

INTRODUCTION

What is it like to live in Cuauhtémoc, the so-called heart of the country? Unlike major trends in general research, the analysis of specific cases allows us to understand more broadly social logics that include both the individual and society. Based on this perspective, we present an approach to problems of everyday life faced by the inhabitants of the borough of Cuauhtémoc in Mexico City. This research gathered and analyzed the stories of three people who live in situations that are different yet the same insofar as they are inhabitants of the same place and at the same time. It is not necessarily the case that the borough of Cuauhtémoc, as the symbolic and political center of both the city and the country, represents a microcosm of dynamics that are more widespread in Mexico City or Mexico as a whole. Nevertheless, in this urban space there occur expressions of sociability that help to understand how the frameworks of coexistence are built and operate.

This research focuses on understanding, based on three empirical cases, how this coexistence comes about, and how and why people in

situations of conflict relate to each other. We are also interested in learning what is and what is not negotiated in these relationships, and what role is played by formal authorities. These concerns are all connected to the notion of social capital. At the time of writing this report, the borough of Cuauhtémoc is among the least safe in Mexico City. According to data from the capital's Attorney General's Office, the rate of high-impact crimes in the borough surpassed 550 per 100,000 inhabitants, the highest among the 16 boroughs that make up the city (Díaz, 2018). It was followed in this roll of infamy by Miguel Hidalgo, Venustiano Carranza, Benito Juárez and Iztapalapa with 502, 360.8, 343 and 331 high-impact crimes per 100,000 inhabitants, respectively. This figure is significant if we consider that Cuauhtémoc is not among the most densely populated boroughs (see Annexes 1, 3 and 4). However, the relatively low resident population is compensated for by the intense, transitive and dense character of the floating population, together with the complex social relations that occur in its streets. In other words, we seek to understand how the streets of Cuauhtémoc function in situations of conflict.

Three cases serve to guide this research (Julia, Lorena and Iván¹). This is a transversal exercises that makes it possible to compare three people who are apparently very different, but connected by the borough

¹ Names have been changed to respect privacy.

of Cuauhtémoc and by different dynamics. For this reason, we first present a reflection on the role of Cuauhtémoc and its characteristics, followed by the values and social capital of the borough. The investigation is accompanied by annexes which are available on the website of the Seminar on Peace and Violence. All this material is useful to understanding the importance of Cuauhtémoc in the context of Mexico City.

What does Cuauhtémoc represent and why does it matter?

The borough of Cuauhtémoc is frequently thought of as the heart of Mexico City and perhaps of the country, too. To a large extent this is true, since there is both historical weight and socio-demographic arguments to support this both romantic and compromising idea (see Annex 1). However, it is also a very small area in relation to the number of things that circulate through it: people, relations, money, communications, and many others. Cuauhtémoc is a borough of crowds: people go there without living there, build and create intensively, yet the space is qualitatively limited. (Quantitatively too, though this requires a study of its own.) As a result, there is an impact on the form, quality and intensity with which social relations take place here.

When both elements come together—the shortage of public space and the huge, recurring concurrence of residents, passers-by, visitors and in general itinerant people (the so-called floating population) the *breeding ground* becomes a special one. These people, in a myriad of ways, are related to each other in that limited public space. These relationships are defined by variable parameters that include the qualities of violence, discrimination, control, authority and legitimacy.² In this case, we treat the inhabitants the same as the residents, they are all itinerants because of the way in which their rootedness and constant presence in the area define their histories, scenarios, situations, relationships and reactions.

In Cuauhtémoc life is not homogeneous. Two people can live here just a few kilometers apart, and yet experience totally different forms of sociability and everyday life. It is not that they ignore each other, but that their social circuits rarely cross, even in their experience of relating to the government and the state. Nevertheless, they also live the same experience insofar as both individuals are subject to the same space, with all its historical, political, economic and social baggage, and therefore to the same dynamic: that of being the heart of the city, where space is limited and public space even more so. In summary, between the neighborhoods of Roma and La Lagunilla there are vast differences and

² There will be more on these issues in the following pages, particularly in the light of the cases that guide this research.

also correlations. How are we to distinguish them? The response points to social capital, to public space, to violence and to discrimination. It is a question of understanding that those who seem remote from each other, yet are near and experience a specific point of similarity: they live in Cuauhtémoc.

Returning to the issue of limited public space, we note how it both enables and detonates dynamics of violence and discrimination. These two attitudes are in turn the result of social relationships that occur (among other possibilities) in a small, but disputed, public space. In this sense, the relationship between this characteristic of public space and the emergence of violence and discrimination was detected. These spaces are fundamental for life in the city, since they permit and enable community, generate and orient social relations, construct a sense of belonging, and permit mobility when they are well designed. They also generate places for the government to interact with citizens, in the sense of public safety, institutional trust, legitimacy of the authorities, dissuasion toward disruptive conduct and providing solutions to conflict, all of which depend on the harmonization of public space suitable for the prevailing conditions.

In Cuauhtémoc, public space becomes a valid tool for the exploitation of capital. This opens up the possibility for certain private entities to take advantage of this space for profit, and in this attempt to

capitalize on it they privatize it, even if only informally. This action gives rise to disputes in a place like Cuauhtémoc, where defending rights is a relatively well-developed activity and where there are cases in which the defense of what is public is a reality. This generates tensions that give rise to violence and/or discrimination, as we will see below.

The heart of the city is not a place whose conflicts can be explained solely by overcrowding or the vast floating population. Everyday conflicts arise from the limited spaces of coexistence, the private bodies that dispute them and the inability of the authorities to harmonize the existence of these public spaces. Indeed, in the construction of these cases, at times the formal authorities are seen as just another party in the dispute, which therefore generates greater tension. In some cases, the formal authorities fail to play their role in these disputes, while in others they behave as organic, harmonious forms of government that do display practices aimed at reducing conflict or helping those suffering from such conflicts. The reduced and disputed public space is the first component to emerge from the findings of this research. The second is related to the form in which social capital exists and operates in Cuauhtémoc, and will be addressed next. These reflections provide a basis for understanding how and why public space is disputed, and what this dispute gives rise to.

Values and social capital in the borough of Cuauhtémoc

The idea of social capital has been explored with particular emphasis in the past thirty years. A number of social science disciplines have taken up this idea as a tool to explain, firstly, how social bonds are formed between agents. Secondly, the notion is employed to understand how and why the resulting social relations are used. Finally, the Colmex's Seminar on Peace and Violence has specialized in taking the debate further to evaluate the type of social capital in a sense that may be positive (associated with practices of respect for human rights and democratic values) or negative (related to consent to, permit or promote illegality, violence and authoritarian social relations). In the borough of Cuauhtémoc, social capital is operating as an intermediate mechanism for construction the legitimacy of authorities, though often these are not the legal authority.

According to a survey of social capital carried out in the borough in 2014 (see Annex 6), 48% of the population of Cuauhtémoc state they are open to the community organizing to deliver its own justice, although only 1 in 4 think there is any possibility of this happening. In addition, although this apparent openness to create community bonds, 3 in 4 say they would turn to a family member in case of needing immediate assistance. Only 0.3 % would turn to their neighbors. To this may be

added the fact that, while the inhabitants of Cuauhtémoc consider themselves to be compassionate people and opposed to discrimination, an enormous lack of trust towards the other prevails: 44.5 percent said that it is “very risky” to speak to people they don’t know in the street.

Given that the area is defined by the tensions arising from the characteristics of its public space and the predominant fragility or frugality of the formal authorities, the borough’s inhabitants do not see it as either unusual or unlikely to have recourse to their own forms of social capital when it comes to defending their rights, but also to exercise violence. In short, the construction of each individual’s narrative is not grounded in the absolute trust in a formal authority that is just, legitimate and reliable; and given the need to employ resources to defend themselves from aggression, social capital becomes a viable option instead of recurring to the authorities. In addition, due to the social, economic, educational and labor-related characteristics of the community in the borough, it is frequently the case that much of the social capital built up by the inhabitants does not come from Cuauhtémoc itself. In some cases, former colleagues from their work or educational backgrounds are the source of social capital, while in others they are relationships built up since childhood. The source of social capital may also be found crossing the street. By contrast with the data from the abovementioned survey, in our case studies family relationships do not

appear as the first not most important resource, which feeds a novel perspective on major trends in Cuauhtémoc.

Those interviewed reveal the need—and sometimes the custom—of having recourse to their social capital in cases of urgency. It is a simple decision in light of the pointlessness of not doing so. It is worth acknowledging that, in one of the cases, the Council for the Prevention and Elimination of Discrimination in Mexico City (Consejo para Prevenir y Eliminar la Discriminación de la Ciudad de México, COPRED) forms part of the social capital in question. Nevertheless, this seems to be an exception in the government apparatus, one in which other state institutions figure. It remains the norm that the authority is not always reliable and it is not a good idea to seek its help. After all, the de facto authorities are the ones who tend to control or exploit (also in a de facto manner) space that is supposedly public. As may be seen in Annexes 3 and 4 to this paper, conflict in Mexico City and in Cuauhtémoc in particular is being expressed in ever more violent crimes, including homicide. Part of the increase in this crime may be explained by the way disputes are resolved in public space, and how social capital enables or otherwise mechanisms of intermediation to resolve these conflicts.

Violence and discrimination alike stand out as instruments. They are resources that feed, nourish and open up a path for conflictive relationships that are invariably connected to a public space that is scarce

and disputed, whether real or imaginary. This instrumental function makes it possible to distinguish a new angle in both practices. In the case of violence, it appears as a radical but real and potential element, ready to hand when needed. The possibility arises of intensifying the dispute over scarce public space, where a private party may be seeking to privatize it, and this allows for violence to appear.

The rational use of violence is directly connected to the disputes that arise. However, it appears as a radical measure. By contrast, discrimination does not seem to be so extreme but rather an everyday occurrence, part and parcel of narratives about spatial disputes, although almost always implicitly rather than explicitly. Here an interesting paradox arises. In strict terms where rights are lacking (see Annex 2 on the concept of discrimination), the negation of public space is a veiled form of discrimination that people do not tend to be aware of, and as such do not denounce. In the chain of conflicts that arise, it is essential to observe the few options there are for resolving problems peacefully, together with the fact that the authorities fail to take the lead or attempt to mediate a solution.

Finally, we can say that on the basis of exploiting their social capital, the three individuals interviewed have managed to achieve and maintain a moral authority that allows them to relate to the hierarchy. This relationship functions as a defense mechanism. It is worth

emphasizing that the formal authorities appear perhaps as an alternative among the forms of social capital but not as the first, let alone the first port of call when help is required.

Who controls and regulates public space in Cuauhtémoc?

In Mexico City public space is one of the principal sites of conflict. This not only refers to the area that spatially contains the conflict, but also enables it, motivates it and even gives it meaning. According to the most recent National Survey of Urban Public Security (INEGI, 2018), 40 % of the population over the age of 18 had experienced at least one conflict or confrontation in their daily lives over the three months prior to the survey. The most frequent types of conflict mentioned in the survey are related to public space and coexistence, including: noise (13.5 %); trash thrown out or burned by neighbors (12.7 %); parking issues (10.7 %) and conflicts relating to public or private transport (8.7 %). Additionally, the survey includes references to other conflicts associated with public space such as harassment by drunks, drug addicts or gangs (6.8 %); problems with public security forces (5.7 %) or street vendors (2.9 %).

In the cases analyzed by this research, three different yet similar spaces are presented. Tepito, Tabacalera and Condesa may be

distinguished from countless viewpoints; that may be the easiest task of all. Our work consists, by contrast, of finding the similarities. The first is the most obvious but perhaps the most important: they are all located in the borough of Cuauhtémoc. This is not merely a banal affirmation or cartographic happenstance, and does not arise from the artificial demarcation of the borough, which automatically creates a shared space. To the contrary, it constructs this sense of community that is established practices, specific sociabilities and characteristics of the space. In this case, it refers to those characteristics associated with the use and abuse of public space, to the form in which social capital operates, with a particular interest in the violence and discrimination that arises from these potential tensions.

Returning to the social capital survey cited above, 70.3 % of those surveyed in Cuauhtémoc acknowledged in 2014 that public space is where violent incidents occur. This intuition is accurate, since although sources do not provide precise data, police records of complaints filed are dominated by robberies and other aggressions in the street (not always associated with criminal activities). More precise data is needed, but public opinion guides us for the purposes of this investigation. We may add that the same survey reveals that only 2.2 % of respondents said that security in parks and public spaces is “very good” (see Annex 6). At bottom lies the tension found in the questions: Who controls public

space? How is it regulated? The answers to these questions show how public these spaces really are, and in consequence how much the right to public space has been used in Cuauhtémoc.

The cases we present reveal that public space is disputed with violence and/or discrimination. It is a defensive and aggressive measure in the face of lack of definition. Both in places where gentrification is occurring, and on “dangerous” corners, there is always a component of discrimination that permits some to be present there while others are not. In both cases there are codes that reflect “who is in charge there” and how the power relations are structured in this micro-space, which in reality is broader. Discrimination establishes a kind of compass in people that encourages or inhibits them to move through a space or not. Very often, if the codes are not known this fosters fear, resentment and other forms of prejudice that feed discrimination. Sometimes, a person’s own knowledge of the codes is what nourishes the same phenomenon. A constant factor is that the authorities responsible for public safety are just another actor disputing control of these spaces. They are not a definitive authority in terms of either control or regulation, but act to dissuade potential conflicts.