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**A CULTURE OF CONTESTATION  
EMERGING AGENCIES AGAINST URBAN SIMULACRA  
OF THE NEOLIBERAL STATE IN MEXICO CITY**

**HEIDI SOHN**

## **A CULTURE OF CONTESTATION**

### **Emerging agencies against urban simulacra of the neoliberal state in Mexico City**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This paper considers recent theories that claim that contemporary neoliberalism, more than the hegemonic free market economic doctrine of global capitalism, is one of the expression of a *political* project that enforces the rise of authoritarian, repressive or 'monstrous' forms of state power based on the militarization of social life and the propagation of a 'culture of violence'. It claims that this form of violence deeply affects the psyche and structures of feeling of society, permeating into mainstream rhetoric and critical discourse as well. The repercussions for meaningful thought and action are legion, as these discursive critiques trump the productive and creative potential of collective and social agencies of resistance.

Using Michel Foucault's analysis of power-resistance and his formulation of apparatuses as an entry-point to the notions of 'assemblage', 'agency' and 'affect', which today are gaining attention in the humanities, the social sciences and human geography, the paper frames the methodological possibilities of instilling dissent and contestation with new lines of inquiry. It argues that contemporary urban social movements -in all their differentiation- may be read as a global agential assemblage infused with intense affectivity (desire) that affords the conditions of possibility for the emergence of a new 'culture of contestation' against the prevailing 'culture of violence' imposed by advanced neoliberalism.

Using the case of Mexico, where in the past two decades the signs of a so-called neoliberal 'necro-state' have become too obvious to ignore, the paper attempts to trace an affective-agential line between the national social mobilization against the prevailing political culture of violence, and more modest forms of local, urban social dissent against the undemocratic expressions of the neoliberal state via the announcement of privately-exploited urban mega-projects that simulate social, public or collective interest. The affective intensities in these agential assemblages of dissent are intimately and relationally tied to their inherent power of contestation.

**KEYWORDS:** neoliberal necro-states, urban social movements, power-relations, affective agential assemblages, 'cultures of contestation'.

## **A CULTURE OF CONTESTATION**

### **Emerging Agencies Against Urban Simulacra of the Neoliberal State in Mexico City**

#### **1.1 Neoliberal necro-states and the importance of contestation: from a Culture of Violence to a Culture of Contestation**

*“Imperial policies that promote aggression all across the globe are now matched by increasing levels of lawlessness and state repression, which mutually feed each other. On the home front, civil society is degenerating into a military organization, a space of lawlessness and warlike practices, organized primarily for the production of violence.”* (Giroux, 2016)

*“El catalizador del cambio no va a surgir del estado mexicano que hoy es víctima de las mafias de gobierno que lo controlan.”*<sup>1</sup>(Buscaglia, 2015)

In the last decade Mexico has gained notoriety in the international headlines as a country ruled by violence, impunity and the systematic violation of human rights. Under the banner of the infamous ‘anti-narcotics war’ initiated in 2006 by former president Felipe Calderón the number of enforced disappearances of civilians, journalists and human rights defenders, extrajudicial executions, torture, military abuses and generalized impunity have run rampant.<sup>2</sup> Parallel to all this, there has been a sharp spike in the intensification and diversification of organized crime and others forms of illegality, which, in many instances have visibly merged with institutionalized forms of state power and authority resulting in an intricate mesh that is hard to classify by any accepted parameters, and to understand with any existing standards. Some experts claim that Mexico has transformed its political model of ‘bland dictatorship’ that it followed during most of the twentieth century, into a full-blown, downwardly monstrous neoliberal ‘narco-State’ model with clear ‘necro-State’ characteristics.<sup>3</sup> As I have argued elsewhere, (Sohn, 2015a) a very particular version of the neoliberal carceral or penal state (Wacquant, 2012) has now become fully encroached in Mexico, evidencing the militarization of social and public life as a result of advanced neoliberalism in very painful ways.

Needless to say the consequences of the rise of a neoliberal authoritarian political regime in Mexico that not only condones, but also (re-)produces these forms of systematic violence are nefarious: the erosion of the social tissue, the intensification of conditions of precarity, insecurity and vulnerability, as well as a dramatic increase in the polarization of the population, have affected the life and psyche of every single citizen in one way or another. This has triggered deep rifts and transformations in the structures of feeling of society.

In the face of such conditions, it is almost impossible to avoid thinking and acting *affectively* and *affirmatively*, and in Mexico, like in so many other regions across the globe, in the past decade, but especially in the last five years, there have been multiple mobilizations, protests, assemblies and mass demonstrations of all kinds and sorts to resist, oppose, and counter these and other

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<sup>1</sup> “The catalyst of change will not emerge from the Mexican state that has today fallen prey to the government mafias that control it.” (Buscaglia, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Between 2012 and 2014 there have been 145,000 deaths in Mexico related to organized crime and more than 50,000 disappeared. See for instance: Human Rights Watch International Report 2015. Available: [www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/mexico](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/mexico) [last accessed: May 31, 2016]

<sup>3</sup> Among many others, the extensive research work on the impact of political corruption, organized crime and impunity in Mexico of political analyst Edgardo Buscaglia and journalist Lorenzo Meyer is worthwhile to consult in this regard.

manifestations of neoliberal state power. A culture of contestation to the widespread culture of violence and political decay incited by the new neoliberal necro-state appears to finally be emerging from Mexican society.

These resound with the global wave of dissent and social mobilization that has engulfed the planet since 2011. Differently than other surges of social dissent and uprisings throughout the twentieth century, contemporary forms of social manifestation of protest, contestation and mass mobilizations have taken unprecedented forms and characteristics, especially their recurrence, unpredictability and volatility, their 'leaderless-ness' and political indeterminacy, their urban and public character, and by the unparalleled and innovative use of digital technologies and self-produced media. New forms of dissent coalesce with ongoing more traditionally structured or organized popular, social and political struggles, merging as it were, into a complex assemblage of global resistance. In spite of its high degree of differentiation, it nevertheless is shaping what appears to be an emerging culture of contestation on a global scale. This has given rise to a growing field of studies on twenty-first century social movements that open venues for rethinking theoretical frameworks and proposing alternative methodologies to better understand this phenomenon. However, the challenge is double: studying (or "reading") these assemblages of resistance as emerging cultures of contestation, necessarily means not only gaining knowledge and understanding of what causes these uprisings and movements in the first place (what some experts refer to as 'underlying issues'), but especially what sort of affective intensities fuel, and are involved in this new culture of contestation.

Depending on the particular movement, the characteristics of the social group(s) that it involves, the demands it makes and the problems it addresses, the cause or root of dissent becomes momentarily visible and tangible. Whether the movements' demands are political in nature; or if what they oppose are draconian economic austerity measures, unemployment, gentrification, or the loss of the public sphere to privatization; if they seek social, class, civic, gender, or cultural inclusion or self-determination; etc., a common denominator in all these movements is that they are "intensely drenched in affect" (Kluytenberg, 2015: 2). On the other hand, they consciously or unconsciously, oppose and challenge in one degree or another, the advance and encroachment of diverse manifestations of the late global capitalist machinery and the negative outcomes endorsed by neoliberal (autocratic, authoritarian, repressive, necrotic) politico-economic regimes. In other words, contemporary social movements rise not only consciously but also affectively from different expressions of a rising neoliberal state power according to each context, or what Brenner and Theodore call 'actually existing neoliberalisms'. (Brenner and Theodore, 2002) One such 'actually existing neoliberalism' is the case of Mexico.

Compared to the dramatic scenarios opened by the violence that fuels and is fuelled by this allegedly 'new' form of neoliberal state power in Mexico, where it is no longer possible to tell where the state, the market and blatant crime begin or end, it seems almost irrelevant to speak of small-scaled, localized social mobilizations that contest equally specific, localized urban regeneration projects. Nevertheless, and as I will argue in this paper, these, and all forms of social dissent, assembly, mobilization, protest and contestation are part of a larger affective assemblage where resistance is not unequal in its potential and power, than that of the power which makes it rise. Hence, even the most modest forms of resistance count and therefore need to be accounted for, not only to approach, expose and critically interrogate apparently insignificant manifestations of neoliberal state power that otherwise might go unnoticed or disregarded as simple 'minor infractions' within the more complex 'big picture' of contemporary global neoliberalism, but also, and especially, as an affirmation of emerging forms of social struggle and resistance, and a sign of the rise of an culture of contestation infused by affective intensity.

Within assemblage thinking the issues of agency and affect become paramount, especially in social movements, where individual and collective *human agency* remains a key –but problematic- category of inquiry. Nevertheless, and as I will try to show in this paper, scale and dimension, as well as

hegemonic positions and hierarchies break down within so-called ‘agential assemblages’, so that all *acts of resistance* exist equally -and simultaneously-, as *acts of power*. What drives them and what connects them to human agency, is precisely the notion of *affect*. To this end I will begin this elaboration with a brief introduction of French historian Michel Foucault’s well-known analysis of power-relations, and the critique from the Left, as a frame and access to the presentation of the theoretical *problématique* and discussion of my case study further on.

## 1.2 Power-relations and the critique from the Left

“... *the final word on power is that resistance comes first.*” (Deleuze, 1988: 89, emphasis in original)

*“I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. [...] Rather than analyzing power from the point of view of its internal rationality, it consists of analyzing power relations through the antagonism of strategies.”* (Foucault, 1982: 780)

The choice to begin this paper with a problematization of the notion of power, instead of directly dealing with the all too obvious discussion on neoliberalism and its impact on the production of urban space, or with the exposition of a specific case study, in spite of seeming oblique, is not gratuitous. The association between contestation and power as embodied in Foucault’s famous mantra ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (Foucault, 1978: 96-7), has become a quasi forceful point of entry in many contemporary accounts depicting the emergence of social movements, civic protest, dissent, and more widely, all sorts of practices of contestation, which in the aftermath of the global economic crisis of 2008, have significantly diversified and intensified in an increasing number of contexts and urban environments across the world.

The ties that exist between Foucault’s analysis of power-relations, and his subsequent formulations on neoliberalism as a gateway to theorize the turn from government to governmentality (Foucault, 2008) have received great attention in recent decades. They might also explain why, under advanced, militarized neoliberalism, Foucault’s understandings of power are regaining currency in many studies of present-day social movements. One of the most important aspects of his analysis rests on his rejection of the exteriority of resistance in relation to both, power and capital. Here, power and resistance are viewed as ‘relational’, that is, as internally related terms that do not partake in oppositional dialectics. By arguing that resistance shapes power as much as power shapes resistance, in fact, that resistance *constitutes* power and vice versa, Foucault debunks the essentialist conceptions of power as a unilateral, repressive, monolithic, authoritarian, ‘negative’ and homogenous force on the ‘outside’. His is a disavowal of hierarchical, centralized power structures. Instead, there are multiple and heterogeneous relations of power and resistance constantly connecting, intersecting, converging and diverging across the social field. (Foucault, 1978) Foucault provides an inclusive and relational understanding of the resisting tensions that are immanent to power, and this is often regarded as a potentially emancipatory, affirmative understanding of ‘power as resistance’.

The questions are no longer ontological; they move between epistemology and methodology; they become plural, diagrammatic, strategic and tactical: how to determine which forms of power are more desirable; which need to be limited, contested, or resisted; and how different forms of power shape different manifestations of resistance and vice versa according to specific cases and situations. Instead of hierarchical, dominant structures of meta-power and meta-capital, there are multiple, differentiated micro-politics negotiating continuously in relation to their resistance. In this sense, and in the words of Benjamin Noys, “the pluralisation of configurations of power, and the pluralisation of capitalism, is often invoked today as liberating us to possibilities of political

contestation and construction that are affirmative and not bound by the reactive limits of critique.” (Noys, 2012)

Here, the ‘reactive limits of critique’ refer to critical lines of inquiry from the Left, especially, that reject Foucault’s conceptualization on the grounds of its indeterminacy. A strong opponent of Foucault’s formulations is, of course, Jean Baudrillard, who claims that capitalism has become an ‘indeterminate random machine’ (Karatzogianni and Schandorf, 2012) where capital and state collide to reproduce the systemic neutralization of dissent. (Poster, 2011: 122) Slavoj Žižek, for his part, joins the critique and argues that Foucault’s micro-politics are inefficient strategies to effectively challenge, contest and ultimately dismantle structures of authority, control and domination. (Žižek, 2000) But the critique goes further, claiming that Foucault’s formulations have opened a sort of theoretical and conceptual Pandora’s box, where capitalist power is rendered coded and absolute, yet indeterminate, and hence uncontestable.

The prevalent rhetoric of the alleged ubiquity and *inevitability* of global capitalism; neoliberalism and liberal democracy as the *hegemonic* mode of production, the *overriding* politico-economic regime, and the *dominant* form of power in our contemporary social world that permeates much of mainstream and conservative politico-economic analyses and radical critiques alike, echoes this problem. It depicts capitalism not as a contingently ‘striated’ formation, but as a ‘seamless totality’ immune to all relations of exteriority. In this tone, resistance is futile. This has played a crucial role in the demise of radical critique of the Left in recent decades and instilled a structure of feeling based on the philosophy of disenchantment and generalized nihilism in contemporary Western societies. (Critchely, 2007)

The repercussion of this logic on the theorization of dissent, resistance, contestation and struggle necessary for the understanding of social movements and protest as emancipatory, is significant, as it draws from a sort of paralysis that miniaturizes, reduces and cripples action, and belittles situated narratives of success as relative, peripheral and insignificant to the global anti-capitalist project.<sup>4</sup> In the past decades, much has been written in this regard, often from a position encroached in the ‘sad passions’ or unproductive affects that trump meaningful agency, and which can be observed in the generalized de-politization and pacification of civil society. It is commonplace to engage with the ways in which capitalism today permeates and modulates the whole of life, and this, as Noys reminds us, leaves us with little leverage to resist. (Noys, 2012)

These accounts, it must be said, are always partial and drenched in negativity, and fail to convey the undeniable jest and productive potencies that fuel and inform so many of the past and present day movements across the globe, and their never insignificant achievements. But they nevertheless do raise the question –if we follow Foucault’s analysis in rigorous terms-, how in a dialectical sense, the different forms of contemporary resistance, rather than either reactionary to the power of capital, or conversely, fully revolutionary, are in fact co-implicated in the constitution of a plurality of new, unprecedented power-relations, and hence may be said to have aided in the production not only of desirable forms of power, institutions and practice, but also, and importantly so, how these as ‘mirrors’ of control have modulated, simulated and replicated the powers they pretend to resist. In other words, at this juncture it is important to question in what measure one can argue that social movements and contestatory practices indeed, not only resist and oppose, but on occasions also mimic, shape and constitute neoliberal forms of capital and power.<sup>5</sup> A simple answer to this is at first sight: ‘one can’t’ –at least not from a generalizing discursive standpoint-, and especially in the light of the complexity of contemporary social resistance; dissent can never –and should not-, be

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Baudrillard identifies three ‘orders of dissent’ on the levels of transnational/global; national; and local, which act against a ‘social code’ imputed by capitalism. This leads to dissent acting against these codes. Baudrillard claims that when ‘lower orders of dissent’ encounter higher codes, the hegemonic order absorbs them and neutralizes them. See, for instance Poster (2011: 122).

<sup>5</sup> For an insightful discussion on Slavoj Žižek’s allegedly erroneous interpretation the two ‘types’ of resistance drawn in Michel Foucault’s power analysis, see Armstrong, A. (2008). “Beyond Resistance: a Response to Žižek’s Critique of Foucault’s Subject of Freedom”, in *Parrhesia*, no. 5, pp.19-31.

grouped under one universalizing category, and neither can nor should power. They need to be “read”, observed, and studied case by case.

Whether one regards contemporary capitalism as an indeterminate and complex mesh of power-relations, or if one understands it as an all-encompassing power structure, what seems undeniable is that it has undergone deep transformations that consequently impact society at large. Over the last decades, but especially during the last thirty years, the theoretical landscape of capitalism has registered significant changes, which point towards its inherently ‘affective’ dimensions. The well-known formulations of Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski who claim that capitalism entered a new stage, which they refer to as ‘the new *spirit* of capitalism’, (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999; my emphasis) resonate with Gilles Deleuze’s earlier understanding of what he calls ‘the society of control’ of our era: a time when disciplinary enclosures and molds have been replaced by an era of constantly changing *modulation* and *control* of floating codes, samples, and data. (Deleuze, 1992: 4)

Maurizio Lazzarato, in an analysis of the new relations of labor under flexible accumulation, for instance, builds from Deleuze’s notion of the society of control to suggest that capitalism in its present guise registers fundamental transformations in relation to *modes* and *production*. Although space does not allow me here to elaborate on this point in more detail, Lazzarato’s formulations nevertheless depict capitalism not as a mode of production, but as the production of ‘modes’. In other words, capitalism today does not create the object of consumption (goods), nor its subjects (workers, consumers), but the very worlds within which these objects and subjects exist: capitalism as the ‘creation of life-worlds’. (Sohn, et.al. 2015b: 7) But Lazzarato’s conception of the ‘cooperation between minds’, which he largely bases on his understandings of contemporary ‘immaterial labor’, produces more than public, collective and common goods. It suggests the emergence of new differentiated values and subjectivities of co-production (Lazzarato, 2004: 200) that may transpire into collective, common and social practices and emerging cultures of contestation. This perspective is important in order to discuss the potentials of dissent and resistance at a time when the running out of steam of critique eclipses with the apparent cracks in the structures of contemporary global capitalism.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.3 From Apparatus to Assemblage: affect, agency and assembly

*“What I try to pick out with this term is, firstly, a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions – in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus.”* (Foucault, 1980: 194-5)

Apparatuses emerge in response to a problematization, understood as historical fact and as a conceptual research tool.<sup>7</sup> (Legg, 2011) For Foucault this means that an apparatus is more than a “system of relations” among heterogeneous elements; it is a strategic device that helps to identify the connection among these elements and assists in the understanding of specific (power-knowledge) formations within historical moments that respond “to an urgent need”. (Foucault, 1980: idem) Further, an apparatus aids in establishing connections among the analytical categories of governmentality (episteme, identity, techne, visibility and ethos) to the regime of practices, establishing, as it were, a relational milieu, or ‘ecology’. As such it may be an extremely potent

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<sup>6</sup> Here the recent report issued by the research wing of the IMF about the failure of the neoliberal doctrine to deal with growth and development is telling. See: Ostry, J., Loungani P. and Furceri, D. (2016) “Neoliberalism: Oversold?” Available: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2016/06/pdf/ostry.pdf> [last accessed June 4, 2016]

<sup>7</sup> For a glossary of the origins, definitions, and diverse uses of the term ‘dispositif’ or apparatus, see Frank Kessler’s “Notes on Dispositif” (2004) unpublished work in progress; available [last accessed June 2, 2016] <http://www.hum.uu.nl/medewerkers/f.e.kessler/Dispositif%20Notes11-2007.pdf>

devise to approach social movements and other forms of social or political organization, especially if theorized in its proximity to the notion of assemblage.

Although Foucault never explicitly referred to his 'dispositif' or apparatus as such, his somewhat 'machinic' description comes interestingly close to that of French philosopher Gille Deleuze's understanding of assemblage (or 'agencement' in French); in fact, these concepts may be read as complimentary to each other. Deleuze's understanding of assemblage comes from his interest to remove subjective notions of *agency* from the ontological worldview and challenge dominant linear beliefs in progress. He introduces the term to disassemble 'bordered thinking' in terms of *desire*, territory, philosophy, bodies and movement. (Legg, 2011)

Assemblages (and in a certain sense also apparatuses) are 'entanglements', and as such, they have the simultaneous ability to establish connections that lead to either order, sedimentation, 'striation', 're-territorialization', long-term effects and scaling, or to the exact opposite: disorder, destratification and smoothing, short-term effects and de-scaling. (idem.) They avow to heterogeneity, difference and fragmented narratives as much as they may lead to normalization, control and entrapment. (Agamben, 2006) In other words, both assemblages and apparatuses contain the conditions of their own decay, contestation and obsolescence (lines of sedimentation and stratification), as well as the traces, remnants, seeds and potential for the alternate state, the present, or creativity, and that these need not to exist in hostile opposition. As such, they bespeak relational ontologies, heterogeneity, relational causality, constant change and differentiated space-time relationships. (Legg, 2011) They stand in radical openness and include a multiplicity of lines and bodies, which when *read* together, open up unforeseen topologies, dimensions of visibility, enunciation, force and subjectification. In the words of Deleuze when referring to Foucault's apparatus,

*"Untangling these lines within social apparatuses is, in each case, like drawing up a map, doing cartography, surveying unknown landscapes and this is what Foucault calls 'working on the ground'. One has to position oneself on these lines themselves, these lines which do not just make up the social apparatus but run through it and pull it, ... diagonally."* (Deleuze, 1992:159)

This cartographic understanding of apparatuses resounds with more contemporary, 'posthuman' readings of assemblage theory in which human *agency* (desire) is redistributed and 'flattened' out along an entanglement of non-human actors, bodies, elements, relations and entities. According to Colin McFarlane, readings on assemblages follow three 'types' depending on the way they engage with the notion of process: gathering, coherence and dispersion; collectives, groups and agencies; and countering notions of apparatus in its understanding as 'regime' or governmental technologies in that they focus on *emergence* rather than formation. (McFarlane, 2009) These types of readings, especially those that focus on the differentials between actors (agents) and agencies (as vector force of action) come in handy when analyzing the potentials of acts of protest and contestatory practices as emergent within a larger assemblage of power such as the one embodying the contemporary neoliberal necro-state. Once hierarchical positions are 'flattened' it becomes easier to disentangle how they emerge, how their 'becoming' takes lines and trajectories within assemblages, how the different mechanisms relate to hold it together, how it molds and shapes space, and how it may indeed fall apart, or uncouple. Assemblages name an uneven topology of trajectories that cross or engage each other to different extents over time and which themselves, exceed the assemblage. (Bennett, 2005) In other words, assemblage retains a focus on emergence and allows the component parts to exceed the network; that is, it incorporates relations of exteriority. (Müller, 2015: 35)

Reading social movements as part of an agential assemblage where human agency is only one of the multiple lines that come together under given situations allows us to understand the myriad of elements that are involved at a given moment or situation, and discern the different operations and

strategies (social, material, political, etc.) that give rise to certain relations of power and the emergence of certain events, and not others. It offers powerful analytical and synthetic tools to understand the distribution not only of goods, wealth, justice, politics, resources, access, power, etc., but which also include the distributive forces of human and nonhuman *agency* as conducive to change. (Bennett, 2005) Agency, then, is “the ability to make a difference, to produce effects, or even to initiate action distributed across an ontologically diverse range of actors”, where ‘actors’ may be regarded as entities and forces, as well as the assemblages in which they partake. The focus is placed on “the process itself as an actant, as itself in possession of degrees of agential capacity.” (Bennett, 2005: 446; 459) This may be extended with Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of ‘diffuse agency’ in which material content (bodies, actions, passions) and enunciations (statements, plans and laws) are linked rhizomatically, and play themselves out in the constitution of the social field. (Li, 2007: 285)

Thinking about social movements in these terms opens the possibility to rethink power, politics and space from processual and sociomaterial perspectives where dominant positions and centralities dissolve into a de-scaled topology of distributive agency. Small affective encounters and entanglements may produce huge effects on a given assemblage, because the agency of not just each member of an assemblage, but of the groupings themselves conform the milieu, or the arrangement of things through which forces and trajectories (lines) inhere and transform, (Bennett, 2005) and this is relevant when rethinking the impact of social practices and geographical –physical-space beyond –and even against- categories of social constructivism and delimiting scalar considerations.

Many geographers studying diverse contemporary urban processes, including sociomaterial ones have taken on different approaches to assemblage theory as an analytical tool.<sup>8</sup> Although these are extremely important for an understanding of how assemblages reconfigure urban space through the interaction of relations between bodies and materiality, and hence are crucial to any investigation on the production of the built environment, for the purposes of this paper the focus will remain on the *affective* potentials of agency and assemblages as these impinge on social movements. The motives for this are that when investigating contemporary social movements one is hardly ever dealing with purely human agency, or with exclusively ‘physical’ or material embodiments and material processes; one is also and importantly so, engaging with their *affective interaction* within forms of ‘immaterial labor’ (digital and virtual activism, i.e.) which are often involved in a de-localized position. Here, the physical, actual human body, human actors and human agency –understood as ‘intention’ and ‘motivated will’-, nonhuman agencies and actants, technological, spatial and political instrumentalities, etc., couple and connect to form complex agential assemblages infused with affect.<sup>9</sup>

Dissent and resistance, as well as political power and capital, are assemblages intimately related to both, agency and affect, understood not as ‘emotional’ or purely ‘emotive-sensorial’, but as either intentional or motivated actual force with the capacity to affect and be affected. Within agential assemblages, human agency is never individual; it is always in an affective relationship with multiple collective social, political, economic and technological agencies that ‘*influence and inform*’. In the next and final section, framed within assemblage theory and affect theory as expounded in the previous segments, I will attempt to briefly disentangle issues of human agency (collective and individual), and the affective capacities of actors and actants (material and immaterial ‘bodies’) using a narrative of a series of recent social mobilizations in Mexico City to arrive at an understanding of assemblage relevant to present-day social movements.

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<sup>8</sup> See for instance: Fariás, I. and Bender, T. (eds) (2010) *Urban Assemblages: How Actor-network Theory changes Urban Studies*. London: Routledge; or Tampio, N. (2009). “Assemblages and the Multitude: Deleuze, Hardt, Negri, and the Postmodern Left”, in *European Journal of Political Theory*. Vol. 8; pp. 383–400.

<sup>9</sup> For an insightful overview of the different understandings and interpretations of the term affect, and Affect Theory, see Thrift, N. (2015). “Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect” in *Geografiska Annaler*, 86B (1), pp. 57-78.

#### 1.4 'Shopultepec' and beyond: a modest example of a rising urban culture of contestation

*"To rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to consider more closely the bodily dimensions of actions, what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together in a historical space that undergoes a historical transformation by virtue of their collective action: What holds them together there, and what are the conditions of persistence and of power in relation to their precarity and exposure?" (Butler, 2015: 73-4)*

During a brief period between August and December 2015 social media platforms were overflowing with posts and tweets from Mexican users sharing all sorts of information and critical opinions on a controversial urban regeneration project known as 'Chapultepec Cultural Corridor' that had suddenly, and without previous processes of consultation or public participation, been announced by the city government of Mexico City and ProCDMX.<sup>10</sup> The CCC urban design project is a rather simplistic and generic adaptation of an elevated 'linear-park' that resembles several urban projects that have sprung across the world that claim that by intervening on the public spaces of a given area with a beautification of the immediate environment (with the profuse use of 'greenery' in the renders to suggest an environmentally friendly park-like atmosphere) and the introduction of non-specific 'cultural and public' programs (with 'galleries', 'art cafés', and 'cultural centers' at the center stage), as well as with non-descript infrastructural interventions (in this case an elevated pedestrian corridor along a problematic artery in the city) the affected area, and the entire city will enjoy the benefits of reinvigoration and regeneration of old, decayed or underdeveloped urban space.<sup>11</sup> The rhetoric is just as simplistic and vague, aimed mostly at passive middle class audiences: through the embellishment of public space, all sorts of social problems such as poverty, unemployment, segregation, mobility and precarity will be miraculously addressed and solved. But the project itself is not as banal and simplistic as its design proposal suggests. It withholds in its core a form of inherent, subliminal violence.

Very briefly, this mega-project, also dubbed 'Shopultepec' by its many detractors and critics, is part of a much larger 'urban vision' for the 'regeneration' of Mexico City, consisting of at least ten clearly neoliberal urban mega-projects strategically located throughout the city in so-called 'zones for economic and social development' (ZODES).<sup>12</sup> These 'special zones' and the projects that are proposed in them are part of a government initiative that in the past decade has introduced a host of important reforms to normative, legal and spatial planning bodies of Mexico City, that are devised as tools for the modification and reform of land-use and zoning regulations, as well as of financial and legal policies aimed at the investment in key urban areas identified as vital for the attraction of capital through spatial redevelopment.<sup>13</sup> In very summarized terms, the model usually rests on public investment and governmental policy facilitation of privately exploited programs on urban space, conventionally advertised as 'cultural', 'infrastructural', 'scientific', 'educational' and

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<sup>10</sup> ProCDMX is a para-state agency for social investment and infrastructural development of the government of Mexico City founded in 2007. Its tasks are the promotion and realization of strategic projects under public, academic and national and international private sector schemes. See: <http://www.procdmx.gob.mx> [last accessed: June 2, 2016]

<sup>11</sup> The webpage for the CCC project was cancelled after the referendum. For a comprehensive critique of the project and a collection of renders of the original project, see for instance: Laura Bliss (2015) "The Backlash to Mexico City's High Line-style Park" in *CityLab*, Sept. 29, 2015. Available: <http://www.citylab.com/design/2015/09/the-terrible-plan-for-mexico-citys-high-line-style-park/408010/> [last accessed: June 4, 2016]

<sup>12</sup> ZODES ('zonas de desarrollo económico y social') were announced in 2014. Although more than 10 mega projects are planned for Mexico City, five of them fall under the ZODES regulation: 'Health City', 'Future City', 'Green City', 'Administrative City', and 'CCC'. See Erika Angulo's 2016 article: "El Corredor Cultural Chapultepec: estrategias políticas y acciones de resistencia", available: <http://contested-cities.net/CCmadrid/el-corredor-cultural-chapultepec-estrategias-politicas-y-acciones-de-resistencia/> [last accessed: June 2, 2016]

<sup>13</sup> For an informative insight on the particularities of these reforms see for instance, Angulo, E. (2016). "El Corredor Cultural Chapultepec: estrategias políticas y acciones de resistencia", available: <http://contested-cities.net/CCmadrid/el-corredor-cultural-chapultepec-estrategias-politicas-y-acciones-de-resistencia/> [last accessed: June 2, 2016]

'public',<sup>14</sup> but which are in reality nothing else than commercially-driven, corporate and/or consumer-oriented real estate models of quick investment recovery schemes and tax-incentives for private investors. These obviously carry important socio-spatial and economic consequences for the city: the unequal and asymmetrical distribution of these investment zones throughout the city emphasize their relational position vis-à-vis other key financial, cultural or spatial locations that do not take into account the spatial, material and infrastructural needs of local populations, but instead, focus on the concentration and investment of capital and the increase of property value in key areas of the city. As such, these projects are yet another simulation of the neoliberal state that disguises private interests for the accumulation of profit as urban projects of public interest and positive socio-spatial impact. In this way programs and functions, as well as the reform and implementation of urban policies and regulation, are geared towards the intensification of spaces for foreign and national private corporate investment and rampant consumerism, and as such, hardly deviate from the 'global' model of neoliberal urbanization.

In Mexico, however, typically neoliberal urbanization models that are currently implemented in most cities across the globe collide with a well-established local 'culture' of 'white collar' and organized crime, widespread corruption, ineptitude, nepotism, repression and impunity. It is, for instance, not uncommon that private investors have strong personal or business ties with city officials, political parties or other governmental bodies, on the one hand, and on the other, many public servants in key functions in the government –or their direct families- own private developing and construction companies themselves. Needless to say, corruption is a widespread practice in these 'public-interest' urban projects, which in spite of being apparently rooted in legality, are nevertheless entangled in convoluted webs of shifting compromised interest groups, monopolies, political power and capital. Furthermore, understanding these projects requires extensive and expert knowledge on the nature and transformation of urban policies and governance, and the socio-spatial impact of such reforms, and as such they are not entirely accessible and transparent to a large segment of the population. This facilitates the circumvention of democratic processes including public consultation and participation, and public competition for the design, materialization, financing and exploitation of these projects.

Yet, this is a common practice in Mexico City, and until recently it had received little to no resistance from the general population, who it needs to be stressed here, is not known for its active civic democratic participation. Passivity, dis-interest and apathy, or conversely a conservative rejection of all sorts of public displays of mass protest, couple with mechanisms of co-optation to fragment and trump the agency of civil society. One could even speak of a certain a-political 'culture of complicity'. Until recently, that is. And here, a quick narrative detour that connects the introduction of this paper to the case of 'Shopultepec' is necessary to understand the affective dimensions involved, and which could be interpreted as the trigger towards an emerging 'culture of contestation'.

While Mexico City has a historical tradition of social urban movements and popular organizations throughout the twentieth century these remain more or less circumscribed to the struggle of localized populations of lower income groups and the socially and politically disenfranchised, with highly specific claims focused on the provision of social housing, the legalization or formalization of property rights, and access to basic public infrastructure. Many victories have been gained through these organized and politically structured social movements against precarity, but as such, they hardly ever attract support from the middle and upper classes of Mexican society as these hardly ever allude to their own needs, interests and ideology. But Mexico City, as the capital city and seat of political and economic power, is also the performative scenario in which national social dissent historically takes place and plays out. As such is it the 'space of appearance' of the public.

In the past two decades, and in response to the increase of violence and criminality against civil society at large, the dramatic levels of political corruption and impunity, and the ubiquitous

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<sup>14</sup> See for instance: <http://www.grieta.org.mx/zonas-de-desarrollo-economico-y-social-zodes/> [last accessed: June 2, 2016]

mechanisms of simulacra, Mexico City has seen the rise of massive social mobilizations that reunite representatives of all sectors of the population and that specifically target the implicit and explicit violence of the neoliberal necro-state with recurrent peaceful manifestations, public assemblies, silent marches and other forms of public displays of dissent and contestation. One such recent mobilization is the now globally known movement protesting the forced disappearance of 43 students of the rural technical school of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero in September 2014. The movement not only demands clarity of the facts, demanding that the government takes responsibility as co-perpetuator in these (and many other) hideous crimes, it also appeals civil society to unite in affective empathy for the families of the tenths of thousands of disappeared individuals and hundreds of thousands of violence- and crime-related homicides since the war on drugs erupted in 2006. Arguably, these movements form part of an affective assemblage composed of very differentiated actors and agencies with a goal common to all Mexicans: the repudiation of state-repression, negligence, incompetence and impunity on the one hand, and collective solidarity and the demand for justice, on the other. These massive manifestations against impunity and in defense of basic human rights are drenched in an affect that is shared and common to basic human emotive and cognitive registers, and which holds the inherent power of that which gives rise to it. The violence perpetuated by the necro-state is no longer tolerated by -or circumscribed- to specific social groups, individuals or “people”; it is a form of power that has an inherent agential affectivity that permeates into the psyche and structures of feeling, thought *and* action of society as a collective.

Although there is no apparent connection between the ‘anti-violence’ movements and the ‘Shopultepec’ case, these assemblages permeate and relate to each other on affective registers that trigger productive action, or to use Spinoza’s term ‘joyful passions’ that incite bodies to act together, creatively. Not in dialectic opposition to power, but as a form of power in itself that affords connections, assemblies, affiliations and ultimately, as these play out, the actualization of potential. At this juncture, the ‘Shopultepec’ project is key, as it challenges the generalized apathy, and even antagonism to social or popular protest in the city from variety of angles.

Within a matter of days after its announcement, a significant and unprecedented ‘movement’ of dissent in strong opposition to this particular project began to take shape, first through printed media and on social media outlets - #NoShopultepec- and shortly after, on the streets of Mexico City itself. The surge of dissent began when small groups of experts (architects, urban planners, scholars and known intellectuals, mostly) started sharing their critical insights on the many inconsistencies and problems of this particular urban project, using social media outlets as their primary medium. This facilitated a massive and rapid exchange of information among individuals, which were not necessarily spatially concentrated in Mexico City, but which for one reason or another, identified with the ‘movement’, lending support and furthering its spread and visibility across the Internet: a scale-less, dis-located assemblage of actors and actants became activated in the process.

A few weeks after the announcement, the movement had literally ‘embodied’ and reached the streets of Mexico City, when a host of social, popular and political affiliations began to merge with neighborhood organizations, academics, students, housewives, and other highly differentiated interest groups and social ‘classes’, who on several occasions took to the streets in protest against the lack of transparency of this project, and in demand of democratic participation. The “underlying issues” were not only at the level of the critique of the design as banal, the defense of public space and the rejection of its privatization, or even the fight for the right to the city. The underlying issues, I argue, were saturated in spasmodic, ephemeral, yet intense affectivity that may be traced diagrammatically to the to the issues of state-induced and supported violence as a form auto-destructive power. If one considers Foucault’s and Deleuze’s theorizations on how power is always and already a form of resistance, and further if one recalls that according to both, apparatuses and assemblages hold not only the lines of sedimentation or stratification leading to

their own decay, contestation and dissolution, but also contain the seeds and potential for the emergence of the ‘new’, it is well possible that dissent in its current ephemeral, somewhat chaotic and erratic forms and expressions, signals the imminent collapse or mutation of some of the more complex affective assemblages in which it operates.

After a series of peaceful protests, massive marches and public assemblies throughout the city, accompanied by a simultaneous campaign on Twitter and Facebook, the ‘movement’ managed to force the city government to engage in debate and dialogue over this particular project. The consultation campaign was accompanied by official propaganda on the “pros” of the project, versus the oppositional material provided by urban experts and academics. This eventually led to a public referendum open exclusively to the residents of the areas and neighborhoods that would be directly affected by this project to vote in favor or against its implementation. The referendum concluded that the citizens opposed this project by a significant margin, and the city authorities were forced to provisionally end the project.

The story, of course, does not end here. Although this victory was not insignificant, it was contingent and temporary. Parts of the ProCDMX trust and hence other components of the project remain either dormant, or have been re-activated only a few months after the referendum with the announcement of a smaller, but equally controversial project located in a strategic position within the polygon of the CCC project. The so-called ‘Cetram Chapultepec’ –an urban project including a multimodal transportation transferium, a hotel, a corporate tower and shopping mall- is another angle of the CCC project; another simulation of the neoliberal state. In other words, the CCC project seems to have splintered and ramified into ‘smaller’ operative entities as a result of public, collective and social contestation.

But Facebook and Twitter are once again overflowing with critique, information and research on this new urban simulation, and this may be yet another affirmative sign of performative, affective and embodied ways of coming together within the agential assemblages of the emergent culture of contestation in Mexico City.

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