year grace period before loans would need to be repaid, the fact remained that entrance into La Central was prohibitively expensive for some of the smaller competitors in the old market. Indeed, it was the most powerful and wealthy among La Merced's wholesale merchants who had lobbied for the move to the modernist market allying themselves with Mexico City officials and national leaders in the process, and causing a rift between factions of wholesalers whose traces continue to be felt today.[10]

In terms of addressing the monopolistic concentrations of power in the food system that

[10] UNCOFYL, which had until then been the main union for merchants in La Merced, split into two factions, with a large number of merchants refusing to abandon La Merced. Those who resisted the move, led by Celedonio Cortez, argued that the process was being done without transparency and without adequate support for merchants of more modest means. The conflict, which was extremely acrimonious, came to a head on the night of November 22, 1982, when the city government sent trucks in to blockade La Merced, essentially strangling its supply system, which ultimately forced holdouts to concede their position. Many grudgingly moved to the CEDA, while others downscales to be retail merchants, and others folded their businesses entirely

had developed over the course of the twentieth century, La Central was ineffective. According to the sociologist Hector Berthier, who conducted one of the first studies of commercial practices in La Central, the market was no more than an "expensive new house" for the titans of La Merced (1986, 368). The largest merchants continued controlling a huge percentage of the influx of diverse food products, enabled by their complex and intimate links with local and national authorities. For example, most of the 214 warehouses that in the original plan had been destined to CONASUPO and small producers collectives in order to open up competition in the market, were ultimately given to wholesalers from La Merced (Berthier 1986, 367). Many merchants divided their holdings across family members, creating the illusion of decentralization, while in fact much control remained in the same kinship clusters. Oversight of merchants continued to be lax and mechanisms for exerting control over the market elusive. In 1987, after another period of instability in food prices in the wake of Mexico's currency devaluation and post-boom financial crisis, the state resorted to having fresh food merchants sign a "voluntary agreement" in which they promised to reduce their prices by 15% in relation to current market prices (*DDF memorias 1988*, 21).

In terms of increasing transparency in the food system, La Central was likewise unsuccessful. Despite the proximity of regulatory agencies and representatives in the market, reliable official numbers and statistics pertaining even to the amount of food bought and sold in La Central are hard to come by. A truncated 1987 study produced the still-circulating statistics that 80% of the total fruit and vegetable consumption in Mexico City passes through La Central, totally 16,000 tons of food per day. Yet studies in the 1990s suggested that these numbers were closer to 7,000 tons per day, nearly 50% lower than official estimates (Echanove 2002). These

discrepancies can be attributed to a number of factors, ranging from the difficulty in keeping accurate records of mobile, highly perishable goods sold by volume and with constant fluctuation and poorly overseen, decentralized merchants, to willful manipulation on the part of authorities in whose interest it is to overstate the importance and magnitude of the market itself. Echanove (2002) points out, furthermore, that in 1987 national production as a whole was higher, such that not only is the gross quantity of food sold lower than official estimates, but as a percentage of national production it is probably closer to 12% than to the official 40% in the late 1990s, and likely even lower now.

In the 1980s, under the presidency of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988), furthermore, the state established COABASTO and the Sistema Nacional Para el Abasto (SNA), state food agencies which were intended, among other things, to generate information and regulation of perishable food markets. The SNA, in particular, was motivated by a concern that fresh food markets were backwards, hindered national progress, created excessive waste, and had inflated prices due to monopolistic practices and excessive intermediarism (*DDF memories 1988*). These efforts, however, ultimately failed, having fallen victim to neoliberal regulations that required the state food agencies to become financially self-sufficient or otherwise cancelled their funding. Through the 1990s, the State Food Agency gradually contracted, with even CONASUPO closing definitively in 1999. Yet, even as the neoliberal era limited the state's will and ability to regulate certain aspects of the food market, in a boon to the wholesalers, it ushered in a series of changes that would ultimately threaten the foundations and organizations of the modern food system as it had developed throughout the twentieth century.

Conclusion

The Mexican fresh food system, as it developed over the course of the twentieth century, was characterized, I have argued, by underregulation and a great deal of practical autonomy for fresh food merchants. In this context, merchants and traders were able to exploit the marginality of peasants, social and spatial distances between the countryside and urban centers, and their own connections to rural areas in order to amass wealth and gain control over the system of food distribution. At the same time, the state maintained a general anti-intermediary rhetoric, referring to merchants as 'speculators' and 'hoarders', originally aimed at grains merchants but which came to be extended to produce merchants as well by the 1970s. Yet rather than antagonistic, the relationship between merchants and the state was largely ambivalent, marked by a gap between rhetoric and regulation, in which there was a great deal of room for merchants to appropriate the state, through UNCOFYL and other trade organizations, as well as through connections with local *caciques* and regional structures of power in the countryside.

Today, merchants complain that Wal-Mart and Soriana and other "corrupt" corporations operate illegally and unethically, without regard for *la palabra* (one's word of honor in trade) and with the support of the government. In the decaying infrastructure of their own market, their dwindling sales numbers, and their vulnerability to crime, they see palpable evidence of their neglect and abandonment by the state with whom they claim to have once had privileged intimacy. As they are left to fend for themselves in this increasingly hostile terrain, they develop theories of who wields power, who poses a threat, and foster fantasies of once again reaching the success that the older generations in La Central still remember.

CHAPTER 2

Disrupted Flows: Temporality and Power in the Market

Temporalities of flow

Markets, when they are doing well, are not generally slow-paced places. From Tokyo's Tsukiji market to Chicago's iconic trading floors, the signs of a thriving market are bustle, noise, and urgency. One needs to buy cheap or sell dear before somebody else does, so time is of the essence. This sense of urgency, moreover, is often by design. Sometimes it comes as a function of spatial lay-out, as in the case of traditional food markets, where the dense clustering of competitors compel merchants and vendors to hawk their wares aggressively. Sometimes it is a function of how the commercial transactions are structured—both auctions and sales, for example, being time-bound affairs which by design impel buyers to act quickly. Urgency can also be a consequence of the item being sold or traded. A new clothing line may be on the verge of coming out, or the expiration date on the packaged foods may be coming up. For many reasons, markets of various types are places where marked by multiple scales and experiences of time, urgency being among the most important.

Nowhere is this characteristic of markets more pronounced than in the case of perishable foods. Fruits and vegetables, after all, ripen and rot. Unless preserved, they rather quickly cease to be recognizable as fruits and vegetables at all. This basic, although not entirely biological[11],

[11] While perishability seemingly refers to a biological process of transformation of a plant or fruit, the category of perishability (and the inverse category of loss, or *mermas*) are a priori cultural, in that the "lifecycle" to which they refer and which is in danger of perishing, is based on the criteria of usefulness and value to human populations, within a particular (market) system of valuation where the fruits are only considered useful while they possess certain aesthetic qualities.

quality of perishability shapes the organization of the food distribution system and its moral economy in profound ways. Perishability makes the constant *flow* of goods an absolute necessity in economic terms for food systems actors, to an even greater extent than in other commodity chains. Flow is the successful result of coordination of producers, consumers, and markets; of the human and non-human; of supply and demand across "among many irreconcilable clocks" (Bestor 2001, 92). Without such temporal coordination, stuff simply doesn't move. Flow thus refers to a process of material circulation, but it is also a normative temporality. When that normative temporality is disrupted in the form of stagnated or slowed circulation of goods, it is experienced as a form of disorder in the food system, the kind of break-down which causes the otherwise invisible infrastructure of produce circulation to come under scrutiny.

Figure 9. Garbage heaps in La Central

Figure 10. Garbage heaps in La Central 2

The ability to delay the circulation of food, like the ability to coordinate it, is therefore an exercise of power. It is a power that has historically been largely concentrated in the hands of merchants and traders throughout the world, since the ability to block food from circulation has the potential to starve populations and destabilize governments. The exigencies of perishability, however, mean that temporal coordination is also a source of vulnerability, uncertainty, and speculation for merchants, in both the linguistic and financial sense of the term. If somebody else intervenes in circulation, causing delays in the careful coordination of temporality, they may literally be left with a rotting, putrid investment.

In this chapter, I analyze accounts of delays in the food system in order to trace the figures who appear as possessing the power to interfere in and disrupt the flow of food. I argue that sovereign uncertainty can be grasped through the lens of temporality rather than only that of territory, as merchants interpret delays in terms of power whose contours are uncertain and suspect. In making sense of delays, they blur the distinction between legal, corrupt, and criminal

power. I begin by situating my discussion in political anthropological discussions of temporality, especially on migrant and border studies. I then provide an outline of the work of coordinating temporalities in which merchants engage. Turning to the problem of delay, I describe the different actors who are seen as being able to interfere in the food system, and show how the boundaries between them are rarely entirely clear even to merchants themselves. I conclude by arguing that, behind these criticisms lies the open secret that the moral economy of flow is necessarily based upon collusion with local authorities and power-brokers, both state and non-state, and that the increase in uncertainty or disruption indicates not only the emergence of illegality in the food system, but rather the merchants' own increasingly precarious position.

States, Temporality and Power

Writing of a 'fleeting' encounter between peasants and state authorities in Peru as one where the margins of the state come into relief, Deborah Poole (2004) has suggested seeing "time and mobility as in some senses even more central than space to the twin problems of margins and the exceptions that inhabit (and constitute) those margins" (2004, 36). Poole's suggestion is to move studies of the state away from spatializing tropes of peripheries and centers of power, and look instead at how power comes to be experienced and questioned in *moments of encounter* between authorities and subjects (see also Kernaghan 2015). Despite this invitation, anthropological studies of the state and law have paid relatively little attention to the relationship between temporality and state power, especially in contrast to the large amount of work focused on issues of space, territory, and borders. Yet regimes of temporality are closely related to the exercise of power, whether by the state or competing entities. State and colonial authorities may manipulate

and define time (Dalsgaard 2013; Schieffelin 2002), while the experience and perception of time is shaped by different institutions of power, from church to factory to courtroom.

A notable exception to this trend, ironically, are borders and migration studies, which offer insight into the relationship between material circulation, the control of *and* subjective experience of time, and its relationship to power. Within border studies, scholars have recently turned their attention to documenting the ways in which borders produce distinct temporal experiences and economies. Studies have analyzed the interminable queue, illegal border crossing, and the migrant detention center as symbols and sites of the biopolitical production of 'migrant temporalities' (Holmes 2013, Coutin 2000). These temporalities are characterized by the subjective experiences of waiting, out-of-timeness, an inability to plan for the future, and temporal uncertainty (Andersson 2014, Coutin 2000, Crapanzano 1985). Such experiences, Andersson (2014) argues, are not simply a by-product of territorial regimes, but are a product of *active* temporal usurpations and expulsions on the part of state actors which constitute a 'temporal economics of illegality.' While studies of borders are largely focused on the transnational circulation, stratification and regulation of *human* mobility—in part, perhaps, as a response to the ideology of globalized capitalism in which goods flow freely while people do not—here I am interested in the circulation of *things* within a country and the way in which experiences of temporal disruption, such as waiting or delay bring into relief the uncertain nature of sovereignty in contemporary Mexico.

I argue that the ability to coordinate and intervene in temporal cycles is a way in which sovereignty is performed and enacted, not so different from the erecting of territorial borders, checkpoints, infrastructures and monuments. In fact, territory, space, and temporality are linked

together in the concept of flow, which refers to timely circulation through space. Delays thus often occur by strategically impeding mobility—on roads, loading docks, ports, market entrances—which may rely on existing boundary-making infrastructures. Yet these encounters are often fleeting and take place far away from merchants or authorities. As such, while the temporal effects are felt all the way down the distribution line in the form of delay, who exactly the authors of these effects are is often less clear to merchants. This is because their spatial remove from the fleeting encounters means that they only learn of them by word of mouth, through their contact people, such as traders, producers, truck drivers, or brokers in the countryside and distribution network.

During the course of my research, merchants and other actors were frequently wary of and speculating about the ways in which different entities exercised power through such spatiotemporal strategies as delay and withholding. Although they often did not have a direct encounter with the authority in question, their accounts foreground subjective experiences of waiting, uncertainty, and nostalgia. Such embodied temporalities, migration studies scholars have argued, are a result of the biopolitical regulation of (migrants') bodies by sovereign powers. Yet while most studies of migrant temporalities and borders focus on the "strong relationship between power, the state and management of time" (Griffiths et al 2013: 30) to the point of reification, here I am interested the ways in which the coordination of time comes to be a space in which the *weak* relationship between power and the state is articulated, where sovereign uncertainty is acutely visibilized.

Coordinating market temporalities

Most merchants see the skill in their trade in lying precisely in the ability to move between and coordinate multiple temporal scales and schedules which come together in the market, and attribute success in doing so to a combination of savviness, intuition, and ruthlessness. Good merchants need to know *who* their buyers are, the *quantities* they are likely to buy, and the *stage of ripeness* in which they prefer their fruit. They need to know who to contact to usher along delayed shipments, and who to call as a backup purveyor if a deal falls through. They need to know when to slash prices and when to hold fast to their price instead of letting competition drive them down. At stake in the enactment of these forms of knowledge is not simply skill, however, but power: those merchants who are most able to coordinate the market's complex timescapes—to generate flow—are those who command the most capital and respect.

The first temporal cycle we can speak of in the wholesale food system is that of the sales day, which starts early in the morning—between two and six o'clock—and by late morning tapers off, before finally coming to a close when the market closes in the mid to late afternoon. This cycle depends on the working hours of retail vendors and restaurants, and follows their successes and failures closely. At five o'clock in the morning, the passageways and roads of the Central de Abasto are clogged with *diableros* (dolly pushers) hauling thousands of tons of merchandise around the market, as buyers rush around trying to fill their orders and get on the road before rush hour begins in earnest. In the central corridors of the market, where the chili pepper merchants cluster, there are daily traffic jams as bodies, dollies, and goods push against each other to form a nearly impenetrable mass. Men whistle and swear. The air is both tense and intense, and I am relieved, after my first time caught in the midst of it, to get out, eyes still

smarting from pepper oil fumes.

For merchants, these traffic jams are moments of adrenaline and excitement. Old timers in the market say that it used to be much more crowded throughout the day, that the traffic jams would extend through much larger swaths of the markets. They speak fondly of the days when buyers would almost get into physical fights in their efforts to outbid each other for a particular crate of mangos or pears. These days, fights over produce are unheard of and the most intense commerce takes place only in the early morning hours, which is when street vendors, restaurants, small retail vendors, and others who comprise the "traditional" food distribution networks of Mexico go to buy the goods they will use that day (Torres Torres 2009). By eight or nine o'clock in the morning, many of La Central's merchants have a sense of whether their day was a success or a failure, and start planning accordingly. Later in the day, larger buyers, such as grocery store representatives, or larger restaurants who order in bulk, filter in to inspect produce and place orders.

Beyond the daily sales cycle, there is the weekly schedule, which also hews closely to the demands and consumption patterns of urban consumers and the retail outlets which service them. Since Saturday through Tuesday are the biggest sales days in the city's public markets and restaurants, most merchants work through the weekend, and some take the day off on Wednesday, if they take a day off at all. In fact, most businesses in La Central and other wholesale markets work seven days a week, with only some closing for holidays such as New Years or Christmas.

The cycles of boom and bust thus follow the peak market days, especially for some of the smaller and more precarious merchants. Merchants generally lower their prices on peak sales

days in order to be more competitive, knowing that they will be able to make up for the lower earnings with larger sales volume. If the larger sales don't materialized as anticipated, however, merchants who are left with a large stock of produce on Tuesday afternoon find themselves in a difficult predicament, as they need to try to find a market for their goods before they become unsaleable. This is often the most stressful part of the wholesaler's week, and it can be the moment during which the smallest merchants see their businesses go under, as their investment rots away and they find themselves without liquid capital to invest in a new stock of products.

The daily and weekly cyclical time of local commerce thus intersects with another kind of temporality: that of fresh and perishable fruits and vegetables. Unlike markets for other types of commodities, where merchants can hold a fair amount of capital in their stored goods, which can be sold at a later date or even returned to manufacturers, fruits and vegetables need to be sold quickly or they become a source of pure loss. At the most general level, then, merchants all need to sell their goods before they rot or become unusable for secondary processing or refuse markets[12]. Indeed, rotting and damaged fruit becomes an additional liability since large amounts of waste are difficult and sometimes costly to get rid of. Here, however, we are speaking of multiple temporal cycles, since each fruit—and indeed, each particular strain, size, or shipment of a given fruit—has a different timeline for ripening. Potatoes can stay in cold storage for weeks and even months, while some strains of blackberries just last a few days. The case of banana merchants is an illustrative example, since the banana market is almost entirely dominated by

[12] There are multiple channels to get rid of waste, primary among them being the garbage pick-up organized by the market's administration. In addition, there are multiple organizations of garbage pickers—often women with small children—who pick salvageable produce out of the garbage piles and "polish" it to look presentable and then sell it in poor neighborhoods or on the street. There are also those who go to merchants at the end of the day, offering a very small amount for produce that is destined for the dumpster. Today, increasingly, merchants complain that these groups aren't even offering any money but simply offer to take the goods for free, which the merchants see as emblematic of a larger breakdown in social relations of respect and order in the food system.

one type of banana, the Cavendish, which ripen in very visible, standardized, and familiar ways.

Most of the customers of the medium and small-scale banana wholesalers are public market and street market vendors who will sell their goods that very day or the next. They prefer to buy bananas which are nearly perfectly ripe, since that is what most final consumers look for, and their goal is to get rid of their stock within one or two days since they rarely have a place to store overstock. Bananas that are too green will sit and unnecessarily occupy storage space for them, while overly ripe ones will get damaged in transit and become useless within a couple of days. On the other hand, larger supermarkets and buyers who purchase for extended periods of time often prefer greener bananas, since they are more durable and ripen on their own over time. Each wholesaler thus needs to anticipate the needs of their respective buyers, and ensure that they have in stock bananas at just the right ripeness point for each, or they risk losing business to a competitor with better products. Refrigeration rooms and gas-ripening chambers (all bananas and papayas require methane to ripen uniformly) are key ways of achieving some control over the natural processes of decomposition, but are unevenly distributed among merchants.

Yet another temporal scale enters the market at the level of the growing and harvesting of produce. Merchants need to ensure that they will have a supply of produce arriving from the countryside in appropriate conditions at the correct time in order to maximize their ability to compete at the local market. When it is high season for a given fruit or vegetable, supply is abundant and price is low, such that margins of profit are extremely slim and merchants need to be particularly careful about not being left with an excess of overstocked fruit for which the demand is satiated. Conversely, when it is off-season for a given product but demand remains steady, securing an adequate supply becomes an issue in order to avoid being left with no stock

and losing customers, or having to buy from competitors in order to have something to resell, which cuts tremendously into profit margins. Finally, shipping times mean that there is a lag time between harvest, when an order is placed, and when it arrives at the wholesale market. All of the produce in La Central de Abasto arrives on trucks of various sizes, either from the place where it is harvested and packed in Mexico, or from the ports where it arrives in the case of imported produce. Since prices in the market fluctuate from day to day and profit margins are slim, particularly when a fruit is in high season, a day or two lag time can mean the difference between a healthy profit and loss, especially for small scale merchants.

Coordinating these multiple temporalities is the work of the wholesaler. In order to ensure that things flow, merchants need to be flexible, informed, and above all else well networked with those who are part of their supply chain *and* those external actors who have the power, not necessarily authorized, to cause delays or blockages. Oftentimes, differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate delays, however, is hardly straightforward.

Legal delays versus corruption

Different state agencies and actors are legally vested with the power to delay or stop flow. In the perishable goods market, SAGARPA, the state agricultural agency, is one of the primary executors of this power. SAGARPA relies on an expansive network of employees and sub-contracted *ingenieros tercios* throughout Mexico's agricultural areas to conduct inspections of goods and documents to ensure that all produce which circulates complies with regulations ensuring that it is free of pests, contaminants, and pathogens. Inspections can take place on farms, packing plants, or at roadside stops, *garrifas,* on highways which mark borders in between

regions of Mexico that have different phytosantiary status. For example, there are regions of Mexico which are deemed *libre*, free of certain pests, while other areas of the country are still considered risk zones. While these distinctions are a matter of natural regulation and are monitored and established by SAGARPA, they are also highly important because of international agricultural trade agreements. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), for example, only allows avocados from the state of Michoacan (a *libre* zone) to be imported. Obtaining and maintaining 'free' status and not being contaminated thus creates a system of internal borders, which become sites of potential delay. Transportation of edible products between risk zones and free zones is heavily regulated, and produce shipments are accompanied by a packet of documentation referred to as *la guía,* which inspectors look over. *La guía* is like a passport of sorts for fruits and vegetables, and the mobility of produce depends on the source and content of their documents[13].

At one of the *garrifas*, or inspection sites, if the documents are found to be suspicious or lacking, inspectors may conduct physical inspections of a specific box, or may demand that the entire truck be unloaded and inspected, at the cost of the person receiving the shipment. On one occasion, I heard merchants receive phone calls from their *transportista* en route to the market with goods, letting him know that they had paid a *cuota* (fee) to the *garrifa* inspectors, due to some sort of irregularity with *la guía,* in order to avoid having to pay the far larger fee that unloading and reloading the entire truck would entail. When I asked him about what type of irregularity might have been in question, he snorted, "this is how our authorities work, they find problems and then offer the solutions for a price."

[13] Interview, SENAISICA office, January 2018.

Another common form of state-caused delay could come in the form of highway police, who would stop vehicles for speeding infractions, to check documents, inspect their vehicles for migrants or contraband, or simply to demand money. Such stops are regular occurences for truck drivers, and because the areas in which such extortions occurred are widely dispersed and sometimes remote, taking any sort of action or drawing media attention to the problem was difficult. Most of the time, accordingly, these are fairly routine and invisible occurrences and while they no doubt elicit a large amount of grumbling about the state of corruption in Mexico, they are seen as part of the cost of doing business, which ultimately gets incorporated into the final mark-up of goods when they arrive to market. Nor is this a new phenomenon; Felipe Torres Torres, a researcher who has written extensively about Mexican food systems, told me that over twenty years ago when he accompanied truck drivers transporting produce from Veracruz to Mexico City they were stopped multiple times along the way, and that this was simply part of the budget that buyers incorporated into their transportation costs.

In the day-to-day practice of food commerce, then, paying off officials is routine, as is extortion by officials. While clearly a form of unequal exchange and negative reciprocity, much of the time it is unremarkable, and goes both ways; merchants may have to pay in order for nonexistent problems with *la guía* to be addressed, but they also pay officials to apply *la vista gorda* (turn a blind eye) to produce that might come with irregularities. Shipments might be missing a signature, or a vehicle might not be in compliance with standards, or might be speeding, and paying for these transgressions to be overlooked is a necessity to prevent delay in commerce. Less frequently, thieves may steal entire truckloads of produce, particularly high-priced commodities such as limes or avocados, and then sell these on the black market. In order

for this to be able to take place, however, they go through merchants who pay the officials who inspect *la guía*, which contains detailed information about sellers and the trajectory of shipments, to overlook irregularities. The back and forth between extortion and bribery, therefore, is a routine part of commerce, the shared understanding that flow is both a necessity and a point of vulnerability lubricating the social interaction. Most of the time, these interactions are invisible although the subject of frequent gossip. It is a public secret that anybody who does well in commerce has to know how to pay off those who control points of passage, and that preventing delay *requires* such forms of reciprocity.

It is only when delay occurs, when the threat that lies latent behind the camouflage of the official inspection blossoms, that the public secret reveals itself and normative categories of evaluation are applied to it. This became evident in a meeting I observed between a visiting delegation of Chilean grape growers, and representatives of a wholesaler's association. Over coffee and cookies, as they talked about ways of deepening trade relations between their countries in the sector of fresh fruits, the problem of a delayed shipment was raised by one of the Chileans.

"It's a well known problem," the visitor said, "that Mexico has a problem with corruption. We know that *la mordida* is part of doing business here."

He gave an example. A couple of months back, he said, SAGARPA had falsely claimed to have found *un bicho*, a pest, in the shipping container full of grapes as they were undergoing inspection in the port city of Manzanillo. For days, while the scientists conducted careful inspections, the grapes sat trapped in a mercantile limbo, going bad and rapidly losing value until they were unsellable. Tens of thousands of dollars, he claimed, were lost in the process by the

producer who was not paid in full for a shipment not received.

"But we all know there was no bug," the Chilean concluded. "And if we had thrown just a little more money at the situation, things would have turned out differently."

The Mexicans in the room shifted uncomfortably, some shaking their heads. The presidents of the merchants' association spoke up first.

"Yes, yes, it's a real problem, this issue of corruption in our ports. But you know which one is the most corrupt by far? Manzanillo. It's the worst."

Another Mexican merchant spoke up next. "It concerns us too, of course, but the truth is that the majority of Mexicans are hard-working, honest people. But there are some localized problems in certain states…"

In this conversation, the Mexican merchants were left with few options: they could not deny the problem of corruption in Mexico in general, nor could they defend the legitimacy of a particular instance of inspection. They did not even challenge the account of the Chileans on the grounds that the shipment was almost certainly insured, as nearly all international shipments are. The dominant narrative about the Mexican state as deeply corrupt and criminal, which merchants, ironically, frequently promulgated, was too entrenched to allow for them to make such claims. Yet, in the interest of deepening trade relations and bolstering their relative position, the Mexican merchants had to try to temper the critiques that the Chileans leveled at them, taking recourse in two strategies. The first, which took the form of a familiar trope of lamenting bad Mexican governments while celebrating good Mexican people, was to assert that Mexicans suffer at the hands of their corrupt government but are themselves honest and hard-working. This sort of narrative, as Lomnitz (1995) and Nuijten (2003) have argued is central to Mexican nationalism.

Yet this strategy, which redeemed the traders at the expense of the state was problematic as well, since all international trade is ultimately mediated by state agencies and law in some way or another. The other strategy, accordingly, attempted to localize the problem to particular agencies or populations without trying to deny the particular instance of state extortion, to cleanse themselves of the taint of corruption (Lomnitz 1995).

What comes to light in this interaction is the impossibility of sustaining an official distinction between legal compliance and criminal exception in a context where corruption is a dominant folk category (Muir 2015). According to SAGARPA agents, delay is a necessary if unfortunate occasional occurrence in the process of protecting borders and public health and international trade agreements. While the officials I interviewed acknowledged that some instances of inspection accompanied by extortion or bribery occurred, in the vast majority of cases, I was told, the inspectors were honest public servants working in the national interest. Merchants and drivers, however, usually view such delays as inherent signs of the *abuse* of power, as indexical of corruption. Indeed, the notion that the abuse of power by corrupt inspectors is an obstacle to commerce is so widely held that it becomes difficult for *any* instance of state-caused delay to be read in a contrary light. Where delays are attributed to official sources, therefore, they are a priori interpreted as evidence of corruption that play out by preying on precisely the vulnerability of the economy of urgency that characterizes commerce in perishable goods. The official excuse, whatever it may be, is too easily readable as an instance of what Jusionyte (2015) describes as camouflage, where the criminality of the state hides behind the symbolic trappings of the legal-moral order it purports to uphold.

Criminal delays

In early 2014 the price of a kilo of lime, a central feature of most Mexican meals, surged to over 400% its regular price. Between December 2013 and March 2014, in La Central de Abasto, limes which had been selling for 10 pesos a kilo shot up to between 45-50 pesos per kilo[14]. Some markets reported shortages of the fruit and restaurants started rationing what was previously a ubiquitous and free condiment on every table. Even in the United States, where much of the lime gets imported from Mexico, lemons started replacing limes in cocktails and taquerias. During the lime crisis and for months thereafter, there was speculation about the reason for the shortages. According to reports issued by SAGARPA, the reason for the lime scarcity was the unfortunate confluence of bad weather and the outbreak of the HLB pest (Huanglongbin, or *dragon amarillo*) during the low season, which wholesalers and intermediaries took advantage of in order to price-gouge[15]. Produce merchants and some media reports, on the other hand, claimed that the real reason for the lime prices was organized criminals, with the state's complicity, extorting producers and holding crops hostage, disrupting the supply chain.

According to the stories that circulated in the market, but also in the media, especially related to regions such as Michoacán or Veracruz, criminals can disrupt the circulation of goods in several ways: First, at the fields and packing plants in the countryside, they may blockade growers' crops and prevent them from shipping their goods unless they pay a heavy fee, usually per truck of produce. On the highways, they may set up roadblocks and stop trucks, demanding

[14] *Animal Politico*. Estas son las razones del alza al precio del limon. March 14, 2014

[15] Informe. El Limon. SAGARPA. San Pedro Tlaquepaque, Jalisco. March 19, 2014. http://www.sagarpa.gob.mx/Delegaciones/jalisco/boletines/Paginas/2014B04002.aspx

money in order to be allowed to pass. Less frequently, they may rob truckloads of goods entirely and sell them on the black market. Finally, at some regional markets, although not in La Central itself, merchants are prevented from offloading their goods or opening their stores unless they pay fee, a strategy which was famously deployed by the mafia in New York City's Fulton Fish Market in the late twentieth century[16].

When I started talking to lime wholesalers, many contested the government agencies' accounts, and claimed to be confounded about what had happened just a few months earlier. They described prices that got higher and higher by the day in a market which was usually relatively stable. They described producers who claimed to have nothing to sell them, or who asked for extraordinarily large sums. They acknowledged that they were charging prices far beyond anything they had ever seen, but claimed that it was simply a reflection of what they were being charged in the countryside. Some of them had run out of merchandise. Tito, a young merchant who oversaw a large and successful lime business that was based primarily out of Veracruz described it as a time of confusion:

> It was quite strange for us. The thing is, you learn to measure the market and to understand how it's trending. But last year, we were all confused. We talked amongst ourselves and asked around to figure out what was going on, because we all know each other. The producer would tell you "listen man, I don't have any lime" and you'd ask "how is it possible?" Or another producer would tell you he had limes but that it was going to cost 40 pesos [a kilo], or that he could only sell you a small amount. And suddenly your neighbor [in the market] had limes and you'd say "whoa, how did you do that?" and he'd tell you "look, so-and-so sold it to me, but he said he doesn't have anymore." And so on.

The case of the disruption in the lime supply chain, of the blocked flow, caused a flurry of speculation—of the narrative rather than monetary variety— in La Central de Abasto. Some

[16] NYTimes. Oct. 16 1987. "Mafia Runs Fulton Fish Market, U.S. Says in Suit to Take Control." NYTimes. August 23, 1981. "Organzied Crime Said to Rule Fulton Fish Market".

merchants rejected out of hand the idea that there was a pest at play. Toño, a third-generation lime merchant from a family of producers-wholesalers compared the *dragon amarillo* (HLB) pest to the *chupacabra*, a folkloric figure who sucks blood from goats, and suggested that it was a story created as a conspiracy to dupe the public.

> The pest never existed. I can guarantee you it never existed…It's like…in 1994 this thing called a *chupacabras* supposedly appeared [in Mexico], which would kill cows and animals, and it drew all of Mexico's attention, and I mean everyone's, we were all so busy trying to find out what was going on with the *chupacabras*, and in the meantime they were devaluing the peso. It affected us terribly. And with this pest, I swear it's like that. One day the agricultural engineer calls us and says "listen, we have to watch out, they've reported that there's HLB in Colima" and on the news they said they were going to burn 10 million trees. In [the village of] Martinez, the peasants were terrified, saying "what's going to happen to my trees if the pest gets here?" But I think it was a strategy planned by some people, to be able to do it [price gouge] or so that nobody would talk about organized crime.

Toño suggested that the official account was a cover-up for the *real* interests and powers at play, which took the form of organized crime, a certain small number of merchants in other states, and supermarket chains.

> And then PROFECTO came and fined us…the idea was that we were controlling the market, that we were responsible for the prices going up so much, when in actuality they just didn't want to go to the countryside and have problems with the people down there who weren't being allowed to sell their fruit. There was lime, but the trucks weren't loading up with it, ask any truck driver. But they [the authorities] just wanted to put on their hero's medals and say "look, lime is expensive and this is why." There were some who speculated too. La Comercial Mexicana [a grocery chain] and Wal-Mart suddenly were selling lime for 17 pesos a kilo when it's more than double the price everywhere else, and so you realize that there were some shady deals there that nobody paid attention to.

Other merchants didn't necessarily reject out of hand the idea that *somebody* was conspiring to rise the lime prices, but they claimed that the official account was off. The real reason was that organized crime had made harvesting and transporting certain crops, including

limes, so expensive because of the endless extortions, that some producers and rural traders were forced to abandon their business or raise their prices. *Es el precio de la extorción*, (the extortion price) they said over and over again. Given that limes came largely from Michoacán, from an area that had been heavily affected by conflicts between *autodefensas* and cartels the previous year—indeed, one of the leaders of the autodefensas, Stanislao Bertran, was himself a lime grower—many found it curious that this was less emphasized in the media, and that SAGARPA didn't even mention it as a factor. Merchants instead suggested that many growers in the *tierra caliente* had simply decided it wasn't worth the risk and the cost of growing and harvesting fruit that would be accompanied by a hefty extortion fee and had abandoned their fields for that growing season. Others, the rumors went, were directly prevented from harvesting their crops by gangs who were punishing or threatening them for not paying a "protection fee."

Several of those with whom I spoke who had been fined by PROFECO in 2014 claimed that they were victims. They claimed to have been doing what they are meant to do—buying and selling for a reasonable profit—but that they had been scapegoated for following a system over which they had little control. Tito suggested that his losses had been in the hundreds of thousands of dollars, less because of the fees that PROFECO imposed, but rather because of the prices that they were forced to abide by:

> I proved to them that I was buying for 38 pesos a kilo, they would arrive here costing 40[17], and I would sell at 42. I showed them receipts in which you could see all of that, but even so they fined me 90,000 pesos, and my father too. But the worst thing is that they made us immediately put our prices down, and we had 25 tons on our hands at that time, which was a huge investment when prices were

[17] This refers to the fact that the price at which something arrives at the market is often higher than what was agreed upon when the purchase was negotiated. It is common but is widely viewed by merchants as a morally questionable practice, a violation of the code of honor, *la palabra*, which should guide the market. See more on this in chapter 2.

> very high. Keep in mind, I bought at 38 and they made us sell at 17, I lost 17 pesos a kilo for 25 tons…it was an incredible loss, almost 8 million pesos...

In SAGARPA's report, interviews with market authorities, and different media sources, blame for the lime crisis falls on the shoulders of the recognizable figure of the merchant or intermediary who, as I discussed in chapter one, has historically been a problematic and threatening figure in the Mexican food system. The merchant's self-interested and excessive accumulation, which comes at the expense of the people, thus symbolizes the market's immoral side, and demonstrates the need for state oversight and regulation. Here, the intermediaries appear in the familiar figures of the *hoarders* and *speculators*, those who manipulate the market's legitimate temporalities and create stagnation instead of flow. The inspection and punishment of some of the merchants, publicized in media reports, is an attempt by the state to reinstate the social order through a public performance of its own sovereignty.

The merchants' accounts, meanwhile, contest the official story not only by rejecting its denotational content, but by challenging the normative framing and the moral categories that would render it legible and credible. The dragón amarillo, for example, instead of appearing as a scientific category of threat is reframed as an urban legend analogous to the *chupacabras*, and those who believe in both appear as unfortunate dupes. Whereas the official account reports on the fining and shuttering of businesses as evidence of order being reinstated and justice being served, Toño reframes it as a performance saying "they wanted to put on their hero's medals." Both the "urban legend" of the *dragon amarillo* and the transparent performance of the PROFECO inspectors are thus recast as a mask for forms of conspiracy in which the state is complicit either by design or because of simple laziness.

The trope of the savvy and unscrupulous merchant, meanwhile, is upended by accounts

of *not knowing* and confusion. Far from the masterminds of the food system who coordinate and see everything, Toño and Tito cast themselves as clueless and doubly victimized (first by the organized criminals, then by the state which unjustly punishes them). It is the organized criminal—a figure who scarcely makes an appearance in the official explanations of the lime crisis— who *knows* and manipulates the market's temporalities, strategically delaying the harvest and transportation of goods. Some merchants even suggested that it was no coincidence that the crisis took place precisely during the winter months of low production, since this is when it was easiest to corner the market, and when limes garnered their highest price per kilo, which incentivized producers and merchants to pay exorbitant extortion fees. Organized criminals, with this reasoning, are intimately acquainted with the market's temporalities. Whereas the merchant is confused about what is going on, the organized criminal appears as an omniscient yet spectral figure.

The merchants' accounts are a partial inversion of the official narrative about the lime crisis. In both accounts, the food system is opaque and complex, and vulnerable to the manipulations of criminal entrepreneurs who enrich themselves at the expense of the system as a whole, exceeding the limits of the local moral economy. Yet while organized criminals appear as external figures, knowledgeable interlopers into the legitimate system of circulation, the figure of the speculating merchant is internal to the market itself, a symbol of the market's intrinsic moral risks. These narratives also diverge in the possibilities ascribed to the state to reinstate the moral order upended by blocked flow. Whereas SAGARPA and PROFECO attempt to reinstate order through implementing the law, the merchants point to the fragmented sovereignties and forms of corruption which would render such an endeavor impossible. While the villain of the official

accounts is the merchant, symbolizing and the uncontrolled force of the unregulated market, the villain of the merchants' accounts is the criminal-state nexus and the specter of impunity.

Conclusions

While the normative temporality of the food market is indeed one of flow, there are tremendous profits to be earned by creating blockages and shortages. Merchants try to lay blame for such disruptions on figures who lie outside of the market proper by associating them with illegality and labeling them criminals or corrupt. Yet it is merchants themselves who have historically wielded this power to the most dangerous effect as far as food security is concerned, most visibly in cases of grain shortages, where speculation and hoarding are significant problems. In the perishable food industry, hoarding is more difficult, but as the case of the lime shortage above demonstrates, price-gouging and dubiously legal and ethical commercial practices are hardly unheard of.

In fact, the public secret of the market is that it is virtually impossible to conduct any sort of trade without engaging in agreements with unsavory and perhaps criminal power-brokers. Sometimes, palms need to be greased for a legitimate transaction to not get held up. As Sofia, a lime vendor told me when talking about the rumors that some of the top lime merchants made payments to organized crime groups, "one can't work in the *tierra caliente* [region of Michoacán] without getting dirty." Indeed, even some of my most educated and transnational interlocutors in La Central—an MBA holder who did business with Canada and the USA, and a former lawyer—who were generally critical of the 'informal' and unaccountable ways of doing business in Mexico confessed to having to falsify receipts and tax documents in order to appear

to be fulfilling requirements in the case of inspections, and to having to pay off inspectors sometimes. "They force us into doing it," Pedro the lawyer said, "they require us to show receipts of purchase for all of the goods that we buy, but in the countryside when you're dealing with semi-literate peasants who don't even have bank accounts and who are suspicious if you ask them to sign anything, you have to just do things in cash and then try to make it look right later."

While merchants use the language of illegality and crime to describe the disorder that they perceive where flows are delayed or blocked, I would suggest that they are giving voice to the sensation of sovereign uncertainty, of not knowing whom to reach out to in order to ensure that their goods don't get held up. As Nordstrom (2004) has pointed out, commodity and supply chains are criss-crossed with illegality and informality; that is the norm rather than the exception or pathology. In La Central, when merchants feel stable and in control, things like extortions, whatever their sources, and shake-downs are likely to be simply incorporated into the business operations, written off as a cost. Where there is change or unpredictability, especially backed by the threat of lethal violence they articulate this as the conspiracies of the colluded *narco* state or of corrupt authorities.

CHAPTER 3

From Channels to Vectors: Fear and Infrastructural Appropriation

Conflict in the countryside

Don René started selling avocado, which he calls "a noble fruit," nearly thirty years ago, long before NAFTA transformed it into a wildly lucrative export crop. He likes to tell the story of driving down to the state of Michoacán, the world's most important avocado-growing region, in a borrowed pick-up truck and a short list of contacts he had gotten from a friend, and knocking on doors to introduce himself as a merchant from Mexico City who was looking to branch out into avocados. "I didn't even have enough money to pay for the first truckload up front," he reminisced. "I offered to leave the truck as collateral, but one of my compadres and I reached an agreement, and he fronted me a shipment, so it wasn't necessary. It went well, gracias a Dios, so here we are." He concluded with a smile, gesturing at the modestly sized, tidy warehouse he owns in Mexico's largest wholesale food market, La Central, where even at the age of seventy-six, he continues to spend six days a week, from five in the morning until late in the afternoon.

Ever since that first visit, René has been going back to Michoacán to maintain social ties, make new acquaintances, inspect the fields, and pay his purveyors in person. In 2012, however, armed conflict between the Knights Templar cartel (*los Templarios*), vigilante self-defense groups (*autodefensas*), and the army put Michoacán on headlines around the world. In this largely rural, poor state in Mexico where neoliberalism has crippled the agricultural sector, giving rise to mass waves of migration, increased drug cultivation and trafficking, and on-going territorial disputes, the fruit and vegetable trade has turned into risky businesses. Rumors started

to circulate, first among locals and then filtering their way up to Mexican and international media, that the cartels were heavily involved in agricultural production in Michoacán, especially in the lucrative avocado and lime industries (Arias-Vazquez 2014; Maldonado 2013, 2014). Back in Mexico City, René, like other wholesalers, started worrying about getting mixed up with the wrong people. He decided to stop making trips to Michoacán, and hasn't been back since.

Today, René relies on telephone contacts to place his orders and hear about crop conditions, and sends money through bank deposit, or via a truck driver known as *El Babas*, who arrives every Wednesday with a trailer full of avocados. Logistically, his business is a bit more streamlined than it was before, stripped as it is of the long drives and social obligations that his Michoacán visits entailed. Yet, René isn't happy about the situation. Part of his love for the job comes from the sociality of it all. Good merchants tend to be charismatic and sociable, and spend a considerable amount of time cultivating ties with business partners through lunches, boozy outings, telephone calls, and stopping to greet and shake hands with an interminable parade of associates and acquaintances in their daily rounds in the market. René says he feels disconnected from what is going on in the countryside now, and wonders whether the reports of violence and extortion that he gets are always legitimate, or if they are sometimes invoked to justify raising prices. To be a good wholesaler, he believes, entails having an intimate knowledge of the local supply chains, and not relying too much on local intermediaries. Yet unlike some of the largest wholesalers, René cannot afford to hire a full-time representative as his right-hand man on the ground in Michoacán, so he relies on his suppliers in the countryside to keep him informed and do right by him in terms of pricing and fulfilling shipments.

René avoids Michoacán because he feels it is dangerous, because he is worried about getting

on the wrong person's radar and becoming the victim of violence. Fear has shaped his mobility, eliminating a filament in the web that keeps avocados flowing into Mexico City, but animating others, as his telephone and people like El Babas acquire a new importance. These too come with their own set of anxieties, however. What if the wrong person gets hold of his contact number? What if the wrong people get to El Babas? These and other concerns preoccupy René, who like most merchants is worried about the shadow that violent crime and corruption cast on his line of work.

Affect-ed infrastructures

In this chapter, I analyze how fear, which some scholars have theorized to be the dominant subjectivity of contemporary Latin America (Greene 1994; Rotker 2002; Reguillo 2004), circulates in and shapes Mexico City's food distribution system, one of the most essential of those "boring" infrastructures upon which urban life depends (Anand 2017; Star 1999). As an affective response which depends on perceptions of danger and learned reactions to it, fear leaves its mark both on our bodies—in adrenaline surges, upset stomachs, sweaty palms—and on our surroundings. From the fortified enclaves that dot Latin American cities, to nuclear fallout shelters and the invocation to "see something, say something," fear inscribes itself onto landscapes and subjectivities alike, and there is a political economy to its imprints. Insecurity fears may lead to increasing levels of mistrust and suspicion (Goldstein 2012; Green 1998), surveillance (Merry 2001, Masco 2012), changing forms of mobility, including migration, and enclosure or exclusion from public spaces (Low 2001, Leal 2016). In this chapter, I build on this body of scholarship, which speaks to affects's social and material *effects*, while tracing as well

how affect emerges at the interplay between historically situated people and their material environments (Navaro-Yashin 2012).

In what follows, I argue that fear and uncertainty are communicated by human and non-human actors, including fruits, cell phones, roads, and truck divers, who "discharge affect" (*ibid*) and are resignified alternately as indicators and carriers of criminal violence. The mediated social networks that make up the food system are materially reconstituted as consequence of these affective states. Central to my argument, therefore, is an attention to the relationship between *resignification,* which points to the always changing nature of the meanings that adhere to relatively stable material forms, and *reconfiguration*, which refers to changes in material forms, objects, and relationships. Paying attention to the dynamic and productive interplay between these forces allows for a more comprehensive accounts of both change and continuity in contexts of violence.

The chapter is comprised of several sections. First, I define the food infrastructure as a socio-material assemblage in which 'grooved channels' of repetition are built through the phatic labor—always mediated—of merchants. Next, I describe a local theory of appropriation in which merchants see this infrastructure as being taken over by criminal forces who would visit violence upon them. I describe the nature of this appropriation and its transmission through the epidemiological metaphors of contagion, and give examples of how people as well as shipments of fruit, telephones, and bank accounts can be seen as vectors, flattening the distinction between human and non-human actors. I show how central to this local theory of contagion is the idea that exposure occurs through visibility, which renders one vulnerable. This vulnerability means that merchants try to remain invisible, but this creates a paradoxical situation as they need to

have a visible profile to do their work.

Although I emphasize throughout how merchants imagine and narrate the "dark infrastructure" of food, I don't mean to suggest that these accounts are somehow imaginary. Indeed, infrastructural appropriation is inherent to infrastructures themselves which are always used and appropriated to diverse and sometimes divergent ends, and in Mexico, by all accounts, organized crime does play a significant role in usurping licit networks. In the state of Michoacán, for example, Salvador Maldonado (2012; 2014) has argued that organized crime has made use of many of the infrastructural objects developed in the twentieth century with IMF loans, repurposing roads and built structures for their ends, while at the same time filling the gap where the neoliberal state has receded from some of these agricultural zones. Yet studies of such appropriations are difficult and dangerous to conduct, and information about them therefore tends to circulate in the realm of rumor and speculation.

In emphasizing the narrated nature of the accounts, therefore, I hope to capture some of the speculation and uncertainty that undergirds attempts to generalize about the risks which may or may not lurk in the filaments of the food system. There is uncertainty in Don René's decision to not go to Michoacán, in his reluctance to answer unknown phone numbers. Fear renders these familiar practices strange and threatening, and the food system becomes an infrastructure which allows for the circulation of not only fruits and vegetables, but of danger. Thus extortion, murder, and drugs travel parasitically with mangos and avocados, making their way through the truck routes and phone numbers which connect merchants to buyers to growers. Or rather, they *may* travel along those routes, and the lack of certainty about whether or not they will means that the imagined circulation of threat potentiates the actual circulation of fear in the food system—a fear

which has material consequences, as the filaments in the web of food distribution themselves transform in response.

Infrastructure as grooved channels

Similar to sewage systems, electric grids, dams, and roads, food systems are "networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas, and allow for their exchange over space" (Larkin 2013: 328). I understand the Mexican food system to be a complex system of channels connecting social actors—including merchants, truck drivers, growers, inspectors, and police—in relations of exchange, mediated by built structures (warehouses, wholesale markets, packing plants, roads), objects (cellular phones, computers, contracts, receipts), and laws (municipal, consumer protection, international treaties, tax). These communicative channels are what allow fruits and vegetables to flow from the countryside to Mexico City's central wholesale market, but they are not reducible to that function, nor are they unidirectional or coordinated in nature.

My understanding of the food system as an infrastructure comprised of mediated social relations, is much indebted to Simone's (2004) notion of "people as infrastructure" and Elyachar's (2010) concept of "phatic labor" as infrastructure. Simone argues that the infrastructure for urban life in Johannesburg resides in the ability of the city's seemingly marginalized residents to "engage complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices" (2004: 407-8). It is the connections between people, and their ability to mobilize these connections that provides the edifice upon which circulation, provisioning, and reproduction in urban life can occur. Poor South Africans' activities are characterized both by regularity and provisionality—the need to be constantly flexible, mobile, and move across disparate spaces and

activities. This tension between regularity and provisionality is central to the work of wholesale merchants, as well, regularity being necessary for the rhythm of commerce, and provisionality stemming not so much from a place of economic precarity or marginalization, as from a sense of political abandonment and fear in a context of heightened insecurity.

In her article about the appropriation of women's "phatic labor" in Cairo, Julia Elyachar (2010) builds on Malinowski's and Jakobson's notions of phatic, or connective, functions of language, to argue that Egyptian women going about daily processes of socialization through visitations and gossip create networks which are used for the purpose of exchange and provisioning knowledge and goods essential to economic life. Their phatic labor, in other words, providing an infrastructure which is essential not only to social reproduction, but to economic production as well. In La Central, as in other markets, phatic labor is similarly essential to constructing the connective channels which allow for other forms of exchange to occur. Merchants like Don Rene invest large amounts of time circulating through the market, chatting with colleagues, organizing parties for customers and employees, and even making purchases and sales that are not necessarily in their immediate economic interest, for the purpose of cultivating enduring trade relationships. For example, Don Pedro, a banana merchant, contributed large amounts of money and sent gifts to the secretary of a packing plant in the state of Chiapas for her daughter's 15th birthday party. It was a token of gratitude, he explained, for all of the help that she gave him, keeping him informed about local goings on over the years.

The phatic labor of merchants in La Central as a form of infrastructure can be usefully visualized with the help of the metaphor of "grooved channels," which Theodor Bestor (2003), drawing on Clifford Geertz, uses to describe the way that social relations of trust result in highly

patterned, regular flow of people, goods, and information in Tokyo's seemingly chaotic wholesale fish market. In a sea of options, he shows, most buyers go to the same sellers over and over again, the pathways connecting them worn as if into the ground as a result of repeated use and social interaction. The underlying logic is that once in a groove, there is an incentive to stay in that groove, there being more at stake than just a one-time economic transaction. Thus, return customers are likely to get better treatment than first-time visitors, and long-standing routes are economically more productive since they are both familiar and trusted. As economic actors get more and more accustomed to their relationships, they become more efficient, and they also become more complex—trust and loyalty enter into the picture. Among Mexican food merchants like Don René, friendships develop with purveyors and certain buyers after long years of dealings, and relationships that began as simplex become multiplex.

Expanding this metaphor beyond the brick and mortar confines of the wholesale market, we can see Mexico's food distribution system as being comprised of a series of grooved channels connecting the countryside to the city, through a combination of intermediaries and mediating objects. Produce comes into La Central from around the country via truck, which carry goods either directly from fields in the countryside, or from packing and storage facilities in rural areas, where small producers sell their products to intermediaries for processing and packaging. Wholesale merchants specialize in one or a few products, and enter into agreements, usually verbal, with intermediaries in the countryside or directly with producers to bring products to La Central. From the wholesale market, merchants sell goods to restaurants, retail markets, and grocery chains, as well as to smaller-scale wholesalers in La Central and other markets. Historically, these agreements were made in person and involved regular trips to the region from

which the food ships, though today agreements are often made by telephone calls. Payments are sometimes made via wire transfer, but often take place as wads of cash being handed off in person by wholesalers or their surrogates on visits to the countryside, or to truck drivers at the moment of delivery in Mexico City. Although many of the largest contracts involve wire transfers, and all serious wholesalers have bank accounts, a significant proportion of transactions in La Central and beyond continue to be in cash[18], and *a palabra* (oral contract) (McCullough 2008; Echanove & Reardon 2006; Berthier 1994). Along the way, there may be inspections by SAGARPA (the state agricultural agency), PROFECO (the consumer protection agency), and police at various stages of the journey.

In order for a food system to function, then, it depends on repetition, predictability, intelligibility—on grooves created in large part through phatic labor, in other words. In schematic terms, we might say that the job of a food merchant is to successfully "get into a groove," that is, to enter into a series of relationships which permit exchange to occur in a way which will be predictable enough to make financial sense and profit. Grooves, then, are a valorized form of visibility, which is essential to commerce. Those same things, however, become resignified in contexts of violence. Routines become potential liabilities and a sources of fear. The very "stickiness" of grooves—the tendency that they have of encouraging repeat visitations and solidifying social relations—has a dark side if the relation in question is threatening, frightening, or exploitative. If, as Bestor points out, customers often continue to go back to the same vendor again and again, sometimes disregarding small price fluctuations and other "rational" economic considerations, merchants believe that perpetrators of violence will

[18] This fact creates vast amounts of speculation that the CEDA and other markets are sites of money laundering, fronts for *narcos*, and rife with tax evasion

behave in a similar way. Once they are in the sights of the wrong people, misfortune will visit again and again, so they must engage in the everyday work of remaining undetectable to the wrong eyes. The "dark side" of the grooves is thus visibility in its pernicious, threatening form.

How can we understand the relationship between the "grooved channels" of the food system—the material and social networks of which it is comprised—and the "dark network" which appears in the accounts of merchants as running parallel and intersecting? In the situation they describe, criminals hide among farmhands and stevedores, trucks that should bring fruit into the city carry extortionists among their loads, telephones get used to demand ransom rather than place orders, and networking centers where one goes to find employees in the countryside get used as sites of criminal reconnaissance. The food distribution infrastructure gets appropriated, in other words, for criminal ends, generating a dual-use infrastructure of sorts.

Mexican wholesale merchants thus have an understanding of appropriation that is similar to that which Elyachar (2010) describes in the context of the microfinance boom of the late 1990s in Egypt. There, she argues, the relatively invisible social networks which women cultivated became visibilized and instrumentalized as an infrastructure upon which other types of profit-driven projects could be organized, thereby empowering not the women per se—contra the idea of microfinance as gender empowerment—but rather certain elements of their sociality which were then appropriated by capitalist investors. In Mexico City's food system, similarly, when the commercial infrastructures which are comprised of mediated social networks—the grooved channels—become overly visible, they become vulnerable to forms of appropriation which are pernicious, criminal, and dangerous in nature.

In/Visibility // In/Security

Visibilization is therefore a necessary step in the process of infrastructural appropriation that I describe here, and both literal and metaphorical modes of seeing are particularly fraught in the La Central and its provisioning networks. Historically, this is nothing new; the channels that link the countryside to urban consumers have been problematically opaque from the state's perspective throughout modern Mexican history, while efforts to see without being seen are central to commerce and arbitrage, as I describe in chapters one and two in more detail. In the contemporary context of heightened violence, however, criminal modes of seeing mimic those that have long been endemic to the market, resignifying them at the same time.

On the one hand, then, wholesalers are, as a whole, averse to many forms of regulation, taxation, and interference in the market, which they tend to talk about in gauzy liberal terms as self-regulating and honest—in contrast with the state, which they portray as neither. They are visibility-averse and notoriously private, reluctant to share information about their connections, finances, and plans. In this sense, they are like merchants the world around, for whom buying cheap and selling dear is invariably a matter of protecting trade secrets while knowing as much as possible about competitors and customers. Accompanying that search for information, then, is the imperative to protect one's own, both from competitors and from the state.

In the context of Mexico's ongoing security crisis, however, there is another layer to this fairly standard account of state-market relations. Merchants today worry about remaining invisible to another force: that of the organized criminal. As they transact in large shipments of goods and money, merchants are often seen as being wealthy. Wealthier than they actually are, some of them claim, since often a significant portion of their capital is caught up in perishable

merchandise. Relatedly, even if the contents of their bank accounts and private places of residence are unknown to most acquaintances, their relative wealth can be estimated by the size of their warehouse in La Central, and by the number of trucks of goods they receive per day. Anyone fairly versed in market prices, for example, can quickly calculate the value of a trailer of goods, and multiplying that by the number of trucks coming into a given business per week, can get a sense of how much disposable capital a merchant has.

The strategy of manually counting trucks coming in and out of a given warehouse or market is in fact still used by many merchants and by government administrators themselves to get a sense of market offerings and to keep a tab on how well competitors and neighbors are doing. One highly successful, modernized banana merchant who I interviewed, for example, pays a 'counter' a small sum—around USD $50 per month—to walk around the banana zones of the market every morning and count how many trailers of bananas are sitting there, awaiting sale. On the basis of this number—scribbled in pencil on a scrap of paper, with the number of trucks and states of provenance in two columns—the merchant generates sophisticated graphs using marketing software. In general, merchants are always keeping tabs on and looking at each other's sales.

This routine practice of *observing* others and being observed is a key mode of visualization in the process of infrastructural appropriation, as merchants note that extortion or kidnapping attempts are usually based on some sort of familiarity with the victim's financial situation. Thus one of the recurring themes that I made note of in interviews, was the fear of being watched and seen by the wrong people. Merchants worry about criminals who disguise themselves as stevedores, day laborers, or customers in order to be able to blend into the masses

at the market and observe the flow of goods. They are wary of anyone who asks too many questions, or arrives without a proper introduction. Some of the largest merchants are rarely seen in the market, and are virtually impossible to get hold of[19]. Many have their businesses broken up into multiple smaller entities, registered under different names and distributed among family members—a strategy useful for "tax reduction" purposes, but which also can act as a deterrent for would-be criminals[20]. As I discovered when I tried to approach merchants in my fieldwork, unless I arrived in the company of an associate, or had previously been introduced via telephone or email, my attempts to get in touch with merchants were usually doomed to failure. If merchants have long been notorious for their lack of trust in strangers and tendency toward secrecy, in the context of insecurity these characteristics have been amplified and reinterpreted as *responses* to an exceptional state of affairs.

This creates a paradox, however, for being seen as a successful merchant with a large number of contacts and contracts is a boon, on the one hand. Many contracts and informal lines of credit are acquired through word of mouth, and on the basis of one's reputation as a responsible, economically sound actor. Mario, one of La Central's largest watermelon distributors, recounts that he was offered a contract to work with the supermarket Carrefour as a purveyor back in the early days of grocery store expansion, in the 1990s, because of his family's established reputation as some of the nation's most important watermelon vendors. One day, he

[19] In fact, while large, successful merchants are often the most worried about vulnerability, many medium and small scale merchants have also been targeted, and may even be more vulnerable. In a study of shifting trends in kidnapping in Mexico over the last few decades, Ronaldo Ochoa (2012) shows that middle and working class Mexico City residents have become more vulnerable to kidnapping than their highly elite peers, in part because of the ability of the latter to take more extreme measures to protect themselves.

[20] Lawrence, an American lawyer who did due diligence for American companies hoping to export goods to Mexico, told me in an interview that he was constantly stymied in his work by the prevalence of shell companies and difficulty in accessing legal records for commercial enterprises.

got a phone call inviting him to sell to the grocery store, and several years later, the same thing occurred with Wal-Mart. His reputation, and ability to procure massive shipments of the fruit had preceded him, and allowed for him to expand his business vertiginously. Yet several years later, Mario's own brother, Roberto, was kidnapped on his way to the market one morning, and held for over forty days until a ransom was paid. The least successful member of the family business in terms of sales, Roberto nevertheless ended up paying the price for the visibility that had afforded his family such commercial success.

If the need to balance revelation and concealment, and to establish the best vantage point possible for knowing the market are routine parts of commercial practice, today these practices are being questioned and shifted as merchants come to fear that even their modes of seeing are infiltrated by violent forces. Indeed, extending the notion of appropriable phatic labor to include routines forms of seeing that include counting trucks, stopping by neighbors' warehouses, and going to visit growers in the countryside, we can see how concealment becomes increasingly important as a form of protection, both bodily and business. How to evaluate when threatening forms of exposure might occur, and reacting accordingly, are therefore part of the everyday work of merchants and others in the food system.

Theory of Violence // Contagion

An important element of the theory of danger that circulates in the wholesale food system is that threats are communicable—both in the epidemiological sense, as being transmittable from one entity to another, often through a vector of contagion, and in the linguistic sense as being based on communication. Exposure to violence is greatest in regions of the country which appear,

in Mexico's symbolic geography, as dangerous. These regions are largely rural and peripheral, contrary to the majority of scholarship on violence in Latin America which focuses on urban violence. Border zones, coastal areas, and certain states are viewed as particularly dangerous, although so too are particular neighborhood of Mexico City, including Iztapalapa, where La Central itself is located.[7] In insecure areas of the countryside, merchants report being extorted, followed, and threatened.

Ronaldo, a third-generation orange merchant with a charismatic smile and slight paunch, explains that he stopped going to the state of Tamaulipas, where he has orange groves, after some "unpleasant interactions":

> You get there, there's a place in Tamaulipas, where all of the cutting squads get together, the guys who cut the fruit from the trees, the people who offer their services for harvesting the crops. You get to the fields, you reach an agreement with the producers, with the sellers, you go to that place and hire the squad of guys to come and cut the field for you, and that's where you also hire a driver unless you already have one. The trucke are there that can take your fruit from the farm to your bodega or wherever. And…um, that's where they find you, they see you, "look here, friend, come here," um, they're just looking to see who comes and goes, who is the buyer and who is a seller, who does what, you know? [They say] "look my friend, um, you know that we suffer from a lot of violence in this region, and so that you have a pleasant stay here in Ciudad Victoria we need you to give us a modest donation of 1000 pesos per truck that you will be loading here." And that's not a bad deal. Sometimes it can be two, three, four thousand. It depends on how much you're loading. And they take money from the producers too, from the truck drivers too, from us merchants too…and you have no choice but to pay. There are those who have refused to pay but they've ended up disappeared, their trucks stolen, beaten up and worse.

Similar stories are repeated throughout the market, and in the news media. They corroborate reports that organized crime is increasingly turning to extortion and extraction through "taxes" based on territorial control rather than strictly drug cultivation and transportation. Self-preservation can thus take the form of René and Ronaldo's process of not going to the

countryside. Such forms of avoidance are significant because merchants are historically highly mobile and well-connected in rural areas that are seemingly impenetrable to the state's regulatory gaze. Indeed, much of their power, historically, has been accrued through generating such connections and maintaining a superior vantage point.

Limiting their own mobility is only one strategy to which merchants resort. Many try to do business with vetted acquaintances only, or use trusted intermediaries to avoid contact even with others who have already been victimized by violent crime since such contact with victims can itself be potentially dangerous. Solomon Ramos, a pineapple merchant who is the third generation in a line of wholesalers, explains why he refuses to continue to work with producers who have been targeted by organized crime:

> Security is a difficult issue. Last year they [some sellers] offered me mangos, and I asked the friend who was selling them why the price was so high? And he told me that it was the 'extortion fee' (el precio de la extorción). Because in the region where the mangos come from La Familia (Michoacana, a cartel) is active, and for every truck I load they're charging me 2000 pesos. 2,000 pesos per truck. And no, at the moment, I said "this deal dies right here." Because it's not just that the fruit is expensive, but that they send people with the goods to see who is on the receiving end, and that's when they start extorting you, maybe even kidnapping.

Other merchants repeated variations of this account of victims-turned-vectors of contagion. Even fellow merchants can be suspect, as Roberto, the watermelon merchant who was kidnapped and held for 42 days in 2008, speculated when he told me that he had perhaps been sold out by one of his neighbors in the market who had himself been targeted just a few months earlier and had probably been forced to share information about other merchants. In this context, where being a victim can be a liability, many merchants try to keep quiet about their own troubles.

Within La Central itself, merchants worry about criminals who masquerade as stevedores

or customers, and are vigilant about looking out for those who linger a bit too long in these capacities. One merchant I met told me that he and his neighbors had recently become nervous about a youth who was hanging around their sector of La Central, flirting with his a female employee of his and otherwise not appearing to have enough of a reason for being around. He fired his employee and that same day approached the youth with a group of other merchants and employees, threatening him with violence if he showed his face in their sector again. Another frequent source of imposter-anxiety within the market itself are the *diableros*, men who act as the muscle which moves all merchandise around the sprawling market by loading hundreds of kilos of merchandise at a time onto hand-pulled dollies. Among the poorest, most vulnerable actors in the market, *diableros* are often rural immigrants for whom the rough labor is the first and only opportunity for work in the daunting capital city. As largely poor young men for whom loitering (while waiting for work) and circulation are part of the job, they are often seen as easily infiltrated by criminals by merchants. The idea that diableros are easily infiltrated is a position echoed even by some of the unions representing these groups, and which acquired a new potency in 2015, after the shooting of a wholesaler by robbers masquerading as *diableros*.

Juan José, a well-do-do first generation merchant who sells spices and dried goods, recounted that when he first came to La Central in the early 2000s, one of the biggest challenges for him was learning not to fear his employees and the diableros. “Until you learn to really tell the difference, everyone kind of looks like a *ratero* to you,” he explained. Another merchant, Mónica, attributed the decrease in sales in recent years to the fact that many people in the market, especially informal vendors and *diableros*, have *cara de rata*—faces of rats/criminals—and that it scared people. Even now that she knows who to trust, she explained, it is still too hard to tell

who is good and who isn't among the new arrivals. Cognizant of this fear, Odilon, one of the leaders of the numerous *diablero* unions, has been in negotiations with La Central's administration to introduce more visible permits for the workers, including color coded uniforms to make them appear more "formal" and less like one of the potentially dangerous masses.

But it is not only territories or persons whose appropriation can expose merchants to criminality. Mediating technologies—cell phones, email addresses, bank accounts, transport dollies, trucks—can be coopted and put to use for nefarious ends. A point not emphasized by Bestor or Elyachar, but important for my discussion, is that there is a *materiality* to the sociality of the market's grooves which relates to other forms of mediating infrastructures[21]. Social relations of exchange and reciprocity, while not reducible to technological objects or built structures, nevertheless follow the network of roads which link specific villages or farms to a particular wholesalers; they take the form of telephone numbers repeatedly dialed, of bank accounts whose information is already known, and of truck drivers repeatedly contracted. Blocked roads or lost telephones may disrupt the flow of fruits, or may resignify the relationship of those involved in the transaction. And, of course, the materiality of fruits themselves—perishable, always threatening to decompose—inserts an urgency into all of these interactions.

A melon merchant told me the story of sending three truckloads of produce to a Wal-

[21] In his thorough and compelling study of Tokyo's wholesale fish market, Theodor Bestor claims that "the infrastructure of the trade is social and cultural; it is embedded in contexts, not in buildings, freezers, or well-hone knives…[the relationships] are reaffirmed, reinvested, re-created, and recapitalized in the daily round of business" (Bestor 2003, 302-3). More recent anthropological approaches to infrastructures, which have drawn on science studies and the materialist turn, have complicated this sort of characterization of infrastructure as *either* social *or* material, insisting on the social, material, and symbolic elements of technopolitical projects. Anand's study of Mumbai's water system, for example, shows infrastructure to be the product of complex interactions between settlers, municipal engineers, pipes, water, and varied forms of ignorance and knowing (Anand 2012; 2015). While Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox (2015) have shown that global flows of money and expertise interact with local desires and materialities in the construction of a South American highway (Harvey & Knox 2015).

Mart, only to have two of the trucks refused on the grounds of poor quality at the receiving end. Such things, common in the food trade, are a source of distress for sellers, who are left with a literally rotting investment unless they can quickly offload it. As the remaining two trucks drove back, he got a call on his cell phone telling him that they had changed their mind and needed another truckload after all. Delighted, and less cautious than he would otherwise be, he directed the trucks to turn around. Shortly after, they were intercepted and the drivers forced out at gunpoint, vehicle and merchandise robbed. How the criminals knew who to get in touch with and who to call was a mystery which led the merchant to change his number, yet again.

Many merchants thus juggle multiple cell phones, changing their numbers frequently, doling out their contact information sparingly, and assiduously refusing to answer calls from unknown numbers. They see being uncontactable as a form of protection, since they all know that information collection is the first order of business for those who would demand money from them. One merchant described to me how, despite his efforts not to share contact information with anyone, during a visit to a grower an employee walked up to him and silently handed him a cell phone from which he received instructions on how to make a "safety payment." Roads, another form of infrastructure upon which the food system relies, can be coopted as well. Mónica, a second generation lime merchant, explained that truck drivers are often compromised not because they are bad people, but because the roads are the most dangerous areas, where crooked police and organized criminals alike "hunt down" drivers, shake them down for a payment for "protection," and then ask them for the name and contact information for the person who is to receive the shipment.

Finally, imposture and appropriation appear in the form of the multiple legal and

regulatory regimes which criss-cross the food system. In the avocado producing region of Michoacán, for example, wholesalers report that SAGARPA, the agricultural agency which in theory has a registry with names of landowners and acreage, shares that information with organized criminals who then use it to extort producers and those who buy from them. Police in general are suspect of criminal collusion, from the local beat cops who keep guard over the market and are accused of "conveniently" not being around whenever burglars strike, to the state police who stop merchandise en route to the market and need to get paid off, at a cost to the buyers and truckers alike. Indeed, as perhaps the least trusted public servants in Mexican society, police of various stripes often try to keep their work identities secret, and are encouraged to do so by their higher ups. While this is ostensibly to prevent them from being targeted by criminals as victims or collaborators, police report keeping their identities secret, as well, as a way to avoid the stigma that comes with being seen as a 'corrupt cop.'

In Don René's warehouse, I unexpectedly had the opportunity to learn first-hand about this form of secrecy one morning when Lalo, René's right-hand man, was manning the register, as he often did in his boss's absence. On that morning, Doña Valeria, René's wife, came in and I saw her interact tensely with Lalo, and then retreat to the upstairs office. She summoned me there a few minutes later, and whispered that she wanted me to "be careful around Lalo." She didn't like him, she explained, didn't trust him at all. But she can't say anything to René about it. "For some reason," she sighed, "he treats Lalo like a son." I knew some things about Lalo. He is from Michoacán, the fertile and volatile state from which nearly all avocados in Mexico City arrive. René had told me that Lalo used to be an alcoholic and a bad boy, running around with the wrong crew, and that he, René, had helped him pull himself up and get clean. Between the

two of them they would joke around, calling each other "papá" and "hijo", and Lalo made no secret of the fact that Don René had, as he put it, saved his life. Despite his colorful past, however, Lalo today seemd to cut the figure of the model employee—well groomed, unfailingly on time, never uncouth.

Doña Valeria pressed on: "He used to be a state police in Michoacán," she explained. "Then he went to the US after that for a while, then he came back here an found René and now….I'm worried. You know how these people are. I don't want to deny that people can turn over a new leaf, but the fact is it's dangerous that he is here. Who knows why he left Michoacán, why he saw the need to go to the USA to begin with, and why he came here at all. Who knows what he was involved with and who's chasing him. The point is, if he's seen as close to us, it could affect us. That's why I don't like it when he calls René 'papá,' because it creates a tie that somebody could make use of. Somebody could try to hurt our family to get back at Lalo."

Later that day, I casually asked Lalo about his past. "When you lived in Michoacán," I ventured, "what did you do? Did you work in the market as well?" He laughed a bit, put me off with an elusive answer. "I worked for the government—*el malo*—and then I went to visit my family in the USA." But why not go back to the job, I continued to pester him, using his answers to finally "deduce" that he had been in the police. He turned a bit serious and whispered to me that Don René didn't much like for it to be known around the market about Lalo's past, so he tried to avoid talking about it. "They [the police] have a bad reputation, he said, "and people get uncomfortable and think we might extort or kidnap them. It is true though," he continued, "that a lot of my former colleagues are involved in organized crime and drugs down there. So that's why I'm here."

The theory of danger that structures the circulation of fear in the food system, can thus be understood in terms of an epidemiological metaphor: criminal violence emerges as a parasitical force which travels outside of its sectors of imagined concentration, following legitimate channels of communication and exchange—the infrastructure of which the food system is comprised in other words—and turning often unwitting acquaintances, associates, family members, and objects into vectors of contagion along the way. It does this through complementary processes of infrastructural appropriation and falsification, which are always potential rather than verifiable. And within the system, once a particular entity is affected by violence, it is difficult to escape its snare, and to avoid acting as a vector of contagion, passing danger further along. Safety, in this scenario, takes the form of altering habits, interactions, and mobility in a way that reduces one's exposure to danger, and simultaneously alters the pathways that comprise the food system.

Conclusions

A few months after I left the field, a newspaper article came out in the national newspaper *El Universal* confirming something that I had been hearing for months from merchants and workers alike: La Central itself is infiltrated by narcos. Criminals, it was rumored, use La Central as a space for money laundering, selling small quantities of fruit and vegetables for massively reduced prices while filing tax documents that tell a completely different story. Or, increasingly, they use it directly as a drug market, sending truckloads of small packages in at the wee hours of the morning, to be unloaded and packed onto other trucks. The administration vociferously denies these rumors, sticking to the Mexican state's official narrative about the

nation's capital as being an organized crime free. As of yet, there aren't reports of merchants themselves being extorted in La Central, but some speculate that it is only a matter of time before that practice begins affecting them.

The merchants worry about the appropriation of the market in which they have long been key, powerful players, about a kind of doubling in which there is a clear distinction between the criminal and legal forms of commerce. Yet, as I have shown, the boundaries between these are not nearly as tidy or clear-cut as they would like to imagine, one use does not negate the other. Taking a turn of phrase from Jakobson, we might see there as instead being both dominant and subordinate functions that are always present in the language of commerce, their relative dominance shifting at different times. A merchant may well both sell bananas, and store and ship drugs from his warehouse space. A buyer may indeed make legitimate purchases, but might also pass along information, wittingly or not, to an extortionist. Roads that are blockaded and used to generate profit on the part of bandits or corrupt police are also simply roads, along which people and vehicles often travel unfettered.

Appropriations are rarely complete, and often uncertain. Rather than representing an external threat to the system, then, the power of the market's double comes precisely from its uncanny resemblance to that which it imitates. But the double is also not a substitute for the system which it unsettles, indeed it depends on the continued existence of a "legitimate order" which it can appropriate to mask its own forms of accumulation through a process of camouflage (Jusioyte 2014). Whether or not La Central is indeed a "nest of narcos" as the newspapers claim, it now bears the uncomfortable double role as both a likely marginal site in the drug trade, and as a definitively key node in the Mexican food system. The former does not obliterate the latter, but

reveals its contradictions and its vulnerabilities.

Following local theories of danger that emerge in a context marked by widespread fear over violence, I have suggested some places where these vulnerabilities are particularly pronounced, and where these contradictions are productive of changes in perceptions and practices through which a seemingly coordinated infrastructure such as the food system is achieved. If the everyday practice of food commerce takes place in the uncomfortable manipulation of in/visibility in the interest of security, following the fear that lies behind the optical metaphor can help to reveal where the places where sovereignty is tenuous and partial, and where established forms of control, territorial or otherwise, are being reshaped and contested.

CHAPTER 4

Inverted Threats: Employment and Clientelism

How to fire a thief

Roberto didn't know how to go about firing his employee, Carlos, who he claimed had been stealing money from him and renting out the company's delivery van to his friends and neighbors without permission. Carlos was a registered employee, *con seguro*, and Mexico's labor laws offer protection, at least in theory, to employees, who have the right to severance pay when they are laid off, and who can sue against unjust firings. The onus was on Roberto, as the employer, to demonstrate that the firing was justified, a task rendered difficult by the lack of a paper trail and of people willing to go on record testifying to Carlos' transgressions. Roberto was afraid that if he did fire Carlos without the proper documentation, he would be sued by his former employee. It had happened to him before; he once had to pay thousands of dollars in back pay, lawyers' fees, severance, and penalties, and he was reluctant to go down that path again.

For weeks, Roberto had been trying to gather evidence to prove that Carlos was stealing from him with little success. His secretary told him that she saw Carlos pilfering in the petty cash box, but she wasn't willing to sign anything testifying to that effect. He didn't have receipts to corroborate his suspicion that Carlos was skimming money off of the cash he received to go around the wholesale market fulfilling orders. He overheard other employees complaining to each other about how Carlos failed to pick them up in the delivery van to bring them to work, as was the agreement, and about how he rented it out for a profit, but when Roberto questioned them about it, they became evasive, unwilling to be 'snitches' to the boss. Still, Roberto was aware that his employees are gossiping about Carlos' transgressions, and he was afraid that he

was losing authority in the eyes of his employees. “Not to mention,” he told me, “I shouldn’t have to have a thief working for me.”

In addition to the threat of legal action, however, there was another factor which gave Roberto pause when it came to firing his worker: Carlos is a young man from the poor and reportedly lawless borough of Nezahuacoyotl. Roberto was afraid that Carlos might have contacts in criminal gangs who could be called upon to take revenge against Roberto, or that Carlos could sell him out by sharing private information about his family, his habits, his financial situation, and his schedule with potential kidnappers or extortionists. Although cases of disgruntled employees exacting revenge on their bosses are uncommon, the fear that this might occur is sufficiently widespread as to inform hiring and firing decisions, such as that which Roberto faced. “He knows what car I drive, where my kid goes to school, what time I come in, what I eat for lunch, everything,” Roberto explained. *Necesito quedar bien con él.* “I need to stay on good terms with him.”

Roberto ultimately decided that he needed to solve the problem in a way that many merchants and employers opt to, in order to protect themselves from lawsuits: He would need to get Carlos to sign a form stating that he was voluntarily quitting his job, and absolving Roberto of responsibility. The problem was, how to go about getting Carlos’s signature without antagonizing him, and while protecting their good relationship, and thus Roberto’s sense of safety? Roberto decided to be straightforward but careful. He called Carlos into his office one morning, and told him that he knew what had been going on. Bluffing, he said that he had written proof and testimonies from different workers that Carlos had been stealing money from the business, and that he was using Roberto’s truck to earn money on the side by renting it out to

people in his neighborhood. Roberto explained to Carlos that while he personally was not so angry, he was also aware that the other workers were gossiping about what a lax boss he was, and that he had little choice but to fire Carlos given the circumstances. "But I know we all make mistakes," he told his employee, and suggested that they come to an amicable resolution to the problem. "How much money would you need," he asked, "to feel comfortable signing the resignation form?" Carlos asked for 10,000 pesos—nearly $500 USD—and signed the form, which Roberto filed away in his office, and they parted ways on good terms, or so Roberto hoped.

Legal and Criminal Threats

What is the relationship of the informal resolution reached by Roberto and Carlos to the labor laws which purport to regulate such disputes? Roberto decides to pay off Carlos because he is afraid of the consequences he might incur otherwise. This isn't necessarily a rational fear; the discrepancy between actual occurrences of criminal acts of revenge by former employees is radically out of step with the fear of these threats; fear of the *threat* of criminality is not an objective fear. People may be afraid when there is little risk, or unafraid in conditions of significant risk, as generations of anthropologists have argued, for reasons that are structural, cultural, and have little to do with (lack of) information or rationality (Douglas 1984; Merry 1981; Comaroff & Comaroff 2017). Here, I am interested in looking beyond the intriguing and persistent gap between incidence and perception of crime and disorder, and the puzzle of why such inflated or imaginary threats may worry people so much more than the "slow" and structural violence of environmental degradation, war, bureaucratic red tape, and inequality (Nixon 2011, Gupta 2012, Comaroffs 2017). Instead, I want to focus on the shape and structure

of criminal power as it is popularly imagined in order to understand how these imaginaries inform and constrain different categories of social relationships, in this case that of workers and employers in La Central.

At first glance, it may appear that the negative consequences for firing an employee that Roberto hoped to avoid—both criminal and legal—are informed by distinct and even contradictory logics. One recognizes the power of the state, and its promise of justice and order as enshrined in labor law, while the other recognizes the forms of violent and illegal power wielded by criminals that prevail in spaces of lawlessness and impunity. Yet, as I will argue in this chapter, both the threat of state repercussions and the threat of criminal retribution represent forms of ordering which are complementary and interwoven rather than discrete or antagonistic. Understanding the regulation of labor relations in the Central de Abasto requires attending to both of these, as they mediate the patron-client relations between workers and merchants.

Antonio Azuela (2017) recently argued that much contemporary legal scholarship focuses on corruption, lack of rule-of-law, and illegality, at the expense of actually paying attention to the law's ordering effects. He calls for a return to the realist tradition in critical legal theory, which would account for the ways that the law works, rather than only normative assessments of its failures, since the latter often end up reproducing global hierarchies of 'legality.' This chapter responds to this call, in showing how the law mediates patron-client employment relations, although with effects that are sometimes unexpected and usually unequal, varying depending on the gender and ethnic identities of employees. Yet fear of criminal actors, both real and imagined, also plays a profound role in shaping contemporary Mexican social life. As such, I also move beyond a standard sociolegal account of law 'in practice', by exploring the role that the *fear* of

criminality plays in labor practices, and arguing that the threat of violence acts as a "field of reglementation" (Falk Moore 1978). I argue that the processes of hiring and firing workers in the Central de Abasto, takes place at the conjunction of these regulatory orders.

In arguing for the regulatory nature of imagined criminal sovereignties, I build on the work of recent anthropologies of the state that emphasize its symbolic, mythical, and performative nature, through metaphors of "spectral" (Goldstein 2012), "magical" (Das 2004), and "fetishized" (Taussig 1993, Coronil 1997) power. The fictitiousness of the state as an ideal-type does not negate its social effects or the persistent power of that ideal form, and the same, I suggest, can be said of the trope of criminal power, which takes on mythical properties in contemporary Mexico, similar to that which the mafia takes in post-colonial and post-socialist contexts (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006, Reis 2002, Verdery 1993). An analysis of local understandings of criminal and state power, and the actions that they inform, reveals how the seemingly informalized relations between *patrones* (bosses) and their workers are mediated by merchants' perceptions of both state law and criminal power.

On & off the books: legal fears and fantasies

Informal employment is the norm in the Central de Abasto, like in much of Mexico, where it is estimated that over fifty percent of the total non-agricultural labor force works in the informal economy (ILO 2011). While salaries are generally higher than the minimum wage, asking for benefits and to be formally registered is virtually unheard of in hiring negotiations. Nevertheless, labor laws are implicitly invoked in the everyday arrangements in which employers offer higher wages in exchange for lower benefits or greater informalization. They also come into play when

job termination occurs, since even workers who are informally employed might try to sue their former employer for back-pay and back-benefits. More often than not, such cases come to naught, but the specter of legal threat creates some possibility for justice—or revenge—depending on whose perspective one takes. What this means is that the labor market in the Central de Abasto is partially shaped by labor laws and tax regulations, albeit differently than the letter of the law might intend. Law functions, then, as what Sally Falk Moore (1978) described decades ago as a "semi-autonomous social field," its effects produced in conjunction with other social fields and normative orders that coexist alongside it.

In general, each *bodega* corresponds to one business, and each of these businesses has several categories of worker. First, there are the merchants themselves and their family members, who usually *are* insured and formally registered; they are rights-bearing citizens as a result of already 'being somebody', in other words. Similarly, there is usually a secretary/accountant who is there full time, and who might also be formally employed, especially if s/he possesses a degree. Then there are the workers who comprise the backbone and motor of the business; these men and women (thought they are usually men) engage in loading and unloading products from trucks and putting them into storage, separating fruits and vegetables into categories, acting as salespeople, delivering goods to customers, and disposing of rotting merchandise. Each *bodega* has a minimum of 2-3 such workers, and although there are no reliable statistics, there are certainly tens of thousands of them in the Central de Abasto. The majority of these workers are not formally employed, although often businesses have an *empleado de confianza*, a trusted employee, who has spent years working with the family and may be given insurance and benefits.

Minimum wage in Mexico now hovers at 88 pesos per working day (around $5 USD).

Workers in the Central generally earn far more however; based on interviews I conducted with employers and workers in twenty *bodegas*, in a ten-hour day, they can earn between 300 and 600 pesos. Some charge fixed rates for certain types of work: for example 350 to unload a smaller truck of watermelon (~15 tons), or 550 pesos to unload a trailer of ~28 tons. Some employers pay for the transportation costs for their employees, and for food and drinks, while others offer no such perks. There is significant variation, and although pay differs depending in part on the standards of each employer and worker, those who are excluded from legal employment—minors, rural migrants who lack identification cards (IFE), and a small number of undocumented Central American migrants—are usually the lowest paid. Even in the informal labor market, therefore, employment conditions are affected by the requirements of legal employment.

For those who are formally employed, *con seguro*, merchants usually report lower wages for their employees than what they are actually paid, which translates into having to pay lower insurance and benefits for them, but in exchange pay them larger amounts in cash. This sort of agreement, which is virtually the rule in La Central, allows merchants to pay lower taxes, and gives workers more take-home wages at the expense of their benefits. For many workers, this is preferred, since many of them have little confidence or interest in benefits such as the state medical insurance (IMSS), preferring instead to go to private clinics. This system of having employees wages underreported is facilitated by the heavily cash-based nature of the economy at La Central de Abasto. Since the absolute majority of workers do not have bank accounts, their salaries are paid out in cash and reported as such. Workers usually "bank" and save their money in *tandas*[22]—informal, rotating credit circles which are managed by workers themselves—and

[22] Tandas are a common was of saving money among populations that have been traditionally excluded from formal

thus have no paper trail of their earnings that *Hacienda,* the tax agency, can trace.

The high degree of informalization of labor relations, itself shaped by laws and the documentary regimes they entail, is part of the moral economy of the marketplace, at least as far as the merchants are concerned. They portray the trade-off of docking pay if a worker asks for benefits, for example, as a rational and legitimate decision without which they would be unable to continue working effectively and making a profit. Yet when contentious moments emerge—the firing of an employee, or wage disputes—this informality becomes the subject of concern and speculation, when employers, like Roberto, start to worry about potential encounters with the law. They portray state law in such cases as favoring workers, and view fines and consequences as evidence of bureaucracy run amok, as opposed to as a tool for ensuring rights.

These worries, however, mask the fact that in reality, in the majority of cases, employers are able to fire and hire on their own terms, without consequences; Even when workers do try to file a claim, they are often stymied along the way by negligent or overworked lawyers, and by a backlogged court system. Doña Lupe, for example, is a former head cook who worked in a restaurant frequented by wholesalers in La Central for 21 years, 14 of those employed *con seguro*. In 2015, when the owner was preparing to sell his business, Doña Lupe approached him about filing for retirement. A 68 year old with a bad knee and diabetes, the long days and hours of commuting were taking a toll on her body. Instead of signing her retirement papers, however,

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banking, or are wary of banks. The way that they operate is that each week, each participant puts in the same amount of money (say, $10 per person), but only one person takes all of the money that week. This gets repeated each week until each participant has had the opportunity to take everything home. Since workers know in advance when their week will be, they often schedule large payments for that day. Not having the money available in the interim is useful because it prevents other family members from using or requesting it, and offers protection against robbery or loss. Interestingly, *patrones* sometimes participate in their workers' tandas, which is usually viewed favorably by the workers.

the restaurant owner fired Lupe, leaving her jobless and pension-less. In order to bring a case against him, she would have to demonstrate that she had worked for over 20 years, and that he had fired her without due cause. With the help of her daughter, Lupe hired a lawyer, but after months of the case languishing and the lawyer being evasive, they came to the conclusion that he had been paid off by the restaurant owner, a practice that is rumored among workers to be common. They started the whole process again with a new lawyer, but it is slow going and they see their chances of winning the case as increasingly slim since nearly three years have passed since Lupe's firing. "If I don't win this time, so be it. We'll figure out a way to survive, as long as we have health, we'll figure out a way," the old woman mused last time I saw her.

Such cases are not isolated. When employees initiate a legal dispute, they are entering into a terrain where favorable resolution is far from guaranteed, and where they can suffer consequences for even attempting to make legal claims. Hiring in La Central is largely through word of mouth and references, and having a reputation for being a trouble-maker or one who pursues back-pay can make it difficult for workers to find jobs in the future. For this reason, many employees choose not to even try to go down the legal route. In spite of this, Roberto and other merchants see themselves as disadvantaged, or potentially disadvantage, where labor disputes arise.

Whether the law is seen as offering a threat (of punishment) or guarantee (of protection) in mediating patron-client relationships is a matter of perspective. What is key is that it offers the possibility of both or neither, and that it appears as spectral, lurking and haunting encounters; potentially there but also potentially not there, its promises of justice or punishment providing uncertain (dis)incentives to workers and employers alike. Daniel Goldstein (2012) uses Derrida's

notion of the specter to describe the state in this way in his study of law and security in marginalized Bolivian neighborhoods. The state, he argues, is an absent presence, a "phantom state": nowhere to be found when needed and desired for security and prosperity, yet ever present in the form of bureaucratic obstacles and extortion. Yet the specter is difficult to dismiss as mere fiction or fancy precisely because sometimes it *does* materialize as promised (or threatened) for parties on both sides of the divide. This unpredictability and ability to act in unexpected ways and on the side of justice, diversely defined, is a source of the law's power and legitimacy, as E.P. Thomson (1976) pointed out years ago. Indeed, the fact that Roberto and other merchants seek the cover of legal form for their employment transactions speaks to the continued power and legitimacy of the law, and that Mexican state's ability to operate as a "hope-generating machine" (Nuijten 2004).

Informalized labor relations thus bear the mark of state law, but it is only in moments of disjuncture and conflict that the law becomes a subject of overt speculation and complaint. In such moments, merchants and their employers confront the law's spectral presence, the uncertainty that emerges in the space between its threat and guarantee. Sometimes, they engage its forms—trying to get lawyers to secure or deny severance pay, negotiating resignation documents—but almost always this is accompanied by a narrative that depicts the law as biased and bureaucratic. In this sense, wealthy merchants and poor workers share an understanding of the "phantom state" (Goldstein 2012), as they claim to be abandoned by the state in questions of security and shackled by its bureaucracy. Yet it is not only the imaginary of state power that informs their decisions and interactions; In making sense of their feelings of abandonment, merchants conjure images of similarly spectral but competing sovereigns—criminal gangs who

operate with impunity—who they link to the figure of their employees.

Criminal sovereignties and distrustful hiring

Criminal specters are not completely arbitrary, or at least are not imagined as such. They are seen as following a logic of contagion, as I laid out in the previous chapter, in turning legitimate channels of exchange and communication into vectors through which threat moves. In this chapter, the legitimate channels that are distorted by criminal appropriation are the patron-client relations that exist between workers and employees, upon which the market's operation relies. When criminal misfortune strikes merchants, there is always a great deal of speculation. Why did it happen to just that person? Why did somebody decide to target that family instead of the other one? Often, the immediate suspects are those who have some connection with the family, although not one of a high degree of trust. Employees are seen as a particularly threatening category; close enough to be well versed in and aware of the merchants' finances, information, and habits, but not close enough to be *de confianza total,* totally trustworthy, a category of fictive kinship.[23] As poor workers who outnumber their *patrones* (bosses), employees in La Central are frequently a source of anxiety and paranoia, typical of relations of affective intimacy and domination, yet felt to be aberrations or disorderly.

The figure of the *rata* [lit. rat], the petty criminal, lurks behind the (usually brown) face of every worker in the Central, as Juan Jose, a wealthy merchant, acknowledged when he explained

[23] *Empleados de confianza* are often the right-hand men in La Central. While themselves coming from the same backgrounds as other workers, they often have spent a long time working with a particular family, and sometimes may be a second generation relationship. They are given special privileges and responsibilities. There is no question that these relations are highly unequal—*empleados de confianza* continue to speak to their *patrones* in the formal "Usted" no matter their age, and do not joke or speak freely with their employers—but they are accorded a place of special trust.

that his wife didn't like to come to the market because she felt like everyone "looked like a criminal." Monica, another merchant, suggested on a separate occasion that many potential buyers didn't feel comfortable shopping in the market because it is full of people with *caras de rateros*—faces of criminals. Fear or suspicion of workers is not unique to the Central de Abasto or to contemporary Mexico. Colonial histories are full of stories about the paranoid fantasies that colonialists harbored against slaves and dominated classes, often in conjunction with deep affective intimacy and codependency (Taussig 1987; Stoler 2003; Ally 2011). In contemporary Latin America, paranoia abounds about domestic workers and others who penetrate the walled enclaves of the wealthy, revealing the dependency and lack of hermetic sealing of such 'safe' spaces (Caldeira 2000).

Workers in all of these accounts can thus act as vectors—but for what? What is the nature of the criminal violence that they can transmit? If we look at Roberto's story, we see that Carlos is imagined to be connected to a whole network of criminal others who are sufficiently *organized* as to pose a threat. His threat is not simply that of the *ratero*, a troubling but petty and autonomous criminal; instead, his threat is connected to that of organized crime, a trope so widespread in Mexico today as to be an entire industry in film, *nota roja* tabloid newspaper reporting, literature, and music (Escalante 2012, Yeh 2012, Zavala 2018). These organized criminal entities, lurking in dangerous neighborhoods in which workers live, have the ability to mete out revenge, or justice, depending on the perspective one takes. Like state law, which is spectral and uncertain, merchants envision criminal sovereignty most acutely in those moments of disruption to the moral economy of work relations, when they are confronted with the possibility of its threat. Yet in their day-to-day hiring practices, as well, they take steps to ensure

safety and to mitigate the threat that employees pose.

Merchants in La Central are therefore generally careful and systematic about whom they hire to work for them. Since workers are poor, either from the more marginal neighborhoods of Mexico City, or recent rural migrants, they are associated with danger in the social imaginary. Yet La Central is a place precisely marked by the constant influx and circulation of people from these risky areas, and because of the back-breaking and relatively low paid nature of the work in the market, it necessarily depends on poor people, especially young men.

Workers, moreover, have significant access to intimate knowledge about their bosses. As constant presences on the sales floor, employees have a clear sense of how much merchants sell. As the ones who receive and unload incoming shipments, they also know how much their receive, and how much the merchants pay for their goods, information which merchants try to protect as trade secrets. Workers are thus well positioned to have a good sense of the financial standing of their employers, information that is valuable to those who might be interested in extortion or kidnapping. Workers also see the comings and goings of merchants and their associates. They know what car each person drives, and what time they come and go. They know what time the money gets taken to a local bank to be deposited, and what day and time everyone gets paid. As Roberto said about Carlos, workers know a great deal and that knowledge can be a source of frightening power if, as merchants fear, the world is full of entities who would be interested in finding out more about them.

Employers, accordingly, have strategies for minimizing risk and ensuring that their workers are *de confianza*. One of the principal strategies is hiring through kin networks and/or through regional networks. Mexico City is a site of migration for people throughout the country, and

market areas such as La Central are often one of the first stops in the city (Vera Alpuche 2015; Berthier 1986). Regional networks play a major role in bringing people to the market—it is often a cousin, an uncle, a parent, or a sibling who first brings a worker from their village to a job in the city—and the market is full of migrant networks from around Mexico. Migrants will often rent apartments in the vicinity of the Central to room in together, will engage in *tandas* collectively, and will help each other find work. It is not only the workers, however, for whom regional identities are strong. Merchants themselves often trace their origins from a particular state or region in Mexico; many of them, after all, come from families who themselves migrated to Mexico City just a generation or two back in search of a brighter future. Indeed, historically the power of merchants was tied to their privileged familiarity with producing regions from which they sourced their merchandise, as I discussed in chapter one. Produce commerce, moreover, was highly regionalized until the second half of the twentieth century, when merchants started to go to different regions in order to be able to sell the same product year-round. Even today, many merchants continue to have close ties with certain areas of the country, and may still have family based in those regions.

In these cases, some merchants opt to hire workers who come from villages in their preferred region. Having all of their employees come from the same area ensures security in several ways. First, if multiple family members and friends are dependent on the same employer, the likelihood of a worker undermining that employer is reduced, since it might have repercussions for other workers. Merchants thus depend on workers to act as a sort of check on each other. For similar reasons, many hire through kin networks of their existing employees. As a result of the employee 'vouching' for his relative, the workers become involved in more complex relations with their

employer, upon which both then depend.

Stereotypes about what Mexicans from different regions of the country are like similarly inform hiring practices. Some employers choose not to hire urban workers, claiming that they are more "vice-ridden" than their rural counterparts, while others deride the slowness of some of the recent migrants, particularly those who come from indigenous areas of Mexico and might not speak Spanish as their first language. One merchant explained that although rural migrants appear more passive and obedient, they contain within them a violence that explodes when it actually comes out. One merchant explained his theory about the repressed violence of certain Mexicans like so: "The *hidalguitos* (dim: people from Hidalgo) and the *oaxaquitos* (dim: Oaxacan people) are treated badly by people, who say they are stupid and dark and ugly, and they seem silent but they are full of resentment, so when they explode they get really violent." Other merchants, however, suggest that Oaxacans are "honest" and "hard workers," while those from Chiapas are "unstable," and difficult to communicate with, and workers from the Estado de México are "go-getters" but sometime "vice-ridden." Similar regional and ethnic stereotypes play a fundamental role in social interactions and jokes more broadly in the Central de Abasto.

Behind these different hiring practices lurks the specter of violence, enabled by impunity, potentially perpetrated by employees. The importance of having a sense of security and the confidence that somebody won't harm or betray one's employer is important enough that merchants may overlook behaviors that are less than optimal in their workers. Roberto, for example, puts up with an employee who had a drinking problem, and would occasionally come to work heavily hung-over, or fail to turn up to work on time because he felt that the man was fundamentally a "good person" and harmless. Yet I would argue that what is at stake in these

relationships is not exactly *trust*. Following Carey (2017), I believe that it is more useful to focus on *mistrust* as a general disposition held by most merchants, which, contrary to the dominant vein of social science which postulates lack of trust as corrosive and anti-social, generates its own forms of social organization. There is a lack of trust in employees, in the legal system, and in the criminal order, a sense that one can never quite know where one stands and how one will be treated. Mistrust is the correlate to forms of imagined and fragmented sovereignty that predominate in contemporary Mexico, and mistrust lies at the center of the patron-client relations of which workers and employers in La Central are but one example.

Inverted clientelism

Patron-client relationships, marked simultaneously by deep intimacy and deep mistrust, have been theorized to be the very basis of public and private life in Mexico in the extensive literature on clientelism and corporativism (Wolf 1977; Yeh 2009). They are relations marked by domination, but also exchange; the logic undergirding them is that the *patron* can offer protection and contacts to power, in exchange for loyalty and support (Auyero 2001; Lomnitz 1994). In the most typical theorizations it is a matter of the exchange of goods or favors for votes or political support. In La Central, employer-employee relations are characterized by this dynamic; in addition to wages, *patrones* may offer their employees a range of favors in which they act as brokers or intermediaries granting employees access to things that would otherwise be outside of their reach. Don René, for example, bought an expensive smart phone for one of his workers and helped her register it, which she repaid in monthly installments, since she herself was unable to get credit in another way. He would also arrange to have a doctor come to the

bodega to test his workers' blood sugar levels and give them diabetes prescriptions, since going to the doctor was expensive and difficult given their long working hours. Roberto, the watermelon merchant, lent one of his workers enough money to go off on his own and start a small retail business in limes and gave him a small corner of his *bodega* with two months rent-free in which to get started. Juan, the spice merchant, vouched for his employee who was starting his own small fruit business, serving as his guarantor so that he could get fronted fruit on credit to start his business. These sorts of gestures established them as good *patrones*, towards whom employees developed affective relations of goodwill in addition to economic dependency.

This sort of dynamic, in which a benevolent *patron* provides the necessary connections and conditions for employees to do well in exchange for loyalty and trust are the ideal-type of the patron-client relations that characterize the moral economy of La Central. They are built on a logic that recognizes the necessity of having a 'contact' out there, in order to get things done, whether that be navigating bureaucracy or acquiring credit. In part, this image of the patron's power is a fantasy, based both on speculative notions of what power in a particular context looks like, and on a hopeful view of what the patron is actually capable or willing to achieve. In a study of how Mexican peasants navigate a bewildering bureaucracy in attempting to defend their claims to their land, for example, Monica Nuijten (2004) shows how the figure of the 'broker' (a synonym for *patron* as I am using it) is imagined by peasants to possess connections in relevant state agencies. Even as they are disappointed time and again by the brokers who promise to help them resolve their land claims, the fantasy of the *patron* who can mediate remains an enduring component of political (dis)enchantment in contemporary Mexico.

The patron-client relationship is thus enabled by a fantasy of *intermediation* (cf

Mazzarella 2006, 499) in which patrons are imagined to stand closer to authority, and to thus be able to provide the connections necessary to access power and protection, while clients in return can give loyalty in whatever form necessary. Yet it is not only a dyadic relationship between multiple sets of individuals that makes up the patron-client imaginary, as Wolf and others have suggested (Wolf 1977; Kemp 1982). The "possibility of stacked influence" is important in scaling up the way that power is understood, as Rihan Yeh argues:

> The patron has access to things one does not, including access to higher patrons. With supernatural patrons, one eventually reaches God; with human ones, one reaches, perhaps, the State. The network made of dyadic relationships between patrons and clients…may well be so personalized as to fail to create any common bond of corporate group-ness. But, I would suggest, no patron-client bond can work exclusively on a dyadic model, because its principle is the logic of a receding source of authority" (2009, 311).

The logic of clientelism as one of differential and mediated personalistic ties to receding authority can accordingly be seen as one of *channels* in the sense discussed in the previous chapter; certain individuals (*patrones,* brokers, or intermediaries) connect other individuals to (receding) power and authority in "stacked" fashion, and in the process accrue political power and prestige by virtue of having clients. Channels, however, can allow for flows in both directions. What happens when we invert the directionality of patron-client relations? This, I would suggest, is precisely what we see in the fears that inform the merchants' hiring practices in La Central, which crystalize most clearly in moments of conflict, such as firing a worker. In the inversion of the patron-client ideal type relation, it is not the *promise* of the benevolent patron's contacts and connections to authority that can be passed onto the worker, but rather the *threat* of the client's connections to a nefarious network of criminality which can get passed onto the

patron. In both cases, there is an imaginary about the way that power (whether it be criminal, market, or state) operates, where it is located, and the channels through which one could access it. The logic, of personalistic, instrumental ties couched in the language of 'friendship' or patronage is the same.

While the threat of the employee's connections is most acutely felt in moments of rupture, where the relationship ends, the fear is constant and is part of the logic of this particular unequal relation of exchange. We can see that in the mistrustful hiring practices I outlined above, in which seeking protection from the employee is central to the way in which these largely informal relations get established to begin with. Even when the relations are couched in the language of trust (*confianza*) and affection, and even where affection is sincere, they take place in the broader context of generalized *mistrust*. This generalized mistrust is founded on the fear that one party in a relationship of exchange may try to exploit or harm the other party, and to benefit at the other's expense, that what is idealized as a relationship of balanced reciprocity will actually turn out to be one of "negative reciprocity" (Sahlins 1972; Lomnitz 2005). Workers may fear, with reason, that their employers will summarily fire them or not give them their due wages or severance pay, as in the case of Doña Lupe. Merchants may fear that their employees will try to rob or extort them, or worse. In any case, negotiations that mark the ending of such relations of reciprocity reveal the underlying tensions and inequalities upon which they are built.

Conclusions

To return to the resignation form. How do we make sense of it? Is it a forgery? A lie? Clearly, the legal archive it leaves is misleading: Carlos did not quit his job of his own volition,

he was fired, and was paid off. Yet the resolution it marks, the agreement between parties, is authentic. It is a testament to the power of state law, but also its weakness. Formal law provides the structure—in the form of the documents and language—to the articulation of the informal agreement that Roberto and Carlos reached. The signed document is both the result of an informal transaction, *and* the object of exchange that had a cost of $10,000 pesos. Yet while Roberto and other merchants may well fear the state's regulatory gaze, and have their workers sign resignation forms as a kind of insurance, the negotiation between them reveals the degree to which mistrust marks these kinds of relations.

Labor laws are, in theory, designed to protect workers from exploitation and abuse on the part of their employers, but they are also regarded with suspicion and hostility within the moral economy of La Central's merchants and their employees, who prefer the flexibility and invisibility that informal agreements enable. Nevertheless, state law *does* mediate employment relations, from creating different categories of workers (a form of recognition by the state enabled by the *patron*) to creating a basis for legal claims to be made by workers (which the merchants perceive as a legal threat). To focus only on the informality of labor relations would be to miss the ways in which it is conditioned and shaped by legal artifacts and legal imaginaries.

Yet it is not only the promise and threat of state law and power that mediates relations between employers and employees in La Central. Merchants perceive themselves as threatened, as well, by violent crime, which might come to them through their employees. Employees, then, become imagined as vectors of sorts, connecting merchants to an imagined world of criminal sovereigns that they, like many Mexicans, see as simultaneously omnipresent and spectral. Local

theories of crime thus posit the workers as the potential bearers of the violence that would destroy the patron-client bond of trust, and the merchants as those who are in need of protection. In both cases, there is a spectral threat emanating from these competing and imaginary sovereign orders—state authority versus more-or-less organized criminal networks—which comes to bear on the decisions that employers may make regarding hiring and firing considerations, and which may ultimately culminate in an informal agreements or in a legal document: an employment contract, an insurance plan, or a resignation form, like the one Carlos signed.

CHAPTER 5

Authority, Legal Ambiguity & Disambiguation

A contentious cup of coffee

Street vendors, or *ambulantes* as they are commonly known, are a controversial but ubiquitous presence in La Central de Abasto, like in other parts of Mexico City. Unlike in other neighborhoods, however, where street vendors may sell the same products as storefront businesses, leading to accusations that they represent an unregulated, unfair form of competition, *ambulantes* in La Central are a largely complementary economy; they sell products related to commerce to workers in the market, including smocks, batteries, and gloves, or consumable goods for buyers and sellers alike, including food, newspapers, and gifts. Nevertheless, wholesale merchants are, as a whole, deeply hostile to street vendors in theory, if not practice since most of them regularly buy goods from *ambulantes*. Merchants regard street vendors as illegal actors who dirty and crowd the market's passageways, make La Central more dangerous and less modern, and are organized in mafia-like associations with illicit connections to the authorities.

Lupe is a street vendor, a *cafetera,* who sells hot coffee, sweetbreads, and *atole* out of a shopping cart in the wee hours of the morning in La Central. To get there in time for the morning rush, Lupe gets up before 3 o'clock am every day to start brewing coffee and boiling sugary water which she thickens with cornmeal to make the hot morning beverage, *atole*. By 3:30, she loads her grocery cart with the beverages, styrofoam cups, napkins, and thin plastic bags. With her oldest son, who helps her in the mornings before going to the university, she walks for 45

minutes down darkened streets to get to the market, stopping at a bakery along the way to pick up several bags of rolls and *pan dulce.*

Once there, Lupe goes to the same corner she has worked on for the last seven years. Leaving her son in charge of the cart, she goes around her sector, taking orders for coffee, flashing a broad smile here and there, greeting everyone in sight. Although most people only know her by her first name, Lupe is intimately acquainted with her neighbors, and on excellent terms with the local police, inspectors, and merchants alike. These good relations, Lupe is quick to make clear, are a consequence of, rather than a substitute for, legality. She always has prominently displayed a crisp, laminated vending permit, which demonstrates that she is an *ambulante legal*, a legal street vendor. There are others, she explains, who are there illegally, who don't have permits. Those ones are a problem, and the authorities need to remove them in order to prevent the market from getting too crowded.

Figure 11. Street vending prohibited

Wholesale merchants are quick to point out that street commerce is prohibited by the municipal and market codes. At regular meetings of the merchant's association, UNCOFYL, the problem of street vendors was frequently trotted out as one of those intractable issues that demonstrated how little regard the authorities had for the market, and how corrupt they were. At one such meeting, as they discussed the practice of permitting certain street vendors, Leopold, an aging wholesaler, was emphatic in his disagreement with Lupe on the subject of *ambulantes*: "There's no such thing as a legal *informal* (informal vendor). The only thing that permit tells us is that the authorities are colluded, and that they [the vendors] are here thanks to the cancer of

corruption from which we suffer in this country." Even as he buys his morning coffee and newspapers from *ambulantes*, Leopold rejects Lupe's attempt to differentiate between legal and illegal street vendors, instead lumping all of them into the latter category, which he sees as a signifier of a rotten political system.

Ambiguous Legality

In this chapter, I take up the problem of street vending as a way to demonstrate how legal practices, such as the issuing of permits to *ambulantes*, contributes to the sense of sovereign uncertainty in the food system. I propose analyzing street vending in La Central as a form of what I call "ambiguous legality." Ambiguous legality is a term that can be used to describe fields of social practice—in this case, street vending— for which uncertainty and disagreement over legality are among its constitutive characteristics. Ambiguous legalities have four basic qualities: 1) There is a lack of consensus about the source and legitimacy of authorities who could define their formal legal status; 2) They are subject to frequent, significant changes to formal legal regulation governing their practice; 3) They are a heterogeneous legal field grounded in a homogeneous social imaginary; 4) They compel actors to engage in "disambiguation," that is, forms of symbolic and affective boundary-work.

The concept of ambiguous legality—especially its first and second characteristics— draws on recent theories of informality, most notably Ananya Roy's (2009) account of "deregulation" as a condition of what she calls the "informalized state." Deregulation refers to the partial, incomplete forms of state regulation of particular spaces and activities, which produces legal ambiguity and confusion, with the law appearing "open-ended and subject to multiple

interpretations and interests." While deregulation refers to a process, however, ambiguous legalities are social fields of practice within which people work on doing particular things, such as selling tacos or sex on the streets, or washing dishes in a restaurant. Paying attention to ambiguous legalities means looking at the ways not only that legal uncertainties are created and maintained, but on the way in which they influence forms of everyday comportment and the invisible labor of symbolic boundary-work (Lamont 1992), which I refer to as *disambiguation*.

In this chapter, I focus on a series of debates over a permitting program in La Central which produced cleavages and social disagreements rather than legal clarity or legibility. In the first section, I briefly outline the way in which the relationship between legality and street vending has been theorized and popularly imagined in Mexico, arguing that insufficient attention has been paid to the heterogeneous types of formal legality and interpretations which comprise the field of street vending. In the second section, I turn to an extended ethnographic example to illustrate the ways in which ambiguous legality is produced through the legal technology of the vending permit, situated in the context of existing understandings of street vending as criminality, and corruption. In the third section, I describe how street vendors and other social actors attempt to make moral-legal claims through a process I refer to as "disambiguation." In the final section, I discuss how popular discourses about state illegitimacy and corruption contribute to legal ambiguities, and the challenges that they pose to street vendors in their efforts to combat popular perceptions of criminality and illegality.

Visualizing Legal Heterogeneity

Street vending has been associated with illegality and disorder in Mexico City to varying degrees since at least the nineteenth century, when modernizing regimes introduced municipal regulations aimed at eliminating what elites saw as its unsightly and unhygienic presence from the street (Agostoni 2003, Barbosa Cruz 2010). Concerns about diseases, miasmas, and unruly crowds animated the efforts of early modernizers in Mexico to restrict street commerce in the nation's capital. After the revolution and throughout much of the twentieth century, street vendors grew in number and political power, fueled by waves of rural migration to the city as well as clientelistic arrangements with the ruling PRI party (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional*) through which vendors' associations were able to secure large swaths of land for their members to work (Cross 1998; Monnet 2005). Even in the midst of these successful forms of political appropriation on the part of vendors' associations, however, city leaders periodically attempted to remove vendors from specific parts of the city, pointing out that they were there illegally and smearing them in state-controlled media. With the onset of neoliberalism and democratization in Mexico in the 1980s and 1990s, the number of street vendors increased markedly, but so too did heightened fears of criminal disorder and globally circulating discourses of corruption and transparency (Becker & Muller; Leal 2016).

Vendors, consequently, came to be associated with illegality in Mexico both as a result of violating specific municipal laws, and because of their clientelistic arrangements with the state that got glossed as "corruption" by middle-class critics (who themselves conveniently elided their own forms of state appropriation in the process). Newspaper headlines accusing street vendors of being "mafias," trafficking in illegal goods, engaging in corruption, and being

disorderly are now daily features in Mexico (Aguiar 2013; Leal 2016; Hayden 2014). Alejandra Leal (2016) has argued that in a context of "actually existing neoliberalism" in Mexico, middle classes view street vendors as representing irredeemable forms of illegality and criminality, as well as outmoded and illegitimate forms of politics. One of her interviewees, a man named Armando, pithily articulates the widespread elite sentiment that street vendors are pathological: *"They are also a cancer for the center, because they make noise and they don't respect the law."* He goes on to explain to her the compromised moral and political status of vendors:

> It is disrespectful to those trying to do things right, those who pay taxes, those who want to contribute to society, to the historical center, to build a better society. And it is a bit like Mexican crookedness, you know, like, "not me," right? "I take my own path and I do whatever I want. To me it is like dishonest competition, it is opportunistic.

On the one hand, this popular association of street vending with illegality appears not to be unfounded: There are indeed multiple laws prohibiting the use of public thoroughfares in Mexico City for commercial purposes, including the *Reglamento de comercio semifijo y ambulante* (1930), *Reglamento de Mercados* (1951), and *Ley de Cultura Cívica* (2004), among others. Beyond overt legislative attempts to limit street vending, moreover, the current Mexico City government is in the process of attempting to "reorganize" street vendors, with the idea of limiting their numbers, by using "smart city" technologies, like geolocated vending permits. Such "soft" technologies act as forms of biopolitical regulation, in tandem with "hard" forms of repression and violence against newly criminalized vendors.

Yet street vending is hardly an undifferentiated realm of illegality. There are tens of thousands of permitted *ambulantes* in Mexico City, ranging from specially recognized groups of

disabled and blind vendors' organized into unions, to individual applicants (Meneses 2011; Serna Luna 2013). Vending permitting systems, moreover, are the consequence not only of negotiations, protests and mobilizations by what Chatterjee (2004) calls "political society," but also of actions in the realm of "civil society," in court battles fought by associations of *ambulantes* over the years (Azuela & Meneses 2014). Indeed, in numerous cases over the years, the courts have ruled that street vendors have a constitutionally guaranteed right to work, enshrined in Article 5 of the Mexican constitution,[24] even as they have permitted cities to restrict vending in certain areas (*ibid*). In 2016, reforms of the Mexico City constitution included, in article 15, recognition of street vendors as "non-salaried workers," and guaranteeing certain rights as a result. For as long as there have been prohibitions placed on street vending, in other words, there have also been categories of legality built in the form of permitting systems and legal recognition at various levels of the state.

Yet these differences and implications of formal legal status have gone largely unnoticed by scholars interested in street vending, who have largely replicated homogenizing discourses about street vendors as "informal" and "illegal", even as they have provided critical insights into the dynamics of urban exclusion and resistance. In a recent article, Crossa (2015) notes that street vendors are too often approached as an undifferentiated collectivity, and argues for the need to de-homogenize them in order to better understand the nature of urban informality. Her analysis, however, largely focuses on organizational, class, and discursive modes of differentiation, and is less attentive to the role of formal legality in contributing to the heterogeneity of street vendors.

[24] Mexico's 1917 Constitution, drafted after the Revolution, is famous for being progressive, restricting the power of the Catholic church, and enshrining a number of social rights, including the right to work in any occupation so long as it does not infringe on the rights of others.

In notable exception, Meneses (2013) has drawn attention to the existence of permitted and unpermitted vendors in Mexico City, arguing that their shared presence in the downtown represents a "dual-legal geography," in which vendors may work from the same area, but experience space and movement in different ways. Important though this insight is, however, it leaves little sense of how the more broadly circulating popular discourses of *illegality* intersect with more complex, heterogeneous forms of *legality* within street vending, and how people negotiate the space between these two. As I will later argue, "disambiguation," a form of boundary work, becomes central to the everyday labor of street vending in this context. To illustrate how legal ambiguity is *produced* through deregulation, I turn to an ethnographic account of debates over a street vending program in La Central.

Permitting Legal Ambiguity

In spite of Leopold's assertions to the contrary, the wholesale market allows for some legal street vending. Through its Office of Regulatory Compliance (*Normatividad*), the market's administration issues 2,881 permits to members of thirty vendors' associations, under an agreement reached between vendors' unions and the former administration in 2005. The demand for permits far exceeds these numbers, however, since there are estimated to be well over 5,000 vendors in the market itself, leading to the situation described by Lupe, where some vendors are licensed and other are not. Instead of resolving disputes over street vending, therefore, permits themselves generally become the source of new "fields of illegal practice", in the form of unregulated vendors whose numbers always exceed the changing limits of permitting regimes (Foucault 2001: 280). More problematically, still, from the perspective of those, like Lupe, who

hope to be exempted from the stigma of illegality, the legitimacy of licensing programs is itself frequently called into question by formal merchants and opponents of street vending. Yet it is not only the lack of information about the "truth" of Lupe's legality, or a case of differing perspectives which account for her disagreement with Leopold. The permit itself, as a legal technology, contains within it multiple forms of ambiguity and contingency, both temporal and spatial.

Figure 12. Lupe's vending permit

The permit which Lupe displays is a busy, color-printed document embossed with all of the trappings of officialdom. It has the logo of La Central, the market director's signature, a barcode, a ten digit identification number, expiration date, and various identifying details about Lupe, including her photo, full name, product she sells, and hours during which she is permitted to work. Conspicuously absent from the permit, however, is any specific information about *where* Lupe is permitted to hawk her wares. Instead, in the lower right-hand side of the document, it says Ambulatory Vendor ("comerciante en andadores"), despite the fact that Lupe stations herself in the same place every day.

Permits, however, never specify the *place* from which street vending can occur, since such specification would go against regulations prohibiting the use of public space for commerce. Instead, the workspace is constructed through regulating the bodily comportment of vendors, and by placing limits on the times during which they can work (Meneses 2013). This does not mean, however, that access to specific places is random or unstable, but rather that allocation and access is delegated to the vendors' unions, who apply non-standardized and unwritten criteria. These criteria are often based on seniority, and on the individual leaders' personal relationships with vendors in their base. In practice, then, vendors tend to have a significant amount of spatial stability granted through the union.

The lack of specific spatial guidelines in the vendors' permits leads to these becoming objects which produce spatial uncertainty in two ways. First, by creating a disemplaced "workplace," it allows for the abstract right to work enshrined in article 4 of the Mexican Constitution to be protected, without explicitly violating local restrictions on street commerce (Meneses 2014; Azuela 1990). As permits offer no right to work in a *particular* place, however,

they are useless as legal claims when spatialized conflicts do emerge, as vendors learned the hard way when their permits are summarily rescinded once certain desirable areas of the city are suddenly proclaims off-limits to them (Crossa 2015; Stamm 2007; Azuela & Meneses 2014).

Secondly and relatedly, the vending license does not place explicit limits on the distribution or density of street vending in a given area, leaving these sorts of determinations to the discretion of local inspectors, police, and vendors' leaders. What this means is that when there are territorial disputes between street vendors and merchants, or among vendors, even where all parties are fully licensed, there is no legal ground for staking a claim to a particular location.

Although working hours are clearly stated on the vending permit, these documents nevertheless become objects of temporal uncertainty and disaccord. Permits are the result of political agreements between authorities and vendors' unions, and wholesale attempts to remove vendors or cancel permitting agreements are likely to be met with violence and overt resistance. One of the strategies that the current administration has been using, accordingly, is to change the temporality of licensing itself, requiring permits to be more frequently renewed and less durable. In a 2015 meeting with members of UNCOFYL, a representative detailed the administration's strategy to move forward with the "reorganization" of *ambulantes*, a city-wide initiative that aims to reduce their numbers. Previously, the permits issued to the 2,881 vendors covered in the 2005 agreement had an indefinite duration, but *Normatividad* has reduced their period of validity first to one year, then to six months. The idea, he explained, is to make it more difficult for merchants to renew these permits, and to ensure that those who don't comply with hygienic and spatial regulations cannot renew. Not only will no new vendors be permitted, but some of those already grandfathered in will be stripped of their documentation.

The rapidly shifting, partially documented, and incomplete forms of legal regulation of street vending in La Central are productive of a field of ambiguous legality. Within this field, where legal status and the very legitimacy and meaning of the law itself are questionable, the work of disambiguation becomes an important daily event.

Disambiguation

Disambiguation refers to the process by which subjects who are interpellated by ambiguous legality work to clarify legal categories in order to assert the morality of their own position. It is a form of boundary-work that entails drawing symbolic boundaries between oneself and others, and interpreting difference as a means of defining identity. In her seminal study of boundary-work, Michele Lamont (1992) looks at the construction of working class male identities, and how they use religion, work ethic, and emotion as means of constructing racialized moral boundaries against "immoral" men. In separate studies of Latinx migrants in the United Stats, Susan Coutin (2000) and Nicholas DeGenova (2005) find migrants engaged in a constant struggle to demonstrate their "deservingness," often in moral terms, and against other "less deserving" migrants and US citizens, especially Blacks. In the context of street vendors' legal ambiguity in Mexico, disambiguation serves to both bolster the moral identity of those who are associated with illegality, either by recourse to claims of legality, or by questioning the legitimacy of existing boundaries of legality.

In the case of the debate over vending permits in La Central, discussed above, disambiguation takes on a particular, temporally defined form. Vending permits are products of particular moments in time, of agreements reached and conditions negotiated. To accept a permit

as legitimate means accepting the legitimacy of the authority emitting the permit, who in turn respects the legitimacy of the agreement reached in the past. One of the ways that vendors and others attempt to render themselves moral subjects, accordingly, is by situating their own claim to legality in a particular historical moment, which they interpret as moral, and interpreting agreements reached in other moments as illegal, immoral, or corrupt.

Wholesale merchants, for their part, often cite 1981 and the issuance of the *Reglamento* (internal statutes which prohibit street vending) as a date that precedes and obviates permits, as a time when the market was brand new and the administration had just promised to fortify it against informal commerce "like the Great Wall of China" (Berthier 1994). "In La Merced there was a huge problem with *ambulantes*, but that is why we came here, to modernize commerce," explained Jaime Liniers, a lime merchant who had studied law and was one of the proponents of the move to La Central. "Unfortunately, that opportunity was lost by our administration, which, as you know, is corrupt." Ironically, even though many merchants come from families in which their parents or grandparents may have gotten their start selling fruit and vegetables on the street, today they see *ambulantes* and the permitting system as signs of disorder, which many hope to eliminate by turning back to the legal guarantee of a different time, rolling back the multiple agreements between administration and permitted vendors which have allowed for the former to persist in the market.

Street vendors, on the other hand, tend to invoke the law as a guarantor of *rights* rather than a way to enforce rule-based order located in a distant past, although the extent to which they embrace this depends in part on their own legal status. Crispin Valencia is the leader of one of La Central's recognized informal vendors' unions. A short, dark skinned man from southern Mexico

near the Guatemalan border, he has been in La Central for over twenty years and is responsible for mediating between the hundred and fifty or so people he has in his association, and the market administration. Each month, he collects 135 pesos (slightly over ten dollars) from each of his constituents, in exchange for which he makes sure that their permits are in order and that they are protected in the case of conflicts with local inspectors or other merchants. Of this money, he deposits 103 pesos to the market administration's Department of Regulatory Compliance (*Normatividad*) bank account as a land use fee, keeping the remaining 32 pesos for himself.[25]

Like other street vendors I encountered, Crispin is well versed in the language of law. All Mexican citizens, he explained to me, are guaranteed the right to work in the constitution, and this right cannot be prohibited in public spaces. "The sidewalks and parks are not theirs to privatize," he explains, referring to the city government, "and it is illegal for them to try to push us out." Permitted and unpermitted street vendors alike tend to recur to this logic of rights (to work, to the city) when articulating their claim to the streets, while they see the state's attempts to enforce anti-vending bylaws as illegal and illegitimate.

As a way to strengthen their claim of rights, Crispin and other street vendors work on demonstrating their deservingness, contrasting themselves with other, less worthy subjects. Speaking of his union membership, Crispin explained that eighty percent of La Central's street vendors are women, and that were it not for the possibility of selling food or trinkets on the street they would need to turn to prostitution or crime. Lupe and Norma, too, quickly allude the specter of prostitution when discussing the paucity of options available to poor, single women. "I am

[25] In 2015, the administration of the CEDA removed itself from the list of public agencies required to have public financial disclosure. Some merchants speculate that it is because of shady deals, such as the street vendors' unions *cuotas*, that the administration chose to do this.

doing honest work," Norma said, "every day I'm here, giving it my everything, not degrading myself or others." Street vendors emphasize their poverty, humility, and legality, contrasting themselves with criminals. "We are poor people, humble people, without the resources to pay thousands of pesos a month in rent," Crispin told me, "but we work hard." In meetings with market authorities and merchants, Crispin is careful to perform this deserving role, always wearing a battered plaid shirt and baseball hat no matter the occasion, and referring to himself in the third person as "su servidor" ("at your service").

It is not only vendors, however, who portray themselves as deserving, hard-workers. Police officers, despite being responsible for many of the most violent and repressive encounters with street vendors, are often quick to express their discomfort with characterizations of *ambulantes* as criminals, and defend their character. One officer, a young migrant from the state of Chiapas who joined the police force in order to have access to its football facilities and teams, used to work as a street vendor selling car accessories at a busy crosswalk during rush hour. Today, working in the police, he is frustrated by the periodic directive to "remove" vendors or confiscate their goods.

> I don't like to do that because I know they are breaking the law but I know—I see, that they are here doing honest work. If they weren't here selling gum, they could be selling something else. And sometimes they [the government] tell us to leave them alone, sometimes they tell us to remove them, and in the end it's us, the police, who end up getting into trouble.

The police officer here, like Crispin and Lupe, engages in a form of boundary-work that serves to differentiate between criminals who "sell something else," and the "honest work" pointing to the problem of incoherent regulation that conflates the two.

Nevertheless, the expansive notion of law-as-rights held by Crispin and other permitted

vendors contracts when they are confronted with the question of what to do with *ambulantes* who are not covered by the 2005 agreement with the administration. "Deservingness" also means differentiating themselves from unlicensed vendors, through comparing themselves in terms of their hygienic standards, legality, or work ethic (Hayden 2014). Recall, for example, Lupe's claim that the administration needs to remove unpermitted vendors in order to prevent overcrowding in La Central. Permitted vendors like Lupe are often in favor of increasing regulation and codifying the unwritten agreements which give them a right to work on the streets as a way to restrict further access to those same streets. In 2015, Crispin and a group of other vendor's union leaders proposed to join forces with UNCOFYL in support of a "reorganization" of the market's street commerce laws, which would remove a large number of unpermitted vendors from the market. Explaining the logic behind this move, one of Crispin's allies, Valentín, explained:

> It is true that many of those people are hard-working, but the fact is that this market does not have room for all of us, and it is of no use to anybody if nobody can make a living. That is why I support the reorganization efforts, since we need to have rules (*normas*) which are clear so that people can't take advantage of them. Without rules everything gets resolved through shady deals (*acuerdos oscuros*), and it gets harder to make sure that there are no criminals getting involved.

Permitted vendors thus represent the law, on the one hand, as a flexible technology that may be morally appropriated and modified in the interest of social justice. Yet this understanding of law as a guarantor of rights quickly shifts to the logic of law-and-order, as Valentín picks up on the discourse of street vendors as linked to criminality in his reference to *acuerdos oscuros*. For undocumented vendors, on the other hand, permits exist in the realm of future aspirations and negotiations still to come, and get expressed in the language of still unrecognized rights. Rights, in the form of permits still ungranted, reside in a promised future, whereas order, signified by

their absence in a system where *ambulantes* would be altogether eliminated, belongs to an unfulfilled past promise. Permits thus act as a legal technology through which the classic tension between rights and order gets articulated through recourse to different temporal imaginaries, the past and present both representing a promise of stability which the present moment forecloses.

Disambiguation, then, takes multiple forms: it can take the form of performing "deservingness" by dressing, speaking, and acting as behooves as "humble, honest worker." It can take the form of symbolically distancing oneself from other, more criminal figures, such as the *rata* or the prostitute or the undocumented vendor. Or, it can take the form of explaining the basis of certain legal claims using the language of rights or of law-and-order, and of dismissing others on the basis of corruption or illegitimacy.

In spite of the widespread discourse which associates street vendors with disorder and criminality, therefore, attention to the forms of disambiguation which different actors engage in reveals the potency of the counter-narrative in which vendors are held up as particularly honest, humble, hard-workers, and representative of the best side of Mexican society. The term *trabajador*—which in Spanish refers to both the noun form of "worker" as well as somebody who is a "hard-worker"—is invoked by vendors, merchants, and even police to describe street vendors in positive terms, and to contrast them with two categories of Mexicans which are also popularly seen as sources of disorder: the common criminal (*rata*), and the corrupt government. The difficulty of disambiguation, then, lies precisely in this slippage between categories and the question of legitimacy.

Contested Legitimacy

Vending permits in Mexico are a legal concession rather than a guarantee or pathway to substantive rights. This situates them firmly in a grey area of legality, and makes them prime sites for the production of ambiguous legality. As the Susan Coutin and Sally Merry have suggested, in reference to a very different type of permitting—the selective issuing of "deferred action" status to undocumented youth under the Obama administration—such permits substitute "administrative solutions to social problems and conflicts" (Coutin & Merry 2013: 4). In spite of this, permitting continues to be one of the primary legal pathways through which street vendors, in their daily lives, attempt to regularize their relationship with the state, and make a claim to legality. The forms of citizenship permits confer is partial and incomplete, but it provides a "terrain of political possibility" (Zeiderman et.al. 2015), both for street vendors who hope to claim their right to the city, and to those who oppose them and would eliminate the program.

Waiting, deferral, and "lawful presence without lawful status" (Coutin & Merry 2014) are spatio-temporal conditions to which the street vending permit contributes, and which compel subjects to engage in a process of disambiguation in an effort to clarify the moral boundaries and their uncertain legal terrains. Yet it is not only the affective sensation of timelessness, out-of-placeness, and insecurity on the part of street vendors that we can learn about through paying attention to the legal technology of the permit. The way in which these technologies are understood by those administering them and those opposed to them are instructive, as well, and reveal the way in which popular political imaginaries of corruption and legitimacy shape street vending and other forms of ambiguous legality.

Back in La Central, during a meeting between wholesale merchants and representatives from

market's Office of Regulatory Compliance *(Normativitidad*) in 2014, the subject of street vendors came up, as it does in nearly every meeting between the two groups. Why, asked the merchants, were the *ambulantes* still there, in clear violation of the market's *normas* (by-laws)? Why was the office going around issuing permits instead of implementing the rule of law and removing the street vendors? In an attempt to explain the legal grey zone through which vendors are permitted—an act of disambiguation on the part of an authority enmeshed in the fraught terrain of *ambulantaje*—a *Normatividad* officer responded, "The thing is, there are two kinds of *normas:* written ones, and customs which become law." His explanation was met with disbelief and anger on the part of the wholesalers.

"Very convenient," one merchant grimly joked. "I guess now they're going to tell us that drug trafficking isn't really illegal because it's a custom which became law."

The joke is telling of the way in which many merchants view street vending permits: as documents illegitimately issued by authorities which, furthermore, serve as *evidence* of the authorities' illegitimacy. Instead of communicating something about the street vendors' legality, many merchants see permits as instead revealing the state's illegality Further, when the authorities try to modify the terms of permitting, either by curtailing or expanding them, street vendors themselves are wont to assume this same stance, accusing the authorities of acting illegitimately and corruptly. As forms of legalizing documentation, then, permits are contingent and incomplete, productive of social cleavages and disagreements as much as resolution to the persistent disputes over street vending in Mexico City. Even as some vendors and authorities cleave to permits and other forms of legal recognition as tools of disambiguation, as ways of establishing their rights and legitimate claims in contested terrains, these tools often serve to

perpetuate conditions of legal ambiguity.

This situation is compounded in a context where the source of legal authority itself is suspect, and the state is widely mistrusted and seen as corrupt, as is the case in Mexico today (Durant Ponte 2012). Yet here I am not simply giving an account of the break between law and society, where the former acquires the status of moral community in Durkheimian fashion, as Greenhouse (2010) has noted is the case in many contemporary legal anthropologies. Some street vendors, to be sure, may disambiguate by pointing to the immorality of the law, as was the case with one itinerant vendor in Mexico City's Centro Historico who told Rodrigo Meneses that he "never wanted to apply for a license because, according to him, the current authorities are the same crooks that have always benefitted from the less privileged" (2013: 3). Most vendors, nevertheless, seek some form of recognition, or engage in a process of disambiguation by depicting themselves as ethical subjects sometimes against and sometimes through the state, sometimes in solidarity with other vendors, and other times at odds with them.

The legal ambiguity of street vending is a product of a long history of negotiations through political and civil society, of illegal occupation and legal regulation, of the social and symbolic construction of the meaning of street commerce. The key to its persistence lies in this very ambiguity, which compels vendors to engage in the everyday work of maintaining and erecting boundaries and of strategically reinterpreting the law, which in turn is constantly reinterpreting their legality. It is this work, of moral policing and finding clarity in the midst of uncertainty, that comprises an important, but often unseen, form of everyday labor, for street vendors, merchants, and authorities in La Central de Abasto.

CHAPTER 6

"La cultura de la denuncia": crime reports and culpability

A shooting in the market

In 2014, just as I was starting my fieldwork, La Central was rocked by the shooting death of a wholesaler and two of his daughters during the morning rush hour. While the rest of Mexico City enjoys some brief hours of cool quiet before the sun peaks over the encircling mountains, La Central is throbbing with people and vehicles at 4:30 am. On a normal day, the cheerful chaos of commerce mingles with the colorful spectacle of tons of fruits and vegetables in motion, and early in the morning is the zenith of movement, as restauranteurs and retailers come to stock up for the day. It was at one such a moment when the attack happened in aisle S/T. The security cameras caught it all: several men with guns went into the bodega and demanded money, the merchant and his daughters resisted, and then they were dead in that rapid, crumpling way that semi-automatic weaponry has of killing people. While murders aren't unheard of at La Central, they are always sensational, and it was in the aftermath of this event that I started attending security meetings between merchants and market administration. Every other week, a cluster—between five and twenty or so—merchants would gather over snacks and complain to Major Lorenzo, his chief of police, General Castañeda, or another underling who the administration had sent over, about how dangerous the market had become.

At the first such meeting I attended, the merchants were worried and there was palpable anger in the air as they interrupted one another to add their voices to the din of discontent. How are they expected to work in these conditions? What will happen to business if things continue

like this? Vincente, a charismatic pineapple merchant with greying hair and a slight paunch stood up.

"Just this week, we've had five robberies in [section] U/V. The *rateros* come in with guns, they don't even bother covering their faces. They just come in and while they're taking wallets and robbing safes, they swear, they touch the ladies inappropriately. The authorities know this. You know this. Where are the police when this happens? Suddenly there isn't a cop in sight. Why doesn't anybody do anything?"

There were murmurs of approval, a pause while everyone waited for Major Lorenzo, the head of security in the market and former military man, to respond. Direct confrontations like this were rare in the polite, indirect discourse that these meetings usually favored. The major looks unfazed by the angry cluster before him.

"What I would like to know," he asked slowly, "Is how many of you have gone to report a crime [*denunciar*]? Raise your hands. Without those statistics, what can I tell my boss when he asks me why we need more police officers here? He looks at the numbers and says "no, no, no, you've got it under control. There's barely any crime there at all." I know some of my men are lazy, they show up at 9, sign in and then disappear. We are working on a system to fix that. *But my main problem is that you don't report crimes.*"

La cultura de la denuncia

In Mexico, according to official statistics, ninety percent of crimes go unreported to the authorities (IINEGI 2015). Scenes from La Central illustrate these numbers well: When Elvia's bodega was robbed at gunpoint early one Saturday morning, she didn't go to report the crime.

Instead, she wrote off the thousands of pesos taken from the safe as a loss, and jacked up the prices of her avocados to compensate. When Don Pedro's wife was snatched from the parking lot one evening as she left the popular restaurant that they owned in La Central, he paid a private investigator to help him negotiate with her kidnappers rather than go to the police. When Clara, one of the waitresses in the same restaurant was threatened by her boyfriend, she sought help from her boss. In these sorts of everyday decisions, people show that they know better than to have faith in the criminal justice system if the result they desire is justice, protection, or resolution.

In Spanish, the word for reporting a crime is *denunciar*, and the general public's decided lack of enthusiasm for *la denuncia* (a crime report) is a source of great concern for authorities and civilians alike—so much so that the Mexican state diligently collects data about the reasons that people don't report crimes to authorities. In an annual survey, people's reasons for not reporting are divided into "reasons attributable to authorities"—including fear of extortion, waste of time, long and difficult bureaucratic process, lack of confidence in authorities, and hostile attitudes from authorities— and "other reasons"—including fear of the aggressor, crime of little import, and lack of proof. The results of these surveys confirm what many merchants have long been saying: they don't trust authorities, they fear being extorted by the criminals or the police, they fear retributive action from the criminals. They don't know whom to trust. But though state statistics endeavor to separate reasons into categories "attributable to authorities" and "other reasons," in reality most see the state and criminals as hopelessly intertwined[26].

[26] These divisions themselves are problematic, as this chapter will suggest, because all of the "other reasons" are linked to failures of authority. That is, fear of the aggressor is linked to the belief that the police and in cahoots with the aggressor, and cannot adequately protect the privacy of those who report crime. The category of "crime of little

In spite of a widespread aversion to *la denuncia* in practice, the low reporting rate is a source of concern for many in the food market, and not only authorities like Major Lorenzo. "We lack a culture of reporting crime" [*la cultura de la denuncia*[27]] is a diagnosis I heard frequently during my fieldwork when people discussed the epidemic of criminality that they perceive around them, often accompanied by a grave shaking of the head, a shrug of the shoulders. The lack of widespread *denuncia* is most often spoken about in these terms: as a social deficit, a cultural deficiency, a political pathology. In this chapter, I examine this paradox in which reporting crime is held up as an ideal despite being rarely enacted in practice. Rather than focusing primarily on the normative question of why people don't report crime, however, I focus on how people in the market make sense of the gap between norm and action (Malinowski 1922), and to what effect by tracking how *denuncias* were discussed in everyday interactions and interviews.

Scholars of Mexican politics have long noted the divide between the formalism and ritual of the public order (norms), and the personalistic nature of politics on the ground (action), where "'money and relationships' are to a large extent determining for what happens, but where at the same time continuous reference is made to the importance of formal procedures and the civil order" (Nuijten 2004: 226; Lomnitz 1995, 2001, de Vries 2002). In such a context, fantasy,

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import" is again based on the above failure to make reporting a secure, streamlined process. Lack of proof is also often based on hostile investigators, or skepticism from the investigators which makes people feel like they lack proof. "Other reasons," in other words, absolves the state from its responsibility to ensure that the conditions for reporting crime and safe, equitable, and efficient.

[27] In Mexico, the formulation *tener la cultura de hacer algo* , (having the culture of doing something) is not uncommon, but interestingly it is usually used in the negative and to refer to actions that are seen as modern or "civilized", as in the case of *no tenemos la cultura de la denuncia* or *no tenemos la cultura de reciclar* (we lack a culture of recycling). A more idiomatic English translation would be "we don't have the custom of doing _____" but I hope to underscore precisely the culturalist undertones of this assertion in Spanish by translating it as culture in English.

conspiracy theories, rumors, and counter-publics proliferate (Picatto 2017; Nuijten 2003, 2004; Lomnitz 1995; Yeh 2012). In this chapter, I trace how two theories about how state power and crime that emerge in discussions of *denuncias* work in tandem, creating a situation which sustains the "divide between the national ideal, wherein the law has universal extension and application, and real state power, which is seen as making decisions on a self-serving and ad hoc basis" (Lomnitz 2001, 82).

The first, which is frequently invoked in public interactions and embodies the normative exhortation that citizens report crime, portrays the state as a neutral bureaucratic entity which operates impartially but according to strict rules and "sees" through reports and statistics. The act of making a *denuncia*, according to this ideal, is a form of revelation, through which criminals can be exposed and brought to justice, hence ensuring security. The second, which circulates more in conversations and interactions coded as private or as rumors, refutes such claims, and suggests instead that the state is permeable and colluded with criminals. According to this latter theory, the directionality of the 'seeing' enabled by *denuncias* is reversed—the act of reporting reveals not the victim, but the one who reports the crime, thus exposing them to further threat.

In order to understand why the former account, which celebrates *denuncias*, continues to carry weight, I approach reporting as a form of speech, which, like other linguistic practices, exposes speakers to risks and evaluations in social interactions. Paying attention to the metapragmatics of *la denuncia*—how this form of talk is talked about—I show that the possibilities for articulating the dangers that merchants perceive in filing the criminal report are circumscribed, since speaking openly about fearing *la denuncia* marks one as lacking political connections and social status. My analysis of "denunciation talk" reveals both how the

boundaries between legality and criminality are blurred in everyday interactions, as well as how the law manages to retain a certain aspirational legitimacy in theory, even as it lacks it in practice.

Revelation through reporting

Authorities like Major Lorenzo argue that they are doing their jobs to reduce crime to the best of their ability but that they are handicapped by the merchants' failure to comply with their civic responsibilities. Their point is this: Legally speaking, unreported crimes are unsolved and unsolvable crimes by definition. Even if resolution is reached by extra-juridical means—by paying ransom to secure the return of a kidnapped relative, or in the infrequent but widely publicized cases of lynching—they remain formally unrecorded and hence invisible to the language of statistics in which the state aspires to transact. Without a *denuncia*, the crime is unseen, and thus unactionable, or at least so the official story goes. A particular mode of knowing through quantification thus undergirds the communicative economy of reporting of which the police report is a key tool for generating statistics. This ideology of knowing—and governing— the world through the use of statistics, relies on the "magic" of numbers, and finds its expression in indicators which take complex phenomena and problems in the real world, and render them visible through a process of labeling, commensuration, and flattening. This is a basic technology of the modern state, one that purports to enhance transparency and visibility through processes of quantification (Foucault 1991; Porter 1995; Merry 2011, 2015; Scott 1998). This logic gets deployed by the market administration as a tactic to deflect criticism about their ineffectiveness—and the insinuations that this reflects a more generalized condition of corruption.

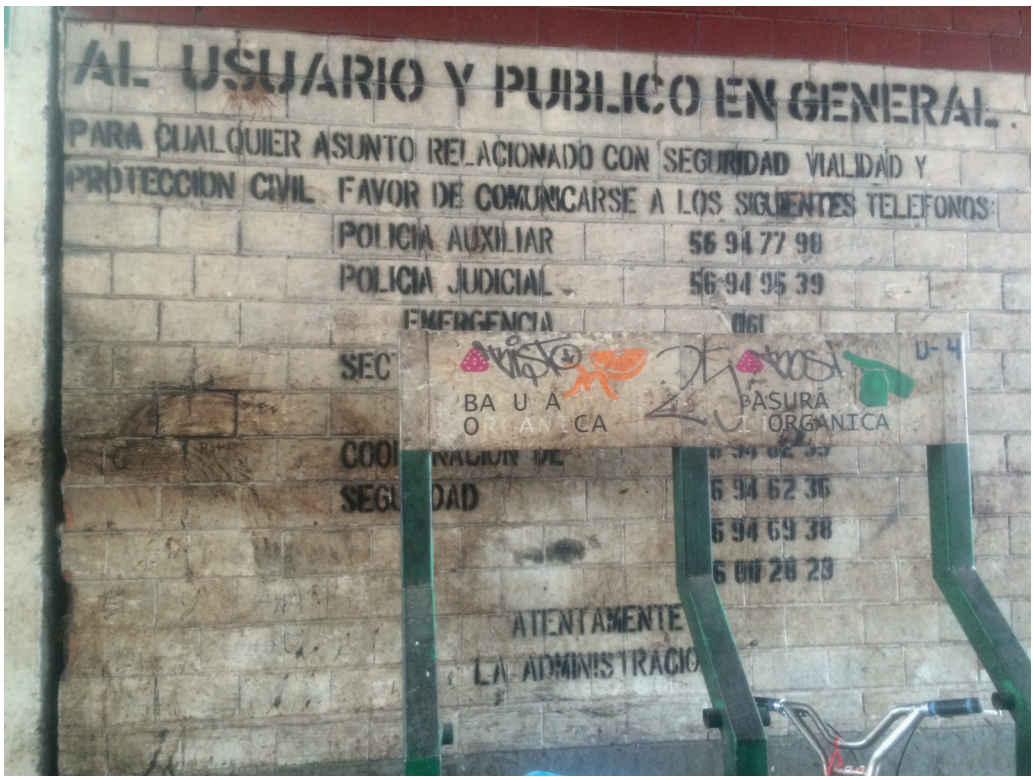

Figure 13. Security contacts

It is to this idea of "revelation through reporting" that Don Pedro, the president, and Ingeniero Solomon, secretary of the wholesalers association UNCOFYL, referred one day as I interviewed them about crime in the market:

> **Pedro:** In La Merced, those were different times, a different government. Nowadays, criminality has become totally ubiquitous. But it's also our fault. Why? Because for example, I go to my bodega, I open, they steal whatever amount from me, but, for reasons that I still don't understand, I don't report the crime! And if I don't report the crime, if he doesn't report, if you don't report, the authorities when they look at the statistics they say that nothing is happening here, if you, if you don't report— So the people who you've spoken with, I'd like for you to ask them: have you been robbed? Yes. Have you reported? Well, no.
> **Tiana:** Yes, I've asked. And you're right. I'm trying to understand that a bit.
> **P:** Not even we understand it!
> **Solomon:** The thing is, there isn't a *cultura de la denuncia*. Why? Because they say that they don't get treated well, but they have to just suck it up, they have to report crimes so that they can catch the rats [criminals]. Because if we report then

> the authorities can do their job. But if we don't, we go to the ministry and they say let's see what we have and what happens? It turns out that there's just people they caught doing pee-pee. Let's see, how many [did you catch]? Fifty. How many thieves did you get? [indicates zero with his hands] Why? Because we don't have robberies. And they [the authorities] go to their bosses and it's the same, it's the same. No, here it's all good, nothing's happening. When the reality is different.

As intermediaries between the market's state-appointed administration and the merchants themselves, Pedro and Solomon were frequently accused of "taking the side of" the administration, probably in exchange for personal favors. While they vociferously denied this, and took efforts to make their allegiances with the merchant base clear, they often ended up giving explanations on behalf of the administration, trying to make them palatable and intelligible to their constituents.[28] In the interview above, for example, there are multiple voicings[29] embedded in the speech of Pedro and Solomon—my voice as the interviewing ethnographer, that of a hypothetical merchant who doesn't report a crime, that of the merchant who goes to complain to the municipal office, that of the municipal authorities, that of the police chief, that of the mayor or other higher up. In each of these, a series of potential or previous interactions is reported in which the figure who expresses a grievance to a higher authority is rendered ridiculous due to the lack of statistics to support his claim. What's more, the party who is left without statistics ends up appearing a liar, for lack of evidence to support a claim. "We don't have robberies" and "No, here it's all good, nothing is happening," are statements that

[28] Sally Merry, tracing a similar process of "translation" by the 'people in the middle' in the context of international human rights law, has referred to this process of translating discourses and practices into specific situations as a process of "vernacularization" (Merry 2006; Merry & Wood 2010). In the context of La Central, where authorities themselves are seen as corrupt or untrustworthy by the merchants, this task is particularly fraught, as giving voice to such "insider" explanations can taint the intermediary by association.

[29] I use Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) notion of 'voicings' to describe the different perspectives or speakers that co-exist within one narrative, a characteristic he describes as *heteroglossia*. Voicing does not necessarily refer to specific speakers, or literal voices, which are quoted or heard in narrative, but rather to perspectives which are 'voiced' in particular ways

appear in Pedro and Solomon's accounts as self-evident lies, but the speakers who they are animating are left with no recourse but to make such false claims, because they lack the proof which can only be supplied in the form of the language of statistics or the ingredients to generate them—namely, the *denuncia*.

Such voicings draw on and give credence to official narrative of how statistics work—as disembodied numbers which have the power to communicate truths to authorities through a process of visibilization. As Solomon explains the importance of reporting crimes, he does so by suggesting that without them, crime cannot be seen, that it is invisible to authorities. First, he points out that if merchants don't file *denuncias*, crime remains invisible to the municipal administration, who looks at the statistics and only sees "people they caught doing pee-pee," an allusion to the misdemeanor of public urination, something for which no accusing body is necessary. The numbers, he suggests, deceive because while on paper it appears that there are only fifty infractions, and minor ones at that, the reality is altogether different. He then shifts to another interaction, in which the municipal authorities, in conversation with their own bosses, are unable to demonstrate that there is crime in the market because the statistics don't reveal anything. Here they are echoing the point that Major Lorenzo made when he claimed that without statistics, he cannot convince his own bosses that there is a need for more policing resources to be made available to La Central.

Much has been written in recent years on the rise of quantification and indicators as techniques of "audit culture." Many of these studies have followed the way in which indicators are crafted, and how they are used in ways that reveal certain realities by naming and measuring them, while concealing others which are unaccounted for. What I describe above, however, is the

way that authorities attempt to circulate discourses that affirm the power of numbers and reports to reveal crime. They need only invoke failed "shadow conversations" (Irvine 1994) between imagined authorities and their higher ups to demonstrate the power of state forms of collecting data and seeing. But while these invocations are interactionally powerful, that does not mean that people take them at face value. For as we will see shortly, making a *denuncia* is no guarantee of being heard by the authorities, nor is the "official statistic" the only intelligible way that authorities have to communicate "up the hierarchy." Still, the power of the discourse of "revelation through reporting" is strong, as we can see in the way that it gets mobilized by authorities when they are challenged.

One of the effects of such use is that it renders political problems into technical questions of compliance (Merry 2001, Merry & Coutin 2014). Thus, what merchants might view as a crisis of security attributable to failures of governance, the authorities attempt to depict as a crisis of information, a lack of crucial visibility generated by the merchants' failure to comply with their responsibilities as "good citizens." They do this by invoking the idea of the police report and the numbers it can generate as the only lawful way to communicate the reality of crime to other scales of government, and suggesting that the lack of particular documents make it impossible for the 'machinery of justice' to do its work. Or, as one detective suggested in a speech to the merchants association, "with all due respect, I'm telling you that what they have in the United States isn't better police, it's better databases of information. But for that we need the cooperation of all of you, of each and every last one."

La cifra negra

This is the promise of the state: that which can be counted, filed appropriately, articulated through indicators is that which can be acted upon. Yet when statistics do circulate publicly, more often than not these are met with skepticism or outright dismissal when they come from official sources. Invariably, these statistics communicate information favorable to the current administration, as a selection of headlines from the monthly bulletin published by the administration reveals. In June 2013, it merrily proclaimed: "May crime rate 30% lower than in 2012. High-impact down by 55%, low-impact by 40%". The January 2014 bulletin continued this trend, noting that "2013 crime rate 31% lower than 2012, thanks to new administration." In February 2014, we learned that the "January crime rate 29% lower than in 2013, 43% lower than in 2012," and in November 2014 it was 14% lower than in 2013. Most merchants are skeptical of the rosy picture that these statistics paint, which stands in stark contrast to the pessimistic view that they have of security in the market, and write them off as propaganda by the administration. For them, contrary to the popular adage that numbers don't lie, numbers *do* lie, and rather consistently at that, such that the bulletins exist largely for show, their value as sources of reliable information essentially non-existent.

The chief of police in La Central, a vivacious former military man named General Castañeda, admitted as much to me one day in an interview. When I asked him how he, as the head of police, dealt with statistics which were so inaccurate and misleading, he winked and told me that, of course, there was another set of numbers: *la cifra negra*. Literally, this translates into "the black measure," and it refers to informal estimates of those things which cannot be reliably accounted for through conventional reporting mechanisms. "Black measures" of this sort are

what researchers and governments the world around rely on to assess the actual, as opposed to reported, incidences of things which people are reluctant to report. Rape, domestic abuse, and other forms of private-sphere violence, for example, are often underreported, and it is common knowledge that official statistics on these are unlikely to reflect actual occurrences. In a context where underreporting is perceived as an endemic, pervasive problem, the *cifra negra* works to bridge the gap between that which is visible to the modern state's top-down, flattening efforts at "seeing," and what is really going on, on the ground. It also, however, confirms that things are not as they seem, that behind numbers that purport to stand upon facts, there are layers of shadowy rumors.

The existence of a *cifra negra,* however, is no secret. It gets trotted out in interactions between authorities and merchants, the former arguing that without adequate reporting, the *cifra negra* never gets validated, never acquires the legitimacy to make it actionable. But where it gets spoken of, it indexes secret channels of communication and information within the locus of state power, and in this way contributes to the idea that the state is colluded and opaque. Authorities, however, need to bring up the *cifra negra* to stave off allegations that they are incompetent, or don't know what is going on. Similarly, they need to demonstrate that they know who the criminals are, by identifying them, throwing around nicknames ("that one's called 'the beard'"), and places of origin ("these guys are in the Oaxacan gang"). In meetings, sometimes they bring grainy video footage from surveillance cameras as proof that they *see*, that they are not incompetent or clueless.

"Take a good look," Major Lorenzo said during a security briefing after a week that had seen a spate of robberies. He showed a group of merchants a video of a pair of young men

dressed as stevedores walking down a corridor, and zoomed in on their faces, which, though pixilated, were clearly visible. "We know those guys robbed a couple of *bodegas* last week, we know they held up some people, we know where they hang out and who they work with. But we can't do anything. Why? Because according to the records they haven't done anything. Because your comrades here stay silent and don't report a thing."

In the relatively public forum of the meeting between merchants and authorities, it is essential to the performance of power that the police chief be able to demonstrate that he is in the know, that nothing escapes him. In this he differentiates himself from his underlings, the beat police, those working-class cops who are often described by Mexicans as being stupid, uneducated, obtuse. In his study of policing in Mexico City, Markus Müller (2012) quotes middle-class Mexicans as feeling that "local police rarely understand" what is going on when a crime needs to be solved. Thus the offering of information about criminals, about when robberies were committed, about whether or not individual merchants reported, all of this serves as a particular kind of performance, and as a "revelation of concealment." Like the *cifra negra*, the General's knowledge suggests back-channel modes of obtaining information. This is a normal part of police work the world over, but the strategic revelation of these secrets is a mode of rendering them powerful. It also, however, undermines the appeal to transparency upon which the logic of reporting rests.

Risks of revelation

The promise of the crime report and the numbers that it can generate is that criminals will be revealed when one reports. But a different theory of visibility and revelation informs the

decisions that merchants make in their daily lives not to report crimes: that instead of the criminal, it is the person who denounces who will be revealed, and exposed to extortions by the police themselves, or by criminals who will try to exact revenge on the would-be denouncers.

Miguel is a middle-aged man with the lilting accent of Mexico City's working classes, who together with his sons and brother run a small wholesale cantaloupe shop in the bustling center of La Central. One day, Miguel told me about a brush that he had with criminals who had robbed his shop a few years earlier. Early one morning, as he was negotiating a transaction with some buyers, two armed men approached his customers and started demanding money. Another client who had a gun with him fired on the robbers from behind, shooting and killing both of them. On that occasion, Miguel didn't report anything to the police, and refused to tell them anything that might incriminate his friends when they showed up to interview bystanders:

> **Miguel:** The thing is we don't have much trust in the authorities. Everyone wants a bribe, the system is corrupt. That's why, that's why no…the thing is that they don't care, they don't care. They just want to see how they can personally benefit from the situation. That's all, what kind of benefit they can obtain. And the other thing that the people here are afraid of with reporting crimes is that somebody will come and take revenge on…the thing is that they [the criminals] find out. Right there, when you go fill out the paperwork, they know who is reporting, they make you fill out papers, they take your statement, they take a statement from the victim, but the victim leaves his information and then it's a matter of who you are reporting to. Let's see your ID, let's see your address, let's see your…and they know. That's why, many people out of fear of retribution don't report crimes. But it's important to report, we want justice, we want them to get rid of those people…it's possible only through reporting, only through reporting do they know. On that occasion, it's true that I had the obligation to report, since I had seen the events. What I saw, what I knew. Eh, well and I did tell them what I saw and what happened, it's just that I didn't say who did it….that client was a friend of mine and the truth is that it…it was pleasant, he killed the criminals, eh? He killed them. And that is what we want, for them to free us of so many…of so many people of that sort.

Note how Miguel justifies his reasons for not reporting crimes in ways that blur the lines

between criminals and authorities. In his account, the voices of the authorities appear: "*let's see your ID, let's see your address…*", and are followed immediately with the statement "*and they know*." This ambiguous "they" refers to the criminals, to those who ostensibly should be revealed by the process of reporting, but who instead are able to find out information about the person who would report, who is obligated to leave personal information—ID, address. The victim is rendered visible and vulnerable in Miguel's account, presumably because such personal information isn't safe with the authorities. Thus while "fear of the aggressor" is lumped into the category of "other reasons" for not reporting crime in the Mexican state's own statistics (see INEGI 2015), for Miguel this fear is a consequence of the porous line between criminals and the state.

Still, Miguel ends up coming around to expressing the normative expectation of reporting as desirable, even virtuous, and he couches his reasons for *not* reporting in the diffuse language of the third person: *"And the other thing that the people here are afraid of with reporting crimes is that…"* Conceding—perhaps for my benefit— that "it's important to report" and that only through reporting can justice be achieved and crime be "known," Miguel implicates himself in the problematic lack of *cultural de la denuncia.* Strathern makes a point, writing about audit culture, that is broadly applicable to other areas where people are exhorted to report or otherwise render visible things that they know: "people both deploy, and are skeptical about deploying, visibility as a conduit for knowledge" (2000: 310). In Miguel's case, however, the case is reversed: supportive of the idea of visibility as a conduit for knowledge, he nevertheless doesn't deploy it.

Miguel was hardly alone in simultaneously distancing himself (through the third person)

and implicating himself in the failure to report crime. In public meetings and discussions, the ideology of *la cultura de la denuncia* is upheld through indirect and formal speech, in which the threat of the wrong thing made visible is only alluded to, or is attributed to other speakers. What this means is that while the idea that one will suffer consequences for speaking up circulates widely, it does so as a rumor, as a form of general knowledge which nonetheless is always dislocated from any particular place, person, or destination, which belongs to nobody (Rafael 1991; Das 2007). This doesn't mean, of course, that nobody experiences retribution for speaking out against power, but rather that insofar as these stories circulate publicly as rumors, rather than through gossip, they are unlikely to be attributed to anybody in particular.

Claudio Lomnitz (1995) has argued that in Mexico, rumor and ritual are key spaces of expression due to a national public sphere which lacks widespread respectability. But as Rihan Yeh (2012), following this, argues, while the "bourgeois-type" public sphere may be a fetish, non-existent anywhere in practice, it exerts a powerful hold over the middle-class imaginary, where it vies, but always unevenly, with the "hearsay public." As Yeh demonstrates, appeals to knowledge which rely on hearsay, on the *se dice* ("it is said") public, are always suspect, indexical of compromised forms of belonging and subjectivity. This provides insight into the reason that the common knowledge about the risks of reporting crime are so difficult to articulate in La Central without running the risk of being associated with such compromised publics.

Take this conversation between a group of merchants who had gathered over lunch to discuss the issue of repaving the floors of the market. As often happened, the conversation drifted to the subject of robberies, and the lack of law enforcement.

Pedro: it's true, it's true, there is so much crime nowadays, but they don't want to

report, and maybe with the kinds of authorities we have here, if they don't report, they wash themselves of responsibility—

Margarita: —how can we detain them?

P: The whole machinery can't start working until somebody comes forward to report—

Carlos: But if nobody wants to make a statement it's—

P: —No no it's true, very true—

Teresa: And what if we accompanied them in making a statement?

P: And with the security cameras we have, you can se their faces clearly. But it's necessary to have somebody in front of the authorities who accuses. So with respect to security—

Carlos: — an officer told me that there were ten of them—

M: I don't know if anybody saw how they left [the market]—

P: Yes, yes, and they're looking for them now, they are going to see if they have a record and if they do—

T: —But people don't report because they're afraid of threats, no?

C: That's a problem that we're been having for many years now.

T: Yes, and if you had an office where you can go and file a report and they treated you well and you knew everything would turn out well, the people would go, but as it is it's just a nest of corruption.

P: They don't have faith in them, period.

In this dialogue, the problem of non-reporting is always discussed as a problem of *others*,

of those who don't report. In this way, each of the participants in the conversation distances themselves from those who fail to fulfill their civic responsibility. Together, they construct the image of the untrusting merchant who fails to report crime. But they do so by voicing the reasons that those others have for not reporting: "They're afraid of threats, no?" and "They don't have faith in them." The repetition of these shorthands serves both to circulate the narrative which lies behind them (those who report will suffer reprisals), and to construct the authorities as less than trustworthy. There are thus two groups of others against which these merchants position themselves: the corrupted authorities, and the non-reporting merchants. In their accounts, both of these groups are implicated in the lack of security in the market.

The merchants who thus try to make sense of *others*, and in the process redeem themselves—as neither the corrupted officials, nor the non-reporting subject—are collectively enacting a form of national belonging, performing their citizenship, through the self-protective language of "they", of reporting. This protection, however, is incomplete, for in simply alluding to the risks of revelation through articulating them, merchants open themselves up to the allegation that they are part of the crisis of information which only reporting can solve, that they are spreading rumors. In a paper attending to the metapragmatics of evidentiary frames such as "rumor" and "gossip" in Latino migrant communities in Israel, Alejdandro Paz (2009) argues that such labels—signaling that a form of communication comes from non-specified sources, and is of dubious trustworthiness—map onto particular speech communities. Latinos come to be associated with "gossip," a devalued and less trusted form of discourse than that of the Israeli public sphere. In La Central, these evidentiary frames are less associated with a particular speech community than with a stigmatized public, but their power in interactions is no less potent (Yeh

2012).

In the meeting between Major Lorenzo and the merchants with which I opened this chapter, after the major asked those assembled to raise their hands if they had gone to file a denuncia, scolding them collectively for their failure to do so, a female merchant, Teresa, attempted to provide the explanation that people were afraid to report.

"The thing is, people are afraid and that's why they don't report," she said. No sooner had she spoken than Paco, a young man with an air of cool success and fine clothing, stood up to speak.

"It's the problem of the urban legend," he said. "People have this idea that if they go report anything somebody will come and take revenge against them, which is absurd. I went a few months ago to report the criminals when they robbed our *bodega*, and it was fine, everything was perfectly fine. Did it take a few hours of my afternoon? Yes, yes. But it's our responsibility, and furthermore it's the only way to—"

He got cut off by a heavily made-up lawyer from the prosecutor's office, eager to weigh in. "Exactly. We can't start confusing these thieves with organized criminals, who really are dangerous. Who, exactly, is going to exact revenge? The families of these rats are little old ladies, not *narcos*. But the fact is that all criminals feed off of these kinds of urban legends. Our fear is their biggest weapon, so I congratulate your comrade here because *la denuncia* is the way to a changed society."

After this exchange, the female merchant, Teresa, was quiet and looked slightly uncomfortable. In failing to raise her hand and recount her story of successfully reporting a crime, she had inadvertently allied herself, discursively speaking, with those non-reporters whose

reasons she voiced. In so doing, she became part of the "problem of the urban legend," as Paco and the prosecutor implied. As a disseminator of fear, Teresa became an accessory to precisely the criminality which she tried to position herself against.

Protection through appropriation

There is another reality, then, which hides behind the idea of the deficient *cultura de la denuncia*. It is this: the problem is not of a cultural deficit, a lack of customs, but rather it is a political problem of differential access to power, and to the ability to speak. To be able to effectively make one's voice heard in the "proper" channels, one needs to have a connection of some sort, an intermediary to guide one through the process of reporting, or to simply circumvent the process through somebody on the inside, thus preserving the illusion of doing things procedurally correctly. This is the basis of the systems of patronage and clientelism that lie at the heart of Mexican political life, and also of the fantasies and speculations surrounding it (Wolf 1977; Lomnitz 2005; Nuijten 2004, 2003). Often, this form of intermediarism, and its relationship to forms of clientelism, is lost on those who take advantage of it. Scholars have traced how both middle-class and poor Mexicans appropriate the police in different ways in order to accomplish their ends (Leal 2007, 2015; Muller 2014). In spite of their reliance on connections within lower and higher rungs of law enforcement, middle-classes often imagine themselves as law-abiding subjects in opposition to the unruly masses who engage in clientelistic practices, and index a corrupted form of citizenship (Leal 2015; Yeh 2012.).

The Maestra Margarita is a well-connected woman, one of those who dismisses the stories of infiltrated authorities as pernicious rumors. A psychologist by training, she worked for

years in HR in a large bank before coming to La Central to help her ailing mother with the family business after her father died. While Margarita's parents were themselves working-class, first-generation immigrants to Mexico City from Aguascalientes, her light skin and education allow her to pass as a well-off urbanite. Margarita is close to many of the administrative workers in the market, and she has an easy rapport and air with them based on their shared habitus of the Mexico City white-collar middle-class. Like other merchants who are involved in the top levels of UNCOFYL, Margarita has the private telephone number of the police chief, the head of *normatividad* (regulatory compliance), and other authorities. When a robbery occurred in her bodega, she quickly sent a WhatsApp message to the closed group that she administers of merchants, and called General Castañeda to tell him what happened. Within minutes, he had gotten in touch with investigative police from the borough office, and had placed a call to his colleagues there informing them that Margarita would be coming later in the day to fill out some forms. Unsurprisingly, Margarita feels comfortable reporting crime. Perhaps also unsurprisingly Margarita doesn't see herself as doing anything other than simply *reporting*. Like Paco, Margarita views *la denuncia* as an obligation which she is proud to fulfill, and is critical of those who fail to do so.

Successfully denouncing, publicly and non-anonymously, is a marker of one's proximity to power, and in turn constitutes the speaker as a particular kind of person—the kind of person who denounces, who isn't problematically silent. While Teresa might allude to the risks of revelation with her suggestion that "people are afraid, and that's why they don't report," her attempts are ultimately unsuccessful since they can be labeled as a form of rumor, the "urban legend." Unable or unwilling to take the risk of herself supporting the claim with personal

testimony, Teresa is reduced to what Yeh (2012) calls the "hearsay public." This form of belonging thus serves a protective function while also identifying the speaker as part of a problematic communicative public. When Paco stood up and indirectly called out Teresa's account as an "urban legend," offering testimony to debunk her implicit claims, he performed the role (befitting his social standing as a moneyed, white Mexican man) of the kind of person who speaks up, who denounces. The prosecutor acknowledged his efforts, and the form of citizenship which he was enacting.

The authorities are not unaware of the importance of personalistic ties in creating a sense of trust in the authorities. The police chief, General Castañeda would often exhort the merchants to have faith in the police. "We are here, working for you!" he was known to exclaim, pointing emphatically to a "La Central" pin that he wore prominently on his lapel. In La Central, the authorities have undertaken two principal strategies to try to combat the underreporting of crime. The first of these is the dissemination of personal contact information on the part of law enforcement authorities, such as General Castañeda. Frequently, he would dole out his phone number in meetings at UNCOFYL, a strategy which I witnessed the borough prosecutor and several other administrators do on separate occasions when somebody complained about specific problems, such as lack of police presence in their section of the market, lack of water, or slow response time to their complaints. This sort of effort at community-centered policing has become a standard strategy in Mexico City, but based on my observations at La Central, one which is unlikely to have a lasting effect in increasing confidence in authorities.

"Here, I'm giving you my personal cell phone number. Call me, call me, whatever hour of the night. Get me in trouble with my wife, I don't mind. I'm here to serve you." General

Castañeda commented one day to a female merchant who complained that the police officer on her aisle was rarely in his position. Scrawling his number on the back of a business card, he told everyone present at the meeting that he was always available, but that it was up to them to contact him because without their information he couldn't do anything. "Just ask Gloria," he said, gesturing to another woman seated near him. "She called me when some suspicious types were hanging around, and we sent some people over right away, didn't we?" Gloria nodded.

At first, it might seem like this strategy, which recognizes that those who are connected are able to safely and successfully report to the state—would be successful. Yet in practice, the value of this particular strategy depends on who makes the call. Gloria, like Maestra Margarita, shares the middle-class habitus of the General, Major, and other administrators to whom they turn with problems. They appear as trustworthy, and their grievances are addressed accordingly. Other merchants, however, report having little success in their attempts to reach out to these same figures. Often the authorities themselves are skeptical of the merchants, interrogating them about what they have done to bring the problem they report upon themselves. One day, for example, the Major came to a meeting with a story about a merchant who had gone to one of the banks inside of La Central to take out 90,000 pesos (approximately $7,000), and subsequently reported having been robbed on his way out of the bank. The punch line here was that the bank's security cameras clearly showed the merchant successfully completing his transaction and leaving the bank undisturbed, contrary to his claim.

In conversation, the Major confirmed that the merchants were not to be trusted. They expect protection while shirking any responsibility, and they when they do report robberies, there is never any way to prove that they lost the amount they claim to have lost because so many

transactions are in cash. Who knows if the "robbers" are actually friends, compatriots, collaborators, or criminals. Many of the robberies that actually do get reported, he confided, are probably self-robberies, done so that people can collect insurance money and keep what they earned too. With this sort of attitude on the part of the head of security in the market, the merchants' reluctance to report crimes takes on a further meaning, since those who do report may be suspicious precisely because they do *not* fear reprisals enough, unless they have previously established closer relations with one of the authorities and can be vouched for as trustworthy.

The difficulty of actually making use of a private number was revealed one day when two medium-wholesalers, a married couple, arrived at an UNCOFYL meeting one day. Dressed in track suits and the ubiquitous *babero* aprons of workers in La Central, they were immediately marked as different from the more consciously middle-class, administrative appearance of other merchants when they attended the meetings, who would generally come in sweatshirts and jeans, or even jackets and khaki pants. Clearly upset, the couple explained that they had been told to come to the meeting by some friends, because they were having problems with a gang of young men who were coming to their *bodega* every day, demanding "a cooperation"—a bit of money. At first, they explained, they would give them some pesos to get rid of them, but lately they had taken to coming more frequently and demanding more and more money. When they tried to refuse the "cooperation," the men started threatening them, getting into a fight with one of their employees and ransacking some of their produce stores before running away, promising to come back the next day. They had tried to talk to the police officer on their aisle to little avail, and so wanted to appeal directly to the higher ups for help.

At first, it seemed to be going well. General Castañeda gave them his phone number, and the speech about how they could call him anytime, stop by his office for breakfast and conversation, his door was always open. But then he started asking them if they had actually filed a formal accusation at the borough office. Without that, he said, he would be delighted to talk, but nothing could *really* be done until they reported a crime. "We have to work together," he said. "You do your part, we do ours. We have to trust each other. So please, I encourage you to make sure that you report these troubles that you are having." Other merchants started agreeing with the General, emphasizing how security was "everyone's responsibility," and encouraging the couple to go to the borough office. Visibly unconvinced, they thanked the General and quietly left even as the meeting continued. Their efforts to solicit the personal help of authorities was unsuccessful, but even when attempts to appropriate the help of authorities in navigating the bureaucracy of reporting and policing is successful—as in the case of Margarita—it serves to legitimate those participants in the interaction as good citizens who report and trustworthy officials respectively, while undermining the faith in the system as a whole.

A second effort that has been undertaken in La Central, and elsewhere in Mexico, is a campaign to allow for anonymity when reporting crime. This takes multiple forms—from anonymous hotlines where corruption can be reported, to the App for smartphones *Mi Policia*, where anonymous complaints can be registered, to lobbying to protect identities of those who file *denuncias*. In La Central, UNCOFYL was spearheading a campaign to allow merchants to list the association's address rather than their own— recognizing the fear of (mis)revelation—but, as I will argue, is largely unsuccessful for two reasons: First, it fails to account for the fact that only those who *lack* social connection would have to make use of it in the first place. Second,

it requires confidence in an intermediary rather than in the system.

Merchants who want to file a *denuncia* for a crime committed in La Central need to go to the borough office for Iztapalapa to do so. Iztapalapa is one of Mexico City's largest, poorest, and most dangerous boroughs, and its public security offices are daunting spaces. For the majority of merchants, Iztapalapa is menacing and unfamiliar territory. While many of the market's migrant laborers and poor workers hail from the surrounding neighborhood, wholesale merchants overwhelmingly live in more middle-class enclaves and commute to the market in private vehicles. "It's not for nothing that they call it Iztapa*lacra*," remarked one of my informants one day, *lacra* being slang for criminal. According to many merchants, having to go to "out" to Iztapalapa is a major disincentive for reporting, and they have little confidence in the borough bureaucracy. For UNCOFYL, accordingly, one of the major goals in their negotiations with the administration is to create a system by which merchants can file reports within the market itself, where they are familiar with the bureaucracy, and to allow them to file reports anonymously, leaving the association's name and address as the accusing party, instead of their own personal information.

This solution is met with resistance by the borough, which argues that it simply doesn't have the jurisdictional authority and manpower to create a separate reporting system within La Central, and which insists that individual information is necessary for reporting processes to be in compliance with the law. Even if they were to introduce UNCOFYL as the intermediary, however, I believe that it would be unlikely to work for the simple reason that it is *connections* to trustworthy authorities rather than *anonymity* which merchants perceive as being most protective. That is, they feel most secure not when they are seen by *nobody*, but rather when they are

recognized by a *somebody* who can ensure they will be treated well and protected in the course of their attempt to denounce criminality either to or about the authorities. This supports Lomnitz's observation that in Mexico, as a consequence of the national public sphere never having achieved widespread legitimacy because of too many voices being excluded from it, "people always prefer a personal source of information ("gossip") to merely an official one" (1995: 36). Attempts to create anonymous reporting mechanisms therefore fail to address the anxiety which not having trustworthy connections inspires in citizens.

Further, having intermediaries—either in the form of an anonymous hotline, or in the form of a merchants' association—requires trust in those entities. Yet people are frequently suspicious of such bodies. UNCOFYL, for example, struggles to maintain an accurate register of its members contact information, since merchants frequently change their cell phone numbers, or refuse to give out their personal addresses and phone numbers, citing security concerns. Since extortion and kidnapping require perpetrators to have an intimate knowledge of the victims' personal contact information, remaining uncontactable is seen as a protective mechanism by many merchants. Many merchants change their telephone numbers with frequency, or at least claim to do so in order to avoid giving out information to unwelcome interlocutors. For the merchants' associations, this poses a problem organizationally since they cannot effectively reach out to people. But for the point that I am making here, the relevance is that it is difficult to imagine that UNCOFYL will be able to serve as a trustworthy intermediary if the organization itself isn't able to gain the confidences of its members enough to reach them when necessary.

Conclusion

In the strategic responsibilization of merchants for security, the authorities draw upon the fantasy of a legal system in which a smoothly oiled bureaucracy is lubricated by the democratic participation of all of its citizens. This fantasy, of course, appears absurd on one level to the merchants in Mexico, where the popular understanding of the state, and in particular its law enforcement branches, is that it is corrupt. Studies have shown that the police are among the least-trusted institutions in society in Mexico (Durand Ponte 2002), and even the abysmally low reporting statistics collected by the government itself admit as much (c.f. INEGI 2015). But other research has suggested that in spite of this, Mexicans, even poor people who are most likely to suffer at the hands of the state, retain faith, or at least hope, in its institutions (Nuijten 2004; Mūller 2012). What this chapter shows, then, is how this "horizon of legitimacy" (Mūller 2012) is produced in the everyday practices of revelation and concealment which mark the interactions between the authorities and merchants in La Central.

CONCLUSIONS

I wrote this dissertation with two primary goals in mind. The first was to develop an ethnographically grounded account of what has been described as a crisis of state sovereignty in Mexico through an approach that privileges local perceptions and understandings of the relationship between violence, power, and territorial control. Scholarship and journalistic accounts describe the fragmented nature of sovereignty in contemporary Mexico, in which organized criminals, privatized security companies, gangs, local municipalities, militias, or armed self-defense movements compete against each other and the state for territorial control and legitimacy. The landscape which they depict is a dizzying one in which the boundaries between criminal and authority, legitimate force and predatory violence, extortion and taxation are hard to parse analytically.

This inscrutability was perhaps best captured in a roundtable I attended at Columbia University on April 25, 2014 titled "What is happening in Michoacán?" in which visiting scholars from the Colegio de Michoacán talked about the violence that had erupted in their home state in recent months. The take-away from the interesting talk was that, in essence, nobody was entirely sure what was going on--whether the *autodefensas* were autonomous or a cover for a particular criminal entity, what the role of local authorities was--and that it was still too dangerous for researchers to really go in and find out. In the months and years following, of course, some of those scholars, among others, have returned to the field and given accounts of what fueled the violence in political, economic, historical, and social terms. As in other cycles of violence and tumult, uncertainty gave way to narratives, to accounts that provide partial and

competing ways of making sense of the misfortune and violence people have experienced.

While the 2014 outbreak of violence in Michoacán was a particular moment which has stabilized since, it served to exemplify the broader issue of fragmenting sovereignty in contemporary Mexico, and the epistemic and ontological uncertainties to which is gives rise not only for scholars, but for citizens of all stripes. My interlocutors in the field are, in a sense, very much like those scholars who were struggling to define and understand who wielded power, where, and how in Michoacán. As they navigate the everyday work of food commerce, including their own security, commercial transactions, negotiations with authorities and with workers, they come again and again to the question of *who* can guarantee order and how far that guarantee can extend. I call this on-going question, in which the source of order is not assumed but is a source of speculation, *sovereign uncertainty*. The different chapters of this dissertation show how this sense of uncertainty emerges in events both small and large, in places quite far away from the front lines of gun battles between cartels and soldiers, in places like La Central, and how they inform people's actions and interactions.

I have focused on the subjective dimensions of sovereignty rather than its ontological form because the former is what conditions people's behaviors and renders intelligible their interactions. Here I take a page from the book of criminology and sociological approaches to crime, which have long struggled with the paradox of perceptions versus incidence of crime. People's ways of imagining crime and perceiving risk are hardly reflections of their likelihood of victimization (the long standing paradox being that those who are more vulnerable are often less afraid) or of objective conditions of risk, since risk perception itself is culturally constructed

(Douglas 1992, Merry 1982). Gabriel Kessler (2007) has thus proposed disentangling the perception of danger, which he called "sense of insecurity" from indices of crime in order to more adequately consider the ways in which the former sensibility creates effects and takes shape on its own terms. So too, people's ways of imagining the limits and forms of power wielded by the state and by other sovereigns may bear little resemblance to the way in which power 'actually' operates, but the perceptions themselves are no less important for that reason, their effects no less impactful.

Each of the chapters of this dissertation describes what I see as one of the most consequential effects of sovereign uncertainty: a *resignification* of the familiar in the form of the proliferation of a generalized disposition of mistrust. This mistrust finds its articulation in the suspicion that criminal violence may lurk everywhere, even in long-standing and familiar practices, people, and networks. The familiar, in this context, becomes strange, and the strange threatening. Thus, routine delays may appear as evidence that criminal sovereigns and corrupt authorities are flexing their muscle (chapter two). Or, familiar routes of commerce and sociality may appear as infrastructures for spreading violence (chapter three). Employees may be perceived as potential links to criminal underworlds (chapter four), while street vending unions get described as mafias, and vending permits as evidence of corruption (chapter five). Even crime reports appear as potential technologies for criminal reconnaissance (chapter six). In this context, people see criminal violence as traveling laterally, colonizing familiar sites, objects and relationships and turning them into vectors of contagion.

Sovereign uncertainty, as the examples in each chapter show, is most often articulated as concerns about criminal violence and corruption. Crime, Sally Merry wrote in a study of urban insecurity in the US years ago, "serves as an idiom for expressing and legitimating fear of the

strange and the unknown" (1982, 14; see also Comaroff and Comaroff 2017). The same can be said of corruption, which has come in recent decades to be a primary way in which disorder is articulated not only in Mexico, but in many parts of the world (Muir 2015; Gupta 2012; Muir and Gupta 2018). In contemporary Mexico, discourses of crime and corruption are ubiquitous ways of explaining misfortune, and both point to the central question of fragmented sovereignty: wherein lies the boundary between authority, legitimacy, and violence? Even as authorities and analysts strive to differentiate between corruption, petty crime, political crime, and organized crime, my research shows how these different forms of disorder are linked together in the accounts of many Mexicans, in indexical chains that culminate in the figure of the organized criminal and the criminalized authority.

I have suggested that the food system is a particularly apt place to investigate fragmented sovereignty from below. In part this is because the materiality of the system itself--spread across territories, jurisdictions, involving multiple temporalities and perishability--makes it more sensitive and vulnerable to changes in regimes of extraction and boundary-making. Markets, moreover, even those that have all of the trappings of formality and officialdom, are themselves, as liberal theory has it, is defined by their externality to the state (Mitchell 1991). They are governed by a higher power, the very formulation of 'the invisible hand' invoking a sovereignty which is above the banal regulatory forces of the state. In practice, markets work by skirting the law and working the margins. Weber observed in writing on the difficulties of legally regulating economic spheres, "the inclination to forgo economic opportunity is obviously slight, unless circumvention of the formal law is strongly disapproved by social convention…" (in Moore 1973, 721). Building on this insight, Sally Falk Moore pointed out that markets are places in

which the “semi-autonomous” nature of the law is easily visible, where social practices based on other kinds of affinity and incentive develop and can be seen to impinge on and interact with the law. Chapters one, two, and three of the dissertation discuss how the history and materiality of La Central and the Mexican fresh food system more broadly have led to it being an economy marked by informality and illegality, in which information is difficult to come by, and secrecy is prized. I show how these characteristics, endemic to the market, come to be resignified as threatening in the current context.

To invert the order of this argument—markets are useful places to look to understand the relationship between authority, violence, and power—is to ask why looking at insecurity might be of interest to people who study food systems and markets. This brings me to the second primary goal of this dissertation, which is to provide an account of the way that perceptions of criminal violence affect the food system in Mexico, and to argue more broadly for the importance of considering how the "sense of insecurity" may shape food systems elsewhere.

In anthropology and beyond, studies of the effects of criminal violence and non-war armed conflict on food systems have been virtually non-existent. Early on in my research, I asked a couple of colleagues whose ethnographic work on power and politics in the Mexican food system I admired, about the fact that they made no mention at all of the way that crime and corruption play out in shaping the system. I was surprised since I realized rather quickly after beginning fieldwork that this was the topic which was literally on everyone's minds, and the subject of a great deal of concern. Both of these scholars responded that while there was indeed a great deal of rumor and gossip about organized crime, cartels, extortions, bribes, and violence in the communities and systems that they had studied, these things could never be verified or truly

observed without the sort of investigation that journalists, rather than anthropologists, should do. Insecurity fears resided in the realm of rumor and speculation, and so, while omnipresent, didn't make it into their ethnographies which strived to account for dynamics that were observable and verifiable.

This lacuna, while not necessarily always justified in such terms, strikes me as the norm in studies of food systems, where most of the focus on violence has been on the symbolic and economic variety (Holmes 2013; Mintz 2001; Grey 2013). The countryside the world around, after all, is a place of exploitation and deep inequality, with Mexico being no exception. Yet people, from lowly farmworkers to millionaire merchants and producers are affected by the sense of insecurity, and the decisions that they take and way that they conduct themselves are informed by this sense. Moreover, the food system, and indeed most any market, depends to some degree on informal negotiations and extra-legal accords, and is therefore based on relations of trust and predictability. Understanding how perceptions of insecurity and violence influence these spaces is in the interest to all of those concerned with securing a safe, just, well-regulated food system.

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