

From Client to Comrade: Alternative Currency and Market Relations in Mexico

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic exploration into people's attempts to re-signify the meanings of money and market relations in contemporary Mexico. The thesis looks at producers, traders and service providers who are striving to institute their own economic system through a project called the Mercado Alternativo Túmin (MAT, or Alternative Market of the Túmin). In essence, the MAT is a solidarity economy network, held together by an alternative currency called the *túmin*. The *túmin* is both the material and symbolic basis through which the *tumistas* (project members) strive to create the conditions for a good life together. It acts as a medium for imagining and creating social relations guided by the project's foundational principles of trust, solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy.

Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic research conducted in multiple field sites, the thesis narrates and analyses part of the MAT story as it grew from a small, localised affair in a small rural town, to a nationwide network made up of individuals and collectives across the country. The chapters look at the multiple manifestations of the MAT in different settings, documenting how the *tumistas* understand and engage with their project according to their particular life trajectories and contexts. I argue that the *tumistas* overwhelmingly engage with the project as a vehicle through which they can imagine and enact their visions of a good life. This is most commonly expressed through values and a sense of dignity, which they feel have been denied to them living under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. The MAT provides a framework through which the *tumistas* can reflect on their position in the world, and make ethical judgements and decisions which inform their actions towards constructing a better life for themselves and their fellows. I suggest that we can understand the MAT as a process of collective and self-transformation through which a certain sort of person – a *compañero solidario* (a solidary comrade) – is formed.¹ The ethnography focuses on how the *tumistas* strive to enact and materialise their ideas about alternative values and ethics; efforts which inevitably exist alongside and often in tension with pre-existing social forces, relations and imaginaries.

Given the growing interest in the 'solidarity economy' in recent years from activists, scholars and policy makers alike, a study of the MAT is a worthy endeavour. I contribute an ethnographic study that takes seriously the multiple possibilities and contradictions that arise when the solidarity economy is lifted from the page and animated in real life. I also contribute to ongoing conversations in the anthropology of money and to debates on the value question, as well as providing insight and inspiration for all those who contend that 'another world is possible.'

¹ The term *compañero* is widely used in Latin America to denote relationships such as those between classmates or work colleagues, yet it has deeper connotations of equality and solidarity. Commonly employed in contexts of struggle and political mobilisation, the term usually translates as 'comrade'.

DECLARATION

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Glossary of terms

Acarreados	people ‘shipped in’ to rallies by political parties
Acuerdos	agreements
Ayuntamiento	town council / local government
Brujo	witch
Cacique / Caciquismo	local political boss
Campesino	peasant
Centavos	cents
Cliente	client
Comadre	fictive kin ‘co-mother’ or close friend
Comerciante	trader / dealer
Compadrazgo	fictive kinship institution
Compañero/a	comrade
Coyote	middleman / buyer
Creciente	flood
Curandero	traditional healer
Ejote	green vean
Espinalteco	resident of Espinal
Envidia	envy
Huerto	vegetable patch
Jornalero	agricultural day labourer
Limpia	ritual cleansing (of aura or spirit)
Lona	printed canvas used to advertise
Maestro/a	teacher
Mayordomo	community religious figurehead
Metafísica	metaphysics
Mezcal	alcohol from the agave plant
Mole	thick sauce for cooking
Padrino	sponsor
Palo volador	large pole used for ritual dancing
Pueblo	small town / people
Pulque	alcohol from the maguey plant
Prosumidor	prosumer (producer-consumer)
Quincena	fortnightly wage payment
Regatón	middleman / buyer
Regidor/a	councillor
Reglamento	guidelines (regulations)
Socio/a	cooperative member

Tanda	rotating community savings scheme
Tianguis	open air market
Tianguis tumista	Itinerant cross-network events, generally lasting 2-3 days
Trueque	lit. barter exchange, reference towards reciprocal relations
Tumista	member of the Mercado Alternativo Túmin

Anacronyms and abbreviations

BUAP	Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla / Meritorious Autonomous University of Puebla
CC	Coordinación Central / MAT Coordinating Committee
CT	Casa Túmin – MAT cooperative shops and operative hubs
CRAC	<i>Coordinadora Regional de Autoridades Comunitarias</i> / Regional Coordination of Community Authorities
DICONSA	Distribuidora Conasupo / Conasupo Distributor
ECOSOL	Economía Social y Solidaria / Social and Solidarity Economy
ENAH	Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia / National School of Anthropology and History
JBG	Junta de Buen Gobierno / Good Governance Council
MAT	Mercado Alternativo Túmin / Túmin Alternative Market
PAN	Partido Acción Nacional / National Action Party
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional / Institutional Revolutionary Party
PRONASOL	Programa Nacional de Solidaridad / National Solidarity Programme
TRA	Túmin-Regional Autónomo / Autonomous Túmin Region
RUDH	Red Unidos por los Derechos Humanos / United for Human Rights Network,
SAGARPA	Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación / Secretariat of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food
UI	Universidad Intercultural / Intercultural University
UV	Univeridad Veracruzana / University of Veracruz
UVI	Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural / Intercultural University of Veracruz

Introduction:

Money, Value and Autonomy in Contemporary Mexico

In the early months of 2011, the Bank of Mexico instructed the PGR (Procuraduría General de la República, Attorney General's Office), to open an investigation into the Mercado Alternativo Tumin (Tumin Alternative Marketplace, MAT hereafter). When members of the MAT coordinating committee (Coordinación Central, CC hereafter) presented themselves to the local PGR office, they found that they were under investigation for the possible violation of article 28 of the Mexican Constitution, which granted the Bank monetary sovereignty. The evidence presented against them was a DVD recording of a news report that had been aired a few months previously on a prime-time slot on one of the country's most popular TV channels. The news report stated that the MAT was an 'alternative for commercial exchange', describing the *tumin* as 'an instrument of exchange for 80 producers in the municipality of Espinal, Veracruz, to facilitate the trafficking of goods' and 'strengthen the economy of the participants' (Televisa, 2011). The report features snapshot interviews with the founders of the project, and a shopkeeper, who provides an example of how the *tumin* is generally used in combination with the peso to complete transactions. The reporter then provides information on the denominations of *tumin* notes that exist (1t, 5t, 10t and 20t), and the type of businesses enlisted, before forecasting the project's growth over the coming months. The report ends with Juan Castro, the mastermind behind the project, describing the *tumin* as 'sustainable money' – a currency that stays in the locality and is constantly circulated between network members.

The MAT was launched a few months previously in November 2010, in the small rural town in the Totonacapan region to the north of Veracruz State. The project was designed and coordinated by a small group of human rights activists, university lecturers and local tradespeople with the aim to stimulate the local economy by encouraging exchange between local producers and traders through a cooperative network of members with a network specific currency. The network was envisioned as the foundational basis for cultivating social relations between its members – known as *tumistas* – guided by the project's foundational principles of trust (*confianza*), solidarity (*solidaridad*), mutual aid (*ayuda mutua*) and autonomy (*autonomía*). As an intervention into local economic life, the rationale behind the MAT was no different to countless alternative currency and other LETS (Local

Exchange and Trading Systems) projects that have proliferated across the globe in recent years. Yet for some reason, the Bank of Mexico took issue with the MAT.

The threat of legal action sparked a wave of media interest, and by the time I first heard about the MAT in the summer of 2012, the project had already made numerous national and even international headlines. Reports championed the project as a renewed example of indigenous struggle for autonomy against the Mexican state, or sought to discredit it, calling into question the specifics of the MAT's legality and its founders' links with the Zapatistas.² The sensationalism around the project was further fuelled by the tumistas' response to the threat.

On the 30th April 2011, the MAT CC (CC hereafter) issued a communiqué published on the front page of the movement's newspaper, the *Kgosni*, under a headline that read 'El Banco de Mexico señala al Túmin' ('The Bank of Mexico points its finger at the Túmin'). The text stated that, contrary to the Bank's claims, the project did not aim to supplant the Mexican peso. Referring back to the news report that was used as evidence against them, the tumistas pointed out that those interviewed had only praise for the project. They also made it clear that the philosophy of the MAT was totally different to that of the Bank of Mexico, which uses the peso to drive 'capitalist schemes' based on 'speculation and usury', where foreigners are able to 'make money out of Mexicans through interest and embargos that are the result of the great debts to which they have subjected the whole country' (Castro Soto et al., 2011). The text ends with a bold declaration:

The túmin is not an instrument for stealing, but for cooperating and helping one another out amongst *compañeros* [comrades]; it is not for getting rich off the backs of workers. It arises out of a situation of extreme poverty to satisfy local necessities, faced with a national economy driven to disaster, for which the Bank of Mexico is largely responsible.

The túmin arises to exercise the right to autonomy of local cultures, as specified in article 2 of the constitution. And not only is it legal, it is also more just, more healthy and more Mexican than the peso, given that it is produced in Mexico, it has a greater moral quality, and it recuperates the social function that commercial instruments should have. Given this state of affairs, it is us who politically accuse the Bank of Mexico for perverting the functioning of the Mexican peso and for giving in to foreign interests.³

2 The Zapatistas I refer to here are the EZLN (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), who publically launched their movement with an uprising in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas in 1994.

³ Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

The declaration situated the tumin at the heart of moral debates on the nature of money and sovereignty on the local, national and even international scale. The tumin was framed as a local exchange instrument that was designed to ‘satisfy local necessities’; and it was juxtaposed with the peso – the official fiat currency, which had been ‘perverted’ by the Bank of Mexico. The tumistas’ accusation suggested that the Bank had been neglecting its duty to steward the national economy and wellbeing of citizens, preferring to side with foreign interests and condemning many Mexicans to a life of poverty and misery. Moreover, the tumin was framed as a tool through which economic life can be reterritorialized and grounded in a particular locality. The MAT can thus be understood as a project through which people can strive to regain control over how and with whom they conduct their economic affairs.

The MAT-Banxico episode presents us with three central ideas that run through this thesis: money, value and autonomy. It introduces us to the idea that people are engaged in rethinking the role of money and, in particular, the conditions that give different currencies legitimacy as means of exchange and standards of value. It also points to the role of money and institutions – and specifically instituting currency and corresponding economic systems – in establishing regimes of value through which people live, understand and give meaning to their lives. Moreover, the episode can be read as emblematic of concerns in contemporary Mexico vis-à-vis relationships between the state and civil society – in this case movements that push for autonomy or recognition of different ways of doing and being within and against the national space. Finally, the episode can be read as symptomatic of recent shifts in the history of global finance and economic governance, and how the intersection of the two shapes political programmes and visions of the future; visions which have been increasingly called into question by or come into conflict with people’s everyday lived experience of a ‘healthy economy’.

The MAT-Banxico episode was a defining moment in the history of the project. The entanglement with the law had lasting effects in Espinal. While Kgosni headlines declared that the tumistas were defiant and ‘not afraid’, talk of illegality and courts summonses coupled with stigmatisation and harassment from fellow townsfolk and representatives of federal organisations deterred more cautious members from participating. Yet, paradoxically as support for the project seemed to wane in its hometown, interest and support was sparked elsewhere. The tumistas received messages of support and displays of solidarity from a whole host of people – activists, members of collectives, educational institutions – who

invited them to speak about their experience, and many of whom wanted to become tumistas themselves. The episode thus marked a watershed: it was the moment in which the project was publicised and explicitly politicised, and the start of a national movement of tumistas, which has been growing steadily since 2010. Over the course of nine years, the project has evolved from a local experiment in Espinal to encompass a network of 1,880 members spread over 21 states of the republic - and even a handful of international tumistas in recent years.⁴

The present thesis narrates and analyses some of this story through an ethnographic study of the MAT. The ethnography draws on 18 months' of fieldwork with the tumistas in multiple settings: from the project's rural backwater hometown and a tumista collective in the sprawling metropolis of Puebla, to book presentations in educational institutions and itinerant cross-network *tianguis* – celebratory events that lasted up to three days, combining marketplace, workshops and assemblies.⁵ An ethnographic study of the MAT is important and timely for a number of reasons. Not only does it offer fresh perspectives on anthropological debates surrounding money, value and autonomy; it also presents a valuable insight into the workings of a 'Solidarity Economy' initiative at a time when the term is garnering considerable traction in different settings across the globe. The Solidarity Economy is a term that is increasingly evoked by activists, academics and policy-makers alike as a possible alternative to neoliberal capitalism. The embracing of terms like this to inform and guide more just and sustainable economic systems can be understood within wider critiques of civilizational crisis, most recently pushed to the forefront of discussions about the future of humanity and other life forms in the midst of the climate emergency we face (Beckett, 2019; Escobar, 2018; Toledo, 2015). The present thesis thus engages with people who either actively see themselves, or who are considered by academic and activist observers alike, as pioneers in a transition to a brighter future. Moreover, the study emerges out of a long line of anthropological interest in the value of documenting social change as it happens, and from a commitment and hope that scholarship might have something to offer in shaping a better world.

⁴ The numbers are correct as of 31st July 2019. See chapter 3 for more detail on network distribution.

⁵ The word *tianguis* comes from the Nahuátl *tianquiztli*, and commonly refers to weekly street markets that are held throughout Mexico. *Tianguis* are generally considered informal, yet they have become institutions in their own right, playing an important role in the lives of many (Garnica Quiñones, 2016). In recent years the organic markets movement and other ECOSOL initiatives have appropriated the word.

Overview of the main argument: an ethnography of efforts to re-signify money and markets

Academic interest in LETS (Local Exchange and Trading Systems) and Solidarity Economy projects like the MAT has increased in recent years. This literature is wide in scope, yet it is possible to identify some general trends. There are excellent contextual and historical overviews of the subject, and many authors who work towards developing a conceptual framework for understanding what the Solidarity Economy is, or questioning the extent to which it provides a new economic paradigm through which to think and act through (Collin Harguindeguy, 2012; Laville, 2010a; Laville, 2010b; Miller, 2010). Edited collections provide both theoretical reflections and empirical examples (Marañón Pimentel, 2012; 2013; North and Scott Cato, 2017). There is the overarching sense that many authors are concerned with the extent to which LETS and Solidarity Economy initiatives may offer an alternative to neoliberal capitalism, thus many enquiries are framed in terms of binaries: (largely grassroots) alternatives are pitched against hegemonic forms of organisation, production and consumption. Analysis is often presented in terms of successes in or limitations to providing an alternative route to development (Dacheux and Goujon, 2011; for a MAT specific study, see Orraca and Orraca, 2013). While I too am interested in the extent to which these projects may offer a viable alternative to neoliberal capitalism, I seek to nuance this binary approach.

What I hope to show in this thesis is that through an ethnographic perspective we can start to arrive at more nuanced understandings of the ways in which people engage with projects like the MAT and what it is that motivates them to do so. Furthermore, the ethnographic perspective opens up room for observing, recording and taking seriously a multitude of possibilities that arise when a Solidarity Economy project like the MAT is lifted from the drawing board and animated into real life. Here we are able to reframe the terms of debate away from the extent to which the MAT is able to create viable alternatives to capitalism, to focus more on what people understand as living a good and dignified life, and perhaps ask how it is (if at all) that they reframe their intentions and actions through and/or as a consequence of engagement with the MAT. The problem then shifts from the ability of the MAT to provide an alternative, towards what people see as valuable in the project, and how it is that they use the framework to inspire reflection and critique and guide certain types of action and transformation.

This thesis, then, looks at how people engage with a project that aims to re-signify the meanings of money and market relations. My argument starts from the ethnographic premise that the túmin is both a tool and token for instituting the tumistas' vision of an alternative economy through a variety of creative practices. It thus serves as a material and symbolic basis for imagining and creating social relations that are based on the tumistas' understandings of the values that underpin their project. At the heart of these efforts is an overriding ethic of transformation. Through participation in the project, it is hoped that the tumistas change 'their capitalist chip for a solidary chip' (*cambiar el chip capitalista por un chip solidario*); thus engendering a collective change in consciousness. The MAT therefore offers the premise for the tumistas to treat each other with 'humanism and tenderness', and to restore a sense of value and dignity in themselves; markers of the good life which they feel have been denied under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism. This thesis thus looks at the varied ways in which different subjectivities interact with the MAT, how they understand it in the context of their own past experience, and how they harness it to make ethical judgements and decisions which inform their action as tumistas.

Yet, while the MAT may be discursively framed as an 'alternative to capitalism' in a broad sense, it is precisely the project's reliance on money and market relations that show that the 'alternative' often looks much like what we have seen before. Thus, while the túmin is a powerful token for bringing into being different value systems, the fact that it is a functional currency means it still lends itself to the sorts of actions and abstractions that money in a capitalist system characteristically brings about. Moreover, the project is predictably subsumed into the complex web of pre-existent social life, which means it exists in tension with all manner of structural forces, social relations and imaginaries, which inform the way the MAT is materialised in practice by the tumistas in varied settings. In the following section, I develop my argument in relation to the main themes and frameworks that guide the thesis.

Conceptual framework

Money

The 2008 financial crisis has provided the opportunity to reflect on the changing forms, functions, and meanings of money (Guyer, 2012; Hart, 2012a). Probable causes of the crisis, and the problem with financial capital at large, have been suggested as rooted in the blurring between the concepts of money and credit (Amato and Fantacci, 2012; Graeber, 2011). Yet,

what is money and where does it come from? (Hart and Ortiz, 2014a: 471). Aristotle denoted four functions of money: as a medium of exchange, form of payment, unit of account, and store of value. The anthropological notion of ‘general purpose money’ is understood as money that combines all four functions (Guyer, 2012). Hart (2012a) writes that the most commonly recognisable form of general purpose money in recent history is national currency. Hart points out that the era of financial capitalism (since the 1970s) has seen a ‘break up’ of this money form: thus we see the decline in the importance of national currencies and the rise of credit money, which is created, regulated and utilised by big banks and financial institutions. Correspondingly, since the 1980s, there has been a proliferation of alternative monetary forms emerging from the grassroots, the MAT being a case in point here. The distinction between money and currency is an important conceptual point. Currency is a particular kind of physical, tangible form of money. A focus on currency allows us to look at the social and political configurations and institutions that come into play in establishing the (il)legitimacy of certain types of money and monetary arrangements.

The rise of alternative currency movements like the MAT has caught the interest of many in the academy. Geographers, sociologists and political scientists in particular have looked at these movements with enthusiasm, asking whether they pose a challenge and offer an alternative to neoliberal globalisation (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham and Cameron, 2013; Helleiner, 2000; North, 2006; 2007). In the last decade, similar questions have been posed by a burgeoning theoretical, pedagogical and policy-orientated paradigm now defined as the Social or Solidarity Economy (ECOSOL hereafter, for its acronym in Spanish) (see Collin Harguindeguy, 2012; Marañón Pimentel, 2012; 2013; North and Scott Cato, 2017; Utting et al., 2015).⁶ Much of this literature seeks to provide a theoretical framework for being able to identify or propose an alternative to capitalist social relations of exchange and production and, as we shall see in the following chapter, these efforts are often closely tied with ECOSOL activist praxis. Yet despite the rise of interest in ECOSOL across many disciplines, specifically ethnographic accounts of ECOSOL projects in action have been limited. Notable exceptions here include accounts of ECOSOL initiatives in Greece (see Cabot, 2016; Rakopoulos, 2016); more regionally pertinent is Nelms’ account of state efforts to institutionalise ECOSOL initiatives in Ecuador (2015). I thus hope to contribute to

⁶ The Solidarity Economy is closely related to the Social Economy, and both terms are commonly used interchangeably as if they were the same thing. See chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion on this distinction.

a more nuanced understanding of what ECOSOL looks like – and in particular an alternative currency project – from an ethnographic perspective.

The MAT as an instituted process

My ethnography focuses on the process through which the tumistas are creating and engaging with their own economic system. A central element to this process is the túmin: as an object, the currency provides the material and symbolic basis upon which the wider project is elaborated. There are two things going on here that are closely bound together: the túmin is an object which brings to life or necessitates the wider institution of the MAT, and as a symbol it represents the general ethos and sociality aspired to through the project. This close association is reflected in the shorthand the tumistas often used for their movement: simply ‘El Túmin’.⁷ Taking the currency as a starting point thus helps us to think through the MAT as an instituted process (cf. Polanyi, 1957); the contours and content of which are documented in the following pages. We see how the MAT allows the tumistas to create and experiment with economic forms and behaviours that are in line with their perceived shared values. Ultimately, the MAT permits the tumistas to imagine and define meanings of money and exchange away from dominant conceptions – such as wealth as measured in GDP – to celebrate wealth as measured in the type and quality of human relations they aspire to (chapter 1). There are two key points to the argument here: the first is that the tumistas are striving to institute an economy that both generates and represents their shared values. The second point is that the economy and participation in it is geared towards collective and self-transformation. The MAT is thus a process through which a certain sort of person – a *compañero solidario* [solidary comrade] – is formed. Ultimately the project seeks to cultivate moral/ethical selves – tumistas whose intentions and actions are geared towards the collective endeavour of creating a good life together.

To make this argument I take inspiration from both Hart (2012b) and Graeber (2001), who seek to revive the political project present in Mauss’ writing. Mauss’ most famous contribution to anthropology was his *Essay on the Gift* (1990 [1925]) which has become the cornerstone for discussions in anthropology surrounding the nature of different economies, most commonly exemplified in the gift-commodity divide. Hart and Graeber remind us that Mauss was not opposed to market relations; indeed, he considered money and markets as

⁷ Although the terms MAT and túmin are interchangeable, especially where I cite tumistas, I generally refer to the project as the MAT to avoid confusion.

‘human universals’ (Hart, 2012b). The real problem for Mauss was ‘to try and get at the heart of precisely what it was about the logic of the market that did such violence to ordinary people’s sense of justice and humanity’ (Graeber 2001: 158). Citing Mauss, Graeber writes that he used the ethnographic record to trace the importance of the marketplace throughout history, and thought that it was possible to

imagine what a society in accord with such popular standards of justice might look like: one in which the market could be relegated to its proper function, as a technique for decentralized decision-making, a kind of popular polling device on the relative appeal of different sorts of consumer goods, and in which an entirely different set of institutions preside over areas of really significant social value – for example, ones centered on “the joy of giving in public, the delight in generous artistic expenditure, the pleasure of hospitality in the public or private feast” (Graeber, 2001: 158).

Moreover, Hart has shown that Mauss saw the revolutionary potential in the creation of ‘new monetary methods’ where ‘common people of different nations would be allowed to know how they can have control over themselves – without the use of words, formulas or myths’ (Mauss in Fournier, 2006 [1994]: 212; cited in Hart, 2012b). In the following pages we see how many tumistas engage with the MAT as a critique of the contemporary form of ‘the market’ in Mexico, with its profoundly damaging effects on people’s livelihoods. We see how the tumistas harness the project to imagine, create and enact the sort of market that shares many of the qualities Graeber refers to above. Central to these efforts is the túmin, which we can understand as a ‘new monetary method’ that is the basis for building an economic project that strives towards self-management (*autogestión*), in which the tumistas feel they are taking ‘control over themselves’, no matter how fleeting and particular to certain places and circumstances this may be.

The túmin as a valuable object

The túmin can thus be understood as a symbolic materialisation of the type of sociality the tumistas are trying to create, and an object that motivates action towards this end. As well as being an instrument of exchange that facilitates exchange between the members of the network and provides an extra source of liquidity, much of the power of the túmin resides in its symbolism. Here, I take inspiration Graeber’s revision of Marx on the symbolism of money (2001, 2013). Graeber points out that while money lends itself to both fetishism and alienation, the reverse is also true: money is can be something that measures and symbolises the importance of certain forms of social action (2001: 66-67). I follow Graeber in

considering the túmin a ‘token of value’ – it is an object that ‘represents and embodies the value of a certain genre of creative activity’, which appears to ‘generate the very power it embodies’ (2013: 225 -226). The túmin is an index of the sentiment of mutuality shared between the tumistas, and throughout the thesis, we see how tumistas are motivated to action ‘for the túmin’. Here the currency becomes a symbol and a reference to the wider movement, which ultimately represents their own intentions and actions as well as those of their fellow tumistas.

The above notwithstanding, the túmin and the MAT exist in a world where capitalist market relations abound, and it is precisely the túmin’s monetary form that means the tumistas find themselves – consciously or not – repeating the same sorts of attitudes and behaviours that the MAT strives to transcend. In other words, in the túmin we see the reproduction of qualities of money as it operates in capitalism. For example, in the following we see how one tumista uses the MAT to sow relationships of credit, debt and obligation (chapter 2), and how tensions and disagreements over administration and allocation of funds surface as the MAT network expanded (chapter 3). It is here where evident paradoxes arise in attempts to construct ‘alternatives’ based on monetary and market relations that are deeply embedded within pre-existing forms of sociality, organisation, production and exchange. Given this, I subscribe to Bloch and Parry’s idea that

the meanings with which money is invested are quite as much a product of the cultural matrix into which it is incorporated as of the economic functions it performs as a means of exchange, unit of account, store of value and so on. It is therefore impossible to predict its symbolic meanings from these functions alone (1989: 21).

Indeed, in the ethnography presented here I try to catch the richness and varied expressions of the development of the MAT as the túmin travels and is subsumed into different social contexts. This is clear in chapters 2, 4 and 5, where we can see that the MAT takes on different contours and meanings depending on the context. In chapter 2, we see how two tumistas strive to use the túmin to articulate versions of positive sociality, yet their efforts are at risk of being thwarted by the pre-existing elements of negative sociality in their hometown. In chapter 4, we see how the MAT takes on quite a different appearance in an urban, largely middle class setting, as the project is harnessed by small-scale producers orientated towards permaculture principles. Likewise, we see how the MAT is inscribed with notions of indigeneity (chapter 1) and is subsumed into indigenous realities as it travels to different places (chapter 5).

The túmin, as an alternative currency and a valuable object, thus raises questions about the very nature of value. Moreover, in understanding the MAT as an instituted process of engendering alternative values to those enshrined in the institutions of money and markets under capitalism, we can start to understand its potentiality as a political alternative with the ability to disrupt the flow of capital, which is why the Bank of Mexico was compelled to investigate – a point I return to later.

Value

The MAT is a particularly apt setting to explore the value question because it is through the project's materialisation and the tumistas' actions and reflections that values are made clearly visible. We saw above that the túmin is a valuable object because it embodies and represents forms of wealth and action (which can be the same thing) deemed valuable by the tumistas. Yet the túmin is just one – albeit very important – element of the wider project of the MAT which is based upon four key values: trust, solidarity, mutual aid, and autonomy. In the following pages we see how these four values, often stated and narrated in the language of principles (*principios*), are interpreted, reflected upon and enacted by the tumistas as they engage with the project and go about the task of instituting their idea of their economy into tangible expressions. The following ethnography thus contributes to an anthropological understanding of value by focusing on how the tumistas seek to lead moral lives and create a good life with their fellow *compañeros*, guided by the politico-ethical project of the MAT. These efforts are of course punctuated with paradox and contradiction, as the tumistas come up against the realities of trying to lead alternative lifestyles that exist alongside and often in tension and conflict with life under neoliberal capitalism in contemporary Mexico. In exploring this, I suggest that value offers a conceptual frame for thinking about the relationships between people and objects, and the ways in which people come to value certain types of social relationships, practices or things.

More than market values

Graeber identifies a 'problem' when it comes to discussing value and values, which lies in 'the fact that we use the same word to describe the benefits and virtues of a commodity for sale on the market [...] and our ideas about what is most important in life' (2013: 224). Discussion of value, then, often evokes the market, where things are commoditised, and other realms of life that we consider should not be commoditised. Indeed, the process through which economic value has become a central part of what people consider valuable

is at the heart of the MAT. The market as the cornerstone for the production of value has been championed by two powerful positions that have influenced much of the history of Western thought on the subject: the Marxist theory of labour and the Friedmanite equation of utility value. As Gregory writes, most thought on value has concerned a specific time and place in history: ‘the theoretical journey from Marx to Friedman, then, is one from factory floor to shopping centre’ (1997: 22). Moreover, these conceptions of value both share an integral reflection on what it means to be human, and what motivates human action – an important point that I will return to below. Marx provided us with the idea of class consciousness, and Friedman has proposed the idea of the maximizing individual as the ultimate expression of modern man. Both positions have taken on an almost religious power in influencing Western ideology (cf. Gregory 1997: 20-21). Both Gregory (1997) and Graeber (2001, 2013) think that anthropology can contribute so much more to the value question, and I take inspiration from their work in my approach to value. The present study also raises questions about what motivates action and what it means to be human and it likewise takes the market as the foundation for exploring value, yet here we are concerned with understanding a market where the *tumistas* foster supposedly alternative values to those enshrined and generated by capitalist social relations.

Gregory’s concern lies in the affirmation of ‘coeval value systems’, which he sees as a pressing academic and political task. Writing against the supposed hegemony of free market values, Gregory suggests that it is the task of the anthropologist to evidence the existence of different, ‘rival value systems’, and to reveal the power relations that lie behind the symbolism of money in particular (1997: 9; 299). For Gregory, the symbolism of money is central because it is upon this construct that the dominant value system of the ‘Free Market Anarchists’ – his term for financial traders – has been built, and to which the rest of the world has been subject with the rise of financial capitalism. Gregory calls this ‘disorganised capitalism’, defining ours as a historical moment characterised by a decline in state power over market forces, and ‘a growing distrust among citizens of the world in the capacity of the state to act morally’ (1997: 1). This is the precise critique that the *tumistas* levelled at the Mexican Central Bank in the opening vignette. Indeed, the whole Banxico-MAT episode could be read as a clash of different value systems. In the following pages, I too focus on the symbolism of money, in the form of an alternative currency, as the basis for the construction of an alternative sociality based on different values to those of the ‘Free Market Anarchists’.

Gregory writes: '[v]alues are those invisible chains that link relations between things to relations between people' (1997: 13). The invisibility of values, which primarily exist as 'forms of human consciousness' (ibid.), is precisely what makes them difficult to capture and write about in any concrete sense. Yet ethnography is a methodology which allows us to capture human values and how they are mobilised in social life. Moreover, it is through value that we are able to discern important reflections on peoples' lived experience, find out what they most care for, what motivates them, what they may dislike or critique about the world, and what sort of world they aspire to live in.

As Gluckman (2006) has shown us, conflicts are often the most revealing ethnographic moments. Certainly in the material analysed here, I found that moments when the tumistas felt their values were being encroached upon or subordinated is when they clearly articulated those values in comparison to others. It is at moments such as these that it becomes clear what values are and the role they play in social life. Throughout this thesis, from the MAT-Banxico episode to an incident of encroachment narrated in chapter 4, we will see how the tumistas evoke and inscribe values into their project in order to describe or make sense of what it is they are doing. Here we see how value is inherently moral, and a comparative measure through which people make sense of their lives – such as what is good and bad. At times it allows for the creation of a scale for that purpose, such as the life history perspectives offered in chapter 2. Therefore, from the general guiding principles of the movement to more subjective understandings of the MAT, the tumistas use value to 'describe what is and prescribe what should be' (Gregory 1997: 13): values become statements of intent that guide corresponding action.

Socially meaningful action is Graeber's (2001) definition of value. Graeber's theory of value is particularly suited to think through creative, transformative projects like the MAT, because as he points out, value is 'a key issue if we see social worlds not just as a collection of persons and things but rather as a project of mutual creation, as something made and remade' (2013: 222). The MAT is indeed a project of mutual creation, and it is a process that is in constant transformation as new members join and different voices offer fresh perspectives on how things might be done. The MAT offers a frame through which the tumistas can generate and articulate certain types of social action. We saw above how integral the tumin is to animating these efforts: it is a valuable object in the sense that it facilitates exchange, it motivates certain sorts of behaviour, and it represents the importance of the tumistas' own actions. Key here is the relationship between value as embodied in an

object and the object embodying what is considered valuable. Therefore, an important question addressed in this thesis is: who judges the importance of social actions? By suggesting the MAT was criminal and a threat to monetary sovereignty, Banxico clearly gave the project extraordinary importance. This thesis looks at how and why the tumistas understand the importance of their actions.

Graeber's take on value helps to decentre dominant ideas of economic systems and the value(s) produced by/within them, briefly discussed above. These insights help to overcome the tendency towards seeing 'alternative economies' as axiomatically opposed to market activity, thus allowing us to ask different questions. Graeber reminds us that Marx and Engels understood that the term production refers to 'both the production of material goods *and* social relations – and therefore, by extension, human beings' (2013: 223). This is a point that Graeber has sought to demonstrate elsewhere, drawing on the ethnographic record to reveal 'the fact that all "economic" activity is ultimately a means to the creation of certain sorts of person' (2001: 211). The ethnography presented here demonstrates this point: we see in the following pages how the MAT is a vehicle through which certain sorts of behaviours are encouraged and generated. It is hoped that participation in the project will generate a change in consciousness – a transformation from *cliente* (client) to *compañero* (comrade). We saw above that this is understood through the idiom of 'changing chips' – 'from a capitalist chip to a solidary chip'. Thus, we see how the ultimate goal of the MAT is to create a particular sort of person: a 'liberated subject' (chapter 1), a 'solidary *compañero*'; and simply to 'become better people' (chapter 5).

Key to these efforts are physical spaces in which the tumistas can enact their values, such as the Mercado Túmin in the garden of a holistic health centre discussed in chapter 4, or the itinerant tianguis that are held in different places as discussed in chapter 5. Here again I follow Graeber in suggesting that we can understand these spaces and the importance of them for the tumistas as 'arena[s] for the realisation of value' (2013: 22; 2001: 88). Here Graeber is describing another facet of the interplay between the imagination and its tangible manifestations, suggesting that perceived social order and meaning most commonly take shape in rituals, as I explore in the case of opening rituals for tianguis in chapter 5. The point here is that people make their actions meaningful in a variety of creative ways, and that certain material elements are key to help manifest and delineate the content and boundaries of their perceived value systems. In the case of the MAT, we see how the tumistas go about the task of instituting their idea of their economy into tangible expressions, from the túmin

note and the publication of a bi-weekly newspaper to the actual construction of physical market places and the creation and realisation of rituals. All these efforts are guided at generating certain sorts of human behaviour – or generating certain sorts of socially meaningful action – that are the basis for the existence of the MAT in the first place. Once again the interplay between objects and actions is key here, and as Graeber writes: '[i]t is value, then, that brings universes into being' (2013: 231).

Value and moral reasoning

The value question leads on to questions of ethics and morality. While the MAT prescribes an ideal towards which the tumistas can try and live their lives as solidary *compañeros*, the reality of these efforts varies between members. So while the MAT provides the politico-ethical framework to which to aspire, the ethnography presented here details of the lived experience of tumistas as they engage with the project in varying degrees. Predictably, this entails dealing with tensions and contradictions that arise as an inevitable part of everyday reflection, decision making and social interaction within and outside of the MAT. In this sense, my thesis could be considered an 'ethnography of moral reasoning' (Sykes, 2009a). Sykes proposes we use the term moral reasoning to capture and describe 'how people negotiate paradoxes in their daily lives' (2009b: 15). Sykes writes that humans across the globe engage in moral reasoning, thus it is a 'term for contemporary times' that can help us understand the way in which people understand and negotiate the conditions of a shared life together, both on a local and global level (2009b: 25). We will see in the following chapters that tension and contradictions are rife within the MAT, from differences of opinion and disagreement among tumistas, to the very basis of the project and its proposal of an alternative that is in practice so closely tied to the Mexican peso. Disagreement and resolution are of course part and parcel of social life. In the MAT case, we see how different moral and ethical positions are brought together under the umbrella of a movement that seeks to negotiate difference and unify tumistas through appealing to shared values which underpin the project – a thing which is itself emergent and contingent on a process of ongoing reflection and communication across the network (chapter 3).

Language is key to moral reasoning: people use words and speech to communicate their reflections on the world and their place in it. That we live in a world where people sometimes speak one way and act another is a basic point of contradiction. Yet Gregory (2009) and Venkatesan (2014) remind us that words, utterances and expressions can provide vital and

insightful statements on values and intention. Moreover, as Venkatesan highlights, as ethnographers we might not always be around when values become articulated in practice; and our presence may provide an important soundboard for the people we are working with to work through certain problems they may have (2004: 26, see also Sykes 2009b). It is in a similar vein that I take seriously, for example, declarations that the *túmin* is a revolutionary weapon (chapter 1), or certain *tumistas*' stated beliefs that capitalism is dead and they are living the future (chapter 4). From statements such as these, we can garner insights into what the MAT means for the *tumistas* and what their participation in the project can tell us about the way they see their place in the world. Equally, I was able to understand a great deal about the project and the role it came to play in the *tumistas*' lives, and what troubled or concerned them, by talking through anxieties and frustrations as well as hopes and visions for the future.

Autonomy

If money and value are ultimately questions of politics, then the politics of the MAT are best articulated through the language of autonomy. Autonomy is the fourth pillar of the project – a principle that best represents the mode of organising towards the collective good that the MAT aspires to. Autonomy is aspired to in contrast to everything the MAT stands against: dependency engendered by clientelistic, corrupt politics, and the constraints of the capitalist system that do not allow people to flourish as they could (chapters 1 and 2). Thus, autonomy is both an organizational model and a philosophical inspiration for the process of transformation that it is hoped the MAT will facilitate.

Discussion of autonomy has come to the fore for many social movement theorists in recent years because the concept is now central to social movement struggles and demands, especially in Latin America (Dinerstein, 2015; Escobar, 2018; Hellman, 1992). Diaz-Polanco signals the use of the term as originating in 1980s Nicaragua, and since then the 'autonomy question' has remained central to indigenous-state relations in particular (1997). Since the mid-1990s, the Zapatista experience has proved to be an enduring example for both indigenous and non-indigenous struggles for autonomy, in which many hallmarks of their organisation and tactics have been replicated. As Holloway and Peláez (1998) have suggested, the Zapatistas showed that it was possible to 'reinvent revolution' and orientate revolutionary activity towards autonomy from the state, rather than by taking state power (see also Holloway, 2005). The rationale for this lies in the idea that the modern, neoliberal state does not or cannot represent indigenous communities, and moreover the state has

invariably been an important conduit in the destruction of indigenous communal life (Escobar 2018). Indigenous claims to autonomy have therefore mostly been framed in relation to self-determination (*autogestión*): the right to decide how best to administer themselves. In a practical sense this most commonly comes down to negotiating different degrees of autonomy in the administration of resources, political organisation, justice systems and the like, of which many studies have been carried out (for example, (for example Blackwell, 2012; Mora, 2015; Sieder and Barrera Vivero, 2017).

Thinking about autonomy is thus usually understood or measured by the degree and kind of relations certain groups – most commonly indigenous peoples – have with the state. Here, land is fundamental: indigenous claims made for carving out autonomy usually rest upon a notion of belonging to a certain territory (Stavenhagen, 2006). Yet the demand and practice of autonomy is no longer restricted to just indigenous and territorial-based struggles; it is a strategy and horizon now commonly embraced by many types of social movements seeking radical change. So what does this notion of autonomy actually look like? Böhm et al. provide us with a helpful overview of the concept, and point out that the idea of autonomy that is pertinent here ‘involves a group working together in common to construct alternative ways of living’ (2010: 19). Escobar also asserts that ‘Latin American conceptions of autonomy are predicated on a radical notion of relationality’ (2018: 171). This notion of autonomy is the opposite to what Escobar calls ‘the modernist sense’, where autonomy is suggestive of individualism and self-sufficiency (2018: 171). Escobar further demonstrates how the Latin American vein of ‘*pensamiento autónómico*’ (autonomous thought) is geared towards thinking and designing alternatives that are geared towards the communal (2018: 166); and that: ‘[a]t its best, *autonomía* seeks to establish new foundations for social life’ (2018: 174). As we will see, the MAT takes ideological inspiration from the Zapatista struggle in particular and indigenous ways of life more generally. The tumista experience offers insight into how these pre-existing ideas and practices are mobilised in an alternative market setting, thus using the field of commerce and mechanisms of exchange to forward their own version of radical relational autonomy, as I will touch upon below.

Escobar points out ‘[t]here is no absolute autonomy in practice; rather, *autonomía* functions as a theoretical and political horizon guiding political practice’ (2018: 173). Similarly, Böhm et al. propose we can think of autonomy as (im)possibility: drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) writing on hegemony, they show that ‘*within the impossibility of autonomy there are the possibilities of autonomous practices that challenge the very hegemony they are part of*

(2010: 18, emphasis in original). This view of autonomy is central to the discussions in this thesis. The currency itself exemplifies this most visibly: although people sometimes refer to the túmin as an ‘autonomous currency’ (*moneda autónoma*), it is commonly used in conjunction with the Mexican peso. Just as the tumistas shift between different value systems, the idea of autonomy exists in constant tension with the dominant forces that the project seeks to subvert or transcend. Yet, as we saw above, the túmin is a valuable object, in that it motivates the tumistas to ‘create spheres of actions that are autonomous from the State and new institutional arrangements to this end’ (Escobar 2018: 174). For example, we see in chapter 2 how one tumista describes the project as representing ‘a clearer horizon’ and a demonstration of how ‘we can create a different world that is not dependent upon the authorities or the governments, who only put you down and insult your dignity’ (chapter 2). Many observers have noted that autonomy provides a framework of hope and dignity for organising and practising politics in the face of savage neoliberal capitalism (Dinerstein, 2015; Escobar, 2018; Esteva, 2015). Thus it is the symbolic weight of the idea of a counterhegemonic currency that fuels the imagination (chapter 1), and it is from its use that the tumistas have been able to carve out different spaces and practices, in an effort to ‘live as humanly as possible in neoliberalism’ (chapter 3).

In this thesis, we see how the tumistas are pushing the communal notion of autonomy into the market sphere as the ‘new foundations for social life’. The MAT project for autonomy is based on the aim of *autogestión* – self management and self sufficiency – and the cultivation of certain types of social relations and a particular sort of person (a *compañero solidario*). Marketplace action and behaviour is re-orientated towards fostering cooperation and solidarity – dependency away from the state and towards one another, in the cultivation of a good life together. Autonomy is imagined as the sowing of interdependent social relations, built on the assumption of mutuality and the fashioning of politico-ethical selves towards the collective good. This radical goal of autonomy stands in sharp contrast to the idea of the consumer agent, who acts as an autonomous maximising individual, exercising rational choice. Radical relational autonomy thus sets the frame for guiding social relations, and we will see the varied ways in which different people engage with these ideas and how they understand, interpret and use them to guide and reflect upon their actions and behaviour and those of their fellow tumistas.

Practices associated with the political project of autonomy can also be found in alter-globalisation movements, which have attracted interest from anthropologists who have

suggested they represent a ‘new way of doing politics’ (Juris, 2005; 2008: 14) or that an ‘alternative democratic praxis’ is emerging (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 5). The authors distinguish these ‘new ways of doing politics’ from liberal, representative democratic models and more traditional top-down organisations, in contrast to which the ‘alternative democratic praxis’ uses practices such as networking as the basis for horizontal forms of organisation, holding assemblies to facilitate communal/participatory decision making. These modes of political organisation and practice are known as ‘prefigurative politics’, where radical change for the future is practiced and lived in the present (Juris and Razsa, 2012; Lazar, 2014; Maeckelbergh, 2009).

Maeckelbergh writes:

practising prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the *present* towards a goal in the *future*; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present. Prefiguration is a practice through which movement actors create a conflation of their ends with their means. It is the enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society. (Maeckelbergh, 2009: 66-67)

My ethnography offers valuable ethnographic insight into how these practices take shape within the MAT. For example, I suggest that certain arenas like the tianguis and Mercado Túmin mentioned above are important spaces for enacting prefiguration. In chapters 4 and 5, we see how these become spaces where the means and ends of the MAT are collapsed, and the ultimate aim of the movement is manifested in the sociality that is lived in these moments and spaces of alternative conviviality, where the importance of the assembly becomes clear. In chapter 3, I trace the dynamics of MAT network politics, through which the tumistas ‘learn to relate to one another differently’. Here we also see the tensions and paradoxes which arise, largely based on the fact that network membership is often shaped by pre-existing social relations, which shape and to some extent constrain alternative possibilities (chapter 3). Moreover, the MAT network comes to resemble a ‘big family’, thus the case shows how efforts to create new organisational platforms and engender radical change can take on clan-like notions of expectations and obligations, which ultimately influence the nature of the alternative pursued.

A cognate of autonomy is freedom, although the former refers to more ideologically grounded notions of how to organise and do politics, while the latter is more representative of how individuals negotiate the conditions of their co-existence together. The dual notions

of autonomy and ‘responsible freedom’ (*libertad responsable*) express the politico-ethical project of transformation at the heart of the MAT. Freedom is a subject which has garnered renewed anthropological interest in recent years, albeit much enquiry has been shaped by overwhelmingly religious ethnographic contexts (Laidlaw, 2002; Mahmood, 2004; Robbins, 2012). In this thesis, I approach the subject of freedom from the perspective of alternative social, political and economic imaginings. The MAT is envisioned by some as a vehicle through which the tumistas can fashion themselves as ‘liberated subjects’ (chapter 1), and it is hoped that participation in the project will engender a freedom of will and consciousness to think, create and make decisions for themselves. While this is a collective endeavour, there is a heavy onus on individual ethical action to guarantee cohesion and articulation of the movement as a whole. For example, ‘responsible freedom’ is an ideal state of being that is evoked to mediate between tensions that arise across the MAT as the network grows. Responsible freedom operates as a personal ethic in tandem with the organisational vision of autonomy: articulating locally autonomous regions made up of individuals in collectives, who form part of a national movement (chapter 3).

The Central Bank, state-society relations and international finance



Fig. I.1: ‘In the balance’: The MAT and Banxico. (Source: Castro et. al. 2011)

The cartoon above was printed in the Kgosni alongside the tumistas’ accusation against the Central Bank cited in the opening vignette. The image clearly conveys the idea of opposites:

on one end of the see-saw we have the then-governor of the Central Bank, Agustín Carstens: a real life ‘fat cat banker’, head of a large, professional institution, dressed in dark suit and sporting a flashy watch; on the other the Túmin is characterised as a much slighter man, depicted in far simpler attire, suggestive of the average working Mexican. Despite Carstens’ apparent size and authority, it is the túmin that weighs the most here. Yet for us to understand more fully what is ‘in the balance’ in the MAT-Banxico case, it is necessary to situate the interests of both parties in the context of recent national and international history. This thesis is of course concerned with the tumistas, but it is instructive to look at the role of the Central Bank and the influence of monetary policy in national politics. The representation of Carstens is a good place to start. Carstens’ career is typical of trends in Mexican politics over the last 30 years or so, which has shaped state-society relations and Mexico’s position vis-à-vis international finance; trends that have ultimately led to the contemporary socio-economic and political conditions the tumistas are critiquing, and their accusation that the Bank has perverted the peso and given in to foreign interests.

Carstens started his career in 1980 as an intern at Banxico, where he benefitted from the Bank’s scholarship programme and was able to complete an MA and PhD in economics at the University of Chicago (El Universal, 2016). His postgraduate studies were supervised by a top IMF official, an institution in which he started working in 1999, having previously occupied various positions within Banxico after his return to Mexico (Carstens, 2005). In 2006, Carstens was invited to help coordinate presidential candidate Calderón’s economic policy in the run up to his election. Carstens then worked as Calderon’s Finance Minister before being appointed as governor of Banxico in 2009. Carsten’s career exemplifies the rise of a new generation of foreign-trained economic ‘technocrats’ that became highly influential in public administration from the 1980s (see Camp, 1985). The rise of the technocrats saw political solidarities becoming more aligned with international financial institutions, especially following the 1982 debt crisis. In short, the role of economists at the Central Bank was key here for paving the way for the transformation to neoliberalism, a point that I will return to shortly. For now, let us take a broader look at the role the institution played in statecraft in post-revolutionary Mexico.

Banxico, statecraft and monetary policy

Banxico’s anxiety surrounding the MAT, and the decision to investigate the tumistas, can be understood when we look at the role of the Bank and the monetary policy it pursues. Strict

monetary policy has been a constant feature of the institution's mandate since its foundation by federal decree in 1925. Banxico's website describes the situation before its creation as a 'long period of instability and monetary anarchy' (Banco de México, n.d.). Up until that point, a large number of private banks had been operating throughout the country and printing their own currencies, not to mention the existence of multiple local bonds issued by rich landowners and industry magnates. The situation was further muddled with the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), which sought to abolish the debt peonage that was characteristic of haciendas, yet funding these efforts meant further bonds and currencies were issued – most famously Pancho Villas banknotes, forcefully issued by the Bank of Chihuahua (Katz, 1998). Banxico therefore had its work cut out in dealing with inflation, and in persuading people to accept their paper pesos as national tender. This was not achieved until the early 1930s, a period in which the Bank 'was remade from a mere guardian against inflation to an active agent in stimulating economic growth' (Babb, 2001: 38). Having achieved monetary sovereignty, the Bank's primary mandate was to maintain the stability and purchasing power of the Mexican peso, to avoid inflation and to maintain conditions favourable for national and foreign investment to encourage economic growth (Banco de México, n.d.).

It is precisely the sacrosanct nature of monetary policy that has meant the Bank has played a key role in influencing government policy, and it has also been central in negotiating between various domestic and international financial institutions. Since its founding, the Bank has shared strong ties with the international financial community, and has been considered a "center of talent" (Babb 2001: 89) for young economists who characteristically ended up working at high levels of Mexican state administration. The government has largely let the Bank operate on its own devices, granting the institution complete autonomy in 1994. As Banxico's website reports:

Banco de Mexico's autonomy means that no authority can demand credit from it, hence guaranteeing its uninterrupted control over the amount of money (banknotes and coins) in circulation. The purpose of autonomy is that the central bank's operation be conducive to preserving the local currency's purchasing power; that is, to keeping prices stable in the long term. (Banco de México, n.d.)

The only interruption to this trend was between 1970 and 1982, during the Echeverría and López Portillo administrations. These years were characterised by high public spending on internal development and infrastructure. These actions upset private business, but most opposition came from the Central Bank as it was clear that

‘[b]oth presidents Echeverría and López Portillo were willing to sacrifice the integrity of the peso – the very thing the Banco was dedicated to defend – in favor of increased government spending and unorthodox monetary policies’ (2001: 128, *sic*).

It was during this period that Banxico staff ‘solidified their bonds with central bankers and economists abroad’ (Babb, 2001); a trend made clearly visible in dealing with the spiralling debt crisis.

The debt crisis and the rise of neoliberalism

In August of 1982, the Finance Minister announced to the US government, the IMF and other international finance organisations that Mexico was going to default on its debt payments (Babb, 2001: 177). The declaration marked the start of not only the Mexican but a regional, Latin American debt crisis which resulted in a turnaround from previous developmental approaches to the adoption of neoliberal policies at the expense of social welfare (see Roddick et al., 1988). In August 1982, the outcome of the crisis was not yet clear, but a polarisation of loyalties in the government was. On the one hand, López Portillo sent pro-free market ministers to negotiate with the IMF. Shortly after, with less than three months remaining in office, the president declared the nationalisation of the banking system, and appointed a Cambridge-trained economist with socialist leanings as governor of Banxico (Babb 2001: 175-179). López Portillo announced this bold move in a tearful address, uttering the now famous words that he would ‘defend the peso like a dog’ – a statement suggestive of the extent to which politicians are willing to ‘sacrifice’ themselves in the name of a national currency (Lomnitz, 2003).

The Mexican debt crisis made more visible than ever the links between the Central Bank and international financial institutions and the role of the institution in ushering in neoliberal reforms. López Portillo’s reshuffling stalled negotiations with the IMF, but only for a short time. In December 1982, de la Madrid took office, and the new president re-appointed the previous Bank governor who followed through with the IMF’s recommendations (Babb, 2001: 177-179). Mexico was not allowed to default on its debt, and instead was obliged to adopt a series of structural adjustments in exchange for the granting of a \$4 billion dollar loan which went straight back out of the country to pay off debts to foreign banks (Deadren, 2012). Therein followed a debt-restructuring plan, negotiated between international finance institutions and the technocrats who had risen to prominence in the government. Banxico economists took a central role in the negotiations with their counterparts at the World Bank

– a situation that was facilitated by the fact many were close friends, colleagues and ex-schoolmates (Babb, 2001: 181), as we saw in the case of Carstens. 1982 was thus a decisive year that exposed the political solidarities at play in different approaches to monetary policy.

The debt-restructuring programme reached its apogee with the election of Salinas de Gotari (1988-1994). A controversial figure in many ways, Salinas de Gotari's most resounding legacy was the implementation of a whole host of neoliberal reforms which significantly changed state-society relations for the first time since the Mexican Revolution. Shortly after taking office, Salinas announced a 'pact of economic solidarity'. On the one hand, this social pact sought consensus between the government and its support bases in private business, trade unions and the peasant sector in implementing a series of hard-hitting measures to target inflation. On the other hand, a flagship social welfare programme called PRONASOL (Programa Nacional de Solidaridad, National Solidarity Programme) was launched in an effort to ameliorate some of the harsh effects of the restructuring on Mexico's most vulnerable sectors (see Cornelius et al., 1994). Once again, monetary policy was a central guide to this restructuring and, despite PRONASOL, it was clear that curbing inflation and creating favourable conditions for foreign investment was prioritised over the wellbeing of most Mexicans.⁸ Alongside the signing of NAFTA and the Zapatista uprising, the end of Salinas' term was marked by renewed economic crisis. Within this context, Banxico pushed congress to grant the institution full autonomy, which came into effect in April 1994.

Monetary policy, narrative and discourse

In his study of five central banks across the globe, Holmes (2014) has shown that over recent decades the monetary policy pursued by central banks has been largely based on words and persuasion. By looking at the protocols of inflation targeting, which has increasingly become a key focus of the central bank toolkit, Holmes suggests that monetary policy has come to increasingly rely on a series of 'communicative experiments' by which banks seek to shape public expectation on the future state of the economy. What were once 'famously secretive institutions' started to 'experiment with far-reaching communicative practices under the aegis of transparency, with the effect of generating narratives which produce 'a communicative field within which and by which the economy is made, remade and unmade' (Holmes, 2014: 14). Holmes thus sees the economy as made up of 'communicative action,

⁸ (Hellman, 1994) provides an intimate account on how these structural changes had an effect on the everyday lives of Mexicans in this period.

which is performed socially and enacted prospectively' (10). In large part then, the business of central banking rests on upholding belief in a healthy economy through narratives (11). In addition, drawing on statements from the likes of the ex-chair of the US Federal Reserve, Holmes suggests that these shifts in monetary policy have seriously called into question the worth of national "fiat" currencies, as the 'soundness of a currency' is directly related 'to the predicaments of the public, to their sentiments and expectations' (19-20). A secondary argument that Holmes puts forward is that central banks are engaged in collecting what amounts to ethnographic data to help them understand public opinion on the economy 'in vivo', from which they can assess levels of confidence in the economy. From this, banks can 'orchestrate the contingencies of economic stability and growth' (17-18).

The panorama that Holmes presents sits with Hart's (2012a) notion that the era of financial capitalism has seen a decline in the importance of national currencies, and it is within this context that we can understand the shaky foundations upon which central banks now find themselves. It seems that the Bank of Mexico is no exception: in 2001 the institution officially adopted an 'inflation targeting framework' with much the same characteristics mentioned by Holmes – transparency, communication and the management of expectations (Ramos-Francia and Torres, 2005). Thus, as successful monetary policy depends on the skilful management of narratives that reinforce belief and confidence in the future of the peso, the institutional frameworks which uphold it and the values which it symbolises, we can imagine why Banxico might want to investigate the emergence of a popular monetary arrangement on their doorstep.

In many ways, this thesis begins from the same point of investigation. Moreover, although we start out from a specific instance of people questioning locally the legitimacy of a national currency, the *túmin* raises questions that examine the very nature of money itself. With this in mind, and given the overview of the last few decades of strict monetary policy and the social effects it has had, we can now look towards the MAT as an example of how people are coming up with their own revised and reworked monetary arrangements. We see that, in the pursuit of a good life together, the *tumistas* are engaged in an endeavour to foster greater proximities through networks, which are not bound by class or geopolitical location.

On fieldwork and methodology

Given the network character of the MAT, the material in this thesis was garnered from multiple field sites. I started fieldwork in November 2014, and had previously planned to

spend most of my time in Espinal: given the town is the ‘birthplace of the túmin’, it seemed the most sensible place to settle down. Locality, place and scale are central themes that emerge in the literature on alternative currencies and LETs schemes (Gibson-Graham, 2003; North, 2005). Therefore I originally planned to use Espinal as ‘a contingent window’ (Candea, 2007: 179) onto the wider MAT network. Yet, after less than a month in the field I realised that the MAT was much bigger than I first thought, and while it was interesting to document the way in which the tumistas were responding to network growth in the project’s hometown, my curiosity was sparked and I wanted to see what was happening in other places for myself.

I soon found myself ‘following the túmin’ (cf. Marcus, 1995) to other parts of the country. My first trip was with a delegation of tumistas who were going to open the Casa Túmin (CT hereafter) in Texcoco, Mexico State, in March 2015. The inauguration of the CT Texcoco was a big deal: it was the first time a tumista designated sales point had been opened outside of Espinal, and it soon set a precedent for the opening of similar CTs in different parts of Mexico (see chapter 3). It was also the first time I was able to see the MAT taking root in tangible forms in different settings. I became set on the idea of carrying out an extended period of fieldwork elsewhere. My research plans also coincided with the MAT CCs efforts at ‘articulating’ the movement on a national scale, so in conversation with them it seemed fitting that I should go and find out what was going on in other places across the network. As a result, I spent about a week in three potential fieldsites (in Puebla, Oaxaca and Chiapas), before deciding on the city of Puebla as a comparative case study. I spent a total of 8 months in each place.

Small town, big city

I chose the city of Puebla as a comparative field site because it seemed to offer the polar opposite to everything I had experienced in Espinal. Espinal is a small town of 2500–3000 people located in the Tecolutla river valley towards the north of Veracruz State (Subsecretaría de Planeación, 2016: 2).⁹ The town is the administrative centre of the municipality of the same name, known locally as the ‘doorway to the sierra’, referring to its geographical position at the foot of a large mountain range that forms part of the Sierra Madre Oriental. Citrus production dominates the socio-economic and political life of the

⁹ Although local population estimates for the town fluctuate due to the presence of students and education workers who reside in Espinal for periods of time.

town: many *espinaltecos* (people from Espinal) find seasonal work in the harvest in plantations that surround the town and neighbouring settlements; and the municipal president at the time of my fieldwork was the latest in a long line of *caciques* (political bosses) from a local family who dominate the citrus trade. The heat and the general quiet that hung over Espinal was punctured by the constant growling of giant trucks carrying citrus fruit to be weighed and sold in Mexico City or abroad, or gravel and sand from the riverbed for sale to the construction industry, as they made their way down the main highway that cuts through town.

Away from the highway and the businesses that lined it, the day-to-day sensation of socio-economic and social life was slow – something poetically reflected in the clock face frozen in time on the belltower of the town's church. This stagnation was one of the main reasons behind the MAT (chapter 1), and while undoubtedly terrible for their businesses, the quiet pace of life helped me to cement strong relationships with certain people, which heavily influenced the type of data I was able to obtain. I was able to spend a long time chatting with *tumistas* in their homes or workplaces (which were often the same places), almost uninterrupted. Most of the data I gathered here was through long conversations over many weeks and months. I had originally set out to build up a database from structured interviews with *tumistas*, but this made people uncomfortable, and I was only able to gather a few, very short interviews. I decided to focus on three case studies of *tumistas* with whom I had the best relationships. On occasion, I asked directed questions and sought structured interviews, especially for the life history material narrated in chapter 2.

After initial months of cold shoulders and suspicion by most, my presence in Espinal was slowly accepted as a *maestro* (teacher), because I lived with a teacher from the Intercultural University of Veracruz (UVI hereafter) and was friends with others. After some time, I started giving English classes in the Casa Túmin, which further cemented my reputation as a teacher, but also closely aligned me with the MAT. This also coincided with my active participation within the project as a *tumista*. It was through this process I was able to experience first-hand what the project was about, and I was able to practice being a *tumista* –using túmin, attending meetings and assemblies, and inadvertently becoming a promoter of the MAT as I was invited to give talks and share experiences alongside other members.

Selene, the founder of the MAT network in the city, invited me to Puebla in June 2015, where I stayed with her and her partner Everardo on their didactic farm at the southernmost

city limits on the shores of Valsequillo Lake. As the fourth biggest city in Mexico, Puebla was a radically different field site to Espinal. I had come from a town where almost everyone knew each other to settle in a city of 2.5 million people. My first week with Selene and Everardo was busy and hectic: I accompanied them travelling many miles by bus and foot across the city, carrying products to sell at different alternative consumption venues and rendezvousing with different tumistas to pay them in túmin and pesos for produce the couple had sold on their behalf. I moved to Puebla in October 2015, and in January 2016, the Mercado Túmin was founded, which became a focus for my research (chapter 4).

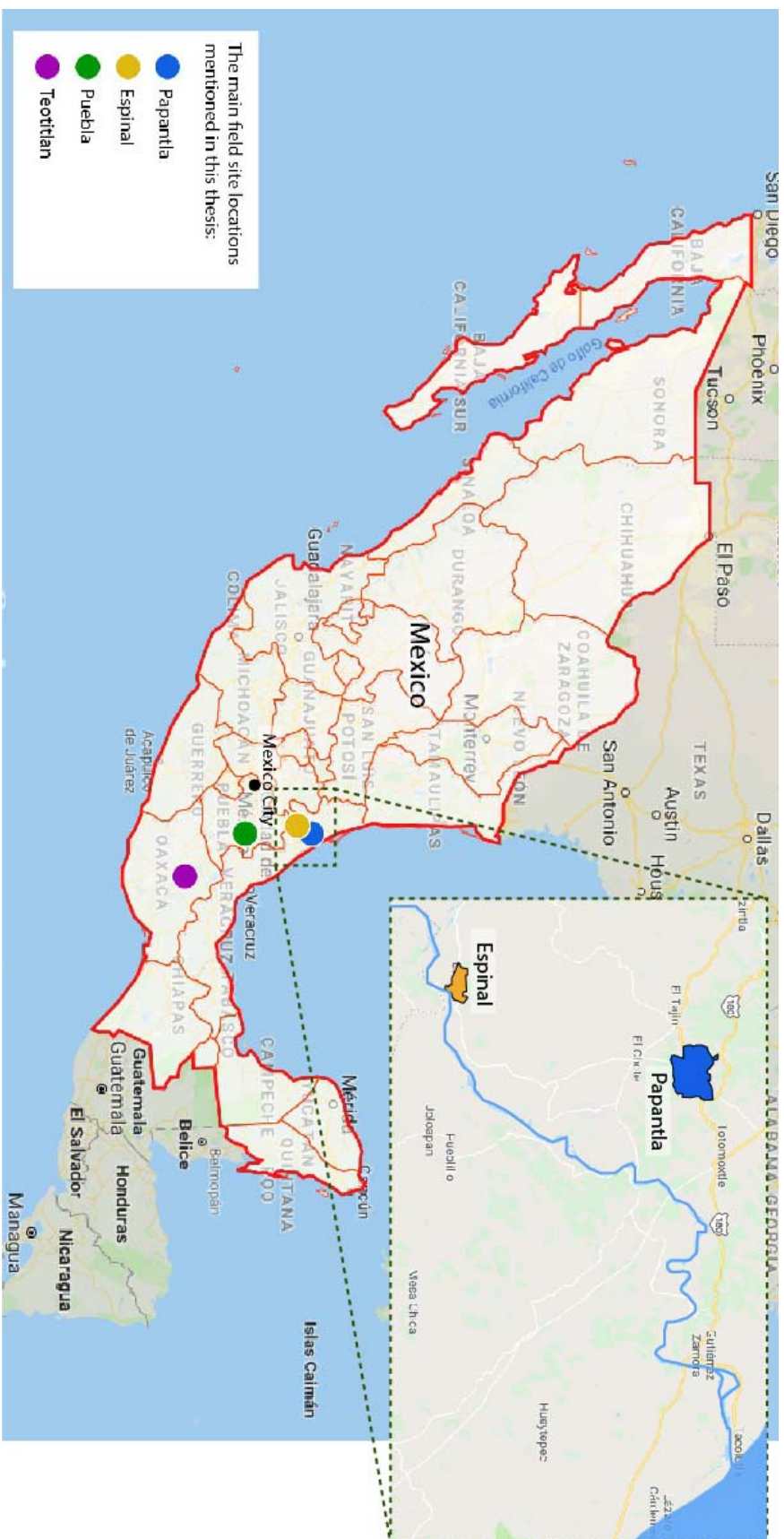
Due to the size of the city, the distances most people travelled for work, and their busy schedules, most of the close interaction I had with tumistas took place in the Mercado Túmin, at other alternative commerce venues or by pre-arranging visits to their homes or workplaces (once again, more often than not the same place). From January 2016, I also started to compile case studies, accompanying some tumistas for a day in their working week. This is how I got a sense of what life was like for many of the small scale producers and artisans who seek to make a living between producing and selling their wares at alternative commerce venues like the Mercado Túmin. The data I gathered in Puebla was mainly based on conversations and interaction in alternative commerce venues or through participant observation when accompanying tumistas during their days of work. After a few months, I also conducted a series of more formalised, structured interviews.

The gulf of experience between Espinal and Puebla was marked in many ways. The dynamics of the MAT in Puebla was certainly more akin to what ECOSOL theorists write about. The tumistas I met were mainly ‘prosumers’ (producer-consumers – see chapter 4), who had varying degrees of experience in alternative production and consumption circuits, and participating in collectives of various kinds. They were mainly urban middle-class, university-educated people, who were sensitised to various alternative logics and lifestyles, from neo-Zapatismo, permaculture and slow-food circuits to Eastern spirituality. In contrast, many of the people I spoke to in Espinal owned small trading enterprises or provided services. Those who did produce and sell their own products were few and far between. Some tumistas in Espinal had experience with *tandas* – citizen-organised rotating savings schemes, or more formal loans and savings cooperatives in nearby towns, and many only had basic schooling. Their understanding and experience of notions like solidarity and organisation came largely from the church, or previous involvement in teachers’ unions or peasant organisations.

The different day-to-day experiences and life trajectories of tumistas in Puebla, Espinal and elsewhere was sometimes a source of tension (chapter 3). While I recognise these differences, it is not my intention to write an ethnography on the differences between life in rural and urban settings in contemporary Mexico. Moreover, while the following chapters are undoubtedly shaped by and contain analysis of the different dynamics of the MAT in varied settings, I chose to focus more on the overwhelming similarities between the tumistas' lives in diverse settings. The fact that people from such diverse backgrounds have chosen to engage with the MAT, and the stories they have shared with me, points towards a shared deterioration in life conditions for all of them during the last few decades of financial capitalism. Yet I think it also points towards their ongoing hope that a good life is possible.

Personal considerations

When I first read about the MAT back in 2012, my curiosity was sparked. There was something about the content and tone of the article that appealed: it made a great story, which inspired me to investigate further and a few months later devise a research project, which got me accepted into the University of Manchester and started me on the journey to writing this thesis. The way in which the media painted the MAT undoubtedly had an impact on the way I designed my research proposal, and it certainly formed my preconceived notions of what the project was all about (see chapter 1). The MAT seemed to capture many of my research interests and appeal to the utopian dreamer within me. However, in my first communications with Juan (MAT founder), he was quick to point out that the project was 'much more modest and difficult' than its portrayals in the media. I am aware that western academics have been criticised for fetishizing social movements (see Hellman 1992). While I was undoubtedly drawn to the MAT because it speaks to the sort of issues of social justice that I take very seriously on a personal level, in the following I have taken care to balance my political engagement with the necessary 'critical distance' to convey the MAT story to the best of my knowledge (Gledhill, 2008: 484).



Map 1: Main field site locations mentioned in this thesis (source: Tamara Salinas)

Chapter 1: 'For us the túmin is a weapon'

One afternoon in May 2016, I sat in an auditorium of the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National School of History and Anthropology, ENAH) in Mexico City, amongst an audience made up of mostly ENAH students and members of diverse collectives and ECOSOL projects from across the city and beyond. We were there to listen to a panel discussion organised for the presentation of the book 'Aceptamos Túmin' ('We Accept Túmin') (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014); the story of the MAT project published by its founders.¹ That afternoon, the book presentation featured as the headline event of a number of talks and activities organised for the first Solidarity Economy Day (Primera Jornada de Economía Solidaria) held at the ENAH. Outside the auditorium, a tianguis had been set up in the entrance hall of the university building. Many of those producers and traders present were already tumistas; those that were not were encouraged to practice using the túmin and invited to join the MAT network.

On the panel were two MAT coordinators and two academics, supporters of the project. Alejandra Jiménez, then president of the MAT CC, offered a vision of the project:

...for us the túmin is a weapon; it's the weapon of this new revolution. We are no longer going to fight or try to change things with guns and bullets: what we need are tools and weapons that are far more sophisticated and powerful. And for us, the túmin is the weapon with which to carry out the revolution. We believe that it is a first attempt at making a revolution. Why? Because we think we can only attack the capitalist system by its own means. If we are lacking money, well we will make our own money! But this money is different because it doesn't set out to make people slaves, or make people throwaway objects. With this weapon, we hope to liberate subjects: turn our *compañeros* into liberated subjects and to make these liberated subject *compañeros* capable of seeing in the other a solidary *compañero*, and together, we will be able to build new pathways. This political and ideological project at the core of the túmin.

Alejandra's affirmation that the túmin was a revolutionary weapon suggests that the MAT had particular ideological groundings and wider political aims than those of strengthening the local economy of Espinal, where it had been launched six years previously.

¹ Junta de Buen Gobierno translates as Good Governance Council, and is a term the MAT promoters have taken from the Zapatista experience, as we shall see below.

Moreover, the assertion located the MAT as the product of specific legacies and trajectories, with the potential to conjure up powerful ideas in the Mexican social imaginary. Indeed, the inauguration of the project was timed to coincide with a specific symbolic moment in national history. The first emission of túmin was printed shortly after the bicentenary of Mexican Independence and in the same month as the centenary of the Mexican Revolution, in November 2010. A denomination of the first banknotes to circulate was decorated with the face of Emiliano Zapata (see Figure 1.1). It was clear that the project's architects sought to cash in on the legacy of these historic moments and symbolic figures, and as the epigraph to their book makes clear, the tumistas had launched what they saw as 'their 'own small independence movement' and 'little revolution':

One day in 2010, inspired by the power of symbols, in the midst of the celebrations of the centenary of the Mexican revolution and the bicentenary of the Independence, we decided to start our own small independence movement in Espinal, our own little revolution, as it suited us, in the way we could, and with what we had, in that forgotten village in the north of Veracruz State.

We designed our own economic system and we printed community money; the túmin, starting an autonomous project with our own resources, independent of state resources and against the grain of the capitalist system, as part of a silent and pacific revolution that has been taking place (*que se viene dando*) in the world for a few decades. (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014)

In this chapter, I take Alejandra's assertion that the túmin can be understood as a revolutionary weapon as a starting point to look at why and how the MAT project evolved the way it did. I propose that the MAT has endured because it appropriates ideology, symbols and discourse that appeal to a well-established social imaginary of resistance and revolution, and repackages them in an alternative currency paradigm. In this configuration, the MAT pushes notions of alterity and resistance into the fields of economic practice, and for many the túmin emerges as a symbol of renewed struggle and hope for an alternative to state-backed capitalist development in Mexico.

The chapter is divided into two parts. In part one, we see how the MAT was envisioned as a critique of and an alternative to capitalism and economic development, as understood in local perspective. I then trace the varied ideological and institutional currents that have influenced the form the project took. Part two takes up the MAT-Banxico episode, and I look at how this clash rather unexpectedly projected the project to fame across Mexico and beyond as the project became explicitly politicised and even romanticised. Here I show how pre-existing notions of resistance and alterity have come to shape the discourse surrounding the

project, which in turn reveal sensitive fibres that point to the political salience of the MAT vis-à-vis the Mexican state.

Part 1: Economic pragmatics and revolutionary ideas

Integral to the idea of the MAT is its origin story. Public events like the book presentation in the ENAH, and indeed a great deal of the book itself, serve as forum for narrating the origins of the project and explaining why and how the MAT materialised. The above-cited epigraph to the book plays on the idea that the project emerged as a ‘little revolution’ from a ‘forgotten corner’ of rural Veracruz State. Like most forgotten corners of the globe, the profits from local industries are usually enjoyed by only a select few. In Espinal, the tendency runs that political strongmen are also major figures in local industries, as we see in more detail in the following chapter. The municipality is categorised by Mexican government agencies as a municipality with a ‘high grade of marginalisation’, with 78.8% of the population recorded as ‘living in poverty’ (Subsecretaría de Planeación, 2016). Given the data on its marginalisation, Espinal, like most of the surrounding municipalities, is a target for the Federal Government’s programme the Cruzada Nacional Contra el Hambre (National Crusade Against Hunger), which in theory is meant to eradicate hunger and malnutrition and facilitate agricultural food production, distribution and commercialisation. In practice, the crusade is focused on distributing basic foodstuffs either as rations or for sale at a discounted price in DICONSA Tiendas Comunitarias (Community Shops) in target communities. In Espinal, the DICONSA ‘Tienda Comunitaria’ is located down the road from the CT, the original cooperative shop, nerve centre and symbolic home of the MAT project. On the face of it, the DICONSA ‘Tienda Comunitaria’ and the CT aim to do the same thing. However, the geographical distance between both locales is nothing compared to the vast ideological difference that separates them. While the DICONSA is reported to have sold Maruchan instant soups proven to cause serious health problems and transgenic maize (Enciso, 2013; Sosa, 2010), alongside the *canasta básica* (basic food basket) of goods like tinned food, freeze dried coffee and detergent; the CT sells locally made yoghurt, ground coffee, chemical-free detergent, herbal medicines and political documentaries on pirated DVDs.

Given this context, Espinal could be any number of ‘forgotten corners’ in Mexico. The details of the origin story of the MAT are important in this respect: the reality of life in a rural, marginal enclave can resonate with many who live in the same situation. Yet, at the

same time, the details help to conjure up an image of the project in the social imaginary that also resonates with many who (knowingly or otherwise) romanticise rural life and endow those dwelling in the countryside with a revolutionary potential. This speaks to a long and complex history that has been divided between notions of the centre and the hinterland, the rural and the urban, the Federation and the *pueblos* (Lomnitz, 1992; 2016). A large part of the MAT story and hangs on this construction, where rural hinterlands are framed as places from which authentic alterity – real or imagined, hopeful or terrible – springs forth into the national space. But why did the MAT come about in the first place? In this section, we look at the tumistas' rationale for an alternative currency project. We then look at how and why the project was launched at a specific symbolic moment of Mexican national history.



Figure 1.1: First emission of tumin with Zapata and Diego Rivera designs (source: Arteaga, 2013)

The MAT as a critique of local political economy

The MAT emerges from a particularly localised understanding of capitalism and economic development. Preceding Alejandra's assertion that the túmin was a weapon, she had said the following:

The túmin came into existence 6 years ago and it emerged from a revolutionary idea. Yes, it emerged from a real life problem: how are we going to resolve and attend to our immediate necessities on a daily basis? And not only for those of us who proposed this instrument, but also for the *compañeros* who have even more of a problem resolving this on a daily basis – *compañeros campesinos*, house wives, *compañeros* builders, the carpenters, the fishermen, the humble people from the countryside. Those who although they have something to sell, they are not able to trade, and the produce goes to waste. In the [Totonacapan] region it is common to see produce left to rot – for example how oranges are wasted because there is no way of getting them to the market to sell. Sometimes they go to waste lying there in piles, or rot on the trees – there isn't even the possibility to harvest them, because it is more expensive to harvest than leave them there. And so this revolutionary instrument came into being, emerging out of the necessity to resolve immediate, everyday needs, in a place where the crushing reality of capitalism impedes you from being able to flourish in this capitalist logic. Because not only are you limited by/to what you consume, you are also restricted in developing your daily life... Given this, the doubt, the question that arose was that if we have the produce, and if we have our labour force, if we have our culture and our identity, why can't we make what we don't have. And these are those instruments that for us – from a more political and ideological posture – for us the túmin is a weapon...

Here Alejandra states the basic problem the MAT sought to resolve: in a region rich in resources, culture and identity, 'humble people' from the countryside were not able to trade with one another for lack of money. Although people were wealthy in many aspects, the fact they lacked wealth in monetary terms meant the local economy was stagnant. This is the 'crushing reality of capitalism' that Alejandra refers to as she exposes the faults of a market system that does not work, yet one whose negative effects on the human condition are readily felt. With people unable to take to fruit to market for sale, it sits rotting on trees, and on a more existential level, 'capitalist logic' acts as a barrier that denies people the chance to truly 'flourish'. It was into this context that the túmin was inserted as a catalyst for circulation and transformation. So how does the MAT actually work?

As we saw briefly in the Introduction, the MAT was designed to encourage exchange between local producers and traders through a cooperative network. This foundational aim is summed up in the phrase '*Cómprale a un compañero*' – 'buy from a comrade' (i.e. a fellow tumista). On joining the network, tumistas are given 500 túmin to facilitate trade with

fellow *socios* (cooperative members). One of the few set guidelines for the project stipulates that túmin should be used to cover at least 10 % of the total cost of a transaction between tumistas. For example, if a tumista sells 1 kilo of chicken for 70 mx to a fellow *socio*, the chicken seller would have to accept at least 7 t, and the remaining sum of 63 in pesos.² 10% is the *minimum* acceptance rule for the MAT, yet it is hoped that as tumistas participate in the project, they will *concientizarse* or *entrar en consciencia* (gain consciousness, become aware or ‘woke’) and be able to accept more túmin in transactions.

The idea that tumistas ‘gain consciousness’ through their participation in the project speaks to the wider politico-ethical agenda of the MAT, and is summed up in another common expression: ‘*el túmin como escuela*’ – the túmin as a school. This refers to the ongoing process of education and transformation that participation in the project is meant to engender, based around the guiding principles of trust, solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy. The tumistas decided on the first three principles by vote in a public assembly in July 2012 (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 87). We see in the following chapters that much of the work that sustains the MAT is based on activities designed to raise political and ethical awareness, like attending regular meetings, assemblies and workshops. The túmin is thus just one tool in a constellation of ideas, people, processes, material things and activities that make up the MAT.

A question of wealth

As a critique of capitalism, the MAT offers a distinct conception of wealth. Álvaro, one of the project’s founding members, tells us the following:

...the túmin emerged after a process of reflection amongst various university lecturers, people from Espinal, and students, and it emerged not because it was a great idea but more because it is a sign that people are fed up (*hasta la madre*) with the effects of capitalism and with money as a form of social control. In other words, it is clear that people don’t have an alternative; they don’t have alternatives to money and we are getting poorer, right? I mean, we are poor, but we are poor economically speaking: we are only poor in money, right? And there is much more wealth (*riqueza*) in the region. We have human wealth, material wealth, cultural wealth, and so much more. So from here we thought of a local instrument that could invigorate our wealth, right? A woman from Mecatlán said that she only realised she was poor when they told her they were going to give

² In this sense, the túmin is a ‘complementary’ currency, in that it is most commonly used in conjunction with the fiat currency. However, most people refer to it as an ‘alternative’ currency. Using the correct terminology is a sticking point for many hard-core ECOSOL activists and theorists, and there is much discussion over the terms ‘community’, ‘local’, ‘complementary’ and ‘alternative’ (see Blanc, 2011). In the thesis I refer to the túmin as an alternative currency, reflecting the emic understanding of the majority of tumistas.

her Prospera because she didn't know that she was poor.³ I mean, she hadn't realised she was poor, until they told her they were going to give her Prospera, so she said '¡ah, chingá! So I am poor then, right?' So, at least here in the region there is a lot of wealth, and that was the idea. One of the first difficulties we had; well, one of the most complicated was the lawsuit from the Bank of Mexico. Carstens wanted to sue whoever was responsible. Of course, when people hear about a social currency, a community currency that tries to change regional economic dynamics and mechanism, well of course it grabs their attention. How is another currency possible if it is the only method of control that capitalism really has, right? And of course, they went crazy on us and asked us to go and testify in court. And we went to testify. Well, a lot of us went, nearly all of the UVI students, and we went there to the Ministerio, and many people testified. Well, the advantage was that solidarity is still not considered a crime, right? So we explained that it was a project based on solidarity, that it was a citizen project, that it was a project where there was no type of payment in exchange for anything. So they investigated, and sent forensic anthropologists – forensic anthropology there in Espinal! So this started to generate certain distrust between people, because well, if a policeman or investigator arrives at your house and asks you: 'Hey! Are they not asking you for money? Are they not thinking of robbing you? Are they not thinking...' Well, it was something that started to generate some distrust. But the very same dynamics of the túmin recovered that trust, because people realised that we were not asking for their money, on the contrary, instead of asking, we were giving them money, because the túmin became an instrument that has the same function as money, right? And little by little, that trust has been recovered. I'd say that now the people are certain that this is truly a social project.

The túmin can thus be understood as an attempt to monetise the wealth that the tumistas identified as abundant in their region, but in the form of an alternative currency to that backed by the state. This currency takes the form of a revolutionary weapon against the capitalist system that imposes particular understandings of wealth that the architects of the MAT see as damaging or restricting to the collective wellbeing of the region.

The above accounts demonstrate that the MAT was designed as a practical economic intervention and a political project. The accounts also delineate the binary oppositions that cropped up repeatedly during my fieldwork as the tumistas told me what their project was, and was not, about. Indeed, the very title of the project tells us that it is an *alternative*, and

³ Mecatlán, a town an hour into the mountains from Espinal, and often cited as one of the poorest municipalities in Veracruz Staten (e.g. (Trujillo Baez, 2018). Prospera – literally meaning to prosper – is the latest rebranding of a Federal 'Social Inclusion Programme' that aims to 'tackle poverty' by depositing cash transfers to eligible recipients on a monthly basis. The programme has evolved from PRONASOL (see Introduction), and was originally launched as Progresá (Progress) in 1997, then rebranded as Oportunidades (Opportunities) in 2002. The MAT promoters criticise these programmes for creating conditions of paternalist dependency on state handouts in places like Espinal (see chapter 2). The tumistas frame the MAT in opposition to this sort of project, highlighting the importance of autonomy from the state, rather than dependence upon it.

both Alejandra and Álvaro make it clear that the MAT stands in opposition and seeks to provide an alternative to the way in which social relations are organised in a capitalist market system. Alejandra tells us that capitalism does not allow humans to develop their full potential, and Álvaro defines the MAT as a ‘truly social project’, suggesting that other development agendas may not have the social at the forefront of their concerns.

Rakopoulous and Rio (2018) provide us with a historical distinction between the meanings of wealth and capital, suggesting that the former is largely inalienable, as opposed to the latter, which is readily alienable. They also posit that ‘an anthropological meaning of wealth points to matters valuable for relations and their reproduction on a local level’ (Rakopoulous and Rio 2018: 284). The MAT is thus framed as a project that seeks to activate and generate wealth in the form of trust and solidarity amongst people on a local level. This is opposed to the state-backed development agenda that seeks to generate and extract wealth from the region under the terms of capital. The tumistas see this as a process that enriches some at the expense of others, who then might get categorised as poor, like the woman who did not know she was poor until the agent from Prospera –the Federal government’s poverty alleviation programme – told her she was. Here, GDP wealth is juxtaposed with wealth measured not by dollars or pesos, but in trust and solidarity, which is mediated in túmin and through the MAT framework.

Taking back the economy as a revolutionary task

The tumistas seek to put human values and lived experience at the forefront of their project, rejecting the notion that the economy is made up of abstract models, numbers and predictions. The MAT is not alone in this sense. As we saw in the Introduction, it is one of many projects across the globe where people are questioning the foundations upon which dominant notions of ‘the economy’ are built. These vary from grassroots efforts of the tumistas and countless others who are attempting to ‘take back the economy’ (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013); and at the institutional level with think tanks such as the New Economics Foundation, and the burgeoning ECOSOL paradigm (Beckett, 2019; Coyle, 2014). In rejecting the notion of poverty and wealth in terms of GDP, the tumistas are ‘reframing’ and ‘imagining the economy differently’ (Gibson-Graham, Cameron et al.: 3). As we saw in the opening vignette, for Alejandra, at the centre of this reimagining is the idea that the túmin is a weapon for waging a new revolution. Therefore, what is distinct about the MAT case is that the ‘taking back the economy’ also means ‘taking back the revolution’,

which is a notion that plays on a powerful, pre-existing social imaginary in the Mexican context.

Indeed, many social movement struggles in Mexico have reclaimed certain legacies of the Revolution, with the overarching idea that its promises were never fulfilled. Different sectors of society have mobilised at different points stressing the need to revisit the content and renew the fervour of that historic period. Constant in this process is the harnessing of certain symbols, perhaps the most enduring of which has been the figure of Emiliano Zapata. Throughout the 20th century, Zapata's demands were reclaimed by peasant movements at the same time the post-revolutionary government worked hard to domesticate and institutionalise his legacy (Brunk, 2008; Padilla, 2008; Stephen, 2002). The Mexican Revolution and its legacies have therefore been important elements in statecraft and counterhegemonic designs, providing a focal point upon which both the state and non-state actors can make claims. Symbols and symbolic moments have therefore become points of contention: as Stephen demonstrates, the symbol of Zapata, the Mexican flag and articles of the Mexican Constitution, have all served to articulate 'different views of a nation' and 'ideas about how one belongs to the nation' (2002: xxiv–xxxv). The Zapatista uprising of 1994 is perhaps the most visible and enduring use of the Zapata symbol for a counterhegemonic programme, and it was into this very vein that the architects of the MAT sought to locate their project by printing the image of Zapata onto the 1t notes of the first series of túmin (see Figure 1.1).

By printing their own currency decorated with the image of Zapata in November 2010, the tumistas were making a bold political statement. As mentioned above, the date here is important. November 2010 marked the Centenary celebrations of the Mexican Revolution, which came just weeks after the celebration of the Bicentenary of Mexican Independence. The then President Felipe Calderón oversaw preparations for what was called 'El año de la patria' (The year of the nation), which saw a massive orchestration of projects and events across the country, with participation from almost all federal and civic entities imaginable. Predictably, the moment was also used by many to critique and inspire, demonstrating the pressing need to renew the demands of both the independence and revolutionary movements, based on long standing grievances and in light of the deepening crisis of legitimacy of the state as Calderón's War on Drugs spiralled out of control.⁴ Therefore, the architects of the

⁴ For a historic overview of the War on Drugs in Mexico, see Watt and Zepeda 2012.

project designed the MAT garnering influence from both the Zapatista experience and the historic events commemorated that year:

...we started to design the idea of a community currency from March 2010, approximately at the heart of (*aproximadamente en el seno de*) the ‘Otra Campaña’, the Zapatista movement that sought to build autonomies, abandoning all hope for a solution to our problems from the State. It had to be designed like that, with people who believed in the autonomy of the *pueblos*, disillusioned by the welfare state and contrary to the capitalist system that we have identified as the source of all evils.

So it was not just any old idea, nor was it an initiative to see what occurred to us. In principle it had to be autonomous and anti-capitalist; that was the proposal and it could not be done any other way. It needed to be like that, or it would not be done. Thus, it could only be designed from an anti-systemic space with rebellious people and in a context that gave us the energy to be able to do it: the year 2010, centenary of the Mexican Revolution and bicentenary of this country’s independence (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 30).

In this section, we looked at the rationale behind the project, and the symbolic importance of launching this alternative imagining of the economy at a specific moment in time. Our first approximation is that the túmin serves as a practical exchange tool and a symbolic token of alternative value systems to those enshrined in capitalism. Many of these ideas are expounded in the second part of this chapter (and throughout those that follow), when we move on to look at how the MAT evolved from a regional experiment in that ‘forgotten village in the north of Veracruz State’ to becoming overtly politicised and publicised following the MAT-Banxico episode.

However, before doing this it is instructive to look a more deeply into the main currents that have influenced the MAT project. This will help us situate the MAT as the product of particular trends, many of which overlap, which in turn will help us understand more fully the milieu in which the project was formed and into which it has been promoted, received and critiqued. It will also help us understand some of the contours that have shaped notions of alterity and resistance in the popular social imaginary of contemporary Mexico.

Mercado Alternativo Túmin: Genesis

The origins of the project are located in particular ideological trajectories, which account a lot for why the MAT took the form it did and how it was able to appeal to well established notions of resistance and alterity in the Mexican social imaginary. In particular, the role of community organising and the influence of the progressive church, human rights and neo-Zapatismo all shaped the principles upon which the project is constructed. Alternative

pedagogical currents also played a role, such as participatory-action research and intercultural education. Finally, the ECOSOL theoretical paradigm is something that contributed to the project's inception, despite the mixed reception that MAT has received from academics in that field.

The Human Rights paradigm

At the core of the MAT story is a small human rights (HR hereafter) organisation, the Red Unidos por los Derechos Humanos (United for Human Rights Network, RUDH hereafter). The RUDH was formed in August 2003, at a meeting – Encuentro por la Paz, los Derechos Humanos, y el Desarrollo Local (Meeting for Peace, Human Rights and Local Development) – organised by a church-based HR centre in Tlaxcala, where Juan Castro was working that year. The formation of the RUDH concretised some years of previous coordination, organisation and work between diverse social movements from the Totonacapan and Huasteca regions. At one point, the RUDH was made up of a network of 16 different organisations across the regions, most of which were HR organisations or groups linked to the church, and a number of people who had no affiliation to any pre-existing group. In 2003, the RUDH's objective was to 'construct a solidary and regional organisation for the defence and promotion of Human Rights' (RUDH, 2004). Twelve years later, Juan told me that in practice the RUDH was a dispersed group, and members would only meet up to plan and coordinate activities. Most of the work the RUDH did was in the educational sphere or accompanying existing social movement struggles. They focused specifically on issues such as raising awareness of and supporting political prisoners; gender equality; Catholic social teaching and 'productive projects'. An overarching theme running through the RUDH's work – and indeed a guiding template – has been neo-Zapatismo. As we will see in more detail below, most of the founding members of the RUDH also have a long experience of engagement with the Zapatista movement, either in Chiapas directly or in the nationwide networks that have been forged over the years since the 1994 uprising.

The project's origins in the RUDH meant that the MAT's architects could make moral claims about socio-economic life from the framework of HR. Indeed, the MAT can be considered a project that demands and exercises 'the right to live with dignity' (Señorans, 2017). For example, tumistas were given 500t (£21) on joining the project because 'that quantity represents what we thought would be a just daily minimum salary for any Mexican family'

(Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 40).⁵ At the time the MAT was launched, that amount (500 t) was around 10 times the minimum salary, which was just above 50mx.⁶ A dignified and just minimum wage was imagined as enough for a family to ‘live well’ on. In MAT public events, workshops and assemblies, it was common to resort to the language of HR. The tumistas reasoned that if people are obliged to live under the socio-economic conditions produced by capitalism, then they have the right to earn a dignified minimum wage in order to be able to meet their needs.

This also means that the MAT is in dialogue and became allied with certain HR groups organising around similar themes. A constant in this respect were those groups struggling for all types of justice in other parts of the country (and the world). For example, these encompassed other ECOSOL projects, groups defending (often indigenous) rights to autonomy (the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Cherán in Michoacán, the CRAC in Guerrero) and those defending land rights against encroaching extractive industries – most notably the ‘mega death projects’ in the Totonacapan region of Veracruz and neighbouring Sierra Norte in Puebla.⁷ One of the most significant projects that the tumistas are also involved in terms of rights is the CNPM – the Consejo Nacional del Pueblo Mexicano (National Council of the Mexican People). The CNPM is a broad coalition movement that was also born out of the church, which has set about the task of writing a new Constitution from below, through a series of consultations and workshops. The CNPM rejects electoral politics and serves as a forum to propose and discuss new plans for the nation that bypass existing channels of representation and institutions.

Reporting on HR news was the role of the Kgosni – a newspaper published twice monthly by the RUDH, which came to be the official mouthpiece of the MAT. We will learn more about the Kgosni in the following chapter, for now it is sufficient to say the Kgosni was one of the central instruments of the MAT, published and circulated both physically and electronically via extensive mailing lists every two weeks. The Kgosni kept tumistas

⁵ All conversions into pounds sterling are approximate: they have been rounded to the nearest whole number, and were correct as of September 2019.

⁶ While doing fieldwork, the minimum wage set by the government was between 63.77 mx (2014 low) to 73.04 mx (2016). Minimum wage for 2019 is set at 102.68 mx (176.72 mx in the North Border Free Trade Zone) (Comisión Nacional de los Salarios Mínimos, 2019).

⁷ ‘Mega death projects’ or ‘Mega proyectos de la muerte’ was a term commonly used by critics and activists to refer to planned extractive projects like mining, hydroelectric dams and fracking. The Totonacapan and Sierra Norte regions are particularly affected as part of the controversial ‘Aceite Terciario del Golfo’ project (De La Fuente, 2016; Comisión Nacional de Hidrocarburos, , 2010).

informed of the latest news about their project from its diverse locations, denouncing HR abuses and reporting on social movement struggles across Mexico and internationally. The transformation from RUDH newsletter to official MAT mouthpiece is an example of how many elements of the project were influenced by – or in this case directly imported from – the architects’ previous experience as HR defenders (*defensores de derechos humanos*).

The face of the RUDH I saw in the field was a small group of seven people based in Papantla and Poza Rica, some of whom were founders of the RUDH and the MAT. On one occasion I also met the RUDH contact in Xilitla, San Luis Potosí (where the RUDH office is also now the Casa Túmin Xilitla); and on another I met the RUDH contact in Tampico, Tamaulipas. Both were also the contacts for the MAT in their hometowns; I met them at MAT public events in Mexico City and Papantla. The core group of seven in Papantla and Poza Rica were decisive in the planning and implementation of the MAT, as well as providing, either as a group or individually, the main sources of ‘solidary contributions’ – finance to keep the project running (see chapter 3). Four of the core group had been present at the founding of the RUDH in 2003. The other three joined the RUDH later. For example, Oscar Espino came into contact with the RUDH when working at a church-backed community radio in Huayacocotla, Veracruz, and he later got a job as a lecturer at the UVI-Totonacapan – the educational institution based in Espinal (see more below) – alongside Álvaro and Juan. The RUDH was essentially formed out of a close group of friends and colleagues, who either knew or came to know each other through pre-existing networks or contacts; there was also considerable overlap with the kind of political activities and work they were involved in.

Zapatismo

Much of the anti-capitalist and pro-autonomy ideological currents that have influenced the MAT can be found in Zapatismo. Many founding members of the project (and other non-founding members) are adherents to the Zapatistas Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona, and between 2005 – 2010, the RUDH left aside other projects and to focus exclusively on accompanying La Otra Campaña. The former, simply known as La Sexta, is the sixth of a number of declarations the Zapatistas have made since their first call to arms was released on the eve of their January 1st 1994 uprising (EZLN, 1994). La Sexta was released in June 2005, and with it the Zapatistas announced their plans to make broader alliances both within Mexico and internationally with all those ‘struggling against neoliberalism and for humanity’ (EZLN, 2005). Up until that point, the Zapatistas focused their struggle vis-à-vis

the state towards the indigenous rights agenda and achieving change through institutional means, while simultaneously building their autonomy at home. This shift came after a series of failed negotiations with the Federal Government –the story of which has been well documented elsewhere– which lead to the Zapatistas rejecting any engagement with the state (Díaz Polanco, 1997; Rivas, 2004). La Sexta was a display of recognition, solidarity and an invitation for all of those against neoliberalism, be they indigenous or otherwise, to work together to construct a new ‘left alternative for Mexico’, ‘from below and for those below’, rejecting engagement with political parties and federal entities. The ensuing project was La Otra Campaña, launched in July 2005, which saw a Zapatista delegation travelling across Mexico to visit and exchange experiences with a broad range of communities and social movements, in order to build up a popular consensus and platform for reimagining and constructing new political alternatives and the writing of a new Constitution.

As Mora has noted, the La Otra Campaña resulted in ‘[t]he recentering of an anticapitalist critique’ which had previously been absent from Zapatista discourse, opening up fruitful dialogue with more traditional leftist movements and groups that had ‘historically remained on the margins of the Zapatista movement’ (Mora, 2007: 65). The history of the Zapatistas’ relationship with the left has been an interesting one. Many championed the 1994 uprising as proof that a revolutionary political project was still possible –a much needed beacon of hope at a time when neoliberalism was seemingly the triumphant hegemonic model that was engulfing the globe, while others were sceptical and reluctant to engage with what seemed to be a strongly indigenous agenda (Mora, 2007). As Mora points out, during the Otra Campaña it seemed that the left in fact had a lot to learn from the Zapatistas and that indigenous experience did have something to offer in terms of an alternative to neoliberal capitalism.

The idea that indigenous people possess an important ancestral knowledge and template for imagining a more just society and a more harmonious existence with nature is widely held across the Americas (and beyond). It takes manifest form through both grassroots activism and social movement activity and in government-implemented development strategies; like the notions of *Buen Vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay* in the Andean countries (Ranta, 2018), or inspiring resistance and an alternative political horizon in the era of Trump (Klein, 2017). In Mexico, the Zapatistas and their project for autonomy have most popularly exemplified this trend. The autonomy question took on renewed importance following Mexico’s signing of the ILO 169 in 1990 and the subsequent constitutional reforms of 1992, and indeed took

centre stage from the 1994 uprising, the San Andrés Accords of 1996 and the constitutional reforms of 2001 (see de la Peña 2006; Rivas 2004).⁸

We will see throughout this and preceding chapters that people understand the alternative offered by the MAT through the same or similar discursive fields of indigeneity and autonomy. This inserts the project into a readily identifiable discursive framework, and counts for a large part of the MAT's appeal and longevity. Indeed, the tumistas used the juridical framework put in place by the constitutional reforms of 2001 in their defence against the Bank of Mexico.⁹ The effect this has was to conflate the project with indigeneity, especially in the media. Both these points will be unpacked below. On another level, we must remember that ideas for the MAT were incubated during the period that the RUDH was involved with the Otra Campaña, due to certain members' involvement with Zapatismo from the 1990s. As such, the MAT shares much of the EZLN's ideology, discourse and governance structure. For example, decisions are taken in assemblies and the Junta de Buen Gobierno (Good Governance Council, JBG hereafter) enacts upon the proposals, and overall the MAT is envisioned as made up of 'Autonomous Tumin Regions', as we will see in more detail in chapter 3. These mechanisms are taken directly from the EZLN – in 2003 the autonomous communities started to organise their internal affairs through JBGs (Speed, 2007), and the term was officially adopted by the MAT in 2010, when the second CC took over the management of the project.

Alternative pedagogical currents and the educational sector

From its inception, the project's architects envisioned the MAT as a transformative educational project. This is reflected in the phrase we saw above – 'the tumin as a school' – and the idea that the MAT helps people to 'change their capitalist chip for a solidary one'. There was a phrase painted on the sign hanging above the door of the Casa Tumin in Espinal that read '*Educar para transformar, transformar para educar*' ('Educate to transform, transform to educate'). This phrase was also used in tumista literature and discourse, which reflected the particular vein of popular or alternative pedagogical currents the project's founders had been trained and practiced in. This was, of course, a mammoth and

⁸ The San Andrés Accords are the agreements signed between the government and the EZLN following the uprising.

⁹ The reforms never lived up to what was reflected in the San Andrés Accords, but nonetheless established certain bases for differing degrees of juridical and political autonomy of indigenous peoples within the state at a municipal level (see de la Peña 2006).

experimental task, and MAT promoter Oscar Espino once told a group of tumistas gathered in Xalapa; ‘the túmin is an unconstructed construct, and our text-book is in its use’ (*el túmin es una construcción no construido y nuestro libro de texto está en su uso*). It was thus through practising using the túmin that tumistas would learn to stop ‘seeing one another as clients, and start seeing [themselves] as *compañeros*’. As we will see in the following chapters, the MAT promoters place much emphasis on the processual change brought around through practising and working within the MAT. This focus on educational transformation can be understood by looking at the pedagogical roots of the project, and a good starting point for this is looking at the role of the Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (Intercultural University of Veracruz, UVI hereafter).

The UVI is a higher educational institution within the structure of the Universidad Veracruzana, the autonomous public university of Veracruz State. The UVI was founded in 2004 and within a year four branches of the institution were up and running in different ‘Intercultural Regions’ of Veracruz State, along with a central branch in Xalapa. Intercultural regions are categorized as such due to the presence of a strong indigenous population, who through a long history of socio-economic and cultural exclusion, have had limited access to higher education (Téllez et al., 2006). One of the four branches of the UVI is located in Espinal: the UVI-Totonacapan, where Juan and Álvaro worked when the project was launched in 2010, and where various MAT promoters have worked before or since. For example, it was here where the MAT coordinators in Puebla, Oaxaca and Xalapa first came into contact with the project. The UVI thus served as an institutional and educational hub for the project, yet as we shall see below support for the MAT within the institution has waxed and waned over the years.

The UVI is the Veracruz chapter of a nationwide network of institutions that came into being during the Fox administration (2000–2006), yet as Lehmann notes the Universidades Interculturales (UIs hereafter) sought to transcend the ‘neoliberal indigenism’ characteristic of Fox’s *sexenio* (2013: 781).¹⁰ In this respect, the UIs were in part born out of a pressing political necessity to readdress the relationships between education, indigenous people and the state following the Zapatista uprising (Dietz, 2012). The UI model seeks to deliver

¹⁰ Here Lehmann is citing a phrase coined by anthropologists (Castillo et al., 2004) to describe the Fox administration’s stance towards the indigenous population which, despite rather superficial constitutional changes, the underlying basis of state-indigenous relations remained characterised by marginalisation and/or assimilation.

education that is pertinent to the inhabitants of the designated intercultural regions. A practical example of this is the UVI's methodological focus on *investigación vinculada* (linked investigation), where students are encouraged to carry out research projects in consultation with – and hopefully to the benefit of – the very communities which the UVI educational offer is set to target. This model can be located within broader progressive pedagogical currents that are common in Latin America, like Participatory Action Research framework, famously pioneered by Colombian anthropologist Fals Borda (1973), which had been in turn inspired by Paulo Friere (2000 [1973]).

From the beginning, the MAT promoters hoped students from the UVI-Totonacapan would get involved in the MAT because it was a practical example of the type of investigation and community consultation work – in this case contributing to local self-management and community development – expected of them. Indeed, some students participated in the initial consultations and planning of the project, and over the years students have been encouraged to support the project, whether by actively participating as *tumistas* or MAT promoters, or working in the Casa Túmin as part of their *servicio social* (community work).¹¹ However, the relationship between the MAT project and the UVI as an institution has been a blend of curiosity, enthusiasm and caution. On the one hand, there are people within the university structure who celebrate and support the project as a shining example of the types of self-management projects (*proyectos autogestivos*) that can be developed between academics and the community. On the other there are those who have distanced themselves or openly rejected it, especially following the threat of legal action brought about by Banxico.

In the first camp are people like Gunther Dietz and Shantal Mesenguer. Dietz is a well-known academic in the intercultural field who has worked within the UV/UVI since 2007. He served for a short time as the university's director – a position Mesenguer assumed in 2014.¹² Dietz is an enthusiastic supporter of the MAT: he understands it as a clear and successful example of the UVI's focus on *investigación vinculada* (engaged research), and has even made it part of a wider educational project, Intersaberes (Between Knowledges). Dietz told me that this strategy lent the MAT some sort of institutional backing and support in the wake of the Banxico episode, when the UVI chose to distance itself from the project

¹¹ *Servicio social universitario* or University Social Service is an obligatory part of university education in Mexico, where students are encouraged to do something to contribute towards the 'social development' of the country, amongst other things (Lagarda and Soler, 2002).

¹² The headquarters of the UVI is based in Xalapa, where the overall director and central offices are located. Each campus then has its own director and corresponding internal structure.

to avoid ‘political problems’. Herein lay the issue that divided opinions: the institution supported the project at the start, but when the MATs legality was called in to question the then director of the UVI (who had succeeded Dietz and preceded Mesenguer) chose to withdraw support. It was not until Dietz was in a position to help that the UVI re-established official ties with the MAT, reversing what he called the ‘túmin stigma’ that had taken hold there since 2011. Moreover, Dietz saw this as imperative: if the UVI was to call itself ‘intercultural’, then it *needed* to actively support, defend and promote projects like the MAT, despite the conflicts that might arise. Dietz’ enthusiasm for the MAT relates to the wider aims of the UI model to promote local, sustainable development in the intercultural regions, encourage self-management (*autogestión*) and to educate community and indigenous leaders for the future. Aside from more personal and political reasons, from his position as an academic within the UVI structure Dietz supported the MAT primarily for its educational value. He saw the MAT as a ‘bridge’ between the academic sector and the work of experienced HR defenders, and he was interested in how these two experiences converged upon and worked with the local community.

Educational interest in the project has taken many forms. Dietz’ own project Intersaberes inspired Mayeli – a MAT coordinator from Xalapa – to undertake an investigation of the MAT as a learning process, in which she also reflected on her own transformation during her participation with the project, from outside observer to coordinator in her hometown (Ochoa Martínez, 2016). Mayeli’s thesis is one of a few that have now been written by students from diverse disciplines, both in Mexico and internationally (see also Medina Domínguez, 2013). When I set out to do my own fieldwork in Espinal I soon realised that the MAT was increasingly the subject of academic interest and study, and the arrival of coach loads of students from Mexico City or elsewhere on a field trip to Espinal was not an uncommon event in the tumista calendar. As we saw in the opening vignette, MAT promoters were often invited to speak at educational institutions about their experience, where they invariably made an impact on the students and academics present, fostering support for the project and inspiring others to experiment with their own forms of economic exchange.

The MAT was thus partly born out of a university environment and readily found allies and supporters in the educational sphere, as we saw with the event described in the opening vignette of this chapter. In Mexican society, academia has long been seen as a progressive and even radical sector, with a strong social commitment, and I think it is easy to see how the MAT stirred a lot of interest in academic circles. The project was thought to demonstrate

something many students and academics were eager to see. Undoubtedly, the ideology behind the MAT played an important part here, but equally many observers saw in the MAT a real life example that educational theory and social development could come together and work in a tangible project that seemingly flew in the face of mainstream economic theory. The MAT had a strong educational value, and it represented something fresh, new and exciting – something that turned much conventional knowledge on its head and opened up a world of possibilities. Despite this, the MAT has also sustained some heavy critique over the years, and much of that has come from different camps within academia, like those working in the ECOSOL paradigm.

The ECOSOL Paradigm

The MAT is perhaps one of the most publicised ECOSOL projects in Mexico. As of 2016, Ochoa (2016) had recorded the existence of 19 similar currency projects in Mexico dating back to the mid-1990s (see also Santana Echeagaray 2008). Of these, the túmin is arguably the most well known, with certainly the largest circulation. However, for some hard-core ECOSOL ideologues, activists and academics, the MAT does not meet their expectations. One ECOSOL activist and theorist once exclaimed to me that the túmin was '*pura cáscara vacía*': just an empty shell. A MAT promoter once told me that academics criticised the project because they were jealous: while they were theorising and writing about ECOSOL, the tumistas were getting on and actually *doing* it.

Collin (2012: 251) traces the beginnings of ECOSOL as a growing agenda for groups and social movements in Mexico in the mid-1990s, with the conformation of the Vida Digna y Sustentable (Dignified and Sustainable Life) Network in 1994. In 2003, ECOSOL then became an explicit agenda for groups that were originally gathered under the umbrella of the Mexican Institute of Social Christian Doctrine (IMDOSOC) and, with a strong influence from the recently formed National Cooperative Alliance (ALCONA), a group called EcoSol México, A.C was formed (Collin 2012; EcoSol México, 2004). The stated aims of the group were to work towards a pact to 'create a horizontal system of mutual aid at the national level with international links', and they believed that they were 'gestating the seed of a new economic paradigm' (EcoSol México 2004: 1). In 2004, the group gathered 41 organisations as signatories, declaring that 'Another Economy is Possible' (*Otra Economía es Posible*) (Collin 2012; EcoSol México 2004: 5).

The motto ‘Another Economy is Possible’ has its roots in the World Social Forum (WSF), which, since its inception in Porto Alegre in 2001, has come to be a much-cited example that ‘Another World is Possible’ (see Fisher et al., 2015). The WSF in many ways became a forum for representation of many sectors of the alter-globalisation movement, and it is here that we can see how the frames of reference in which ideas of ‘alternatives’ are informed by localised experiences which are then translated into international discourse, and vice versa. Brazil is an important point of reference for being home of the WSF and because it is from here that much of the theory and practice of ECOSOL has emerged. ECOSOL in Brazil is well-established, and a strong emphasis is placed on its virtues and development in educational and governmental fields, having received much support and funding from the PT government in the 1990s and 2000s and owing a lot to the party’s relationship with the Catholic Church.¹³ The Brazilian case has set an example and a benchmark for other Latin American countries, and many governments now have some form of ECOSOL legal framework and corresponding institutions.

In Mexico, the Ley de la Economía Social y Solidaria (Social and Solidarity Economy Law, LESS hereafter) was passed in 2012 which decreed the founding of the Instituto Nacional de Economía Social (National Social Economy Institution, INAES hereafter). The INAES has branch offices in state capitals across the country. Moreover, interest in ECOSOL is growing in the educational sector: the Universidad Iberoamericana has worked for some years promoting social economy in business incubators, and the autonomous universities of Chapingo, Puebla, Michoacán, Guanajuato and Aguascalientes now offer an ‘inter-institutional’ doctoral programme in ‘Social Solidarity Economy’. These are examples of the way the ECOSOL paradigm has become institutionalised, be it within the state apparatus or the educational sector. Herein lie examples that help illustrate the difference between the ‘Social Economy’ and ‘Solidarity Economy’. Although both terms are used to describe similar things, and in many cases are used interchangeably, there is much discussion about the origin and correct usage of them. I find it helpful to use Laville’s (2010a) distinction, according to which ‘Social’ economy generally refers to top-down, institutionalised processes and projects, with more of a European heritage, and ‘Solidarity’ economy referring

¹³ ECOSOL in Brazil, as is the case in many Latin American countries, is often cited as originating in the late 1970s and 1980s, in projects started up by groups associated with those elements of the progressive Catholic church, inspired by liberation theology (see Collin, 2012).

to bottom-up, grass roots process and projects that generally emerged in Latin America. The promoters of the MAT define ‘Solidarity Economy’ as

a way of organising production and trade around cooperation and ‘buen vivir’ – the search for a good life together – contrary to the competition and capital accumulation that characterise the (capitalist) market system (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 24).

Here we see once again how the MAT is defined explicitly in opposition to capitalism. Moreover, that the INAES is the institute of ‘Social Economy’, and the tumistas define the MAT as ‘Solidarity Economy’ is telling of the different ideological visions that guide each project.

It is interesting to note that the RUDH was officially formed around the same time as the ECOSOL alliances and networks that Collin (2012) traced, and that similarly both the HR and ECOSOL networks had close associations with the church. The founders of the MAT even report that the idea of starting a currency-based project first occurred to them in 2003, at the third Encuentro Nacional de Economía Solidaria (National Solidarity Economy Meeting), where amongst others they met one of the founders of then Mexico’s longest running ECOSOL project, Tianguis Tlaloc (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 28).¹⁴ We can see how ideas for the MAT were influenced and formed in relation to wider experiences and discussions of ECOSOL happening at the time, both in Mexico and beyond, and that these experiences can all be traced back to a similar moment in time and similar ideological projects. Equally of note is the fact that the Ley de Economía Social y Solidaria was passed and the INAES formed shortly after the MAT-Banxico clash, and it would be interesting to know if the episode had any direct effect on this introduction of legislature and institutionalisation of ECOSOL on the part of the Mexican state.

Here we have looked at the broad picture of the main currents that have influenced the architects of the MAT, and the milieu in which the project was gestated. There are many overlaps, and certain key features can be distinguished: the role of the church, education and Zapatismo in particular. Collin (2012, personal communication) suggests that a progression can be identified, from groups working with the church in CEBS in the late 70s and 1980s, through to the ECOSOL movements of the moment. In a similar way, others have noted how into the 1990s, left-wing activists adopted or harnessed multiculturalism and particularly

¹⁴ The Tianguis Tlaloc was formed in Mexico City in 1994 (see Santana Echeagaray 2008).

indigenous struggles in Latin America as the political terrain shifted following the collapse of the Berlin Wall (Hale, 1994). The MAT is an amalgamation: its architects are long-standing community organisers with links to the church and adherents to the Zapatista struggle, who have seemingly followed and pushed the political terrain of contestation and alterity into the ECOSOL paradigm, where they hope to craft new political subjectivities. Indeed, the marketplace has always been at the centre of political debates, and fertile ground for conceptions of the moral economy (Palomera and Vetta, 2016; Thompson, 1971). What we see with the MAT project is how long-standing notions of resistance and alterity have been adopted and reworked through an alternative market paradigm particular to the Mexican context.

Part 2: The MAT-Banxico Episode and the construction of alterity

As we saw in the Introduction, the consequences of the MAT-Banxico episode were paradoxical: support from the project waned in Espinal at the same time as the MAT gained popularity further afield. In this section, we turn to look at how a narrative unfolded around the events which led to the project becoming overtly politicised and romanticised. In particular, we will see how pre-existing social imaginaries of alterity and resistance shaped the terrain and interface through which the MAT was presented and understood. Here I highlight the role of the media, and look at how the tumistas defined their project vis-à-vis the state through their legal defence; where they both openly criticised institutions and legal processes but also used the legal framework and evoked the Mexican Constitution to help them to do this.

Media coverage

Like many others, I first heard about the MAT through the media. I read a small piece written by Juan Castro, published in June 2012 on a left-leaning website dedicated to publishing ‘journalism from below’ (Castro Soto, 2012). Titled ‘El Tumin: una moneda alternativa en México’ (The Tumin: an alternative currency in Mexico, *sic.*), the article opens with the same lines that later make up the preface to the book ‘Aceptamos Túmin’, which I have already cited above, locating the MAT within the context of 2010 and describing the project as a ‘small independence: our own little revolution’. The article contains a very brief resumé of the aims of the project and recounts some of the experiences over the first two years, including the clash with Banxico. A few months in to fieldwork, someone suggested that I had been a ‘victim of the wave of media interest,’ meaning that, like others, I had travelled

far to Espinal to see what was going on there and, when confronted with the everyday reality of the MAT, had found it hard to reconcile this with my preconceived ideas. I discovered that the suggestive power of the ideology of the project, and its portrayal in the media, were crucial elements of the MAT story.

The first media outlets to show an interest in the project were local or regional, but soon the news of the MAT had reached the ears of the BBC, CNN and Telesur to name a few (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 91). However, the reports that would have the biggest impact in the trajectory of the project came from two of the largest Mexican media outlets – Televisa and TV-Azteca – and an online video report by the newspaper *El Universal*. But what was it about these media reports in particular that had such an impact? A large part of the answer here lies in the sort of media outlets Televisa, TV-Azteca and *El Universal* are, and what sort of coverage they gave the project in their reports. Despite their size and popular appeal, the first two outlets are regarded with suspicion and heavily criticised by some sectors of Mexican society due to their close association with the rich, powerful and corrupt, along with their track record of media bias and manipulation – a situation which was made particularly clear following the 2012 election of president Peña Nieto (Hughes and Lawson, 2004; Tuckman, 2012). The MATs founders shared a cautionary stance towards the outlets because, as they write: ‘we all know that these companies help consolidate the power in Mexico and have always dedicated themselves to attacking autonomous projects via the media’ (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 91). It seems that the project’s architects knew from the start that they might receive some unwanted attention. So it was that one day, two Televisa film crews turned up at the UVI looking to interview those behind the project to feature in reports for their respective programmes. The tumistas’ gut reaction was not to speak to them. However, they decided to face the cameras, fearing that they might make things worse otherwise, so they divided themselves up to give interviews and invited the reporters to speak with various tumistas around town (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 91). One report went out the following morning, and the other was to be aired a couple of months later; the other ended up presented as evidence by the PGR.

The Televisa reports were aired on some of the most popular news programmes in the country, ensuring that the MAT was given wide coverage. The tumistas mark this coverage of their project particularly as a watershed, because ‘ever since then the media has not stopped publishing reports on the Túmin’ (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 92). It was with the TV-Azteca and *El Universal* reports that a certain narrative of the project started to

emerge – one that centred on questions of legality and revolutionary potential. In particular, the TV-Azteca report highlighted Article 117 of the Mexican Constitution, where it is detailed that states cannot ‘mint coinage, issue paper money, stamps or stamped paper’ and the *El Universal* report painted the project in a ‘revolutionary’ light (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 93). As the tumistas noted, ‘[t]hese facts marked a radical change in the dynamic of the Túmin. What started as closed and discreet became open door’ (93).

The media machine was set in motion, and the narrative around the MAT took on a decidedly marked course. Since then, reports have consistently focused on the project’s revolutionary aspirations, its links with the Zapatistas, and Espinal’s location within the *sierra*; a place inhabited by poor indigenous people. For example, the above-mentioned report for *El Universal* stated that Espinal was an indigenous town in ‘monetary rebellion’, publicised the project’s links with the Zapatista struggle, and that the project had put the government in ‘checkmate’ (Castellanos, 2012). In a similar vein, a report by the BBC focuses on the ‘rebellious’ nature of the project – that it was launched around the festivities of 2010, yet that for ‘many indigenous communities like Espinal, the celebration was a way of excluding the minorities of the country’; and that in this context the túmin – decorated with ‘images of Emiliano Zapata and paintings of Diego Rivera’ – was an ‘instrument of protest’ (Nájar, 2012). Of course, media reports almost always mention perhaps the most revolutionary credential of all: the clash with the Bank of Mexico, which underlines the state–counter-state relation running through the whole affair.

Legal defence

The nature of the narrative spun surrounding the project and the MAT-Banxico episode was fuelled by the tumistas defiant response to the threat of legal action. Following their first visit to the PGR in April 2011, the tumistas set about preparing the defence of their project and appealing for help and support, drawing on their network of members and supporters, many of whom were experienced in HR law. The first defence of their project was printed in the Kgosni at the end of April, which I have cited at length in the Introduction. This is the defence where the tumistas juxtaposed their currency with that of the Mexican peso, claiming amongst other things that the former had a ‘greater moral quality’ than the latter, which had been ‘perverted’ by the Bank of Mexico by siding with foreign interests. Moreover, the tumistas’ statement and ensuing defence framed the túmin as a ‘tool of

autonomy’ (Amato and Fantacci, 2012: 250), which saw them engaging with the judicial framework put in place by the 2001 constitutional reforms.

Two weeks later, in May 2011, the tumistas went back to the PGR equipped with the limited paperwork they had concerning the project and a written legal defence based on article 2.a of the Mexican Constitution, adding to it Article 7.1 of the ILOs Convention 169, and article 234 of the Federal Penal Code (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 95-99). The former two articles both state that indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination and autonomy, and can thus decide how to design and manage their own economic systems. The latter article states it is a crime to falsify legal tender, or print currency that looks like or can be confused with it. The tumistas were confident: their currency did not try to imitate the state-backed currency in any way – it was based on a totally different vision. Given the milieu in which the MAT promoters were formed and their alignment to the Zapatistas’ Sexta declaration, it is perhaps unsurprising that the core of their legal defence rested on the right to self-determination and autonomy. The explicit foregrounding of autonomy would overwhelmingly influence how the project was perceived and received, undoubtedly giving the MAT its edge both vis-à-vis the state and amongst its more radical support base.

‘Let’s see if they are indigenous’¹⁵

The tumistas’ recourse to the language and legal tools of self-determination and autonomy dictated the direction of the proceedings. In March 2012, almost a year after the summons, the PGR sent an anthropologist to Espinal to find out if the tumistas were in fact indigenous. The tumistas were amused and slightly perplexed by this, as they narrate their first encounter with the anthropologist, to whom a tumista posed the question:

And how are you going to know [if we are indigenous]? Because around here some people are *totonacos* but they don’t feel like they are, and others feel like they are but they aren’t.... ‘Ah, and there are others who don’t even feel they are and are definitely not (*hay otros que ni se sienten ni son*)’, added *doña señora* [a woman who was present]. And if we aren’t indigenous, then what happens? Or by any chance, is there (*acaso hay*) racial discrimination in this country? (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 98).

The above extract demonstrates the problematic nature of defining who or what is indigenous; an enduring paradox beyond the tumista experience (De La Cadena and Starn, 2007). The tumistas highlighted the problematic and discriminatory process and

¹⁵ Title taken from the ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ book (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 98).

categorisation which multicultural regimes employ to identify who or what belongs to a certain culture or ethnic group. Moreover, they suggested that what was important here was that people have the right to exercise self-management and autonomy in deciding how and with whom they conduct their affairs, be they indigenous or otherwise (RUDH, 2012). After spending two days interviewing tumistas in Espinal, the anthropologist concluded that the MAT was a plural project, in which people from all sorts of backgrounds participated, and that far from being illegal, it was ‘a laudable example’ for the rest of the country (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 98). This twist demonstrates the ambiguous nature of indigeneity on the one hand and interpretation of the law on the other (see de la Peña 2006). Hansen (2018) has shown how indigenous identity can be mobilised as a political strategy to defend or assert certain rights, including municipal autonomy, vis-à-vis the state. In the tumista case, it was not that they were actively assuming an indigenous identity as a strategy per se, but that they evoked article 2.a to defend their right to self-management and autonomy because it was the only judicial framework available to them for this, indigenous or not. In any case, the encounter with the forensic anthropologist revealed the complex and ambivalent nature of indigeneity more generally. With the anthropologist’s visit, it seems the PGR ‘ceased hostilities’ towards the MAT, and they have not pursued the case since. However, Banxico have not retracted their lawsuit – it remains open and unresolved to this day (September 2019).

The anthropologist’s visit to Espinal sheds light on the role of indigeneity in the construction of the MAT in a more general sense. The findings were nothing new – in one of the earliest exchanges I had with Juan Castro he sought to clarify that the MAT was ‘not an indigenous project’. My presumption that it was had largely been based on what I had read in the media reports. Despite the anthropologist’s findings and Juan’s clarification, the fact remains that the MAT is still closely associated with indigeneity, be it through media portrayal, outsider commentary or by many of the tumistas themselves. The association of the MAT with indigeneity, and some of the entanglements we have seen in this chapter, point towards the wider role of indigenous identity in the construction of national identity. This is a vast subject, but the broad picture points to the ambiguous and ambivalent value ascribed to indigeneity in Mexico, which is highly dependent upon the context and situation in

question.¹⁶ Here it would seem that the MAT is one of countless other projects and ideas that have actively drawn upon or been charged with elements of indigenous identity or heritage, depending on who you talk to and the situation at hand. So what are some of the common tropes that emerge?

As we will see in the following chapters, this association is drawn for many reasons, perhaps starting with the name of the currency. ‘Túmin’ means ‘money’ in Totonac, the native language of the Totonacapan region.¹⁷ The locality is also important here. The region is evocative of an ethnic enclave in the state of Veracruz that is even known and celebrated on a national level thanks to the *Danza de los Voladores*, a pre-Hispanic ritual dance that was granted Intangible Cultural Heritage status by UNESCO in 2009.¹⁸ The town at the centre of this tradition is Papantla, the neighbouring municipality to Espinal, and home to El Tajín ceremonial centre – one of Mexico’s most iconic archaeological sites. The region has thus long been identified with indigeneity in the popular imaginary, which is reinforced in administrative and intellectual spheres (Kelly and Palerm, 1952; Ramírez Melgarejo, 1994; Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2011).

A large part of this synthesis is also due to the túmin’s close association with *trueque* – the term used to describe barter exchange that is commonly understood as a distinctly indigenous way of carrying out economic exchange. As we will see in the following chapters, many tumistas would say that the túmin was like trueque, and phrases like ‘the túmin is trueque, like our ancestors used to do’ were often offered as an explanation as to what it was the tumistas did with their currency. Leaving the specifics of monetary vs. barter exchange to one side, what it is interesting to note here is the ubiquity of trueque in people’s explanations, and the idea that trueque was (and continues to be in certain places) an indigenous practice.

Indeed, exchange and markets have always played a central role in Mesoamerican life, being a central part of the way society has been organised in Mexico since pre-Colombian times (Cook, 2004; Wolf, 1959: 325). Moreover, pre-Hispanic marketplaces and exchange are past experiences that have even been immortalised in the social imaginary through things like Diego Rivera’s famous mural of the great tianguis of Tlatelolco. The mural is painted on the

¹⁶ The literature that addresses these questions is exhaustive. For an overview, see Bonfil Batalla (1996). A classic ethnography is Freidlander (2006). Saldivar (2011) traces ‘everyday practices of *indigenismo*’, and Taylor (2009) offers a broader perspective and historical overview on ‘indigeneity in the cultural imagination’.

¹⁷ The tumistas have since discovered that the word túmin has Arabic and Greek origins, and that ‘tomin’ was a word used during the Spanish Colony to refer to tribute payments (Valdez, 2015).

¹⁸ For a discussion of Intangible Cultural Heritage see (Arizpe, 2009).

walls of the Palacio Nacional in Mexico City, which is suggestive of the importance attached to commemorating these past practices and enshrining them into Mexican national identity of the post-revolutionary period. The idea of trueque is thus evocative of something that is at once different from exchange in mainstream marketplaces of Mexico, but also remains intrinsically Mexican. It suggests an alternative way of doing exchange that has a deep historical trajectory and one that is associated with an indigenous way of life.

Beyond trueque, the MAT is evocative of other values and customs that many Mexicans associate with life in present-day indigenous communities, or values from a pre-Hispanic past that in some way are taken up again (*retomados*) and promoted through the project. I was often told that the project's underlying values – trust, solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy – were things which had been mostly ‘lost’ (*ya se perdieron*) in contemporary society, or that they were things that one can find in indigenous communities. We see in more detail in chapters 3 and 5 how these notions comprise expressions of *comunalidad* (communality): a term coined by indigenous academics to refer to a philosophy and way of being generally associated with life in indigenous communities (Martínez Luna, 2010). Here we will see clearly the idea that the MAT offers an alternative that is closely associated with an indigenous way of life that is often located in the past. This aspect affords the MAT a temporal framing, in which the past is often taken as inspiration for constructing an alternative future. In this sense, we are taken back to the idea that for many, indigenous experience offers a valuable and practical alternative to capitalism, as we saw in the first part of this chapter.

Consequences of the MAT-Banxico episode: the MAT, indigeneity and alterity

As we saw in the Introduction, the MAT-Banxico episode had resounding consequences in Espinal. When I arrived three years later, I got a sense of the aftereffects of the whole affair.¹⁹ The question over the legality of the túmin hung in the air, and I even heard rumour of continued harassment towards tumistas from representatives of Federal entities – people who ultimately had a lot of influence over a population like Espinal, where many townsfolk relied on them for technical and financial assistance. Once confidence in the project had been knocked, it was hard to regain. However, this was also the moment that the tumistas started to receive messages of support and solidarity and invitations to talk about their project, which resulted in network expansion. Therefore, while the episode may have caused the project to

¹⁹ More on the MAT in Espinal will come in the following chapter.

dwindle in its hometown, it also meant public interest in the MAT soared and the project took on dimensions the tumistas had never imagined.

To get an idea of what went on, let us look at how Pável described the arrival of the MAT to Puebla City in 2013:

In that period of social discontent, maybe in some utopian way [...] I think we thought – because I also thought–‘No shit! We are making an alternative currency network and we are against the World Bank... We are making a revolution with this... I think it was probably that first impact, they thought ‘an alternative currency... Shit! This is totally a revolution!

Pável is typical of many would-be tumistas across Mexico in that he was also an adherent of La Sexta, and has been active in different radical movements and collectives for most of his life. He joined the MAT with his organisation Milperos Autonomos – a small collective of people who focused on growing foodstuffs in urban spaces; anything from friends’ roofs or backyards to public parks and the central reservations of busy major roads. For Pável and his *milperos*, sowing their own food was an act of resistance against the imposition of transgenic food regimes.²⁰ Pável was attracted to the MAT, as were many others, because of its revolutionary potential, which is reflected in his poetic vision of taking on the World Bank through using the túmin, and here we are reminded of Alejandra’s idea of the túmin as a revolutionary weapon.

The period of social discontent Pável refers to was following the election of President Peña Nieto, whose inauguration in December 2012 marked the PRI’s return to power.²¹ Peña Nieto’s election was hotly contested by many who claimed there was overwhelming evidence of electoral fraud (Sheinbaum Pardo and Ímaz Gispert, 2012). Peña Nieto’s whole *sexenio* (2012–2018) has been marred by more scandals, the unmasking of the extent of state-linked or sponsored violence and the state-narco nexus, as revealed most infamously with the disappearance of 43 students in the town of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, in September 2014. Lomnitz has suggested that Ayotzinapa ‘exposed most powerfully and brutally the crisis of representation in Mexico’ (2016: 42). This crisis of representation runs deep and has many facets. The previous *sexenio* of President Calderón was characterised by the start

²⁰ The politics of food has a long and interesting history in Mexico, especially surrounding corn production (Fitting, 2011; Fox, 1993)

²¹ PRI is the Institutional Revolutionary Party, who governed over Mexico for 71 years between 1929 and 2000. The writer Vargas Llosa famously called the PRI a ‘Perfect Dictatorship’, referring to the varied strategies used to retain PRI hegemony over Mexico for so long.

of a War on Drugs, which plunged the country into a dark era of violence, disappearances and migration producing an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, which shows no sign of abating.²² The return to power of the PRI signalled the return of the party that, according to many, betrayed the principles of the Revolution – a judgement based on the neoliberal overhaul of the country and the constant modifications to the 1917 Constitution following the debt crisis of the 1980s. Indeed, the Constitution has been reformed so many times since the 1980s that a ‘radically distinct’ project for the nation has been formulated within the shell of the original constitution that was once hailed as a benchmark for the development social constitutionalism in Latin America (Carrillo Nieto, 2018: 325).

As we have seen, it is precisely this project for the nation that the tumistas sought to contest by symbolically launching their project amidst the aforementioned bicentenary and centenary celebrations of 2010, thus calling for a renewed independence and revolution. Given what we have learnt so far, I suggest that the politicisation of the project allowed for people like Pável to see a clear continuity between pre-existing radical movements – the most recent and visible of which are the Zapatistas – and the MAT. The media portrayal of the project coupled with the tumistas’ own resort to the language of rights to self-determination and autonomy clearly resonated with supporters of the wider indigenous autonomy movement and beyond. In the resultant configuration, Espinal was cast as the new site of struggle: the MAT had emerged out of this ‘forgotten village’ nestled in the mountains of Veracruz to take on the Bank of Mexico. Crafting of the MAT in this way – which was intentional in some cases, in others not so – had enduring effects on how the project was perceived and received by distinct sectors of Mexican society. It seems the State resorted to treating the tumistas as what Stephen (1999) has termed ‘political suspects’ – groups considered ‘dangerous’ or ‘subversive’; most commonly associated with indigenous people (see also Gledhill, 2012).²³ Equally, on the other side of the spectrum, others applauded the tumistas as the latest in a long line of indigenous/peasant uprisings against the State. In both cases, the MAT was closely associated with indigeneity, which in turn is generally associated with alterity.²⁴ Thus, the tumistas were able to draw upon specific legacies of resistance and alterity to help convey the distinct vision the MAT offered, thus ensuring that the project

²² For an overview of the current crisis by a collection of journalists, see Cacho et. al. (2016)

²³ Stephen (1999) writes that ‘a range of political suspects’ exists in Mexico, the ‘dangerous’ and ‘subversive’ are also considered or coexist with those considered ‘marginal’ and ‘weak’.

²⁴ Notwithstanding recent efforts to destabilise that assumption in academia (Caballero and Acevedo-Rodrigo, 2018).

was understood in a common framework of understanding already existent in the Mexican social imaginary. The fashioning of the MAT upon particular trajectories, and the unfolding of the Banxico episode thus helped to propel the project from a low-key experiment in a rural backwater to grow into a nationwide movement.

Conclusions

We began this chapter by looking at Alejandra's assertion that the *túmin* was a revolutionary weapon. So, in what ways can the *túmin* be considered a weapon, and where does this revolutionary potential come from? In the above, we have looked at the influences that have contributed to the ideological blueprint for the MAT. We saw how the *tumistas* drew upon pre-existing notions of revolution, resistance and alterity, reworked and repackaged them in an alternative currency paradigm. It is precisely the suggestive power and political salience of these notions that have charged the *túmin* with such revolutionary potential. The MAT emerges as another point of contention and the *túmin* becomes a symbol of struggle against the Mexican state on one level, and neoliberal capitalism at large, on another. Moreover, the MAT becomes a vehicle through which people can profess an engagement with an 'alternative'. Definitions of this 'alterity' are quite predictably informed by existing ideas of autonomy and indigeneity, which are sites of resistance and struggle that play an important role in the Mexican social imaginary.

However, what is interesting about the MAT is that while it emerges from these ideas, in practice it does not quite fit established formats. So, although the *tumistas* depended upon established discursive and legal frameworks concerning the 'autonomy question' to defend their project against state encroachment, it soon became clear that the specific legality of their defence was not important. The MAT was not an indigenous project; and in any case, it sought to transcend the indigenous autonomy paradigm. The *tumistas* used established frameworks of contestation to put pressure on the state to accept their practices; or at least recognise that they had the right to self-management and autonomy to organise their own economic system. Interestingly, in 2012, the state passed the Social and Solidarity Economy law, and created the INAES – all the while, the court case against the *tumistas* remains open. Perhaps we can understand this whole as a particular manifestation of the historical tension between the Federation and the *pueblos* (cf. Lomnitz 1992; 2016), where issues of centralised power and local autonomy are key.

The MAT is thus also illustrative of the shifting political terrain of social movement activity in Mexico. It may be possible to suggest that the ECOSOL paradigm now offers fertile ground for experimenting with alternatives and reimagining modes and discourses of contestation – of which the MAT is a particularly clear example. In this respect, the broad appeal of the MAT and similar projects perhaps reflects the extent to which people are searching for ways to identify with and define economic activity in terms that are far more representative and meaningful to them, as we will see in the following chapters.

Finally, the example set by the MAT is important because it offers people in Mexico the chance to renew their hope for a revolution and the establishment of a new social pact, at a time when many feel that traditional routes of political organisation and association offer no real alternative. While this revolution is markedly distinct from that great historic precursor, the legacies of the latter are strongly embedded in the ideological blueprint of the project. Here we start to see the importance of the túmin as a token of different value systems to those dictated by capitalism; in this light, the MAT can be considered as an ‘insurgent hope’ in a sea of ‘neoliberal hopelessness’ (Dinerstein 2015). In that sense, the túmin continues to inspire people who believe that ‘another economy’ – and thus ‘another world’ – is possible. The túmin is thus a powerful symbol, which motivates people to want to participate in the MAT, and as we shall see now in the following chapters, it is also one of the primary means through which people ‘bring these value systems into being’ (Graeber 2013).

Chapter 2: Espinal: ‘La cuna del túmin’²⁵

In this chapter, we look at how people engage with the MAT in the small, rural town where it was first launched. The material centres on case studies of two tumistas: Maestra Irene and Don Mateo.²⁶ These case studies demonstrate how people from opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum engage with the MAT, thus demonstrating a diversity of understandings, motivations and consequences of their involvement with the project. Irene is a well-known and respected figure: a retired teacher, who has been active in social struggles and organisations throughout her life. Fondly known by some as ‘Mama Túmin’, Irene is a founding *socia* (member) of the project. Irene participated in the network offering her internet café services, and was directly involved with the inner workings of the MAT: among other things, she was in charge of printing and assembling the Kgosni. Don Mateo is a retired *campesino* (peasant farmer) who is not as well known or of the same socio-economic status as Irene. Mateo participated in the MAT offering services as an acupuncturist – a skill he learnt when working as an assistant to an acupuncturist and naturist doctor in the 1970s – and he distributed the Kgosni. The Kgosni is a key element that connected both tumistas, and if it were not for the newspaper rounds, Mateo and Irene would have rarely interacted. Both defined themselves as some of the ‘most active’ tumistas in Espinal. However, what this actually meant for them, their reasons for their participation, and the activities they carried out as members of the MAT are different.

I present the case studies in life history form. The narrative emerging from these life histories provides an analytical framework through which we can start to understand and critique contemporary capitalism from the varying degrees in which people work within and against it. We see how Irene and Mateo talk about and understand their position within capitalism and the MAT, using both as frames of reference to talk about their understanding of the economy. Irene and Mateo’s accounts thus provide a distinct perspective and temporal framing to that of financial capitalism, reframing the experience of the economy from a human perspective, and highlighting the importance of the túmin as a currency and the MAT as an alternative horizon guiding their endeavours to create a good life in the present.

²⁵ ‘The birthplace of the túmin’.

²⁶ ‘Don’, translates as ‘Mr’, and is used as a sign of respect and to address older men. ‘Maestra’ translates as ‘Teacher’, and although Irene is retired, she retains her title as Maestra, which also denotes respect.

Thinking back to Graeber's concept of value (2001; 2013), I suggest that through the life histories of each protagonist, we can see value indexed as the importance of socially meaningful actions.

The argument I put forward here is that despite their different motivations, both Irene and Mateo engage with the MAT because they see it as a vehicle to help transcend their everyday socioeconomic circumstances. The project presented an alternative sociality to the everyday trials and tribulations of village life, which was largely characterised by negative effects of the wider political economy and forces such as greed, envy and witchcraft. In this sense, the MAT provided Irene and Mateo with a basis through which they could imagine and cultivate positive forms of sociality. Irene used the project to articulate and celebrate what was good about her town, seeing within the project to bestow a sense of value to Espinal as a place, and in doing so restore the dignity and worth of the hard working people who live there. Mateo's case is an example of this: through the MAT he was able to pursue dignified work and cultivate a sense of self-worth in his otherwise abject living conditions. The MAT offered an idea and a framework through which their individualised notions of moral and just socio-economic practice, social relations and personal wellbeing could be articulated and aspired to. Yet paradoxically, as the project was subsumed into the pre-existing social order, it also became the site for particular manifestations of the more negative forces it strived to transcend; thus raising questions about the efficacy of their engagement with the MAT as a strategy to create conditions for a good life.

The chapter reads as follows. In the first section, we see how Irene understands and cherishes the MAT project as something that is good for her town, in contrast to the bleak picture she paints of the wider political economy of Espinal. The MAT offers what Irene sees as a 'clearer horizon' for the people of Espinal: it is an example of an alternative way of doing and being, through which people and their lives are valued and a sense of dignity restored – something she thinks is denied to them by the socio-economic and political status quo. We see how Irene actively participates in the project, like printing and assembling the Kgosni. The Kgosni serves as a bridge to the second section, where we see how some of Irene's ideas and intentions are exemplified in the case of Mateo. Here we see that the MAT gave Mateo the chance to creatively reinvent himself and pursue dignified and meaningful work, which in turn made him feel valued as a person. The section ends by looking at the ways in which Mateo interprets and enacts the MAT with some quite unexpected consequences. Here we come across one of the paradoxes in the use of a currency as a token of and tool for

strengthening the MAT. As currency, the túmin still lends itself to the sorts of actions and abstractions characteristic of monetary relations, thus going some way to subverting the solidarity network it is meant to represent and strengthen. In both cases, we see how Irene and Mateo's efforts to create some degree of positive sociality through the project exist in tension with the more negative forces characteristic of everyday village life.

Irene

My whole life I have dreamed that my town would be recognised by a little red dot, if only here in the State, but I never thought that it was going to put a huge red dot on the world. And look, God is so great and marvellous that with the túmin project, [Espinal] isn't just [recognised] in the State, nor in Mexico, but at an international level. Because when I travelled back from Morelos, we went to the beach and brought a tourist guide to the Totonacapan region, and there you can find Zozocolco, Coxquihui... Zozocolco with its church, its waterfalls. Like Coyutla, its church, Coxquihui, [with what] it can offer for tourism. And what can Espinal offer in terms of tourism? We don't have anything, and look – [then] the túmin came out of the blue and entered the minds of the *compañeros*. I would never have imagined that I would be on the internet. I never dreamed, nor even thought that one day – me who doesn't like people to take my photos. But if you go and look on the internet, you will find my big face. I never liked photos ever, not young nor old nor anything. But there you have it. And I carry my túmin with pride. If they say that I am a criminal... well if having túmin and giving value to our people and giving value to our life is to be a criminal, well then, I am.²⁷ And I am with great pleasure. There are poor criminals who die anonymous. Well, at least I will be a criminal that when I die, everyone will know about it. Everyone will know me and they will say "that woman is crazy". Well yes, I am crazy, but I am following a dream, and moreover it is a dream that has become a reality, that I can drink my tea with bees' honey produced by a *compañero tumista*, bought in the Casa Túmin. It is the greatest satisfaction to have these products...

– Irene Castell

How are we to understand Irene's dream that her town be known for something? To answer this question it is necessary to look at how Irene understands the MAT as a project for the collective good. This view is shaped in contrast to Irene's understanding of the wider political economy of Espinal, which saw people who had been stripped of their land, livelihoods and dignity. What follows is a potted history of the local political economy of

²⁷ Here Irene is referring to the MAT-Banxico episode, and the threat of prosecution the tumistas faced.

Espinal, as told through Irene's account, with which we can start to understand why she considers the MAT such an important project to promote and sustain.

The political economy of Espinal

Irene's father grew tobacco for the then existent TABAMEX industry in the region; hence, like the majority of people in Espinal, her family had some tie to the land. Indeed, land has always been a central axis of socio-economic and political life in Mexico. Irene's childhood was punctuated by violent incidents of land grabbing: houses and properties were mysteriously burnt down, either forcefully evicting people or obliging relatives of deceased owners to sell the plots that had been left abandoned. Those that benefitted from this sort of action were local rich families, who became notorious for appropriating people's land in a number of unfair ways.²⁸ Socio-economic life in the town was dominated in particular by three families – two of Italian descent whose forefathers had come over in the mid-late 19th century and then consolidated their land and fortunes in the last years of the vanilla boom (Kourí, 2004); and another local family who came to acquire their wealth at some stage later on.²⁹

The stories about violent or cunning acquisition of land and properties that Irene and others recounted during my time in town are consistent with what Velasco Toro (1989) has called a 'politics of expropriation' at the heart of the political economy of the modern Totonacapan region. From the late 1800s onwards, land, wealth and political power were consolidated into the hands of oligarchs and entrepreneurs.³⁰ The Mexican Revolution saw a brief interruption to this tendency: indeed, Veracruz State became the 'birthplace of land reform' in 1914 followed by a flourishing of revolutionary activity during the 1920s and early 1930s (see Fowler Salamini 1978). However, the progressive actions of this period were soon reversed and peasant political organisations heavily persecuted in the years following the

²⁸ Credit and debt commonly played a role here also. People had also told me that it was not uncommon for the store owners in town to give poor, indigenous people credit in return for their land titles. Whilst it is hard to ascertain the extent to which this happened, the fact that it exists in the historical memory of the townsfolk itself is important.

²⁹ Interestingly, many I spoke to remember the Italian families as good people and hard workers first, and monopolists and occasional tricksters second; whereas the other family were considered downright mean, violent and non-deserving of their amassed wealth. I even heard rumour that the family first stumbled across their fortune when they found a pot of gold hidden under a stove in a house they had bought off an Italian family.

³⁰ We can understand these processes in historical context as part of the ongoing seizure and expropriation of communal land and small properties that was encouraged by the state during the 19th century (Kourí, 2004; Velasco Toro, 1989) and then a continuation of this into the 20th century, despite the promise of agrarian reform that came with the Mexican Revolution (Fowler-Salamini, 1978; Velasco Toro, 1993; 2010).

election of President Cárdenas in 1934 (Fowler-Salamini, 1978; Toro, 2010). ‘National Interest’ became the new banner of the Revolution and from the 1930s PRI hegemony was skilfully woven into all sectors of Mexican society over the next few decades.³¹ With the nationalisation of the oil industry in 1938, the region was further catapulted into the modern nation state; especially with the start of the construction of a road between the highland town of Tetziutlán and the fast growing petrol city of Poza Rica in 1944 (Hernández, 1995). The road construction led to further expropriation and privatisation of land, the prices of which had now soared. Investors from places like Puebla and Mexico City bought up land, and laid the foundations for what would become large-scale agribusiness in citrus production (Hernández, 1995).

From an early age, Irene wanted her town ‘do well’. This was because she remembers the town as a ‘very backward’ place; it lacked basic things like electric lighting and running water, and the church needed restoring. Of this time, Irene said there was not much ‘movement of money’. The idea that ‘money moves’ was an expression I heard frequently during my time in Espinal. It was used when expressing the overall socio-economic climate or the management of money. We can understand this as a metaphor for the literal circulation of currency in a locale, as an indicator of wealth or a healthy economy, or how people manage their own money.³² Movement was generally considered to be a good thing: that someone knew how to ‘move’ money or a product was a positive appraisal of their entrepreneurial skills.

The arrival of the citrus industry brought more movement of money. However, Irene notes that once again, only a few benefitted from this:

Now with the [arrival] of the citrus industry, well now there has been more movement [of money]. But the citrus industry is only worked by people who have money, who I call *coyotes*.

The term *coyote* to refer to the middleman: someone with the means to transport the agricultural produce grown by small-scale farmers and sell it on to others at a profit. In Espinal, this specifically meant the close family of the then municipal president, Evencio

³¹ For a review of the way in which the PRI consolidated hegemony over the rural population, see (De Grammont and Mackinlay, 2006).

³² ‘Moving money’ – or even in certain tumistas’ case ‘Moving túmin’ – was a general statement that referred to someone’s capability to trade, do business or make money. It was also used in the negative: ‘I don’t know how to move it’. Common verbs also used in this sense were ‘*manejar*’ – to manage / administer; and ‘*trabajar*’ – to work.

Tovar. The Tovar family is well known in the region: Evencio served as municipal president between 2001–2004, a position his brother, Pastor, occupied from 2008–2010. The family also has a monopoly over the regional citrus market. They own a fleet of large trucks that daily rumbled through Espinal, transporting tonnes of oranges and limes out of town to be sold and/or processed for national and international markets. The power of the Tovar family in local socio-economic and political life was reinforced and legitimated by their representation in elected municipal government. In places like Espinal, *caciquismo* and patron-client relations are a salient feature of everyday life.³³ Irene understands this situation very well, and of the *coyotes* she says:

...they empower themselves and they set the price of oranges. Oranges or limes, even though they have a different value in another market, well you can't take [the produce] because you have no way of transporting it. You are forced to sell it to them at the price they pay. At the price they pay: that's how it works around here, right? The strongest defeats the weakest.

The relationship between political power and domination over the local economy is particularly acute in a town like Espinal. Following suit, Irene's critique of the political economy also extends to a critique of the forms of governance and citizenship that characterise her town. Irene told me that she was attracted to the MAT because she saw it as 'a blow to the government'.

Indeed, Irene had before been active in protest movements that came up against the full force of the Mexican State. Irene's early career as a teacher was politicised by her participation in the 'teachers' insurgence' (Insurgencia Magisterial) of 1979-1981.³⁴ One memory she shared is her participation in the march from Cuernavaca to Mexico City in 1980. On the one hand Irene remembers the enthusiasm and solidarity that characterised the movement, yet on the other she remembers the brutal repression, having seen two of their leaders 'bloodied, tortured and raped' and thrown in front of the Doberman dogs and police on horseback; only one of them survived the ordeal. Irene also remembers how she stood shoulder to shoulder with fellow protesters in front of the Government Palace in the central park of Cuernavaca in 1981, chanting '*El pueblo unido, jamás será vencido*' (The people united will never be

³³ *Caciquismo* can translate as 'political bossism'. For a varied historical overview of the phenomenon see Knight and Pansters (2005).

³⁴ There is a long history of conflicts between the Teachers unions and the State in Mexico (see Foweraker, 1993; 1995). The 'insurgence' that Irene took part in in this case lasted between 1979-1981, when protests came to a head in many states of the country following the death of a teacher at a health clinic in Morelos (see Arriaga, 1981; Treviño Carrillo, 1984).

defeated). In the same conversation, she lamented the present day situation: ‘look at us now; a divided people’. Whilst Irene’s participation in the teacher’s movement politicised her for life, it also made her fully aware of the risks involved: when the state wanted to, it could come down with full force, ‘with boots and rifles’. On a local level, Irene has a more complex relationship with the Mexican State. For example, Irene’s sister was employed as a *regidora* in the municipal government of Evencio Tóvar, and tensions would often flare up between the sisters over the former’s involvement in the MAT and the latter’s involvement in PRI party politics. Also, Irene and Evencio used to be in the same class at school – a fact which helped Irene in negotiating to secure the space for the Casa Túmin, which was on loan from the municipal government, when Evencio came to the presidency. Despite this, Irene remains constant in her critique of the ‘patriarchal government’ that has created dependency amongst its citizens.

Like many, Irene is suspicious of government aid programmes. The programme with most impact in Espinal is Prospera (see chapter 1, footnote 8) – which most people continued to call Oportunidades. People complained that Oportunidades came with a price: those who received it were obliged to meet requisites like visiting the local health centre on a regular basis and attend courses and seminars. Recipients are notoriously used as ‘*acarreados*’ - people ‘shipped in’ by the government to make up a crowd at civil events and political rallies, and they commonly have their vote bought at election times. Whilst I was in town, a rumour went around that the government were going to hand out flat screen TVs to recipients of Oportunidades. Cautious observers warned that the TVs would have a camera installed in them with which the government could see inside people’s houses. Irene had said that in reality there was no need to install TVs with cameras: the government already knew everything about you because, in one way or another, they always had their eye on you.

Given Irene’s lucid and hard-hitting critique of the political economy of Espinal, we can start to understand her commitment to and passion for the MAT project as an alternative to the socio-economic and political reality the majority of her townsfolk lived on a day-to-day basis. Irene saw that the MAT project could be a transformative force for the communal good:

[The MAT] interested me a lot because we saw – well I saw – a clearer horizon so that maybe a little or a lot or maybe not at all, well maybe we can change the ideology of people, which is the most important thing; demonstrate to ourselves and to the *compañeritos* that we can live, we can create a different world that is

not dependent upon the authorities or the governments who only put you down and insult your dignity. And that way, well, we feel – and indeed we are – more free.

Here, the potential Irene saw in the MAT is revealed. It provided a ‘clearer horizon’, towards a world in which people were less dependent upon the government – which was ultimately responsible for stripping people of their dignity – and more dependent upon one another. Irene saw the MAT as a force of good, through which community solidarity could be encouraged and channelled to create a different world. It is to her efforts in this endeavour that we now turn.

The power of community solidarity

Irene has always believed in the power of community solidarity as a source for positive transformative action. Irene had a high regard of ‘the community’ and ‘the people’ in general, and *her* people in particular. This was evident in the way she spoke about them, and it was reflected in the things she did ‘for her people/her town’.³⁵ In this way we can consider community solidarity as a positive social force that motivates Irene in her public and private life. Irene is a tireless promotor of local history, culture and traditions. Before her involvement in the MAT project, she started the educational group Amigos del Totonaco – Friends of Totonac – with a friend, with the aim of teaching younger generations the indigenous language of the region. Irene herself does not speak more than a few words and phrases of Totonac; however, this does not preclude her from valorising indigenous heritage. An activity stemming from this is the stall that Irene sets up in the annual Feria de San José, dedicated to promoting Totonac language, the MAT and other subjects of interest depending on the year. Irene is also a writer. She is in the process of writing a monograph on Espinal, and she has already written the biographies of two people she considers amongst the town’s most prominent figures. The first is Padre Senem, who served as parish priest for 50 years and was the first indigenous local priest; and the second Mardonio Méndez Suárez, leader of a group of indigenous dancers who travelled the world performing the famous Danza de los Voladores.

In fact, it was when talking about a picture of her mother that is printed in the biography of Padre Senem that Irene told a story which demonstrated both her admiration for her town

³⁵ Here there is a slippage common in Spanish between two meanings of the word *pueblo*. Pueblo means both ‘people’ and ‘village’ or ‘town’. Of course, ‘the village’ is made up of ‘the people’, and in many cases – like this one here – reference to village or town refers to the people who live there also.

and what she thought communal solidarity could achieve. The story concerns the melting and re-forging of the church bells as part of the extensive remodelling of the building. In the early 1990s a new steeple had been constructed upon the older edifice, and the townsfolk and people from neighbouring villages were invited to donate their smeltable possessions to be remade into the church bells that would hang there. Irene's mother had donated her gold rings, so that instead of her children fighting over them when she was dead, they would instead be reminded of her every time the new church bells chimed. Irene was moved by the amount of things people donated – including by the poorest and most humble indigenous people from outlying communities, who came to donate their gold. The story is written in the biography, and it paints this melting of personal possessions as an act of community solidarity: the whole town and surrounding communities came together to donate for the cause. I suggest we can understand part of Irene's motivation for participating in the MAT within this frame of experience. There is clearly direct resonance between the ideas evoked in the bell story and what the MAT aims to do. In both instances, the virtues of community solidarity are extolled and used as demonstrative of what can be done when the pueblo works together for a common cause.

Irene's sentiment is most visibly captured in a sign on the side of the road that leads into Espinal from Papantla and Poza Rica. Perched high on a steep hillside that falls away to the river valley and town below, the sign reads in both Totonac and Spanish, and it welcomes you to the 'Birthplace of the Túmin' (see Figure 2.1). The sign was originally commissioned for the Amigos del Totonaco project, and repainted in 2010 with the launch of the MAT. In it, we can read three things that are central to the imaginary of the project: the importance of place; respect for an indigenous ancestral heritage and the promotion of small business. The sign is a literal manifestation of Irene's dream from the opening epigraph: it is a declaration of recognition – a 'marking on the map' that locates Espinal as the home of the MAT. Interestingly, this sign sits further along and on the opposite side of the road from a much smaller, local government commissioned sign made up of various photographs depicting characteristic scenes from the town and an inscription that reads: 'Work and Humility' – the slogan of the Tovar administration. The symbolism of the two signs is political, and they suggest coexisting value systems that here quite literally stand in contrast to one another. The second sign sums up the dominant political economy of the place, where citizens are expected to work and be humble, whereas the first stands higher, larger and perhaps defiant of this expectation, representative of an alternative sociality. The bilingualism can be

explained by the sign's origins with the Amigos del Totonaco; it also evokes and attaches strong indigenous identity to the project – an idea that we saw in the last chapter, and one we will come across again. The sign also serves as a promotional billboard for Irene's own business, Cyber Castell.

Cyber Castell, home and family life

Cyber Castell is located down a small side street, just off the main highway that runs through town. The small business is located in the front room of Irene's house. In some of my early field notes I referred to Cyber Castell as an 'alternative information point for Espinal'. Here I was referring to the various projects Irene has underway – like the biographies – and the pride with which she displays a number of MAT artefacts and posters, as well as a small photomontage of the history of the project (see Figure 2.3). And, as we saw exemplified by the sign, Cyber Castell was *the* information point for the MAT in Espinal. Indeed, it was my first port of call on arrival to town on the recommendation of Juan Castro. Anyone who came looking for the túmin was usually told to go at look for '*la maestra*' in the Cyber: she knew everything there was to know. Cyber Castell is equal parts business, MAT information point, and home. With the joining of these three elements, the Cyber could be considered an archetype for the sort of social and economic activity the MAT project seeks to cultivate. Irene sees her business as a service to the community, much in the way she envisions her participation and commitment to the MAT. The location of the Cyber in the front room gives a sense of warmth, hospitality and literal homeliness. Many of Irene's clients are also invited down the steps from the Cyber into the living space and kitchen below, to drink a coffee or share breakfast at *la barra* (the bar). The *barra* is a special place for Irene because it was where she was able to share food and friendship with people. Here a more personal picture of Irene as a well-reputed, altruistic and passionate matriarchal figure emerged.

Irene took out a loan to open the Cyber in 2007 to cater for the growing student population in town, and her client base is mainly made up of these students, from pre-school to university level, and their teachers.³⁶ It is important for Irene to help out her clients, and her thoughtfulness is reflected in small actions like her informal 'luggage storage facility', the corner of a spare room where she lets students leave items they may not want to carry around

³⁶ Espinal is an important regional centre for education. Alongside the towns Kinder, Primary and Secondary schools, there are further education institutions like the COBAEV, which opened in 1994 and offers college level education, and the UVI, which opened in 2004. Espinal is also home to various education offices like the local zone Supervisión Escolar and the CRAM (Centro Regional de Actualización Magisterial).

with them all day. Irene also extends her support to students in the form of sponsorships: she has helped to finance a small group of teenagers through school and even helped some to university level. These youngsters often work in the Cyber, or have done their school *servicio social* (community service) there. This is a variation on the well-established and important model of *compadrazgo* that is intrinsic to upholding social relations through obligations across Mexico and beyond.³⁷ Irene has many *comadres* and she also participates in a *tanda*: relations which further bind her into networks of financial and social solidarity with fellow townsfolk. These varying degrees of ritual and quasi-kin relations are of vital importance to Irene: she even calls those she sponsors part of her family – a category which also extends to her employees, close friends and allies. This recourse to expressions of kinship, as we will see, also arises with the MAT: Irene commonly refers to the network as ‘the big tumista family’.

Irene has a large biological family, yet she was widowed at a young age with children. This tragic event would influence the type of woman Irene became, and perhaps can explain the importance she placed on establishing quasi-kin relations with people in town and from afar. Moreover, it was through through her struggle to maintain a roof over the heads of her new family that she gained life experience that we can see reflected in her decision to join and support the MAT. Irene met her husband when he was working as a teacher in Espinal. He was from Morelos, which is where the newly married couple moved to set up home. After only a short time married, Irene lost her husband, and she decided to leave Morelos and move back to Espinal with her young children. Irene found some help and support from her parents: she and her children moved into a small front room in their house.

Irene found financial support through the Cooperativa San Andrés Coyutla, a credit union from the nearby commercial town of the same. With loans from the cooperative, Irene started to build a house of her own: an important foundation that enabled her to raise a family independently. She then completed her college-level education and got a job as a teacher. In one of our earliest conversations, Irene stressed the importance of hard work, and that in particular women needed to learn to work hard in order to be independent, ‘free from dependency on men’. In this respect, Irene has always been something of an outlier in her hometown. She never remarried, yet she managed to carve out a well-respected social standing, have a successful career, and manage business enterprises. Irene remains an active

³⁷ For a classic account of *compadrazgo*, see (Mintz and Wolf, 1950).

member of the credit union, and she participates in a regional organisation for retired teachers.

Social standing and *envidia*

Irene's position as a well-known public figure and the face of the project in Espinal has also brought her problems. As we saw in the opening quote at the beginning of this section, Irene is aware that people might call her *loca* (crazy), and the phrase 'maybe I am crazy' was a common saying of hers. Indeed, due to Irene's position in the project she had close contact with the core group of MAT promoters from Papatla, who also referred to themselves as 'crazy people' because of their utopian dreams. This close association drew some criticism – even from her own family – about the kind of company Irene was keeping. Having witnessed how a vicious rumour was spread around town with the intention of defaming Irene, I suggest that this talk of craziness could be one step away from a far more serious cultural phenomenon in Espinal: *envidia* (envy).

Envidia is a concept which has surreal power over the population of a town such as Espinal. De Vidas (2007) has written about the effects of *envidia* amongst the Teneek indigenous communities in the culturally similar Huasteca region, where people keep activities and objects that could cause envy hidden from 'the gaze of indiscreet eyes' (220). In much the same way, *espinaltecos* use up a disturbing amount of small plastic bags, as shopkeepers insist on bagging everything, no matter size or weight, so as not to provoke desire – and possible envy – in others. Bagging purchases from the corner store was just the thin end of the wedge in comparison to the potentially damaging effects of *envidia* on social relations and personhood. Taussig (1987) has noted that in the rural setting of the Putumayo region in Colombia, *envidia* is a 'necessary' phenomenon, that serves as a discursive explanation for the 'twisting of social bonds'; 'the outstanding feature of which is the failure to reciprocate and treason in friendship' (393–394).

Irene sees *envidia* as one of the largest obstacles to for the MAT in Espinal. 'Envidia abounds' in her town, and she described it as the worst type of 'poison' a human being possessed, with the ability to 'consume people'. In the same conversation, Irene offered an account of the ways in which feelings and accusations that point to issues of social hierarchy and difference have been transposed onto the very project that sought to transcend such negative aspects of everyday sociality. The gossip that was spread about her was a prime example of this. The gossip was spread by the family of an ex-CT attendee following the

latter's dismissal. Amongst other things, it was said that Irene 'felt like the owner of the túmin', and that she had taken the decision to replace the attendee. The decision had actually been taken by the CC because the attendee had not been fulfilling their obligations. Nevertheless, it was Irene who had to bear the brunt of it.

That Irene would become the victim of gossip and envidia due to her involvement in the MAT is perhaps unsurprising. As a strong-willed, independent and successful widow in a town like Espinal, Irene was at once well integrated and at odds with *espinalteco* society. Her highly visible and central role in the project possibly accentuated pre-existing notions surrounding her personhood. Irene was widely respected as a generous, altruistic woman by many. However, her position also increased the chances she would fall victim to envy's poison. In particular, people have questioned her right to invite people to join the project and to attend meetings and assemblies: 'if Juan isn't coming to invite me, then I am not going [...] you Irene, why do you get involved, if it's not your project'.³⁸ Indeed, 'I wasn't invited' was a common grievance I heard from shopkeepers and tradespeople who were not part of the tumista network. Given that Espinal was a town where scant monetary handouts and inclusion in certain schemes and projects characterised the local political economy, the fact that some were included and others were excluded from the MAT understandably gave rise to envidia.

Moreover, here we see how Irene was engaged in a delicate balancing act to offset potential claims against her person that she is 'crazy' or 'the owner of the túmin'. Whilst she may have appeared on TV and her 'big face' is all over the internet, she strives to demonstrate that she has the best intentions of her pueblo and the MAT at heart. Romanucci Ross (1973) has shown that in small town Morelos, whilst economic success and betterment generally brings respect, it is when this success 'is tainted by unmitigated *egoísmo* [egotism], *orgullo* [pride], and *categoría* [claims to high status] that it becomes the object of *envidia*' (96, emphasis in original). Equally, writing about Chocoanos migrants in Medellín, Wade (1993) has written that 'Success [...] can also bring *envidia* if people think someone is *creído* [arrogant] and not reciprocating properly' (318). This seems to explain Irene's rejection of claims that she is seeking fame and influence with the MAT, and also explains the importance of her altruistic actions, in light of her position as an already successful and

³⁸ Irene's response was that the tumistas do not realise they are all responsible, that they all have the same 'right and obligation to look after and invite each other to participate'. This is further addressed in the following chapter.

influential figure in town. This perhaps explains the extent to which she makes her personal life outwardly visible (the Cyber in her front room), and why she is so intent on sharing and helping out those in need. These actions can also be understood then as an attempt to counterbalance the possibility of accusations and envidia resulting from her social position.

At first glance, it might seem that the social effects of envidia are the direct opposite of the MAT. For example, instead of strengthening social relations, it has the ability to damage or even destroy them in extreme cases. If the defining features of envidia are failed reciprocity and the betrayal of friendship, the MAT stands for the reverse: mutual aid, solidarity, *compañerismo* (comradeship) and the rest. Yet, the ethnographic record has generally interpreted envidia in the Mesoamerican context as a ‘levelling mechanism’ (De Vidas, 2007; Foster, 1967; Wolf, 1955). For example, Wolf writes:

Paralleling the mechanisms of control which are primarily economic in origin are psychological mechanisms like *institutionalized envy*, which may find expression in the various manifestations such as gossip, attacks of the evil eye, or in the fear and practice of witchcraft (1955: 460, emphasis in original).

The author explains, these psychological mechanisms of control ‘have an integrative effect in restraining non-traditional behaviour’ seeking to minimise

disruptive phenomena such as economic mobility, abuse of ascribed power, or individual conspicuous show of wealth. On the individual plane, it thus acts to maintain the individual equilibrium with his neighbours. On the social plane, it reduces disruptive influences of outside society (460).

Here we can see that in some ways, the values underlying envidia as a social mechanism are paradoxically similar to those of the MAT, nevertheless expressed through different means. Envidia seeks to ensure a level of equilibrium and cohesion, and that social relations of reciprocity are maintained. The MAT seeks to cultivate reciprocity and mutual aid through the use of the túmin and participation in the solidarity network.

Envidia was a symptom, alongside many others, of the adverse context into which the MAT was first introduced. Yet, despite the bleak socio-economic reality, the Banxico court case threat and accusations from her own neighbours, Irene’s belief in the MAT project never wavered, and she was able to balance the negative aspects of her fame with the positive:

You shouldn’t be afraid of anything. And with the túmin, I am not scared of anything. I am not scared and there I am, happy. We are going to continue with the túmin and we are going to advance. Look, the túmin brings me happiness

here to my house [...] And a while later, if those outside call me a ‘bloody crazy woman’; I don’t care if they call me crazy, I am doing my own thing.

Irene is without a doubt the most passionate, visible and vocal exponent of the MAT project in Espinal. Her drive and passion are intimately linked to how the project makes her *feel*. The MAT brings Irene happiness; and this in itself is one of her strongest motivations to continue supporting, participating and promoting the project, despite being fully aware of the consequences. Given the wider socio-economic and political climate in which the MAT was operating, that Irene found a ‘clearer horizon’ of freedom, dignity and happiness in the project is important. Irene’s conception of the MAT, and the potential she saw within it to help promote positive forms of sociality, is influenced by her background in the teacher’s movement and her more personal experiences with cooperatives and other civil society organisations. The MAT provided the framework and the tools through which Irene was able to engage in socially meaningful action, bringing about a value system which foregrounded solidarity with her pueblo and her fellow tumistas, and encouraged autonomy from more dominant, mainstream institutions and norms of the Mexican state, which ‘insulted people’s dignity’. However, we have also seen that Irene’s participation is bound to, and on occasion tainted by, deeper negative social forces at play which, despite the tumistas best intentions, get projected onto the MAT. Before moving on to the next section, I will say a few words about the Kgosni. The assembling and distribution of the paper was one of the central processes of the MAT in Espinal, and an empirical expression of everyday social movement activity (Escobar, 1992). The Kgosni also serves as a bridge between Irene’s story and that of Mateo.

The Kgosni

Irene’s internet café was the site of much of the day-to-day business of running the MAT project in Espinal. For example, it was where the Kgosni was printed and assembled and it is where the keys to the Casa Túmin and its sales diary were kept overnight. Moreover, Irene often took on the responsibility of ordering – and even packing – new stock for the Casa, like two of the most sold products on offer there: fried plantain chips and the Túmin Honey. As we saw in the last chapter, the Kgosni is a principal feature of the MAT apparatus and it is the official mouthpiece of the movement. Every two weeks, the Kgosni was compiled by Juan who sent it over to Cyber Castell via email. Irene – or her employees – would then print, photocopy and assemble 150 copies of the newspaper ready for distribution in the two

towns.³⁹ Juan called the Kgosni a ‘sign of life’ for those tumistas who lived in Espinal and Papantla and had little or no access to the internet. Irene was paid \$360 mx and 120t for each batch of Kgosni. Although payments were sometimes delayed, printing the Kgosni provided Irene with her most constant source of income in túmin. The copies of the paper were then sent to the Casa Túmin, where designated distributors would hand out the Kgosni to the tumistas according to a ‘zone’ assignment. In theory, Espinal was divided into 4 zones, and in the past there had been a distributor for each zone. This provided a small but constant source of income for the Kgosni distributors: recipients were invited to pay a 4-túmin and/or 4-peso ‘cooperation’ fee in exchange for the paper. When I was in town, two people handed out the Kgosni regularly: Boni, Irene’s daughter in law, and Mateo. We see in the following section that the Kgosni provided Mateo not only with an income but it also formed part of a process of self-reinvention and restoration of dignity through meaningful work.

³⁹ Beyond the 150 physical copies that were handed out in Espinal and Papantla, the Kgosni is also distributed electronically to 150 000 recipients across diverse mailing lists.



Figure 2.1: ‘Espinal, La cuna del túmin’ (photo by author)



Figure 2.2: Displays in Cyber Castell (photo by author)

Mateo

I was introduced to Mateo on my second day in Espinal by Gerardo, a teacher at the UVI who offered me a room and his friendship during the time I lived in town. Gerardo, his son Andrés and I had just had lunch out and were walking back up the hill towards home, when Gerardo decided to pay a visit to Mateo, whose house was on the way. We stopped at the open window of an old, white adobe construction, and Gerardo called out to Mateo, who stepped into the frame from the dark interior. Mateo was wearing an old white shirt and the sun illuminated his wrinkled, smiling face and slightly unkempt white hair. Gerardo introduced me, and Mateo presented himself to me as an acupuncturist. Gerardo asked if he had time for a quick consultation, to which Mateo agreed and invited us in. Andres and I took a seat on an old sofa, and Gerardo was invited to sit on a wooden chair in the middle of the large room. The room was cool, dark and sparsely decorated. Two of the walls had giant cracks in them that let in light from the outside. In the following months, I would often sit and wonder what had caused those cracks, feeling that at any moment the walls could come down, pulling with them the old, heavy tiled roof that sat atop a frame of dusty rafters and cobwebs above our heads.

In fact, that day something did fall down: almost as if by magic, as we sat on the sofa and Mateo and Gerardo got ready in front of us, an old calendar fell from a nail in the wall, revealing a poster that was hung beneath it, which read: '*Aceptamos Túmin*'. 'Look! There's the túmin!' exclaimed Gerardo; to which Mateo responded by asking if he had any. Gerardo said he used to, but that he no longer had them. Mateo agreed: 'yes, it gets spent'. Mateo proceeded with the treatment, asking Gerardo how he had felt since they saw each other last, whether he was stressed, and so on; all the while passing the tips of small wires over different points on his body. I soon discovered that Mateo was experimenting with '*electroacupuntura*' – electric acupuncture. Yet that day my curiosity dwelled on other things: I was foremost struck at the existence of an acupuncturist in a small rural town like Espinal. I wondered how Mateo had learnt his trade, and whether he actually had enough paying patients to depend on it for a living. Where did the MAT feature in all of this? Why had he covered up his túmin poster with an old calendar? And what did it mean that all the túmin got spent?

When the treatment was over, Gerardo said he would settle with Mateo when the *quincena* came.⁴⁰ He then asked him how he was doing for money; to which Mateo answered, ‘Like always, there isn’t any!’ Gerardo reached into his wallet and pulled out a \$50mx note: ‘I’m going to give you 50 *pesos*, is that ok?’ Mateo agreed and accepted the note, and the three of us said goodbye and left.

Mateo, the MAT and meaningful work

Learning from Mateo’s experience was one of the best insights into how the MAT was understood and acted upon by someone who lived a precarious existence, struggling day-to-day with extreme poverty. In this sense, Mateo belonged to a group of people whom the project was originally designed to benefit: small-scale producers, traders and entrepreneurs on the margins of mainstream socio-economic activity. Mateo participated in and used the MAT structure from necessity; the project allowed him to get by thanks to the income he was able to generate from it. The MAT offered him a space to advertise and practise as an acupuncturist, and the Kgosni delivery round secured a meagre yet constant income in both túmin and pesos every two weeks. Yet, as I got to know him, I realised that the project offered Mateo something more than this limited economic benefit: it gave him the chance to creatively reinvent himself based on his past experience as a travelling sales rep and acupuncturist. We will see that this was a time in his life when things were good and he pursued meaningful, dignified work and social relations. Mateo thus used the MAT as a vehicle through which he could articulate and enact socially meaningful action, recreating some of the positive sociality associated with his past experience in the face of otherwise abject socio-economic circumstances. However, like with Irene, Mateo’s intentions and actions – and the consequences of them – were bound up with both prior notions surrounding his personhood, and the abundance of more negative forces that had the potential to subvert the type of sociality he aspired to through the project.

The first section looks at Mateo’s life history. Through his past experience, we can understand the importance he places on a ‘good job’ – and the resulting sociality and generalised ‘good times’ – which are things that become manifest in his reinvention as a tumista. Next, we see how important this harking back to past, positive experience is for Mateo, given his actual everyday experience in Espinal. Then we look at the process of

⁴⁰ In Mexico, the majority of people employed in the formal wage sector are paid on a fortnightly basis. This form of payment is known as the *quincena*. The quincena is an incredibly powerful regulatory force: it serves as a marker of time and means by which people organise their lives.

reinvention itself. Here, we see how Mateo engaged with the MAT, focusing on his role as Kgosni distributor. This was one of the modalities through which actively participated in the grassroots, day-to-day functioning of the project, on which he could also give a well-informed critique of its functioning and impact. Through this activity, Mateo was able to fashion an influential position vis-à-vis other tumistas in town, inadvertently or otherwise; and it was here that paradoxes surrounding of the project's central mechanism – the túmin – started to be revealed.

A working life

Mateo was born in 1949, son to Rosalía Juárez Méndez and Cesáreo Álvarez Vega – ‘Totonac Indians, native to Espinal’ – and one of eight brothers and sisters. One of Mateo's earliest memories is of a flood that saw the River Tecolutla burst free from its course, spreading across fields and swallowing crops, animals and houses, as the waters raged up the hillside to the lower end of town. Yet, while the river sporadically destroyed livelihoods, it also provided them: around the age of 10 Mateo started working as a water-distributor, making journeys between the shingly banks and town with four large cans of water mounted on the back of a mule. From an early age, Mateo was involved in wage employment: he charged one peso a journey to deliver around 80 litres of water from the river to people's houses in town. After delivering water, Mateo worked for a period as a *jornalero* (rural labourer) before taking a job as a builder's assistant at the age of 18, for which he was paid 50 mx (£3) a day.

As a wage labourer, one strategy by which Mateo made sense of other large-scale changes that affected his life was through comparing wages and prices over time (cf. Guyer, 2004). Time and money are idioms through which Mateo commented on the quality of life, most commonly in the ‘before’, ‘after’, and ‘now’, and in reference to a wage or what something costs. For example, one of Mateo's earliest memories alongside his job distributing water was the construction of the *carretera* – the road that connected Espinal with Poza Rica to the north, Papantla and then the coast to the east, and Coyutla and the *sierra* to the west. Mateo recalls that the road ‘arrived’ when he was 7 or 8 years old, and with it, the socio-economic situation in town started to change, ultimately for the worse: ‘there was a change’, ‘modern things’ started to arrive, things sped up and money was no longer worth anything.

Mateo thus understood the ‘arrival of the road’ as an emblematic moment which marked the start of a life-long period of socio-economic change, during which the quality of life has

been sharply curtailed by dwindling job opportunities and the devaluation of the peso. He would lament that ‘before’ there were plenty more jobs to go around, and workers had the ability to negotiate and pick and choose whom they worked for based on what they would get paid. Equally, the peso was worth more than it is today: ‘before’ 50mx would buy enough food to feed a family for two weeks, whereas ‘now’ (2015), 50 mx did not even buy a jar of Nescafé coffee (which at the time cost 73 mx (£3)).

Mateo’s life changed significantly in 1974, when he was invited to go and work in Vega de Alatorre by a native of that town he had met whilst working on a hacienda near Espinal.⁴¹ In Vega, Mateo worked as a night watchman and administrator in a hotel, earning 300 mx a month. Mateo laughed when he told me that 300mx a month was too little for the work he was doing, yet he recognised that in any case he was happy in his job and in the new town: ‘I felt right’. Despite the low wage, the fact he worked nights gave Mateo spare time in which he enjoyed exploring the town and spending money eating out and drinking beers.

Mateo remembers his job fondly because he was able to meet many new people, and it was whilst working at the hotel that he met a group of travelling sales reps and therapists who worked for the Mexico City-based naturopathy specialist, Professor Humberto Avilés. Mateo recalls that the reps were in Vega low on their luck. Business was slow, and they did not have enough money to eat. Mateo empathised with them: he knew what it was like to go through ‘good and bad working times’ and one afternoon he invited them to eat *tacos*. Mateo would then invite the reps to eat every three days, and they would often go for beers after eating. This way Mateo and the reps became ‘good friends’.

When the reps were ready to move on, they thanked Mateo for his friendship and invited him to go and work with them. Mateo explained that he already had a job, and without good reason he could not leave it. A few months later, the reps returned and the situation repeated itself. However, this time Mateo had worked out a way to leave his job and join the reps: he asked the hotel owners for a pay rise, from 300 to 400 mx a month. Unsuccessful negotiations saw Mateo leaving the hotel and joining the troupe. Under the guidance of his new colleagues, Mateo started to study medicine and acupuncture and little by little, he learnt how to practise and make sales. Within time, Mateo was registered as an official representative of Avilés, who from Mexico City sent a certificate, books and manuals.

⁴¹ A town located on the coastal plain of Veracruz State, 130 km from his home town via Papantla on the coast road.

Mateo was 24 or 25 years old when he started to work as a rep, and remembers it as a life-changing moment. He was enthusiastic about his new job and quick to learn, attend to clients and make sales.⁴² Not only did he learn a lot, Mateo's job gave him an opportunity to travel to different places as far away as the isthmus in the south of Veracruz and Oaxaca State. Mateo earned between 30% and 50% of the sales he made, and with this, he had money to invite his friends to eat and drink together. He often recounted tales from his travels, how it was good to meet different people and do good things for them, himself feeling good in the process.

Mateo recalls that at the beginning it was extremely difficult for him to deal with patients and clients face to face:

I got nervous, and all those things, but as I went along I confronted the situation and I got better at it, until I made a few sales. It took me a lot of work to make one, two, three sales. From the fourth or fifth well I got to grips with it. Afterwards I started to get over my shyness and fear and I started to work normally, there in Martínez. I made a lot of sales.

In this quote, we can read a more nuanced self-transformation that occurred in the same period. To 'make a lot of sales' meant being a good salesman or practitioner. We can imagine that as Mateo gained confidence in his work, he also gained confidence in himself. This transformation went hand in hand with his experience of meeting and treating people, who were 'thankful' for his work, and his making and maintaining friendships.

This experience stood in contrast to Mateo's return home, where he was confronted with quite a different situation:

M: I arrived here to El Espinal, and here, well, people did not know what work I did. I arrived home, said hi to my mum and dad, to everyone. I started to tell them what I did for work. They didn't believe it.

J: Why?

M: Well, the truth is that they thought that I knew nothing. So then, I started to publicise my work here, to sell treatments, to publicise acupuncture, but people did not accept it. Right up to today, people don't accept it.

⁴² Mateo worked as a rep through a 'cash on delivery' (*correo reembolso*) system. Mateo would fill out files for the patients he attended, listing their personal details and symptoms, which were then sent to Avilés in Mexico City, who would then prescribe medicines and acupuncture points for the patient and send the files back with his cut of the payment.

Despite this situation, Mateo continued to sell products and give treatments in nearby communities until one day in 1989 or 1990, when the sales files he had sent to Avilés were returned to him. Without ever knowing what happened to his employer, Mateo was obliged to stop working as an alternative therapist. After a brief period in Playa del Carmen as a door-to-door salesman, Mateo returned to work as a *jornalero* in and around Espinal, until his diabetes and age no longer allowed him to continue.

*

From the above life history, we can identify key patterns, motivations and values that shape Mateo's lived experience. Mateo experienced wage labour from an early age, and wages and prices therefore informed his perspective on differing degrees of 'good' and 'bad' times. From early adulthood, Mateo spent a long period working out of town doing a job that fulfilled him. Leaving Espinal gave him a chance to experiment with different forms of work than those available for a man of his background in and around his hometown, which he found more rewarding. During his time as a travelling sales rep, what mattered most to Mateo was his ability to engage in socially meaningful actions: in particular, his experience was marked by his ability to make and maintain relationships. His friendship with the sales reps arose out of empathy and solidarity with them, and in mutual recognition and a display of thanks, he was invited to work with them. Mateo thus placed much importance on wages (money) and the social relationships he could make and sustain with his work colleagues-cum-friends. These networks, and the medium through which they were maintained and strengthened, became wholly important to defining who Mateo was, in the absence of more traditional familial and kin-based support networks. The paradox in the story is that Mateo was only able to fully realise himself as a salesman, practitioner and social being away from Espinal. Indeed, decades later, Mateo lamented that his fellow townsfolk still 'didn't accept his trade'; nevertheless, he was compelled to reinvent himself in his past image. I suggest that this rejection and Mateo's stubborn adherence to the knowledge rejected is related to other aspects of his life and social standing, an enquiry into which takes us back to look at more negative forces of sociality that abounded in town.

Social standing, envidia and mysticism

Like Irene, Mateo was also the victim of envidia, however his case is perhaps more acute – and as we shall see, more fantastic – due to his position at the opposite end of the social spectrum. Mateo had a sense of his position in the social ranking of the town, and this made

clear on occasions where he compared people like himself with people of ‘higher status (*gente de categoría*)’.⁴³ For example, one day we talked about how people addressed me as *maestro* – teacher – because of my association with other *maestros* from the UVI. Mateo said: ‘When one is something, they are somebody; and when they are not they are nobody’. He explained that *maestro* denoted a certain level of respect and importance, whereas people looked at him like a ‘nobody’. We saw above how this sense of disregard for his personhood also translated into the skill and knowledge which Mateo held so dear.

Despite this, Mateo believed that his knowledge of acupuncture and healing was incredibly important and had the potential to do powerful things.⁴⁴ Mateo said people in Espinal did not accept his trade because they were unfamiliar with it. He had advertised in the Kgosni and put flyers up around town, to let people like the university students know there was ‘an alternative health option’ to cure their ailments, but he received no calls and someone even ripped the flyers down. In an effort to help, I paid for a *lona* (printed canvas) to help advertise his services. Mateo wanted to hang the *lona* above his door, yet it stayed rolled up and kept in his room. When I asked why this was so, I was told there were many ‘bad people’ in Espinal, and if the *lona* was hung someone would throw acid on it. Mateo was caught in a bind: he wanted to advertise his services and gain more clients to earn a decent living, yet he could not do this with the *lona* because of potential ‘bad people’ (insert *envidiosos*) spoiling it. There are undoubtedly many different elements converging here, least of which was the provenance of a new, shiny *lona* from an outsider. Nevertheless, the potentiality of envidia as a social force made itself clear, and Mateo’s fear was well founded – his flyers had already been pulled down. As we saw in the first part of this chapter, envidia is closely tied up to notions of economic progress and betterment. Yet Mateo’s relationship with envidia and its effects differed from Irene’s story in significant ways.

Congruent with Irene’s account, Mateo has memories of houses and properties set ablaze during his childhood. However, Mateo said the fires were a product of envidia, started by *brujos* (witches), who were well known for sending balls of fire shooting through the skies. That Mateo was to equate the same violent dispossession Irene talked of with the realm of witchcraft tells us more about the impacts of envidia and its close association with more

⁴³ See Romanucci Ross (1973) for a discussion on the term ‘*categoría*’.

⁴⁴ Mateo spoke about knowledge and command of acupuncture in the same way he talked about studying the scripture and believing in God. While these are slightly different things, it was clear that Mateo attributed an important and powerful status to acupuncture and healing in much the same way as to God.

mystical forces at play in Espinal. Indeed, it seemed that Mateo had close experiences with this mystical side of life: he knew the sorts of activities *brujos* undertook, and the animal forms they adopted when travelling to do people harm. He had also come across supernatural beings like giant snakes and ghost horsemen. For Mateo, the existence of supernatural forces and the social manifestation of envidia often blurred into much the same thing. He lived plagued with the idea that something or someone was out to get him, and he often asked if I could smell the scent of women's perfume, or hear footsteps outside his door as we sat chatting – sure signs of 'bad people' wanting to harm him.

The realm of mysticism enters into Mateo's understanding of illness and treatment. It was through receiving treatment myself I found out acupuncture was just one of a range of techniques Mateo used to heal. Another significant part of his repertoire focused on *metafísica* (metaphysics). Mateo explained *metafísica* as the power to cure and protect oneself, and live prosperously through positive affirmations and thoughts. Mateo used *metafísica*, prayers and *limpias* to command the illness to leave the body.⁴⁵ Another skill Mateo possessed was the ability to 'do jobs'. I once arrived at Mateo's house to find him sat *velando* (watching over) a candle that was burning in front of an image of San Martín Caballero.⁴⁶ When I asked what the candle was for, Mateo explained someone had asked him to 'do a job' (*encargar un trabajo*) for them. Every now and then Mateo had other 'jobs' to do, like foraging for a certain medicinal plant, or paying people a visit.

Mateo's practices had a lot in common with well-known and documented types of traditional folk healing in Mexico whose practitioners are commonly referred to as *curanderos* (Pereyra and Guzmán, 2010). However, it is important to note that Mateo never defined himself as such, yet it seems he *did* make a distinction between different types of healing. He openly advertised his services as acupuncturist; his other services not so. For example, Mateo did most of his 'jobs' and gave *limpias* behind closed doors. Moreover, he was keen to talk about his knowledge of acupuncture, and vague on other aspects of healing. We can imagine that Mateo's position as a poor, single man, actively involved in the world of mystical forces, played a role in determining his social standing in Espinal. This in turn could explain why

⁴⁵ 'Una *limpia*' – quite literally a cleanse or purification – is a common practice all over Mexico and beyond, where the healer 'cleans' the body or aura of the afflicted person, usually with plants or incense. Mateo also used candles, which were later burnt on an altar.

⁴⁶ San Martín is a saint commonly petitioned for business matters.

people ‘did not accept’ his trade as an acupuncturist, and thus why Mateo was, despite his best efforts otherwise, destined to live a precarious existence.

How is all this relevant to Mateo’s participation in the MAT? Well, Mateo entered the MAT network offering services as an acupuncturist specifically and not as a healer more generally. In doing so, Mateo made a clear distinction about the types of healing. Indeed, both types of healing involved different types of activity and transactions. For example, acupuncture was given at a fixed rate of 100 mx (£4) a session or 800 mx (£33) for a month’s treatment, and in my experience, ‘jobs’ and *limpias* we paid for by a ‘donation’.⁴⁷ Moreover, Mateo proudly publicised the fact he was an acupuncturist (the adverts in the Kgosni, the flyers, and the intention of the *lona*), whereas his identity as a healer or *curandero* did not seem so openly declared. This gives us an idea as to the types of work Mateo considered good for the MAT, which in turn tells us that he saw the MAT as a place to recreate conditions of good work and sociality.

In a sense, Mateo used the MAT to reinvent himself in the image of past ‘good working times’ under the auspices of Humberto Avilés and his fellow colleagues – times that he remembered as characterised by positive sociality and feeling good. This stood in contrast to his experience working as a healer in Espinal, which by its very nature bound him up in the effects of negative sociality: envidia, witchcraft, social isolation and the like. I suggest that Mateo understood and used the MAT as a vehicle to transcend his everyday socio-economic circumstance: the project provided a framework through which he could imagine and creatively engage with personalised notions of positive sociality and intentions to ‘do good’, in realising what he considered a more formalised, respectable and socially sanctioned endeavour.

On entering the MAT

Boni, Irene’s daughter in law, invited Mateo to participate in the MAT. Boni used to call on Mateo during her Kgosni rounds. At first, Mateo refused the paper, explaining he had no money to pay for it. Boni gave it to him anyway, and after a couple of visits, she suggested Mateo should join the project: he would get ‘money free’. Mateo’s interest in the project was

⁴⁷ Mateo’s use of the word ‘donation’ (*limosna*) here is interesting. It is more commonly used in referring to alms given at church, or given to beggars in the street. This is different from the *cooperación* – cooperation – asked for in exchange for the Kgosni, or even the ‘cost’ (*costar*) of an acupuncture session or monthly treatment.

sparked by the ‘important information’ he found within the Kgosni’s pages. In particular, the little sections focused on different types of treatments and cures caught his attention. One day, Mateo went to the Casa Túmin to get registered as a tumista. Mateo narrates his meeting with Juan like so:

He told me to come in, so I did. I was given a seat and I sat down. Then *maestro* Juan started to talk to me and he asked me what it was that I knew how to do or what it was that I did for work [and I said] “No, I no longer work – at my age it is difficult for me to work”. “So what do you do to earn your *centavos*?” “Well, there is usually some sort of errand to run or odd job that I get offered, and this is the way I pass my time” I told him. “And what do you know how to do?” “Well, I don’t know how to do anything” I said to him. “No, man, well I can’t help you if that is the case.” “Ok, so I will get going then” I said. “Ok then.” So I said goodbye, but on leaving, as I stepped through the door, I remembered the acupuncture and I said to him: “Yes, I do have a job.” “Let’s see, what is it?” “It’s Chinese Acupuncture” I told him. “Ah, well come back inside” he now told me “and sit down”. So I sat down, and I started to talk with Don Juan and I told him all about acupuncture and all that. “Now it’s OK” he said. Then he got out his notebook and wrote down my name, my address and everything there. Then I signed and he gave me the túmin. He gave me 200 túmin, “and afterwards we will give you the rest” he told me. So, they gave me the túmin and the [...] poster, and they took my photo and I signed and that was that. “Now you can go” he said to me [Mateo laughs]. So I left, and since then I started to work once again with Chinese acupuncture, without selling natural medicines. Just acupuncture, up until today.

Mateo’s ‘remembering’ that he had a skill other than doing ‘errands’ and ‘odd jobs’ supports the idea that he considered acupuncture a good job to formally offer in the MAT over his other healing skills. Moreover, the story demonstrates how simply people can join the project, provided they have something to offer fellow tumistas. Here we see how participation in the project is based on an assumption of trust and goodwill: Juan did not ask for official papers or certificates, and Mateo’s word and a simple acupressure demonstration were enough for him to join the MAT.⁴⁸ Soon after joining, Mateo was invited to give a course on acupressure in the Casa Túmin.

The MAT provided Mateo with a structure through which he could start working again at a time when he most needed it. If we remember back to the opening vignette of this section, Mateo lived a precarious existence, alone, in what I later learned was his dead uncle’s house, without any real income. The 200 túmin he received on joining was Mateo’s initiation into buying products in the Casa Túmin and from fellow tumistas. One of his best purchases

⁴⁸ Membership criteria and the importance of ‘the word’ (*la palabra*) is discussed in the following chapter.

from the Casa was an electric kettle. Mateo would often visit the Casa and have coffee with Juan, who always had a warm cup ready to offer anyone stopping by. One day, Juan suggested Mateo could buy coffee to make later at home. Mateo explained that he had no way to heat water, to which Juan replied that there was a kettle for sale. The kettle originally cost \$200mx, but Juan said that Mateo could have it for \$100mx. That day, Mateo bought the kettle on credit, and has since been able to make his own coffee and hot drinks at home. This story is an example of the small but significant ways Mateo found the MAT useful. He also bought clothes, cleaning fluid and headphones in the Casa, as well as used its notice board to advertise his acupuncture services.

The kettle story also demonstrates why Mateo considered the MAT ‘good’ and ‘important’, beyond offering him a chance to work again. The discount and credit Juan gave him were little actions in line with the project’s underlying principles of trust and solidarity and mutual aid. Mateo recognised how significant these actions were: he often compared his town negatively to places in the *sierra* where it was customary for people to ‘help each other out’ – behaviour that he considered was now ‘lost’ in Espinal. There are two interesting points to flag up here. First, Mateo’s imaginary of a communal spirit as existing elsewhere sits in juxtaposition with the imaginary many tumistas and outside observers have of Espinal itself, as we saw in the previous chapter.⁴⁹ Second, Mateo therefore understood that the MAT sought to rekindle and reconstruct the type of social relations and obligations commonly associated with this communal spirit, which stood in contrast to the negative aspects of everyday sociality he was accustomed to. It was also an understanding from which he formed a critique of those tumistas whom he saw as not participating in the same, committed way he did. Mateo defined himself as one of the most ‘active’ *socios* in Espinal – meaning that he used túmin, distributed and read the Kgosni, invited people to join, and regularly visited the Casa Túmin. Mateo’s enthusiasm for and commitment to the project is understood in light of his personal experience: the MAT framework through which he could reinvent himself as a ‘somebody’, as opposed to a ‘nobody’. We now turn to the ways Mateo exercised his newfound agency as a tumista.

⁴⁹ Interesting to note here that Mateo laments the loss of more communal-based spirit in Espinal, and imagines it as existing elsewhere in the *sierra*, whereas visitors to Espinal or tumistas in other regions of the country imagine Espinal as a place where this very spirit resides. Interestingly in both cases, this communal spirit is linked to indigenous custom and culture, as we saw in the previous chapter and will continue to see throughout.

The Kgosni round

Mateo became a Kgosni distributor shortly after joining the MAT; a job he came to rely on for a meagre but constant income. In some cases, the Kgosni was the only means of contact *socios* had with the project, and the only way they were kept informed about what was going in the MAT both locally and further afield. Mateo's position was interesting because as Kgosni distributor, he was the interface between many *socios* in Espinal and the wider MAT network beyond. This made him one of the most informed about the general attitude towards the MAT amongst the *socios* in Espinal – to many of whom he became the embodiment of the project – yet his only direct interaction with more influential MAT promoters was with Juan and Irene. Paradoxically, Mateo did not know that Juan was in charge of compiling and editing the Kgosni, he only knew that Irene was responsible for printing it. Despite his lack of contact with the CC, Mateo held an influential position, and as we shall see, the interactions between Mateo and the *socios* had some interesting and unintended consequences.

Mateo took his distributing job seriously. The Kgosni provided his main source of income in túmin: the paper round was 'when the túmin stacks up again' – here referring to the 'cooperation' he received in exchange for delivery. Mateo visited around twenty *socios* on his rounds, although sometimes he was called upon to do a double round. During the months I accompanied Mateo on his round, the resulting 'cooperation' varied between a recorded low of 4t plus 28mx and a high of 40t plus 54mx.

The delivery round was done early, in order to catch people at home before they went out, and to avoid the midday sun (see Figure 2.4). On a typical delivery day, Mateo and I would have a ritual breakfast of instant coffee, hot lemonade, or simply hot water and sugar (all thanks to his kettle) with sugary bread or bananas. Mateo would then put on a chequered shirt, hang his imitation Adidas sling-bag filled with the Kgosni over one shoulder, and put on his cap before announcing we were ready to leave. During the round, interactions between Mateo and the *socios* were diverse. Some interactions were predictable, with the same scene unfolding every two weeks, like in the poultry wholesaler, where each visit the woman attending the cash register would pay out 4t for the Kgosni, often making a joke: 'It's always the paper with you!', or 'I am going to pay you with túmin, right, Mr?'. In other places, people would sometimes pay their 'cooperation' and sometimes not, like the municipal government's cafeteria. Others looked forward to the delivery, like Cenorina, who on seeing

us arrive would exclaim ‘Let’s see what good news it brings this time!’ Cenorina rarely paid Mateo in pesos or túmin, instead inviting him in for a glass of cold fruit water (see Figure 2.5). Some people flatly rejected the Kgosni, like in Felipe Salazar’s medical consultancy, where the secretary would shout ‘I don’t want it!’, to which Mateo stood firm and shouted back: ‘Take it!’

It was clear that where some people welcomed Mateo’s visit and the arrival of the Kgosni, others were less keen. The exchanges between Mateo and the *socios* were as varied as the transactions that accompanied them. However, there was one scenario that stuck in my head as it repeated itself over the weeks, and I think this is because it can tell us something about the paradox of using money as a tool for creating and strengthening a solidarity network.



Figure 2.3: Mateo on the Kgosni round (photo by author)



Figure 2.4: Mateo and Cenorina (photo by author)

Credit and Debt Obligations in a Solidarity Network

The first time I accompanied Mateo to Alicia's house, her son enthusiastically invited us in to their home. Alicia's son was a mechanic whose time spent crouched under old vehicles had given him a bad shoulder. Mateo had previously treated the mechanic's ailment, and that day the mechanic not only paid him for the Kgosni, but also agreed to more treatment. Mateo was pleased to secure another treatment, which would give him an extra few pesos. However, over the following weeks a pattern started to emerge. Either no one would answer the door, or if someone were in, the door would remain shut. On occasion, a sheepish Alicia would appear at the part-opened door and refuse the paper, explaining that she had no money to pay for it. The day I became more conscious of the possible implications of these interactions, the exchange went like this:

M: The paper is here!

A: I don't want it this time.

M: Why?

A: Because I don't have any money. [Then there was a brief pause, and Mateo handed over the Kgosni anyway.]

M: Take it; you can pay me when you have money.

It was clear that Alicia felt uncomfortable about taking the Kgosni, and I thought that my presence with a notebook in hand did not help the situation. Weeks later, I shared my concern with Mayeli, a fellow researcher doing fieldwork in Espinal and MAT coordinator in Xalapa. Mayeli knew Alicia well, and she pointed out that the problem in this situation was not my notebook, but Mateo's insistence. Alicia told Mayeli that she felt trapped in a difficult situation: she had no money to pay for the Kgosni, but Mateo had said that if she no longer wanted to receive the paper she would have to tell Juan that she no longer wanted to be a tumista. Moreover, Mateo pointed out that if Alicia no longer wanted to participate in the MAT, she would have to hand back the original amount of túmin given to her on joining the project.

Here Mateo was referring to an 'obligation' laid out in the guidelines (*reglamento*) of the MAT: tumistas who no longer want to participate in the project are expected to return the amount of túmin they received on joining, or a quantity of their products equal to it.⁵⁰ As we

⁵⁰ It is important to point out that Mateo was referring to the guidelines he was given on joining the MAT. The guidelines themselves are periodically revised and updated based on experience, as we see in more detail in

will see in chapter 3, ‘rules’ were never really enforced, and many tumistas had already stopped actively participating in the project without handing back their túmin. The interesting thing here is how Mateo used the project’s *reglamento* as guide and script. To him, Alicia’s refusal of the Kgosni was a clear example of her failing to meet the obligations she had as a tumista, and accordingly she needed to be reminded of the consequences. If she no longer wanted to participate in the MAT, she would have to tell Juan and return to him the túmin she was given on joining. The catch was Alicia no longer had that amount of túmin, thus she could not ‘formally’ leave. This obliged her to keep receiving the newspaper, even if she had no money to pay for it, thus binding her to Mateo – and perhaps her commitment to the project – in an awkward debt-relationship. Alicia’s refusal of the Kgosni echoes Mateo’s first interactions with Boni, when he too would also say he had no money to pay for the paper. Of course, the difference was that Alicia had already signed up to the MAT, so in some sense binding her to the obligation to receive the paper, whereas Mateo was not then a tumista. The example demonstrates how different registers of obligation and debt enter into and are felt within the MAT. On one level, long-term obligation to the MAT is aspired to through the cultivation of sentiments of mutuality and generalised reciprocity between the tumistas. Yet in this case, obligation towards the project takes the form of a short-term monetary debt.

Mateo would complain that he did not know what to do with *socios* who no longer wanted to receive the Kgosni, and the dwindling numbers of ‘active’ *socios* – those who accepted túmin and received the Kgosni – concerned him. Mateo’s concern was both economic and moral. On a personal level, his income from the ‘cooperation’ was at stake. More generally, he was perplexed as to why people in Espinal did not want to participate in a project that to him seemed inherently good. We saw earlier how Mateo made the parallel with the MAT project and other communities in the *sierra* where notions of solidarity and mutual aid are supposedly engrained in social relations. More specifically, the MAT was good for Mateo because it gave him a job, and a job that granted him some degree of dignity and importance. Mateo’s participation in the MAT is bound to the Kgosni, and the opportunity the paper round gave him to make a living. Mateo used the MAT as a survival mechanism, and his economic necessity undoubtedly influenced the ways in which he understood and acted within the structure of the MAT. Mateo was able to use his understanding of MAT

the following chapter. The current guidelines, revised in January 2017, have had the clause Mateo was referring to removed (see Junta de Buen Gobierno, 2017).

membership in some cases to enforce an obligation, thus guaranteeing him an income, and his own survival and that of the project on a local level.

However, Mateo's experience as Kgosni distributor points to a rather significant paradox. The crux of the issue seems to lie in the tumistas' use of money as a tool for creating, strengthening and propagating a solidarity network. Graeber (2011) has shown that money's origins actually lie in credit-debt relations, which can be characteristically coercive (or violent). Whilst it is clear that the MAT promoters are using the tumin as a symbol or token of a different type of value system to that which is hegemonic in places like Espinal – where violent dispossession of land and livelihoods are the norm, for example – the fact that this token is *money* may actually be the problem in some cases. In the above scenario, it seems that Mateo's actions as Kgosni distributor-cum-debt-collector might subvert the very solidarity network his work is hoped to sustain and cultivate. That money may always be bound up in credit-debt relations is an important point, and one that is all the more present and pressing in a town like Espinal, where these types of relations manifest themselves in particularly acute ways.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have argued that Irene and Mateo both understand the MAT as a project that aims to 'do good' and foment positive forms of sociality in a locality where negative sociality abounds. As such, both tumistas use the MAT as a vehicle through which they strive to transcend their everyday socio-economic circumstance and engage in socially meaningful action, albeit in different ways. The way in which they understand and participate in the project is highly dependent on their individual life trajectories.

Irene's position is clearly opposed to capitalism and the political economy it engenders. She therefore engages with the MAT in light of her earlier experience in teacher's mobilisation, in many ways was as a renewal of struggle against the state, and through a labour of love and care for her town and her townsfolk. Irene celebrates the vision that the MAT offers: she tells us it provides her and her fellow tumistas a 'clearer horizon' towards which they can aim, and at the same time they can learn and create the conditions for a good, dignified life together. Moreover, the MAT offers Irene the chance to extend her matriarchal care and influence through a different sort of family – the participation in which ultimately makes her *feel good*. However, her well-to-do position in town and visible role at the centre of the MAT also brings with it the complications of envidia.

On the other end of the spectrum is Mateo. His socio-economic circumstance means he engages with the MAT in a different way. While he also recognises within the MAT the potential to recuperate and live out ‘lost values’ of mutual aid (values which he understands as existing elsewhere in the *sierra*), unlike Irene, his understanding does not seem to be as consciously opposed to capitalism as a system, the type of governance associated with it, or the political economy of place. Through the MAT, Mateo strives to recreate something of his past life as a travelling sales rep and entrepreneur – a time when life was good, and work and friendships were plentiful – perhaps a celebration of what capitalism can offer when it works well. In this sense, the MAT offers Mateo the chance to pursue dignified work, and on a practical level, it provided him with a vital source of cash income to eke out an existence. Despite his best intentions, Mateo, like Irene, cannot transcend the more negative social forces that exist in Espinal.

We see that Irene and Mateo engage with both capitalism and the MAT, using their understandings of each as frames of reference to reflect on and talk about their endeavours in the present. Here it is clear that understanding and participating in ECOSOL in an everyday way cannot be easily structured in terms of a clear-cut binary of ‘capitalism’ and ‘alternative economy’.

A secondary argument emerging from the case studies is in relation to life histories as analytical devices. Those presented here offer a distinct analytical framework for understanding and critiquing contemporary capitalism, and the varying degrees in which people work within and against it, in their endeavours to create conditions for a good life. In particular, I suggest that they function as economic explanations that offer distinct ways of understanding value and temporality. The life histories demonstrate how value is understood – and importantly how it is *felt* – as the importance of social actions (Graeber 2001, 2013). Although their strategies and understandings are different, Irene and Mateo share a temporal framing – they have lived through the same periods of Mexican history – and it is through their perspective we can understand the experience of the rise of financial capitalism from a ‘human economy’ perspective (Hart et al., 2010). They have both felt their standards of living decline – a major contributing factor in their decisions to join the MAT, which provides the framework through which they strive to realise the sort of social action that is meaningful to them, in light of their past experiences. In this sense, the MAT provides an example of how people are reimagining monetary instruments and arrangements to work for ‘the now’ as opposed to the financial logic of ‘the long run’ (Amato

and Fantacci, 2012; Guyer, 2007). That the túmin is currency in cash form is fundamental here. an important feature. It provides an important injection of liquidity, yet paradoxically here we also saw how its monetary form means it could, in certain contexts, subvert the solidarity network it is meant to sustain.

Chapter 3:

MAT network politics

In this chapter, we move from Espinal to look at the organisation of the MAT network as it expanded across Mexico. In particular, I focus on the notion of *libertad responsable*, or ‘responsible freedom’. Responsible freedom emerged as an important form of social action in the context of network expansion, and it became the guiding principle of MAT network politics. By the time I started fieldwork in late November 2014, the MAT network had grown from around 60 producers in Espinal and surrounding communities, to around 600. In many places, the MAT had grown through pre-existing social relations – often made up of family and friend networks. In other places, collectives and individuals with no pre-existing relation to the tumistas joined. The composition of the network varied and it spread across wide geographical distances, from Tamaulipas in the north of the country to Chiapas in the south. As we saw in the last chapter, the tumistas often referred to the network as a ‘family’ – the ‘big tumista family’. Less frequent, yet still common, was the notion that this was a ‘network of friends’, or a ‘community’. Referring to their network in familial terms reflected the sentiment of mutuality and belonging the tumistas strived to cultivate in through the MAT. Yet network expansion brought with it unforeseen situations: oftentimes logistical and financial headaches, and differences of opinion on what network belonging, and in particular what ‘being a good tumista’, meant. Accordingly, from late 2014, efforts to reimagine the organisation of the network on a national scale resulted in the CC establishing guidelines allowing for the autonomous organisation and expression of local collectives, whilst at the same time seeking to guarantee a level of cohesion and commitment to the politico-ethical project at the core of the MAT. It was through this process that appealing to responsible freedom became an overarching principle guiding MAT network politics.

Network expansion

Compared to most alternative currency or LETs schemes, the MAT bucks the trend towards localism.⁵¹ Since 2010, the MAT has grown 30 times its original size, from around 60 tumistas in Espinal to 1,880 tumistas in localities spread over 21 states of Mexico – and even

⁵¹ For a discussion of scale, see North (2005). Perhaps the most comparable example of widespread and long-lasting networks is Argentina, see North (2007) and Pearson (2003).

a handful of international members.⁵² The largest number of tumistas can be found in the state of Veracruz (671), followed by Oaxaca (409) and Puebla (176); with large groups also present in the states of Chiapas (119), Estado de México (118), Morelos (112) and the country's capital, Mexico City (106). There are many tumistas in Veracruz because that is where the project started, and most are concentrated around Espinal and Papantla. The MAT in Oaxaca has spread through enthusiastic promotion and regular and yearly tianguis events (see chapter 5). We learn more about the expansion to Puebla and Estado de México (Texcoco), and the consequences of network expansion as felt in Espinal, later in the chapter.

We saw in chapter 1 that the MAT-Banxico episode was instrumental in the process of network expansion, projecting the MAT to popularity across the country. Yet the rationale behind and justifications for expansion have been a contentious subject amongst tumistas. Some questioned the need to expand, while others saw it as a key imperative. The distinct phase of network organisation that I will focus on here coincided with a change in CC membership, and my fieldwork period (2014-2016). The majority of those who took the mantle of the project in 2014 prioritised network expansion, and it seemed they were committed to the idea of networking as a political organisational form. On the subject, Juris writes that

Expanding and diversifying networks is more than a concrete organizational objective; it is also a highly valued political goal. The self-produced, self-developed, and self-managed network becomes a widespread cultural ideal, providing not only an effective model of political organizing but also a model for reorganizing society as a whole. (Juris, 2008: 15)

The primacy of the network is not just limited to the European anti-globalisation movements about which Juris writes. During my time in the field, in different forums and meetings all over the Mexico, the importance of networking – *tejiendo redes* (to knit networks) – was foregrounded as the best way of communicating and coordinating action between diverse movements, collectives and individuals who were pursuing varied projects for social change. Given this, and from what we learnt about the trajectories of certain MAT promoters in chapter 1 who had assumed positions in the CC in 2014, we can understand their interest in expanding the MAT network. The túmin served as a potent 'networking tool' (Juris 2008: 2): it linked up some of these diverse and disparate collective experiences of people working

⁵² Numbers are taken from the MAT directory, which was updated on the 31st of July 2019. The international members are registered in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Italy, Great Britain, Peru and the USA.

on alternative economic projects, environmental conservation, or in questions of human rights and education, etc. Here we look at what the MAT ‘model of political organizing’, which indeed aspired to ‘a model for reorganizing society as a whole’, looked like in theory, and in practice (Juris, 2008: 15).

Mutuality as the basis of good governance and responsible freedom

Gudeman (2008) writes that the economy is made up of ‘mutual connections’ on multiple levels, and he defines mutuality as ‘shared language, speech codes, body gestures, rituals, and unwritten practices and processes as well as norms, laws and other social agreements’ (27). The notions of family, friends and community evoked by the *tumistas* when talking about their network helps to understand the core sentiment of mutuality at work within the MAT: the cultivation of relations that are dependable, reciprocal and intimate. Gudeman further suggests that ‘through mutual affiliations’, relational identities – or ‘people in community’ – are formed (32, see also Gudeman, 1992). The assumption of mutuality on joining the MAT also served as the basis for envisioning and practising different ways of organising and doing politics.

In the first weeks of my fieldwork, in December 2014, I attended a public assembly in Papantla. Iván, a *tumista* and MAT promoter from the town, said the following:

We believe that this project is about solidarity, with humanism – it’s about human beings who help one another out. This is a labour of consciousness. When one is aware, then one can participate in a project like this. Because this is not an economic project, it is a solidarity project. So it is here where every one of us should be raising the awareness of their *compañeros*, their community, their family... So that those who are in charge of the project in that moment can then go and register them to join this solidary project. And as Juan says, this is not a democratic project. I think that something we need to start saying aloud is that democracy has fundamental limitations, and at the end of the day, it has been taken by neoliberalism as yet another form of control over the population. Well, what are we referring to? [...] Things like science, culture, and solidarity do not come about through a process of voting, they come about through human development/education. That is where democracy does not solve things for our society. Things get solved by us starting to relate to one another as people and starting to fight for a way of governing ourselves in a different way – one that is based on humanism and tenderness. So I think this is the sort of government we are looking for, and this is the origin of good governance – which at the end of the day is what the *túmin* is all about.

Juxtaposing the idea of *tumista* relationality against that of neoliberal democracy, Iván suggests that the MAT is less of an economic project and more a project about learning how

to relate to one another with ‘humanism and tenderness,’ which serves as the basis for ‘good governance’. Here Iván evokes the model of organisation the tumistas were developing, the terminology and template for which are inspired by the Zapatista experience (as we saw in chapter 1). The Zapatista notion of ‘good governance’ was developed as an alternative to the liberal representative democratic tradition, and refers to a system of political organisation that is bottom up and consensus based, where the assembly is the maximum authority, captured in the phrase ‘*mandar obedeciendo*’ – to lead by obeying (Speed 2007). Iván’s comments came in part as a resumé of a long discussion between the public, tumistas and MAT promoters over the issues and complications implied in network growth. In particular, the notion of ‘consciousness’ came up time and again, and the idea either that people chose to become tumistas because of a ‘certain level of consciousness’ they had, and/or as Iván points out, that it is the responsibility of each tumista to help ‘raise awareness’ among their fellow friends and family as a condition of network belonging. What consciousness was, exactly, and what constituted a ‘conscious’ self, was a subject of debate amongst the tumistas, and is a demonstration of the multiple viewpoints and ideas that came together under the umbrella of the MAT as the network expanded. Consciousness related to how different people understood the project and their participation within it, which ultimately influenced how they got on with one another. In this context, tumista ‘good governance’ meant a process of open-ended dialogue, negotiation and reflection between people with different points of view, which could be complex and fraught at times. It is in times of tension and disagreement that the importance of practicing responsible freedom shone through as a means to maintain network unity and cohesion. So, what is responsible freedom and where did the idea come from?

The origins of responsible freedom date back to the early days of the project, when the tumistas met in assembly to decide how and what to establish as guidelines to orient MAT practice. The tumistas wrote a small document of guidelines called the *reglamento*, which was printed along with the four founding principles and handed out to tumistas when they joined the MAT. In the previous chapter, we saw how Mateo referred to this *reglamento* in his dealings with Alicia. However, with network expansion, this changed, and the reality was that many tumistas rarely checked the document to guide their day-to-day practice. Equally, the architects of the project stressed it was best to understand ‘the philosophy of the project,’ and ‘to be guided by the principles or values that orient our behaviour in using the Túmin, based in each person’s conscience and trust between one another’(Junta de Buen

Gobierno 2014: 87). In this respect, ‘the word’ (*la palabra*) was favoured over strict adherence to rules and regulations. Ultimately, by laying out the key principles of the project (trust, solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy) it was hoped that each tumista would participate with responsible freedom. Responsible freedom was the ideal ethical stance at the core of the project, and adhering to this notion, and more importantly *practicing* it, was key to cultivating the tumista ‘person-in-community’ (Gudeman 2008, 1992). It was therefore through network participation that the MAT promoters hoped that a certain sort of person would be created: an individual motivated by and for the collective good.

Moreover, responsible freedom indexed the ongoing learning process implicit in the MAT. As we shall see in more detail in the ethnographic examples below, in dealing with disagreements or differences of opinion, the tumistas placed an emphasis on responsible freedom rather than establishing hard-line rules or introducing sanctions upon those who seemingly transgress. A recent example published in the Kgosni of a tumista caught trying to steal a table they had rented for the weekend at a tianguis (more on these in chapter 5) demonstrates this:

It is worth pointing out that for this *compañero* will not be expelled from the [MAT], nor will he be stopped from participating in future events, because the [MAT] is a school of *compañeros* where the focus is on learning, it is not a penitentiary; and where there are different levels of consciousness, an amount of tolerance is required so that we can all advance together despite our differences and deficiencies, learning from one another. [It is an example of] another polemic of the [MAT], where there are no obligations nor punishments, only the path towards a responsible freedom. (RUDH, 2018)

Published under the headline ‘Túmin School, 5 lessons from the 3rd Túmin Festival in Papantla,’ this is a clear example of how the MAT is envisioned as a school, as we saw in chapter 1. Participation in the project meant an ongoing process of learning to relate to one another differently, which hung on the notion of responsible freedom as both an ethical practice and as the basis for political organisation.

In recent years, there has been increased interest in the formation of ethical and political selves and subjectivities in Latin America (Holbraad, 2018; Lazar, 2008; Lazar, 2013; Wilde, 2018). I take inspiration from these accounts to suggest that MAT network participation both delineates and contributes to the formation of the tumistas as politico-ethical subjects. For example, much as Lazar has focused on the notion of *contención* (containment) as ‘an idiom of collectivity which can be thought of as a group technology of

the self’ (2013: 114), I posit that we can think of responsible freedom as the epitome of the formation of the tumista ‘person-in-community’. Having looked at the idea of responsible freedom, I now turn back to the subject of network expansion and look at the organisational vision it engendered from December 2014, before moving to look at how these ideas worked in practice. We will see how the organisational vision and the ethical principle of responsible freedom complement and to a certain extent mirror one another: cultivating the politico-ethical subject is both the means and the end of the MAT political project, and the organisation of the MAT is designed to facilitate this cultivation of this subjectivity through practice. Here we see a particular expression of Maeckelbergh’s (2009) notion of prefiguration, as discussed in the Introduction: joining the network supposed adherence to the assumption of mutuality and a commitment to the ideal of responsible freedom; yet the ideal also served as the guide for practice in the present.



Figure 3.1: New members of the tumista family from Guerrero, alongside the then MAT president Alejandra, at the Casa Túmin, Espinal. The ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ poster is a visual declaration of mutuality (photo by author).

Túmin-Regional Autónomo

In the same assembly cited above, Juan had announced plans to establish formally Túmin-Regional Autónomo (Autonomous Túmin Regions, TRA hereafter) in areas with a strong tumista presence. The rationale behind this was to establish a set of guidelines and a framework to orient the tumistas in how to relate to one another through the ever-expanding network. To be sure, the proposal of formalising TRA was an effort to relieve the CC of the

financial and logistical headaches resulting from network expansion, yet it also provided opportunity to experiment with organisational forms that corresponded to the MAT principle of autonomy. As discussed in the Introduction, the notion of autonomy we are dealing with here is what Escobar has identified as the ‘thinking and designing of alternatives that are geared towards the communal’, or as ‘[establishing] new foundations for social life’ (2018: 166, 174). Escobar draws upon the biological notion of ‘autopoiesis’ to draw a parallel to understanding autonomous modes of organisation as ‘a system of relations among components [...] whose continued interaction produces the composite unit itself’ (69). However, Escobar does not view these ‘composite units’ as totalizing – there is room for diversity and complexity within them (170). Escobar’s take on autonomy can help us understand how the notion operates in the MAT. Autonomy in a tumista sense thus references a project based on alternative models of sociality and organisation. Here the focus is on exercising *autogestión* – the right to self-management and determination – in deciding how best to manage their affairs and internal organisation. This is where the concept of TRA comes in: they were envisioned as autonomous within the TRA structure, allowing for a greater degree of freedom, creativity and diversity within the movement (reflecting the principle of responsible freedom), yet at the same time being part of the unified network as a whole. Thus within the imagining of TRA, we can see how the architects of the MAT were hoping to articulate a network of different MAT collectives that were at once locally autonomous yet nationally interdependent. Here I present the outline, before moving on to look at how this worked in practice.

The plan for TRA was loosely based on replicating the original organisational structure of the MAT outside of the Totonacapan region. To understand this, it might be helpful to first look at the original structure itself. The book ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ provides an organigram of the project. In theory, the ‘general assembly’ governs the MAT, and assemblies are held every two to three months. The general assembly is imagined as the ‘maximum authority’ (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 83) of the internal organisation of the project because it is here where tumistas meet to share news, developments, make decisions and sketch out plans for the future, as well as to discuss any issues or concerns that have arisen over the period since the last formal meeting. The ‘Good Governance Council’ (JBG) then acts upon decisions taken in the assembly. In turn, the JBG is made up of ‘work commissions’, focusing on five different areas: ‘General and Banking Coordination’; ‘Education and Training’; ‘Promotion and Diffusion’; ‘Production and Exchange’; and ‘Monitoring and

Follow Up’ (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 84). The theory behind these different commissions was to help spread the workload of the MAT. It is important to note that this structure was devised at a certain time and place, and in effect produced an ideal organisational process. In practice, I found that the ‘General and Banking Coordination’ – which I have been calling the coordinating committee (CC) as it was more commonly referred to – along with a small group of more committed tumistas carried out most of the work directly.

All of this worked well for the first few years, but increased network expansion meant that a small group of MAT promoters and CC members in the Totonacapan were then responsible for finding the funds to print and distribute more túmin, as well as responding to invitations and attending events further afield.⁵³ It was in response to these changing conditions that the CC for the period 2014–2016 prioritised the organisation of the movement on a national scale. Defining what this organisation would look like, and enacting it in practice, was an on-going process of reflection and negotiation based on the concrete experience and ideas that arose from within and between the local collectives of the MAT. Local assemblies met in places like Oaxaca, Chiapas and Puebla to discuss how their network might be organised, and this information was fed back to the CC in the Totonacapan region.

After some weeks of consultation, Juan compiled and published a document titled ‘Recommendations for the Regional Autonomous Túmin’, which was circulated through the MAT mailing lists. It included the following guidelines:

1. That at least 50 people be interested in constituting an RAT to make it formal.
2. That some form of coordinating body should be established to look after and distribute túmin, made up of at least three people and rotated at fixed intervals. Each region can ‘decide autonomously’ on what the coordinating committee can and cannot do, and how the RAT should be organised internally.
3. That each RAT finance itself, in the form of donations from civil society; just as long as they do not accept financing from the government (this would compromise their ‘autonomy and moral quality’).
4. That each RAT design their own túmin, using images from local artists and printing with a local printer, if possible.
5. To ‘think national túmin’, not just local RAT to not make changes that might affect the national network. The document provides a list of general recommendations, urging that each RAT respect: the four denominations of túmin notes (1t; 5t; 10t;

⁵³ As a general rule, a new round of túmin was printed for every 100 *socios* who joined the project. 52 000 t was printed at a time with an average cost of 2 900 mx (£128). The constraints on financing often meant that this target

20t); that the túmin be valid to the bearer; the modality of ‘túmin for change;’ the participation of producers, traders, or service providers without distinction etc...

The document demonstrates how the tumistas conceived of autonomy in various ways. For example, local TRA would be responsible for financing themselves, and they would be free to decide on how to govern themselves, so long as they adhered to the foundational principles of the project. Autonomous denominations of túmin could be used across the network nationally, and local actions would not damage the movement as a whole, but contribute to it. This shows that ‘autonomy’ also meant ‘interdependence’ to different degrees (Escobar, 2018). Local TRA were encouraged to develop their own ways of being, as long as they adhered to the core principles of the project and did not ‘damage the project as a whole’. As much as the promoters were keen on pushing for TRA as a tangible expression of the underlying political goal of autonomy, the personal ethic of responsible freedom shone through as the basis of this organisational vision, which in turn would help ensure collective harmony. For example, at the end of the previously cited TRA guidelines, we find the following passage:

Manage things with absolute honesty and transparency, otherwise you will fall into mediocrity [...] As much as you can, make sure you don’t act/take decisions alone – coordinate with those you have empathy with. Communicate constantly with the tumista community about everything that you are doing or have stopped doing. Don’t be afraid to say what you think but base yourself in the truth and be respectful (often being respectful can be more important than the truth). Other regions should not denounce bad management, which is the responsibility of each autonomous community.

Here the qualities of honesty, transparency, communication and respectfulness are championed over the idea of denouncing malpractice. The vision for TRA thus established the foundations for coexistence within the tumista family at a point where network expansion demanded a renewed organisational vision and clarification of the ‘dos and don’ts’ of network belonging. Constant in this respect was adherence to the politico-ethical project of relating to one another with responsible freedom and as solidary comrades – a relation that was to endure, no matter differences of opinion or tensions that may surface.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ This document was the first attempt in establishing TRS guidelines, and in this sense, it reflected an ideal for TRA organisation that helped guide and orient a project that was constantly evolving. The process was open-ended and open to analysis, reflection and change. For example, after 2016, the CC was reimagined as a *concejo* – drawing inspiration from an indigenous *concejo de ancianos* (council of elders).

The varying composition of TRAs

The extent to which TRAs matched the above guidelines in practice varied greatly. For example, the Oaxaca TRA got off to a bumpy start, as tumistas were not able to agree on a coordinating body, after the general assembly passed a vote of no confidence in 2015 against one of the main promoters in that state, resulting in fragmentation. CCs have been formed in Chiapas and Morelos, but the CC in Puebla has not changed hands since it was created in 2013. To date there are four variations of túmin in circulation: Túmin Totonacapan; Túmin Chiapas; and Túmin Nahuátl, from Morelos; and Túmin Zapoteco, from Oaxaca. Talk of printing a Túmin Puebla was a regular assembly feature during my time there, but to date it has not been done. The CT model has also been replicated across TRAs. To date, there are CTs in seven different places; from Teotitlán del Valle in Oaxaca to Xilitla San Luis Potosi. The CTs are strategic sales points for many of the tumistas who have no access to other markets, and the tumistas saw them as a key foundation for MAT autonomy.

The network of CT provided an important backbone for the project: they became focal points for local collectives of the MAT; and to some extent they facilitated the circulation of products and knowledge through the national network. For example, as tumistas made trips or met at tianguis, they exchanged products from different ATRs when possible. For example, coffee from Papantla was sold in the CT in Teotitlán, ecological floor cleaner from Puebla was sold in the CT in Espinal, and *mole* cooking paste from Coxquihui was sold in Texcoco.⁵⁵ Exchanges like this were far from frequent and did not involve great quantities, given logistical complications, but the fact they took place was of increasing symbolic importance: as the network expanded, the variety of products offered in the CTs could increase, at least giving some tangible expression to the functioning of a national network. Equally, tumistas from other places could travel to different CTs to impart knowledge in the form of workshops and classes.

To conclude this section, a note on hierarchy and horizontality. In the above, we have seen how the principle of responsible freedom and the organisational vision of TRAs were products of discussion in assembly and across the network. However, the CC based in the Totonacapan were largely responsible for communicating the decisions taken collectively. This, coupled with the fact that for the first three years of the MAT the CC Totonacapan

⁵⁵ 'Mole' is the name given to a variety of thick cooking sauces across central and southern Mexico in particular.

were the only coordinating body in the network, meant that many tumistas looked to them for guidance, instruction or mediation. Encouraging responsible freedom and organisation in TRAs was to engender the practice of self-organisation through decentralised and non-hierarchical politics. Juris reminds us that '[h]orizontal networks should not be romanticized' and that they 'do not suggest the complete absence of hierarchy, but rather lack formal hierarchical designs' (Juris, 2005: 257). Therefore, the process was not without tensions: the MAT aimed towards horizontality, but elements of hierarchy still existed and shaped how the tumistas understood and enacted MAT network politics, as they lived and negotiated the conditions of collective coexistence in TRAs. The rest of the chapter looks in more detail at this process.

Relating to one another through the MAT

In this section, I turn to look at specific cases of how the tumistas understood and related to one another through their network, thus providing an ethnographic perspective on MAT network politics. First a note on methodology. I arrived to Espinal in November 2014 equipped with a printout of the MAT directory, which gave me a list of tumistas, their contact details and the product or service they offered within the network. This gave me an abstract sense of the network, which I used as a springboard for investigation. However, I was soon to find that cold calling was not the best way forward to meet new tumistas, especially when I knew very little about the project myself. This eventually happened through certain tumistas like Irene and Mateo, who would talk of or present me directly to others in their social network, or through my own closer association with the MAT and the Casa Túmin as I became an 'active *socio*' giving English classes there. Equally, my invite to Puebla emerged organically out of my own network participation. I thus became aware of and sensitised to network dynamics as a participant within the MAT, and particularly through the way people talked about and related to one another. It was through this process that I was able to see that there were many different perspectives on the MAT which, along with network expansion, revealed tensions and disagreements. Here I saw the importance of defining and appealing to the shared base of mutuality and the core politico-ethical project of responsible freedom to help negotiate these differences. The first case is short, but offers an important window onto how network expansion was felt in the 'birthplace of the túmin'. The second case demonstrates the complexities of TRA organisation and network belonging from local and national perspective.

Case 1: Espinal

One hot Saturday in mid-April 2015, a group of 16 tumistas sat in assembly for four hours under the corrugated iron roof of the Casa Túmin (CT) in Espinal. The main subjects for discussion centred on the organisation and funding of the project, and the future of the place in which the tumistas were gathered. Alejandra (then president) had taken the lead in reminding those present that ‘one of the most important duties’ of the CC at that time was to ‘organise the túmin on a national level and to create a national coordinating committee’. Since the last assembly, where plans to construct TRA were announced, the CC had been busy attending networking, educational and book presentation events, and the network had grown considerably. Yet, the pressures of funding this ongoing expansion had made themselves manifest in unexpected ways. A week before the assembly I had sat listening to a distressed Irene, as she told me that members of the CC were discussing the possibility of closing the CT in Espinal and opening up shop in Papantla. The CC were discussing this possibility based on what they understood as the waning popularity of the project and relative inactivity of tumistas in Espinal compared to Papantla or other places in the network.

Irene had before expressed frustrations at the CC’s decisions, suggesting there was a gap between their ‘ideology’ and lived ‘reality’. Irene had felt while the intention behind network expansion was good, these efforts now clearly came at the expense of neglecting the project’s roots. Others, including members of the CC, shared Irene’s frustration and incomprehension, and these sentiments spoke to a key paradox at the core of the mission to ‘organise on a national level’. We have already learnt of the importance of Espinal to the larger imaginary of the MAT (chapter 1), not to mention the significance to Irene on a personal level (chapter 2). For these reasons alone, the plan to shut the CT there seemed totally absurd to Irene. If the CC wanted to open up shop in Papantla, then so be it, but the CT in Espinal had to stay. She appealed to Juan, who agreed and added that the project needed to be ‘strengthened’ in its hometown. Without the CT in Espinal, the project would lose an important part of its material and symbolic base.

Irene was moved to action. She invited me along to pay a visit to Don Hilario, an herbalist doctor who lives and works in a town 33km up the road into the mountains, who makes and supplies one of the CT’s best-selling products: a range of natural medicines. Irene explained this was a double mission: she would pay Hilario what he was owed for over a year’s worth of sales in the CT, and to ask him for a donation of túmin to be recirculated in Espinal in an

effort to revive the project. Irene herself was going to donate 300t, but she explained that Hilario had a much bigger reserve, and that of course he would agree to donate because he was the ‘guardian angel’ of the project. After the business of checking and signing off the sales inventory and handing over the cash – just over 10 000 mx (£415) and 1,127t (£47) – Irene told Hilario about the threat of losing the CT, invited him to the upcoming assembly, and asked for a donation to recirculate amongst tumistas who had run out of túmin.⁵⁶ Here she reminded Hilario the túmin was ‘not hers, or his, nor Juan’s, but it was everyone’s’. Hilario agreed with Irene: the CT had to stay, and he gave back the 1,127 t as a first instalment of a donation. Hilario apologised that he would not be able to make the assembly, but said at least his help would be present in the form of the donation.

On the day of the assembly, Irene reiterated the importance of people like Hilario, whom she then referred to as the MAT’s ‘patron saint’. The CC had proposed a motion to open up a funding platform via the project’s website where people could make donations, inviting people to become ‘friends of the túmin’. This point caused some friction. While some agreed that it was OK to ask for help, and that the Zapatistas had done much the same thing, others did not agree, voicing concerns over the dangers of opening the door to unknown sponsors. Irene for one was in favour of keeping the sponsorship amongst a tight knit group of ‘friends of the túmin’, as it had always been, giving the example of the recent donations of túmin made by Hilario, herself and Juan. Members of the CC explained that it was not enough to simply hand out túmin to rejuvenate the project in Espinal –the situation needed to be thought through and discussed further.

I paid Irene a visit after the assembly. She felt that lots had been left in the air, including finalising plans for a trip to Texcoco the following month. Irene referred to the difference between ‘ideology’ and ‘reality’ again, and said that although the CC had good intentions and nice ideas, if they chose to neglect the base, what was it they really hoped to achieve? Despite this criticism, Irene was also involved in efforts to bolster the MAT further afield. That details for the trip to Texcoco had not been finalised particularly worried Irene. Irene had helped to expand the MAT network in Texcoco alongside her friend Luz, who was the

⁵⁶ As far as I could tell, tumistas with popular products but who themselves had very little day-to-day trading activity within the network soon built up an accumulation of túmin. Hilario, for example, lived too far from Espinal to re-spend túmin on a daily basis amongst *socios*. Another example: the owners of a corner shop in Espinal would periodically bulk buy coffee or honey from the Casa Túmin, putting túmin back into circulation that way.

designated project coordinator there. Luz had visited Espinal in 2013, to investigate the MAT for a university assignment. Luz stayed at Irene's house during her visit, and from there a close friendship blossomed between the two. The following year, in June 2014, Irene paid a visit to Texcoco to help Luz sign up new tumistas.

A week after the assembly, the Texcoco trip still troubled Irene. A small group of us had assembled in Ciber Castell to bottle up honey for sale in the CT (see Figure 3.3). Beto, Irene's son, and José Manuel, an employee of the Ciber, had been to collect a large vat containing 19 litres of honey from the beekeeper in nearby Colonia Guadalupe. Also present was Lucero, who Irene had recently employed on a short-term basis to cook meals for Irene whilst she recovered from a minor operation, and Rocío, a teacher who rented one of the rooms above the Ciber. Before we scooped honey from the vat and poured it into smaller recycled juice bottles to go on sale (at a price of 35 mx/ 20 mx + 10t / 30t; £1.45), Irene gave me an update. She had received a string of emails in which the CC were trying to finalise details for the upcoming trip. The plan was for a delegation to take a printed canvas reading 'Casa Túmin Texcoco' as a symbolic gesture to officially open the second CT in the country (see Figure 3.2). However, in light of recent financial constraints discussed at the assembly, someone questioned the real need to take the canvas. In responding to the email, Irene had written that it was hard to understand the meaning of solidarity. Irene had herself invested a considerable amount of her own time, effort and resources in sewing a series of shawls and other knitted goods that were to go on sale in the new CT, as well as assembling special badges for the delegation to wear on the day. Moreover, she had just found out that the CC was not going to reimburse her for having bought paint to repaint the CT Espinal doorway. Irene insisted that this was not an issue – adding that she had paid for things like shelving units for the CT in the past and never asked for reimbursement – but she was upset that people were now questioning the need for the canvas. When we had finished bottling, Irene said we had been a 'great help to the túmin' that day, and that our work was exemplary of what solidarity is: 'doing things without thinking too much about them, or worrying that it may be bad'.

Solidarity in action

In the above, we see how network expansion brought tensions and disagreements to the surface, which were generally the products of differing points of view over what the MAT was all about and what constituted good tumista practice. The threat of losing the CT had

moved Irene to call upon people she esteemed in her own networks on a local scale. Her active engagement with people, and her need to exemplify solidarity in actions, shows that Irene clearly valued face to face relations rather than discussing and resolving issues via email, which became characteristic of the CC (as we shall see later on). Therefore, face-to-face relations, and action geared towards ‘the good of the project’ were key elements of what solidarity meant to Irene. This was reflected in her own actions, the way in which she appealed to Hilario for help reminding him that the túmin was ‘for everyone’, and how she considered our help bottling honey a helpful contribution to the project and demonstration of solidarity.

The vignette also demonstrates the tensions that arise over the issue of funding and sponsorship of the MAT, and what it means to be a tumista. Here it is clear that a small group of people were responsible for funding the project – a pressure that at first was increased, and not shared, through network expansion. Irene had pooled a considerable amount of personal time and resources into keeping the CT running, as well as the preparations for the trip to Texcoco. Here we see the complexities involved when individual designs and commitments are geared towards the collective endeavour, particularly in this case where Irene perhaps felt they were questioned, or not appreciated or reciprocated. However, instead of seeing this as a limitation or withdrawing her support, the threat to the CT and the questions around the Texcoco trip redoubled Irene’s conviction. It allowed her to show selflessness and to demonstrate and embody what for her the project was all about: carrying out solidary actions for the collective good, without thinking or worrying about what the longer term consequences might be.

In a similar vein, Irene clearly holds Hilario in high esteem, and measures his commitment to the project through his philanthropy. Others echoed Irene’s praise for Hilario, like Alejandra, who once told me Hilario had always been ‘understanding and solidary’, before explaining that he sold his medicine to the MAT at wholesale price, for resale in the CT at retail price. Hilario was thus responsible for generating the largest income for the CT, which in turn helped finance the MAT.⁵⁷ Here, both Irene and Alejandra equate ‘being solidary’ with commitment and contribution to the project. Moreover, Irene’s recognition of Hilario as a ‘guardian angel’ or ‘patron saint’ perhaps reflects the top end of a scale of perceived levels of commitment to and participation within the project: tumistas also frequently used

⁵⁷ 10% of the sales price of products sold in the CT stays there and goes towards funding the MAT.

terms like ‘active’ (as we saw in chapter 2), ‘*compañero solidario*’ or ‘*tumista de corazón*’ (tumista at heart/to the core). Here we see localised expressions of good tumista practice, which are particular understandings and variations on the politico-ethical core of the project.



Figure 3.2: Casa Túmin Canvas being hung in Texcoco (photo taken by author)



Figure 3.3: Bottling honey – solidarity in action (photo taken by author)

Case 2: Puebla

Selene founded the MAT network in Puebla in July 2013. Selene had previously worked alongside Juan and Oscar at the UVI in Espinal. In this sense, MAT growth into Puebla was typical – the project spread through pre-existing networks, yet the form this local chapter of the MAT would take was quite particular. Selene had invited Juan, Oscar and Alejandra to inscribe a group of 14 individuals, whom she had chosen for their previous experience working together and their shared ideals. The majority were small-scale producers and social activists, closely aligned to permaculture philosophy and the international Slow Food movement. These origins gave the MAT Puebla a distinct character to other local expressions of the project across the country. Membership criteria were strict, and for this one MAT promoter referred to them as the ‘purists’ of the movement. When I first visited Puebla in July 2015, I was able to see that the nickname reflects their shared condition as small-scale producers of organic or ‘transition’ products, which they commonly sold in alternative or ethical consumption venues increasingly popular throughout the city.⁵⁸ For Selene, this decisive feature was key to ensuring what for her was the correct and proper functioning of the MAT network: it facilitated cohesion and a greater sense of solidarity between and amongst producers, as well as their commitment to the ECOSOL enterprise (more on all of this in the following chapter). The MAT Puebla is thus an example of a TRA developing its own local character, yet the following story demonstrates the complexities of TRA organisation, and perhaps the limits of MAT network belonging, through different visions of what the core politico-ethical principles guiding the project were.

To explain how and why Selene managed the network in such a strict sense, she referred to the MAT’s ‘boom period’ in 2013. MAT Puebla was born at a time when the idea of the *túmin* was incredibly attractive to the city’s more progressive and radical networks following the MAT-Banxico episode. We have seen how many understood the wave of interest as a ‘display of solidarity’ (chapter 1), but Selene saw the situation differently. In her view, people in the city were eager to join the MAT to have *túmin* as a ‘souvenir’, as part of ‘their own little revolution’, or that they were simply following ‘a trend’. Whatever the reasons, during this period, MAT Puebla grew rapidly. Yet it was not long until Selene and a core group of *tumistas* realised that while many had signed up to join, most were not attending meetings and assemblies. When somebody discovered a numismatist selling a set of all four

⁵⁸ ‘Transition products’ were those produced by people making the effort to transition to organic.

túmin notes at the annual Puebla fair for 800mx (£33) claiming it was a Jamaican currency, it was decided that something had to be done to stop such ‘abuses of trust’.

In light of the situation, those gathered at an assembly held in 2014 posed the question ‘Who is a tumista?’ The question served to reflect on what sort of qualities a tumista should have. The assembly decided that possessing the currency alone was not enough: what was more important were attitudes and intentions: ‘a tumista is he/she who has a solidary attitude [...] for the common good, who works for the group.’ Here we see how the same expressions of what it means to be a tumista can actually mean different things in different settings. In Puebla, this reflection served to revise membership criteria, and at this point, it was agreed that MAT Puebla would grow slowly and cautiously, building up a movement on strong foundations. The new membership criteria established that those who expressed an interest in joining the network should go through a series of steps before formally being invited to do so. Amongst these was the ‘*padrino*’ figure (lit. ‘Godfather’, here referring to a sponsor) – someone who was already a *socio* who could vouch for the interested person, their products or services, and to guarantee that they would participate actively in the network. Another step was the sales trial period, where the aspiring tumistas’ product would be sold at designated sales points for a period, before being invited to join the network (or not) based on the popularity of their product.

An added dynamic was Selene’s focus on ‘creating community’ as a way of identifying would-be tumistas. As we will see in more detail in the following chapter, the majority of tumistas who were active in the Puebla during my time in the field had experience in another alternative commerce space, the ‘Encuentro Comercial Sostenible Tameme’ (Tameme Sustainable Commerce Meeting), more commonly known as Tameme. Selene had created a process through which she could sound out the degrees of enthusiasm and commitment of would-be tumistas in Tameme through inviting them to participate in ‘El trueque’. ‘El trueque’ consisted of Selene inviting producers to leave a product in a big wicker basket she carried from table to table, from which they could take a product in return. Selene ran the trueque intervention over a period of months, jotting down in a notebook the people who participated and what sort of things they exchanged. Selene saw ‘El trueque’ intervention as an action that helped to ‘create community’, which she considered the fundamental first step in moving towards a solidarity economy. Those who were considered to ‘respond well’ (those who showed an interest and participated regularly) to the trueque were invited to join MAT.

The MAT Puebla was thus characterised by strict membership criteria, which generated a different type of cohesion and ‘ways of being solidary’ amongst the tumistas there. Their shared condition as small-scale producers of organic or transition products contributed to a particularly accentuated sense of belonging on a local level, which at the same time exemplified the varied composition of TRA in relation to the wider MAT network. Yet when I settled in Puebla in October 2015, events soon unfolded that revealed some of the more complex tensions and paradoxes running through efforts to organise a national movement based on TRAs. Here different points of view over what was the politico-ethical project guiding the MAT emerged, resulting in the need to refer back to the CC and in particular Juan, to reinforce and reorient tumista practice in accordance with the core base of mutuality and practicing responsible freedom. Enter Mario.

Mario

Mario is a graphic artist from the city of Puebla. Mario first heard about the MAT when he met Oscar – both were participating in a ‘festival of resistance’ against the planned construction of hydraulic projects in a town in the north of the state, in the *sierra norte* mountains, not far from Espinal. A few months later, Oscar and Alejandra invited Mario’s graphics collective to Papantla to work on a community mural project to raise awareness against fracking in the region. Mario took the opportunity to visit Espinal and officially register as a tumista, leaving some of his prints for sale in the CT, and taking away 200t and an ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ poster. Mario understood the MAT as a network through which he could promote his work but also meet new, like-minded people and to exchange knowledge and experience with them. Since joining, Mario actively engaged with the MAT in various places in Veracruz, Oaxaca and Chiapas. The CC even invited Mario’s collective to illustrate a new issue of *túmin*, which went into print in July 2015. Paradoxically, Mario felt he did not belong to the local chapter of the network in his home town, due to the very tendencies that had characterised MAT Puebla as distinct TRA. Far from being a ‘purist’, Mario worked with highly toxic materials to produce his artwork, and for this, he felt excluded.

One evening in December 2015, Mario and his colleague Janet came over to my house to talk through their plans to organise a MAT informative event. They wanted to invite Juan to Puebla to give a presentation and register a new round of tumistas – friends and colleagues of theirs who had expressed a keen interest in joining, but who also did not fit the profile of their local network. Feeling like I had been put in a tough spot, and unsure about what to

suggest, I advised that they speak to Selene and try organise the event with her, given that she was after all the official coordinator of the TRA. After some discussion, I agreed to write a group email to the CC and Selene, proposing to hold an informative event followed by a new round of affiliations for the MAT Puebla.

A string of emails between various members of the CC, Janet, Mario and Selene ensued. In particular, a strong-worded exchange took place between Mario and Selene, as it became clear they had very different views on the MAT. Selene did not agree to new affiliations, explaining that, in Puebla, the network grew slowly and surely, amongst producers who had ‘clean’ products and a ‘real solidarity economy consciousness’. For Selene, working on building up consciousness was an essential first step, after which affiliation could take place. Mario responded that when Oscar and Juan had invited him to join the MAT, the only requisite for joining was to offer a product or service to the network. Mario further cited examples of certain family members of his who he felt practised solidarity economy: his brother, a mechanic, would often charge discount rates or carry out work free if his clients were in a tight spot. Ultimately, Mario reasoned that the type of product or service one offers should not determine membership to the MAT, because if that were the case, it would exclude him from MAT Puebla. He called for consistency with the slogan printed on the bottom of the ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ posters – ‘solidarity is the tenderness of the people’, and signed off his email attaching a text from the Zapatistas, where they explain why – to the surprise of many ideological purists – they drink Coca Cola.⁵⁹

Similar yet different politico-ethical visions

Selene and Mario had different notions of what participation in the MAT meant, and their points of view were guided by their particular understandings of consciousness, solidarity, and what it meant to be a tumista. Selene thought consciousness and sensibility towards solidarity economy was a prerequisite to MAT participation, whereas Mario worked on the assumption that anyone could participate. Selene’s take on the project was more aligned to permaculture philosophy, which meant she had orientated the Puebla TRA around a similar but profoundly different politico-ethical project to that at the core of the MAT. Mario was aware of this: he had joined the MAT under a different set of circumstances to those

⁵⁹ This slogan was coined by Nicaraguan poet Gioconda Belli and has been widely used in different contexts across Latin America. For the full text on the Zapatistas and Coca Cola, see http://enlacezapatista.czln.org.mx/archivos/Preguntas_y_respuestas_como_caminos.rtf. (accessed 20/09/19)

prevailing in his home town. The base assumption of mutuality between tumistas seemed to be frayed, or at best complicated. In Espinal, he had learnt of a different politico-ethical project guiding the MAT to that he encountered in Puebla. Thus, paradoxically, he felt part of the big tumista family on a national level, but not amongst his closest family members at home. Interestingly, Selene and Mario appealed to both the CC and Juan in particular, in seeking approval or validation of their points of view. This demonstrates that despite imagining the organisation of the movement in TRA, the tumistas still considered the CC based in the Totonacapan region and Juan in particular as the voices of authority.

Juan responded to the emails by saying that both Mario and Selene had valid points, but pointed out that the MAT was originally conceived a project in which tumistas learnt and ‘gained consciousness’ through practice. Juan quoted from a report that had recently been published in the Kgosni, about MAT participation in a recent panel discussion on ECOSOL in Mexico City. The article quotes Juan saying that many people put their expectations into the túmin, but this was wrong because it was essentially only an instrument to facilitate exchange. In Juan’s view, the biggest challenge implicit in the project was for people to learn to ‘trust in and be solidary’ with each other. Essentially, the túmin

does not look to put an end to global warming or the sale of transgenic products or agrochemicals; nor fracking or mining; not even Coca-Cola or capitalism. The only aim is that *socios* are able to help each other out by using a little bit of paper, trying to not repeat capitalist practices amongst ourselves. (RUDH, 2015)

Here we are reminded of Iván’s words at the beginning of the chapter, that the túmin is really just a pretext for learning new ways of relating to one another: how to ‘help each other out’, and to ‘trust in and be solidary’ towards fellow tumistas. The MAT offered the chance for people to learn collectively through experience. Juan thought that consciousness was raised through the use of the túmin, reflecting the notion of the ‘túmin as a school’ (chapter 1); but recognised that different tumistas will have different ideas about what consciousness meant, as much as they would have different ideas over the quality of product that should be offered in the MAT.

In the wider ambit of ECOSOL, activists and scholars alike have criticised the MAT for its lax adherence to rules and norms that regulate products and services offered in the network, something that Juan pointed out in the email. This criticism is something MAT promoters have to respond to regularly in public meetings, and it is something they have addressed in their book in a section entitled ‘The sacrilege of buying a Coca Cola with túmin’. Here the

authors specify that given the context in Espinal – where very few tumistas are owners of their means of production (even less so organic production), the MAT was primarily designed to facilitate exchange between network members. Thus, tumistas were free to buy a Coca-Cola with tumin, or any other transnational product – these being the products that fellow tumistas sold and consumed within the locality (Junta de Buen Gobierno, 2013: 110–111). Juan concluded by saying that each TRA was free to decide on their own requisites of affiliation according to the context. Selene responded to both Juan and Mario, making it clear that her comments were not purely personal opinions: they reflected decisions taken in periodic assemblies since the founding of the MAT Puebla in 2013. She invited Mario to attend the next assembly due to take place, emphasising the importance of continued dialogue ‘to talk about our differences, which allow us to be equal’.

Solidarity Economy, not Permaculture

The assembly took place in January 2015. The membership criteria was the third point for discussion. In light of the recent events, Selene set the scene, explaining that the current membership criteria had been established in an assembly the previous year, telling the story of why and how this came to be, before opening up for discussion. Mario soon spoke up, presenting himself for the first time to the majority of tumistas present, and explained his predicament. Mario told how he had joined the MAT in Espinal, but he feared he would not be able to participate locally in Puebla because he made his artwork with highly toxic materials. He also mentioned people like his mother and brother – a corner shop owner and a mechanic – who were interested in joining, but that the products and services they offered did not fit the established criteria. Mario emphasised that he had come across tumistas in other places - especially in Espinal and Oaxaca – who owned small corner shops, and that while big capitalist enterprises may supply their stock, they depended on their shops to feed their families. In this respect, in his view, the ability to participate in a solidarity economy was more important than having ‘clean’, organic or transition products. It was more about supporting commerce between tumistas rather than focusing on what type of produce one could sell. Mario added that by becoming part of the MAT, the aforementioned storeowners would then have the chance to go and buy ‘clean’ products from organic producers in the network, thus allowing them to pursue a healthier lifestyle. Here Mario was reiterating the core ethic of the MAT as he understood it, which was in line with Juan’s vision of learning and ‘raising awareness’ together. In a sense, he put the case forward for reorienting MAT

Puebla tumista practice towards the sociality and politico-ethical project that was the base of the movement as a whole.

The majority of those present agreed with Mario. In particular, Belinka pointed out that the principles of ECOSOL were different to those of Permaculture and that as tumistas, their primary concern should be focusing on the former: i.e. striving to construct different social and economic relations built on solidarity, but in a different way to that conceived by Selene. For Belinka, networking was essential to this task, and while working towards different forms of production, commercialisation and consumption could be considered common concerns, they should not be requisites. Belinka reminded those present that when Juan originally explained the MAT back in July 2013, he stressed the importance of being inclusive, and that if someone wanted to buy a Coca-Cola with their tumin then they should be free to do so. Once again, Belinka offered a vision of solidarity and tumista practice that was in line with the core ethic of the MAT. After discussion and deliberation, the assembly decided that people with corner shops and other services – like mechanics and artists – would be able to join the MAT, as long as they complied with the other criteria, which had not changed. However, what was new was the idea that would-be and existing tumistas commit to a ‘formative process’, meaning they should attend talks, workshops and courses that may help them towards a holistic transformation in their lifestyle choices.

The above example shows how the Puebla TRA was formed and managed along a similar yet different politico-ethical project to that of the wider MAT, and the consequences of this. Selene saw the MAT as a complementary project to a pre-existing commitment and shared bond between a small group of people. From here, we can understand her notion of ‘creating community’ as an essential basis for network expansion. Yet her understandings of community, solidarity and consciousness – and by extension what it meant to be a good tumista – in this sense was particular, and were more closely aligned to the ethics and principles pursued in the permaculture, Slow Food and organic movements she had experience working with. Consequently, MAT Puebla took on a distinct character, and the base of mutuality and ideas for the collective good on a local scale were different to those shared in the MAT on a national scale. Mario’s case clearly rocked the boat, but his dilemma made visible some complications along the road to articulating the MAT comprised of distinct TRA. Mario’s exclusion presents an interesting case in which it is possible to see the fraying of MAT social relations, or the ‘limits of the network’, as the base of mutuality and politico-ethical core of the Puebla TRA was different to that assumed by joining the MAT

elsewhere. We see how both Mario and Selene appeal to the CC, and in particular Juan, for guidance or to validate their positions. Both points of view raised the notion of consciousness, and what membership to the MAT means, or should mean.

Here we also see how pre-existing experience, ideologies and inspiration feeds into the tumistas' particular understandings of the MAT. We saw in the last chapter how Irene and Mateo transposed their past experience into the project, and here too we have Selene doing much the same. Mario brings his experience of participation in collectives, the Zapatista's *sexta* and his own family's practicing of economic solidarity. Juan clearly evokes the popular educational currents that were discussed in chapter 1, reinforcing the notion of the 'túmin as a school', as discussed above and elsewhere. A similar expression of this idea was found in the proposal put forward in the assembly – that the tumistas commit to a formative process upon joining the MAT Puebla. In the next two sections, I pick up the notion of the 'túmin as a school' once again, and return to the core idea of the MAT as learning to relate to one another differently.

Mediating difference and learning from controversy

In the above, Selene invited Mario along to the assembly to discuss matters, placing emphasis on the fact that their differences made them equal. In the previous ethnographic vignette too, we saw the importance of the assembly as a place to meet face-to-face, alongside the mailing list to communicate virtually, to discuss ideas and come to a consensus through dialogue. Indeed, the differences of opinion between Selene and Mario, and those between Irene and other members of the CC, are just a few examples taken from many I saw arise over the course of my fieldwork. As the MAT network expanded, difference of opinion was an inevitable fact. In the cited examples, we see that a common recourse was turning to seek guidance or backing from other MAT members, especially members of the CC and in particular Juan. As the mastermind behind the MAT, many looked to Juan as the ultimate moral authority, despite the fact that he only served on the first CC from 2010–2012. This led some to refer to him as 'el guru', a nickname that existed alongside another: 'el comandante'. Juan has tried to distance himself from this image, but the fact remains that he ultimately took the most active role in mediating tensions and differences of opinion between tumistas. Through these mediations, it became clear that Juan saw understanding and negotiating difference as an unavoidable part of the collective experience, which, instead of

being an obstacle, became a key part of the process in learning how to relate to one another differently.

This idea is present in Juan's emails, official MAT guidelines and communiques, and the decision making process in assemblies. In this sense, Juan acts as a voice or moral compass that consistently urges and reminds the tumistas of the core politico-ethical project that should guide their actions, the importance of practising responsible freedom, and that the MAT is a project based on cooperation and not competition. In assemblies and public meetings for example, Juan makes it clear that the point is not to 'debate and convince, but to listen and talk' to one another. Equally, things are not decided on through a process of voting – echoing Iván's statement at the beginning of the chapter – because debating, convincing and voting are considered characteristics of the liberal democratic model that the tumistas are trying to construct an alternative to.⁶⁰ In distancing themselves from this model, Juan and other MAT promoters often highlight the fact that 'the MAT is not democratic, nor is it for everyone'. For example, speaking in the above-cited assembly in Papantla, Juan explained that:

in a sense, nor is [the project] democratic [...] There is a concrete proposal, and it should be done like that, or not at all (*o es así o no es*). For those who want to join and then say, "Oh, you know what, I don't like being *compañeros*" – well no, you can't join; and like Oscar says, "this isn't for you, this isn't for everyone". It is for those who identify with the philosophy of solidarity, mutual aid, cooperativism, trust. I think that is how it should be.

Here Juan is making it clear that there is a concrete proposal, and that the MAT is best suited for those who agree with the underlying philosophies that guide the project. Therefore, we can understand that 'the MAT is not democratic' in a double sense. First, it is not democratic in the sense of liberal democracy, which the tumistas understand in the Mexican context as characterised by the vote, competition, corruption and fostering dependency; and second, it is not democratic in the sense that not anyone can join without a certain level of commitment or disposition towards the 'concrete proposal'.⁶¹ However, we have seen in the above

⁶⁰ This is also feeds into the close and sometimes overlapping experiences of the MAT promoters in the Consejo Nacional del Pueblo Mexicano (CPM). The CPM is a broad coalition of organisations and social movements that have been working for the past three years on re-writing the Mexican Constitution from below, based on input from numerous assemblies and discussion groups that are organised in cells across the country. The idea is to present an alternative Mexican Constitution, autonomous from any party politics, in time for the 2018 presidential elections. Some of the key MAT promoters are also members of the CPM Huasteca-Totonacapan chapter, and their activities were often promoted through the MAT network.

⁶¹ As we have seen in the preceding chapters, these approaches can also be understood in the wider context of the crisis of representation of the Mexican State, and a yearning for alternative ways of doing politics.

ethnographic examples, tumistas may have very different interpretations of what the underlying philosophies are or what the concrete proposal is. Given what we have learnt above, we can understand this concrete proposal as adherence to the base of mutuality between the tumistas, and the politico-ethical ideal of ‘responsible freedom’. Through MAT participation, tumistas are fashioned as ethical subjects who commit to relating to one another differently, and this sociality is the basis of tumista good governance.

The organisational and decision-making strategies that the MAT pursues are similar to those that Maeckelbergh (2009; 2013) has observed within the alterglobalisation movement. Maeckelbergh suggests that the horizontal and direct democratic practices of the movements constitute an alternative to liberal representative democracy, where diversity and conflict is encouraged, rather than homogeneity and consensus. Movement actors see conflict as a creative force:

From diversity comes conflict. This is not a fault, but an opportunity. Through the creation of procedures that resolve conflict in a non-adversarial manner, conflict becomes a source of creative energy and ideas. Advocating a conflictive space transforms the notion of conflict from an impasse between two competing viewpoints to an opportunity to express, accept and create difference (Maeckelbergh 2009: 101).

In August 2015, the first *tianguis tumista* was held in Teotitlán del Valle Oaxaca, which I write about in more detail in chapter 5. For now, it is enough to know that the tianguis was the first time many tumistas from other regions of the country had come together. While there was plenty of opportunity to celebrate and practice being solidary together, the event was not without its complications. Stemming from a disagreement over where the funds from a raffle organised during the event should have gone, what had initially been a disagreement between two tumistas on the day had snowballed into a discussion involving many across the MAT mailing list for days afterwards. In response to this situation, Juan honed in on the notion of controversy, and thus created another key reflection on the whole process – that ‘the túmin is controversial’. Rather than seeing controversy as something negative and damaging per se, what was important was how the tumistas learned to respond to controversy, as part of the overall learning experience implied in participating in the MAT. Juan wrote a text entitled ‘Túmin: Two Visions, and the challenge of tolerance’, which was circulated through the mailing lists and published on the MAT website. In the text, Juan noted the controversial nature of the MAT from its beginnings, and that as it grew and more tumistas came on board with their own visions of what the project was, there arose a greater

need to exercise tolerance, not judging or criticising what the other tumistas may or may not do. I cite some lines from the text, by way of introduction to the final section:

One characteristic of this polemic little bit of paper has been freedom – no one is imposed upon and everyone is responsible for their own actions. Perhaps for this reason in the small set of guidelines the words ‘must’ or ‘duties’ do not appear, nor is anyone keeping an eye on anyone else. What there are is commitments, intentions, and challenges.

This requires tolerance to be able to accept that not everyone can be judged by the same standards; that no one is better or worse but that each tumista gives what they have and what they can; nor is anyone going faster than anyone else, but at the right time and at their own rhythm.

Furthermore, sometimes it is necessary to slow the rhythm and demands so that all those who are interested can coexist and participate. Here, the following lines from León Felipe⁶² seem relevant: ‘We move forward with tight reins and slowing the pace, because the important thing is not arriving early and alone, but on time and with everyone.’ This ‘*comunalidad*’, as our comrade Jaime Martínez Luna⁶³ says, forms part of the [MAT] philosophy. Tolerance is needed when the other does not act the same or thinks differently. Tolerance, when the temptation to control or impose arises. Tolerance when mistakes are made. Tolerance is needed when someone buys a vile Coca Cola with Túmin.

Communality

I suggest that we can understand the tumista notion of ‘communal’ thinking, or the ‘person-in-community’ as corresponding to the ideal moral position of ‘responsible freedom’, which I discussed above (Escobar 2018; Gudeman 2008). Escobar traces different strands of communal thought that have been guiding Latin American grassroots politics and social organisation in the last few decades. Escobar points out that ‘[c]ommunal thought is perhaps most developed in Mexico, based on the experiences of social movements in Oaxaca and Chiapas’ (2018: 177). Jaime Martínez Luna, the Zapotec intellectual Juan referred to in his appeal for tolerance, is one of the authors of the term *comunalidad* – communality. The term was coined to capture the essence of personal being and interdependent relations in Luna’s native Sierra Norte de Oaxaca:

⁶² León Felipe Camino Galicia was a Spanish poet and anti-fascist, who after fighting in the Spanish Civil War moved to Mexico.

⁶³ Jaime Martínez Luna is a Zapotec intellectual and artist from Oaxaca who has written extensively on the notion of ‘*comunalidad*’, a subject on which he presented in the first Tianguis Tumista in Teotitlán del Valle in August 2015.

We are communality, the opposite of individuality, we are communal land, not private property; we are *compartencia*, not competition; we are polytheism, not monotheism. We are exchange, not trade/business (*no negocio*), diversity, not equality, although in the name of equality they also oppress us. We are interdependent, not free. We have authorities, not monarchs. (Martínez Luna 2010:17)

The notion of *comunalidad* reflects much of what the MAT aims to achieve in engendering individual and collective transformation, summed up in the project's slogan 'from clients to comrades'. In this transformation, *tumistas* are actively encouraged to foster interdependent, solidary and mutual relations, where individual actions are orientated towards the collective good. Thus while the idea of responsible freedom places onus on the individual; it is a conception of the individual who is free to do as they please, as long as they exercise responsibility and are aware of how their words and actions might affect others to whom they have pledged mutuality. The MAT thus serves as the basis and vehicle through which particular ethical subjects are formed; and responsible freedom is thus an ideal condition of communal coexistence in the big *tumista* family.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which the *tumistas* are imagining and enacting different ways of doing politics as part of the MAT process of 'learning to relate to one another differently'. The *tumista* notion of good governance is a critique of western liberal democracy, and shares much in common with non-hierarchical, horizontal and network-based forms of doing politics, which are more in line with indigenous, communal or anarchist approaches to organisation (Graeber, 2002). I sought to demonstrate that cultivating politico-ethical subjects is both the means and the ends of the MAT political project. Two ideas were important here: responsible freedom, as an ideal ethical stance and a form of social action, and the TRA structure as the organisational framework. I suggested that the principle of responsible freedom reflected and was the basis of the wider organisational vision of the MAT, and that it emerged as an important form of social action, facilitating coexistence within and keeping the network together. The MAT provides an example of how prefigurative politics works across a varied network of people: joining the network was the first step in creating the conditions for the future in the present, despite the complications and obstacles that may be encountered along the way.

While network expansion allowed the tumistas to experiment with different political forms, it also caused unforeseen tensions and differences of opinion to surface. Within this context, the importance of adhering to responsible freedom became all the more clearer. The two case studies showed how complex MAT politics could be in practice. Here we saw how different visions or perspectives on what the project was all about and what constitutes good tumista practice varied across the network. These visions were understandably shaped by the distinct trajectories of the tumistas. In both examples, we see the importance of the assembly and the resolution to discuss things face-to-face, alongside the use of the mailing list to seek advice or confirmation of individual ideas with the wider MAT community. A central paradox in the whole process was the tumistas' ongoing appeal to Juan as a moral authority figure to mediate and resolve problems.

Chapter 4:

‘We eat what we produce’: Value(s) in the Mercado Túmin Puebla

The Mercado Túmin was a small, intimate market space for tumistas, held weekly in a residential neighbourhood in Puebla City. One Friday in April 2016, a woman visited the Mercado looking to make connections with the tumistas in order to supply her newly opened boutique shop in the centre of the city. Selene had prompted the woman’s visit by paying her own visit to the shop earlier that week, when she explained that she was part of the MAT, a network of producers who practiced solidarity economy, who had their own currency, and whose market space had just opened months previously. Selene was used to receiving visitors, and judging from the reception that she gave the woman on arrival, this visit seemed nothing out of the ordinary. Selene explained to the woman that the Mercado was as a place where different forms of commerce and social organisation took place. The woman then went on to browse and talk with the tumistas individually at their stalls. That day, however, it became clear that the woman’s motives did not sit well with Selene, who went around warning her fellow tumistas in hushed tones that although the woman had come to do business, she had also come to haggle.

The woman’s visit, and her haggling in particular, was the subject of that afternoon’s assembly. Selene opened the discussion by saying the visit demonstrated that other shops in the city were starting to show an interest in selling the tumistas’ products. Whilst recognising that this sort of publicity could potentially be good for them and promote their nascent marketplace, Selene pointed out that haggling could not be permitted:

I think that if we are walking towards a different economic form, the first thing we need to do is respect our products and respect our way of seeing the world, which is not the same as the Mercado de la Acocota¹, nor of any other conventional market [...] Our products are handmade and involve other processes [...] Therefore we cannot allow someone to come and haggle as if we were in another type of market.

Selene set the tone for the discussion that was to follow. The woman’s visit had provided a springboard for the tumistas to state why their market was different to other ‘conventional’ marketplaces, and why their ‘way of seeing the world’ had to be defended.

¹ The Mercado de Acocota is a well-established market in the centre of Puebla City.

So, what was so different about the Mercado Túmin, and what was it about the woman's haggling that had caused so much offence? This chapter will answer these questions by looking at why and how the Mercado Túmin was so important to the tumistas, what the haggling woman represented to them, and why 'their way of seeing the world' had to be defended. This can be understood by looking in closer detail at the type of people the tumistas were, and why and how they differentiated their space from other commerce venues. Here I follow Graeber (2013) to argue that the Mercado Túmin was an important symbolic and tangible space for the materialisation and realisation of values that were denied to the tumistas in other spheres of life. This is most practically demonstrated by the way in which the tumistas were able to collectively decide the terms upon which commerce would take place in their market, and this reflected their more utopian ideals and efforts to create different sociabilities and value systems to those dictated by the overarching capitalist political economy. The Mercado Túmin became a space where the tumistas could consciously reflect upon the contradictions and tensions that characterised their lives. From this point of reflection, they could then actively participate in rewriting the terms of a particular social contract that would be more harmonious with their values and those which they inscribed into the MAT project.

The chapter is structured in the following way: I first look at the broad features of the Mercado Túmin and how it came into being. I then move on to discuss the particular profile of the Puebla tumistas. Here I focus on the specific notion of the prosumer (producer-consumer) and show how this identity is central to understanding the tumista 'way of seeing the world', their understandings of realising value in the market, and how it was different to the logic of the haggling woman. I present two case studies to show how and why the market represented such an important space for them. I then move on to examine a salient feature of the Mercado: the assembly. Here I take up the debate surrounding the haggling woman's visit, to show how the assembly played a key role in defining and defending the values the tumistas inscribed into the MAT. We see that the haggling episode represented the encroachment of a different market logic into their *space*, and showed disrespect for price, product and tumista. The penultimate section looks at how socialisation in the Mercado Túmin helped engender the personal empowerment and self-realisation of one tumista. Finally, I reflect on how the tumistas communicated their values to the outside world, thus seeking to articulate the specific experience of the Mercado Túmin with the MAT network on a national scale, and hinting at its wider political import to society at large.

The Mercado Túmin

The Mercado Túmin is a market space for the Puebla tumistas. The market took place once a week on Fridays from 10 am to 3.30 pm in the garden of the Yugadharma Holistic Health centre. Yugadharma is located in a house in a residential ‘upper middle class’ area of Puebla City called San Manuel. The area is home to one of the city’s most prestigious private schools, The Instituto Oriente, located half a block away from Yugadharma. The main campus of the Autonomous University of the State of Puebla, the BUAP, is also close by. That Yugadharma was to become the home of the Mercado Túmin was of strategic coincidence. The tumistas had been lucky to find a place to hold a weekly market that was located in a neighbourhood that promised to attract the sort of middle and upper class consumers that had the time, money and interest in buying the sort of products the tumistas offered. The first Mercado Túmin was held on the 15th of January 2016. I was lucky to witness the evolution of the market over six months. The market started out with a modest attendance: 9 tumista stands, which peaked at 18 over the whole period. The Mercado Túmin became a place that had certain features and characteristics: a set of guidelines and procedures to define who could and could not participate; a weekly event/talk/workshop; certain mechanisms that aided exchange between tumistas and the circulation of túmin; raffles and promotions; and a regular meeting and assembly. Attending the Mercado Túmin offered me a window into the processes of instituting the MAT in a physical space. The charter of the Mercado was in key with a notion of tumista ritual economy: it was here where I was able to see what it was that motivated the tumistas to participate in the Mercado, and how they were able to ‘materialise and substantiate their worldview’ into tangible practices and processes (Meanany and Christian Wells, 2008).

The Mercado Túmin became the home, hub and public interface of the MAT Puebla. The establishment of the market was important because it meant the tumistas could meet on a weekly basis in a fixed venue; and as such it was a social space as much as an economic space. Furthermore, in contrast to the shop model of the Casa Túmin, the Mercado Túmin was a place where the tumistas brought their wares to exchange with their fellow *socios* or sell to consumers in person. The regular, face-to-face interaction was precisely the sort of strengthening of social ties and cultivation of alternative sociality that the MAT aimed to promote, thus the Mercado Túmin provided a good opportunity to document how the tumistas professed, experienced and negotiated the conditions for these different forms of sociability.

In their foundational study of an Oaxacan market system, Malinowski and de la Fuente (1982) were interested in understanding the main functions of and people's motivations for attending the marketplace. They conclude that 'the market is almost exclusively an economic mechanism in the conceptions and ideas of the natives themselves' (1982: 189). In the case of the Mercado Túmin, my early fieldnotes show that I was trying to understand what was happening in terms of a dichotomy between the market as a 'social space' and an 'exchange space'. These categories came out of conversations I had and my participation in the Mercado over the course of six months. Much like Malinowski and de la Fuente, then, I was trying to work out what it was that motivated the tumistas to attend. However, the conclusions I arrived at were somewhat different. Many tumistas expressed the enduring tension between low sales and the need to publicise the market, all the while asserting that they were engaged in a different type of commerce. Accordingly, low sales were expected – and maybe even did not matter – and the most important thing was they had a great time together. The uncertainty and doubt over whether the market would succeed and whether it would prove to be a viable sales point was something that was salient from the first day of trading back in January 2016. Jokes and banter became a way of roughly disguising anxieties. I would regularly help Everardo to take stock from the boot of his car to set up on the stall. He often said we 'should not bother getting too much out, because he did not expect to sell anything'. Equally, on the first day I had a chat with Gloria, who told me it would probably be her first and last Mercado Túmin. It had cost her a lot to get there, and she did not expect to sell anything. I pick up on Gloria's story below, where we will see that, while she may have not have sold a lot, her anxieties were soon calmed, and Gloria gained a lot through the process of socialisation, geared towards self- and collective transformation, that came to characterise the Mercado. On returning from the field, I was interested in how the tumistas were getting on. In December 2016, I spoke to Vero, one of the most vocal and passionate members of the MAT in Puebla. She pointed out that they were soon to celebrate the first anniversary of the founding of the Mercado Túmin. After a year of activity, she told me that 'the truth is we don't sell a thing, but we all go with the right attitude and we have a great time'.

Despite the slow pace of trade, morale was kept high and a core group of tumistas would meet every week, sometimes in extreme weather conditions. It became clear that there was something more than a neo-classical assumption of economic gain that was spurring the tumistas' motivation. At its most vague, the tumistas felt they were really *doing something*.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that this *doing something* was their enacting personal understandings of the key values that they enshrined in the MAT. It turns out that the binary vision of ‘social space’ and ‘exchange space’ was not that helpful, or perhaps not even applicable. The Mercado was as much a social as an exchange space; and out of the fusion of the two, the tumistas were experimenting with establishing their own forms of commerce, which were in line with ‘their way of seeing the world’. The ways in which they did this, and why it was important for them, is the subject of this chapter. In order to understand the processes at play in the Mercado Túmin, and the importance of people’s thoughts and actions in creating the sociability that came to characterise the space, I again use Graeber’s (2001; 2013) work on value, which I discussed in detail in the Introduction, and have made reference to in previous chapters. Essentially, this allows for a closer and more nuanced understanding of the role of the imaginary and intention as valuable motors for people’s participation and engagement with transformative projects like the MAT. Therefore, the main method by which I will elucidate this relationship is through the frame of value(s).

We will see that the frame of value(s) is particularly apt when talking about the tumistas and the Mercado Túmin because of the type of producers and commercial activity that they want to or are able to engage in. We will see how the tumistas’ positions as small-scale producers, who were in the process of fashioning themselves and their productive processes in an entrepreneurial fashion, meant that they were struggling for a space in which to make a meaningful living, while the access they had to places like the Mercado Túmin also gave them the advantageous position of being able to experiment with different organisational forms. Ultimately, the Mercado Túmin became a place where they could engage creatively and actively with negotiating the conditions of the market and their participation in it, something which they felt was denied to them in the wider capitalist market.

Origins of the Mercado Túmin

Since its inception in 2013, members of the Puebla network met at assemblies and other public events to exchange products amongst themselves and to the wider public. Similarly, there were at least three established ‘points of sale’ across the city – two in small shops run by tumistas in Cholula and Puebla, and from May 2014 in the weekly Tameme market, where many tumistas had their own stalls or were able to sell their products on the Granja La Tierra (Selene and Everardo’s) stall. Yet the establishment of the Mercado Túmin in January 2016 signalled an important advance for the development of the project in that city and region.

For the first time the tumistas had an exclusive space of their own, where all could participate in the construction of a marketplace that would reflect and project the values they inscribed in the MAT. The Mercado Túmin opened up a space of commerce for small-scale producers, for many of whom participation in the wider capitalist market economy was often complicated, or in some cases actively resisted. Equally, the Mercado Túmin offered the tumistas a chance to negotiate and dictate the terms upon which commerce would take place. The creation of an exclusively tumista market place in Puebla had been an aim of the network in the city for some time. In the following, we see why it was that the tumistas felt like they needed their own space. In particular, in order to understand the values that shaped the sociability within the Mercado Túmin and their importance for the tumistas, a trip to another of the city's ethical commerce venues is necessary.

Tameme

As we saw in the previous chapter, the majority of the Puebla tumistas active in the network whilst I was carrying out fieldwork already met at least once a week at Tameme. Tameme was undoubtedly the largest and most successful of a series of itinerant marketplaces and ethical commerce fairs that had sprung up across Puebla and Cholula in recent years. However, there were things about the management of the market that certain people were not happy with, and in particular, a small group of tumistas were becoming increasingly disgruntled and critical of the way in which Tameme was run. The sources of this critique served as a point of differentiation for the tumistas, giving them a site of comparison with which they could highlight how their marketplace was different. Along with the capitalist market at large, Tameme came to be a symbol of what was wrong with certain forms of commerce, and it helped the tumistas define what their market was an alternative to.

The tumistas critiqued Tameme for a number of reasons. To start, a small committee run by members of the same family was in charge of running Tameme. This meant that there was no consultation with and producer/exhibitor participation in making decisions. Certain tumistas also complained that the monthly rent for a stall space was increasing too much and too fast. On top of this, there were another series of payments and even fines handed out to people if they did not comply with the rules of the market, which the tumistas saw as getting stricter and applied with the biased discretion of the organisers. For example, Selene was banned from giving workshops and talks in Tameme following an episode in November 2015. Following a workshop Selene had given on how to make milk from different types of

nuts and seeds, her colleague Silvia, another tumista, had invited those gathered to ‘cooperate’ with a few pesos. Silvia said that the knowledge Selene was sharing ‘was gold’, and that elsewhere a similar workshop would cost a lot of money. Asking for cooperation – *hacer cooperacha* – was standard practice in many forums, meetings and marketplaces where people gave talks, demonstrations or workshops. In time, the practice also became instituted in the Mercado Túmin, with the owner of Yugadharma commissioning a special ‘cooperation box’ for such a purpose (see Figure 4.1). However, in this case, Selene was banned from giving any further talks or workshops because she had not informed Tameme’s organisers that she would be asking for ‘cooperation’. Everardo expressed the situation rather ironically: ‘*La solidaridad viene de acá para allá*’ (solidarity goes from here to there). Solidarity was a one way street – as long as you paid the rent and followed the rules, you were a friend of Tameme. Selene stopped attending Tameme for a while following the event, and set about organising the establishment of the Mercado Túmin.

Another episode involved Silvia directly. As we will see in more detail below, Silvia sold homemade vegan food products. A few months after the episode with Selene, Silvia was given an ultimatum. She either pay a fine or be banished from Tameme, after one of the organisers found out she had sold a *torta de soya* – a slab of soya meat in a roll of white bread – to a woman who they deemed overweight and therefore susceptible to health problems. The whole situation was rather bizarre, and observers in Tameme reasonably questioned the organiser’s authority on deciding what was good or bad for the woman to eat, and her decision to reproach Silvia for selling her the *torta*. Silvia refused to pay the fine, and started to sell her food products from the Walmart car park, next door to the hotel where Tameme was held. Some suspected that the organisers were cracking down on those who actively promoted the Mercado Túmin in Tameme, while Silvia thought it was more clearly a case of trying to get rid of competition: Tameme also had its own vegan café ran by the organisers, and Silvia was her hottest competition.

The actions taken against Selene and Silvia in the above stories became emblematic of the sort of perceived malpractice and personalised conflicts that took place in Tameme. More generally, the tumistas came to criticise Tameme as a profit-orientated venture, from which the organisers were clearly benefitting the most. The tumistas’ critique is interesting because they were also the first in admitting that they usually sold more in Tameme than any other alternative commerce venue. What seemed to be wrong then, was the way in which the market was organised and the attitude of the organisers and fellow traders, which was

expressed in terms of profit-driven interest, but a closer look revealed more subtle differences that seemed unfair to the tumistas. For example, one tumista said that Lucy was not ‘looking after her children’ by allowing more than one producer of the same type of products to sell in Tameme. This meant competition, and a lack of concern for the wellbeing and prosperity of those who had arrived before. Another example was the existence of multiple categories of exhibitors in Tameme, which sometimes blurred the distinction between those who were producers who were selling their product direct to the consumer, and those traders who were intermediaries in the production-consumption cycle. As we see clearly below, the tumistas generally considered that intermediary traders or middlemen were motivated by profit, no matter how ethical and fair they claimed their sourcing to be (cf. Carrier and Luetchford 2012). However, the two examples given could suggest that the tumistas were also complaining about the lack of loyalty to the producer and lack of transparency and honesty in transactions – things that we will return to later. For now, let us have a closer look at the sort of producers the tumistas were.

Tumistas as prosumers

The above examples helped the tumistas understand and demonstrate just how important *their* market was to them. Building on their experience in places like Tameme, the Mercado Túmin became a space they distinguished and identified as a place where their principles and values could be realised and, as we shall see below, defended if necessary. Before moving on to look at the processes that characterised the Mercado Túmin, let us take a closer look at who the tumistas were in order to understand why the space became so important to them. Over the months I attended the market, there was a core group of around ten tumistas, with others participating some weeks and not others. As we have seen, the majority were small-scale producers who had met in other alternative commerce circuits in the city and were invited to participate in the network by Selene. Many of these tumistas had worked in different jobs for many years and were in the process of re-inventing their lives so that their economic activity could represent something more meaningful to them and those who surrounded them. The majority wanted to ‘do good’ for themselves, their fellow tumistas, and society at large. These desires, and conceptions of what was worthy/valuable, were shaped by (and often in contrast to) the tumistas’ past experience.

Selene once told me: ‘In the Mercado Túmin we eat what we produce’. Selene was looking to differentiate the tumista philosophy from other ways of doing commerce. That the tumistas

ate what they produced set them and their market apart from other commercial venues, where traders commonly sold produce they had sourced elsewhere. These traders, according to Selene, did not eat what they sold; they were only interested in making a profit. Many tumistas in Puebla are examples of ‘prosumers’ – a compound word coined by futurist writer Toffler (1980). Kosnik (2018) offers a recent review of the usage of the term, demonstrating how it has been used to describe a variety of people who produce what they consume, and commonly have minimalist lifestyles. This, however, does not exclude them from market participation, and many engage in ‘multiple economic activities’ to make a living (Kosnik 2018: 126), much like the tumistas. Moreover, Kosnik tells us that prosumers ‘[communicate] their social values through leading by example’ (133). The tumistas identity as prosumers was central to understanding the importance of their marketplace for them, and points to the extent of offence that the woman’s haggling had caused them. The question of value is central here.

The Mercado Túmin offered the tumistas an important place to be able to realise value in a different logic to that of capitalism. ‘Eating their own produce’ was here both literal and metaphorical: food was produced and eaten, but the tumistas also offered a variety of other non-consumable products and services, like vibrational therapy sessions, English and yoga classes and a number of workshops that were produced, consumed and promoted by the tumista community. Increasingly too, tumistas sourced some of their primary materials from fellow *socios*. Thus, an important part of the tumista endeavour leaned on moving towards their own sustainable, healthy and autonomous production and consumption cycle, which was tied into a particular ‘way of seeing the world’ that they cultivated in their personal lives, and ‘living the market’ in the Mercado Túmin together as a group. Action towards this desired goal was to create it in the present, and the Mercado gave them a place in which to do this. In the Mercado, value was not extracted from the production process – or the producer – to be realised elsewhere by someone else; which is exactly what the haggling woman wanted to do. Nonetheless, of course interactions and exchange with consumers were a key part of marketplace activity. The tumistas cherished their market because it allowed them to engage with consumers directly, and it was in this social and economic exchange that a distinct marketplace interaction took place. Indeed, a regular once remarked that the tumistas were doing a ‘service to the community’; referring to the information and knowledge they shared with the consumers, which amounted to an invitation to engage in a ‘different way of seeing the world’ or to ‘live the market’ with them. Moreover, the direct

interaction meant the tumistas had the chance to tell the story behind their product. The importance of this direct communication was essential to the process of valuing their work and their produce, which amounted to valuing themselves. I now present two brief case studies, to get a better sense of who the tumistas were and why the Mercado was important to them.

Silvia

Silvia was a single mother, 51 years of age, who sold a range of health food products prepared with Ayurvedic techniques. Silvia ran her ‘micro-micro-micro business’, *Delicia* (Delicacy), with her mum, who had been diagnosed with diabetes a few years previously. Silvia started to look for alimentary alternatives to counter the vast amounts of medicines her mother was taking. She also needed to make a living. The two concerns presented themselves as an opportunity to start a health food business, which she had been running with her mother for two years. Silvia’s decision to start a small business also reflected other, more personal lifestyle changes. Silvia had worked for many years as cabin crew for the now-liquidised air company Aviación Mexicana. She had lived the high life for many years, earning enough money to raise her daughter, travel the globe, eat in fine restaurants, and dress in fine clothes. After taking early retirement, she decided that it was time to live a simpler, fuller life. From choosing to dress in *ropa típica* to becoming a yoga instructor and a vegan, Silvia had made a drastic change that reflected a new set of priorities in her life.²

Like many of the tumistas in Puebla, Silvia heard about the MAT project in Tameme, although she had known Selene for many years. Silvia told me that her decision to participate in the túmin network made total sense: she was looking for a market for her products *and* a solidarity network: to help her *compañeros* and for them to help her. Silvia wanted to ‘live in coherence’ with her life philosophy, and so she told me: ‘being tumista was right for me’. Silvia sold regularly in three different sites: Tameme, the Mercado Túmin and the Tianguis Alternativo de Puebla, but she identified most with the second, and described the tumista market as the most ‘committed and well organised’ of the spaces. In particular, she made a distinction between Tameme and the Mercado Túmin, saying that the former is a business and the latter is a place where a group of producers can help each other. While she liked Tameme because it was an organic market, Silvia said that the solidarity network aspect was

² Commonly identified as indigenous clothing, *ropa típica* is an aesthetic choice that involves dressing in varieties of embroidered garments – shirts, blouses, skirts, the use of leather sandals and belts, and other accessories such as jewellery or headwear.

missing. She put this down to the way in which decisions were made exclusively by the owner, and the size of the market. At around 80 producers, it was hard for everyone to know each other and communication was difficult. In contrast, the Mercado Túmin was small, everyone knew each other, relationships were friendly, and decisions were made together. From its inception, Silvia was one of the most active in promoting and helping to organise the internal affairs of the Mercado, and a member of the committee who decided who could sell there. Silvia recognised that it was sometimes difficult to turn people away, but it was important to make sure people were committed to using (circulating) túmin, that they shared the same principles as the tumistas, and that priority was given to Mexican hand crafted goods over mass-produced Chinese products.

Fabiola

Concern for health and strengthening local small enterprises were things that also motivated Fabiola. Fabiola manufactured natural soaps and other beauty products which she promoted and sold under the name of *Raíces* (Roots), a ‘project’ that she had been working on for five years. Fabiola was 37 years old, and she had previously worked for the state government as an environmental inspector for industry. It was here where Fabiola learnt that the majority of ingredients that industry used to fabricate products were harmful to health, prompting her desire to produce handmade, ecological soaps. A biologist by profession, Fabiola had a keen interest in the utilities of medicinal plants endemic to Mexico, which she would use in her recipes. What started out as a hobby became a full time project after she was laid off along with 14,000 other government workers with technical roles in the areas of environment and agriculture under Moreno Valle’s administration.³ The experience of working for the government helped Fabiola define the values that would guide her solo venture into full time soap production. With her project, she wanted to reduce her carbon footprint and strengthen Mexican commerce through using locally sourced raw materials.

Fabiola first tried to sell her product in the Analco marketplace: a large, traditional tianguis in the centre of Puebla. After two months, she gave up, primarily because she felt the type of consumers who attended the market did not value her product and they would haggle down the price. People were ‘not interested in the story behind the product’; they did not realise the slow, hard work involved in the production process, and the importance of

³ Rafael Moreno Valle was the then state governor of Puebla, from the centre-right PAN party, from 2011–2017.

sourcing local, organic raw materials. In addition, there were certain ‘political questions’ in the market that she did not like: after working in government, she was ‘fed up with *la política*’.⁴ Fabiola met the tumistas in Tameme, where Selene invited her to participate in the network and then attend the Mercado Túmin. Fabiola differentiated the two venues in a number of ways. First, although Tameme offered an important space for producers, the importance that they placed on the certification and validation of products by certification was an obstacle for many. This reflected trends in the wider capitalist market, where in order to sell something under an ‘organic’ or ‘ecological’ label an expensive certificate was needed from SAGARPA to validate the product’s authenticity. To even start the certification process was often beyond the reach or even undesirable for many producers like the tumistas because they just could not comply with the requisites, financial and otherwise.⁵ Second, Fabiola said that the Mercado Túmin was more focused towards small-scale producers with great products who, under other circumstances, would be hidden due to their inability to compete in the capitalist marketplace. Furthermore, the Mercado Túmin provided a space where small-scale producers could meet their clients and tell them all about the story behind the products on sale, giving people like Fabiola the chance to demonstrate the value of her product and feel valued herself in the process.

Prosumer values

Activists and theorists alike have used the term prosumer to refer to a new identity and consciousness that is being forged amongst ECOSOL participants. For example, Collin (2012) suggests that ECOSOL is a paradigm which could provide a truly counter-hegemonic force to market capitalism in the 21st century, with the prosumer becoming the central actor to bring about this change (ibid.). The majority of tumistas in the Puebla network are people who for some reason have consciously reflected on their position in the political economy of the capitalist market and they firmly believe that what they are doing offers an alternative route to social change in Mexico. The magnitude of the tumistas’ convictions were made clear to me one day during a discussion that followed presentations of different experiences across the MAT network, as part of the weekly talks and workshops held in the Mercado. Those gathered were talking about the importance of the solidarity economy and projects

⁴ There is a key distinction here with the way in which people in Mexico use the term ‘la política’ – to refer to the type of actions and dealings of certain people. The term can mean both ‘politicking’ and ‘the realm of politics’.

⁵ As a response to the SAGARPA certification process, many citizen initiatives have started to do ‘citizen certification’ programmes, the Tianguis Alternativo de Puebla being one of them.

like the MAT given the on-going crisis of capitalism. One tumista offered the following vision: ‘the economy is at a standstill from the point of view of capital... our economy isn’t’. Like Collin’s assertion, this may sound like a grand claim on part of the tumistas. However, the point here is not the veracity of what people are saying and whether they actually believe it, but the effect of what they say on influencing their intentions and actions. Here I follow Graeber to suggest that claims like these are examples of the “as-if quality” of totalities’ (2013: 299). Graeber writes that

in complex societies, there are any number of such imaginary arenas for the realization of value, each making similarly totalizing claims, and the ultimate stakes of political life tend to lie precisely in negotiating how these values and arenas will ultimately relate to one another. (2013: 266)

Like all of us, the tumistas undoubtedly lived in complex societies where they negotiated different value regimes on a day-to-day basis. However, their identity as small-scale prosumers trying to make a living in a capitalist society gave this negotiation a certain political edge. If we understand the MAT as a particular imagined totality or universe that helped the tumistas to visualise and make sense of their position in the negotiation of value systems, we start to understand the importance of places like the Mercado Túmin to them. The Mercado Túmin offered the tumistas a practical and much needed point of sale, but it also had a transcendental importance for them: it allowed them to participate in creating and promoting a space in which they could pursue and enact their values. Having looked at why the Mercado Túmin was so important to the tumistas, now it is time to look at the assembly as a defining feature of marketplace practice.

The market as an organisational space

Salient features of the Mercado Túmin were the meetings and assemblies that served as reflexive forums for assessing the process undertaken. Much like assemblies that took place across the MAT network on a national scale, assemblies were important forums for communicating news, discussing and resolving problems, and defining lines of action (as we saw in the previous chapter). The tumistas valued and celebrated the whole experience in conscious reflection of the path they were travelling. The assemblies and meetings were sometimes planned, other times improvised. It was in these meetings that the tumistas had a voice, and it was through group discussion and actions resulting from reflection that the Mercado Túmin became *their space*. The assemblies were a dynamic that were valued because the tumistas were able to discuss and dictate the rules of the game for their own

market participation. Assemblies thus were places where values were explicitly voiced, discussed and put into action, and it was in this process that the tumistas differentiated the Mercado Túmin from the gargantuan, impersonal capitalist market and places like Tameme, as we saw above. The capitalist market was seen as a characterised by processes that were generally hostile to the small-scale producer. Given the historical record, the tumistas, as small-scale producers and *campesinos*, always came out as the underdogs, exploited and denied a dignified existence whilst someone made a profit on their backs. The capitalist marketplace was a vast arena in which they had no part constructing or influencing, and they certainly could not pursue values that they felt represented them. Similarly, while Tameme seemed to offer an alternative and did indeed go some distance to diminish the inequalities of the wider capitalist market; their experience was shaped by the shortcomings between discourse and practice, which we saw expressed in previous sections. I now return to the assembly held the day of the haggling woman's visit.

Values defended against haggling

The discussion in the assembly that followed the haggling woman's visit clearly brought into focus the values the tumistas held most dear. In broad terms, much like the MAT-Banxico episode, the haggling incident also signified a clash of different value systems, and here the importance of the Mercado Túmin and the function of the assembly came into their own. In particular, we see how the distinction between *comerciantes* (traders) and *prosumidores* (prosumers) helped set up a dichotomy between perceived different value systems. This dichotomy then opened the way for the tumistas to talk about a whole range of oppositions – and ideas and attitudes related to them – that helped them identify and defend their values. These related to ideas about respect for price and haggling; artisanal and mass-produced products; quality and quantity; clean and contaminated products; ideas of consciousness and ignorance, and honesty and deceit. Here we also see how respect for price is equated to respect for the product, which ultimately means respecting the production processes and labour involved – thus respecting the tumistas themselves.

As we saw in the opening vignette to this chapter, Selene opened the assembly with a call for respect for the tumistas' 'way of seeing the world' in light of the haggling woman's visit. Integral to this discussion was the need to respect fair prices:

I propose it to the assembly as an important point. I think her visit is enough, right? Enough of this disrespect and abuse towards producers. And we do have

the ability to talk as equals to as these people who want to start a business by taking advantage of producers. I think we need to put limits, devise certain safeguards against certain people... Because she also said to me; 'Look, you know what, we are all partners and we are busy doing other things. This is our shop.' Well, if you have the enough money to run a shop, you also have enough money to pay what our products cost. And don't come to us with thinking of buying for three pesos and selling for twenty, right? So I think it would be good if each one of us, as producers, could think about the sorts of prices we are going to offer things for.

In order to drive her point home, Selene then gave an example of a hypothetical haggling exchange between the woman and Gloria:

For example, your tortillas [parodying the woman]: 'Ah, what tasty tortillas! How much are you going to sell me them for?

[Imitating Gloria] Ten pesos.

[Woman] Ah, but then you are going to give me a good price so I can resell them, right?

[Gloria] Hey! That is what they cost: 10 pesos!

The subject of what constitutes fair or just price has historically been a point of contention, and is a discussion that lies at the centre of ideas of the moral economy (Thompson 1971). More recently, anthropological interest in the notion of 'just prices' has looked towards the ways it opens up discussion of different types of value (Luetchford and Orlando, 2019). Accordingly, the haggling episode and the assembly shortly after, presents us with a window onto tumista notions of moral economy and the ways in which they understand value(s). A lot of this has to do with the tumistas' reflection on their position as small-scale producers for whom participation in the capitalist market is complicated and more specifically their identity as prosumers who were engaging in an alternative market logic to the former.

In her introduction to *Malinowski in Mexico*, Drucker-Brown discusses the figure of the *regatón* – the haggler, or more commonly known as 'the middle man' – who buys for resale (1982: 36 -38). As Drucker-Brown hints at, and as we have already seen in chapter 2, the *regatón*, middleman or *coyote* has become a controversial character in the Mexican socio-economic landscape. The middleman is generally associated with exploiting peasant producers, seen to be paying low prices for their produce for resale at a profit (see also Dow, 1973; McDonald, 1997).⁶ Drucker-Brown (1982) and Beals (1975) also demonstrate that

⁶ However, while Galemba (2012) recognises the term is usually negative, she demonstrates that not all *coyotes* are seen as bad. The use of the term is deployed and understood dependent on particular localised notions of the morality of exchange.

haggling or price negotiation in Oaxacan market exchanges is highly variable and subjective, but a key determinant is the existence or lack thereof of reciprocal relations or understandings of ‘mutual respect’, ‘honesty’ and ‘confidence’ (Beals, 1975: 176) between both parties. Permanence and stability is also key here, and something that has undoubtedly affected the relationships between producers and middlemen in the last few decades, especially since economic liberalisation in the 1980s, followed by the signing of NAFTA in 1994 (McDonald, 1997).⁷ In short, the conditions for small-scale producers to make a living are increasingly difficult, hence the importance of places like the Mercado Túmin, where the tumistas felt they could come and sell their produce at a just price. The arrival of the haggling woman signified the encroachment of a different type of market logic into their space, which was ultimately a demonstration of disrespect towards the tumistas and their way of seeing (and being in) the world.

A similar story emerged from Magda, who was next to speak:

My thoughts on the subject, judging by the little experience I have in this environment, is that we are going to meet a lot of people who want to buy. Their main objective is to buy. Now, terms like ‘sustainable’ and ‘ecological’ are very popular. So when people buy ‘ecological’, they then raise the price, with the justification that ‘this is a sustainable, organic product’ etc. But the majority of buyers have no idea of the cultivation process: the transformation, gathering the produce, drying it... the whole process is done by hand: this adds value. So, in my experience, I know that this sort of person [the haggling woman] is not my market. I know that my objective is to sell because I have people behind me who rely on me to do so, but I am not going to tell them: ‘Guess what? Today I gave away your product and I can’t pay you.’ Because in that case, what’s the point in me fighting for that fairness – something that is so good about the [MAT]... This person [the woman], in my case I said to her: ‘Yes, I will give you all the lettuce you want, but my order is from 500 pesos, my product costs 15 pesos, but you could sell it at 18 pesos, that is your business, right? But I can’t lower the price any more than that.’ However, here, with the tumistas, I have been giving them another price: 10 pesos, 8 pesos, *trueque*... But from my point of view, I have to have a very clear idea of what solidarity economy is. If I don’t live it, if I don’t understand it, anyone can come and say to me, ‘Now let’s see, why is this so expensive?’ ... I feel degraded, I feel that I am being robbed; I am being robbed in that moment.

Magda, together with her business partner Benja, made up the ECOSOL enterprise El Mandadito. Magda and Benja’s case is interesting, because they are producers who also aspire to become buyers, but not like *coyotes* or *regatones*. El Mandadito’s business model

⁷ The North American Free Trade Agreement, signed between the USA, Canada and Mexico, which came into effect on the 1st of January 1994.

is based on training mainly women in impoverished communities on the outskirts of the city to cultivate a range of produce using ecological techniques on small plots of land in their homes.⁸ In order to do this, Magda and Benja also have a large *huerto* (vegetable patch) in one of the communities, which they use as an example for the women they train. The *huerto* served primarily as a source of food for themselves, but it also served as a source of income because they sell most of the produce at different sales points in the city. The aim of El Mandadito was to help the women move towards food autonomy and give them a source of income, by buying up their surplus produce and taking it to Puebla, where Magda and Benja had already secured various ‘safe selling points’ like Tameme and the Mercado Túmin. These were places where consumers value the produce and are interested in where it comes from, and who are prepared to pay a just price for it.⁹

Magda and Benja had formed El Mandadito just months earlier, when they met at a Social and Solidarity Economy Incubator at the Universidad Iberoamericano.¹⁰ Before meeting Benja, Magda had tried to harvest a crop of organic green beans (*ejotes*) on her own. The experience marked Magda and helped her realise the plight of small-scale producers first hand. Magda had struggled to find help to plant the crop, because all the farmers she talked to did not believe it was possible to grow such a large crop using ‘natural methods’. Eventually, after seeing how committed and certain she was, a willing partner came forward, and Magda and her *socio* managed to plant, tend and harvest 1.5 hectares of *ejotes*. The crop was ‘sweet and crunchy’; it did not taste like ‘cardboard’ like ‘normal *ejote*’. The problem came when they could not find a market for the produce. Desperate not to let the *ejote* go to waste, Magda managed to find a *coyote* who agreed to take the crop to a wholesale market in Puebla. However, the *coyote* never showed up. Magda described the experience as a ‘disaster’, and that it was like giving 10 000 mx (£410) to the ground. Magda learned that without contacts and contracts, it was practically impossible to sell produce at a local market. In the same conversation, Magda explained that most small-scale farmers in the Puebla area had contracts with Walmart, who paid 5 000 mx (£205) for a hectare of crop. After covering

⁸ El Mandadito did not aim to target women, but the fact that women made up the majority of those who took the workshops is due to the massive migration of men from the communities to the city and beyond, effectively leaving the countryside in abandon, and from Magda and Benja’s perspective, a lot of land is left to waste.

⁹ For a discussion of ethical consumption, see Carrier and Luetchford (2012).

¹⁰ The Universidad Iberoamericano is a private, prestigious Jesuit University with campuses across Mexico. The Ibero is particularly active in engaging and promoting ECOSOL, as the Incubator demonstrates. Here we see the link between religious organisations and ECOSOL discussed in chapter 1.

expenses, this left the *campesino* with around 1 000 mx (£41), from which they often had to pay out extra costs like transporting the crop, and paying contracted labour etc. Other negatives were that the *campesino* received no payment in the case of crop failure, and that the whole model promoted monoculture, fostering dependency on one crop and the use of pesticides to control pests that came along with it – things that stood in stark contrast to El Mandadito’s mandate of crop diversification, organic produce and food autonomy.

Magda’s experience clearly highlights many of the problems the tumistas associated with the haggling woman. They considered the latter a *coyote* of sorts, whose interests lay in haggling in order to make a profit off them through reselling their produce at a higher price in her own shop. This, and the fact the woman was not a producer herself, demonstrated the perceived lack of equality and mutual respect in the transaction, which was a manifestation of the social relations between both parties. Magda made it clear that she was willing to negotiate prices with fellow tumistas, but when someone came from outside questioning the price of her produce, she felt degraded and humiliated. Value becomes associated with trust here. As we already know, and will see in more detail in the next chapter, *confianza* (trust) is one of the founding principles of the MAT project. Magda’s case is demonstrative of how a chain of trust is a key element to business transactions and exchanges. Magda is aware that she needs to maintain *confianza* as part of a successful business model and as a moral and ethical principle. She identifies ‘fairness’ in transactions as one of the best things about the MAT project. Magda points out that she has ‘people behind her’ who are depending on her to sell produce at a fair price. As a prosumer and a buyer, Magda knows what it cost for her and those she buys from to produce the vegetables she sells. The haggling implies that the sale price Magda is offering is not reflective of the cost price, thus haggling comes to represent a lack of trust in the tumistas.

Magda also spoke of honesty and deceit, giving the example that in other marketplaces, she had come across *compañeros* who were not trustworthy. Once again, profit-driven motives were the starting point: ‘when one sees things from the perspective of a sale, their objective becomes to sell’. Here Magda was referring back to middlemen, who buy goods at the *central* [wholesaler] and then bring them to the market.¹¹ The problem was that the resellers in question sold their produce at a profit under an organic label. Magda was specifically referring to a family of traders who attend Tameme, who sell a wide range of fruit and

¹¹ *Central de Abastos* – Wholesale food markets that exist in practically all large Mexican towns and cities.

vegetables, claiming that they are organic, yet many suspect that they were fraudsters. Magda stressed that this type of action was an ‘unfair blow’: whilst she was trying to motivate people to produce chemical-free vegetables, she could not compete against the quantity of produce that middlemen-come-resellers brought to the market. She made a plea to her fellow tumistas: ‘I ask for solidarity here... not quantity but quality’. Those assembled agreed: their production processes meant that they could only produce small amounts of things, generally over a longer period of time:

We bring what we can, what we are able to produce... It is honesty on our part to tell people that we only have things for a limited amount of time, and when it’s finished, something else will come along.

Here, there is a correlation between tumista production techniques and an ethic of honesty with the consumer. We are reminded of the importance the tumistas placed on the interaction with the consumer, and how the Mercado Túmin offered them the space to be able to tell the story behind their produce. Indeed, the Mercado allows the tumistas the space to be able to communicate and tell the story behind their production processes to consumers, which allows them to demonstrate what their produce cost to produce. The value of the product also becomes a reflection of the value the tumistas place on their work, thus in many ways the value of the product becomes a reflection of the value they have in themselves, and this is why the haggling was so offensive. Moreover, the fact that the tumistas could only offer a small amount of things for a limited amount of time points back to the different market logics that are at work. Those gathered agreed that ECOSOL was generally a slow process, and that the best way forward was through re-educating themselves and the consumers. As Magda suggested, the best way to do that was by ‘living the market’:

I would like us to put a lot of emphasis on making this market different by living it. Because it is easy to say ‘Ah your coconut oil is great’, but we may have never used it. No, we need to try it, use it, and recommend it. So, I think that we – the few that we are – I value your work, and we need to give it its value, its cost: if the client wants bread, it costs 20 pesos... So I support the idea that we should value it, but I also ask that we be solidary, that we unite and we don’t give away our product.

Selene and Magda’s concerns reflected those of the group generally. The tumistas agreed that many consumers did not realise or simply did not value their production processes, and the haggling woman was on the abusive end of the spectrum. Through discussing and reflecting on why and how their market was different in the assembly, the tumistas were able to come up with a strategy to safeguard their space. They decided to draw up a price list of

their products to have on hand for when these types of buyers came to the Mercado. The price list would also communicate a sense of formality and demonstrate a united front to future buyers who might come with the intention to haggle. As Fabiola put it:

These are my prices, and you respect them [...] and that's that. Because if we don't they are going to keep on coming and they will keep on thinking that we are from Eighteenth Avenue, and we are not!¹²

Once again, the tumistas were keen to affirm the difference between them, their products and their market, to the people, products and transactions that took place in other places, like the Mercado Alcocota, the wholesalers and street sellers of 18th Avenue, or the Mercado 5 de Mayo. The type of business that occurred in these well-known centres of commerce was very different to that which took place in the Mercado Túmin.

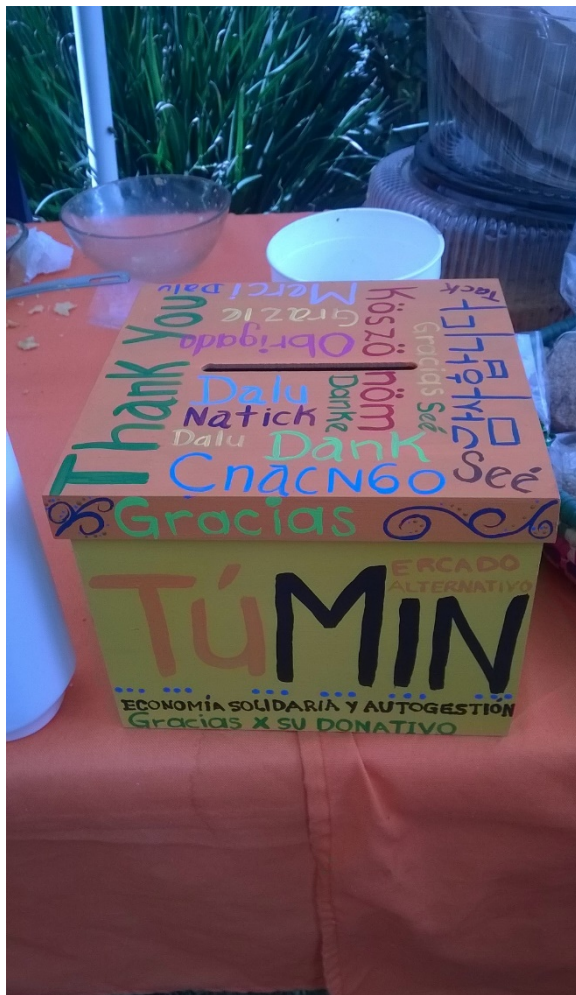


Figure 4.1 Mercado Túmin ‘cooperation box’ (photo by author)

¹² Eighteenth Avenue refers to one of central Puebla's main avenues, where the large Mercado 5 de Mayo is located and many wholesalers and ambulant street sellers engage in commerce.



Figure 4.2: Selene giving a workshop in the Mercado Túmin (photo by author)



Figure 4.3: Magda harvesting beetroot for sale in the Mercado Túmin (photo by author)

Gloria becomes a tumista

Now I return to Gloria, whom we met above, to see how The Mercado Túmin ended up providing an encouraging environment for her to experiment with production. This was a transformative process that saw Gloria become a tumista, through her ‘living the market’ and the support of her fellow *socios*. Gloria was an employee of Federico Barceló, a tumista who owned a model organic farm called Tequio in Atlixco, a small town a few miles southwest of Puebla, nestled in the foothills of the Popocatepetl volcano. Granja Tequio was a well-known reference point for the organic, sustainable and permaculture circles in the region, and Barceló frequently offered courses and diplomas on his farm with a 50% discount for tumistas. Barceló also owned a small chain of cafés in the city, where he sold produce from the farm along with a menu of organically sourced food and drinks. Granja Tequio also had a presence in many of the alternative commerce venues in the city.

Despite Barceló’s known commitment to the MAT Puebla network, that he sent Gloria to represent Granja Tequio at most places, she actually spent most of her time with the tumistas. Gloria used to work for Barceló as a cleaner, but her employment as representative in different alternative marketplaces was quite different and she felt that Barceló did not appreciate the hard work that went into the job. Gloria was only paid a salary for the selling: she had to pay for her transport to and from the venues, carrying all the produce herself. This was a financial burden, not to mention the time and effort it took to Gloria to travel large distances across the city. Furthermore, there were days when Gloria sold very little produce, making her question whether it was really worth her time and effort.

On the first day of the Mercado Túmin back in January 2016, Gloria told me it was her first and probably last time at the market. A discussion about collecting a *cooperacha* (cooperation) from all those present to buy a second marquee structure to provide more shaded space for the tumistas to trade under had added to her sense of unease. This was when Gloria explained that her employer did not understand the extra costs involved with trading in alternative commerce venues, that he only paid her a wage, and that she therefore thought it was unfair that the tumistas then ask for more money, even if it was to the benefit of the group.

However, over time, Gloria’s attitude changed and the Mercado Túmin became her favourite sales point. Through her close interaction with fellow tumistas, Gloria had even been encouraged to make her own product and sell it in the market. After some initial

experimentation, Gloria settled on making assorted *tortillas* with beetroot and spinach, which she sold in small packages wrapped in cling film for a few pesos. The symbolic importance of Gloria's *tortillas* was much larger than their modest appearance. At the same assembly mentioned above, Gloria asked if she could participate in the market by herself. Apart from selling stuff for Granja Tequio, Gloria now hoped to participate in the market herself as a *tumista*, and with the help of her *compañeras* she would design a brand logo and set up a 'small side table, nothing more', to differentiate her products from those of Barceló: 'I want it separate because I want my own thing'. Selene said that of course she could get involved, that she was part of the group, a *tumista* at heart (*tumista de corazón*), and that everyone was happy she was now making her own products. There was a round of applause, bravos, and Antonia set the tone for the general sentiment: 'enterprising women like you, forward!' (*mujeres como tu emprendedoras, adelante!*).

Gloria's becoming a *tumista* was soon cited by Selene on numerous occasions as an example of the importance of the MAT as process. It was through slow, conscious work that transformations took place. Gloria's empowerment is an episode that fits in with wider ethics of knowledge sharing and helping one another out that are implicit in the notion of 'living the market' in the Mercado Túmin. Along with things like yoga classes, dietary advice and accompaniment programmes, and a whole host of talks and workshops, the market became a space where the *tumistas* felt they were also doing work to help people experiment with new (and better) ways of doing things to lead a fuller, healthier life. Gloria's re-inventing herself as *tumista* is a good example of the politico-ethical core of self-transformation that runs through the MAT. It was through contact with and support from the *tumistas* that Gloria hatched the idea to produce and sell her own product. A few weeks later and after some anxious deliberation, Gloria gifted her employer some *tortillas*. The *tumistas* celebrated this as a defiant moment, proof that Gloria had found enough strength and self-esteem as to show her employer that she had learnt and wanted to do things for herself. If the Mercado Túmin was an arena for the realisation of values, it could also be seen as a place where people are given the environment and stimulus to facilitate self-realisation.

Reflection and projection of values inscribed in the MAT

In this final section, I look at how the *tumistas* communicated their values to the outside world. Here we see how the *tumistas* engaged in publicity to promote the Mercado Túmin locally, but also to communicate their belonging to the *tumista* community outside of Puebla,

and as a political statement to society at large. Graeber writes that social life is made up of ‘potentially endless’ arenas that represent different value systems (2013: 233). Thus, an important way of communicating and asserting one’s values is through an audience:

Insofar as value is social, it is always a comparison; value can only be realized in other people’s eyes. Another way to put this is that there must always be an audience (2013: 226).

Since the market opened its doors in January 2016, slow trade and ideas on how to boost Mercado Túmin publicity were recurrent issues. Despite the fact that the tumistas wanted to engage in a different economic model to that of capitalism, they were ever aware that without a steady flow of consumers, the future of the Mercado would be under threat. Efforts at publicity were generally clumsy and poorly thought-out. One day in March 2016, when Selene, Everardo, Rubi and I were about to enjoy a lunch cooked up with tumista ingredients, I had an idea. Discussing over lunch, we hatched a plan to make a video that would reflect the values of the tumistas and the MAT, as well as serving as publicity material for the Mercado. The idea had occurred to me as week on week I also started to participate in ‘living the market’, and sought to buy as much foodstuff from the tumistas as possible for my own consumption. Through this experience, the whole idea of ECOSOL – and Selene’s passionate vision, which informed her strict affiliation procedure (chapter 3) – had started to make a lot more sense to me. During my stay in Puebla, I had become actively engaged in the production, marketing and consumption process, and the idea of cooking and sitting down to enjoy a meal made entirely from tumista produce seemed like an ideal and practical way of communicating what was going on in the Mercado.

Selene and Everardo had a friend, Oliver, who owned a local production company and who they earmarked for producing the video. The standard price for a promotional video was 6000 mx (£247). Selene set about negotiating, and announced one day in the Mercado that Oliver, in an expression of solidarity, had agreed to make the video in exchange for 2000 mx (£82) and tumista products. The final payment was a combination of 3000mx (£123) – raised in the form of donations from the tumistas, and donations of their products. Selene described the payment as ‘a truly different and alternative economic form: *¡trueque total!*’ (a truly authentic barter exchange). Despite the fact 3 000 mx had also changed hands, Selene’s declaration was met with resounding agreement by the tumistas gathered. It appears Oliver’s agreement to accept part-cash part-product payment was a demonstration of his

willingness to experiment with alternative forms of exchange, and in fact, this marked his integration into the tumista community.¹³

At an ad hoc meeting before the above-mentioned assembly, the tumistas had discussed ideas for the content of the video. As with the assembly, the video served as an enabler for revealing and discussing the main values that informed and orientated tumista intention and action. Selene presented the main idea: the scene would unfold around the tumistas sat at a table, enjoying a meal made from their produce. The tumistas conceived of the video as a device through which they could communicate the values that they most cherished: ‘from this promotional video, we can speak about solidarity, work for the common good, and all these principles that motivate us as a túmin organization’. All gathered agreed that the table was a good symbol: it represented ‘the centre of family life and coexistence’, and that it represented the values that they held dear. Some commented that these were values that had been lost and no longer existed –a trope shared by many tumistas, as we have seen in other chapters. Luis suggested that the table act as a frame for demonstrating the sort of exchange that took place in the Mercado:

Given that it is really a question of solidarity, why doesn’t someone take something and leave something of their own? Like, I can take something, something that I need, and I also leave and contribute something that’s mine?

The discussion of ideas for the promotional video sheds light on what sort of principles and values the tumistas wanted to communicate to an outside audience. Recalling what they considered ‘lost’ values related to familial life, solidary coexistence and ‘work for the common good’, the tumistas were making an explicit statement about their project (note the recurrence of familial tropes in relation to solidarity and sentiments of mutuality). The discussion of ideas for the promotional video served as another window into seeing how the tumistas imagined their project and how they tried to translate what was located in the realm of their imaginary into tangible symbols and representations in a creative way.

When it came to the actual script writing and filming of the video, the idea of the table was never taken up. The video was a lot shorter than had been imagined, and with a final running time of 1 minute 44 seconds, the promo was comprised mainly of shots that focused on the stalls of the tumistas, with their logos, their products and the ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ posters taking centre stage. A voice-over – recorded in both Spanish and English – communicated

¹³ In fact, this type of mixed payment is an example of what ECOSOL activists and theorists refers to as ‘multi-trueque’ (see Santana Echeagaray 2008).

the principles of the Mercado Túmin.¹⁴ The script describes the tumistas as a ‘small community of producers, who are pioneering an economic model which prioritises social relations and solidarity,’ which are strengthened by the use of túmin and barter as modes of exchange. The script details two central tenets of the project: ‘respect for mother earth and economic solidarity’, and ends describing the MAT as ‘a small reflection of trust and human dignity’. While the central values communicated in the final cut of the video were quite different from earlier discussions, the general themes of prioritising social relations and solidarity are clearly reflected. The principle of ‘respect for mother earth’ reflects the strong influence of permaculture ideology shared by the majority of the tumistas in Puebla, and the principle of ‘economic solidarity’ speaks to the aims of the MAT more generally. The final idea that the Mercado Túmin is ‘a small reflection of trust and human dignity’ is a poignant claim, but one that makes sense in light of what we have explored in this chapter.

The fact that the table scene never made it to the final cut is demonstrative of many ideas and plans that the tumistas were continually hatching, but which never materialised for one reason or another. In this case, it was due to the limits placed upon them by the media company, who in turn were limited with what they could film given the tight budget and time. As we have seen in this chapter, the tumistas were acutely aware of the limitations and restrictions placed upon them and their ideas due to wider concerns simply out of their control, from the weather putting a literal dampener on a day’s trading to the hegemonic model of the capitalist market influencing the majority of their social and economic transactions. However, the important point here is that belonging to the MAT network – and their participation in the Mercado Túmin more specifically – provided the tumistas with a framework with which to creatively engage in imagining and striving to create new configurations of sociability that were in line with their shared values.

For the filming of the video, Selene had printed out a bunch of ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ posters for the tumistas to display on their stalls. This helped give the Mercado a standard aesthetic, which visually communicated a professional and united image to the outside world. Here we can see that the concerns discussed in the assembly following the visit of the haggling woman were acted upon, and an effort to communicate that the tumistas were serious, professional and worked together united as a network of prosumers under the principles of

¹⁴ See <https://vimeo.com/171680017> for the Spanish version and <https://vimeo.com/171680098> for the English version (both accessed 21/09/19).

the MAT. This was also a visual expression of ‘articulation’ of the Puebla TRA to the nationwide MAT network, perhaps reiterating commitment and belonging in light of the events discussed in the previous chapter. These efforts were reified into the ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ poster. As we saw in the previous chapter also, as an object that tumistas display in their homes and businesses across the country, the poster has an important symbolic weight: it is a declaration of mutuality and adherence to the politico-ethical core of the project. Oscar (a MAT promoter from Papantla) often contrasted the ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ posters (see Figure 3.1) with a sign more commonly found in shops and businesses across Mexico that reads ‘*Hoy no fío, mañana sí*’ (‘Today I don’t give credit, tomorrow I will’). Oscar made this comparison to differentiate the underlying principles of the MAT project, and the type of commerce and sociability it looks to engender, from those which are characteristic of the capitalist market: the former is built on the hope of trust and mutual aid between *compañeros*, things that are notably absent in the latter. Furthermore, Oscar said that the poster was a symbol of friendship and belonging to the ‘big tumista family’: a way of identifying *compañeros* who identify with the same sort of values as you. With the Mercado Túmin promotional video, the tumistas were able to communicate their values to both the wider MAT community and society at large.

Conclusions

I started this chapter with the haggling woman’s visit to the Mercado Túmin, and Selene’s assertion that the tumistas’ market and way of seeing the world were different and needed to be respected. The episode framed the discussion that followed, in which I demonstrated what these differences were. A lot of this hangs on the Puebla tumistas’ identity as *prosumidores*, who ‘ate what they produced’, which suggests processes of production and realisation different from those characteristic of the wider capitalist market. The haggling woman’s visit represented the encroachment of capitalist logic into *their space*. The actions of the haggling woman were deemed so offensive because questioning the price of the tumistas’ products was equal to disrespecting their production processes and what it cost them to produce the products, and thus disrespectful and devaluing of the tumistas themselves as *prosumidores*.

We saw in the previous chapter that the different ways of organising and demonstrating solidarity within the Puebla TRA caused problems for Mario, raising questions about the adherence to strict membership criteria and the general tumista ethos on a local level. In this chapter, we can understand why Selene managed the TRA the way she did. The Puebla

tumistas' sense of belonging and commitment to their local solidarity network was clearly manifest here. The Mercado Túmin offered them an important space to materialise and realise their values, and it became a creative expression of engaging in different forms of commerce. The haggling woman's visit in particular provided the springboard for the tumistas to articulate forms of good and bad social and economic practice, and to express the values that best defined 'their way of seeing the world'. It was an opportunity for the tumistas to express the ways in which they wanted their work, their produce, and ultimately themselves to be valued by both their fellow comrades and other people.

In short, the value question is key here. The Mercado Túmin offered the tumistas an important 'arena for the realisation of values' (Graeber 2013) that they felt were denied to them in other spheres of life. Different values to those animating the capitalist market shone through. For example, the haggling raised questions of cost price and sale price, and the tumistas demonstrated that value(s) in their market were more than this: the value question spoke to the heart of tumista sociality and personhood. Overwhelmingly, the market was governed by 'value in action' (Graeber 2001, 2013) – the most important thing for the tumistas was 'living the market', which expressed the ethos of realising value in various ways. 'Living the market' is therefore also a particular expression of prefiguration, as discussed in the Introduction and the previous chapter. This could take the form of sharing and consuming each other's produce, classes or knowledge, to learning and supporting one another to become better people. The Mercado Túmin thus provides a dynamic local take on the MAT – one that is clearly different to Espinal, for example, but at the same time orientated towards a goal of self- and collective transformation and creating the conditions for a good life together. Finally, in this respect, we can consider the Mercado an important 'autonomous space' that the *tumistas* have been able to carve out for themselves. Of course, this space, and the sociality that takes place within it, exists alongside, in tension with, and permeated by other logics and forces that make up the *tumistas'* often complex and contradictory lives.

Chapter 5: Rituals and Tianguis in the MAT



Figure 5.1: Tumista Ritual offering (photo by author)

One evening in late July 2016, I stood in a circle of people gathered holding hands around a small ritual offering laid out on the cobble stones of Papantla's central park. Those gathered were mostly tumistas from Papantla or Tlaxiaco, although there was a large group of students from a number of Latin American countries who were there for an educational summer camp, and the odd curious passer-by. The ritual offering was made up of various objects assembled on and around a woven straw mat (see Figure 5.1). There were different coloured seeds, coffee, sugar, vanilla pods and rocks. There was also a straw hat and basket, a clay pipe full of tobacco, a pre-Hispanic styled animal-whistle, a maraca and two gourds of *pulque*.¹⁵ In the centre of it all, tucked just under an amaranth cereal bar, was a 1-túmin note. The objects assembled represented various things. The seeds, rocks and straw handicrafts represented the livelihoods of many of the tumistas from Tlaxiaco gathered. The coffee and vanilla represented the Totonacapan region. The 1-túmin note was the object which united

¹⁵ *Pulque* is a fermented alcoholic drink made from maguey.

the tumistas both functionally and symbolically through the MAT network. A ritual to mark the opening of the Tianguis Tumista Papantla was about to take place.

Marisol and Ruben, both tumistas from Tlaxiaco, orchestrated the ritual. A conch was blown to invoke the elements and spirits, and to ask them for their blessings. Gourds of *pulque* were passed around, and those stood hand in hand were bathed with heavy, fragrant incense smoke to chase away bad spirits and generate harmony. The scene unfolded beneath Teodoro Cano's imposing sculptured mural celebrating Totonac cosmology and culture, which ran along a wall that framed one side of the central park.¹⁶ Above the wall, in the atrium of Papantla's 16th century cathedral on a hill overlooking town, the *Palo Volador* – the quintessential image of the region – stood stretching into the evening sky.¹⁷ The aesthetic juxtaposition of elements and symbols charged the event with a transcendental nature.¹⁸

What exactly was said during the ceremony was hard to discern at times. The event had been scheduled to take place earlier that evening, but a last minute change saw the ritual taking place at the same time as the weekly Viernes de Danzón (Danzón Friday); an activity hosted by the Municipal Government, where a live band took to the stage in the ornate kiosk, leading sets of finely dressed dancers who had gathered on the other side of the park. The tianguis organisers had managed to secure use of the park for the whole weekend, but their old, one-speaker sound system proved no match for the band. Despite this, there were brief moments when the band took a pause, and it was possible to discern the gist of what the tumistas said, and the language they used to conduct the ritual. It was in one of these moments that we were reminded why we had been congregated: '*Nosotros venimos por ese papelito*' (We came for that little bit of paper), i.e. the 1-túmin note.

Tianguis tumista as ritual moments

In this chapter, I explore the role of tianguis tumista in the consolidation of the MAT. In essence, I argue that the tianguis are ritual moments that are essential to the celebration and perpetuation of the MAT project. Here I draw upon the Durkheimian tradition of ritual as important moments of 'collective effervescence' in which people are brought together and

¹⁶ Teodoro Cano is a much-celebrated painter from Papantla.

¹⁷ The *Palo Volador* is a large pole, traditionally made out of a tree trunk, that is used for the *Danza de los voladores* (see chapter 1).

¹⁸ For an idea what the tianguis and the ritual is like, and for short interviews with the tumistas, there is now a video on youtube (in Spanish) filmed at the Tianguis Tumista Papantla 2019, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bw1e8ghcAIY> (accessed 21/09/19).

feel part of a unified societal whole. Here, instead of society, I focus on the tumista community. As we saw in chapter 3, the tumista community – or family – is united in a network that stretches far and wide, and is made up of a diverse group of people. Many have never met a fellow tumista from another city or state many kilometres away. We have seen in the preceding chapters that most of the daily interactions tumistas have with their *compañeros* is within their own, localised networks, and when it is with tumistas further afield, it is usually through email, website or social media interfaces. We saw in the previous chapter the benefits of face-to-face interaction as a group or community, which was central to cultivating and living the values underpinning the MAT. The tianguis are different from the Mercado Túmin because they are rare events when tumistas from across the network on a national scale come together. The tianguis are thus moments where the tumistas can meet up with their wider community, and experiment together with enacting and fostering social relations built on the principles of their movement. In this chapter, I explore the preparation, content and consequence of these direct encounters.

I also focus on the role of ritual on a second level, referring specifically to inauguration rituals that are realised as part of the tianguis. Here I follow Graeber (2001; 2013) once again, where we see the centrality of the physical túmin as a symbol or talisman of the base of mutuality assumed by belonging to the MAT, and the type of sociality the tumistas endeavour to practice within this. The túmin note is the symbolic representation of the tumistas endeavours to create new social configurations guided by the values they inscribe in their project. An important part of this argument also rests on the idea of the tianguis as important pedagogical arenas of embodied learning, in which the tumistas and the public are urged to practise using the túmin as a fundamental part of the transformative process in learning to see each other not as clients but as comrades.

As we have seen, the word tianguis means itinerant, open-air market. However, more than just markets, the tianguis tumistas were like festivals: alongside the physical marketplace and the buying, selling and barter exchange that took place, there were a whole host of activities that made up the ‘cultural agenda’. These activities ranged from performances by folk groups playing pre-Hispanic music, workshops on silk-screening and organic indigo tie-dyeing, to talks on the importance of the peasant economy, food sovereignty and holistic health and well-being. The tianguis were also strategic moments for the tumistas to hold cross-network assemblies: analysis and evaluation of the MAT project took place, lines of action were proposed and agreements made.

Much as we saw with the Mercado Túmin in the last chapter, many things are woven together in the tianguis. The physical market space was where tumistas practised using the túmin to mediate economic transactions; the cultural agenda promoted and inspired exchange of ideas, practical knowledge and art forms considered ‘alternative’ in one way or another; and the assemblies constituted the organisational nuts and bolts of tumista ‘good governance’ and learning to relate to one another across the network. The tianguis are important manifestations of tumista ritualised belief: the principles of trust, solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy are imagined, enacted, celebrated and propagated through the events. However, it would be wrong to assume that the tianguis are events that forgo any sort of conflict or tension. In fact, quite the opposite is true. In this chapter, I also look at how conflicts and tensions that arose relating to the tianguis were concealed in an effort to communicate a sense of strength and unity, which was vital for the successful completion of the ritual.

The chapter ends by picking up the story of Maestra Irene. It is through her words we get a sense of the ability of the túmin as an object and a symbol that ‘transcends borders and unites hearts’ across a diverse group of people. We see the importance of the tianguis for tumistas like Irene, who may struggle to make sense of what they have to do in their hometowns to keep the MAT alive. Ultimately, we are reminded that the MAT is a project that seeks to reconstruct social relations built on sentiments of trust and belonging, where value is placed in the intentions and actions of tumistas as they learn to become better people.

Part 1: Tianguis Tumista Teotitlán del Valle

The opening ethnographic vignette was not the first time I had seen the túmin as the focus of a ritual. That had been in an inauguration ritual for the Tianguis Tumista Teotitlán del Valle, in the central valleys of Oaxaca state, in August 2015. The tianguis I focus upon in this chapter are examples of large-scale, cross-network public events, and for this reason, the ritual was so important to communicate a sense of belonging and perpetuation. As we have seen elsewhere in the thesis, smaller, localised tianguis and assemblies were central to MAT social movement activity since the project was launched in 2010. They were essential to facilitate exchange between tumistas, in the form of direct, economic exchange of products and services, but it also meant exchanging thoughts and ideas – communication that was formalised in the assembly. These two components of the tianguis constituted a major part of MAT praxis, where tumistas were encouraged to practise different forms of exchange, which was an instrumental part of practising and enacting forms of sociality

different from those dictated by the overarching capitalist marketplace. The tianguis tumista in Teotitlán was the first large-scale, cross-network tianguis to take place over a period of two-three days, with representatives from many different localities in the MAT present. The success of the tianguis meant that it became an important model to follow for future events, like the Tianguis Tumista Papantla, which I address in the second part of the chapter. The tianguis have become an integral part of the tumista calendar: both events have been celebrated on an annual basis since 2015. They have therefore become an important tangible expression of instituting the MAT. Moreover, in this chapter we see how the tianguis in Teotitlán reveals another facet of the MAT as the tumista network expanded into new territory. As we already know, indigeneity plays a key part in the MAT story. Yet Teotitlán was the first place I saw the MAT clearly drawn into social relations and articulated through values and a worldview associated with indigenous, communal life.

The first tianguis tumista in Teotitlán was held on the weekend of the 8th and 9th of August 2015. The event had been mainly organised by Marco Turra, Adriana Osorio, and local community figure and ex-Federal deputy, Aurora Bazán. Marco is an Italian who has lived in Mexico since 2010, and even before signing up to the MAT after a visit to Espinal in 2011, Marco had devised his own monetary system and printed his own currency, called El Faoro.¹⁹ Marco Turra is one of the most enthusiastic and polemic members of the MAT. He has been criticised for signing up new *socios* with as little as 10t, and in June 2012, he took 1, 109 t to sign up new *socios* in Italy (Junta de Buen Gobierno 2014: 146). Despite Marco's controversial strategies, there is no doubt he has done much to promote and further the project. The tianguis tumista in Teotitlán is a good example of this. Evoking the reciprocal community mechanism of *guelagetza*, Aurora told me that she agreed to help Marco organise the tianguis because of the close relationship she had with his wife, Adriana.²⁰ Adriana is a textile artist who has given training workshops in Teotitlán, showing the town's famous weavers of the town contemporary weaving and dying techniques. Aurora further solicited Adriana's help in exchange for rugs (La Cooperacha, 2015). Adriana and Aurora therefore had a pre-existing relationship built on exchange of knowledge and products, which was

¹⁹ Marco is an enthusiastic blogger and activist, who for many years has been predicting the fall of the global financial order. His currency is for what he calls the 'Sacred Economy', and has a cross-the-board equivalence of 13. For example, 1 *Faoro* is worth 13 Mexican pesos, or 13 túmin, or 13 British pounds. On the note, it says the *Faoro* is valid for exchange between 'people who give it value'. See <https://intercambiofaoro.wordpress.com/page/4/> (accessed 09/07/2019).

²⁰ *Guelagetza* is an indigenous reciprocal exchange mechanism practiced in Oaxaca (see Cohen, 2000; Stephen, 2005).

undoubtedly an important precedent to the support Aurora was able to lend, exercising her local influence to help the tianguis operations. Shortly before the event, Marco invited UniTierra Oaxaca, an educational institution in the state capital, to participate.²¹ This gave the tianguis diffusion across wider networks and more publicity, including a radio spot. The event had already been publicised and promoted enthusiastically through the MAT network's email threads and various Facebook pages. There would be delegations from Papantla, Puebla, Xalapa, the State of Mexico and Chiapas.

The tianguis had been scheduled to take place that weekend to coincide with the UN's International Day of World Indigenous Peoples, on the 9th of August. Around 40 tumistas had set up stalls under a large canvas structure covering the plaza outside Teotitlán's municipal palace. The majority of the stalls belonged to tumistas from Oaxaca State, including from the capital, the Pacific coastal region, and the central valleys, where Teotitlán is located. Then there were the stalls of tumistas that had come from afar. An information and registration table had been set up in one corner of the plaza, to register new *socios* and to answer any questions. Inside the municipal palace, workshops took place, from pottery and music to serigraphy, which formed part of the 'cultural agenda'. Directly outside the municipal palace, there was a space used as a stage to host the opening ritual, musical performances, round table discussions and talks, as well as an open mic session for sharing experiences and testimonies. The event would last two days, and had been preceded by a day of workshops, talks and an affiliation to the MAT in UniTierra, followed by the evening presentation of the book 'Aceptamos Túmin' to an audience gathered in a downtown Oaxaca café, book shop and cultural centre.

Some tumistas considered the tianguis the biggest and best public event that had been coordinated under the banner of the MAT in the project's existence. The market stalls – where tumistas offered a variety of items, including prepared foods, bright, colourful handicrafts of woven cotton and wool, organic chocolate, *mezcal*, books from a number of radical printing presses, artwork, natural soaps, shampoos and medicinal products – coupled with the eclectic mix of events on the 'cultural agenda', made the event feel like a festival

²¹ UniTierra Oaxaca was founded in 2001 by the activist and academic Gustavo Esteva. UniTierra was born out of a dissatisfaction on the part of indigenous communities and representatives with existing educational models in the late 1990s, and it adheres to the Sexta Declaración de la Selva Lacandona. It forms part of a now international network of UniTierras, and the Oaxaca campus is located in the city of Oaxaca, although most of the key actors live and work their cooperatives in the nearby town of San Andrés Huayapam.

or village fair. In effect, the tianguis was a celebration of many things: from Teotitlán's heritage and the world's indigenous peoples, to resistance and alternatives to globalisation and the capitalist marketplace. The tianguis also signalled the cementation and start of a serious effort to articulate a TRA in Oaxaca, as distinct from but part of the wider MAT network (as we saw in chapter 3). There was a lot of optimism in the air. The opening ritual communicated the transcendental nature of the event. To this we now turn.

Ritual, magic and trust

The opening ritual was carried out by civil and religious authorities and eminent townspeople of Teotitlán. First, a representative of the religious *mayordomos* [leaders] took the microphone, who, holding a smoking incense burner in the other hand, carried out a ritual to 'ask permission' to hold the tianguis and give 'energy and wisdom' to the event. The man was stood in front of the other representatives, who were lined up on the stage-like area just in front of the municipal palace. An 'Aceptamos Túmin' poster was propped up against one pillar of the building. A crowd was gathered in the *plaza* below, listening, taking photos and recording the ritual. The man said that the day marked a 'transcendental date' for his community and the state of Oaxaca, with the inauguration of a new project: the MAT. With the incense burner held high above his head, the man asked permission from Padre Sol (Father Sun) to 'illuminate' them in the 'use of the money'. The money – the túmin – was said to have a 'communal value' that would help the new tumistas take up (*retomar*) their products anew and 'share as a community'. The oration linked hopes for the new project with hopes for the continued social and economic well-being of the community. The túmin was also framed as an example of 'retaking and revaluing' the concept of trueque. As noted in chapter 1, this was seen as an ancestral indigenous practice that was celebrated at the launch of the MAT project in Teotitlán:

We ask for a moment of silence to ask Padre Sol [Father Sun] to grant this project solid foundations, and we also ask that this community's *artesanía* [handicrafts] keep thriving, we ask for publicity, a form of subsistence for the families of this community. We ask Padre Sol, Madre Tierra [Mother Earth] and Madre Luna [Mother Moon] for the air that gives us oxygen, [that it should] always be pure air, good oxygen, and that the bad air go elsewhere. We ask that this community continue to be harmonious and calm, where people respect one another, and that all the *pueblos* of Oaxaca take [and learn from] the experience that we are focusing on today: this resource, the túmin; a communal value. And that subsequently we can retake this like our ancestors did with *trueque* [...] So, one of the objectives of this túmin is that it starts today: here it is sown, and hopefully within four years we will see the result [and] where it will have spread [among]

all the communities, and especially ourselves as native people, we will retake and revalue it. We hope that the blessing will be forever and for all of those gathered [here] that we have the energy, that we have that spirit/will to strengthen something that benefits our communities and our people.

These opening words set the tone for the following participation. Locating the *túmin* within a rich discourse of Teotitlán's indigenous, communal practices was the focus of Aurora Bazán's participation in the ritual. With a large bouquet of lilies in one arm, Aurora took the microphone. Like the previous speaker, she paid particular attention to the practice of *trueque*, which she described as being central to the *túmin* and the type of exchange that would take place in the *tianguis*. Lamenting the effects of 'globalisation, consumerism and marketing' on the ancestral tradition, Aurora charged the event, and the participation of those who were gathered, with a special purpose: to 'sow the seeds of conscience' amongst young people to bring about a better future, retaking again the practice of *trueque*, and thus spreading 'harmony and solidarity'. Following Aurora, the Municipal President of Teotitlán gave a similar speech, eulogising the riches of Mother Nature and Zapotec culture and juxtaposing these to the 'ideology of globalisation'. Once again it was hoped that the *túmin* would be instrumental in revalorising past indigenous practices and that it could raise consciousness amongst young people to help change the world.

Juan Castro closed the ritual, thanking those present and pointing out that although the Municipality of Espinal was a *socio* of the MAT, they had never given the *tumistas* a ceremony like the one that was taking place. Juan put special emphasis on the importance of *confianza* (trust):

We are very grateful that you have received us and trusted in us, because this is a project of trust. 'We accept *túmin*' - what this means is 'I trust you'. It might be that it is [just] a community currency, but in essence what it is saying is this: we are trusting each other.

His words were met with applause and cheers from the crowd of people gathered below the steps of the *ayuntamiento* [town hall], as Marco Turra finished by shouting various *vivas*: *¡Viva Teotitlán del Valle! ¡Viva los pueblos de Oaxaca! ¡Viva el túmin!*²² Meanwhile, Juan, Aurora and the municipal president were invited to cut a ribbon that was extended in front of the esplanade below the *ayuntamiento* where the stalls were laid out under a large

²² *Viva* can be translated as 'long live'.

tarpaulin. The act was followed with more cheers and applause, as the three of them stood posing for photos, officially opening the first Tianguis Tumista of Teotitlán del Valle.

The opening ritual of the tianguis was the first time I had seen the *túmin* implicated in such a varied arrangement of people, discourse, hopes and dreams. In the above examples, the *túmin* was used as a thread to weave together similar, related ideas. In particular, the revalorisation of an indigenous past is juxtaposed with the ‘ideology of globalisation’. The *túmin* is imagined as an instrument to help facilitate exchanges like *trueque*, a practice that Aurora lists alongside ideas of communal value, the well-being of the community, and harmonious and solidary coexistence. Thus, the opening ritual brought the MAT clearly into contact with discourses relating to indigeneity and notions of *comunalidad*. None of this was particularly new: as we have seen in chapter 1 and chapter 3, the MAT has long been associated with, appropriated by, or interpreted through ideologies and discourses that stem from indigeneity. However, in the tianguis in Teotitlán, for the first time, the MAT was being subsumed into an overwhelmingly indigenous environment and articulated through discourses and notions of indigeneity that are explicitly part of a socio-economic, cultural and political landscape.

Stephen (2005) has written about the increasing dependency of the local economy of Teotitlán on the global crafts market. Interestingly, one of her main interlocutors is Aurora Bazán. The knock-on effects of this on more traditional forms of community organisation, gender and traditional labour divisions that Stephen documents are of course crucial to understanding the wider context in which the MAT was received in the town. We saw above how Aurora understood her role in helping Marco through the relations of obligation and reciprocity; and these ideas are reflected in the language used in the ritual. What I would like to underline here specifically is the way in which the *túmin* is used as a token of hopes for the wellbeing of the community. In the first quote, the *mayordomo* representative uses the opportunity to ask Father Sun that the MAT project ‘have solid foundations’, but that also the community’s handicrafts trade keep thriving in order for people to put food on the table for their families. The *túmin* is understood as a tool to stimulate trade, but the type of trade that is hoped for is based on the ancestral model of *trueque*. The consistent reference to *trueque* is interesting. As we saw in chapter 1, when asked, many tumistas would often explain that the *túmin* was ‘like *trueque*’. Of course, in any literal sense, the *túmin* was not

like barter exchange at all: it is a medium of exchange in the form of a currency.²³ However, here I suggest that we can understand the consistent reference to trueque not just in literal terms, but as an idea that indexes a wider generalised notion of reciprocity and communal being. As we saw in chapter 3, this is bound up in the philosophy of *comunalidad* (Martínez Luna 2010), which is at the core of the politico-ethical project of the MAT.

The language used in the ritual demonstrates how the MAT was interpreted and articulated through an indigenous spiritual worldview. ‘The túmin’ and ‘the project’ are evoked in the same realm as larger cosmological figures and forces such as Padre Sol and Madre Tierra. The tumistas ask permission and blessings from these figures, and it is hoped that the MAT will be blessed with a solid foundation and good energy (pure air, good oxygen). Here, the MAT and the túmin are clearly imbued with blessings and good energy in order to facilitate the socio-economic wellbeing of the community. Thinking back to the opening vignette, similar discourse was used in the inauguration ritual for the Tianguis Tumista in Papantla: elements and spirits were evoked and their blessings were asked for, and incense was used to chase away ‘bad air’ or ‘bad spirits’. The metaphors of ‘sowing’ and ‘growing’ also appear here, as they did on many other occasions during my fieldwork, in reference to spreading and cultivating the ideology and practice of the MAT project to foster social change.²⁴ The idea of growth and spread will be revisited below. For now, I want to dwell on the implications of placing the túmin in direct contact with cosmological forces and beings in a ritual setting.

Money and other valuable objects often find themselves at the centre of rituals (see Bloch, 1989; Graeber, 2001; Taussig, 1980). In the above, we have a scenario resonant with Taussig’s (1980) ‘baptism of the bill’, for example. Here it would appear that the tumistas, as part of their instituting of the MAT, have also resorted to imbuing their efforts with some sort of magic or mysticism. The túmin is located – either linguistically like the scene described above, or literally as was the case in the opening vignette (and from what I understand has been the case ever since) – at the centre of a ritual. Yet, while the Cauca peasants Taussig writes about baptise the bill in secrecy in the hope of personal gain and at the expense of the child the baptism was meant for, in tumista rituals quite the opposite

²³ There were some cases, like in the Mercado Túmin Puebla, where the tumistas did practice direct barter exchange.

²⁴ Of course, the phenomenon of commodity fetishism does much the same in the popular imagination, lending credence to the idea that the economy is something that is ‘out there’, often with a life of its own, and that markets grow, stretch, reach, contract, shrink etc.

happens: the túmin takes centre stage in a blessing that is channelled towards communal well-being.

So what is going on here? It seems to me that grandiose discourse and performance thus become key components in the communication of hope, unity, strength and trust and so on, and the rituals drive home a sense of transcendental importance that frames what is going to happen in the tianguis over the coming days. The wider contexts for these rituals are also important: the tianguis referred to in this chapter came at a time of important, symbolic moments in the development of the MAT. In the case of Teotitlán, it was the first time such a large-scale, cross network event had taken place, and the tianguis formally marked the creation of a TRA in Oaxaca State. The tianguis proved for the first time that big, cross-network events could be realised. Of course, all of this was made possible through a lot of work, preparation, coordination and compromise between different groups of people. In the case of Papantla, as we will see in more detail below, the tianguis took place at a time of conflict and crisis within the CC, and some saw the future of the MAT in the balance, dependent on the success or failure of the event. In both instances, it was essential to demonstrate and effectuate an overarching ethic of trust in and commitment to the project. Trust, as we saw in the opening vignette, is what Juan explicitly stated the túmin was really all about: ‘We accept túmin’ means ‘I trust you’. Juan went on to say that through the form of the alternative currency, what is actually being expressed is trust in one another. Trust in the túmin, as with any currency, is elemental to its circulation and value as a tool for economic exchange. Trust in the physical form of currency is actually trust that someone else will receive the same currency as payment – or as is usually the case with the túmin, as part payment – in an exchange transaction. Trust here speaks to the disposition of the tumistas to accept túmin, to maintain its value and keep it in circulation. Trust as mediated through the túmin is thus trust in someone else who accepts it: the tumista. Here Juan clearly states that the túmin is an index of trust, which is one of the key elements of the wider sentiment of mutuality – the solidary social relations – it symbolises.

Here we are starting to see a convergence of different things in the symbolism of the túmin note. On the one hand, the ritual seems to endow the túmin with the forces of spiritual beings to contribute to the wellbeing of the community and the continued growth of the project. The túmin is thus being cast as a talisman for bringing wellbeing to the community, harmonious existence between communities etc. On the other, Juan makes it clear that the túmin is a symbolic materialisation of the type of sociality that the tumistas endeavour to create. This

is a clear example of the *túmin* as a ‘valuable object’ (Graeber 2001, 2013). The note exists as a token of alternative sociality: it both ‘represents and embodies the value of a certain genre of creative activity’ (Graeber 2013: 225). The ‘creative activity’ in question here is the collective transformation from ‘*clientes* to *compañeros*’, the cultivation of solidary relations, and all the hard work and effort that goes into sustaining and propagating the MAT.

The inauguration rituals were also instrumental because they served as a framework through and springboard from which the *tumistas* could project their own hopes and dreams, and listen to and interpret those of their fellow *tumistas*. The role of rituals can be understood as moments in which a whole range of abstract hopes, dreams, doubts and anxieties were reified into language and performance, and one effect of this was that the *túmin* was charged with a symbolic power: it was something that helped to hold the whole event together. The rituals served to unite a diverse group of people together under the banner of a common cause: the *túmin*. The rituals were essential in stimulating the sorts of feelings and emotions that facilitated the enactment of the principles of the MAT, especially between people who had never met each other before. Here it could be argued that they created what Juris has called ‘affective solidarity’ (2008); or from a more Durkheimian perspective, ‘collective effervescence’ (2001). The performative nature of the ritual worked on a couple of levels. First, performing a ritual set the tone and agenda for the days of the *tianguis*: the objective was to strengthen the idea of the MAT, through a number of processes, the first of which was the inauguration ritual itself. Others were through the practice of using the *túmin* and engaging in exchanges of an ‘alternative’ kind; attending the workshops, talks, and other cultural events; and engaging in the prefigurative politics characteristic of the assemblies: processes of embodied learning and enacting of alternative socialities which will be addressed in the rest of this chapter.

Practising solidarity economy

Juan’s above affirmation that the *túmin* was really all about trust reminds us of the underlying principles of the MAT (trust, solidarity, mutual aid and autonomy) and the aims of the project to cultivate alternative social relations built on them. As we have seen throughout the thesis, the *túmin* is a tool to help facilitate a transformation: the ‘changing the capitalist chip for a solidary chip’, or seeing one another as comrades, not clients. Of course, this process is not quite as simple as changing a chip. Questioning the efficacy of

affect and emotion in motivating durable social change, Pedwell (2017) pays attention to the transforming of habits. Pedwell writes:

On the one hand, ‘habit’ conjures unthinking reflex, mindless repetition and hence *stasis*. Yet, on the other hand, without the formation of enduring habits, no substantive embodied, social or political *change* can take shape, and become rooted enough to sustain. (2017: 101-102, emphasis in original)

As much as the tianguis tumista were places infused with ‘affective solidarity’ and ‘collective effervescence’ then, they were also important pedagogical arenas: places where the work of ‘changing habit’ could start, be practiced, or take root. For example, the MAT promoters consistently urged those present to practice using the túmin to mediate economic transactions, which they saw as the basis for constructing new socialities, or a catalyst in the change of consciousness. A popular motto of the MAT promoters from the start was a focus on ‘the three Cs’: ‘zero costs, zero risks, zero complexities’. The three Cs were repeated appeals to encourage people to get involved in the project, demonstrating that it cost nothing, involved no risks, and was simple – the most obvious expression of this philosophy is seen in the túmin to peso parity. Yet, actually getting people to use the túmin was not that simple. Trust in the project, and in the túmin as currency that others would accept, had to be cultivated, and tumistas habits had to be changed. So while the theory behind how the MAT worked and how to use the túmin was briefly explained one-to-one on registering, or made clear on paper in the ‘Aceptamos Túmin’ book and other printed materials like hand-out pamphlets, when it came to using the túmin in practice, there was a lot of room for confusion, ambiguity or indifference. The tianguis were thus spaces in which people were invited and urged to practice using the túmin. It would be easier to learn in a collective environment, in a place and at a moment that were conducive to circulating túmin and enacting the principles of the MAT.

The tianguis tumista in Teotitlán was a prime example of this. Over the course of the weekend, the various MAT promoters present urged people to practice using túmin: ‘How much does this cost?’; ‘And with túmin?’; ‘I’ll give you 20 pesos and 10 túmin’. Of course, these sorts of transactions were familiar to them, and many accepted 100% túmin for their products or services. The aim was to familiarise the new tumistas with the currency, and encourage them to experiment with accepting more than the standard 10% rule. Many of the new tumistas present were accustomed to the sort of negotiation that comes with barter and haggling, especially in handicraft markets and with tourists. What was interesting here was

that the element of negotiation was now in relation to accepting an alternative currency. Responses to this were varied. Some embraced the novelty of the túmin; some readily accepted it in exchange for a guaranteed sale. Others said that it was a form of demonstrating solidarity; and some compared accepting a percentage of túmin to the idea of giving a discount.

On the second day of the tianguis, the leader of a local group of cyclists from Oaxaca City was invited to take the stage-area in front of the town hall and share his experience over the loudspeaker. The cyclist enthusiastically raised a small, embroidered wallet in the air, and explained why and how he had bought it. He highlighted the importance of buying local, traditional and quality items, and narrated the ‘interesting experience’, of using part *peso* and part túmin to pay for them: 47 mx and 3 t. The cyclist urged people to make the most of the opportunity to buy quality handicrafts and invited people to have a go at practicing using túmin. The cyclist’s intervention suggests that using túmin was perhaps secondary to his main interest in buying a wallet. Although he urged people to practice using the túmin, the cyclist’s affirmation that it was an ‘interesting experience’ suggests that there was little of transcendental importance in doing so. In this particular case, it is clear that the túmin primarily served functional ends, perhaps dispelling any notion of the túmin as a symbolic token for something more. Here we see how the túmin can be many things to different people, given the context in which and the intention with which it is used. However, what exactly was ‘interesting’ about his experience in using the currency? One can imagine that if the cyclist was to have paid solely in Mexican pesos for his wallet, his experience may not have been as ‘interesting’ as he said it was, and he probably would have not urged people to practice using túmin. Perhaps the use of two currencies made it interesting. The dual payment interrupted what would have otherwise been a standard monetary transaction in pesos. As is the case all over the world, most people rarely stop and think reflexively about what they are doing when they use a state-backed fiat currency to buy things. We can imagine that the interruption of the túmin in this case might have done what the MAT promoters hoped of it: that through its use, the tumista ‘gain consciousnesses’. This consciousness can take on a double form. First, as with the cyclist, the interruption could serve as a point of reflection on the nature of monetary transactions and relations we habitually engage in under capitalism. Second – and most importantly – through practicing using the túmin the user is slowly changing habits and engendering a solidary disposition towards their fellow *socios* (changing that chip), which is increased with the participation in

the wider MAT project (assemblies, workshops, tianguis and the like). For this to happen, however, people needed to get their hands on túmin in the first place. Fortunately, the tianguis were places where túmin were put into circulation in large quantities.

On membership and consciousness (again)

The tianguis were moments of mass-affiliation to the MAT project. A registration table was set up and staffed by MAT promoters for the duration of the event, where attendees were invited to sign up providing they met the baseline requisites of offering a product or service, agreeing to accept at least 10% túmin in each transaction, and an adherence to the guidelines and principles of the project. We have seen in chapter 3 that membership was a debated subject. Yet it seems that in general, the cautious attitudes towards network expansion were dropped in the tianguis – they were celebratory, festive events, where the general public was also invited to participate in the ECOSOL experience by asking for change in túmin.²⁵ At one point during the tianguis in Teotitlán, I found myself behind the registration table with Mayeli, the MAT coordinator from Xalapa. There was a constant stream of people visiting the table, asking for information, wishing to sign up to the project, or to have their introductory allocation of túmin made up to 500t. This tianguis coincided with a new issue of túmin notes, which were kept in ready-packed bundles of 100t in different denominations in a cardboard box under the table, alongside blocks of registration forms and other paperwork. In the time I spent behind the registration table many women from the town came to sign up to the MAT project. As a renowned weaving town, most of the women who registered produced weavings and other handicrafts. There were some exceptions, with visitors from Oaxaca City or further afield registering with different trades and professions, but the majority of new tumistas were women artisans from Teotitlán. Over the weekend, just over 70 new tumistas were signed up to the project.

While I was behind the registration table, an old woman accompanied by a young child came to the desk and, referring to the túmin, asked me for a ‘ticket’. Following the procedure for filling out the registration form, I asked for her name and what she produced or which service she offered. She also wove rugs. In what was by then a well-rehearsed repetition of what I had heard the other MAT promoters say to new tumistas, I explained to her what the túmin was, how it was used, with whom and where she could use it. I then started removing the

²⁵ This modality, known as ‘*Túmin de cambio*’ was invented for people who are not registered tumistas to participate in the project by asking for their change from a purchase from a tumista in túmin.

túmin from their plastic bags and counting them out, filling out the quantities and the corresponding folio numbers on the registration form. The woman then asked if it was possible to take just one bag (100 t), explaining that she only wanted them so that the child could get something to eat. I gave her one bag, thinking that she, along with many other people who had registered that weekend, had little interest in the wider project of the MAT: for her the túmin was a ticket that could be used to feed a hungry mouth. Later that afternoon, I saw the woman walking around trying to buy a plate of food with her recently acquired túmin. Unfortunately, it seemed that no one that day was accepting 100% túmin, and the woman was not able to feed the child with the currency alone.

The above story points to two enduring complications with the tianguis mass-affiliation strategy from the point of view of functional efficacy of the MAT. The first lay in the fact that most of those who signed up to the MAT from Teotitlán did so with the same products of their labour: handicrafts. To start with, the tianguis event had been planned and coordinated with Aurora Bazán and her textile weaving organisation, Mujeres Unidas (Women United). This meant that the tumista pioneers of the town were all women weavers. Teotitlán is well known for producing ‘authentic’ Zapotec textiles for the global craft market (Stephen 2005). The majority of tumistas in Teotitlán were artisans who worked in this sector. To me, it seemed that the obvious complication here would be how to ensure the circulation of túmin beyond the tianguis event: how many tumistas would want to buy a rug or blouse from their neighbour, if they themselves produced the same items? Juan shared my doubts about the effectiveness of releasing a large amount of currency into a small locality, where most of the tumistas worked in the same industry. He had made a visit to the municipal market to invite different types of producers and traders into the MAT. The logic behind this was that the new tumistas would then have a number of diverse trading partners between whom they could exchange their túmin, thus strengthening the local network. This, of course, was one of the most immediate and practical aims of the project. However, it was also a long-term aim of the project, and this would depend on the day-to-day reproduction and strengthening of a network, along with all the ideas and practices we have seen in this thesis (use of túmin, regular tianguis, assemblies, etc.).

The second complication related to the issue of whether the túmin as a tool could alone bring about some higher level of ECOSOL consciousness, or whether this change would be generated through the ongoing organisational and educational process of MAT participation, or indeed both. As we have seen elsewhere in the thesis – and chapter 3 in particular – this

is a recurring tension and point of difference between the tumistas. However, the tianguis were something different: here the importance lay in celebrating the moment, and inviting everyone to take part in the festivities. Therefore, while it was hoped the tianguis would ignite interest in engaging in different forms of social exchange and organisation through the MAT (remember the ‘sowing’ metaphors); what was more important here was not strategizing over *who* could be registered as a new tumista (to ensure a “logical” functioning of the MAT), but that people practiced using túmin in the moment.

In this section, I have explored some of the multiple consequences of practicing using an alternative currency. Practicing using the túmin to mediate economic transactions was seen as a way to engender different social relations based on the principles that were enshrined into the MAT project. As we have seen in chapters 1 and 3, Juan believed that the ‘túmin is a school’, and through its use, people will learn and ‘gain consciousnesses’ of the benefits implicit in the underlying principles of the MAT. As we saw in the previous section on the inauguration rituals, for some tumistas these principles were symbolically represented in the túmin note. However, we have also seen the case of the woman who wanted to feed her child, likening the túmin to a ticket to be exchanged for something. For the woman the túmin was a token of a different sort, which at the end of the day she could not exchange for food as she had supposed. In this case, the túmin needed to be used in conjunction with the peso, or one of the tumistas offering food would have had to accept 100% túmin, in order for the woman to be able to feed the child, yet both of these possibilities were apparently not clear. We also have the example of the cyclist, who demonstrated interest but ambiguity in his transacting with two currencies. The examples presented here shed light on what the túmin as a tool can and cannot do, when it is used in situations that are complex and contingent upon different people’s understandings of it.

Part 2: Tianguis Tumista Papantla

In this second section, we look in more detail at the Tianguis Tumista Papantla. The Papantla example is useful for exploring in more depth the role of the tianguis as a ritual that sought to foreground sentiments of trust and solidarity to overcome underlying conflict and tension. This is because the tianguis took place during an internal crisis of the MAT, thus enactment and projection of the core principles was essential to the successful completion of the ritual and the propagation of the movement. In chapter 3 we looked at how diversity and difference of opinion within the MAT were negotiated. Here we turn to look at the role of tianguis in

creating and sustaining conditions of trust and consensus across the network. Accordingly, we see how there was more emphasis on concealing conflict and displaying unity in the ritual moment.

National Túmin Fair and ECOSOL Meeting

The tianguis in Papantla was originally planned to be the first national meeting of the MAT network since its expansion into more than 15 states of the republic. The event was envisioned as a National Túmin Fair and a Meeting of Solidarity Economy (Feria Nacional Túmin – Encuentro de Economía Solidaria). The idea of the event was to reflect on, discuss and make proposals for the future of the ECOSOL paradigm in Mexico. As we saw in chapter 3, the role of networking was a key focus of diverse transformative projects in Mexico, and the CC at the time considered the MAT a unifying element for disperse groups of collectives operating within different radical paradigms.²⁶ The MAT promoters thus had high aspirations for the event, which they hoped would provide constructive insight into building a broad alternative to the ‘actual monetarised and predatory capitalism’ in Mexico. Similar to past public events and tianguis organised, there would be talks, workshops, demonstrations, and round table discussions, along with an ongoing tumista ‘fair’ – the marketplace for the tumistas to exchange and sell their products. The event was also planned to host the first national-level assembly, counting on the participation of representatives from each MAT collective in the country.

After an initial consultation on what dates would work best for most tumistas, organisational work started, and tasks were delegated through different commissions. A registration platform was set up and a provisional programme of events was released online. Many tumistas had the memory or had heard of the success of the tianguis in Teotitlán almost a year before. Furthermore, the year since the first big tianguis had been marked by several events across the national MAT network, like the strengthening of the TRA in Puebla, Oaxaca, and Chiapas, and the opening of numerous Casas Túmin in different localities. There was much excitement surrounding the proposed event: the MAT experience was growing and moving in directions that the promoters had never envisioned. In Puebla, the news was received enthusiastically. Mario was commissioned to design the poster for the event, and the tumistas who met on a weekly basis in the Mercado Túmin were motivated

²⁶ And as we saw in chapter 1, the túmin was the most widespread alternative currency out of a growing number of such projects in the country.

by the prospect of participating and going to visit the ‘birthplace of the túmin’, which was a short trip down the road. In Oaxaca, Marco transmitted his enthusiasm, and whipped up excitement through the official communications about how a group of tumistas would be coming from Tlaxiaco and Teotitlán in particular, giving symbolic and literal continuity to the idea of the extended network and the importance of the tianguis. Equally, news came from as far away as Chiapas that a delegation was preparing itself, animated by the thought of meeting so many fellow tumistas for the first time.

The internal conflict and the complication of trust

On the 26th of June 2016, less than three weeks before the event was due to take place, the CC sent out a communiqué, informing of their decision to postpone it, citing ‘internal organisational problems’ as the reason for doing so. The consequences of the decision to cancel the event could have been disastrous. One influential tumista, hyped by the news, started to spread panic throughout the network through a string of dramatic emails in which he claimed that the decision to cancel signalled ‘*el fin de la confianza*’: the end of trust. This was a strong accusation, given that trust was cited as the first guiding principle of the movement, and the thing which held the network together.

Some tumistas decided to go ahead and hold a tianguis anyway. The group argued that the CC decision to cancel was disrespectful and devalued the time, effort and resources that many people had already pooled into organising the event. Lots of people had mobilised, agreed to participate and valuable spaces and resources obtained, ranging from chairs, trestle-tables and tarpaulins for the stalls to accommodation and promotional material. The name of the event was changed from the ‘National Túmin Fair’ to the ‘Tianguis Tumista Papantla’. The name change helped re-envision the event as a local tianguis organised by the tumistas in Papantla, and an invitation to join them was sent via email and the Kgosni for those who still wanted to attend and ‘exercise [their] right to be solidary, loving, and rebellious’. Those organising the event even called themselves the Tumistas en Resistencia – tumistas in resistance – although they never made it explicit who or what they were resisting.

The ramifications of the CC cancelling the event were manifold. Rumours spread through the movement, and some tumistas visibly took sides: some with the CC and others with the group of Tumistas en Resistencia. Here was a moment of crisis, to which the tumistas reacted in varied ways. Interestingly, tumistas chose to explain or justify their actions, or equally

assume or displace responsibility or the consequences of their actions, onto ‘the túmin’. For example, some justified their ongoing participation in the tianguis, despite the fact that it would not be endorsed by the CC, by saying that it was ‘good for the túmin’. In doing so, they would not have to take sides with either of the groups, and their intentions and actions would be justified because, despite the controversy, the tianguis would be good for the movement. One of the tumistas in resistance put forward the idea that ‘the túmin’ transcended any conflict or controversy, more candidly writing ‘Long live the túmin! Now no one can stop it, not even the national coordinating committee’.

The CC responded by issuing a statement, inviting the tumistas to reflect on the key principles of the MAT and asking for their understanding and patience whilst they resolved internal problems. Alejandra, the then-president of the CC, said that it was not the question of whether or not a tianguis should go ahead that was in the balance, or a more personal clash of egos or discrediting of the CC, but the future of the project itself. It was necessary to stop and reflect on the ‘real meaning’ of the project, which had, in offering a ‘revolutionary alternative’ to a ‘predatory system’, unintentionally turned into a ‘beacon of hope’. Those tumistas who agreed with the document were asked to sign it, as a visible demonstration of support for ‘the project’; which also happened to be well crafted to mean support for the CC.

The first Tianguis Tumista Papantla

When it finally got underway, the first Tianguis Tumista Papantla was a weekend-long event, with a whole host of activities like the tianguis in Teotitlán. Equally, the focal point of most activity was the tianguis itself, which consisted of lines of trestle-tables that were set up under canvas tents on one side of the central park. According to press releases days before the event, at least 42 local tumistas had confirmed their attendance, with a further 62 coming from afar. At one end of the trestle-tables a tent had been set up that came to be the operation’s logistical nerve centre where, people came for information, to register and to collect túmin. Here a loudspeaker was positioned and used to make periodic announcements, although most of the time it transmitted an eclectic mix of Latin American folkloric and protest music, adding revolutionary ambience to the event.

Little details helped present the image of a well-organised, defiant event, which indeed it was, despite the underlying tension and potential for conflict. For example, it was clear that some of those organising and coordinating were anxious that members of the CC might turn

up to spoil the tianguis.²⁷ Having said this, most of the tumistas present knew little or nothing about the details of the internal crisis. Those that did understood that such crises were a natural part of the process of learning to relate to one another differently, especially when the movement had grown beyond a tight-knit network of friends and colleagues to encompass a wide range of members from diverse contexts and backgrounds. As we saw in chapter 3, learning from controversy became an integral part of the ‘túmin school’. This is a point that I will pick up in the following section. For now, let us take a closer look at how the tianguis was put together.

The majority of local tumistas that were exhibiting were artisans and traders of local handicrafts. Like Teotitlán, a big sector of industry in Papantla relies on the tourist trade, thus many local people make a living selling crafts to visitors. Jewellery, broaches, religious imagery, drinks and alcohol made from vanilla were some of the most popular things for sale. These sat alongside flutes, drums, bows and arrows, delicately painted handheld fans, framed feathers and napkin holders, all depicting local scenes; and small model replicas of the *Danza de Voladores* or the archaeological site of El Tajín. Then there were the typical embroidered *blouses*, shirts, shawls and handkerchiefs – similar too but distinct from those that the tumistas from Oaxaca had brought with them. Xóchitl López was among those present. Xóchitl was actually one of the foremost organisers in Papantla, and the presence of so many local artisans reflected her involvement in mobilising people locally. Xóchitl was the leader of a local organisation: the Consejo Supremo de Médicos Tradicionales, Artesanos y Danzantes del Totonacapan (Supreme Council of Traditional Healers, Artisans and Dancers of the Totonacapan). Her organisation represents a number of artisans who generally have no fixed point of sale. With competition in the town being strong – there are two markets and numerous boutique shops for tourists – it was clear that the Tianguis Tumista presented these local artisans with a valuable opportunity to offer their products.

The bulk of non-resident tumistas present at the tianguis were from the state of Oaxaca. They had come to Papantla in two minivans, the logistics of which were managed by Marco Turra. As we have seen, Marco was largely responsible for organising the tianguis in Teotitlán the year before, and it has now become a yearly event. Marco had helped coordinate the trip of two vanloads of tumistas from Oaxaca, mainly from Teotitlán, Tlaxiaco and a handful from

²⁷ The worst-case scenario imagined was that members of the CC might come and confiscate the túmin reserve that was handed out to new tumistas at the event.

Oaxaca City. The presence of the Oaxaca tumistas brought a degree of diversity to the tianguis: many of the tumistas from Tlaxiaco were straw weavers who brought with them baskets, mats, hats, and all manner of things made out of straw. There were also weavers of wool and cotton items; bakers selling traditional *cemitas*: large, hollow, sweet loaves of bread baked in wood-fired ovens; and a batch of *pulque*. The tumistas from Teotitlán brought their traditional weaving for sale, and some even made the most of the trip to negotiate deals with the owner of a hotel in town, to supply soft furnishings for the rooms.

Here we can see that the bulk of the tumistas present had been invited to participate by either Xóchitl or Marco. However, the real brains behind the whole operation was Iván (who we met in chapter 3), who managed to orchestrate the whole event through his dense, influential networks inside and outside of the local community. Iván had once told me that he was well practiced in mobilising effective public events without any money changing hands. An example of this was when he took over the organising of the yearly Cumbre Tajín Alterna – an alternative to the large, government and big-sponsor supported Cumbre Tajín festival that took place in and around the nearby archaeological site of El Tajín. Iván stepped in to assume responsibility for organising the event after the Municipal Government of Papantla decided their budget would no longer stretch to funding it. Here, Iván stressed that he was interested in ‘making networks, not money’: he was able to pull off the Cumbre Tajín Alterna by drawing upon ‘solidarity networks’.²⁸

Equally, (as we saw in chapter 3) for Iván the MAT is not about the túmin: it is about the network of people that identify themselves as tumistas. The MAT thus provided him with a ready-made network of people to whom he could turn when he needed help. Given his previous experience and extensive networks and influence, Iván was able to mobilise a large number of tumistas and other influential townsfolk to endorse the tianguis. Local media outlets covered the event; hotels agreed to give large discounts on rooms for those attending; a diverse ‘cultural agenda’ was organised for the three days, including a visit to El Tajín; even a PEMEX petrol station was prepared to accept túmin in payment for fuel during the tianguis. Iván’s central role in the organisation of the event also meant he became a

²⁸ Apparently the event was so successful that the Municipal Government asked him to plan the Cumbre the following year, this time with a budget. Iván refused, saying that he would not work for the government or work with money.

prominent spokesperson for the MAT as a result, as well as an influential figure in the decisions that were made during the assembly, to which we now turn.

Tianguis as spaces for prefigurative politics

On the final day of the tianguis, a small group of tumistas met under the shade of a tree in the central park of Papantla. The shaded space had been occupied for the duration of the tianguis as an area for talks and discussions: Juan had presented the idea of the ‘Banco Constituyente’ (Constituent Bank), inviting the tumistas to participate in a much broader project for social change, for example.²⁹ On this occasion, the group had formed to hold an assembly. As we have seen in previous chapters, assemblies constituted the organisational nuts-and-bolts of MAT construction and articulation in the diverse localities that made up the network. The tianguis were thus also strategic moments to hold cross-network assemblies, providing a rare moment for diverse tumistas to analyse, evaluate, propose and make agreements to advance the project. A similar meeting had taken place the previous year at the end of the tianguis in Teotitlán.

However, there were fundamental differences between local-level assemblies that occurred on a regular basis in places like Espinal, Papantla and Puebla, and the assemblies that took place at tianguis. In the first instance, *acuerdos* (agreements) were generally made between the same groups of people. A sense of strength, unity and belonging was predictably stronger between small groups of tumistas at local level assemblies, which facilitated the process on the whole (as we saw in chapter 4). If a new tumista was present, or some tumistas had never met before, they undoubtedly had a friend or colleague in common, or some localised reference point that helped grease the wheels of interaction, decision making and forward planning. What made the *acuerdos* process different at tianguis events was that they were agreements arrived at and taken between members of the MAT network who, more often than not, had only met each other a couple of days or hours previous to the meeting. In some cases, the assembly was the first time some tumistas had ever met. This all made cross-network assemblies interesting places.

²⁹ The ‘Banco Constituyente’ was a project proposed by the Huasteca-Totonacapan cell of the CPM, the rationale behind the project was based on the MAT experience. Inspired by bonds issued during the Mexican Revolution (see Introduction), the idea is that the Banco Constituyente be funded by bonds that cost 100 pesos, and this would be the start of a savings bank that would fund logistics and activities related to the CPM project.

For the MAT project to be sustained and to keep on growing, the tumistas therefore needed events like the tianguis to meet each other face-to-face, in order to enact trust and solidarity, and to experiment with making new social relations and social pacts built on these principles. At these events, it was therefore important to foreground notions of strength and unity, despite any underlying tension or conflict. Problems could be raised, discussed and solved (or not), and agreements were much easier to make if they could be made between people who were brought together at times of ritual, where sentiments of trust and solidarity were brought alive.

Due to the ephemeral nature of tianguis assemblies, the importance of a common language, a basic set of agreements and identification with something both of and beyond one's localised sphere became essential. This is where the role of the túmin as token and symbol of mutuality and commitment to the core politico-ethical project of the MAT came to the fore again. If we remember Juan's assertion in the inauguration ritual of the tianguis in Teotitlán, in order for the acuerdos to be established, a certain level of *confianza* (trust) needed to be, or at least appear to be, present. The tumistas held on to the túmin as a unifying idea that helped to create a sense of unity and belonging, facilitate agreements and ease any doubts and tensions that may have been lurking under the surface. In the case of the tianguis in Papantla, those present at the assembly were essentially deciding upon the future of the movement, without the participation of the CC. On the one hand, this made the assembly all the more fragile and risky; on the other, it gave it a transcendental importance.

The acuerdos taken that day were largely based on what sort of future organisational structure the MAT movement would take, participation in upcoming events, management of the website and information databases, and a change of logo. Present at the meeting were representatives from the states of Veracruz, Puebla, Morelos and Oaxaca. Following the meeting, Iván commented that this was the 'most representative' of túmin events ever since the project started six years previously, citing the participation in the meeting described above and the presence of tumistas from Mexico State, Hidalgo, and even as far away as Chiapas. The assembly and the acuerdos taken as a result of it may not have been endorsed by the official CC, but this only made it seem like the túmin really had transcended even its own organisational platform. However problematic this turn of events could have been for the internal politics of the MAT, the fact remains that the ethic of doing something 'for the good of the túmin' helped propel the movement forward. This leads us on to the final point I would like to make.

Mama Túmin and the Spirit of the Túmin

Maestra Irene was at the assembly in Papantla. We met Irene in chapters 2 and 3. However, at this point, a short recap of Irene's story might be helpful. Irene was one of the MAT's founders from Espinal, and has become fondly known as 'Mama Túmin'. Irene has seen her hometown achieve national and even international fame following the launch of the MAT, and she has received numerous journalists, TV crews, activists and students like myself, all looking for a scoop on the project. However, Irene has also witnessed the decline of the project in her hometown, as the MAT has taken on new dimensions and significance in places further afield, leading her to suggest that the 'roots' of the project had been neglected. Despite this, the town remained the symbolic base of the movement: it was the 'birthplace' of the túmin, and for a long time the practical administration centre for the whole project. Irene lamented the neglect of the MAT in her hometown, but she also celebrated the growth of the project in other areas, proud to be a part of the movement. Having participated in the assembly that took place on the last day of the Tianguis Tumista mentioned above, Irene said to those gathered at the assembly the following:

The túmin isn't going to die, it doesn't need a coordinating committee: it grows on its own. We are proud to be the birthplace of the túmin, but now that pride passes on to you, those of you who are growing in your own places. The túmin is not the little bit of paper, but the change of consciousness, that every day we are becoming better people. You can feel the túmin, and you can feel who is with you and who isn't. And he who doesn't look you in the eyes, or who doesn't hold your gaze, isn't a tumista: plain and simple he is deceiving you. And you don't deceive the túmin [...] In the túmin we are friends, we are brothers and sisters [...] Where you see a sign that reads 'We Accept Túmin', you know you are going to find a brother, because we are the big túmin family. The family was born in Espinal, but it is great that it has now grown in all the communities and states of the country, and that we are also in England and Italy. And like them, there are others in other parts, right? [...] I am not going to ask that we get stronger, because we are already strong, because the fact of being here means that we are strong, and that we have a great spirit of sharing [...] The most important thing in all this is that we believe in ourselves.

This quote contains a number of ideas that have been discussed throughout this chapter and the thesis, and is a particularly apt place to begin ending the story. Irene suggests that the túmin has the power to transcend the CC, and that it does not depend on their guidance to grow. Moreover, as had been said elsewhere, the túmin has the potential to 'transcend borders and unite hearts'. This talk of growth is reminiscent of the way in which people talked about the túmin in Teotitlán; Irene also re-affirms what Juan said in the same event. The túmin is far more than the 'little bit of paper' – what the project *really* sought to change

was people, and their relations with others. ‘The túmin is not the little bit of paper, but the change of consciousness, that every day we are becoming better people.’ The túmin, in its material form, was thus symbolic of the ethic of mutuality and transformation that were at the core of the politico-ethical project of the MAT. Irene’s language reflects the deep-felt emotive or affective forces that are at play through the MAT: the ‘feeling the túmin’ and a sense of ‘who is with you and who is not’, and a common ‘spirit of sharing’ between the tumistas. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Irene drew strength from the tianguis, and it was through the ritual moment that she found meaning in her daily efforts to keep the MAT alive at home: ‘The most important thing in all this is that we believe in ourselves’.

Irene’s statement has grounded the value of the túmin and the MAT deeply in human experience and the quality of social relations the tumistas seek to cultivate between themselves. Believing in oneself and ones fellow tumistas is at the core of what the MAT is really all about. This change in the way you value yourself and your *compañero* is at the heart of what it means to ‘change the capitalist chip’ – the transformation from client to comrade. In the MAT, the tumista gives value to the túmin, and the túmin represents the value of the tumista. As Alejandra once said in response to sustained questions as to what it was that ‘backed’ the túmin: ‘our gold reserve is ourselves’. One of the most enduring paradoxes in the whole MAT process proved to be that many people – observers, critics and even some tumistas – could not conceive of an alternative monetary arrangement built on this idea because it seemed so simple and naïve, yet at the same time, entirely reasonable.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have explored three main arguments. The first is that of the importance of tianguis tumista as ritual events. The second concerns the túmin as a tool and talisman of the MAT. The third is regarding context and the articulation of the project through indigeneity. Many of the issues explored have been present to a greater or lesser extent throughout the thesis. I have focused on the role of the tianguis in particular because they are events that can be seen as a culmination and celebration of the process of network expansion that I have narrated through the preceding chapters.

I highlight the importance of ritual as a process through which the tumistas communicate a sense of belonging and unity, even in the face of conflict and disagreement. The tianguis tumista were large scale, cross-network moments of ‘collective effervescence’, where the tumistas were able to feel part of a wider movement, and to which they could renew their

commitments. They were opportunities for a diverse group of people from different contexts and places to come together to communicate and share feelings of strength, unity and belonging, as well as enact the principles upon which the MAT is built. This argument builds on the idea of the marketplace as an ‘arena to realise values’ (Graeber 2013) as put forward in the previous chapter. The rituals ultimately had a reflexive effect: it was through their realisation, and the constellation of imaginative and material elements that this entailed, that the tumistas could re-affirm and revalue their own intentions and actions as well as those of the group.

I have also addressed in more detail the interplay between the túmin as an object and a symbol. While it is a discussion that has been touched upon throughout the thesis, here we clearly saw how the túmin was a ‘valuable object’ (Graeber 2013), both placed at the centre of ritual and the focus of embodied learning in the tianguis. In the first instance, the túmin is seemingly charged with mystical powers – with the ability to facilitate and strengthen communal practices, the local economy or even to counter the ‘ideology of globalisation’. Yet at the same time, the túmin remains a symbolic, conscious reflection of the tumistas’ efforts to imagine and construct different social relations. I suggest that what the tumistas understand as the intrinsic power of the túmin is so important to them because it is actually a reflection of their hopes for a better world and the hard work many promoters put into keeping the project alive in their hometowns. It is also here where the importance of the tianguis as pedagogical, practice-based arenas shines through. The tianguis are arenas for realising different forms of value through the literal practice of using the túmin to mediate economic transactions, which is a primary and initial means through which the transformation from client to comrade takes place.

Finally, in this chapter, we see how the MAT is articulated through indigenous worldviews. The practice of placing the túmin at the centre of a ritual is something that has emerged out of the indigenous context into which the MAT expanded in Teotitlán. The material here thus substantiates Bloch and Parry’s (1989) claim – discussed in the Introduction – that the meanings and functions of money are highly dependent upon the pre-existing cultural worldview and contextual surroundings.

Conclusion

Overview

I started this thesis narrating the clash between the tumistas and the Bank of Mexico. The episode served as an entry point into the central themes discussed in this thesis. The crux of the issue appeared to lie in who could define and legitimise currency, and what the wider socio-economic and political consequences of this may be. From early on, we saw how the túmin was imagined as a ‘revolutionary weapon’ (chapter 1). This statement served as an opening to introduce the MAT critique of the political economic status quo and examine the ideological trajectories that influenced it. We also saw how it inspired tumistas across the country, feeding into pre-existing alternative and radical social imaginaries. I then turned to look in detail at how the tumistas understood and engaged with the MAT in various settings. In chapter 2, I presented the case studies in the form of life histories to understand tumistas participation in the project in Espinal. We saw that the MAT offered both Irene and Mateo a framework through which they could realise their own personalised understandings of meaningful action, directed towards cultivating positive forms of sociality. In chapter 3, I looked at the issues implicit in network expansion. Expansion necessitated a process of ‘learning to relate to one another differently’, and the adherence to the principle of ‘responsible freedom’ as the basis of tumista politics. I then moved on to look in more detail at how the tumistas interpreted and enacted the MAT in Puebla (chapter 4). I suggested that the Mercado Túmin served an important function for articulating and realising forms of value different to those dictated by the capitalist marketplace. Here the tumistas’ identity as prosumers was key to understanding this localised expression of the MAT. In the final chapter (chapter 5), I demonstrated the importance of tianguis as rituals to ensure the propagation of the project. I also focused on the role of tianguis as arenas for practicing tumista sociality, and explored the relationship between the túmin as an object and symbol for engendering the former.

Throughout the thesis, we saw how the tumistas engage with the concrete proposal of the MAT, and the extents to which they are able to actualise the transformative potential of the project in crafting politico-ethical lives within and against the habits formed through capitalist history. Their endeavours are varied, and engaging and enacting MAT practices coexisted alongside, and sometimes in tension with, everyday efforts to earn a livelihood. What started out as a question surrounding monetary legitimacy therefore branched into a

wider appreciation of who the people engaging with the MAT are, and what this engagement means to them within the context of their life trajectories.

My thesis goes somewhat against prevalent critiques of alternative currencies and other alternative economic imaginings, which generally focus on their successes and failures, and their potential as a viable alternative to capitalism. Here I have demonstrated that the MAT exists alongside capitalism, and I have focused on the ways in which people are reshaping their relationship to it, through their relationship to others. Therefore, with this ethnography, I hope to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of what ‘alternative economies’ and ECOSOL enterprises look like and what they mean to people who participate in them. A large part of this thesis has been in conversation with Graeber’s work on value (2001; 2013). As I suggested in the Introduction, the value question is central to the analysis because it is through adopting Graeber’s lens that we can understand what it is that the tumistas found meaningful in the MAT, and what it was that motivated them to action. Correspondingly, we have seen how the MAT provides a framework for the tumistas to reflect on their position in the world and accordingly take steps towards creating a good life together. I now summarise the main arguments addressed, followed by more speculative conclusions.

Summary of arguments

Alejandra’s assertion that the túmin gold reserve is in fact the tumistas themselves (chapter 5) is a graphic representation of how the MAT reframes understandings of wealth and value in the form of people and the quality of social relationships they aspire to, over commodity or financial assets, for example. Thus, we can see a different logic at work in the economic process of the MAT, which exists alongside, in tension and in contrast to ‘capitalocentric’ understandings of ‘the economy’ (Gibson-Graham 2006). The MAT-Banxico episode framed the dialectical oppositions at work here, and the chapters have revealed the basis of the MAT as more than just providing an alternative currency, but actually encompassing a different politico-ethical project geared towards self and collective transformation. This involves critiquing and reimagining not just normative assumptions of ‘the economy’, but other institutions and processes through which social life is reproduced under capitalism.

A large part of the material and symbolic basis of this reimagining rests in the túmin. In other words, the tumista concept of wealth is monetised in the túmin. The thesis therefore demonstrates how money is ‘a labile social relation with rules that change’ (Hart and Ortiz, 2014b: 474). The understandings, manifestations and consequences of the relationships are

dependent upon the particular context in question, as we have seen in the preceding chapters. The MAT took on different resonances in Espinal, Puebla and Teotitlán, demonstrating that the meanings of money can never be divorced from the wider environment it operates in (Bloch and Parry 1989). However, on the whole, the thesis has shown how the tumistas were using the túmin and the MAT to creatively reimagine how money and monetary institutions can be put to the ‘service of social ties’ (Laville, 2010b: 28), in symbolising and advancing a politico-ethical agenda orientated towards the collective good. Correspondingly, a central argument in this thesis has sustained that the túmin is a valuable object to the tumistas, which simultaneously symbolises and generates the type of activity considered valuable (Graeber 2013). The túmin is thus both a practical exchange tool, and a symbolic talisman for bringing in to being the type of social relationships aspired to in the MAT.

I suggest that the upmost expressions of tumista sociality are realised in tianguis (chapter 5) or the Mercado Túmin (chapter 4), and it is in these events we see clearly how intentions and actions are aligned, and the ‘alternative marketplace’ comes into being. Explicit manifestations of MAT economic logic find expression, and value clearly takes on forms of action and sentiment. Prefiguration and temporality are key elements here. Through ‘living the market’ (chapter 4) the tumistas strive to create and live the conditions for the future in the now. This stands in contrast to future orientated financial logic. Indeed, temporality and prefiguration are themes that run through the thesis. They sometimes intersect with ideas of indigeneity. For example, the indigenous past is often used as a reference point: many tumistas understand what they are doing as bringing to life or ‘retaking’ past indigenous practices (e.g. trueque) in their present practice. Equally, indigeneity influences the sort of prefigurative politics at work in the MAT (e.g. comunalidad, chapter 3).

The subjects of temporality and prefiguration also speak to theoretical concerns. We saw in chapter 1 that the MAT has been criticised by ECOSOL activists and theorists. Juan’s assertion that ‘we are actually doing it’ serves as an important example – the concern lies with learning through practice, rather than refining a theory to then put into action. Of course, Juan did not devise the MAT without theoretical antecedents, but here the influences of participatory action research and the emphasis on learning through experience shine through. The centrality of practice-based learning (‘the túmin as a school’) in the MAT has been present throughout, from ‘learning to relate to one another differently’ through listening, empathy and cooperation (chapter 3), to practicing using the túmin (chapter 5). Generating

sharing and *practicing* knowledge is thus a key part of the MAT experience, and central to the transformative politico-ethical agenda at the project's core.

The MAT experience contributes to a wider understanding of ideas and processes at play in contemporary Mexican socio-economic and political life. Here a couple of things stand out: that many are feeling disenfranchised and disillusioned by the national project over the last 40 years, and the enduring legacy of past struggles and the role they play in the social imaginary to inspire transformative movements in the present. The concept of autonomy plays an important role in the MAT imaginary and practice, and pushes the 'autonomy question' (Diaz Polanco 1997) beyond the sphere of indigenous-state relations and claims to territorial recognition, and into the realms of the market and the crafting of particular politico-ethical subjects. Indigenous experience continues to provide the backbone for inspiration here (e.g. *comunalidad*), yet it remains to be seen if this can be further understood and analysed within the wider shift of political subjectivity from citizens to consumers (cf. Canclini, 2001). Equally, there is ample material for investigation if the Mexican state decides to increase efforts to 'translate' more radical and autonomous ECOSOL experience in attempts to design policy to co-opt or manage them (Dinerstein, 2017, see also Nelms 2015). Finally, and on a related point, the MAT highlights the importance of cash in an increasingly cashless world. It will be interesting to see the consequences for alternative currencies like the *túmin* in light of recent (2019) government and Banxico developments to help 'unbanked' and 'informal' sectors of the Mexican populace through embracing cashless financial technology (Banxico, 2019; Eschenbacher and Irrera, 2019).

Spirits of solidarity for the 21st century?

I ended the last chapter with Irene's reflections on the MAT, alluding to a 'spirit of the *túmin*' as capturing the essence of what the project meant to the vast majority, if not all of the *tumistas* I met. I end then by suggesting that the ethnography presented here can tell us something important about the emergence of such a 'spirit of the *túmin*' – a manifestation of the sentiment of mutuality shared between the *tumistas*, that fuels their convictions and endeavours to re-establish a sense of dignity, worth and belonging in lives. This can be understood in a context where people across the globe are engaging with similar projects that allow them to engage with each other upon different terms to those dictated by capitalism at large. Of note here are feelings of wanting to be *reconnected* and to be able to fashion lives on the basis of sociality that is *not* directed towards purely personal interest and

profitable gains – the recuperation, activation and celebration of wealth on other than normative monetary or financial terms. My suggestion of the ‘spirit of the túmin’ is inspired by Appadurai (2016), whose recent work on the ‘failure of language in the age of derivative finance’ might help to further theoretically and practically locate the importance of the MAT at this current conjuncture.

Drawing on Schumpeter’s (1942) notion of the ‘creative destruction’ of capital, Appadurai has suggested that financial logic has had resounding consequences for notions of the social contract, trust, and that which makes us human. Appadurai demonstrates how the world of financial trading, and in particular the derivative form, is based on ‘the bet on the certainty of broken promises’ (2016: 153). To be sure, Appadurai’s interest in the derivative form arises out of the key role it played in the 2008 financial crisis, yet he demonstrates how, more than a decade on, it remains integral to the spread of finance as an ideology and principle wealth generator throughout the global south.

In short, Appadurai views financial logic as ‘predatory’, damaging and destructive of Western liberal notions of the self (dividual), and the social contract form on which most modern laws, institutions and concepts of society are derived. Drawing on fieldwork in Mumbai, Appadurai highlights the potential for embracing and developing a new understanding of the dividual as the foundation of a new politics based on a ‘socially inclusive and expansive spirit’, by ‘[seeking] alliances, affiliations, linkages, and solidarities outside the individual as the human counterpart of the modern contract’ (2016, 123, 154). Appadurai ends his book with a call:

It is a call to a different conception of the ground from which we can take risks, generate wealth, and pursue sociality on terms that, in leaving behind both the modern individual and the modern contract, have a reasonable chance of beating global finance at its own game. This is not an easy or an obvious political step, but creative destruction does not respect either normal science or politics as usual (2016: 155).

It seems that similar ideas are shared across the globe. History will determine whether these examples have the potential to change the course of financial capitalism. In the meantime, we can learn a lot from the tumistas. They have forged a solidarity network that transcends ethnic, class and geographical boundaries. Moreover, their example points towards the creative potential in rethinking and experimenting with powerful concepts like ‘money’ and ‘the economy’ in building a better world.

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