The Persistence of Indigenous Markets in Mexico's Supermarket Revolution

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Over the last few decades, policy at all levels of government has marginalized Mexico's indigenous market system in favor of corporate food retailers. In response to the debt crisis of the early 1980s and the requirements of structural adjustment plans, Mexico – like many countries in the global South – began a process of major economic restructuring, which had profound effects on every aspect of the food system. The liberalization of foreign direct investment facilitated the entrance of multinational supermarkets, while the elimination of tariffs on imports through the North American Free Trade Agreement enabled global sourcing via distribution centers located elsewhere. State and municipal governments have also privileged corporate retailers as part of their economic development strategies, with governors appearing at ribbon-cutting ceremonies of new stores and offering speeches rife with the language of progress and modernization.

Each time a new supermarket opens, governors and mayors are featured in the media leading ribbon-cutting ceremonies.

Yet little attention is given to the impacts of supermarket expansion on indigenous market systems. The indigenous market system, predating the arrival of the first Spanish conquistadores and common across Mesoamerica, has been the primary source of urban food provisioning for many centuries. My research also suggests the continued importance of these markets to many groups underrepresented in policy-making, particularly low-income urban consumers, poor vendors, and small farmers.

My SYLFF Research Abroad award allowed me to conduct pre-dissertation research examining the history and survival of this market system through a case study of indigenous markets in Oaxaca City, Mexico – called *tianguis* - a rich case for three main reasons: 1) The explosion of multinational supermarket chains is more recent than in other parts of the country, leaving the experience fresher in the minds of vendors and customers; 2) Oaxaca has a deeply-rooted history of urban food provisioning via

tianguis, and much of the large indigenous population of the state continues to be served by them; and 3) The availability of rich historical and ethnographic documentation facilitates deep contextualization.

Tianguis, a word from Nahuatl (*tianguiztli*), refers to the day when producers gather to exchange products. That this indigenous word still dominates the lexicon today attests to their historical significance; though I use "markets" and "*tianguis*" interchangeably here, the Spanish word "*mercado*" in Mexico refers primarily to stationary markets. *Tianguis* are typically held in public spaces, and in fact, in the Mixtec language of Oaxaca, the local word for tianguis – *yahui* – means both market and public plaza; in Mexico today, *tianguis* and the Spanish word *plaza* are often used interchangeably to refer to open-air weekly markets.

Early colonial native language texts and conquistador chronicles demonstrate their essential role in village and urban life across Mesoamerica. The *Florentine Codex*, a compilation of nine books on Nahua culture from the early colonial period, written in Nahuatl and translated into Spanish by a group of bilingual Nahua nobles overseen by Fray Bernadino de Sahagún (1979), dedicates an entire volume to the merchants – with elaborate descriptions of the traders, their wares, ceremonial offerings, and journeys. While this codex documents the more spectacular class of long-distance traders, historians have shown that nearly all Mesoamerican towns formed part of a system of rotational markets. Centuries later, *tianguis* persist as a symbol of indigeneity and popular culture, featuring prominently in the paintings of 20th century artists such as Diego Rivera.

The Great Market of Tenochtitlán, Diego Rivera, 1945

Tianguis vendor, 2017

19th century Oaxacan tianguis

Contemporary *tianguis*

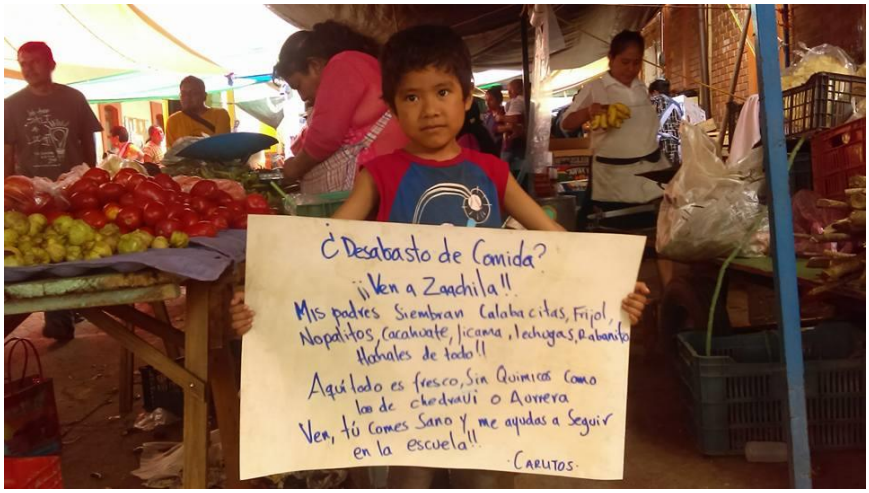
Anthropologists into the late 20th century stressed the centrality of Oaxacan *tianguis* to the regional food system, highlighting their dual function for producer-vendors who also came to buy. They also argued that the indigenous market system operated in a parallel system (rather than a competitive one) to the modern industrialized economy.

In my site visits to *tianguis* markets, interviews with vendors, and thematic analysis of newspaper articles from two newspapers widely circulated in the state of Oaxaca, it became clear that while these markets continue to be crucial to the livelihoods of many low-income people, *tianguis* now find themselves in direct competition with the modern food economy struggling to confront the rapid incursion of corporate food retailers. Oaxaca's metropolitan area went from having only one small national chain supermarket twenty years ago to having dozens, including six Walmart owned stores. And bigger issues of politics and culture – questions about how societies value urban space, regional farmers, and local communities – are being fought out on the terrain of food retail.

My research revealed that as municipal and state governments have promoted corporate food retailers as part of their urban development strategies, they often ignore alternative proposals for economic development, food systems planning, and the use of urban space. In one hotly contested case, the municipality secretly granted permission to cut down nearly 200 trees for the construction of a multinational chain supermarket; this abandoned property had been the last remaining greenspace in a quickly growing urban neighborhood, and neighbors had solicited the government to create a public park. In lieu of opening the issue to public debate, the municipality negotiated secretly with the supermarket; the trees were cut in the middle of the night.

In another high-profile case last summer, a media campaign and counter-campaign underscored the precarious coexistence of transnational supermarkets and the indigenous market systems they were expected to replace, revealing this critical

underlying tension in the urban food systems of Mexico. Alarming headlines inundated national newspapers, reading, "Food shortages in Oaxaca!" accompanied by images of empty supermarket shelves. The state governor blamed the teachers' union for the alleged scarcity, for erecting barricades to demand justice for victims of state-sponsored violence. Immediately, a counter-campaign was initiated by local journalists and teachers' union sympathizers to contest the defamation of the movement and the invented food shortage; hundreds of photographs circulated, featuring plentiful indigenous markets throughout the city and region.



Poster reads: "Food shortages? Come to [the market of] Zaachila! My parents plant squash, beans, cactus, peanuts, jicama, lettuce, radishes…Here everything is fresh, without chemicals like in [multinational supermarkets] Chedraui or Aurrera. Come, you'll eat healthy and help me keep in school! – Carlitos (Photo by Silvia Hernandez)

These photos and articles revealed how people are aiming to regain control over their food system and what they value about the indigenous market system.

The tensions illuminated by contemporary political conflict, together with their rich, well-documented history, and their continued importance in a largely indigenous state, make Oaxaca City a fascinating place in which to study how the markets have fared against the tide of the "supermarket revolution". But given that this supermarketization of food retail is a phenomenon now affecting much of the global South, the issue is of great consequence far beyond the borders of Mexico.

The SYLFF Research Abroad award offered an incredible opportunity to develop and refine a research project, which I will continue during the next year. This study produces new knowledge crucial to theorizing the urban food systems of the global South with a situated, historicized ethnography. In this way, the study contributes to recent rethinking of global South urbanism, which urges a de-centering of urban theory

from its basis in Euro-American experiences, focusing the spotlight on an indigenous marketing system central to food systems in Latin America and adding a new perspective to scholarship on indigenous urbanism, by emphasizing how people stake out and contest claims to the urban food landscape.

Finally, my SRA allowed me not only to develop relationships with research institutions; it also helped me build collaborative partnerships with two important local organizations working on food systems issues. I am documenting agrobiodiversity sold in *tianguis* to be used by the non-governmental organization Geoconservación in their project "Reactivation of the Local Economy," which includes the goal of conserving agrobiodiversity, given its contribution to food and livelihood security, sustainable agriculture and resilience in the face of changing environmental conditions. Drawing on previous experience with community-based research, I will also design and facilitate a teaching module of the Escuela para el Bien Común, a school run by IDEAS Comunitarias for indigenous youth from around the state, in order to introduce students to key concepts of food systems.