You Cannot be Here"
The Urban Poor and the Specter of the Indian in Neoliberal Mexico City

Alejandra Leal
CEIICH, UNAM

Introduction

Armando was a thirty two year old freelance film producer who moved to Mexico City’s historical center in early 2003 in the context of an urban renewal project to revitalize and repopulate the area. Before the initiative was launched in 2001, this was a no-go space for vast segments of the city’s inhabitants. Although it remained an important commercial hub and a tourist attraction, for many middle and upper middle-class residents of the city it had acquired the stigma of a chaotic and dangerous space: filled with street vendors who blocked entire streets and sold illegal commodities, plagued by petty crime, noise and pollution. Launched as a joint endeavor of the local government and civil society organizations, the urban renewal project promised to reverse this trend and to turn the symbolic heart of the nation into an orderly, safe and livable space.

The “rescue”, as the project came to be known locally, attracted the city’s young cultural elites. Ranging from highly affluent professionals of the creative industries (architects, designers, publicists) to struggling artists, the newcomers to the historical center were highly educated and in command of high concentrations of cultural capital. They viewed themselves as morally progressive, cultivated alternative lifestyles and aspired to transform and inhabit the area as a cosmopolitan urban space comparable to capitals across the global north, such as New York or London. They were also invested in liberal idioms of citizenship that included ideals of personal responsibility, legality, civility and tolerance.

Like many new residents, Armando was attracted to the historical center for the type of
urban experience that it offered him: vigorous, dense and socially mixed. Part of his fascination with the heterogeneity of the center fed on his daily encounters with what he called its “characters”, for example the shoeshine man outside his building, the street musician, or the corner shop clerk. But hand in hand with his attraction to these figures—romantic remnants of a supposedly bygone era—and to the possibility of developing a certain intimacy with them, Armando repeatedly stressed that the historical center ought be rescued from people who lacked basic rules of civility and denigrated public space. This is how he expressed it during an interview:

If you live here, you are bothered by noise, from the saxophonist that plays the same out-of-tune song ten times in a row, to the street book vendor screaming for hours on end, in the same block (…) They are also a cancer for the center, because they make noise and they don’t respect the law [Interview by author, September 27, 2006].

While Armando ostensibly differentiated between good and bad characters, they ultimately collapsed for him into an amorphous, disorderly mass that appeared as the antithesis of the liberal citizenship that he aspired to enact, and which was epitomized by the thousands of street vendors that daily crowded the center’s streets. Indeed, echoing widely circulating discourses in which informal workers appear as the embodiment of all the city’s problems—from chaos, to corruption, to criminality—Armando viewed street vendors in particular as the culprits of the historical center’s state of decay. He perceived them as dishonest, dirty, uncivil, dangerous and even criminal figures that had “kidnapped” public space. Unsurprisingly, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the “zero-tolerance” laws and policing strategies directed against informal street workers, which resulted in their complete removal from the center’s streets in the Fall of 2007.

Armando’s investment in a revitalized yet domesticated space, one that would retain its “urban charisma” (Hansen & Verkaaik 2009), its historical depth, density and dynamism, while
at the same time being cleansed of unwelcome uses and populations, recalls the seducing power of globally circulating imaginaries of the city as a “lifestyle” (Zukin 1998). It locates the “rescue” within forms of neoliberal urbanism that include the commodification and market-led redevelopment of marginalized urban areas, repackaged for the educated middle classes, and the criminalization and expulsion of vulnerable populations through harsh policing strategies (Becker & Muller 2013, Rao 2010). It also suggests that such forms of urbanism are experienced by its main consumers as the materialization of legitimate aspirations and desires, themselves informed by neoliberal sensibilities and values (Rose 1999). And yet, while undoubtedly located in the neoliberal present, Armando’s concerns about street vendors also express a long history of elite anxieties about the urban poor, which run at the heart of Mexico’s 20th century racialist and modernizing ideology of mestizaje (the purported racial and cultural mixing of native Indians and colonizing Spaniards). This ideology—which posited the Indian as a primitive other and, at the same time, as the very essence of the nation—has indeed permeated the ways in which Mexico’s cultural elites have perceived and represented the urban poor as menacing others.

In this article I examine the ways in which neoliberal discourses about urban (dis)order in Mexico City weave themselves into such longstanding racialized anxieties, while at the same time reconfiguring them. As several scholars have noted, the discourses and practices of urban redevelopment express class and race-based anxieties and espouse a distinctively bourgeois vision of the city (Feldman 2001). As they travel south, such visions inevitably become entwined with local configurations and histories of class differentiation (Swanson 2007). In Mexico City they not only enter a context of profound class inequality, but also rekindle elite fears of the urban poor, perceived as backward, atavistic and incommensurable figures that have prevented modernity from firmly taking root. As I will explain below, I refer to such racialized fears as the
“specter of the Indian”. My argument in what follows is twofold. First, I contend that in Mexico’s post-revolutionary period (roughly from 1920 to 1980) the supposedly integrated Indian remained in representations of the (urban) mestizo and especially the urban poor as a spectral presence indexing a series of negative attributes in the “national character” as well as a temporality of backwardness. As the internal other, such spectral presence allowed the elites to imagine themselves as modern subjects while at the same time it destabilized that very imagination. Secondly, I argue that while today the “specter of the Indian” continues to haunt elite representations of the urban poor—as exemplified in Armando’s and other new residents’ depictions of street vendors—significant changes have taken place as neoliberal ideologies and policies have become entrenched. While mestizaje—championed by the post-revolutionary regime—proposed the future integration of the urban poor under the tutelage of the state, in the neoliberal present they appear as mere residues, excluded from any possibility of a collective future.

The article engages with recent literature on the forms of urban governance that have given rise to what Neil Smith (1996) called the “revanchist city” as well as studies on the effects of the introduction of such forms of urbanism into cities of the global south (Harms 2013, Rao 2010). I side with scholars who have understood the new criminalization of the urban poor—a blueprint of urban redevelopment projects across the world—as a process linked to the dismantlement of the welfare state (as reality or as aspiration) and of the ideals of community and the collective good in which it was founded. From this perspective, the proliferation of anxiety-ridden discourses about urban disorder, which cast certain people and behaviors in public space as the opposite of decency and citizenship, and justify “zero tolerance” policing, correlates with the emergence of new forms of urban poverty brought about by neoliberal
economic and spatial restructurings. As Loic Wacquant would have it, there has been a transition from a social treatment to a penal treatment of poverty (2009). Indeed, in the context of renewed calls for personal responsibility and active citizenship, the urban poor are made invisible in two distinct ways: they are cleared from central urban areas to make way for new uses and populations and they are erased from public discourse. By focusing on the ways in which new residents like Armando experience the presence of street vendors, fantasize about their disappearance, and endorse harsh neoliberal urban policies in the name of the rule of law, this article discusses the effects of the dismantlement of a specific form of the 20th century welfare state—Mexico’s post-revolutionary regime. I argue that this regime construed the urban poor as racialized menacing others and, at the same time, as the beneficiaries of its particular (massified) form of social citizenship (Lomnitz 2001), a form of belonging that appears foreclosed in the present.

The argument is divided into two main parts. I begin with a brief discussion of the ideology and temporality of mestizaje, which was central to Mexico’s post-revolutionary state’s promises of equality and modernization. I continue with a brief reading of one of the most iconic and widely read studies of the country’s “national character”, Samuel Ramos’s 1934 Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico, which exemplifies how the specter of the Indian has haunted elite representations of the urban poor. In the second section of the article I return to Mexico City’s historical center, where I analyze how such longstanding anxieties continue to inform new residents’ perceptions of street vendors. I argue that such anxieties merge with neoliberal discourses, values and policies so that street vendors ultimately appear residual, a threatening force unfit for modern, democratic citizenship.
The Temporalities of the Mestizo

For most of the 20th century, the legitimacy of Mexico’s post-revolutionary state—the regime emerged from the debris of the war that engulfed the country from 1910 to 1920—was founded on its promises of a better future: a future not only of plenty but also of equality (Eiss 2002). To be sure, the regime kept a number of the revolution’s promises alive and extended social rights (from public education to social security) to previously excluded populations. And yet the promise of a less unequal country was deferred in the name of modernization. The urban poor were an ambivalent figure in this project. They were represented in official discourse as the triumphant revolutionary pueblo1 and as the rightful beneficiaries of the state’s redistributive policies. At the same time, they were viewed as primitive, backward and violent and thus as obstacles on the path to modernization. Nowhere was this ambivalence more apparent than in the figure of the mestizo, the ideal national subject of the post-revolutionary state.

A category of identification that existed since colonial times to designate the offspring of Spanish and Indians, the mestizo was placed by post-revolutionary ideologues at the very center of Mexican nationalism and, inseparably, of Mexican history.2 As the national subject, the mestizo came to represent a racially unified, coherent and forward-looking nation, one that would be capable of standing its ground in the international field. Indeed, in the aftermath of the revolution, the ostensible inability of the Mexican nation to catch up with civilization remained a source of anxiety for the elites. At the center of this preoccupation was the “Indian problem”, which appeared as an enduring challenge to national integration and modernization (Knight 1990). After the revolution’s bloodshed, Indians also stood as a reminder of the ever-latent threat of popular violence (Buffington 2000).
It was the anthropologist Manuel Gamio, one of the main architects of post-revolutionary nationalism and the ideology of *mestizaje*, who advocated the revalorization of living Indians as a constitutive part of the nation. But the “Indian” that entered the national equation was an ambivalent figure, owing to nineteenth century scientific racist views and colonial imaginaries alike. He was at certain moments construed as belonging to an inherently inferior, primitive and culturally and morally degraded race and at others as dignified and pure. He was “incommensurably other,” the past that prevented progress, and at once the embodiment of Mexico’s essence (Poole 2004: 37-38).

The “Indian” thus reflected the anxieties of Mexico’s intellectual elites about their own spatial and temporal place in modernity, which they understood as essentially European-American, and hence foreign. Yet the foreign represented not only an ostensibly unachievable ideal but also a threat in the form of (European) colonialism and (American) expansionism. In fact, much like the Indian, the European foreign has had ambivalent connotations as simultaneously desired and dreaded in Mexico. For nineteenth century liberals, especially in the second half of the century, the threat of the foreign was to be domesticated by disavowing Mexico’s Indian elements and embracing its European roots (Lomnitz 2001). Post-revolutionary elites posited a similar domestication in the synthesis of the *mestizo*. The simultaneously dreaded and idealized Indian was thus displaced to the outside—forever the excluded other—and at the same time inscribed at the heart of the *mestizo* national subject, which remained constitutively split between conflicting temporalities. In other words, the Indian emerged as the quintessential racial and cultural other against which the contours of a modern national collective were drawn, while at the same time it continued to haunt *mestizo* aspirations to modernity (Bartra 1992: 77).
Without disavowing its racist content, some authors have argued that *mestizaje* must also be understood as the integrationist ideology of the Mexican welfare-state, that is to say, as part of a project that entailed the creation of state institutions charged with redeeming and educating the masses in order to turn them into full-fledged, rights-bearing citizens (Eiss 2010, Lomnitz 2001, Tenorio Trillo 2009). In this context, and as post-revolutionary nationalism became institutionalized, the Indian became the privileged domain of anthropology and of the modernizing institutions of the state. The difference between Indians and *mestizos* began to appear, in both public discourse and popular imagination, as natural, that is, as if the terms referred to two clearly distinct groups. A gap opened up between those working with or studying Indians, and those who reflected and wrote about the *mestizo*, which appeared as an essentially urban figure that had left behind his Indian condition. Yet the Indian remained in representations of the urban *mestizo* not as a sociological subject but as a spectral presence, a series of negative attributes in the national character that have haunted the nation’s aspirations to modernity. In other words, the racialist ideology of *mestizaje* permeated representations of the growing masses of the urban poor as primitive and morally deficient subjects, impermeable to modernity and, as I shall argue in what follows, incommensurable.

**The pelado, or the Indian in the Mestizo**

Among the numerous texts that reflected on the “national character” during the first half of the 20th century, Samuel Ramos’s *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico* [1934] (1962) stands out both in how well it captured elite anxieties about the presence Indian in the quintessentially urban *mestizo* and in how widely its ideas became popularized. The book was originally published in 1934, in the context of rapid urbanization and proliferation of the urban working
class.\textsuperscript{9} It claimed to be a psychological study of the “national soul” that sought to contribute to its transformation. In a nutshell, Ramos’ argument is that the Mexican exhibits a “feeling of inferiority” generated by the gap between illusion and reality, that is, between his desire to partake of universal culture (which the author describes as European) and a national reality of backwardness. Rather than discussing this argument in detail, my aim is to point to a series of passages that reveal the spectral presence of the Indian in the text as a diffuse but omnipresent other inscribed at the heart of the urban \textit{mestizo}.

There is a recurrent slippage throughout the text between Ramos’s insistence that he does not attribute a real inferiority to “the Mexican”—just a feeling of inferiority derived from the latter’s incapacity to acknowledge his own limitations—and his assertion of Mexico’s backwardness \textit{vis-à-vis} Europe:

Mexico at first found itself in the same relation to the civilized world as that of the child to his parents. It entered Western history at a time when a mature civilization already prevailed, something which an infantile spirit can only half understand. This disadvantageous circumstance induced the sense of inferiority that was aggravated by conquest, racial commingling \textit{(mestizaje)} and even the disproportionate magnitude of nature (Ramos 1962: 56).

For Ramos, then, the Mexican’s feeling of inferiority stems from the latter’s position in relation to universal civilization, on the one hand, and from the “mental constitution that history has bequeathed us” (Ibid: 17), which the author associates with infancy and barbarism, that is, with the Indian legacy, on the other. These are two forces in continuous tension that shape the national character. They are also two conflicting temporalities: the historical time of universal civilization and the permanence and immutability of the Indian. The latter, Ramos suggests, has left an indelible mark on the \textit{mestizo} as a mysterious force beyond its conscious will:

One supposes, of course, that the Indian has influenced the soul of the other Mexican group \cite{urban mestizos and whites}, because he has mixed his blood with theirs. But his social and spiritual influence is today reduced to the simple fact of his presence. He is
like a chorus that silently witnesses the drama of Mexican life. However, the restricted nature of his intervention does not mean that it is insignificant. The Indian is like those substances identified as “catalytic”, the mere presence of which provokes chemical reactions. Nothing Mexican is immune to this influence because the indigenous mass is like a dense atmosphere that envelops everything in the nation (Ibid: 64).

The Indian is, then, a passive but ubiquitous presence. He is not a historical subject, but a series of primitive traits that are constitutive of the national character. Thus *mestizo* Mexico cannot break free from its Indian element, which in Ramos appears as “a ghost within the Mexican” (Ibid. 65). The inexorable Indian is more forcefully expressed in the figure of the *pelado*, the stereotypically uncouth and violent lower class man of Mexico City, which for Ramos appears as “the most elemental and clearly defined expression of the national character” (Ibid: 58). Ramos describes the *pelado* as the “most vile category of social fauna” and as the embodiment of the “human rubbish from the great city” (Ibid: 59). Thus, while no longer an Indian, the *pelado* still suffers from the former’s negative traits, now exacerbated by life in the city. He is explosive, ill mannered, conceited and mistrustful: “an animal whose ferocious pantomimes are designed to terrify others” (Ibid.).

But while the specter of the Indian is particularly palpable in the *pelado*, according to Ramos it manifests itself in all social classes, albeit less crudely. By contrast with the *pelado*, the bourgeois has domesticated its Indian inside, but the latter can surface in moments of anger (Ibid: 68). The *pelado* thus appears as a primitive other, impermeable to modernity, and yet as the very essence of the national character. In this sense, Ramos partakes of a fundamental tension of Mexican nationalist discourses: the double construction of the *mestizo* as the social class of the urban poor that, like the Indian, appears as an incommensurable and threatening other, but also of the *mestizo* as a national subject that, as Claudio Lomnitz has written, “is dyed with Indianess” (Lomnitz 2001: 23).
While Ramos’s ideas about “the Mexican” have become discredited as bad scholarship, he continues to haunt (and sometimes to be cited as a source) pop and mass-culture reflections about the “Mexican soul”. Take, for example, a recent study written by public intellectual Jorge Castañeda which, originally published in English under the title *Mañana Forever? Mexico and the Mexicans*, presented itself as an attempt to debunk the myth of the national character, or to demonstrate the growing gap between that character and a presumed reality of gradual modernization. The book, however, ended up reproducing the same discourse that it criticized: ‘[T]he very national character that helped forge Mexico as a nation now dramatically hinders its search for a future and modernity” (2011: 11). But the specter of the Indian appears not only in explicit reflections about the national character. It reveals itself, for example, in laments about “the burden” that prevents Mexicans from becoming fully modern, or in complaints about the atavistic and backward Mexico that hinders the full potential of a different, progressive and future oriented one, which commonly appear in the press, on television and in quotidian conversations, often with reference to Mexico city’s lack of order and to “informal” street workers (Escalante Gonzalbo 2010).

**Neoliberal Residues**

While the specter of the Indian continues to make itself present in contemporary elite anxieties about the urban poor as symbols of the nation’s backwardness, an important transformation must also be noted. *Mestizaje* as an ideology that served to unify the national collective in the context of post-revolutionary nationalism has lost ground; the image of a cohesive and homogeneous nation can no longer disavow the country’s profound inequalities. As Mauricio Tenorio (2009) has argued, the social history of *mestizaje* was the history of the
welfare state, that is, of public health and education and social security. The post-revolutionary
state was inscribed within the twentieth century political horizon of social citizenship (Rose,
Barry & Osborne 1996). The state’s capacity to integrate different class interests into its
corporate structures as well as its social programs—from land redistribution or popular education
to social housing—made a mestizo national “we” viable in the post-revolutionary era. Thus
while the pelado stood for the urban rabble and the dreaded masses, he also represented el
pueblo as it emerged from the revolution and the utopian fantasies that it had unleashed. He
stood as the subject of a strong, corporatist and modernizing state, which would channel, civilize
and control him, while at the same time correcting persistent social imbalances and inequalities
(Knight, 1990). Through the tutelage of the post-revolutionary state the pelado would eventually
be able to domesticate his Indian impulses and become a fully-fledged modern subject (Lomnitz
2001: 74).

But starting in the 1980s—that is, in the context of Mexico’s turn to neoliberal policies
and the state’s attenuation and eventual renouncement of its revolutionary rhetoric—such a
model has gradually lost its viability (Escalante Gonzalbo 2006). Like other countries, Mexico
too began transitioning towards a neoliberal economic, political and social model in the early
1980s, triggered by the economic crisis of 1982. This included the implementation of free-
market principles, the opening of the economy to global capital and the redistribution of risks
and responsibilities from the state to society (Aitken, Craske, Jones & Stransfield 1996, Rose
1999). In Mexico City, neoliberal policies have entailed not only the proliferation of new forms
of precariousness and informality, but also a growing public obsession with (dis)order in the
city’s streets and a (re)criminalization of urban poverty (Becker & Muller 2013). It is in this
context that informal street work has proliferated in the historical center over the past decades
and that it has become the target of harsh policies implemented in the name of order and civility (Crossa 2009).

Like Ramos’ *pelados*, today’s urban masses are represented as the ultimate embodiment of the nation’s ills, from corruption or criminality to a lack of modern sensibilities and values. The crucial difference that has taken place is that, while post-revolutionary regimes founded their legitimacy upon the representation of the urban poor as redeemable subjects, today’s neoliberal governance renders them as an uncontainable, residual and threatening force. In the following sections I will analyze how the concerns that new residents of Mexico City’s historical center, with whom I conducted ethnographic research between January 2006 and April 2007, express about the urban poor are haunted by the specter of the Indian while at once betraying a new context of neoliberal sensibilities and values.

“A wonder abandoned in the midst of a pigsty”

In the summer of 2001, Mayor Andrés Manuel López Obrador and telecommunications mogul Carlos Slim announced a joint project to recuperate Mexico City’s historical center from disorder and illegality. As opposed to previous conservation-centered attempts at revitalization, this project was presented to the public as an integral rescue. According to its promoters in both the private sector and local government, the aim was not only to renovate monumental buildings and public squares, but also to reactivate the area’s economy and to transform it into a pleasant and safe space (Leal 2007). A number of fiscal incentives were introduced to attract private investors to revive the area’s housing market. Alongside the remodeling of streets and buildings, the local government introduced an ambitious security program that included a new police force, better trained, equipped and paid, and a sophisticated surveillance technology.
The discourse of rescue (an assemblage of expert reports, urban planning schemes, public declarations, press articles, artistic and cultural projects, and so forth) constructed the center as both a patrimonial space—the symbolic heart of the nation—and as a “problem space,” afflicted by poverty, disorder, illegality and criminality, and therefore as demanding intervention. The large presence of street vendors and other informal activities on the center’s streets was cited as the most pressing of the area’s problems. Consider, for example, an editorial by late writer Germán Dehesa in the national newspaper Reforma, published after the rescue initiative was publicly announced:

The Historical Center of Mexico City is the heart of the country. I say it without exaggerated localism. It is. It is a wonder abandoned in the midst of a pigsty. This is not right. There is not one well-bred inhabitant of Mexico City who does not want to recuperate, preserve, make green, beautify and love his or her city. You deliberate and then invite us. We will be there [July 5, 2001].

Without explicitly mentioning it, the editorial blamed street vendors for the historical center’s state of decay. In the humoristic tone that characterized Dehesa’s newspaper columns, he established a difference between “well-bred inhabitants of Mexico City”, those who valued the historical center as a patrimonial space and were willing to work to recover its lost grandeur, and others who had turned it into a “pigsty.” The specter of the Indian showed its face in how he posited an ostensibly irreducible difference between responsible citizens and unruly crowds, so many backward pelados.

In a similar fashion, new residents with whom I conducted my research often referred to street vendors and other informal workers who inhabited the center’s streets as the most urgent, and seemingly intractable, of the area’s afflictions. Vendors were particularly worrisome for the young professionals and artists who lived in the monumental heart of the historical center, an area known as the financial corridor. Composed of approximately thirty-five blocks between the
Alameda Park to the West and the center’s most important public square, the Zocalo, to the East—this area was entirely renovated during the first phase of the rescue project (2002-2006). Streets pavement was substituted with cobblestones and the wiring that dangled from lampposts was placed underground; sidewalks were widened and their surfaces remade. Several 19th and early 20th century buildings were restored for residential use, targeting young professionals like Armando, the publicist whom I mentioned above. A small number of brand-name clothing stores opened, as well as restaurants and bars catering to a young, affluent clientele of newcomers.

Street vendors were entirely removed from this area and relocated to surrounding streets. A strong police presence was supposed to prevent vendors from returning to the renovated area, but a number of them would intermittently set shop on the forbidden streets, arranging their merchandise on mats on the floor that could rapidly be removed when running away from the police. Such presence of street vendors—fleeting in the renovated area but massive in the surrounding streets—triggered anxieties among new residents about disorderly masses who would prevent the transformation of the historical center into a cosmopolitan urban space. New residents perceived and represented vendors as backward and amoral figures and depicted them with racist undertones as “a plague that keeps reproducing itself” or, casting them as disease, as a relentlessly spreading “cancer”. They also talked about vendors as “violent”, “rats” (slang for criminals), “thieves”, “corrupt”, “illegal”, “a nuisance”, “an unpleasant sight”, “barbarian invasions”, “a bomb on the brink of explosion” and as a contaminating element in the center’s streets.

Take, for example, Gabriela, an academic in her late twenties who after many years of living in the United States, where she pursued graduate studies, returned to Mexico City in 2005 and settled with her husband, a member of Mexico’s diplomatic corps, in an apartment they had
recently bought in the area. During an interview she expressed exasperation at the presence of street vendors outside her building and described them as follows:

I’m going to tell you what bothers me about street vendors -- the filth, I mean, the dirt, they are such pigs! I mean [cleanliness] is part of civility, isn’t it? I mean, why do they have to…? You have seen the tons of trash they leave behind, it is disgusting! Down here you cannot walk during the day, and besides they are dirty, I don’t understand why? Why isn’t there anyone forcing them to be cle… to not make things dirty? [Interview by author, December 14, 2006]

In talking about street vendors’ “dirtiness” as a marker of their lack of civility (and civilization), Gabriela echoed Ramos’ depictions of the pelado as retaining the negative traces of the Indian. She posited vendors as “others” whose mere presence contaminated the spaces they inhabited: “they make things dirty”. She not only voiced disgust at their physical presence—unclean bodies crowding the streets—but also at their stubborn permanence, expressing a feeling that, ultimately, no one would be able to prevail against them. In doing so, Gabriela rendered vendors not only as dirty but also as backward and yet immovable figures.

There was indeed a prevailing sense among new residents that the problem of street vendors in the historical center could never be resolved. They constantly expressed exasperation about the state’s inability to “recover” public space from them, despite its promise to do so. Feeling helpless, new residents sometimes fantasized about possible (and seemingly simple) solutions to the problem. Consider a meeting of a tenants association, presided by Armando, that brought together a number of new residents of the financial corridor. Set in a recently opened café, it was one of their regular weekly gatherings to discuss possible solutions to the quotidian problems new residents faced in the area.

As usual, very few people arrived. Present as always was Armando, who lived only a few blocks away. Gabriela, whom I mentioned above, was also in attendance. Finally, there was a new face at the meeting: Juan, a forty two year old Argentinean who worked as a freelance art-
director in advertising. Both his apartment and his studio, which he used primarily for photo
shootings, were located in an art-deco building on a busy pedestrian street nearby. The tone of
the conversation that morning expressed the usual sense of urgency that characterized
discussions of street vendors. Juan blamed the latter for causing changes in voltage at his studio
(vendors are known to illegally connect their stands to electricity poles), damaging his electronic
equipment. Armando complained that, because they often occupied entire sidewalks, walking
became an almost impossible and always unpleasant activity. Gabriela interjected by saying in a
sarcastic tone that the only solution was “to build an underground tunnel below the center and to
put them all down there”. “Or at least to hide them in the subway”, replied Juan, to general
laughter.

The pessimism that pervaded this and other, similar exchanges reflected a general
apprehension among new residents that street vendors would prevent the transformation of the
historical center into the cosmopolitan space they wished to inhabit. But it meant more than that.
The anxieties about street vendors that surfaced in everyday conversations among my informants
were haunted by the specter of the Indian: street vendors appeared as incommensurable,
menacing figures that, refusing to disappear (or at least to remain hidden underground, away
from view), would forever hinder the city’s and the nation’s move towards the future. But
despite confessing very low expectations, new residents often reported the presence of street
vendors to the police, sometimes leading to their temporary removal – always a welcomed result.
More importantly, through gestures such as reporting transgression, new residents performed a
type of citizenship that, in their own eyes, rendered them fundamentally different from street
vendors. Let me return to Armando to elaborate on this point. During the same interview quoted
above he narrated the story of an encounter between a female resident of his building and a
violent vendor who was offering his products right outside their home on a pedestrian street at
the heart of the renovated area:

A güerita\textsuperscript{13} neighbor of mine, with blue eyes, one day had the ingeniousness to tell a
street vendors who was standing in front of her house, right here outside, someone who
was selling pirate CDs, already camping with his family and all, right? So she tells him:
‘Hey, you know that you cannot be here, don’t you?’ And the vendor becomes
aggressive, starts telling her all things imaginable and more, really threatening. ‘What,
are you going to feed me, fucking…’ To the point where you have two options, to cry
and run for your life, or to confront him. And she did confront him, the woman. Very
brave! She called two police officers [Interview by author, September 27, 2006].

In the neighbor’s injunction to the street vendor: “you know that you cannot be here”,
there is no doubt an implicit reference to the law, which ostensibly forbids vendors from working
on the center’s streets. But, inseparable from such invocation, there is also a temporal
imagination at play. “You know that you cannot be here” posits a desired here and now in which
the historical center has been transformed into a cosmopolitan urban space: clean, orderly,
modern and inhabited by citizens like the concerned neighbor, citizens who report transgressions
to the police. In this temporal imagination the street vendor is projected onto a past that refuses
to disappear. The specter of the Indian thus haunts the entire anecdote. Not only is the vendor an
uncouth, violent and disrespectful figure (also marked by his phonotypical difference from the
blond and blue-eyed neighbor), but he is also represented as a lingering residue that prevents the
arrival of new residents to a desired (modern, civilized) present.

In the name of the rule of law

The law that Armando’s story implicitly invoked was the Civic Culture Act, a
controversial piece of legislation based on Rudolph Giuliani’s consultancy to the local
government.\textsuperscript{14} Enacted by Mexico City’s legislative body in 2004, the Civic Culture Act
penalizes street activities that obstruct freedom of movement on streets and sidewalks. Building
on the “broken windows” approach to policing that Giuliani’s report recommended, the
purported aim of the Civic Culture Act is to curb “antisocial” behaviors in public space, thus
linking such disparate “disorderly” activities as vending on the streets, informally watching over
cars, cleaning car windows at traffic lights, painting graffiti or engaging in street prostitution. Since its enactment it has served to justify the removal of street vendors from the historical
center’s streets (Meneses Reyes 2011).

Based on the ideas and principles applied in New York City, the Civic Culture Act
embeds the historical center’s “rescue” within neoliberal urban policies whose trademark is a
state that “retreats” as a social arbiter and service provider while at the same time heightening its
presence in the field of policing and control (Smith 2002). It captures as well the neoliberal (re)
criminalization of the urban poor that has been documented the world across, as well as the
propagation of globally circulating idioms about disorder and the rule of law (Comaroff &
Comaroff 2006). As exemplified in Armando’s anecdote above, new residents identified with
and were deeply invested in such idioms. They often invoked the Civic Culture Act as evidence
that street vendors did not belong on the historical center’s streets due to the illegality of their
presence. Indeed, besides using racialist idioms of incivility, backwardness, dirtiness, deficient
morality and violent dispositions, they portrayed street vendors as constitutively illegal subjects
unfit for democratic citizenship. Such representations interlaced neoliberal idioms of legality and
the rule of law, which new residents associated with a temporality of the modern, with the
racialized anxieties that I have called the specter of the Indian.

Take for example Carlos, a 32-year-old corporate executive who lived in Armando’s
building and worked for a company that had made substantive investment in the historical center,
especially in real estate. During an interview, he explained the problem of street vendors as follows:

The [leaders of street vendors] are there because they handle ten, fifty thousand, a hundred thousand people, for a vote, for a march, for whatever you want. … But they don’t have a vision for the city or for the country. They are seeing where to position themselves, how to position themselves, how to stay in power. And they also receive a lot of money. I mean, each vendor pays between a hundred and four hundred pesos per day to their leader … So, those who think (I don’t want to be malinchista¹⁶ or anything like that), but those who see the potential, the jobs that could be generated, all that we could offer [by a successful rescue project], are outside this little world. [He points to a piece of paper where he has drawn a map of where street vendors concentrate in the historical center]. So, [my own] vision of Mexico fights with this little world, but this little world is very strong [Interview by author, August 22, 2006].

Invoking the negative stereotypes about street vendors that I have already discussed, Carlos established a difference between a Mexico embedded in corruption and illegality and another group with a modern vision for the country and an orientation towards the future. Precisely in his clarification that he did not want to sound malinchista he associated this second group with the United States, as well as with order and the rule of law. At the same time, Carlos iterated a common trope in depictions of street vending, namely, that it is a highly lucrative (illegal and corrupt) business. His use of idioms of disorder and illegality effectively precluded any discussion about the extremely precarious working conditions that street vending entails, or the economic and social conditions in which such activities are embedded.

Writing about discourses of transparency in Thailand, Rosalind Morris has argued that “transparency” emerges where “class” disappears, where social inequalities are no longer thought about in relation to the structural imbalances of capitalism but rather in idioms of corruption and transparency. Such a seemingly minor change in terminology “indexes a radical transformation in how the social is conceived” (2004: 227). As Morris suggests, this shift in lexicon poses a temporal reversal. A comparable logic appears in neoliberal Mexico City with regards to idioms of disorder and illegality, which come to replace idioms of “class”, such as
references to inequality or labor rights. Here, illegality—or the absence of the rule of law—emerges as the *cause* of the city’s problems, for example, the proliferation of informal street activities. Woven into old anxieties about the urban poor, these idioms of order and legality construe street vendors as intrinsically illegal and thus as irredeemable figures with no place in the city’s desired future.

As evident in the preceding discussion, new residents’ perceptions of street vendors also expressed anxieties about their own status as modern subjects, which, as I discussed above, has been a longstanding obsession of Mexico’s elites (an obsession they have shared with other postcolonial elites). People like Gabriela, Carlos or Armando saw vendors as the antithesis of the lawful citizenship that they saw themselves as representing. But as it was the case in Ramos’s depiction of the *pelado*, the street vendor appeared in their narratives not only as a primitive other but also as the bearer of negative traits that afflict the nation as a whole. Consider the following reflection by Armando:

> In a way, [street vending] is disrespectful. 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. All Mexicans, in some way, carry it integrated within their chip, cheating and corruption [Interview by author, September 27, 2006].

Once again, Armando drew a distinction between those who try to contribute to society, on the one hand, and Mexican crookedness, on the other. He reiterated the stereotypes and prejudices of “the national character” that I have discussed in this article: the Mexican is constitutively crooked, corrupt, incapable of respecting the law, conceited and foolish. He has such characteristics “integrated in his chip”. Like in Ramos’ discussion of the *pelado*, Armando described Mexicans as if he did not partake of their negative attributes, that is, as if those were explained by the street vendors’ lower class status alone. But, again as with Ramos, these
negative qualities slid from the attributes of a specific class, of the unruly and menacing masses, to being an attribute of all Mexicans. Armando thus found himself part of the crowd that he feared. So while the racialized figure of the street vendor, reinterpreted through a local appropriation of global discourses about disorder and the rule of law, allowed new residents like Armando to imagine themselves as cosmopolitan subjects, it also destabilized their very claim to a modern subjectivity.

**Conclusion**

In this article I have argued that the urban renewal of Mexico City’s historical center bears the trademark of neoliberal urban processes documented across the world. It has entailed the transformation of an impoverished urban area into an appealing space for the educated middle classes and the eviction of some of its previous dwellers. Street vendors have become the target of laws and policing strategies aimed at removing them from the historical center’s streets. I have claimed that while firmly embedded in neoliberal discourses and practices this process also partakes of a long history of anxieties about the urban poor in Mexican nationalist discourses: at the core of the post-revolutionary ideology of mestizaje was a fundamental contradiction. While it expressed the elite’s desire to forge a modern nation through the integration and modernization of Indians, it also entailed the insertion of “primitive” time at the core of the national subject. This contradiction sieved into representations of the quintessentially urban mestizo as a primitive other and hence as an obstacle in the country’s path to modernity.

By attending to the ways in which globally circulating imaginaries of the urban weave into a particular history of class and racial differentiation, I have aimed to contribute to anthropological understandings of neoliberal forms of urban governance as emerging in specific
and localized configurations. I have argued that the racialized stereotypes expressed in Mexican nationalist texts from the early 20th century, such as Ramos’ *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*, including the depiction of the urban poor as primitive others, continue to appear in both elite and popular discourse in the present. The prevalence of such stereotypes is observable in the ways in which the new residents of the historical center interpreted their experiences and daily contact with street vendors. These representations fused longstanding elite anxieties about the urban poor as well as about Mexico’s (lack of) modernity with idioms of disorder and illegality, casting informal street workers as irredeemable and hence as not belonging in the present. I have thus proposed that the discourses and practices targeting street vendors should be understood as part of the history and gradual dismantlement of Mexico’s post-revolutionary regime, including the particular forms of social welfare and (massified) social citizenship that it promised to the urban poor.
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NOTES
Like its English translation, the concept of el pueblo refers to both the site of popular sovereignty and that which threatens the very order established in its name (the dangerous crowd).

There were, to be sure, multiple positions within what I’m conflating into the term post-revolutionary ideologues. Instead of elaborating a discussion of these different ideas my aim is to present a general description of two themes that traverse post-revolutionary preoccupations about the national subject, namely, the “Indian problem” and Mexico’s standing in the international scene.

Since colonial times a Creole (American born Spaniard) identity began to take shape around the glorification of pre-Columbian civilizations. By the 19th century this past had become a sort of “classical antiquity”, but it was not viewed as bearing any connection to living Indians. See: (Lopez Caballero 2008)

With this term I refer to a heterogeneous group of writers and scholars whose ideas, often disseminated through the press, contributed to shaping nationalist discourse (Lomnitz & Boyer 2005). Many intellectuals also produced and put in practice technical knowledge for government administration and bureaucracy. For a detailed study of Mexico’s intellectual elites in the 20th century see: (Camp 1985)

My use of the term European-American echoes Chakrabarty’s use of the term Europe in its “hyper real” sense, that is, as a figure of the imagination, the scene of the birth of the modern, whose geographical correlation remains somewhat indeterminate (2000).

Ana Maria Alonso argues that the racialized identities of Mexican elites cannot be reduced to “European” or “white,” as they have in turn been racialized as “non-European” in Europe and the United States (2004).

My approach to the Indian as a specter that haunts the nation draws on Derrida’s ideas about the specter not as an external element of a given social formation, but as constitutive of it. In this sense, the mestizo national subject is constitutively haunted by the specter of the Indian which, however, does not make the latter any less strange or threatening (1994).

Ramos is one of the foundational figures of a field known as studies of “lo mexicano”, composed of texts that share a preoccupation with explicating the “essence” of the “national [read, mestizo] soul”. His ideas influenced other widely known works, such as Octavio Paz’s The Labyrinth of Solitude. For a detailed discussion of this literature see: (Bartra 1992).

Between 1900 and 1940 the city’s population grew from 383,005 to more than one and a half million, the majority of which lived in overcrowded slums (Zamorano 2007).

For a discussion of the post-revolutionary state’s corporatist structure in Mexico City see: (Davis 1994).

In December 2006, Marcelo Ebrard, the new Mayor of Mexico City, created the Historical Center Authority. This new body has followed through with renovation works and has expanded them to other areas of the historic center, including the areas north and east of the Zocalo, which were excluded during the first phase.

When I started frequenting the association’s meetings and activities in February 2006, it was composed of a few individuals who served as unofficial liaisons with both government officials and private investors. Its stated mission was to ensure the implementation of the rescue, especially the removal of street vendors and the continuation of security measures. But most importantly, the association brought new residents together in myriad social events, from private parties to art exhibitions, and thus helped foster a sense of community among them.

Güero is a common form of address in public space that serves as mediating term between social groups. It denotes a class position of perceived affluence, and yet its meaning contains a strong racializing dimension. In this second, racialized sense, it could be translated as “white” or “fair skinned”.

With funding from Carlos Slim and other prominent businesspeople, Mexico City’s government hired Giuliani Partners, the private consultancy firm founded and owned by New York City’s ex-mayor, in October 2002 to provide advice on how to successfully reduce criminality in the city (Davis 2007).

The broken windows model of policing sustains that crime and disorder are intimately intertwined. Tolerating minor offenses and infractions creates the conditions for more serious crimes to occur. Thus, emphasis shifts from “fighting crime” to “keeping order” and to “policing everyday life.” Following this logic, the Civic Culture Act almost doubled the number of punishable “administrative infractions” involving loitering, soliciting and panhandling, and established harsher penalties ranging from fines to administrative arrests. For a critique of this model as implemented in New York see: (Feldman 2001, Smith 1998).

Someone who favors things and ideas that come from abroad, especially the United States.