Papers on Social Representations
Volume 34, Issue 1, pages 3.1-3.28 (2025)
Peer Reviewed Online Journal
ISSN 1021-5573

[http://psr.iscte-iul.pt/index.php/PSR/index]

(Un)walkability, local identity and otherness: perspectives from the production of group mental maps in a peripheral area of Mexico City

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This article looks at the production of symbolic boundaries in San Gregorio Atlapulco, an ancient village located in a peripheral area of Mexico City that is undergoing major urban change and environmental predation. It presents the point of view of inhabitants who claim to be 'natives' of San Gregorio, taking as its angle of approach their pedestrian mobilities and the social representations expressed in these practices. These representations are identified from mental maps produced in workshops with groups of residents. The article examines the relevance of mental maps for understanding the representations deployed in a practice as versatile as walking, and the relevance of the representational approach for understanding what 'really' happens in everyday interactions.

Keywords: walking; symbolic boundaries; otherness; urban periphery: Mexico City

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INTRODUCTION

Located in the municipality (*Alcaldia*) of Xochimilco, San Gregorio Atlapulco is one of the 138 '*pueblos originarios'* that have come to be included in contemporary Mexico City.[1] These ancient villages, with their pre-Hispanic past and community organisation inherited from colonial times, have found themselves absorbed by metropolitan expansion. A megacity with a population of over 20 million,[2] Mexico City underwent rapid expansion during the 20th century, one of the main forms of which was the construction of '*colonias populares*', which covered a large part of its agricultural land and natural areas.[3] The Alcaldía de Xochimilco, which retains significant rural characteristics, is a place where these tensions are starkly expressed. Its ecological reserve, a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1987, preserves one of the last vestiges of the pre-Hispanic *chinampa* agricultural system. Traditional agricultural activities continue nowadays, despite being seriously undermined by land pressure and environmental crisis (see Figure 1). Unbridled urbanisation is having a profound impact on aesthetics, cultural and social characteristics of Xochimilco's *pueblos*[4]*,* which are also beginning to receive institutional recognition: San Gregorio is one of the 48 '*pueblo originarios*' in Mexico City (out of the 138 mentioned above) to which the authorities have granted the right to maintain a form of community self-government, enshrined in the city's constitution. In practice, however, this right to a form of self-determination is constantly breached and some of the residents of San Gregorio are engaged in major eco-territorial protest movements.[5] In addition to the central issue of preserving natural resources, the demands are fuelled by questions relating to lifestyles, the preservation of local traditions and certain qualities of landscape.

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[1] I have chosen not to translate the term "pueblo originario", which refers to a reality specific to the urban context of Mexico City, which could be misinterpreted when translated into English; here, the "pueblos originarios" (literally "original villages") are not exactly linked to the "first nations" recognised by the United Nations, for example: they are above all a spatial entity, the product of the specific context of the urban development of Mexico City. The "pueblos originarios" of Mexico City have a name that consists of their patron saint (e.g. San Gregorio), followed by the Nahuatl name (in this case Atlapulco, meaning "place where the water swirls").

[2] Including the entire metropolitan area, the Zone Metropolitana del Valle de México (ZMVM), of which Mexico City (Ciudad de México, made up of 16 Alcaldias) is one of the political entities.

[3] The "colonias populares", sometimes associated with the idea of a low-income neighbourhood, refers to the urbanisation of areas initially devoid of urban services, by low-income populations who gradually build (sometimes self-build) their homes. This kind of urbanisation is not necessarily illegal and encompasses a wide array of situations.

[4] On the tensions between "pueblos originarios" and urbanisation in Mexico City, see (Portal, 2013).

[5] This term, used in the context of movements opposing extractivist practices, refers to various mobilisations around issues of environmental justice and territorial defence, particularly in the context of indigenous struggles (See Svampa, 2011).

Figure 1.

***Chinampa* de San Gregorio, photograph by the author, June 2023**

My involvement in San Gregorio began with a conversation with a member of the 'traditional authority' of the *pueblo*,[6] who told me of her desire to stimulate resident activism around the issue of pedestrian mobility, which she felt had become impractical in the context of uncontrolled urbanisation. We agreed to organise workshops with local residents, based on collective production of mental maps, with the aim of arriving at a diagnosis of the problems associated with local walking, which could then serve as a basis for reflection on potential solutions for implementation. I quickly realised that the issues of 'walkability', which were the subject of these workshops, raised much wider questions linked to the eco-territorial claims mentioned above, and that the preservation of a 'local identity' was a recurring theme.

This work led me to consider the links between mobility practices and spatial representations, the social production of the 'local' in a global metropolis, and the modes of 'othering' (Jodelet, 2015) that accompany certain processes of identification with place,

[6] The "Permanent General Assembly of the Pueblo of San Gregorio Atlapulco", made up of elected resident-members, claims decision-making power in local management by virtue of the right to self-determination enshrined in the Constitution of Mexico City. In practice, the political authorities do not respect this right.

particularly in a context where the challenges of pedestrian mobility are closely linked to conflicts over the uses of public space.

It emerged from these workshops that walking plays a fundamental role in the construction of representations of proximity through a strong identification with place. For the participants, who claim an 'ancestral' link to the *pueblo*, this is based on a close connection between physical space and social space.[7] In the current context, where walking is becoming problematic, these representations show a weakening of the sense of proximity, a relationship with place challenged by 'peripheral urbanisation', leading to a strong sense of 'deterritorialisation' (Haesbaert, 2004). These representations are reinforced by the othering of certain groups located in the space (physical and social), which are considered responsible for this situation and accused of jeopardising the identity of the place.

What do the pedestrian journeys described and mapped during the workshops tell us about the sense of place of San Gregorio's residents? What connects the daily experience of mobility, the production of social ties, and local identity? Why do obstacles to pedestrian mobility lead to a feeling that this local collective identity is being undermined, and to *outsiders* being held responsible for the situation? And how can we explain the discrepancy between these representations and the 'actual' daily practices of residents, which are largely based on negotiating the use of public space?

THEORETICAL POSITIONING

My theoretical approach will be based on the concept of *place*, relying mainly on approaches from geography and anthropology, but it will also find many points of convergence with perspectives from social psychology and sociology. It will specifically look at the question of the production of socio-cognitive representations of urban space, and at the construction of symbolic boundaries.

[7] Giglia and Duhau (2008) present the "pueblos originarios" as one of the major types of settlement that contributed to the construction of the Mexico City metropolis. The authors suggest that these types of settlement are associated with "urban order" models, which imply specific ways of dwelling. The authors use the term 'ancestral space' to describe how the inhabitants of the 'pueblos originarios' dwell. This implies a strong attachment to the land – even if farming activities may have completely disappeared in some cases; a local sociability in which kinship ties play an important role; and the primacy of religion (syncretism between Catholicism and pre-Hispanic cults) in shaping a locally shared space-time.

Geography and anthropology have used the concept of place to study the processes whereby social groups attribute meaning to space (or portions of space).[8] Places thus play an important role in the formation of spatially anchored collective identities (Agier, 2015; Augé, 1992; Di Méo, 1999; Aguilar Díaz, 2011). In a seminal work, Tuan (1977) presents *place* and *space* as two opposing poles of human experience: the first representing space that is signified and controlled, both reassuring and limiting; the second representing space in its immensity, both frightening and open to possibilities.

The concept of place has acquired major importance in the disciplines mentioned above, in the context of globalisation that is fundamentally changing the ways in which societies spatialise. Numerous studies have sought to understand how the local is continuously being resignified in a globalised world (Appadurai, 1996; Casey, 2001; Cresswell, 2004). The local and the global operate as two polarities in dialogue, often in conflict, which give rise to an infinite number of hybridisations. For some Latin American authors, such as Escobar (2010) and Santos (1993), place becomes a vector of resistance for 'dominated' populations in the face of unjust and predatory globalisation. Eco-territorial movements, which often combine research and activism, strongly emphasise local and community resistance to capitalism and state domination, stressing the affective dimension of the relationship with the local (Zaragocin & Caretta, 2020). For other authors, however, place can become a means of closure and exclusion, arising from a 'conservative sense of place'.[9] In metropolises, this 'conservative' retreat into place has fuelled numerous debates around the notion of 'urban fragmentation', linked to the isolation of the dominant classes in closed, secure enclaves, the so-called 'gated communities' (Caldeira, 2000).

The question of place therefore raises the issue of the meaning and representation of space. It also raises the question of the boundary, the frontier, and therefore ultimately of the spatial dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. In this respect, these questions link with numerous studies in the fields of social psychology and sociology, which have long been interested in the formation of group identities and the mechanisms of exclusion that this implies (Blokland, 2017; Elias & Scotson, 1994; Jodelet, 2015; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), joining the wider field of the study of the production of symbolic boundaries (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). Elias's classic work on the hardening of the identity of a group of residents in a small English 'community',

[8] Conflicts of meaning have been a major focus of research in many studies, particularly in the context of urban change (See for example Colin et al., 2019; May, 1996).
[9] See Tim Cresswell's 'moderated' debate on 'reading 'a global sense of place'' (2004), where the author discusses the positions of David Harvey and Doreen Masey.

leading to the systematic exclusion of 'new residents', shows us on the one hand that belonging to a collective identity plays a major role in the construction of a person's identity, and on the other that this is strongly linked to the recognition of a system of shared norms and frames of reference, which the 'outsider' is perceived as threatening (Elias & Scotson, 1994). This article will demonstrate how the production of collective identity is strongly rooted in space, in relation to the practices (in this case walking practices) of the inhabitants, which enable this mediation between the social and the spatial.

The spatialisation of collective identity leads us to question the ways in which space is represented, delineated, and constructed as objective reality by individuals. In this respect, research on the 'geography of representations' and social representations theory have endeavoured to move the study of representations away from a 'psychologising' individual approaches and towards a focus on their collective and socially constructed dimension. One of the pioneers of this approach was urban planner Kevin Lynch with his book 'The Image of the City' (Lynch, 1960). Drawing on fieldwork carried out in three US cities, Lynch proposes the concept of 'imagibility' to highlight the ability of certain urban forms (avenues, neighbourhoods, buildings, ruptures, connections) to structure the representations of residents, which are themselves linked to their urban practices (including mobility practices). One of the salient points of Lynch's work, on which I will draw, is the link between representations and practices of urban space: representations are not confined to abstract images, but are interwoven with practices, linked to the concrete problems faced by individuals.

A number of studies have subsequently explored the issue of the socialisation of social representations by means of mental maps: Jodelet and Milgram (1976) showed how representations of the city of Paris vary greatly depending on where people live and how they use the city, linked with the socio-cultural context and the norms conveyed by the social groups to which they belong. In Mexico City, Alba (2004; 2006) also emphasised the importance of lived experience in the production of representations of the metropolis, highlighting the role of residents' mobility practices and the gendered dimension of the relationship to space associated with differentiated access to the city. Mental maps were therefore recognised as a relevant way to study representations of urban space and their connection with socialisation. However, this method has also been the target of a number of criticisms, of which the main objection seems obvious because it is an empirical issue for any researcher: it relates to the differences in the ability of individuals to represent space in two dimensions and to communicate these representations by drawing. The implications of these criticisms are far from purely methodological: on the one hand, they cast doubt on the relevance of believing in maps as a

possible mediator or translator of representations of space; and on the other (and more 'radically'), they question the relevance of thinking about our relations to space from a representational perspective at all.[10]

This scepticism (in both its 'radical' and in more nuanced forms) ultimately reflects the adoption of a critical stance towards 'structuralising' approaches that stem from the temptation to reduce the complexity of our relationship with the world to a few major explanatory categories. In his classic book *Thirdspace*, geographer Edward Soja expresses strong doubts about the way in which mental maps tend to be interpreted:

> 'I remember an intense flurry of interest in Geography over the elucidation of 'cognitive maps,' mental images of space that we all carry with us in our daily lives. Many studies were done to elicit such mental maps across gender, race, and class lines by asking individuals to draw maps of the city in which they lived. Various techniques were used to summarize these imagined urban depictions and the resultant composite mappings were then compared. Often, some very interesting insights about human spatiality were produced. But equally often the interpretation abruptly ended with naive categorical idealizations, such as 'men's mental maps are extensive, detailed, and relatively accurate' while women's were 'domicentric' (centered on the home), more compact, and less accurate in terms of urban details; or, the poor have highly localized mental maps in contrast to the wealthy, whose mental maps come close to reproducing a good road map from the gas station. Readers were left with the impression that the conceived space defined an urban reality on its own terms, the mental defined and indeed produced and explained the material and social worlds better than precise empirical descriptions.' (Soja, 1996, p. 80-81)

Ingold's (2000; 2011) theoretical approach, with its focus on knowledge of the environment, has helped present a strong challenge to cognitivist and representational approaches on the grounds that they tend to separate experience from cognition, the body from the mind. Based on Gibson's (1979) ecology of perception and Bateson's (1973) ecology of

[10] These approaches have been grouped together under the term non-representational, popularised in particular by the geographer Nigel Thrift (2008). Some authors will speak of post-representational, or more-than-representational theories (see in particular Rossetto, 2015). For an attempt at a synthesis and a critical approach to these theories, see (Cresswell, 2012).

mind, Ingold (2000) emphasises the role of situated experience and engagement in action in the production of meaning. This leads to a profound critique of the 'mental map' (thought of here as a mental schema internal to the individual that organises his or her thinking about space) According to the author, such a map simply does not exist (ibid). Mapping therefore necessarily involves abstracting space and the 'cartographic illusion' stems from the fact that this process is not made visible and thus naturalized (ibid). Ingold (2000) draws a distinction here between *map-making*, the creation of an abstract two-dimensional representation of space, and *mapping*, the creation of a narrative or sign for a spatial experience:

> 'Mapping must be distinguished from mapmaking. For the designs to which mapping gives rise – including what have been variously categorized as 'native maps' and 'sketch maps' – are not so much representations of space as condensed histories. Thus, to put my thesis in a nutshell, knowing is like mapping, not because knowledge is like a map, but because the products of mapping (graphic inscriptions), as those of knowing (stories), are fundamentally un-maplike.' (2000, p. 220)

The methodological implications of these considerations are major, since they entail taking a greater interest in the process of producing the map (in this case the mental map) as a performance set in a communicative context, rather than as a product, a state of the respondent's spatial representations. Thus, according to Ingold, mapmaking is the process in which a performance is inscribed:

> 'Both mapping and speaking are genres of performance that draw their meanings from the communicative contexts of their enactment. It follows, for another thing, that neither mapmaking nor writing can serve to transcribe pre-existent thoughts or mental representations onto paper. The map, like the written word, is not, in the first place, the transcription of anything, but rather an inscription. Thus mapping gives way to mapmaking at the point, not where mental imagery yields an external representation, but where the performative gesture becomes an inscriptive practice.' (2000, p. 231)

Should we then consider mental mapping – and even the study of representations – as obsolete or even fallacious? My approach, influenced by pragmatic thinking, will be to regard

mental mapping as a useful tool, provided that we are interested not in an object (the map produced) but in a process (the construction of the map). In the same way, representations are important insofar as we understand them not as fixed mental schemas, but as matter in motion, the product of a context of enunciation, and continually redefined in practice.

METHODOLOGY

My use of the mental map method was therefore one element of an ethnographic fieldwork strategy. It took the form of participant observation of six group mental-map-making workshops (3 or 4 people per group, see Figure 2), which I co-organised in 2022-2023, in collaboration with representatives of the local authority of San Gregorio, and in which local residents took part. The co-organisers of the workshops were 'native' residents of San Gregorio who were also heavily involved in the social and cultural life of the pueblo: one resident is a member of the permanent assembly of the pueblo, another is heavily involved in local religious activities, and a third organises weekly sports training sessions for the young people of the pueblo. The division of tasks in organising the workshops was as follows: my companions decided how the workshops would be divided up, decided where they would take place, invited the local people to attend and were responsible for communication. They decided to organise the workshops in sections of the main streets and avenues of the pueblo, and to convene the residents of the area concerned, either by going door to door or through informal discussions. Three of the workshops were held in the private homes of local residents, the other three in community venues: an educational centre and two chapels. My role was to take charge of the running of each workshop, i.e. to give the instructions, and to organise the various stages of the work, which will be presented below.

The residents were divided into small groups and my instructions (expressed orally) were deliberately vague, such as the following:

> 'Draw a map of San Gregorio on a blank sheet of paper (large format, with the option of gluing several sheets together if necessary), and – based on your personal experience – represent, in any way you like, the places where walking seems problematic, dangerous or unpleasant to you; and those where it seems fluid, easy or pleasant.'

Once the maps had been produced, each group was given the opportunity to present its map to the others. The socio-demographic profile of the workshop participants was varied, and the social and gender mix was relatively well maintained. Some participants came from intellectual backgrounds (architect, primary school teacher, office worker), while others were students, shopkeepers, manual workers and farmers. All of them claimed to be 'native' inhabitants of the San Gregorio *pueblo*, some claiming to have been there for several generations, and many were involved in various aspects of local social and cultural life.

Figure 2.

Workshop in the chapel of San Juan Minas, photograph by the author, April 2023

As I explained, the maps were not the final product of the workshops, and it was mainly the discussions between the residents (recorded and combined with my own notes) that provided the basic material for my work. My notes and transcripts, accompanied by a field notebook, were broken down thematically around several entries (reference to sociability practices and their locations; references to memories; references to 'new residents' and differentiation criteria, etc.). These themes were not established in advance but emerged inductively during fieldwork.

Ethnographic observation outside the time-space of the workshops and interviews with key players in the organisation of community life complemented the workshop activities. The ethnographic study conducted in 2022 and 2023 led me to take part in various collective

activities in the *pueblo*, such as community assemblies, cultural and political events organised by residents, and community work activities.[11] It also led me to make regular visits to the *pueblo* as well as to several of its residents, and to accompany some of them in their daily practices and interactions, using walking as an ethnographic resource.[12]

In this paper, I will first look at the role of walking in the identification with place; then I will see how difficulties in walking render this link vulnerable and are attributed to 'new residents' who are excluded to a pole of otherness. Finally, I will qualify this 'othering' by leaving the discursive space-time of map production and exploring how these issues of co-presence are negotiated in practice.

WALKING AS A MEANS OF ANCHORING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY LOCALLY

Identification with social groups plays a fundamental role in the construction of the self, and the formation of such groups entails a delimitation process – the establishment of an *us* that exists only because it is distinguished from a *them* (Elias & Scotson, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The production and maintenance of a social group therefore requires cohesion, which involves the production and sharing of common symbols (Blokland, 2017). Halbwachs (1925), in his work on collective memories, was one of the first to suggest that space played a role in fixing these symbols. Places therefore contribute to the construction and maintenance of collective identities, as French geographer Guy Di Méo (1999) states:

> 'The symbolic universe (territorial ideologies, heritage values, collective memory, feelings of identity in particular) of the cognitive structures of the social subject finds a solid field of reference in the objective structures of geographical space. These, in turn, provide arguments for identity, innumerable landmarks capable of reviving collective memory, for the societies that produce them' (Di Méo, 1999, p. 91).

[11] The practice of faenas comunitarias (community work) (farming, village maintenance, construction or maintenance of community buildings, etc.) is widespread in the pueblos originarios, and dates back to pre-Hispanic times; this practice persists under the name of tequio in the central Mexican altiplano, and finds its Andean equivalent under the name of minga or minka.

[12] On this point, see in particular the theses of Martinez (2019) and Avilés (2020).

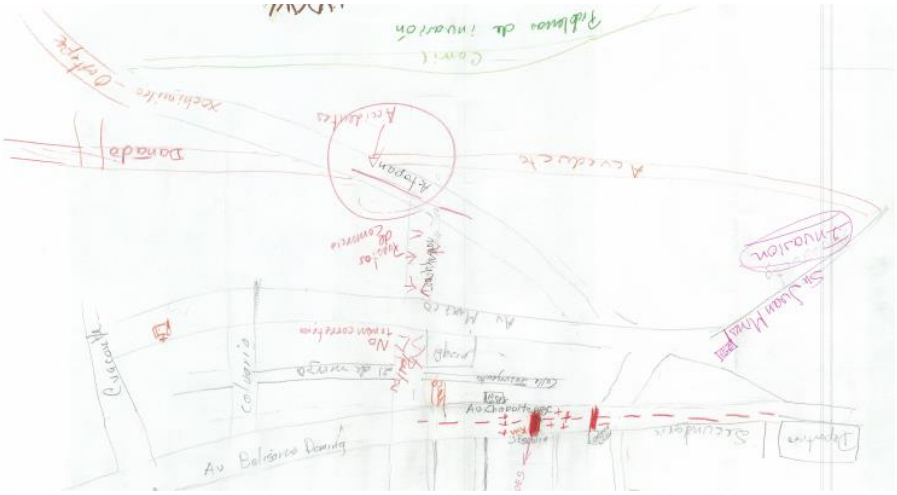
Anthropologists, through the study of settlement rituals, have taken an interest in the processes by which these symbols are set in place, particularly in a context of globalisation that favours forms of multi-territoriality (Agier, 2015; Appadurai, 1996). In the context of the *pueblos originarios* of Mexico City, Alvarez and Portal (2011) have shown that religious activities, including patron saint festivals, played a major role in the production of a cyclical time that reaffirmed the community's embeddedness in the territory, despite a context of urban change. Fewer studies have looked at the role of everyday practices in the production and reactivation of community symbols. It seems to me that a perspective based on walking can fill this gap.

Knowledge of space and its representation: pedestrian mobility and familiar space

Numerous studies have looked at the ways in which knowledge of urban space is acquired, particularly in big cities, where it can only be partial and fragmentary (Garcia Canclini et al. 1996; Jodelet and Milgram, 1977). According to Tuan (1977), place is produced as much by empirical experience as by representations generated in a given social and cultural context. For Gervais-Lambony (1994), however, we only become fully-fledged city dwellers when we can find our way around the city, when our empirical knowledge of it takes precedence over fantasies, rumours and hearsay. During the workshops I attended, I realised that the experience of walking played a fundamental role in people's knowledge of their local space, and in their ability to represent it. In this respect, the vast majority of the maps focused on the central space of the *pueblo*, the 'casco historico'[historical center of the village], with its symbolic buildings such as the church and the cemetery, as well as certain buildings linked to everyday practices such as the market area and the schools.

Figure 3.

Mental map produced by residents at the Chapultepec Avenue workshop, June 2022



The first anchor point from which people seem to find their bearings in the local area is the street, or the part of the street in the immediate vicinity of their home. The street seems to be the best place for neighbours to get to know each other and to understand local urban problems. In addition, the maps showed a lot of blanks (see Figure 3) which residents justified by saying: 'I never go that way'. The margins produced by more recent waves of urbanisation are vaguely represented or not at all. Residents view them with suspicion, and hearsay largely informs their knowledge of these areas.

The role of walking in building community bonds

Walking plays an important role in building and consolidating social ties (Aguilar Díaz, 2016). The foot journeys of the residents I was able to accompany were punctuated by greetings to shopkeepers and passers-by met along the way. Pedestrian routes are rarely linear and continuous, but often punctuated by detours, pauses and digressions resulting from encounters with people they stop to talk with, to catch up, exchange information and so on. One place in particular plays this role as a space for sociability and plays a major part in local identity: the streets adjacent to the covered market. The latter, which was destroyed by the 2017 earthquake and rebuilt by the authorities, is not much liked by the locals, who prefer the less formal stalls that stretch out nearby.. These streets are bustling with pedestrian activity, as they are part of the *pueblo*'s commercial and social centrality. Farmers transport supplies to the stalls, crossing the avenues with wheelbarrows full of vegetables from the chinampas. Residents describe this as a defining feature of the *pueblo*'s identity According to one resident, this market area acts as an 'information centre' where local affairs are discussed.

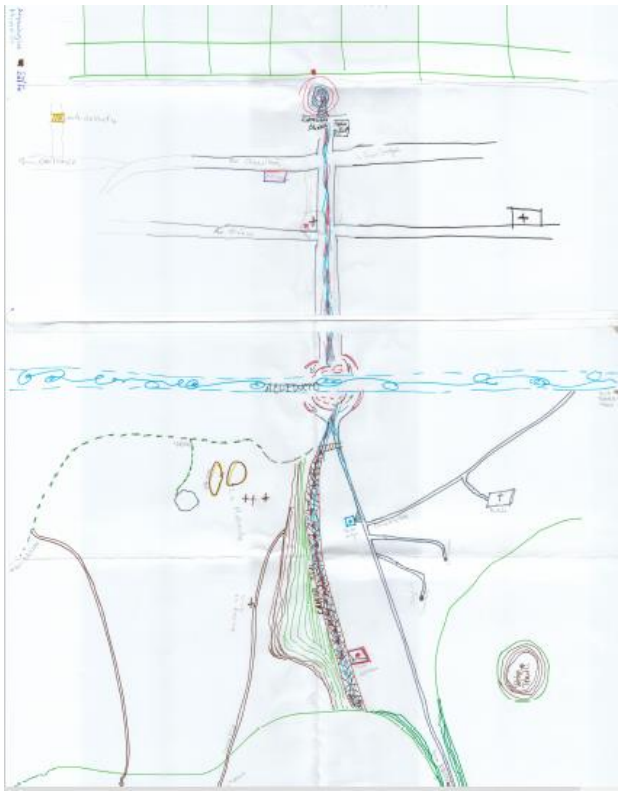
Other ‘ordinary places’ (shops, private homes) punctuate the mental maps and serve as common landmarks for the residents. They are often associated with familiar people in the *pueblo* (so-and-so’s shop, so-and-so’s house). In the residents’ accounts, physical space and social space merge. Pedestrian practices therefore anchor routines that shape knowledge of the local space and interactivity between residents.

Walking as a way of anchoring social memories.

During the workshops, local residents regularly highlighted places that they felt constituted local heritage, often on the basis of their own experience. Places such as the church square, an old house, an ancient farm are highly valued by the residents, who associate them with pleasant walking experiences. Valued sites are also located outside of the *pueblo*’s built area, as are the *chinampas,* figures carved in the rock dating back to pre-Hispanic times, the Teuhtli volcano. The map in the Figure 4 is one of the few to have been taken out of the “casco historico” of San Gregorio, to take account of the natural elements (top: the chinampas area, bottom: the hilly area, with the Teuhtli volcano on the right).

Figure 4.

Map created by residents at the Mexico Oriente Avenue workshop, August 2022[13]



These are places where people feel good; they can be a destination or a resting place (people stop to chat on a bench in front of the church, or meet up there), or simply the cause of a pleasant sensation when passing nearby (an old farmhouse). The past and the present are frequently intertwined when people talk about what a particular street was like when they were children, or how they used to walk along a particular footpath that has now been converted to a road, and so on. The pedestrian practices activate memories anchored in certain places, which serve as 'social frameworks' (Halbwachs, 1925) for local collective memory; the identity – space – memory (Kuri Pineda, 2017) triptych set in motion by the walking practices described in the workshops gives shape to a collective representation of San Gregorio. However, this heritage is seen as under threat. Not only is metropolitan expansion causing its gradual destruction, but the arrival of new populations who do not share these memory links is raising fears that it will erased.

A DECLINE IN 'WALKABILITY' THAT WEAKENS THE RELATIONSHIP WITH PLACE

All the residents who took part in the workshops agree on one point: walking has become impractical in San Gregorio. The mental maps are very detailed on the causes of this 'un-walkability' which, according to them, undermines the identity of the *pueblo*. New residents, particularly those living on the outskirts of San Gregorio, are held largely responsible for this situation.

'Unwalkability' and the weakening of 'local identity'

During the workshops, the initial aim of which was to arrive at a diagnosis of pedestrian mobility and the obstacles to it, a number of barriers (Figure 5) to 'free and dignified' walking emerged.[14] This included poor quality urban infrastructure; the sharp increase in car traffic in the *pueblo*, linked to its position as a crossroads to the *Alcaldias* of Tlahuac and Milpa Alta, a source of atmospheric, visual and noise pollution (see Figure 6); the development of motorcycle taxi services, whose drivers are known for their particularly uncivil road behaviour; conflicts over the use of public space, in particular the invasion of pavements by street

[14] This is the expression used by local people.

vendors;[15] the aesthetic deterioration and loss of visual identity of San Gregorio; the loss of natural and agricultural areas, particularly as a result of urbanisation; and the sharp rise in insecurity linked to drug use, theft and assault.

These issues therefore have to do with people's physical safety, the comfort of pedestrian mobility, aesthetics and local identity, as well as moral considerations; they have various emotional consequences (fear, frustration, unease, etc.) and are at the root of a feeling of 'deterritorialisation' characterised by: 1) a reduction in the space-time available for walking because of the fear of taking certain routes; 2) the closure of certain areas to pedestrian traffic, due to the increase in construction, particularly in former natural areas, and a tendency to certain crossing points to be closed off as a result of a feeling of insecurity; and 3) a sense of dispossession in terms of identity (loss of architectural unity, of San Gregorio's agricultural identity, degradation of valued places, etc.).

Figure 5.

Map produced by residents at the Avenue Belisario Dominguez workshop, June 2022[16]

[15] Street vending is a nebulous phenomenon in Latin America, covering a wide range of practices, from a fixed or semi-fixed position in the street to a walking activity, including selling at main crossroads, at red lights, etc. In this case, we are talking about semi-permanent kiosks (Figure 8).

[16] The map lists the obstacles to walking, but also the positive points that make it easier. Among the former, in order: (itinerant) commerce is taking over the pavements, heavy traffic, taxi base, motorcycle taxis, drug use, safety, public lighting, pavements in poor condition, traffic hotspots, flooding and drainage problems; among the latter: presence of trees, vegetable growers, plants, connection with the Chinampas area, potential for the development of a pedestrian route providing connection to nature.

Figure 6.

Photograph taken by a resident of San Gregorio, June 2023.

This feeling of 'deterritorialisation' means that San Gregorio, as an emotionally charged *place* and a source of identification, seems less and less habitable to its inhabitants, with its capacity for both material and ideal 'appropriation' limited. One of the discursive tools frequently used by local residents is that of nostalgia: the route they took as children to visit their parents' fields or to go for a walk is now closed off by urbanisation or by insecurity. Numerous studies have looked at the use of nostalgia in contemporary cities, which are undergoing sometimes brutal changes (Colin et al., 2019; Gervais-Lambony, 2003; Guinard & Gervais-Lambony, 2016; Portal, 2022). Nostalgia produces communality in the sense that it reaffirms shared symbols, even after their physical presence has disappeared, and is also of protest against an unjust urban order.

Spillover from the city and designation of 'outsiders'

According to the participants in the workshops, the people responsible for this deterritorialisation are mainly the new residents, who have 'invaded' the former agricultural or natural lands of San Gregorio, and who are seen as the main cause of the pueblo's ills. Usually

coming from a low-income background,[17] purportedly from other states in the country,[18] these migrants are part of the process of metropolitan spatial growth through low-income urbanisation. According to workshop participants, the new residents 'don't want to adapt', 'have different morals' and 'are bringing vice to San Gregorio'. Various uncivil and criminal practices and behaviours are attributed to them, and they are almost invariably associated with obstacles to walking (motorcycle taxi drivers, street traders, drug dealers and users).

If the points of conflict between pedestrians and other users with 'uncivil' practices are marked on the maps (e.g. motorbike taxi base, drug dealing area, street-selling *puesto*), the new residents are represented in the speeches as being 'foreigners to San Gregorio', living outside its '*casco historico',*[19] in the '*asentamientos irregulares*'. So, when the conversation turns to 'street vendors invading the pavement', or 'motorbike taxi drivers disrespecting pedestrians', it is regularly stated that 'these people are not from San Gregorio'.

In map representations, this spatialisation of exclusion from the '*pueblo* community' manifests itself in: 1) lack of representation: in most cases, the outlying '*asentamientos*' do not fit into the map, which is almost always centred on the '*casco historico*'; and 2) imprecise representation (see Figure 7), such as a vague shape or just a name written in the margin of the map, which contrasts with the more meticulous representation of the centre of the *pueblo.*

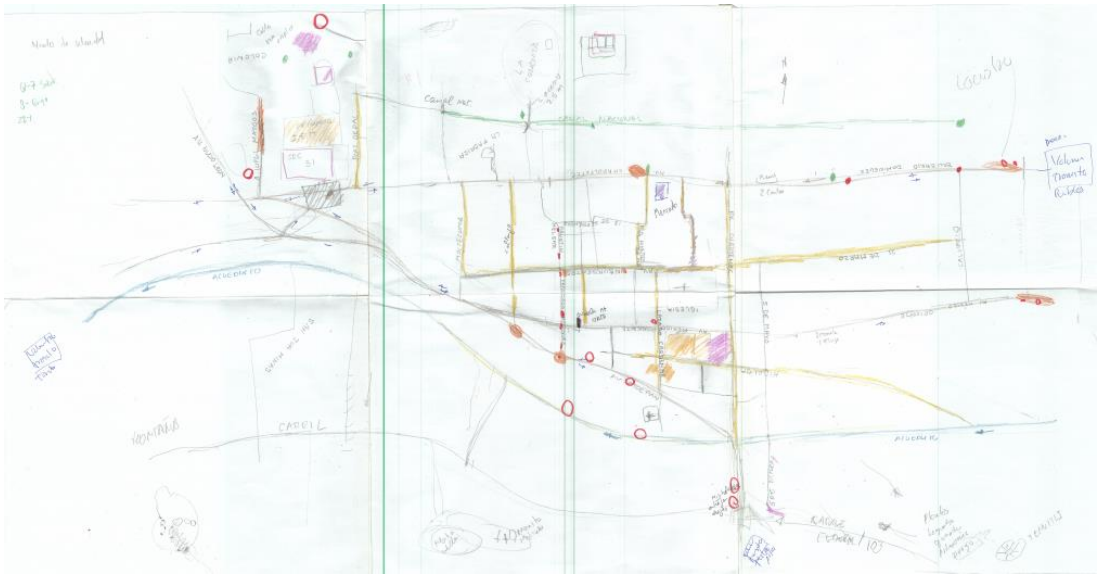
[17] Low-income urbanisation takes a variety of forms, with gradients of informality and inequality, ranging from the "asentamiento irregular" (illegal settlement) to the formal "colonias populares". There are often major variations even within the same area, and it is very common for a large number of houses in a "consolidated" low-income settlement, which enjoys all urban services, to have no "escrituras" (legal recognition of ownership). What's more, while many of the new residents live in very precarious conditions, some of San Gregorio's "originarios" are in similar situations; even in the heart of the pueblo (casco del pueblo), some residents live in homes with no formal recognition.

[18] Mexico is a federal state

[19] Historic centre formed around the church.

Figure 7.

Map drawn up by residents at the Mexico Poniente Avenue workshop, July 2022[20]



The dialectic of 'us' and 'them': the construction of a symbolic boundary

Research, particularly in sociology, on the production of symbolic boundaries warns us that these do not necessarily overlap with social boundaries, although the production of symbolic boundaries can lead to the establishment of social boundaries, or serve to justify them (Lamont & Molnár, 2002). We therefore need to consider the work of producing a group identity, and the issues of delimitation and exclusion that go with it, as a dynamic in its own right, generated in a given context, and therefore irreducible to predefined forms of categorisation (Elias & Scotson, 1994). What is the logic behind the production of the community of *San Gregorio*'s inhabitants? I have already mentioned the high diversity of socio-economic status among the workshop participants. The collective identity to which the participants relate is therefore not based on social class, although the 'new inhabitants' are often coming from more precarious socio-economic categories.

Neither is the practice of walking in the *pueblo* space strictly speaking a distinguishing criterion. In fact, the living space of the workshop participants varies enormously. For some, it is mainly constructed locally, but for others it encompasses a wide range of metropolitan locations (particularly with respect to work-related mobility). Mobility practices and the dimensions of the space experienced are therefore not major distinguishing factors. The main factor in defining the social group and setting *outsiders* apart is therefore 'historical' family

[20] The names of outlying districts are shown on the edges of the map (e.g. La Conchita, San Juan Minas).

membership of the *pueblo*. This membership implies, firstly, that members of the community know each other and are immediately identified as son of, cousin of, etc; secondly, that they adhere to the symbolic markers already mentioned, in particular possession of a body of shared memories; and thirdly, that they are involved in community affairs, whether through local organisations or eco-territorial struggles. In this respect, many 'native' residents are also kept on the fringes of the group and accused of 'apathy', 'disinterest' and even selfishness.

OTHERNESS NEGOTIATED IN EVERYDAY PRACTICES: THE NEED TO CONTEXTUALISE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

In presenting my theoretical position and methodological strategy, I made a point of stressing that the mental maps were not sufficient in themselves. On the one hand, they are more a 'pretext' for ethnographic work based on participant observation than an object of study in themselves. On the other hand, the workshops are just one arena of ethnographic observation among others (e.g. the street and its interactions, community activities, etc.). In observing the street scenes and accompanying the movements of certain residents, I realised that the representations that dominated the workshops were only marginally used. This led me not to discredit these representations but to put them into perspective and, above all, to recontextualise them. This prompted me to move towards less 'representational' approaches, or at least to insist on the fact that representations do not exist 'in themselves', but that they only make sense in the context of practical achievements, and that they are therefore highly modulable depending on the situation.

Practices that reflect a negotiated otherness

The observation of practices through ethnographic analysis reveals ongoing negotiations between residents and 'new' arrivals in the practice of walking and, by extension, in the use of public space. I will take here the example of two practices associated in the workshops with *outsiders*: the use of mototaxis and street vending.

Widely condemned as one of the main enemies of pedestrians, motorcycle taxis are in fact very useful in the daily journeys of local residents and even prove to be an effective complement to walking in the local mobility chain. This is particularly the case for women, who are often responsible for domestic activities and use mototaxis, for example, to return from the market with shopping bags or when they are late in taking their children to school. Street

vendor stalls (Figure 8), for their part, meet demand for consumption, mainly food (fast, cheap), and perform a crucial function in the public space. These informal traders are the 'eyes of the street', to use Jane Jacobs' expression. Indeed, these shops, some of which close late at night, generate a feeling of security for passers-by, especially women.

Figure 8.

Itinerant *puestos* on Avenida Acuaducto, photo by the author, June 2023

Observation of daily interactions also shows that '*nativos*' and 'new residents' get to know each other, greeting each other, exchanging ideas and forging ties of varying strength: a relationship of 'public familiarity' (Blokland, 2017; Felder, 2021) is established. Finally, the ordinary conflicts associated with the practice of walking are managed and negotiated on a daily basis, without the categorisations into 'native'/'newcomer' necessarily being applied, which suggests that these distinctions operate mainly at the discursive level.

Escaping marginalisation in a context of territorial dispossession

The construction of individual or collective identity, according to Hall (2011), is a terrain of power struggles that play out at the discursive level. Many authorshave highlighted the power issues associated with identification processes, in which bodies are the main battlegrounds. Introducing a collective book on power relations in placeness and identity building, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) state : 'if one of the modes of operation of power is to attach identities to

subjects, to tie subjects to their own identities through self-knowledge, then resistance serves to reshape subjects by untying or untidying that relationship' (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997, p.20).

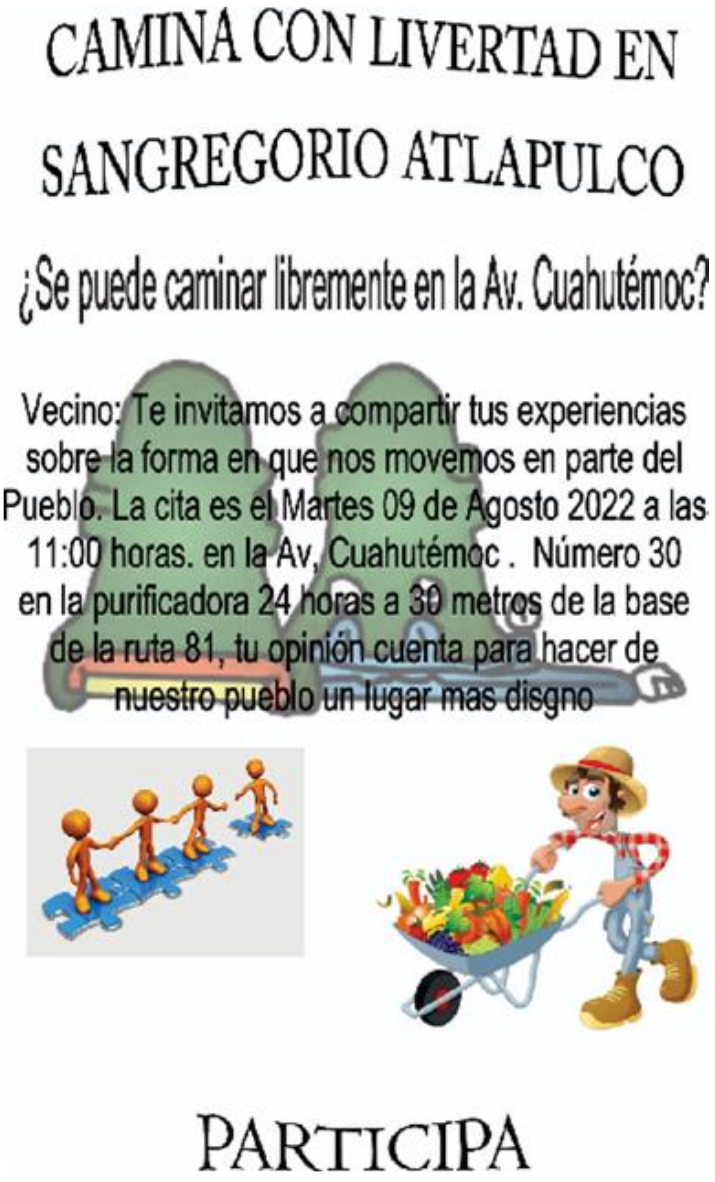
In 2019, the film *Chicuarotes*[21], by renowned Mexican actor and director Gael Garcia Bernal, was released in cinemas around the world. Shot in San Gregorio, the film follows the trials and tribulations of two youths who plunge into a world of violence in a social context of alcoholism, drug use and domestic violence. The residents of San Gregorio took this form of stigmatisation very badly, associating them with the most powerful symbols of urban marginality. This marginality is also experienced on a day-to-day basis and takes the form of degraded urban facilities, inefficient public transport (far from the services available in other parts of the city, e.g. metro, BRT, *cablebus*), and a lack of public response to the challenges of insecurity. As Figueroa et al. (2019) have shown in their study of Santiago de Chile, walking in a degraded urban environment makes people feel marginalised.

One of the discursive tools available to the inhabitants to extricate themselves from this 'marginal pole' (Althabe, 1993) is the political and legal recognition of the status of the '*pueblos originarios*', particularly in Mexico city's 2017 constitution, as well as an increasing appreciation of their practices and traditions on the part of cultural actors, civil society organisations, academics, etc. The inhabitants claim to have a pre-Hispanic past, and incorporated the San Gregorio glyph, derived from colonial codices, into the leaflets communicating about the workshops (see Figure 9).

[21] Chicuarotes is the nickname given to the people of San Gregorio.

Figure 9.

Leaflet produced by local residents to publicise a workshop, August 2022[22]



The claim to an 'autochthonous' and village identity encourages residents to set themselves apart from the metropolis. While a programme to improve conditions for pedestrian mobility promoted by the city authorities includes the installation of more numerous and brighter streetlights, some residents protest against installations 'designed for the city' and 'not in keeping with the spirit of a village'. Some local practices that regularly come into conflict with the metropolitan organisation of mobility, such as horseback riding (see Figure 10) or blocking traffic during religious processions, are strongly supported by local residents. In this way, the

[22] In the background, the San Gregorio glyph, representing the mountains and the water that flows from them. Acapulco (the pre-Hispanic name for San Gregorio Atlapulco) means "place where the water swirls".

claim to a *pueblo* identity, based on historical roots in a territorialised community, gives residents a renewed sense of dignity in the face of metropolitan expansion taking place against a backdrop of dispossession and cultural imperialism.

Figure 10.

Riders in San Gregorio, photo by the author, August 2022[23]

Restoring representations in the space-time of collective action

It seems to me, however, that this production of a group identity linked to identification with place is not just a matter of discourse but is part of a practice of collective action based on a long experience of eco-territorial struggle. The 'we' is important when it facilitates the creation of a *common*, in the sense given by Dardot and Laval (2014), i.e. when it enables the creation of a political community on the basis of *acting in common*. This *common action* is directed towards the claiming of political rights, theoretically granted by the constitution of Mexico City but constantly flouted by the local and metropolitan authorities. It is also associated with the desire to preserve the lifestyles, traditions and religious practices that constitute the uniqueness of the *pueblos originarios* of the Mexico City region. It is in this sense that we should understand the formulation of a group identity that is in principle relatively

[23] This is a "quinceañera", the celebration of a young girl's 15th birthday, a very important family event in Mexico City. Here the locals ride through the pueblo on horseback as part of the celebration, blocking the streets to car traffic.

impermeable. The ‘new residents’ thus symbolise this incursion of the metropolis, which brings with it new practices (drug use), new urban problems (increased motor traffic), new environmental issues and new issues of territorial sovereignty. According to the workshop participants, ‘new arrivals’ are particularly receptive to the municipality’s political and clientelist rhetoric, in a context where clientelism is the main *modus operandi* of urban policies.

CONCLUSION

In the course of mental map production workshops organised in order to establish community initiatives to improve pedestrian mobility, representations emerged of the locality as a place in which a community bond is embedded. Those bonds involve the mediation of space – imbued with symbols, memories and routinised practices – that serve as anchor points for the construction of a shared local identity. In a context of strong urban changes and territorial dispossession, this identity is also constructed through the discursive exclusion of ‘newcomers’ who do not share the same symbolic frames of reference. However, these segregative representations do not seem consistent with the local residents’ day-to-day practices, which blur the lines between *natives* and *outsiders*.

In this paper I have sought to show that walking plays an important role in the construction of a local collective identity, based on spatially embedded symbols, memories and shared social links. I have also sought to show that this local collective identity had its limits and boundaries, which were closely linked to the socio-political and urban context of Mexico City’s metropolitan expansion and its impact on the *pueblos*. However, I wanted to emphasise the need to contextualise these representations which do not exist ‘in themselves’, or ‘for themselves’, but in relation to a practical horizon. In this respect, this work offers a critique of the mental map, which should not be taken out of its context of production but can prove a stimulating tool in the context of situated ethnographic work.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The article was translated from French by John Crisp, with financial support from the Laboratoire Ville Mobilité Transport (LVMT). The author would like to thank Félix de Montety for his help reviewing the translation.

ELIOTT DUCHARME is a PhD student in urban studies at the Gustave Eiffel University. He received a grant from the 'Institut des Amériques', for a 3 years' research fieldwork hosted by the 'Centre d'Etudes Mexicaines et Centraméricaines' (CEMCA) in Mexico City. His work focuses on pedestrian mobilities and social ties in Mexico cities' low-income peripheral areas.