

The Politics of Homeownership: Property Relations, Distributional Struggles, and Group Formation

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines how homeownership regimes mediate the collective production and consumption of cities and shape the social relations forged through these activities. Specifically, I examine how the relations of homeownership generate social groups, drive collective action, and mold beliefs about how resources and power ought to be distributed in society. I draw on two separate empirical projects to explore these themes. The first—based in Mexico City—uses historical records, interviews, and participant observation to examine programs that converted poor Mexico City residents into unlikely homeowners. The second project examines Milwaukee’s Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs)—a type of resident-managed special assessment district—using participant and non-participant observation, interviews, and historical records.

Chapter 1 uses data from Mexico City to present an alternative theory of the segregation-producing process. In the standard account, residential segregation results from how individuals are sorted in the housing market along pre-existing axes of social difference. How does segregation arise in the absence of market-based housing allocation and sorting? I apply a constructivist understanding of identity to theorize a segregation-producing process that does not depend on sorting along pre-existing social identities. I show how non-market allocation of property constituted new, emplaced categories of social difference by imbuing individuals with group identities because of their shared association with place. The subsequent expansion of market relations to these neighborhoods further amplified group difference as residents used the identities through which they became homeowners to demand protection from market-based dispossession. I show how identity can be the *product* of redistributive policy and market-making, not just a signal to which policy and markets respond.

Chapter 2 asks how groups develop collective beliefs that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate market practices. How do these consensuses evolve over time? What happens when they are confronted by alternative models of market organization? Drawing on literature at the nexus of values, culture, and markets, I examine contemporary community organizing around housing and urban development in Mexico City. I show how residents of two classes of neighborhoods—*pueblos originarios* and former squatter settlements—constructed distinct *moral economies* surrounding housing based on their collective entry into homeownership. These sets of beliefs evolve over time as economic change alters the structural positions of communities and the functions of property, and as residents transmit these beliefs to subsequent generations. I frame resident organizing against capital-driven urban development as a form of popular market regulation: efforts are oriented not around immediate material goals, but around strengthening state and community commitments to neighborhood-specific *moral economies* of property.

Chapter 3 turns to Milwaukee’s Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs). Poverty management and social service delivery is increasingly outsourced to private organizations. Yet, another privatizing force has received less attention from poverty scholars: the proliferation of “private governments” that operate underneath municipal authorities. How does the state’s delegation of *both* the provision of social services *and* the very powers of government reshape poverty governance? I argue that Milwaukee’s Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs)—community-controlled special assessment districts—function as a novel form of poverty governance. By “municipalizing” neighborhoods, NIDs transform the subject of poverty governance from poor households to *poor places* and their populations. By making property owners in disadvantaged neighborhoods responsible for financing and designing social programs, NIDs also encourage private citizens to assume responsibility for surveilling and evaluating their neighbors. Finally, I show how NIDs drive the differentiation of neighborhood stakeholders into a hierarchy of citizen classes built around their relationship to property: homeowners, investors, and renters. The rights and benefits owed to these different classes of citizens are determined by assessing their perceived financial and moral contributions to the neighborhood.

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Introduction

In most contemporary societies, housing straddles the line between market commodity and human right (Pattillo 2013). As with many other socially necessary resources (e.g., water, food), most societies have left the distribution of housing as problem for the market to solve. Nearly four decades ago, John Logan and Harvey Molotch (1987) examined the conflicts produced by this fundamental contradiction: while housing—as a commodity—serves as a vehicle for speculation and a source of profit, homes also hold enormous use value as spaces of social reproduction and even sources of livelihood.

But even as commodities, homes are peculiar. They are distinct from many other commodified essential goods in that they are *fixed in space* and, as a result, fix their consumers in place as well. The spatial rootedness of homeownership shapes its meanings and consequences in important ways. By linking people to specific places, housing consumption determines household access to place-based resources (Light and Thomas 2019; Rich and Owens 2023; Trounstein 2016) and shapes their exposure to structural characteristics in ways that can both limit and promote well-being along a number of axes (Sampson 2008; Sharkey 2008; Sharkey and Faber 2014). Despite increasing access to digital communications and spatially liberated modes of social connection, the type and location of the housing we consume also impacts the quality and shape of our social networks (Fischer 1982; Friedland 2016; Pierce, Martin and Murphy 2011; Small 2009).

And, indeed, the distribution of housing resources is surprisingly durable: once in place, patterns of housing inequality are difficult to disrupt (Faber 2020; Howell and Korver-Glenn 2020; Owens 2019; Solari 2012). Even largescale spatial shifts in housing distribution—such as post-war suburbanization (Jackson 1985) or the movement of capital and affluent households “back to the city” (Smith 1979; Zukin 1987)—have done little to counteract socio-economic

inequities baked into homeownership and housing patterns (Glick 2008). In fact, some scholars argue that these instances of spatial redistribution of housing wealth have only further consolidated unequal access to it (Hightower and Fraser 2020; Hwang and Ding 2020; Sharp and Hall 2014).

Another consequence that flows from the spatial fixity of housing commodities is the entanglement of the social and economic value of dwellings, the landscape on which they sit, and places that they collectively constitute (Fennell 2009). Movements to disaggregate these components into independently exchanged commodities notwithstanding (DeFilippis et al. 2019), centering this entanglement shapes how we conceive of housing a site of exploitation, which occurs when the producers of places, dwellings, and landscapes do not control the value imbued in those places through their labor (Gottdiener 1985; Harvey 2012; Lefebvre 1991). Underlying this exploitation is the contradiction between the fact of the city's collective social production and its "pulverization" by private property (Lefebvre 2009).

STUDYING THE POLITICS OF HOMEOWNERSHIP

In this dissertation, I examine how regimes of homeownership mediate our experience of the city's collective production and consumption and give shape to the social relations that we forge through these activities. Instead of approaching property as a "bundle" of individual rights, I draw on scholarship that conceives of property as a set of social agreements—at times contested—that are legitimized and protected to varying degrees by community and state power (Becher 2015; Becher 2023; Blomley 2004). I contribute to the sociology of homeownership, which has produced a wealth of scholarship on its material determinates and outcomes (Zavisca and Gerber 2016), by focusing on how the social relations that constitute homeownership

generate social groups, drive collective action, and are tied to beliefs and decisions about how resources and power ought to be distributed in society.

In the three substantive chapters, I draw on data from two separate empirical projects that center the distribution of housing resources and the relations of homeownership. The first project uses data from historical records, interviews with homeowners, and participant observation to examine the redistributive state policies and property regularization campaigns that converted poor Mexico City residents into unlikely homeowners in the mid- to late-twentieth century. I trace these residents' collective pathways into homeownership, as well as how residents have collectively responded to the retreat of state protections and the intensification of the real estate market. I focus on a cluster of neighborhoods in Mexico City that represent two common urban forms in the city: *pueblos originarios* ("original towns") that existed as agricultural villages before Mexico City grew around them during the mid-twentieth century, and former squatter settlements that were established in the 1960s and 1970s by rural migrants.

For the second project, I gathered data from a variety of sources to examine Milwaukee's Neighborhood Improvement Districts—a type of special assessment district enabled by Wisconsin state law. NIDs allow owners and occupants of residential property to initiate and manage neighborhood-level property tax districts to fund "improvements"—broadly defined—in their neighborhoods. While similar special assessment districts are available to residents of cities in other states, Milwaukee far outstrips all other municipalities in the country in terms of special assessment districts per capita. I examine the case of Milwaukee's NIDs using interviews with residents, practitioners, and city employees; observation of public hearings; participant observation of NID meetings and events; and review of historical records and policy documents.

Several conceptual themes run through the three chapters. The first is concerned with understanding how the relations of homeownership are powerful motors of group and identity formation. A rich body of research examines how places shape identity (Brown-Saracino 2015; Carney 2021; Cheng 2013; LaFleur 2020), as well as how the character of places reflect the people who produce them (Lefebvre 1991; Molotch, Freudenburg and Paulsen 2000). Residential property, specifically, is also deeply tied to how we understand ourselves (Besbris 2016), how we represent ourselves to the world (Pido 2012; Stillerman 2017), and even how we engage with the world around us (McCabe 2012; McCabe 2013). Moreover, beyond thinking about homeownership as a dichotomous condition, researchers have highlighted the material consequences that flow from *how* people enter into homeownership (Gerber, Zavisca and Wang 2022; Jang-Trettien 2021; Starecheski 2016). Together, my dissertation builds on these insights to examine how collective pathways into homeownership generate new social groups and how collective action related to homeownership consolidates group identity and amplifies group difference.

The second conceptual thread relates to the sources and expressions of value in urban space. In the United States, where homes often constitute a household's single largest asset, housing wealth—which is highly unequally distributed, especially along racial lines (Flippen 2004; Howell and Korver-Glenn 2020; Krivo and Kaufman 2004)—has become a cornerstone of household financial well-being. In fact, the structure of the distribution of housing wealth is strongly correlated with a country's overall economic inequality (Pfeffer and Waitkus 2021). As peculiar and rarely transacted market commodities, homes are also difficult to value and exchange, which means that most residential property transactions involve the assistance of

market intermediaries, who also influence how a home's value is perceived and realized through the transaction (Besbris 2020; Besbris and Korver-Glenn 2022; Korver-Glenn 2021).

However, the emplaced nature of residential property means that the value of a given home is also shaped by surrounding property and by the community in which is located. This reality connects homeowners with proximate homeowners, but also to a host of private and public actors involved in the production of community resources that are reflected in property value (Fennell 2009; McCabe 2016). When household financial security is organized primarily through housing investment, the stakes of protecting home values are quite high (McCabe 2016). And, indeed, property owners engage in many activities oriented towards protecting or appreciating their property's value, sometimes at the expense of collective needs and well-being.

But homes hold much more than just economic value. They provide us with places to live out our daily lives, secure our livelihoods, and structure our social relationships (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Longhofer 1993; Ward 2012). In this dissertation, I highlight the social construction of property value as a process where individuals must navigate their own competing interests in different types of housing value. For example, one Mexico City homeowner, who described her property as being "undervalued," sought guidance from a community leader as to whether she should have her home's value re-assessed. The community leader advised her that the decision depended on whether she wanted her house to live in or sell. Owners and occupants of residential property employ a host of strategies to reshape their property's value according to their interests, including through the labor that they invest into dwellings, landscapes, and places. But beyond exploring how residents understand and navigate their own varied interests with respect to property value and act to reshape their home's value in line with their needs, I also examine inter-actor and inter-group negotiations and conflicts over property value. These interactions

become especially fraught when different individuals, groups, and institutions do not share—or are not perceived as sharing—the same balance of interests.

A final concern that runs through the three chapters is about how power is expressed through property. An important task of urban governance is managing the supply, maintenance, exchange, and use of housing resources (Molotch 1976). The varied technologies that control how property is produced, used, and exchanged have far reaching consequences for other spheres of life (Bartram 2022; Becher 2023; Herbert and Orne 2021; Lens 2022) by, for example, regulating labor markets (Flores 2024), configuring the geography of household poverty (Rosen, Garboden and Cossyleon 2021), or advancing colonial state projects (Tzfadia 2006; Weizman 2017). Some tasks of housing are carried out by the state, but others are delegated to private actors (McKenzie 1996; Schaller 2019). Through this dissertation, I contribute to these discussions by shining a light on grassroots efforts to manage the use, exchange, production, maintenance, and distribution of housing. I highlight how community-based forms of property governance push against state-led efforts, in some cases, but in other instances are enabled and promoted by the state.

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

The first chapter traces the origins of contemporary patterns of residential segregation in southern Mexico City to present an alternative account of the segregation-producing process. In the standard account, residential segregation results from how individuals are sorted in the housing market along pre-existing axes of social difference (e.g., Crowder and Krysan 2017). Drawing on scholarship that examines how state categories can become the basis for meaningful social groups (Bailey 2008; Jenkins 1994; Loveman and Muniz 2007; Menjivar and Lakhani 2016), this chapter applies a constructivist understanding of identity to theorize a segregation-

producing process that does not depend on sorting along pre-existing social identities. I show how redistributive state policy opened two, distinct collective pathways to private property ownership for the landless poor in Mexico City and, in the process, imbued assemblages of individuals with new, emplaced group identities (Garrido 2021). As the titling process brought these spaces into the market by the 1990s, group difference was further amplified and naturalized as residents advocated for the creation of policies to insulate them from dispossessive market forces. I show how identity can be the *product* of redistributive policy, market-making, and market regulation, not just a signal to which policy and markets respond.

Drawing again from my Mexico City research, the second chapter engages literature at the nexus of values, culture, and markets (Collins 2017; Fourcade 2011; Fourcade and Healy 2007; Granovetter 1985; Livne 2019; Zelizer 1979) to understand contemporary community organizing around housing and urban development in Mexico City. How do groups develop collective beliefs that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate market practices? How do these consensus evolve over time? What happens when they are confronted by alternative models of market organization? I show how residents of the *pueblos originarios* and the former squatter settlements constructed distinct *moral economies* (Thompson 1971)—shared understandings that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate market practices—surrounding housing based on the collective nature of their entry into homeownership. I show how these beliefs evolve over time as economic change alters the structural positions of communities and the function of property, and as residents transmit these beliefs to subsequent generations of residents. I frame resident organizing against capital-driven urban development as a form of popular market regulation: efforts are oriented not around immediate material goals, but around strengthening state and community commitment to neighborhood-specific moral economies.

The third chapter examines Milwaukee's Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs) as a new technology of privatized poverty governance (Robinson, Headworth and Karp 2024) in which both the provision of social services and governing power are delegated to property owners. Theorizing NIDs as a form of neighborhood "municipalization," I show how Milwaukee's NIDs imbue community organizations and homeowners with novel governmental power over poor *places* and their populations. I examine two broad implications of this novel form of the delegated welfare state. First, I draw on labor theories of poverty governance (Seim 2017) to show how NIDs induce residents of poor neighborhoods to govern themselves through a logic of "sweat equity." Consequently, the surveillance, control, and evaluation of poor people's behavior and choices (Fong 2020; McCabe 2023; Wacquant 2009) is assumed neither by state actors nor socially distant private actors, but by neighbors. Second, I examine how NIDs encourage the differentiation of residents into classes of citizens based on their relationship to property. The rights enjoyed by these different classes of NID citizens are determined by their perceived property-based contributions to the neighborhood.

I conclude by putting the findings from these chapters in conversation and reflecting on the overall contributions of that this dissertation makes to the sociology of housing and property. I also outline future directions for these projects and my research agenda overall.

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Chapter 1: Segregation Beyond Sorting: Property Pathways, Market Expansion, and the Production of Emplaced Social Difference

ABSTRACT

In the standard account, residential segregation results from how individuals are sorted in the housing market along pre-existing axes of social difference. How does segregation arise in the absence of market-based housing allocation and sorting? Drawing on research that identifies redistributive state policy as a source of group formation and links market participation to identity construction, this chapter applies a constructivist understanding of identity to theorize a segregation-producing process that does not depend on sorting along pre-existing social identities. Using historical, interview, and ethnographic data, I trace the emergence of contemporary segregation in southern Mexico City. I show how non-market allocation of property constituted new, emplaced categories of social difference by imbuing individuals with group identities because of their shared association with place. The subsequent expansion of market relations to these neighborhoods further amplified group difference as residents returned to the identities through which they became homeowners to demand protection from market-based dispossession. This chapter shows how segregation can emerge from the strategies pursued by marginalized groups to combat market-based exclusion. More broadly, I show how identity can be the *product* of redistributive policy, market-making, and market regulation, not just a signal to which policy and markets respond.

Keywords: residential segregation, property pathways, redistributive policy, social categories, housing markets

INTRODUCTION

Residential segregation—the separation of people in space along axes of social difference—is commonly understood as resulting from how individuals are sorted in the housing market according to pre-existing social categories. In many housing markets, including in the U.S., the confluence of home seeker preferences, price-based constraints, and discriminatory constraints works to sort individuals belonging to different social groups into separate neighborhoods (Korver-Glenn 2021; Massey and Denton 1993; Taylor 2019; Wilson 1987). The empirical preponderance of this pattern—segregation as the product of social sorting—has become *definitional* to how we conceive of the segregation-producing process (Crowder and Krysan 2017).

The sorting model of segregation relies on an implicit assumption that identity and group membership exist prior to and independent of association with place: *first* individuals assert or are assigned an identity, and *then* they are sorted in the housing market according to those identities, which they carry with them when they move. Yet, we also know that neither identity categories nor identification practices are static (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Loveman and Muniz 2007; Omi and Winant 2015; Saperstein and Penner 2012; Wimmer 2008), and that not all distributional outcomes in housing are dictated by the countervailing forces of choice and constraint in the market (Helderman and Mulder 2007; Poggio 2008).

How does residential segregation arise in the absence of market-based allocation and social sorting? Using the case of segregation in southern Mexico City, I present an alternative model of the segregation-producing process that does not depend on market-based allocation or sorting according to pre-existing identities. Rather, I bring a constructivist understanding of identity to segregation research by showing how non-market systems of housing distribution and the subsequent introduction of market relations differentiated, emplaced, and naturalized two classes of urban poor in Mexico City, producing patterns of contemporary segregation.

To build this alternative model, I trace the production of segregation in a cluster of working-class neighborhoods in southern Mexico City using data from historical records, oral history interviews, and ethnographic study. I use interview and ethnographic data to examine contemporary social segregation within a cluster of working-class neighborhoods in the largely affluent borough of Coyoacán. Despite their proximity and their common socio-economic position, these working-class neighborhoods are socially and spatially divided into two types: the *pueblos* (“villages”) and the *pedregales* (“rocky landscape”). I show how both residents and state actors view these neighborhoods as constituted by different social groups with distinct needs, as

contributing distinct value to the city, and as posing unique governance challenges. The remainder of the paper traces the production of this segregation and outlines a constructivist alternative to the standard sorting model.

The alternative model unfolds in two stages. First, I argue that state projects of legibilization generate symbolic boundaries that transform assemblages of individuals into social groups, and spatial boundaries that turn physical space into meaningful places. A processes of boundary alignment overlays newly constituted groups onto newly constituted places, making group and place mutually constitutive. In the case under study, I show how two waves of redistributive property policy—first favoring agricultural producers, then urban squatters—opened distinct collective pathways to private ownership for the landless poor in the decades following the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920. Despite their shared experience as dispossessed agricultural producers, these two groups of poor residents were differentiated from each other through their distinct categorization by the state (de Souza Leão 2022; Menjívar 2023; Scott 1998), the different pathways through which they became property owners (Gerber, Zavisca and Wang 2022), and the divergent moral claims used to explain their deservingness (Levine and Russell 2023). Rather than produce transitory or individual-level alterations to identification practices (Bailey 2008; Sweet 2018), these state categories became the basis for durable, emplaced collective identities because an individual's ability to secure property rights depended on their association both with other similarly categorized residents and with discrete places (Garrido 2021).

A second stage in this constructivist model of segregation explains how spatially constituted social difference is made natural. In other words, how did the state's categorization of people and place come to be understood as social fact? Building on research that examines how

market participation naturalizes the attributes ascribed to social groups (Krippner 2017; Robinson 2020), I show how the subsequent infusion of market relations into these neighborhoods further brightened and sedimented group difference. In the decades following the formalization of property rights in these neighborhoods in the 1980s, residents—now vulnerable, private owners of market property—have mobilized to demand state protection from market-based dispossession. In these mobilizations, residents of the two neighborhood types draw on the state categories and moral justifications that were employed during the processes of property allocation to make their demands. The state’s responses to these demands have affirmed and naturalized the boundaries defining and distinguishing these emplaced groups (Krippner and Hirschman 2022; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

This paper brings a constructivist understanding of identity to segregation research by showing how identity can be the *product* of property allocation and market participation, not just a signal to which property policy and markets respond (Hirschman and Garbes 2021; Zavisca and Gerber 2016). In so doing, I make several contributions to understandings of segregation, specifically, and to broader debates about how state legibility projects produce durable and meaningful categories of collective identification (de Souza Leão 2022; Menjívar 2023; Scott 1998).

My findings support the conceptualization of segregation as a strategy for shaping the distribution of resources. However, in addition to functioning as strategy pursued by powerful social groups to hoard resources (Flippen 2004; Hanselman and Fiel 2017; Light and Thomas 2019), my findings suggest that segregation can also result when the extension of resources and market protections to vulnerable groups constitute emplaced social categories. Additionally, my findings challenge the assumption that segregation is necessarily remedied by redistributing

people in space (see Chetty, Hendren and Katz 2016; Logan, Stults and Farley 2004). In the case presented here, identity is spatially produced (Brown-Saracino 2015; Carney 2021) and, as a result, patterns of residential segregation are semi-independent of the movement of individuals into and out of places (LaFleur 2020). In other words, because place and identity are co-dependent, individuals can both assume and shed place-based identities as they traverse through space.

RESIDENTIAL SEGREGATION, SOCIAL SORTING, AND SYSTEMS OF HOUSING ALLOCATION

Residential segregation describes a spatial pattern in which individuals belonging to different social groups live geographically separate from each other. Generally, this segregation is theorized as the outcome of a sorting process: in the allocation of housing, households are distributed into different places and neighborhoods based on their relation to one or more axes of social difference. Most research on segregation in market-based systems of housing allocation see these spatial patterns as determined by the balance of two broad forces: the desires and preferences of home seekers, and the constraints that prevent households from realizing their preferences. Preferences generate segregation when households select into communities composed of people who share key attributes, such as race, class, or religion. Importantly, preferences for neighborhood demographic characteristics may be asymmetrical, with powerfully positioned social groups having higher self-segregating tendencies than less resourced and less powerful groups (Farley et al. 1994; Harris 1999).

The constraints that *prevent* households from realizing their preferences in the housing market are generally classified as either price-based or discriminatory (Crowder and Krysan 2017). Price-based constraints—when households are unable to fully realize their preferences

because they do not possess the requisite financial resources—segregate households by income and wealth. However, price-based constraints generate additional forms of segregation when economic status is stratified by other axes of difference, as is the case of household wealth and race in the United States (Crowder, South and Chavez 2006). Discriminatory constraints can take many forms: when existing residents use violence to block the arrival of households belonging to unwanted groups; when market intermediaries steer buyers towards and away from specific neighborhood depending on buyer or tenant characteristics (Farley et al. 1994; Korver-Glenn 2018; Rosen, Garboden and Cossyleon 2021); and when communities mobilize local state power to limit access to their neighborhoods, such as through the codification of land-use policies that maintain high property values or prevent the construction of affordable or public housing (Lens 2022). Discursively, concerns about property value and crime are commonly used to mask racist and discriminatory ideologies (Caldeira 2000; Farley et al. 1994).

As Crowder and Krysan (2017) observe, the standard choice-constraint model of segregation assumes full and equal information about choices and constraints, as well as stable interpretation of this information across groups. However, the segmenting effect of residential segregation means that different social groups are exposed to largely distinct sets of information (Besbris, Schachter and Kuk 2021), construct distinct decision-making heuristic devices to guide their decision-making, and are therefore choosing from “radically distinct sets of neighborhoods” (Crowder and Krysan 2017). In this way, once set in motion, segregation reproduces itself by segmenting the housing market even when price-based and discriminatory barriers are reduced.

The choice-constraint model is less useful in explaining segregation in societies where housing is largely distributed by non-market means (Arbaci 2019; Garrido 2021). State control over housing allocation may reduce segregation when state policy explicitly promotes social

mixture, as is the case under political regimes that prioritize ideologies of economic equality and social homogeneity (Sin 2002). While segregation along standard axes of social difference is generally low under such conditions, non-market allocation systems may produce segregation according to other attributes, such as occupation or rank within the ruling political party (Logan, Fang and Zhang 2010; Walder and He 2014). In post-Soviet countries, the intensification and maturation of market-based systems of housing allocation is associated with increased segregation, especially as powerful and affluent groups retreat into privatized enclaves (Kovács and Hegedűs 2014; Marcuse 1996).

When enmeshed with inegalitarian socio-political systems, state-controlled systems of housing allocation can generate segregation. In the United States, public housing projects have contributed to racial segregation and poverty concentration.¹ The replacement of large-scale housing projects with individualized voucher programs was largely motivated by a desire to deconcentrate poverty and reduce racial segregation (Rosen 2020). Policymakers believed that vouchers would reduce segregation by harnessing the power of market-based residential choice and reducing economic constraints. However, the transition to voucher programs has largely left patterns of segregation unchanged (Owens 2015; Sampson 2008). Voucher holders remain constrained by discriminatory forces—such as the discretionary power of landlords who choose where to accept and reject applicants with vouchers (Rosen 2020; Rosenblatt and Cossyleon 2018).

¹ In 1976, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Hills v. Gautreaux* that the Department of Housing and Urban Development had violated the Fifth Amendment and the Civil Rights act by concentrating public housing developments in disadvantaged neighborhoods of color, effectively amplifying patterns of segregation.

In the Global South, informal settlements have long constituted a primary component of housing delivery. The urban poor, unable to participate in the formal housing market, seek out spaces where they can provide their own “self-help” housing on vacant land or insert themselves into established, informal housing markets (Azuela de la Cueva 1987; Davis 2007; Fischer, McCann and Auyero 2014; Gough 1998; Ward 1976). These dynamics may concentrate poverty on the city’s periphery, creating “rings of misery” (Holston 2008), or manifest in a “patchwork” effect, whereby affluent and poor are interspersed in small pockets (Garrido 2018; Garrido 2019), often partitioned by walls and other security technologies (Caldeira 2000). However, the segregating effect of informal settlements may be temporally variable: the informal built environment’s high degree of malleability may actually engender increasingly greater class heterogeneity as informal settlements consolidate over time (Duhau 2014).

These accounts of segregation share an assumption that identities exist prior to segregation and are stable throughout the segregating process. In this sense, the segregation literature has been slow to incorporate understandings of identity categories and identification practices as contextually contingent and mutable. In the following section, I outline an alternative theory of the segregation-producing process built on a constructivist understanding of identity.

THEORIZING SEGREGATION BEYOND SORTING

To build this theory, I discuss two literatures that aid in understanding how redistributive housing policy and the transformation of property ownership within an expanding housing market may generate and naturalize place-based group identities. First, I discuss research that examines when and how state categories become the basis for durable group identities. Next, I examine the scholarship about how market participation can affirm, construct, and naturalize

social identity and social difference. Together, these insights provide a conceptual scaffolding with which I outline a segregation-producing process where group identity is a product of—not the basis for—the distribution of housing and property rights.

Redistributive Policy, Categorical Alignment, and the Constitution of Groupness

The construction and imposition of categories is central to how states render legible their populations and consolidate their power (de Souza Leão 2022; Scott 1998). While state categories may reflect existing group identities, the mere existence of state categories does not necessarily imply the existence of underlying social groups (Brubaker 2002). As projects of simplification and legibilization, state categories rarely map onto the complexities of lived experience: individuals may fit into multiple categories, fall between categories, or be excluded from classification altogether (Menjívar 2023). Indeed, states also exert control when they *refuse* to recognize groups through official categorization (Maghbouleh 2017; Tehranian 2008), which can lead to grassroots demands to integrate previously unrecognized categories into the state lexicon (Loveman 2014; Mora 2014; Williams 2006). These “misalignments” between categorically constructed ideal types and real subjectivities shaped by lived experience render individuals juridically and materially vulnerable (Menjívar 2023).

How and when are disjoint state categories and on-the-ground subjectivities brought into alignment? Subjects may “learn” how to conform to state categories through discursive or behavioral modifications and, in the process, alter their own understanding of themselves (Menjívar and Lakhani 2016; Sweet 2018). Yet individual identification with a category does not automatically construct a sense of “groupness,” which requires internal identification among members and a sense of collective belonging (Bailey 2008; Brubaker 2002; Jenkins 1994). The extent to which state-created categories are taken up by subjects as the basis for new group

identities can depend on the purposes for which the categories are used. State categories used for *exclusion* are often effective at creating durable group identities because they function simultaneously as “features of power and of resistance” (Mamdani 1998). Individuals categorized by the state for exclusion share a common experience of discrimination and violence, which can create a sense of shared belonging (Moon 2012; Polletta 1998) partly because of the networks of mutual support and survival that actors build. Additionally, shared grievances among the categorized can coalesce into movements of resistance, and participation in collective action generates feelings of groupness (Goldberg 2003; Polletta 1998).

When states create categories for the purposes of *inclusion*—for example, to define the beneficiaries of redistributive policy or for the basis of affirmative action—the mechanisms of group formation based on experiences of exclusion may not be present. Individual identification with state categories used for the distribution of services or benefits may be purely instrumental and transitory (Bailey 2008). To address group-based inequalities without reifying group distinctions, states may construct “replacement categories” by combining multiple “folk” categories into a new, umbrella category that becomes the basis for the distribution of benefits (de Zwart 2005). Examples include the “Backwards Classes” as a new category to encompass low-caste or caste-less groups in India, the use of federal state-based quotas in lieu of ethnic quotas in Nigeria (de Zwart 2005), or the general project of “Africanization” in post-colonial Africa (Mamdani 1998). However, replacement categories are often ineffective at creating durable group identities because they are internally stratified by pre-existing power inequalities among their component folk categories, which often feel more real to members (de Zwart 2005).

Often, however, state projects of categorization have both exclusionary and inclusionary dimensions. When state categories are used to determine eligibility for access to resources and

services, they mark certain individuals and places as deserving and others as undeserving (Levine and Russell 2023). In this sense, state categories are implicated in the construction of both material inequalities (those who receive or have and those who do not) and symbolic inequalities (those who deserve and those who do not). However, being the recipient of social benefits can also confer stigma or relegate beneficiaries to a second-class citizenship in which they are disqualified from holding certain rights (Collins and Mayer 2010; Fox 2012; Fox 2016; Massey 2007). While non-categorical difference also shapes unequal distributions of resources (Monk 2022), the material and symbolic inequalities produced through state categorization are often perceived as legitimate.

Identity, Group Membership, and Market Participation

Beyond the role of state power in constructing group subjectivity, consumption and market participation are also deeply entwined with subjectivity (Hirschman and Garbes 2021). A wide-ranging body of scholarship examines how different identity groups are privileged or penalized during the process of market exchange and consumption, including in housing markets (Korver-Glenn 2018; Rosen, Garboden and Cossyleon 2021) and credit markets (Faber 2013; Jang-Trettien 2021; Norris 2021). However, markets do more than just respond to social categories and identities. Increasingly, researchers are interested in how participation in market transactions and engagement with market institutions can affirm or reshape individual identity, as well as consolidate or redraw group membership.

A key area of focus within the literature interested in how markets shape identity are the dynamics of market expansion. When markets expand to permit participation by previously excluded groups of consumers, states revise the rules governing property rights, exchange, competition, and cooperation (Fligstein 1996), often in ways that harm new participants

(Robinson 2020; Seamster and Charron-Chénier 2017; Taylor 2019). Expansion also entails shifts in symbolic boundaries that the meanings attached to market commodities (Norris 2021; Robinson 2020). Robinson (2020) illuminates how the expansion of credit to finance the development of rental housing for low-income communities of color—“the problem of making markets for the marginalized”—functioned as a project of “racecraft” that naturalized connotations of Blackness, worthlessness, and risk, while reaffirming the “constitutive whiteness of credit.”

Movements to demand expanded access to markets can promote and legitimize new forms of collective identification, as was the case in the community reinvestment movement, or to fragment group-based claims into individual ones, as was the case when the feminist movement to demand equal access to consumer credit resulted in the creation of credit scoring (Krippner 2017). In Krippner’s account, the credit scoring technology developed in response to the National Organization of Women’s campaign had the effect of obscuring *group*-based discrimination, turning women’s market outcomes into personal shortcomings and effectively naturalizing the inferior creditworthiness of women (See also Norris 2021). The nature of the classificatory systems used by market institutions to make their customers legible—whether they assign individuals to groups or assign attributes to individuals—have important ramifications for whether consumers are able to advance grievances collectively as affected *groups* or engage only in individual claims making (Krippner and Hirschman 2022).

Market transactions can be viewed as performances through which buyers reaffirm aspects of their identity (Coleman and Williams 2013; Wherry 2012). In markets where transactions between buyers and sellers are facilitated by intermediaries—such as housing markets—researchers have documented how brokers use their own perceptions of the desires, identities, and aspirations of their clients as heuristics to “match” their clients to products

(Besbris 2016). Brokers may also use stereotypic tropes based on the category to which they perceive their client belonging to guide their client to products that align with these perceptions (Korver-Glenn 2021).

The case of real property relations—and particularly homeownership—is a particularly fertile ground for examining how engagement with markets has the power to reconfigure social identities. The arguments offered by proponents of property titling campaigns in the Global South—that conferral of formal titles will infuse owners with an entrepreneurial spirit and transform national fortunes—reveal the perceived transformative power of property ownership and market participation (de Soto 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Case

I focus on a cluster of neighborhoods, comprised of two neighborhood types, located in the Mexico City borough of Coyoacán (see Figure 1). The first type is comprised of four neighborhoods known as the *pedregales* (“rocky landscape”), a term that refers to the physical characteristics of the terrain (remnants of an ancient lava flow) but is conferred to neighborhoods with a common *social* origin. The four neighborhoods that make up the *pedregales* were established as informal settlements in the 1960s and 1970s. Other neighborhoods that sit on the same lava flow but that do not share this social origin are not considered part of the *pedregales*. Among these four neighborhoods, I focus on Santo Domingo and Ajusco.

The second subset of neighborhoods in the cluster under study known as *pueblos originarios* (“original villages”). Today, this term is a formal status conferred by the Mexico City government to neighborhoods that can successfully document their existence as villages to the nineteenth century or earlier that were ultimately subsumed into the expanding city. Among the

seven *pueblos originarios* in Coyoacán, I focus on Los Reyes and La Candelaria. The remainder of this chapter traces how these places—the *pedregales* and the *pueblos*—were constituted and differentiated from each other.

Together, these neighborhoods constitute a well-suited case for re-examining the segregation-producing process. First, the relatively recent urbanization of this area allows for a thorough reconstruction of the origins of its contemporary socio-spatial arrangements. Until the middle of the twentieth century, the area was rural, sparsely inhabited, and largely disconnected from Mexico City's systems of urban infrastructure. Today these neighborhoods occupy a highly valued location due to their relative proximity to the city's centers of cultural, commercial, and financial power, and by virtue of their integration into Mexico City's main public transportation system (See Figure 2). Despite their prime location in the city, they have generally resisted wholesale gentrification, remaining largely working class and retaining many of the long-time residents that have inhabited them since their establishment and incorporation into the city.

Second, the neighborhoods have long been home to similar populations in terms of socio-economic measures. When this region of Coyoacán was first incorporated into Mexico City in the mid-twentieth century, both the residents of the villages and the recently arrived migrants were largely homogenous in terms of traditional markers of social difference, such as class and ethnicity. They were poor, came from subsistence agricultural backgrounds, were monolingual Spanish speakers, and formed part of the country's *mestizo* majority. Today, the four neighborhoods under study continue to be similarly situated in terms of class, especially with respect to the neighborhoods that surround them, which are considerably more affluent. Figure 3

shows the Social Development Index² by neighborhood³ in Coyoacán and indicates the neighborhoods that constitute the *pedregales* and those officially designated as *pueblos originarios* by the city government.⁴ The neighborhoods of both the *pedregales* and the *pueblos* have lower levels of educational attainment and higher illiteracy rates than the rest of Coyoacán (see Table 1). A similar proportion of residents speak indigenous languages or identify as indigenous (or live in a household where a member identifies as indigenous), though the proportion is slightly higher in the *pedregales*. This finding is striking given that, as we shall see, residents of the *pueblos* are increasingly drawing on indigenous rights frameworks in their claims to urban property.

Third, while much of our understanding about the segregation-producing process emerges from studies of racial residential segregation in the United States, *racial categories* are not salient forms of social identification in Mexico. After Mexican independence in 1810, Mexican intellectual elites promoted an ideology of racial mixture (*mestizaje*) and cultural homogeneity as the cornerstone for national development (Loveman 2014). Except for the census collected in 1921 (Pla Brugat 2005),⁵ the Mexican census does not classify respondents into racial categories.

² The Social Development Index is a metric developed by the Mexico City government to indicate the degree to which the basic needs of households in a geographic area are being met. The index uses a variety of indicators such as housing characteristics, education level, poverty rates, and access to information technology.

³ These neighborhoods are the official, city-recognized neighborhood boundaries. There is a high degree of correspondence between official boundaries and social meaningful neighborhood boundaries, which is likely related to the Mexico City government's practice of including neighborhood names on the street signs found at intersections. In other words, in Mexico City it is readily apparent *where* you are—in terms of neighborhood—at any given moment. The clarity and general agreement surrounding neighborhood boundaries is, at least in part, the result of these urban governance practices.

⁴ I use the list of official *pueblos originarios* as published in the 2019 annual report from the Secretaría de Pueblos y Barrios Originarios y Comunidades Indígenas Residentes (SEPI) [Secretary of *Pueblos* and *Barrios Originarios* and Resident Indigenous Communities]. This list includes 142 *pueblos originarios*.

⁵ The 1921 census coded respondents as white, Indian, mixed, or foreign.

Throughout the remainder of the twentieth century, the census used a question about language ability as a marker of indigeneity. Only recently has the census added direct questions about ethnic identification, including a question about indigenous self-identification beginning in 2000 and a question about Afro-Mexican identity beginning in 2015 (Loveman 2014). Still, however, there is no overarching question that classifies all respondents into racial categories, and indigeneity is a fluid category, largely identified through cultural and linguistic cues (Villarreal 2014).⁶

However, Mexico is a highly unequal country and skin color is a strong axis of socio-economic stratification (Villarreal 2010). Dark-skinned Mexicans have lower incomes, less wealth, less education, and are far more likely to experience downward mobility than light-skinned Mexicans (Campos-Vazquez and Medina-Cortina 2018). Mexico City, in particular, has a high level of socio-economic inequality and moderate levels of segregation by income and education, with affluent households displaying the highest levels of isolation (Villarreal and Hamilton 2009). More recent studies suggest that socio-economic segregation has reduced since 2000 (Monkkonen, Giottonini and Comandon 2021). In fact, in the maps produced in these studies of residential segregation, the neighborhoods examined in this chapter appear as a cluster of relative disadvantage surrounded by affluence. Yet, on the ground, these neighborhoods are sharply socially differentiated from each other.

Data and Analysis

⁶ Indigenous identification in Mexico contrasts sharply with the United States, for example, where indigeneity is defined through political membership, which itself is based on blood quantum rules.

The historical, interview, and ethnographic data analyzed in this chapter are drawn from an ongoing, longitudinal study of urbanization and property relations in Mexico City. I collected and reviewed documents from both state- and community-managed archives in Mexico City (see Appendix Table 1 for a list of collections and the shorthand I use in citations). These documents include newspaper chapter, maps, photographs, petitions and notes from neighborhood groups, correspondence between residents and government officials, government reports, and internal government memos. The bulk of the documents were produced during the period from roughly 1930 to 1980, although some records come from the period prior to Mexico's independence from Spain. Among the archive collections consulted are previously un-reviewed documents and photographs held by a community center in the Santo Domingo neighborhood. This collection includes nearly 100 written testimonies from founding residents of the Santo Domingo neighborhood, which were collected in the late 1980s by a neighborhood organization to preserve the neighborhood's history. Additionally, I reviewed urban planning documents retrieved from government websites and newspaper articles collected from online newspaper repositories.

I also draw on data collected from over 21 cumulative months of participant observation in the neighborhoods between 2010 and 2022. Observational data allows me to understand how contemporary segregation organizes social relations in these neighborhoods and manifests in the daily life of residents. During my time in the field, I observed the everyday social life of the neighborhoods by observing or participating in cultural events, community workshops, neighborhood assembly meetings, protests, neighborhood canvassing trips, organizing meetings, and meetings between resident groups and local government officials. I took both written and audio notes of what I observed in the field.

To complement the historical and ethnographic data, I conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with 48 residents of the area between 2011 and 2022. All participants had lived in the neighborhoods for most or all of their adult lives. I recruited participants for interviews at community events and community centers and then utilized snowball sampling methods to recruit additional participants. During the interviews, I prompted residents to recount the history of their neighborhood in their own words, describe how they came to live there, and recount how they had become property owners. As narratives, these interviews provide insight into how residents understand and choose to represent their neighborhood's history and their place in that history.

SOCIAL SEGREGATION IN COYOACÁN

As discussed above, the cluster of neighborhoods constituted by the *pueblos* and the *pedregales* in central Coyoacán are collectively less affluent than most of the rest of Coyoacán (see Figure 2). Yet, despite their proximity and their common socio-economic position, these working-class neighborhoods are sharply differentiated from each other, both spatially and socially. In this section I show how both residents view these neighborhoods as constituted by different social groups with distinct needs and interests. In other words, I describe the contemporary state of social segregation that the remainder of the chapter seeks to explain.

In 2015, a large luxury condominium complex was approved for construction in Los Reyes, close to the point where the boundaries of Los Reyes, La Candelaria, Santo Domingo, and Ajusco meet. Shortly after groundbreaking, residents living adjacent to the construction site noticed that it began filling with water. Workers from the construction company began to pump the accumulating water down storm drains in the middle of the night, a decision that residents interpreted as an attempt to hide the situation from authorities.

News of these events spread quickly through the neighborhoods. Water is a scarce commodity in Mexico City and both the *pueblos* and the *pedregales* have long suffered from water shortages and prolonged shutoffs. Outraged at the apparent disregard for water waste, residents of the neighborhoods organized a community group with the goal of halting the construction of the condominium complex, converting the site into a public park, and using the new water source to supply the surrounding neighborhoods. Residents named the group “The General Assembly of the *Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias, and Pedregales* of Coyoacán” (henceforth the General Assembly). That residents included each type of urban space—*Pueblos, Barrios, Colonias, and Pedregales*⁷—in the group’s name reflects both the deep social fragmentation among the neighborhoods and the sincere desire of participants to build a unified movement that would bridge the socio-spatial divisions that fragment the area.

Despite the intentions reflected in the organization’s name, however, the unified movement dissolved within a few months when residents of the *pueblos* stopped participating in the General Assembly and opted to start their own, parallel effort. While spending days chatting with residents of the *pedregales* at the General Assembly’s encampment outside of the construction site, I heard the same story again and again: During one of the weekly meetings of the General Assembly before its disintegration, long-simmering tensions between the two groups boiled over. Frustrated that their suggestions were not being adequately considered, residents of the *pueblos* stood up and shouted at the rest of the attendees, calling them *invasores* (“invaders”) and abruptly leaving the meeting. After this point, the General Assembly—while still preserving

⁷ *Pueblos* refers to the *pueblos originarios*; *barrios* refers to another type of pre-colonial neighborhood form similar to the *pueblos originarios*; *colonia* is the generic term for “neighborhood” in Mexico City; and *pedregales* (“rocky landscape”) refers to the four former squatter settlements formed in the 1960s and 1970s.

its full name—became a movement almost entirely composed of residents of the *pedregales*. During my fieldwork, I met only two individuals from the *pueblos* who continued to participate in the General Assembly. They both clarified to me that they did not “represent” the *pueblos*, just themselves—an idea that was repeated to me by residents of the *pedregales*. Rather, residents of the *pueblos*—particularly of Los Reyes, who were most directly affected by the construction—continued to separately organize and meet with government officials regarding the condominium construction.

The two groups rarely interacted or came in direct contact with each other. However, I witnessed one moment when both groups had arranged to observe workers from the federal water authority take samples of the water that filled the construction site, hoping to identify its source. Together with the developer of the condominium building that now hosted a small lake, the water authority had agreed to permit two community observers to accompany workers during the collection of samples. Residents of the *pedregales* were under the impression that they would send one representative, and the *pueblos* would send another. However, when the group from the *pueblos* arrived, they appeared poised to send two of their own to observe, leaving the *pedregales* without a representative. An argument ensued, as the water authority workers waited. The tension mounted until a brief altercation broke out. Once the parties had been separated and tempers calmed, the water authority workers convinced the developer to allow three community observers into the construction site. In the end, two representatives from Los Reyes and one representative from the *pedregales* entered the site and observed the collection of water samples. That residents of these neighborhoods needed to be separately named and represented reflects a belief that these places and the people that inhabit them have different—even opposing—needs and interests.

That the *pueblos* and the *pedregales* are fundamentally different places is not just an understanding shared by residents of those places. This belief is also shared by city government officials, who view these places as posing different governance problems and contributing different value to the city. For example, the 1997 urban master plan for Coyoacán differentiates the borough's neighborhoods into three classes:

In the 1960s and 1970s, the formation of the neighborhoods of the *Pedregales* (Santo Domingo, Ajusco, and Santa Úrsula) began. Starting in that decade, the population growth in [Coyoacán] concentrated in that sector, which developed in an anarchic manner with a tendency towards the concentration of residents. The principal problem in this zone was the difficulty of introducing services and infrastructure and the lack of adequate spaces for the dispersal of the population. Today, the great majority of residents in the *Pedregales* have not been able to completely reverse the lack of infrastructure and services. [...] At first, the growth of [Coyoacán] happened in an orderly manner, later giving way to the anarchic growth of the *zona de los Pedregales*. (“zone of the *Pedregales*,” emphasis added)⁸

Interesting, the repeated reference to the “*zona de los pedregales*” (23 times in the document) never includes the several wealthy neighborhoods to the north of Santo Domingo whose official names include the word “*pedregal*” and are, indeed, situated on the same rocky substrate. The problem of irregular tenancy, the document notes, is concentrated in the “*zona de los pedregales*.”

The *pueblos* of Coyoacán, are—like the *pedregales*—distinguished as their own category of urban space deserving of a distinct planning regime. The document notes that recent urban development in the *pueblos*—including La Candelaria and Los Reyes—threatens the character of the *pueblos* and their historical patrimony. As such, the document notes the need to develop new criteria to govern the aesthetic quality, height, and land use zoning of property in the *pueblos* in order to “preserve” the cultural patrimony of Coyoacán. “These places contain enormous cultural

⁸ Programa Delegacional de Desarrollo Urbano de Coyoacán. *Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal*, April 10, 1997.

patrimony that, today, is preserved by the very residents, constituting their distinctive character from the rest of [Coyoacán].” The peculiar and, indeed, extraordinary history of the *pedregales* is rendered ordinary, not worthy of the same preservation (Mitchell 1994).

The categories of *pueblo* and *pedregal* carry a great social weight that permeates interactions among residents. For example, one afternoon in the summer of 2022, a resident of La Candelaria invited me and a Mexican researcher colleague to his uncle’s house where a group of residents of La Candelaria were going to meet. The uncle, Dionisio, was a community leader in La Candelaria and the group that would be meeting at his house had been trying to obtain government recognition of their ancestral territorial claim for over two decades. Once the group had assembled, they told my colleague and me about the research they had conducted in Mexico’s national archive to prove that they were the rightful owners of a large area of Coyoacán that included the entirety of the *pedregales* and quite a bit more. They showed us copies of numerous colonial-era maps and documents. As they talked, they repeatedly referred to the “people from Santo Domingo” as “*invasores*” and interlopers who had only an instrumental and fleeting relationship with the land. They referred to themselves, on the other hand, as “*naturales*” of La Candelaria, stating that their relationship to the land was generational and almost biologically engrained. In my fieldwork and interviews, I had not often heard the term “*naturales*” used to identify residents as having familial or ancestral connections to the *pueblos*. I more frequently heard the terms “*nativos*” or “*originarios*” to describe residents who had generational ties to the *pueblos*. However, I recognized this term from colonial era documents that I had consulted at archives—the same that they had evidently been consulting—in which Spanish colonial officials referred to locals as “*naturales*” of their respective villages.

Towards the end of the meeting, they asked my colleague where he was from. With a nervous chuckle, he responded that he was from Santo Domingo and that his parents had arrived in the neighborhood in 1971 as part of the “invasion.” Given the negative tenor with which they had been discussing “the people of Santo Domingo” just moments earlier, he quickly reassured them that he took no offense and “understood what they meant.” Additionally, he clarified that he had not lived in Santo Domingo for over a decade—suggesting that maybe he no longer really counted as one of the “people from Santo Domingo.”

Throughout my research, when I asked residents of the *pueblos* and the *pedregales* about relations between the neighborhoods, people generally responded that they had little interaction, leaving each other alone. Decades ago, when the informal settlements were newly formed, the groups clashed over ownership rights to the land. But Casimiro, an 84-year-old resident of Los Reyes, described the persistence of social divisions and tension and explained that “there cannot be a great coming-together” because of the lasting effects of the territorial disputes. Despite the social distance maintained by both groups, however, in many ways the *pueblos* and the *pedregales* constitute one another by defining themselves against what they are not. Indeed, the histories of these two places are deeply entwined. Residents of the *pedregales*, for example, narrate their neighborhoods’ histories by explaining how they were formed on communal or ejido land claimed by the *pueblos*. “What unites us as the four neighborhoods of the *pedregales*,” explained Julián, an elderly leader from the Santa Úrsula neighborhood of the *pedregales*, “is the fact that we made these neighborhoods with our hands, our sweat, our personal energy.” He added: “We are also united in that we come from *ejido* land.” In the first weeks, months, and even years after the establishment of Santo Domingo and Ajusco, residents recount having to defend their plots of land against displacement by both residents of the *pueblos* and the federal

riot police (*granaderos*), who they perceived as protecting the interests of the aggrieved *pueblo* residents.

Residents of the *pueblos*, on the other hand, begin their narrations by describing their territory—understood as the domain of social reproduction of the *pueblos*—which included the area of the *pedregales* prior to its urbanization. Indeed, government reports in years before the “invasion”, describe the economic and social importance of the *pedregales* to the *pueblos*, as places where they collected and cultivated plants to sell, grazed their livestock, and celebrated religious festivities.⁹ Their efforts to secure these lands and, ultimately, their failure to do so, are central themes in their narrations of the *pueblos*’ history.

Today, the categories of *originario* and *invasor* structure social relations in this corner of Coyoacán. On the surface, these terms have discrete definitions: an *originario* is someone who can trace their familial lineage as a resident of the *pueblos* to the period before urbanization, and an *invasor* is someone who participated in one of the “land invasions” through which the neighborhoods of the *pedregales* were first established in the 1960s and 1970s. However, in practice, the terms are applied more broadly to residents, regardless of their individual life history. For example, someone who lives in a *pueblo*, participates in key community institutions, and identifies with local traditions can be endowed with the privileges associated with being an *originario* (such as serving on the committee that plans the annual religious festivals or being buried in the *pueblo*’s community cemetery) even if their familial lineage is not rooted in the *pueblo*. To this point, I met two leaders in La Candelaria who I only learned later were not *originarios* through family lineage. Residents of the *pueblos* recounted other cases of individuals

⁹ Report addressed to the Director of the Office of Lands, March 12, 1960 (*AE EZ*).

who, while lacking generational ties, had participated in key traditions, held appointed leadership positions, supported community institutions financially, and were ultimately given permission to be buried in the *pueblo* cemetery.¹⁰

Likewise, residents of the *pedregales* acquire the character of *invasor* when they are socially integrated into the neighborhood, even if they arrived in the *pedregales* recently or are the children or grandchildren of founding residents. When Dionisio and his colleagues referred to the “people of Santo Domingo” as *invasores*, they referred to all residents of Santo Domingo, not just to the shrinking subset of people who arrived during the invasions of five decades prior. As in the *pueblos*, community leaders in the *pedregales* are actively engaged in efforts to preserve the memory of the invasion and the subsequent years of struggle, passing the stories and sense of self-determination to new generations and new residents. Every September, around the anniversary of Santo Domingo’s founding, a community center called La Escuelita Emiliano Zapata¹¹ holds a week-long celebration with plays, musical performance, poetry slams, and talks recounting the story of *la invasión* and honoring the sacrifices made the original *invasores*. The founder and director of the La Escuelita—a student activist at the time of the invasion who has remained in the neighborhood since its founding—has published two books that weave together testimonies from founding residents, photographs from the neighborhood’s first months and years, and drawings by children in the neighborhood (Díaz Enciso 2002; Díaz Enciso 2009). Murals depicting emblematic images of the invasion adorn the walls of homes and businesses throughout the neighborhood. These efforts—to cultivate collective pride and curate consensus

¹⁰ Previous research on the *pueblo originario* neighborhoods in Mexico City makes no mention of the transferability of group membership.

¹¹ Named after the Revolutionary hero to whom is attributed the phrase “Land for those who work it.”

around a neighborhood origin story that can be easily passed to new generations—function to disseminate the social history of the neighborhood and cultivate an identity of *invasor* among residents.

The contemporary social and physical separation between the *originarios* of the *pueblos* and the *invasores* of the *pedregales* defies the traditional model of segregation because identity and place do not operate independently. Here, segregation is not the product of identity-based sorting: *originario* and *invasor* did not exist as categories of identification at the time of these neighborhoods' settlement. And neither will a re-sorting of people reverse existing segregation: becoming associated and socially integrated with one of these defined social spaces—the *pueblos* or the *pedregales*—imbues individuals with that place's spatially inscribed identity (Garrido 2021). If not through sorting according to pre-existing identities, how did the socio-spatial alignment of neighborhood and group identity come to be? In the following sections, I argue that the management of property relations were key in the constitution, naturalization, and spatial embedding of these categories.

CONSTITUTING GROUPS: THE REDISTRIBUTION OF PROPERTY RIGHTS AND THE MANAGEMENT OF MEXICO CITY'S URBAN POOR

In the decades following the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920, two waves of redistributive property policy—first favoring agricultural producers, then urban squatters—opened distinct collective pathways to ownership for the landless poor. In this section, I show how the allocation of land and property rights in the second half of the twentieth generated a social and spatial distinction between the *pedregales* and the *pueblos*. In addition to drawing spatial boundaries that distinguish these places from each other, redistributive policy also constituted emplaced groups by drawing symbolic boundaries around assemblages of individuals

and associating them with those newly delimited places. Despite their shared experience as dispossessed agricultural producers, these two groups of peripheral urban poor were differentiated from each other through their distinct categorization by the state (de Souza Leão 2022; Menjívar 2023; Scott 1998), the different collective pathways through which they became property owners (Gerber, Zavisca and Wang 2022), and the divergent moral claims used to explain their deservingness (Levine and Russell 2023).

The Pueblos: Agrarian Reform, Material Dispossession, and Symbolic Validation

As of 1810, in newly independent Mexico, ninety-nine percent of the population did not own property. Many Mexicans rented land owned by the Catholic Church, which was one of the new republic's largest landowners (Morales Martínez 2011). By the mid-nineteenth century, liberal reforms targeting ecclesiastical tenure sought to foment the market exchange of land and promote small-scale private land ownership under a market-driven ideology of modernity and progress. The tenants of Church-owned land were given the first opportunity to buy the property they had rented but, when most were unable, the land was subsequently offered at public auction. The transition of these lands from the Church to private owners induced wave of displacement, including many rural and indigenous communities that had lived collectively on Church-owned land.

In Mexico City, the Church went from owning 47 percent of the land (by value) in 1813, to less than one percent by 1864, with virtually all remaining property owned privately (Morales Martínez 2011). In response to worsening inequities during this period and dissatisfaction with the authoritarian rule, several rebellions coalesced into a Revolution that lasted roughly a decade

from 1910 to 1920. One of the Revolution's rallying cries—"Land for those who work it"¹²—reflects the centrality of unequal land distribution among the sources of popular discontent (Womack 1968).

The constitution that resulted from the Revolution—which remains in effect today, although with a few key modifications—established a tripartite system of land tenure: private, public, and social. Social tenure, which encompasses two forms of collective property ownership, was designed to remedy the country's highly unequal land distribution and to reestablish social cohesion that had been shattered by the liberal reforms and the brutality of both the authoritarian rule and the Revolution that followed. While the architects of post-Revolutionary social tenure imagined it would *restore* a prior state of social harmony rooted in communal landholding, this image of a communitarian and egalitarian *pueblo* was largely a historical fantasy. The ideals embodied in the construct of social tenure clashed with on-the-ground realities of diverse landholding traditions (Kourí 2004).

The two varieties of social tenure—the *ejido* and communal land—granted collective property rights to groups of landless agricultural producers. They are distinguished from each other by the type of claim petitioning groups are able to make: petitioners of communal land have to demonstrate a historical collective use of the land being petitioned, while grants of *ejido* land required no such evidence and could be located in an entirely different state from the residence of the petitioners (Azuela de la Cueva 1995). Both varieties were intended exclusively for agricultural production and effectively excluded from market exchange: collective owners were prohibited from subdividing, selling, or mortgaging the land, nor were they allowed to use

¹² The phrase is attributed to the revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, who outlined demands for the redistribution of the nation's land and resources in the Plan de Ayala in 1911.

it as collateral to secure other types of loans. The explicit protection of social tenure from market forces reflected a desire to avoid the same wave of market-based dispossession that followed the liberal reforms and mass land privatization of the nineteenth century. Social tenure rights could only be alienated by state-approved in-kind exchange (*permuta*) or through expropriation by the state.

The state's ability to expropriate all varieties of real property—both for the public good, generally, and to establish social tenure, specifically—constituted the cornerstone of post-Revolutionary land reform. At the end of the Revolution, the new government took power with a mandate to initiate a program of land redistribution and remedy the country's highly unequal ownership structure. Indeed, shortly after the new constitution was established in 1917, the government set about the task of breaking-up large estates and redistributing those lands to the landless masses in the form of *ejidos* and communal lands (Azuela de la Cueva 1995). However, implementation was slow. A decade after the close of the Revolution, agrarian reform was largely seen as having failed. However, under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), who campaigned on a promise to finally delivering long-demanded agrarian reform, land redistribution through social tenure grants accelerated.

At this time, Mexico was still a predominantly rural country with most of the population engaged in small-scale or subsistence agriculture. The country's capital city was home to a little over half a million people, about two-thirds of whom lived urban core (the area that coincides with the four central boroughs of the city today). The remaining residents were distributed across the area that, today, comprises the other 12 peripheral boroughs, including the borough of Coyoacán several miles south of Mexico City's downtown. At the time, the northwest corner of the borough of Coyoacán contained an old colonial center as well as the modern Del Carmen

neighborhood, which was built in the years preceding the outbreak of the Revolution in 1910 as a suburban enclave for the city's wealthy (Brosseau 2020). Beyond that, the rest of Coyoacán was rural, undeveloped countryside dotted by a handful of small *pueblos*.

In this context, residents of Coyoacán's agricultural villages began petitioning for communal land shortly after the end of the Revolution under the country's new system of social tenure. Residents of La Candelaria submitted their first request in September 1922. At the time, much of the land in the area legally belonged to the hacienda of San Antonio Coapa. The petition by La Candelaria was approved in a series of resolutions and expropriation decrees between 1924 and 1929.¹³ The original resolution, which recommended the expropriation and transfer of 506 acres to La Candelaria, was executed in 1928. However, the expropriated landholders filed a legal petition to block the expropriation on the grounds that they were protected against expropriation as small landholders. Owners of properties under 370 acres were protected against expropriation for the creation of *ejidos* and communal lands. Between 1915 and 1922, the owners of the San Antonio Coapa hacienda had strategically subdivided and sold off parcels of the land to distinct private owners, placing much of the ownership in this protected category.

The case was taken to the Supreme Court where the 1928 expropriation decree was ultimately nullified. The Court argued that, because the hacienda landowners carried out the subdivision of their lands *prior* to La Candelaria's petition, their actions did not represent an attempt to circumvent agrarian reform laws and were therefore valid. After the 1928 expropriation decree was voided, a second expropriation decree was issued in 1929 that

¹³ A presidential resolution directing the Secretary of Agriculture to execute the expropriation was published in the *DOF* on April 5, 1924, p. 1239. Two expropriation decrees were published by the Secretary of Agriculture in the *DOF* on January 20, 1928, p. 3 and March 11, 1929, p. 1.

transferred 247 acres to La Candelaria as *ejido* rather than communal land, likely because it was several kilometers from their village. The new decree excluded parcels that had been under 370 acres in 1928 as well as those parcels that had been eligible in 1928 but were now too small since their area had been reduced in the interim through expropriation and transfer to other *pueblos* in the area. This decision marked the beginning of the *pueblos*' experience of redistributive land policy as both a validation of their territorial claims and a tool of gradual dispossession.

In the mid-1930s, a flurry of activity by residents of La Candelaria and Los Reyes further confirmed this experience. First, following a 1931 reform that confirmed the inalienable nature of social tenure, residents of La Candelaria filed a petition for restitution in 1935. They argued that the 1928 Supreme Court decision, which nullified the first expropriation, had been unconstitutional and requested the return of the portions of the *pedregales* that they considered rightfully theirs. While the Federal District's Agrarian Commission initially approved their petition, a subsequent resolution by the Department of the Federal District overturned the decision, arguing that the original resolution was only a *recommendation* not a transfer of title, so La Candelaria had never been in legal possession of the land. Restitution could therefore not be executed because the property had never been theirs.¹⁴

Within a month of the petition filed by La Candelaria, residents of Los Reyes filed a request to be granted communal land, asserting their right given the *pueblo*'s existence "since the Colonial era."¹⁵ While they were deemed eligible for land under the system of social tenure, the government concluded that there was no remaining land eligible for expropriation near the

¹⁴ Resolution by the Department of the Federal District published in the *DOF*, May 21, 1935, p. 349.

¹⁵ Petition by residents of Los Reyes published in the *DOF*, March 1, 1935, p. 4.

pueblo.¹⁶ The remaining parcels of the ex-hacienda were too small for expropriation largely because significant amounts of land had already been expropriated and transferred as social property to other nearby *pueblos*. Other parcels were ruled ineligible for expropriation because their location in the rocky *pedregales* made them unsuitable for agricultural production—the central purpose of social tenure under agrarian reform.¹⁷ Instead, a census was conducted that identified 106 residents of Los Reyes who were deemed eligible petitioners for social tenure land and offered the option of relocating to an area where there was available land for the creation of an *ejido*. They appear not to have taken the offer.

Residents of Los Reyes made another attempt to obtain communal property rights in 1948. Interestingly, they petitioned for *restitution* of a parcel of land located in the *pedregal*.¹⁸ By requesting restitution, they implied that the land at one time belonged to them, although they provided no evidence to support this claim. In a denial of their petition, the government again confirmed their eligibility for land under social tenure law and, this time, named 806 eligible individuals who were “trained in agrarian matters” and identified in a census of the *pueblo*.¹⁹ However, the denial also confirmed the absence of legally eligible lands for expropriation since formal title belonged to a handful of private owners in parcels too small for expropriation.²⁰ While the moral claim of the petitioners was validated, they were unable to translate it into the material resources they sought.

¹⁶ Resolution by the Department of the Federal District published in the *DOF*, August 24, 1937, p. 10.

¹⁷ Resolution by the Agrarian Department published in the *DOF*, August 15, 1939, p. 13.

¹⁸ Petition by residents of Los Reyes published in the *DOF*, January 30, 1950, p. 11.

¹⁹ Resolution by the Department of the Federal District published in the *DOF*, April 3, 1951, p. 19.

²⁰ Resolution by the Agrarian Department published in the *DOF*, July 2, 1951, p. 14.

However, by the late 1950s, the government reopened their case for consideration, possibly prompted by a 1958 reform to the Agrarian Code. In July 1959, workers from the Secretary of Agrarian Reform set about contacting the different parties that laid claim to land in the pedregales, both within and directly adjacent to the area under petition. In total, around a dozen individuals and corporations were contacted. Only two individual owners responded to these notices, protesting the boundary of the proposed communal grant, which they claimed encroached on their property. In response, representatives of Los Reyes arranged to meet with the two protesting landowners on the site of the disputed boundary. However, when they arrived, they were met with machine gun fire that severely wounded (and perhaps killed—though the reports are inconsistent) several residents of Los Reyes. After the encounter, the two landowners erected concrete barricades to protect the lands they claimed as theirs.²¹ Besides this dispute, no other landowners appear to have come forward to dispute boundary or ownership claims.

As part of these efforts, government workers convened a town meeting in Los Reyes to instruct residents about how to conduct a census of the *pueblo* as part of the communal land grant process. The *pueblo* elected two representatives to carry out the census, who went door-to-door to count and collect the names of residents, both “native residents and *avecindados*.”²² Under the Agrarian Code, *avecindado* refers to any resident living in a community for at least

²¹ Report addressed to the Director of the Office of Lands, dated March 12, 1960 (*AEEZ*). The government report states that four residents of Los Reyes were killed, though a newspaper account states that “a driver” was killed and four residents of Los Reyes were seriously injured (see Mancilla 2000, 175).

²² Report addressed to the Director of the Office of Communal Lands, no date (c. 1960) (*AEEZ*). The report refers to a census of residents, “tanto nativos y *avecindados*.”

one year.²³ The final census report produced by census committee of Los Reyes divided residents into three classes: “*comuneros*”, “*avecindados*”, and “*particulares*,” apparently in accordance with guidelines set forth by the Office of Communal Lands. The category of *comunero* refers to those individuals who the community agrees should be endowed with collective property rights to the communal lands in question. The Agrarian Code provides little guidance on how such a determination should be made and, in practice, communities were able to decide for themselves how such individuals be identified. This meant that determining characteristics varied by community, though being born in the community and/or participating in social and religious activities were often criteria for inclusion (Ventura-Patiño 2019). The meaning of the final category, *particular* (“private”), is less clear and the census identified only a few individuals. The term may refer to private landowners who do not meet the definition of *avecindado*, meaning they either do not reside in the *pueblo* or have resided for less than a year.

At the culmination of this process, then President Adolfo López Mateos issued a declaration on September 19, 1961, that a large portion of the *pedregales* be conferred as communal lands to the *pueblo* Los Reyes. The technical reports prepared ahead of the decision show, in no uncertain terms, that the government workers sympathized with the claims of Los Reyes. One report alludes to documents presented by residents of Los Reyes that date the *pueblo*’s existence to “200 years before Christ,” and concludes that the area belongs to Los Reyes as communal lands because the *pueblo* has continually possessed, worked, and lived off the land since. However, for unknown reasons, the presidential decision was not published (as

²³ See, for example, the Glossary of Terms produced by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) as guidance for the 2007 Ejido Census, available here: <https://www.inegi.org.mx/app/glosario/default.html?p=CAE2007>.

would be expected) in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación (DOF)*, leaving the tenure and ownership of the land ambiguous. Indeed, we only know of its existence because it was finally published ten years later, in November 1971—after the *pedregales* had been “invaded” and only four days before they would be expropriated.

Around the same time, the government apparently also reopened consideration of the communal claims of La Candelaria on an adjacent parcel of land in the *pedregales*.²⁴ Residents of La Candelaria had submitted a petition for the conferral of communal land title in 1951 but, curiously, a response to the petition had never been formally published—as was custom—in the *DOF*. The 1951 petition argues that the *pueblo* has been collectively using the portion of the *pedregal* for “more than 100 years” to graze animals, collect firewood, harvest wildflowers, and forage edible plants. They state that they believe there is a formal legal title—which they have been unable to locate—that shows the transfer of the land from the Church to the *pueblo* after the passage of the Reform Laws. They state that a confirmation of the formal communal status of the land would ensure that they be able to continue using the land as they have for decades. The petition was only published in the *DOF* in 2005,²⁵ after the *pueblo* had launched a series of legal motions challenging the privatization of the area.

Despite no record of La Candelaria ever receiving formal recognition of their communal claims to the *pedregales*, it is notable that internal memos regarding the impending expropriation of the *pedregales* of Santo Domingo in 1971, the communal lands of Los Reyes are described as

²⁴ While I was unable to locate a similar body of reports showing the reconsideration of the case, documents from the reconsideration of the communal lands of the Los Reyes (*AEEZ*) reference files related to the case of La Candelaria other nearby *pueblos*. Additionally, the final judgement (published on June 19, 2015 in the *DOF*) regarding a legal challenge submitted by residents of La Candelaria in 2001, mentions that the Office of Land and Water ordered the study of the issue of the communal lands claimed by La Candelaria in 1959.

²⁵ A copy of the original petition, dated October 15, 1951, was published in the *DOF* on July 15, 2005.

adjoining the communal lands of La Candelaria.²⁶ Even more confusing is that the referenced area had been expropriated a year and a half prior to regularize the tenure of residents of an informal settlement, now known as the Ajusco neighborhood.²⁷ As Mancilla (2000) notes in his detailed examination of the case of the *pedregales* that now constitute Santo Domingo, the question “to whom belonged the *pedregal* of Santo Domingo?” is nearly impossible to decisively answer, given the numerous conflicting ownership claims and contradictions in the government’s own records.

However, what *is* clear from the body of records documenting the *pueblos*’ efforts to gain communal title to the *pedregales* is that they took full advantage of the new pathway to communal property ownership that was opened at the end of the Revolution under the new regime of social tenure. And, indeed, despite their mixed success in securing formal communal title, their deservingness as authentic subjects of the Revolution—landless agricultural producers—was continually affirmed through the decades of negotiation with the state. The processes to which they submitted over the course of these attempts to secure communal title included multiple rounds of census-taking, town meetings to elect communal representatives, and even research in the country’s national archives to find evidence of their historical relation to the land under petition. These efforts consolidated a sense of community, broadly, but also generated distinct categories of those who counted as *comuneros* in the *pueblos*, and those who did not.

²⁶ “Expediente de Expropiación de Sto. Domingo Los Reyes”, November 27, 1971 (*AGA/Los Reyes*, p.27-31).

²⁷ Presidential decree published in the *DOF* on July 4, 1970.

During this time the area was coming under acute urbanization pressures. Indeed, urban development had already altered the landscape in ways that transformed the lives of *pueblo* residents. In 1940, after a new water pumping station was built just to the west of La Candelaria, the abundant water in the *pueblos* and the *pedregales*—which had made these areas ideal for cultivating and harvesting flowers and crops—dried up. Prior to the pumping station, residents of the *pueblos* had relied on wells to secure their water. Afterwards, residents limited the uses to which they applied well water given its diminished quantity and quality (Aceves Lozano 1998).

Along with physical alterations to the landscape wrought by encroaching urbanization, residents were also increasingly connected to the urban economy and labor market. Together, these pressures and opportunities meant that the ties between land and livelihood were loosened or altogether severed. Casimiro, who lives in the same house in the Los Reyes where he was born in 1940, explains how when he was a child “you didn’t have to leave the *pueblo* to go to the market to buy meat, milk, or cheese.” He continues: “Everything was made here. Here you had everything. Everything! All the vegetables. And they made delicious tortillas because the corn was from here. And look now: you go and buy tortillas made with corn from who knows where” (see also Aceves Lozano 1998).

The rapid pace of material and social change in the *pueblos* strained community social relations in ways that manifested as intra-*pueblo* conflicts over property rights. These conflicts highlight the inchoate nature of the symbolic boundaries delineating who counted—and who did not count—as members of the *pueblos*. Between 1952 and 1958, for example, residents of La Candelaria petitioned the government seven times to request that the state revoke the *ejido* property rights of certain individuals—often following accusations that they had abandoned

production in their plots—and transfer their rights to new members.²⁸ Similarly, after the residents of Los Reyes submitted the results of the census in 1959 as part of the process of securing their communal rights (discussed above), they followed-up with a letter identifying three individuals that the community requested be removed from the list of would-be *comuneros* and excluded from the communal land grant, due to allegations of fraud against the *pueblo*. As we will see, such fluid ideas about *pueblo* membership contrast with contemporary understandings of inalienable, birthright membership rights based on genealogy.

The Pedregales: Informal Urbanization and the New Calculus of Deservingness

The encroaching urbanization in this area of the city was driven by a rapid increase in the urban population. Beginning in the 1940s, a mass movement of people from the countryside to urban areas transformed Mexico from a mostly rural country to a majority urban one (Lomnitz 1977). Rural families—some *ejido* land owners themselves—were driven from their villages by plummeting real wages and the withdraw of supports for small agricultural producers (Niblo 1999). Fleeing poverty and hunger in the countryside, rural migrants concentrated in Mexico City, which was home to nearly 47% of the country’s total population by 1960 (Lomnitz 1977).

Catering to the desires of the established urban class, who were unsettled by these transformations, the local government of Mexico City sought to limit the growth of the city by refusing to expand services beyond the existing urban limits or develop additional housing in the periphery. Both the local and federal governments were aligned in their anti-growth stances through the mid-1960s (Davis 1994). However, with the election of President Gustavo Díaz

²⁸ See resolutions published in the *DOF* on December 15, 1952; January 12, 1953; July 10, 1954; January 28, 1955; July 27, 1955; November 25, 1957; and June 21, 1958.

Ordaz in 1964, who was decidedly more pro-growth than his predecessor, the local and federal governments were increasingly at odds with respect to their stance on urban growth. In the 1960s, urban development intensified in anticipation of the 1968 Olympic Games, including groundbreaking on the city's metro system.

Given the anti-growth stance that dominated through mid-1960s, arriving migrants tended to locate in overcrowded central tenements or under-serviced neighborhoods and villages on the urban periphery (Ward 1990). Migrant families arriving from rural *pueblos* were unaccustomed to renting and found the experience unpleasant. In my interviews with residents who arrived in the 1950s and 1960s, respondents recalled resenting having to designate a substantial portion of their meager income to rent, disliking the crowded conditions and lack of privacy, and missing the security that came with having “a little piece of land of their own” as they were accustomed. As conditions deteriorated, overcrowding worsened, and rents rose, these families began to search for other options.

For most, the only alternative to renting was participating in an *invasión de terrenos* (“land invasion”), where residents joined together to occupy areas of undeveloped land. Participants in these land invasions were labelled *paracaidistas* (“parachuters”) in the press, a term that describes how they arrived suddenly, often overnight, apparently having dropped from the sky. By 1970, an estimated 35-40% of Mexico City residents lived in these informal settlements (Ward 1976), referred to as *colonias proletarias* (“proletariat neighborhoods”), *ciudades perdidas* (“lost cities”), or *ciudades de miseria* (“cities of misery”). These settlements passed through stages, often beginning with provisional structures to shelter squatters from the elements as they collected building materials to construct more permanent houses (Duhau 2014). This type of urbanization—where homes and neighborhood infrastructure (e.g., streets, lighting,

electricity, water, sewage) are largely built, supplied, or secured through the collective efforts of residents themselves—is often referred to as *autoconstruction* (Caldeira 2016; Holston 2008; Ortega Alcázar 2016).

In the 1950s and 1960s, recently arrived migrant families began informally purchasing plots of land in the *pedregales* near La Candelaria, leading to the settlement of what today comprises the Ajusco neighborhood. Today, residents of La Candelaria characterize Ajusco residents as *invasores*, while residents of Ajusco describe buying plots of land from supposed owners—perhaps residents of La Candelaria, or perhaps outsiders posing as property owners—in good faith. Regardless, by the mid-1960s a community of around 2,500 families was well-established on the land.²⁹ Some lived in provisional structures, others in brick-and-mortar dwellings, and some in caves.³⁰ However, in September 1966, anti-growth Mexico City mayor Ernesto Uruchurtu oversaw the violent eviction of residents, sending in bulldozers to raze their homes. Two days later, after widespread public indignation at the raw display of violence, President Diaz Ordaz forced Uruchurtu to resign (Pozas Horcasitas 2016). His resignation paved the way for a united pro-growth coalition between the Federal and local government (Davis 1994).

This episode also garnered significant national press attention, with accounts largely sympathetic to the poor residents evicted from their makeshift homes in the *pedregal*. It also marks a clear shift in the moral valence among the different classes of landless poor in Mexico City—away from the *comuneros* and towards the *paracaidistas*. In a legislative session shortly

²⁹ “Desalojos de los habitantes de la colonia “Pedregal del Ajusco,” September 12, 1966 (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 1).

³⁰ “Demolición de casas y desalojo de familias de la colonial Pedregal del Ajusco anexo a la colonia Sta Urusla, Delg. Coyoacán, D.F., por autoridades del Depto. Del D.F.,” September 12, 1966 (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 3).

after the eviction event, Federal congress members—both from the PRI and from opposition parties—gave speeches denouncing the demolition of the settlement. Even opposition politicians opted not to blame the ruling party, insisting that all political parties agreed about the need to find a solution to human suffering. “For whom is this city?” asked another opposition congressman. He went on: “We ask for the immediate intervention of the President so that the Department of the Federal District [the Mexico City government] build houses for them, so that the residents of the affected neighborhoods can continue living there.”

In quick order, both PRI and opposition politicians placed the blame squarely at the feet of Mayor Uruchurto. In fact, even opposition parties assured residents that the President would never have ordered such an act. One congressman from an opposition party suggested that Mayor Uruchurto had ordered the settlement be demolished ahead of the Olympic Games because of its very close proximity to one of the Olympic stadiums. Another summed up the general sentiment: “Bulldozers against the people: No. Public works without social consciousness: No. Rather, as the President said: Many public works for the wellbeing of Mexico. The Revolution will always be done with human beings in mind.” Attending to the problems of the city’s poor, who lived in improvised settlements and without the security of formal titles, was the work in the name of the Revolution.

Party officials and elected representatives quickly came to the defense of the affected residents, giving them cash and other in-kind donations, as well as building a provisional communal structure to house those whose homes had been demolished. Several parastate companies also came to the aid of residents, donating milk, bread, and potable water. At the same time, however, the police maintained a heavy presence in the area (ostensibly to protect the nearby parastate asphalt plant from possible retaliation by affected residents) and reports recount

instances of police confiscating residents' water jugs and otherwise bribing and harassing residents.³¹

Many of the affected families had been sleeping in improvised shelters in the ruins of where their houses had once been. Over 300 residents had attended the legislative session, carrying a banner painted with the words: "We ask for justice and instead they knock down our houses." In addition to residents from the Ajusco neighborhood—where the recent eviction had occurred—residents of the nearby Santa Ursula neighborhood attended the legislative session as well. The Santa Ursula neighborhood was another neighborhood settled by *paracaidistas*, situated on a different portion of the *pedregales* that was claimed as communal land by another *pueblo*. In recent years, residents there had faced similar state aggression. In fact, in the wake of the eviction in Ajusco, residents of the two neighborhoods banded together to present a unified front as they outlined their demands to government officials.

After rejecting an offer from the Mexico City government to be relocated to apartments in a social housing complex to the north of the city, residents from the two neighborhoods created a list of demands, beginning with the demand for formal property titles. Other demands included: the provision of materials with which they could build their houses; an end to police brutality and extortion; the provision of water, medical services, and schools in the neighborhoods; and a guarantee that they be allowed to stay in their neighborhoods, given the many years many had been living there.³²

³¹ "Colonia Pedregal de Ajusco," undated (c. 1966) (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 8-16).

³² "Colonia Pedregal del Ajusco," September 14, 1966 (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 66).

Internal government security briefings described two contrasting property claims on the land in question: on the one hand, La Candelaria had been in a protracted legal battle over the claim to the area as communal land; on the other hand, a private company claimed ownership.³³ The *paracaidistas* living in this area of the *pedregales* had registered a civil association called “Colonia Pedregal del Ajusco” in January 1966, which was charged with facilitating a sale agreement between the residents and the “legitimate” owners, which the association identified as the private company.³⁴ The association was also charged with representing residents in negotiations with public officials regarding the provision of public services in the neighborhood. The leaders of the Ajusco settlement urged their neighbors to come to the civil association’s office to make the payment and regularize their property claims. The sale price was set at \$12.50 pesos per square meter (slightly less than \$10.00 per square meter in 2024 USD), with a down payment of 10% and the rest paid in monthly installments over a four-year period. By the time of the eviction, at least some of the residents had entered into sale agreements and government officials indicate that some had provisional documentation linking them to their plots of land.

Within a day of the eviction, the Planning Office of the Mexico City government had begun taking a census of residents of Ajusco. Government officials intended to use the census to identify families in order to distribute the promised construction materials, equitably allocate land, and even provide cash payments. Later, they decided to begin issuing identification cards to distinguish residents of Ajusco from residents of nearby neighborhoods who, the government

³³ “Desalojos de los habitantes de la colonia “Pedregal del Ajusco,” September 12, 1966 (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 2).

³⁴ Flyer from Colonia Pedregal del Ajusco, A.C., March 8, 1966; Contract between Colonia Pedregal del Ajusco, A.C. and Pedregal de Montserrat, S.A. (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 83-85).

worried, were posing as affected residents of Ajusco to receive the goods and services not meant for them.³⁵

The nearby area of the *pedregales* just to the west of Ajusco known as Santo Domingo—the area claimed by the *pueblo* of Los Reyes and subject of the unpublished presidential decree that designated them as communal lands of the *pueblo* in 1961—remained largely uninhabited. However, around the time of the eviction in Ajusco, a small group of people had begun erecting dwellings in the area. By 1971, around 400 people were living in this part of the *pedregal* in structures built mainly from laminate sheets, cardboard, and stones. According to government reports, some leaders from Los Reyes had initiated the settlement by allowing people into the *pedregales* to live in exchange for a small payment. Those who had paid and been given permission from the leaders from Los Reyes were given cards that identified them as members of a “Residents Union.” The payments, they were told, would go toward the cost of obtaining the proper permissions from the authorities, though a favorable decision was not promised. Not all *comuneros* from Los Reyes viewed this practice favorably.

Then, in the first days of September, several thousand people arrived in the area in an event that is commonly referred to—even today—as the *invasión*. Government reports from the time indicate that participants of the *invasión* insisted they were “obeying” what President Echeverría had said in a public speech: “that vacant land could be occupied.” Most had recently arrived in the city from small, agricultural villages in the states like Oaxaca, Hidalgo, Guerrero, Puebla, and Michoacán. Leaving their agricultural livelihoods behind, they found work as laborers, building many of large infrastructure projects of the era, including the metro system and

³⁵ “Colonia Pedregal del Ajusco,” September 16, 1966 (*DFS/Ajusco*, p. 119).

infrastructure for the 1968 Olympic Games.³⁶ As word of the “invasion” spread through social networks, more families arrived in the following days.³⁷ Security officers from the adjacent National Autonomous University of Mexico reinforced the barriers surrounding the campus to ensure that the University’s property would not be affected.³⁸ In the first four days of the invasion, an estimated six thousand people arrived in the settlement. The total population had reportedly increased to 15,000 by the end of February 1972,³⁹ 35,000 by September 1972,⁴⁰ and 68,000 by October 1974.⁴¹

Most of the people I interviewed—as in the government report—recalled they that they had heard the President’s speech, which they understood as permitting their occupation of the *pedregales*. Most indicated that the speech in question was President Echeverría’s annual address, which he gave a few days prior to the invasion, on September 1, 1971. President Echeverría dedicated a significant portion of his first presidential address to the problem of uncontrolled population growth and irregular urban expansion in Mexico City. He promised to regularize the property of informal dwellers throughout the city and to construct affordable

³⁶ “Pedregal de Santo Domingo de los Reyes, Delegación de Coyoacán, D.F.,” October 6, 1974 (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, p. 36).

³⁷ Among my interviews, all had arrived from small villages in nearby states and were renting elsewhere in the city—many in nearby neighborhoods—when they heard about the opportunity in the *pedregales* from friends, neighbors, or family members.

³⁸ “Invasión de Terrenos Comunes en los Pedregales, Santo Domingo los Reyes, Delegación Coyoacán, D.F.,” September 9, 1971 (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, p. 1-3).

³⁹ “Como ganar una vida mejor,” *Mañana*, February 29, 1972. Accessed at the Hemeroteca Nacional Digital de México.

⁴⁰ “Ya hay 35 mil ‘paracaidistas’ en el Pedregal de Santo Domingo,” *Sol de Medio Día*, September 18, 1972 (*IPS/InvasionesB*, p. 73).

⁴¹ “Pedregal de Santo Domingo de los Reyes, Delegación de Coyoacán, D.F.,” October 6, 1974 (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, p. 36).

housing to meet demand. Concluding this segment of his speech, he acknowledged the “subhuman conditions” in the city’s many squatter settlements and promised that regularization would allow the city to grow with “harmony and humanity.”⁴²

Despite government intelligence reports that *comuneros* of Los Reyes had initiated the settlement of the *pedregales*, leaders from Los Reyes sent a letter to President Echeverría a few months before the great *invasión* began. The authors of the letter pleaded with the President to finally publish the 1961 presidential decree that designated a portion of the *pedregales* as their communal land. The fact that the decree was never properly published in the *Diario Oficial de Federación*, they argued, had led to two “grave problems” for their community: First, “*el paracaidismo*” (informal squatting), and second, the arrival of “immoral people” who “exploit our humble peoples.”⁴³ If the government reports are correct, the existence of the letter suggests that sentiments among residents of Los Reyes were divided. One woman who I interviewed reported that she arrived in Santo Domingo as a girl before the *invasión* and that her family had been given permission to erect their dwelling by the *comuneros* of Los Reyes. Similarly, a leader from the Santa Ursula neighborhood recalled that *comuneros* from the nearby *pueblo* had first started allowing families to squat on their communal land in the *pedregales* in exchange for payment. Only later, once the *invasión* had grown beyond their control, did they oppose the settlement.

⁴² “Primer Informe de Gobierno del Presidente Constitucional de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos Luis Echeverría Álvarez, 1o de septiembre de 1971,” *Informes Presidenciales: Luis Echeverría Álvarez* (Cámara de Diputados, June 9, 2014), p. 16. Accessed August 30, 2019. Available at <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/sedia/sia/re/RE-ISS-09-06-14.pdf>.

⁴³ Letter from representatives of Los Reyes to President Echeverría, April 15, 1971 (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, page not numbered).

Like residents of Ajusco who rejected a plan to relocate them to a social housing complex, residents of Santo Domingo demanded “land not housing” and resisted the city’s attempt to build houses for them by blockading the streets to prevent construction equipment and material from entering. Seeing the proposed city-built houses as undignified (interviewees referred to them as “bird houses”), they preferred formal titles to their land so they could build their dwellings and neighborhood as they saw fit.

Over the subsequent years, residents of Santo Domingo, Ajusco, and the other neighborhoods of the *pedregales* organized the construction of the neighborhoods through their respective civil associations, largely constructing their neighborhoods through investments of their own labor and financial resources. The task of neighborhood building was arduous, slow work. Residents of both Ajusco and Santo Domingo recall the extreme difficulty of daily life in the *pedregales* during the first months and years after their arrival. In the beginning, they had no access to basic services like electricity or running water, and the lack of roads made accessing food, water, and other vital goods extremely difficult. Women, in particular, recall overwhelming feelings of despair, fear, and loneliness when they first arrived. In many cases, men left the *pedregales* during the day to work elsewhere in the city, leaving the women alone with their children, struggling to make homes and care for their children in adverse conditions. In the first months after the invasion of Santo Domingo, the closest water source was over a mile away, and women and children had to make several trips per day to secure the water necessary for bathing, washing, and cooking. Indeed, the landscape itself was treacherous, and children were sometimes injured or even killed by falling into the crevices in the lava rock or by fires provoked by the use of kerosene stoves in poorly constructed dwellings.

Residents organized collective work parties—which they called *faenas*—on Sundays, in which they used picks to break up large rocks and pooled money to buy gravel to fill in the streets. Block leaders collected money to buy cable that they strung from nearby neighborhoods bring electricity to the *pedregal*. When city officials dismantled their unofficial electric grid, they simply bought more cable and strung it again. Once the streets were sufficiently established to permit the transport of cement and other building materials, they also worked collectively to help construct each other's houses. Neighborhood infrastructure—and even family homes—are the product of collective labor in the *pedregales*.

Through these labors, residents formed strong social relationships with each other. Women, especially, recalled relying on each other to protect the plots of land, care for their children, and provide for their families. A common refrain when asked to describe life during the early years was that “everything was so hard and ugly” but that they also missed those times because of how unified the neighborhood was. They often recalled proudly that they once knew every family on their block, which was not the case today.

Like in Ajusco, residents of Santo Domingo formed a civil association to represent their demands and advocate for their needs. The association entered into a collective agreement with FIDEURBE, the government agency created in 1973 and tasked with regularizing property claims in the *pedregales* after residents successfully shut down efforts to build social housing in the neighborhood. The association negotiated a process in which residents would be able to purchase their plots for \$40 pesos per square meter, which could be paid in installments (with interest) over a period of up to five years. The cost, FIDEURBE explained, would cover the

compensation for the *comuneros* as well as the operating costs of FIDEURBE as they carried out their work. No downpayment was required for residents to sign their regularization contracts.⁴⁴

To facilitate the regularization process and ensure that only residents who were truly living on their plots of land received titles, FIDEURBE carried out a census of the neighborhood. Around this time, new stories in the press were raising alarms about so-called “luxury squatting” and “professional squatters” who took advantage of the push for regularization of informal settlements to collect plots of land across the city with the intention of reselling.⁴⁵ Residents recalled to me how government workers came around and handed them pieces of paper that confirmed them as registered with the census, and eligible to begin the regularization process. However, the process was complicated because, even before regularization, residents of the *pedregales* engaged in land transactions. Some sold their land for cash (sometimes in installments), and others exchanged their plots for other plots (“*traspaso*”). Plot boundaries were constantly in dispute, and some residents found their plots reduced or annulled because of the need to establish a street or, later on, a passageway allowing access from the neighborhood to a metro stop. Residents who found themselves dispossessed for the greater good of the neighborhood were promised that they would be moved to other plots, but these fights were sometimes protracted.

⁴⁴ Flyer from FIDEURBE to the Residents of Santo Domingo de los Reyes, July 21, 1974 (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, p. 59-60). See also the presidential decree published in the *DOF* on October 19, 1994, which provides a timeline of the regularization process to date.

⁴⁵ See for example: Rafael Cardona S., “‘Invasores Profesionales’: El Arq. Trejo, del DDF, Formula Acusaciones,” *Últimas Noticias*, June 6, 1972 (*IPS/InvasionesB*, p. 10); Froylan M López Narvaez, “Invasiones: Los Agitadores,” *Excélsior*, July 25, 1975 (*IPS/InvasionesB*, p. 197); Ramirez Mendes, “Un Grupo de Viales Negocia con Terrenos Ejidales en el D.F.,” *El Heraldo de México*, August 13, 1974 (*IPS/InvasionesB*, p. 171); Francisco Salinas Ríos, “Paracaidismo de lujo en Tlalpan y Coyoacán,” *Excélsior*, May 30, 1978 (*IPS/InvasionesA*, p. 106-107)

The result was a very slow and complicated process of regularization. By 1978, the civil association in Santo Domingo was demanding meetings to resolve the question of land regularization, but now also represented residents of the other neighborhoods of the *pedregales*—Ajsuco, Santa Ursula, and Ruiz Cortinez—that found themselves in a similar situation of legal ambiguity with respect to their property claims and lack of urban services.⁴⁶ Some of the residents who had entered into regularization contracts with FIDEURBE received their titles *en masse* event in 1983 (residents recalled waiting in very long lines). But far from the totality of the neighborhood was regularized. Later, FIDERUBE was dissolved and CODEUR was established in its place, charged with finishing the regularization of the *pedregales*. More titles were handed out by CODEUR between 1983 and 1988. However, another government agency found that few of the titles corresponded with the current “owner” and fewer still listed measurements that corresponded with reality, leaving residents juridically vulnerable. Thus, in 1994, a presidential decree ordered the re-expropriation of the entirety of the neighborhood, passing ownership to the Mexico City government which would then re-regularize the property claims of the residents.⁴⁷

AMPLIFYING DIFFERENCE: MORALIZED SOCIAL CATEGORIES AND THE SEARCH FOR PROTECTION FROM MARKET-BASED DISPOSSESSION

Rather than produce transitory or individual-level alterations to identification practices (Bailey 2008; Sweet 2018), these state categories became the basis for durable, emplaced collective identities that persist today. In this section, I argue that part of what explains the

⁴⁶ “Union de Colonos del Pedregal de Santo Domingo, D.F.”, July 31, 1978 (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, p. 58)

⁴⁷ Presidential decree published in the *DOF* on October 19, 1994.

durability of these categories-turned-identities is that residents return to them—and the moralized understandings of deservingness attached to them—when petitioning the state for protections against market-based dispossession. In this sense, I build on research that examines how market participation naturalizes the attributes ascribed to social groups (Krippner 2017; Robinson 2020) by showing how the infusion of market relations into these neighborhoods further brightened group difference. In the decades following the formalization of property rights in these neighborhoods (roughly 1980-present), residents—now private owners of market property—have mobilized to demand state protection from market-based dispossession. In these mobilizations, residents of these two neighborhood types draw on the distinct state categories and moral justifications that were employed during the processes of property allocation. In doing so, residents brighten and naturalize the boundaries defining and distinguishing these emplaced groups (Krippner and Hirschman 2022; Lamont and Molnár 2002).

From Comuneros to Pueblos Originarios: The Consolidation of a New Identity in the Pueblos

When the state drew new socio-spatial boundaries around the *pueblos* (space) and the *comuneros* (people), validating their “primordial” character, it constructed a conceptual and spatial “inside” and “outside” to the category (Abbott 1995). As the *comuneros* of the different *pueblos* in Coyoacán and elsewhere in the city waged a losing battle in the 1970s and 1980s to regain collective rights to their expropriated land, they united around their shared experience of dispossession. They had also lost their position as the most deserving subjects of post-Revolutionary Mexico. Beginning with the presidency of Echeverría, poor urban squatters were prioritized for property redistribution. While *comuneros*’ claims to property between the 1920s and 1960s were based on a notion that they had continually *worked* the land for decades, centuries, or since “time immemorial” (claims became increasingly atemporal), the labor theory

of ownership dropped from their claims-making narratives after a new social group—the *invasores*—began articulating a right to space on those same terms. Increasingly, the residents of the *pueblos* highlighted an innate, heritable connection to the land. This would lay the groundwork for the consolidation of a new, city-wide *pueblo* identity.

In the 1990s, the *pueblos* of Coyoacán and other regions of the city began organizing city-wide assemblies to lobby for their shared interests. They began identifying themselves, collectively, as “*pueblos originarios*” (“original villages”). The term was carefully chosen to both emphasize their “primordial” character and distance themselves from the undesirable category of “indigenous” (Medina Hernández 2007a). Collective identification with this new category coincided with a period of political opening as the PRI’s grip on power was rapidly weakening. Political reforms in 1997 gave Mexico City residents the opportunity to vote for their local representatives for the first time—until this point, the head of government was appointed by the President (until this time, the Mexico City government—the Department of the Federal District—had been a branch of the Federal Government). The first elections for local-level representatives in the city’s boroughs were held in 2000. These political changes and the weakening of the PRI allowed for real competition between parties in local political districts, opening an opportunity for *pueblos originarios* to support candidates sympathetic to their particular concerns (Medina Hernández 2007b; Portal 2013). Chief among these were concerns of property rights and urban development.

Over the years, some residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria have sold off property to developers. Often, this occurs when a parent passes away and the children decide not to sell rather than live in the property. The gradual construction of apartment buildings or luxury homes marketed to outsiders has raised the threat of more widescale displacement. One resident worried

about the consequences of further real estate development in the *pueblo*: “They’re going to start telling us that we’re not a *pueblo* anymore, that we’re a *colonia* [generic term for neighborhood] and then make us pay higher property taxes.” Residents are acutely aware of how the construction of large apartment buildings puts upward pressure on prices and property values in the area.

When discussing the importance of resisting real estate development, residents relayed stories of other *pueblos* that, as a consequence of losing control over their territory to encroaching real estate development, had ultimately ceased to exist as *pueblos*. For example, one resident relayed the cautionary tale of Tetelpan, in the peripheral borough of Álvaro Obregón. “It’s a *pueblo*—or it *was* a *pueblo*,” he corrected himself and continued:

Now with so many buildings that have been put up, they [Tetelpan] only have a few blocks left around the church that are still recognized as *pueblo*. But all of the rest is *colonia* [generic term for neighborhood]. And in the *colonias* there is a different kind of built environment than in a *pueblo*. If they disappear us as a *pueblo*, anyone who comes here can put up a building. Not only here, but in all of the *pueblos*. The strength—not the strength, but the law—protects the traditional ways of life of the *pueblos*.

In Los Reyes, the list of rightful claimants in the 1961 presidential decree identifies the familial bloodlines that could claim this birthright. The lack of such a list in La Candelaria is seen by some as an important vulnerability. One resident of the Candelaria, discussing past state maneuvers to impinge on *pueblo* autonomy, suggested that the ambiguity could rightfully represent the interests of the La Candelaria had been harmful to the *pueblo*’s ability to defend itself. He went on: “I’ve said, honestly, we need to search out the authentic lineages [*trazos auténticos*] of our *pueblos*. I’ve said this—even in the general meeting of *pueblos*, I’ve said this. And I have the [investigative] reports.”

Lacking such a list, residents of La Candelaria have actively sought other forms of recognition of their *pueblo*’s ancestral character. For example, residents brought in academic

experts to conduct an analysis of the *pueblo*'s church and certify its age and architectural value. Residents of both Los Reyes and La Candelaria often remarked to me that La Candelaria had a more "authentic" *pueblo* character, primarily because much less real estate development (e.g., apartment buildings, tall buildings, chain stores) has occurred in La Candelaria.

Residents of the *pueblos* have come to see the unique cultural and aesthetic character of their *pueblos* not just as a marker of "authenticity," but as a resource that can be leveraged to protect themselves from urban development and displacement. This notion is also supported by urban planning and zoning regimes that place stricter limits on new building and development in the *pueblos* because of the city's desire to preserve their "cultural patrimony."⁴⁸ One resident of La Candelaria recounted a community effort to certify the cultural value of *pueblo* architecture in the late 1970s, when Carlos Hank Gonzalez was mayor of Mexico City:

I had the opportunity, with other men who have since passed away, to do an evaluation of the church. Others said it wasn't the original church—but of course it was! We called the National Institute of Anthropology and History, the INAH. They did an evaluation from the dome to the door, and [it turns out that] it is an architectural jewel that dates to the 1500s. That is when there started to be respect. Mr. Carlos [Hank Gonzalez] said: "There should never be changes [*afectaciones*] in La Candelaria because they have an architectural jewel. And we're not going mess with their pantheon." Ever since 1950, others wanted to turn the church into a round-about, but thanks to the fact that we're a very old *pueblo* and we have autonomy, we have taught our peers how to defend themselves. Here, it is not about punches and insults, it is about talking with adherence to the law.

By 2007, the Mexico City government had established the Council of *Pueblos Originarios* in Mexico City, which officially recognized and guaranteed special rights for the city's *pueblos originarios*. In 2010, further modification to the city's electoral law created elected "Citizen Committees" in each conventional neighborhood (*colonia*) and "Village Councils" in each *pueblo*

⁴⁸ Programa Delegacional de Desarrollo Urbano de Coyoacán. *Gaceta Oficial del Distrito Federal*, April 10, 1997.

originario, further underscoring their social difference. As of 2019, the most recent year for which I could find a complete and official list, there were 142 *pueblos originarios* in Mexico City (see Figure 4).⁴⁹

(Urban) Land for Those Who Work It: The Pedregales Cultivate an Identity as City-Builders

After residents of Santo Domingo successfully thwarted the city’s plan to build social housing in the *pedregal*, FIDEURBE was charged with regularizing property claims and imposing an orderly regime of private property rights on an area whose ownership had been murky and disputed since Mexico’s independence (Mancilla 2000). Documents from FIDEURBE during this period repeatedly assure residents that all family have “satisfactorily demonstrated their need to live in the *pedregal*” will have the opportunity to regularize their plot of land.⁵⁰ In a flyer presumably posted around Santo Domingo in the summer of 1974, the director of FIDEURBE appealed to residents to cooperate in the regularization campaign:

FIDEURBE will not evict any family of residents who has a need to live in this Pedregal de Santo Domingo de los Reyes [...] FIDEURBE will not impose any housing construction program on residents. Therefore, each resident can construct the house they want, when they want, and as they want on their plot.⁵¹

A comic book produced by FIDEURBE to dispel distrust among residents, shows a family in tattered clothes being addressed respectfully by a man in a suit, with text proclaiming

⁴⁹ Secretaría de Pueblos y Barrios Originarios y Comunidades Indígenas Residentes (SEPI), *Primer Informe de Gobierno, Diciembre 2018-Septiembre 2019*. Available at <https://www.sepi.cdmx.gob.mx/storage/app/uploads/public/5dc/5c7/0aa/5dc5c70aa1b72263642188.pdf>.

⁵⁰ See for example, a letter for the director of FIDURBE to residents, dated April 10, 1975 (DFS/Santo Domingo, p. 62).

⁵¹ Flyer from FIDEURBE to the Residents of Santo Domingo de los Reyes, July 21, 1974 (DFS/Santo Domingo, p. 59-60).

that FIDEURBE is a “friend” of poor families.⁵² Despite outrage in the press over “professional” or “luxury squatting,” the urban landless poor who became property owners in the *pedregales* were deemed worthy because of their authentic need. They won property titles—rather than “bird houses”—because they demonstrated their willingness to invest their own labor to build their neighborhoods.

Indeed, residents of the *pedregales* have cultivated an identity of city builders who stubbornly insisted on making their own neighborhoods on their own terms, and against the desires of the state. They maintain a strong feeling of ownership over public space in the neighborhood, given their role in building it. For example, just prior to the beginning of my fieldwork in 2016, the city had tried to enter into a contract with a private natural gas company to install buried gas lines in Santo Domingo. Most of Mexico City’s neighborhoods—even more upscale ones—do not have buried gas lines. Rather, most residents in the city buy tanks of gas that they refill as needed and store on building rooftops. When residents learned of the plan, they protested—both over fears that such infrastructural upgrades would bring gentrification, but also over fears about the safety of buried gas lines. After the company had started installing lines on some of the streets, residents organized to dig them up in the middle of the night. Ultimately, the project did not proceed. When I asked residents about this episode, they told me that they should ultimately decide because, after all, they were the ones who built the streets.

As in the *pueblos*, some families have chosen to sell their property and move to other parts of the city. I would often ask residents how many of their original neighbors remained on their blocks. In most cases, the number was small. As residents who participated in the *invasión*

⁵² Comic book titled “What is FIDEURBE?,” undated (*DFS/Santo Domingo*, p.53).

age, some have chosen to move back to their *pueblos* of origin in other states. Others left the properties to their children—some of whom sell to developers, while others invest in building apartment buildings themselves and earning a livelihood by renting out rooms and apartments.

But while the number of original *invasores* still living in these neighborhoods dwindles, residents consciously curate the story of the “great *invasión*” and the years of labor invested in leveling and paving streets, digging ditches for drainage lines and electricity poles, and helping each other build their houses. These memories are kept alive in community events celebrating the neighborhood’s history, in murals painted on shop façades, in picture books published in the local community center, and in the small museum of neighborhood history that is curated there.

Residents also keep the origins and identity of the neighborhood alive in daily practices: residents still use the original street names that they chose in the early years of the neighborhood’s founding: Oaxaca Street, “Promises” Street (thus named because it was where politicians would stop during campaigns, making promises rarely fulfilled), “Manifest” Street, etc. Though the official names on the street signs are different today—sometime in the 1990s the city named streets in the neighborhood after plants native to the area—residents stubbornly cling to the original names. Even children born after the street names were changed use the original names, taught by their parents or grandparents. In Mexico City, public busses are adorned with signs in their windshields that identify the landmarks by which they pass. In Santo Domingo, some of these busses bear the names of landmarks from the early days of the neighborhood that no longer exist—except in the collective consciousness of residents. Needless to say, this makes the neighborhood more difficult to navigate for outsiders.

As in the *pueblos*, residents use this cultivated identity and preserved history in their efforts to halt outsider urban development, which residents fear will ultimately lead to

displacement. In the encampment that residents of the *pedregales* maintained outside of the large luxury apartment complex (Aztecas 215) residents painted banners with the face of the Revolutionary hero Emiliano Zapata and the phrase: “Land for those who work it... and the *pedregales* for those who inhabit them!” Residents also voted to use the phrase “Because among the rocks we planted hope—no one can tear us out!” as the slogan for a website they intended to build, referring to the “hope” they “planted” as they broke up the rocky *pedregal* to build their neighborhood. During one of the weekly assembly meetings, residents decided to uncover ditches that the developer had created to channel water from the construction site. As they grabbed picks and shovels to begin their excavation work, a man yelled “The shovels of the *invasión!*” which drew cheers from the crowd.

A resident-led movement that grew out of the protest against Aztecas 215 is a mutual aid WhatsApp group regarding water access in the community. Although the apartment building was not halted by the protest movement, residents of the *pedregales* won several concessions from the Mexico City government and the developer. Among them was the construction of a new water pumping station that would provide water to the neighborhood. During the construction of the pumping plant, residents organized a monitoring effort to ensure that the pumping station was, in fact, constructed. At the start of each week, residents signed up to physically go check (and take photos or videos) of the status of the pumping station. Now finished, residents call the new station “The People’s Well.” It is located at the site of one of the first communal water taps installed in the community in the early years of the neighborhood’s construction.

CONCLUSION

Most scholarship on residential segregation takes for granted the pre-existing and immutable character of the social categories across which people are unequally distributed in

space. Scholarship on racial and socio-economic segregation rarely considers how people's membership in those social categories might be altered as a consequence of the sorting process. This chapter examined how the redistribution of property solidified categories of identification that have become the basis for an enduring pattern of residential segregation in Mexico City. The subsequent intensification of market relations in these neighborhoods has amplified the resulting social difference because the groups leverage those social identities to protect themselves against the market forces that threaten to displace them. This processes produced—and maintain—contemporary patterns of segregation between the *pedregales* and the *pueblos* in southern Mexico City. I have argued that this constructivist account of segregation moves beyond the typical sorting model because the axes of social difference that separate people in space are the *product* of—not the basis for—social sorting.

In building this account of a constructivist model of segregation, I draw on a wealth of scholarship that examines how state projects of legibility (e.g., census taking, poverty governance programs) produce and impose new social categories on populations (de Souza Leão 2022; Loveman 2014; Scott 1998), as well as theories that help us understand under what circumstance state categories are taken up by populations as meaningful forms of identification (Bailey 2008; de Zwart 2005; Menjívar and Lakhani 2016; Sweet 2018), sometimes outliving the programs and state activities that produced them. As others have argued, my findings are in line with prior research that finds people are more inclined to identify with state categories what they serve as the basis for the distribution of social benefits.

Contrary to previous research (de Zwart 2005), however, I find that these new state categories—*comuneros* and *invasores*—which were used as the basis to distribute property rights in Post-Revolutionary Mexico, produced *durable* rather than transitory group identification. In

the case presented in this chapter, the state categories superseded and, indeed, eclipsed previously existing social identities that would have otherwise fractured a sense of groupness. For example, documents dating from the colonial period to the early twentieth century show that residents of the different *pueblos* in Coyoacán, including Los Reyes and La Candelaria, engaged in disputes *with each other* over property claims in the *pedregales*. Similarly, the urban migrants who settled the *pedregales* as *invasores* came from distinct ethnic and geographic origin communities. In fact, residents told me that these groups had tended to cluster together within the *pedregales* (e.g., migrants from Oaxaca settling in one area, while migrants from Michoacán settled in another). Yet, those axes of social differences faded as salient forms of social identification under the “replacement categories” of *comunero* and *invasor*.

What explains this finding? Other scholarship suggests that categories of *exclusion* (rather than *inclusion*) can create more durable feelings of groupness because they become the basis for collective resistance (Mamdani 1998; Moon 2012; Polletta 1998). Those categorized as *comuneros* and *invasores* experienced those subjectivities as both the basis for *inclusion* in social programs and social benefits, but also as the basis for social mobilization to demand full access to promised benefits that failed to materialize.

Additionally, my findings call attention to another dimension of the transformation of state categories into social identities: the spatial dimension. The categorization of individuals as *comuneros* or *invasores* was tied to those individuals’ connection with specific places. Beyond mere location, individuals had to demonstrate a social relationship with those places—in both cases, a *labor* relation—to gain access to the social category. Others—recently arrived renters or property owners in the *pueblos*, or “luxury squatters” in the *pedregales*—who did not have an experience of working the land, either as a source of livelihood or as agents of urbanization, were

excluded from categorization. This spatial dimension ultimately turned those social categories into spatially inscribed identities, forming the basis for segregation without the standard identity-based sorting.

Finally, my findings respond to scholarship exploring the relationship between social identity and market participation (Besbris and Korver-Glenn 2022; Hirschman and Garbes 2021; Krippner 2017; Norris 2021; Robinson 2020). I show how, once these neighborhoods were absorbed into the private property market, residents feared that speculative urban development would lead to their eventual displacement. Fears over displacement were all the more acute, given that their social identities were tied to spatial membership. In organizing to demand protection from market-based dispossession, residents of the *pueblos* and the *pedregales* returned to the social categories through which they became property owners via redistributive policy. Ultimately, they sought to strengthen and preserve the narratives of “deservingness”—whether based on an innate, inherited relationship to land, or on their labor investments—that made them eligible for categorization in the first place. In this process of continual renewal of these identities, residents highlight and amplify a sense of social difference between the two emplaced groups.

A constructivist account of the segregation-producing process pushes us to reconsider a core assumption embedded in the sorting model. While segregation is commonly understood as a strategy that powerful social groups use to hoard resources (Flippen 2004; Hanselman and Fiel 2017; Light and Thomas 2019), I show how segregation can result when the extension of resources and market protections to vulnerable groups constitute new social categories. The segregation I examine in this chapter arose from the strategies pursued by both state actors and residents to create what they deemed a more just distribution of property rights than what an

unconstrained market would have created. These findings support the conceptualization of segregation as a strategy for shaping the distribution of resources, but not necessarily one for concentrating resources in the hands of the already privileged.

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TABLES

Table 1. Population statistics for the neighborhoods in Coyoacán by neighborhood type, 2020

	<i>Pedregales</i>	<i>Pueblos</i>	<i>All Other</i>
N	4	7	112
Total Population	183,963	66,627	349,382
Social Development Index (mean)	0.81	0.85	0.92
Less than high school education (%)	43.1	33.4	19.6
Living in indigenous households (%)	4.5	2.8	1.3
Indigenous language speakers (%)	2.0	1.2	0.5
Born outside of Mexico City (%)	19.0	15.4	17.9
Illiterate (%)	1.7	1.1	0.4
Occupants per housing unit (mean)	3.6	3.3	3.0
Occupants per rooms (mean)	1.0	0.8	0.6

Note: Calculated using 2020 census count data (INEGI) at the *manzana* level (equivalent to census block). The averages presented are weighted averages of *manzana* averages using population counts as weights.

FIGURES

Figure 1. Map of research site neighborhoods, showing the metro system and principal streets.

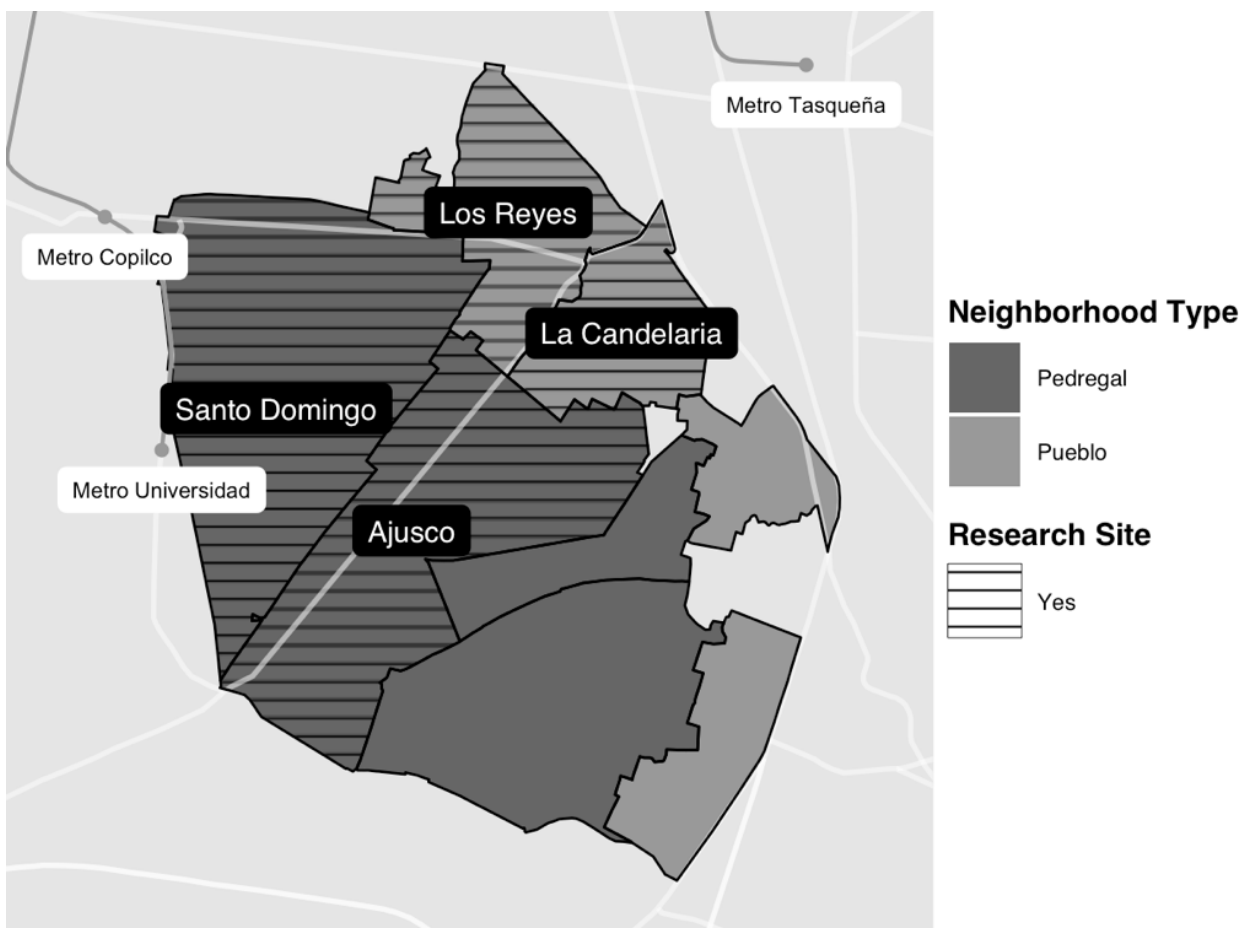


Figure 2. Location of research site within the borough of Coyoacán and Mexico City, in relation to the metro system.

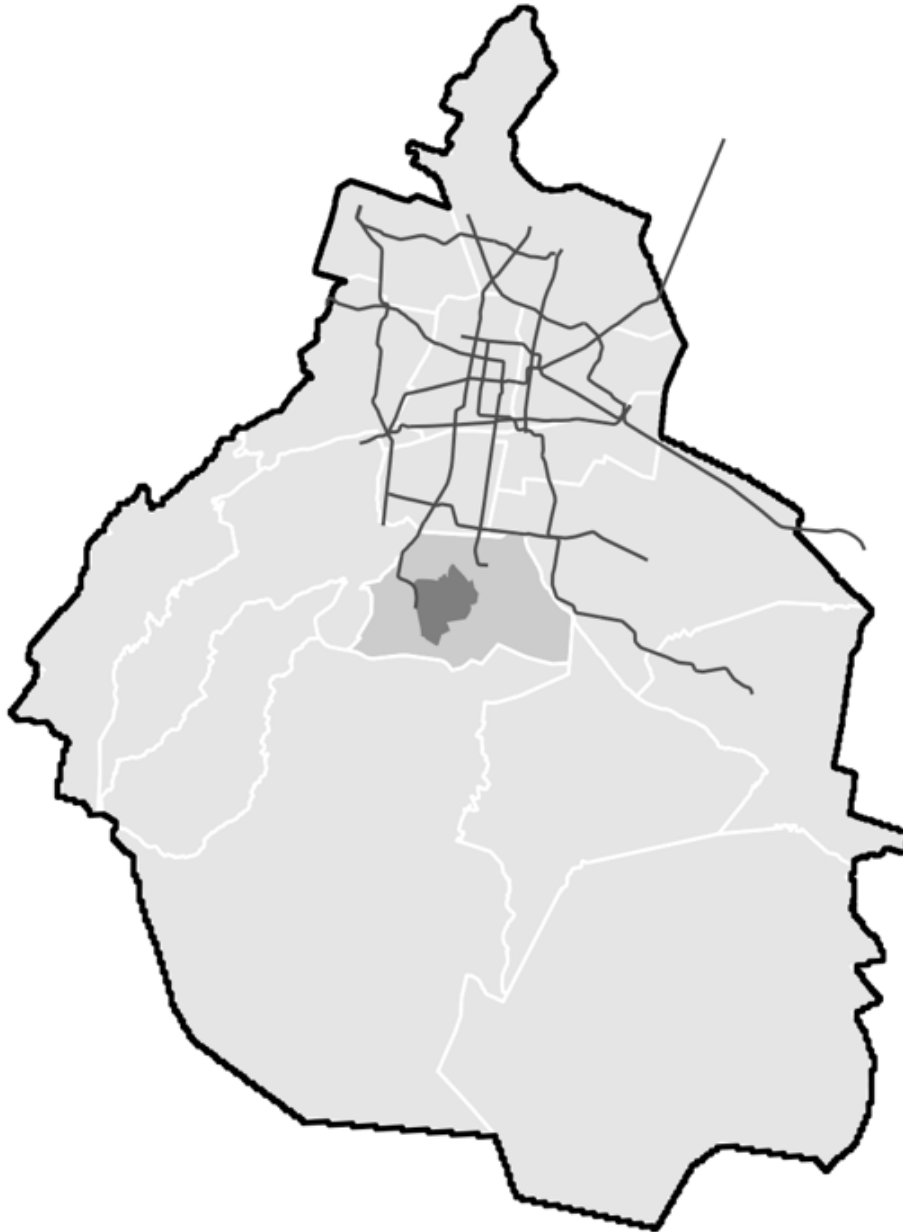


Figure 3. Map of the neighborhoods in Coyoacán showing the Social Development Index. Note: The *pueblos originarios* and the neighborhoods of the *pedregales* are marked. A higher score on the Social Development Index indicates a higher level of social development.

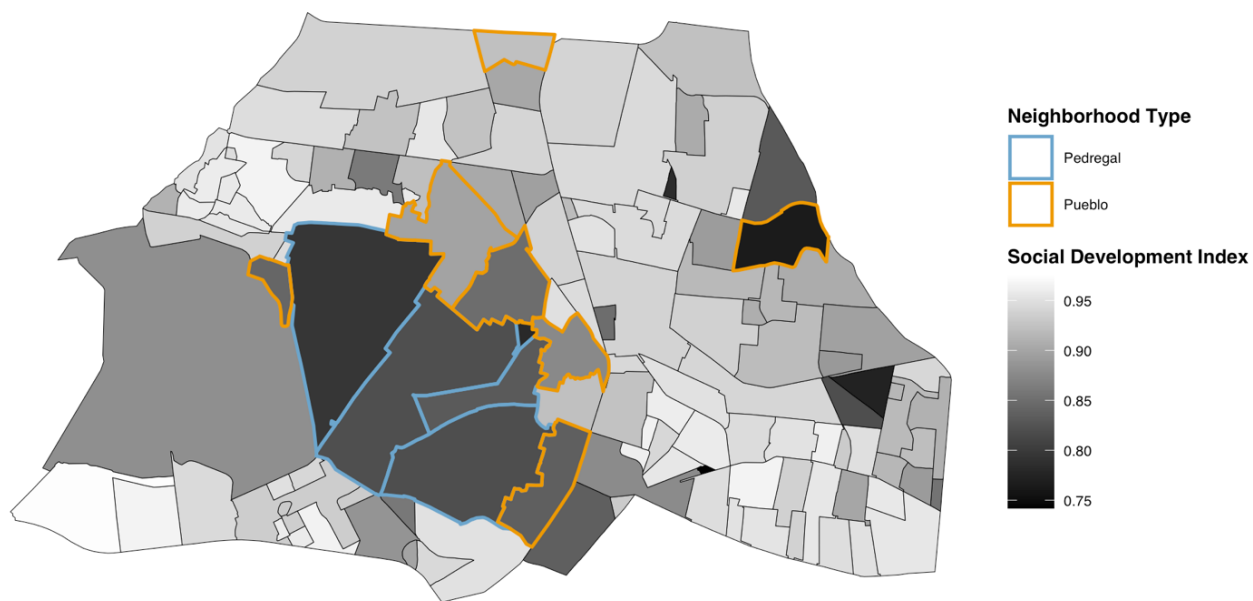
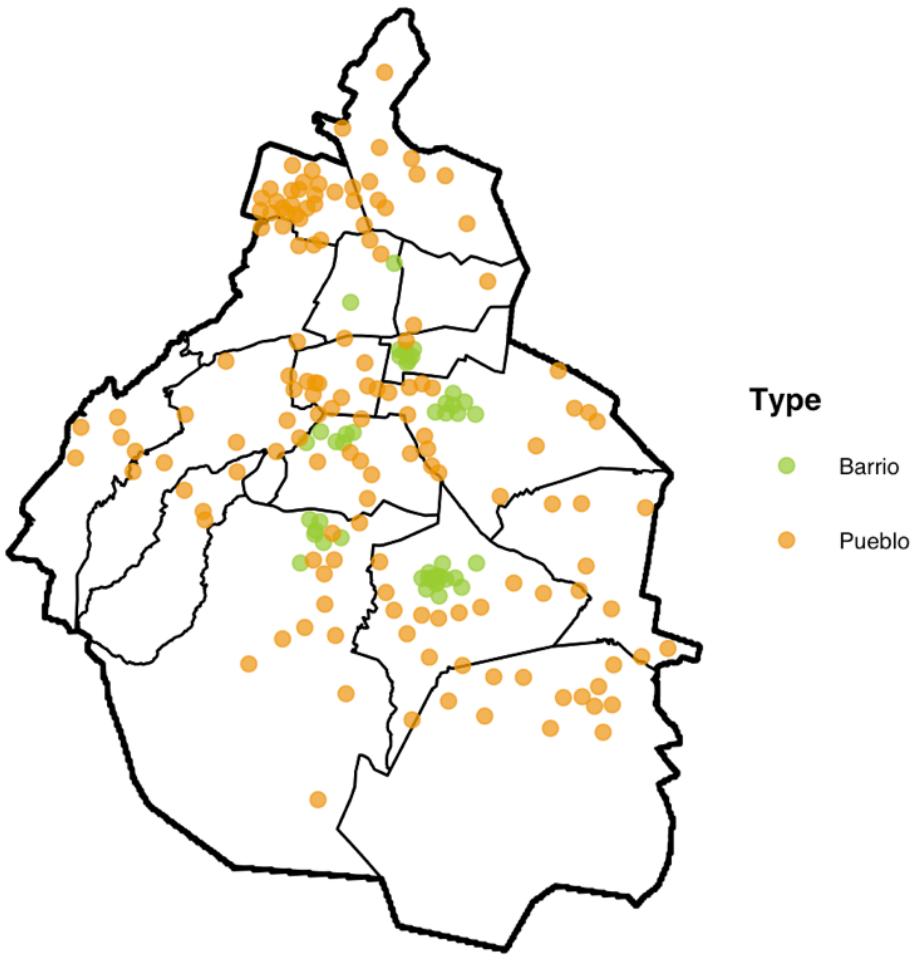


Figure 4. Map of the *Pueblos Originarios* and *Barrios* officially recognized by the Mexico City government, 2019.



APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. List of Archive Collections Referenced.

Citation Shorthand	Location	Collection	Archive
<i>DFS/Santo Domingo</i>	Caja AC33-4223, Expediente 9-390, Legajo 1	Dirección Federal de Seguridad	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>DFS/Ajusco</i>	Caja AC32.4223, Expediente 9-368, Legajo 1	Dirección Federal de Seguridad	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>IPS/InvasionesB</i>	Caja 1801B, Expediente 4	Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>IPS/InvasionesA</i>	Caja1801A, Expediente 4	Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>AGA/Los Reyes</i>	Caja 272.2/1820, Legajo 1	N/A	Archivo General Agrario
<i>AEEZ</i>	N/A	N/A	Archivo Escuelita Emiliano Zapata

Chapter 2: Tradition, Contention, and Popular Market Regulation: The Moral Economy of Property in Mexico City

ABSTRACT

How do groups develop collective beliefs that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate market practices? How do these consensuses evolve over time? What happens when they are confronted by alternative models of market organization? Drawing on literature at the nexus of values, culture, and markets, this chapter examines contemporary community organizing around housing and urban development in Mexico City. I show how residents of the *pueblos originarios* and the former squatter settlements constructed distinct *moral economies*—shared understandings that distinguish legitimate from illegitimate market practices—surrounding housing that are based on the collective nature of their entry into homeownership. I show how these beliefs evolve over time as economic change alters the structural positions of communities and the function of property, and as residents transmit these beliefs to subsequent generations of residents. I frame resident organizing against capital-driven urban development as a form of popular market regulation: efforts are oriented not around immediate material goals, but around strengthening state and community commitment to neighborhood-specific moral economies.

Keywords: moral economy, homeownership, market regulation, community organizing, urban development

INTRODUCTION

Economic sociologists have long examined the moral values and judgements attached to the production, exchange, and consumption of goods. This scholarship has made important advances in dispelling prevailing beliefs about the rational, impersonal, and efficiency-maximizing nature of markets by highlighting their moral foundations. In this chapter, I extend inquiry into markets as values-laden sites of economic exchange by asking: How do communities come to hold common judgements about the proper organization of markets and the rules governing market behavior? Why and how do these consensuses evolve over time or disappear? What happens when these shared sets of ideas about the proper functioning of markets are confronted with alternative models? In addressing these questions, I revisit the concept of *moral economy* as elaborated by English historian E. P. Thompson (1971) and

demonstrate its utility for answering these pressing questions about how people understand, participate in, and regulate markets.

The ideas that Polanyi presents in *The Great Transformation* (2001) about market embeddedness and the “double movement” of efforts to create a self-regulating market and popular demand for market protections have become foundational within economic sociology. While at times mentioned in passing alongside discussions of Polanyi (e.g., Granovetter 1985), E.P. Thompson’s concept of *moral economy* (1971) has enjoyed far less attention from sociologists. This relative disinterest likely stems in part from prevailing interpretations that see *moral economy* as overly dependent on outdated stark divisions between the market and nonmarket spheres of life, and as depicting the clash between pre-market customs and market logic. In this common interpretation, Thompson’s ideas are seen as inadequate for understanding resistance to the expansion of the market within *contemporary* society. However, I argue that the concept of *moral economy* offers important tools for sociologists of economic systems and collective action. Specifically, I outline three areas of inquiry where the concept might be particularly useful: 1) examining the shared normative ideas about how markets ought to operate, 2) exploring how and why these shared ideas evolve over time, and 3) interpreting collective action taken in response to perceived market-based injustice.

I then illustrate the utility of Thompson’s *moral economy* for understanding market organization and collective economic action through an example of struggles over the exchange of real estate in Mexico City. Specifically, I trace the construction, evolution, and defense of two distinct moral economies surrounding property and homeownership in Mexico City over the past century. Drawing on data from historical records, interviews, and participant observation, I examine the moral economies constructed by residents of two types of neighborhoods—those

that existed as agricultural towns before Mexico City expanded around them, and former squatter settlements formed in the mid- to late-twentieth century.

First, I show how these neighborhood moral economies were forged through the *collective experience* of becoming property owners on the urban periphery in the 1970s. Neighborhood-level variation in these collective pathways to private ownership explains why the resulting moral economies diverge. Next, I show how these moral economies have evolved over the subsequent decades as residents *reinterpret* community traditions of property ownership. These reinterpretations of the “moral past” respond to the changing structural position of the community, changes in the function and meaning of urban property, and the community’s need to transmit their moral economic order to new generations of residents. Finally, I examine recent collective action among residents who oppose the intensification of capital-driven urban development. I argue that this contentious action is a form of popular market regulation and that residents’ resistance to cross-neighborhood collaborative organizing reflects the incompatibility of different neighborhood moral economies.

MARKET AS SOCIAL OBJECTS: MORALITY, EMBEDDEDNESS, AND MARKET REGULATION

The overarching concern of economic sociology is to interrogate how economic activity is structured by social relations, culture, and institutions. The study of markets, which constitute a subset of economic activity, has dominated the field, even if economic sociologists have struggled to arrive at a consensus about their conceptual definition (Krippner 2001). Market exchange encompasses only one type of economic activity and markets invariably constitute only a portion of a society’s larger economy (Ferguson 2015). However, as Polanyi (2001) argues, in no society is the market the sole organizer of economic activity. Polanyi famously identifies the

imposition of an ideology of a self-regulating market in the nineteenth century as a destructive force that eroded the equilibrium achieved by a multiply determined economy. The rise of *market society*—where economic activity is disembedded from social life—in the twentieth century produced a host of social dislocations.

Both Polanyi's concept of economic embeddedness—as well as Thompson's (1971) concept of moral economy—have been criticized as representing “oversocialized” views of economic action (Granovetter 1985). Granovetter argues that these frameworks see economic action as driven entirely by the sets of norms and culture in which individuals are located, leaving little room for individual agency. While Polanyi's own conception of embeddedness referred to the co-constitution of the economic and the social, Granovetter's rearticulation of Polanyi's ideas sees social relations and “culture” as external forces that shape economic action (Krippner and Alvarez 2007).

Sociologists have struggled to define “the market” as a subset of economic activity. Some have argued that market exchange is differentiated from other forms of economic exchange through a reliance on the price mechanism. As price loses its primacy in organizing exchange and as social structure gains importance, markets lose their “marketness” (Block 1990). As Krippner observes, theorists writing in the Polanyian tradition have had difficulty in defining the market as a *social* object (Krippner 2001). Many economic sociologists interested in the moral dimensions of markets explicitly distance themselves from Polanyi's ideas because of his view that the market acts as an eroding force for social relations. Thus, Zelizer has referred to the Polanyian approach as one that sees the market and nonmarket activity as “hostile spheres” (Zelizer 2007).

One way that economic sociologists have approached the study of the social within markets is by studying the structures and regulations that shape exchange. Despite the illusion of self-regulation, myriad structures and intermediaries are involved in quotidian market function (Carruthers and Stinchcombe 1999). Market intermediaries facilitate transactions by reducing uncertainty and increasing confidence in the value of goods being exchanged (Lamont 2012). In the process of facilitating exchange, intermediaries can reshape the tastes and desires of consumers, therefore altering the value calculus (Besbris 2020).

Beyond the role of intermediaries, state-enforced laws and regulations reduce uncertainty and risk, thus lubricating transactions. In real estate markets, land-use controls standardize property by placing limits on allowable uses (Flores 2022). By zoning an area for single family residence, for example, municipal governments alter the landscape of investment risk by reducing the likelihood that a factory will open next door. Similarly, deed restrictions and homeowner associations act as a set of private land use controls that constrain the rights of property owners in how they can use or modify their properties (Qian 2010; Tao and McCabe 2012). These limits to property owner rights standardize property assets, promote market liquidity, and facilitate collateralization (Flores 2022).

Sociologists focused on markets have also studied how particular goods are categorized as suitable for market exchange or not, and how “peculiar goods” are assigned economic value (Fourcade 2011; Healy 2006; Zelizer 1985; Zelizer 1978). Thompson’s work on food riots is also concerned with how the exchange prices of goods (e.g., bread) are determined. In his writings on the sale of wives in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century England, he argues that the practice constituted a form of common law divorce but that shifting moral judgements regarding the “selling” of people—even if purely ceremonial—ultimately ended the practice.

THOMPSON'S MORAL ECONOMY

The concept of *moral economy* was first developed explicitly by E.P. Thompson in his 1971 article on “food riots” in eighteenth-century England (Thompson 1971). In the article, Thompson forcefully challenges the prevailing characterization of these events as “spasmodic” reactions by the poor to physical hunger and criticizes prevailing explanations of collective behavior that view “crowd” behavior as the aggregate mechanical or emotional reaction of unorganized individuals (Gurr 1970; Smelser 1962). Instead, Thompson argues that English crowds were motivated not by hunger, but by the defense of a system of “traditional rights or customs.” Their actions were grounded in what he calls a “moral economy of the poor” in eighteenth-century England that was constituted by a “popular consensus as to what were legitimate and illegitimate practices in the marketing, milling, and baking” of bread (Thompson 1971).

Thompson begins by exploring the specific social meaning of bread in eighteenth-century England. He argues that the rural population viewed the ability to purchase bread of a certain quality at a certain price as a *right*. Selling and milling grain, as well as baking bread, were seen not as for-profit enterprises, but as community services. Typically, custom dictated that the poor had first access to purchase grain at the market and that only at the ringing of a second bell could others engage in exchange. These customary practices were buttressed and legitimized by state policy and law, which heavily regulated everything from the nutritional content of flour to the role of intermediaries like millers and bakers to the organization of markets where grains and bread were sold. Over the course of the eighteenth-century, however, practices of producing and marketing bread strayed further and further from these regulatory ideals. Periodic scarcity crises resulted in state efforts to revive the paternalistic regulatory regime. However, in general, burgeoning ideas about the free market “demoralized” the economy and changed the way bread

was produced, distributed, and consumed. The “bread-nexus” was replaced with a “cash-nexus” where the right to maximize individual interest and profit outweighed market actors’ responsibilities to the broader community. This shift materialized in the rise of forestalling—a practice in which grain producers made sale promises before bringing their product to market.

Thompson shows how the protestors who mobilized in response to what they saw as unjust prices rarely sought to steal bread or grains outright, a strategy one might expect if the crowds were reacting “spasmodically” to hunger. Rather, crowd action sought to force millers and bakers to set fair prices. In this sense, collective contentious economic action constituted a form of market regulation. Furthermore, he points out that the direct consequence of food protests was often a short-term *rise* in price. Though perhaps counter-intuitive, he suggests this demonstrates that the crowd’s primary concern was protecting the existing moral economic order—the primacy of the poor’s right to bread over the miller’s right to profit—rather than satisfying an immediate physical need. The burden of a short-term price increase brought about by direct collective action was outweighed by the long-term benefit of protecting the existing moral economy surrounding bread.

While Thompson’s concept of moral economy was immediately popular among historians and other social scientists, Thompson did not intend his idea to be applied broadly to any episode of collective economic contention. Thompson was, in fact, wary of the social sciences’ tendency towards abstractions beyond discrete historical contexts (Thompson 1993). When Thompson set about to describe the moral economy of the English poor, his intention was to provide an interpretation of eighteenth-century food riots, not offer a universal theory of social organization or human behavior. Perhaps this rootedness in historical and geographical context

explains why Thompson's ideas have gained less traction among sociologists compared to Polanyi's theory of market society and the double movement.

While often discussed together, Polanyi and Thompson differ in the scale of the phenomena they are attempting to explain. Polanyi's *Great Transformation* seeks to explain the global political commitment to the utopian idea of the self-regulating market and the global counter movements that sought to block the disembedding of the economy from its social scaffolding. The conflicts and contradictions that arose in this double movement, Polanyi argues, help to explain the outbreak of world war and the rise of fascism. Thompson, on the other hand, is not seeking to explain global historical trends, but rather to understand why England's rural poor responded to price increases and bread scarcity as they did during the eighteenth century. What were their motivations? Why did their actions take certain forms?

In this sense, rather than view Polanyi's and Thompson's ideas as competing or redundant explanations of the same phenomena, a more fruitful interpretation is to see them as complimentary: as attempts to explain different manifestations (at different scales) of popular response to the dislocations of economic disembedding. Thompson's work—especially his 1971 essay on food riots—can be seen as a sort of case study of the double movement described by Polanyi. In this sense, while Polanyi's theory helps explain broad cross-national and cross-historical similarities, Thompson's concept of moral economy is useful for interrogating context-specific variation in the nature of the embedded economy—and specifically, the embedded market—and in how the *double movement* manifests. In this light, Thompson's understanding of *markets* as socially and morally constituted is compatible with—not antithetical to—recent economic sociology that rejects the division of the market from the social sphere (Zelizer 2007).

MORAL ECONOMY FOR THE STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY MARKET ORGANIZATION

Even though the concept of moral economy, as elaborated by Thompson, has not been widely engaged by sociologists, the concept offers much promise for examining the core questions pursued by sociologists of economic systems and collective action. In this section, I offer three areas of inquiry where the concept of moral economy might be particularly fruitful: 1) examining the shared normative ideas about how markets ought to operate, 2) exploring how and why these shared ideas evolve over time, and 3) interpreting collective action taken in response to perceived market-based injustice.

The Normative Frameworks that Organize Contemporary Markets

One common interpretation of the moral economy concept is that it describes resistance of “pre-market” or “pre-modern” societies to their incorporation into the system of capitalist market economy and the parallel implication that the concept describes a “clash” between moral non-market societies and the amoral market. This interpretation leads some to place Thompson’s concept alongside Polanyi as emblematic of the “hostile worlds” approach (Sayer 2007), which conceives of morality and market logic as opposed. However, the classification of Thompson’s work in the “hostile worlds” camp reflects a simplistic reading of his argument. Rather, Thompson argues that markets are often structured by sets of widespread and shared beliefs about how goods ought to be produced, exchanged, and consumed. Such a market—which he terms *moral economy*—clashes with ideologically driven ideas about how markets ought to be organized around price alone—which he terms *political economy* (and what Polanyi described as the ideology of a self-regulating market). The food riots he interrogates in his 1971 essay result from the erosion of the *moral economy* as the primacy of price as an organizing force overtakes other organizers of market activity.

Craig Calhoun made this point 30 years ago in an essay, published shortly after Thompson's passing, on Thompson's approach to history-telling and attention to historical context (Calhoun 1994):

Critics have sometimes misunderstood Thompson's famous argument about the importance of "the moral economy of the crowd," taking him to have described an anti-market traditionalism which resisted all forms of penetration of the market into village life. On the contrary, what Thompson showed was how people whose lives were firmly anchored in market economies, who lived by the market and wished to continue to do so, objected to certain forms of action in relation to markets—like engrossing, forestalling, and generally manipulating the supply and price of food to personal advantage even when it meant that others starved. Traditions of public conflict over entitlement to food in the market sought to regulate the way that markets worked [...]. (232)

The account that Thompson provides of popular unrest over changes to the rules governing the exchange of grain is not one of resistance to commodification. Grain and bread were already commodities, bought and sold on the market.

Not only do Thompson's own writing demonstrate the existence of fully formed markets in bread and grain as constituting the *moral economy*, but subsequent research in the vein of moral economy has highlighted how decidedly "modern" communities have invoked moral economy in their mobilization against perceived illegitimate economic practices (Arnold 2001; Walton 1992). Collective action in defense of moral economies need not be about resisting the marketization of goods, as many assume. For example, the residents of the California's Owen's Valley had long yearned to be incorporated into the broader economic networks of Southern California, but resisted when they felt the terms of their incorporation unjust (Arnold 2001; Walton 1992).

Building on arguments about the embeddedness of markets, some scholars writing within the *moral economy* tradition have argued that *all* economies are moral economies—just with different understandings of what constitute legitimate versus illegitimate practices (Palomera and Vetta 2016). However, the distinction Thompson makes between *moral economy* and what he

refers to as “political economy” (1971; 1993)—which Polanyi referred to as the ideology of the self-regulating market—remains important. While that all economies structured by normative frameworks, the key difference between *moral economy* and “political economy” (in Thompson’s terms) lies in the mechanism that organizes production and exchange. In a moral economy, the market exchange of goods is organized around principles of status and hierarchy, whereas price and contract—which are conceived of as equalizing forces—organize markets in the “political economy” (Booth 1994). On its face, the ideology of price is about eliminating both entitlements and exclusions based on status and rank, even the result of this style of market organization ultimately reifies hierarchy and deepens inequality. Moral economies, on the other hand, openly embrace a market exchange organized around status and rank.

This insight from Booth is useful, even though he misunderstood Thompson’s use of the word “moral” as an indication of Thompson’s own normative judgement as to which organizing mechanism was more just. However, the word “moral” in *moral economy* refers not to Thompson’s assessment, but to the contemporaneous normative assessment of those participating in that system. In other words, the organization of a market is considered a *moral economy* when it conforms to the general consensus within a community as to the “correct” organization of economic activity. In Thompson’s account, the producers and distributors of food were understood as providing a *service* to the community and that service-oriented aim was—above price or profit—seen as the optimal organizer of market action. Thompson juxtaposes these arrangements to those that would prevail where price and profit-seeking determined activity, regardless of the consequences for the broader social welfare.

While Thompson's 1971 essay explores the content of the moral economy that existed around bread and grain, he is less explicit about how such a community consensus emerged. Perhaps simply beyond the scope of his research, the effect is a sense of an essential always-existing set of moral judgements that distinguished between legitimate and illegitimate practices. This sense of stasis is one of the concept's major shortcomings because it becomes clumsy when applied to cases of evolving moral judgment of economic systems and practices (Gastón 2022).

While Thompson's writings do not explicitly address the question of whether moral economies can evolve and change, the moral economy is a *consensus* about what constitutes appropriate market activity. There is no reason to think that such a consensus could not evolve. Although the legitimacy of the shared ideas contained within a moral economy often rest on arguments about their rootedness in custom and tradition, communities "may invent and merge tradition with new rights" (Walton 1992). Instead of deriving solely from an objective prior state of virtuous relations between the state, the market, and the community in question, moral economies can evolve as communities "try to make common sense of their communal experiences" and "create their idealized vision of the moral past" (Calhoun 1982).

This reading of the concept underscores the dynamic nature of moral economy: a community's continual reinterpretation of its past and present realities shapes an ever-evolving moral landscape. Communities are constantly revising their frameworks of "custom" and "tradition" and incorporating new rights as their realities change. While grievances arise from the disruption of a perceived traditional moral order, tradition itself is adaptive to change (Hobsbawm 1983).

Moral Economy and Collective Action

Moral economies are consolidated in the transition between “ordinary times and the time of revolt” and articulated in response to threats on the perceived moral order. In other words, *moral economies* are more clearly defined as they are summoned (Siméant 2015). The concept is particularly useful in examining claims made by communities about the proper production and distribution of social goods during periods of economic upheaval and transformation, especially when those claims invoke notions of custom and tradition in distinguishing between “right” and “wrong” actions of authorities in managing economy of the social good under debate.

However, the concept of *moral economy* is not in itself contentious action, as some interpretations have implied (Gastón 2022). They are, rather, the underlying consensus that adjudicate what constitute proper economic action. When those moral orders come under threat, communities mobilize. However, what Gastón correctly identifies is that the form of collective action must be compatible with the moral judgements on which the moral economy is based. Thompson’s account of food riots allows us to conceive of market-related collective action as more than just a mechanism with which to fulfill an immediate need, such acquiring bread. Rather, protests were about “setting the price”—a form of popular market regulation when the state was unable or unwilling to enforce perceived customary activity.

MORAL ECONOMY IN ACTION: THE CASE OF HOUSING MARKETS IN MEXICO CITY

To illustrate how Thompson’s *moral economy* can be useful for study of markets and collective action in contemporary contexts, I show its application to the study of housing markets in Mexico City. Specifically, I will trace the emergence of distinct traditions and understandings of ownership rights and housing transactions in a handful of adjacent Mexico City neighborhoods. The three neighborhoods that I will examine are emblematic of common neighborhood forms throughout the city. The neighborhoods of Los Reyes and La Candelaria are

considered *pueblos originarios* (“original towns”) and trace their existence back several centuries as small, agricultural towns in Mexico’s central valley. As Mexico City’s population and urban area expanded rapidly in the second half of the twentieth century, the city grew around them. Today, over 140 neighborhoods are officially recognized as *pueblos originarios* by the Mexico City government.⁵³ The other neighborhood, Santo Domingo, was formed when several thousand squatters settled a largely uninhabited expanse of rocky land just to the southwest of Los Reyes and La Candelaria in September 1971. In the decades that followed, residents of Santo Domingo performed the laborious, costly, and dangerous work of transforming the landscape into an urban neighborhood through autoconstruction (Caldeira 2016). Many of Mexico City’s neighborhoods were formed through similar processes of autoconstruction during this period.⁵⁴

In the following three sections, I will use historical, interview, and ethnographic data, to examine how residents of two *pueblo originario* neighborhoods (Los Reyes and La Candelaria) and an autoconstructed neighborhood (Santo Domingo) forged two distinct moral economies surrounding property and homeownership. The first section describes how these shared ideas around property and housing were generated. I argue that differences in these neighborhoods’ moral economies reflect differences in the pathways through which residents became property owners, which was a collective experience for residents of both types of neighborhoods. The second section examines how, contrary to prevailing understandings, moral economies are

⁵³ Secretaría de Pueblos y Barrios Originarios y Comunidades Indígenas Residentes (SEPI), *Primer Informe de Gobierno, Diciembre 2018-Septiembre 2019*. Available at <https://www.sepi.cdmx.gob.mx/storage/app/uploads/public/5dc/5c7/0aa/5dc5c70aa1b72263642188.pdf>.

⁵⁴ According to Ward (1976), somewhere between 35-40% of Mexico City residents lived in informal settlements.

malleable and can change over time. Specifically, I show how residents reinterpret their own histories and experiences as both their own economic position and the meaning of property changes, and as they work to pass on ideas about market organization to new generations of residents. Finally, I examine the conditions under which residents are motivated to collectively defend the moral economies surrounding property in their neighborhoods. Specifically, I look at an instance of collective mobilizing against a proposed luxury condominium complex and provide an interpretation of the movement in line with Thompson's approach.

CONSTRUCTING THE MORAL ECONOMY: MARKET-MAKING AND COLLECTIVE PATHWAYS TO OWNERSHIP

In this section, I describe how residents of the *pueblos originarios* and the autoconstructed neighborhoods built two distinct moral economies around property and homeownership. I trace the slow, fraught process through which non-market land in these neighborhoods was transformed into a market commodity through the imposition of a private property regime over the course of the twentieth century. I argue that a key factor leading the development of these *moral economies* was that residents of the different neighborhoods experienced entry into private property ownership as a *collective* process, rather than an individual one. These shared experiences help explain the consolidation of shared ideas among community members about what constitute legitimate (and illegitimate) practices in the consumption and exchange of residential property. This period also constitutes the "moral past" to which residents refer when advancing arguments about the proper organization of contemporary real estate markets.

The Alchemy of Property: Conjuring a Real Estate Market

At the close of the Mexican Revolution in 1920, new agrarian reform laws allowed landless agricultural communities to petition the government for land grants. Agrarian reform was a central victory of the Revolution, aiming to transform the highly inequitable distribution of land by transferring land from haciendas, the Catholic Church, and other corporate landowners to dispossessed peasant communities. These land transfers were accomplished by dividing up large tracts and redistributing them under a new regime of collective ownership known as social tenure, which had two varieties: communal land and *ejidos*. Functionally identical, the distinguishing characteristic is whether the petitioning group can demonstrate a historical use of the land under question. If a community could demonstrate this connection to the land it was petitioning, the grant would be executed as communal land. For groups who were unable to make such a petition (for example, if no nearby land was eligible for redistribution), the group could receive an *ejido* grant which, by definition, meant that the land was more than 5 miles from the community's location. It was not uncommon for petitioners to receive ejido grants quite far from their community, sometimes in an entirely separate state. Both types of social tenure were held collectively and reserved for exclusively agricultural uses. Additionally, land held in social tenure was barred from sale on the market and could not be used as collateral for loans. These prohibitions on exchanging land on the market and using land as collateral for credit were meant to protect landholders from dispossession.

At the time, much of the area that constitutes contemporary Mexico City was still rural and populated by small, agrarian communities. In the 1920s, these communities began submitting petitions for land grants under the new agrarian reform laws, including the towns of Los Reyes and La Candelaria. Both communities engaged in a decades-long process to gain formal collective rights over the land that they had long utilized collectively used as a

subsistence resource and space of social reproduction. The process was a long, frustrating experience for residents of both towns. La Candelaria was granted communal land in 1929, but the grant was subsequently rescinded after the expropriated landowners successfully petitioned their case to the Supreme Court.⁵⁵ La Candelaria was ultimately granted an *ejido* a few miles to the northeast of the community, but they exchanged the land in 1959 in a deal with a newspaper company (while market exchange of *ejido* land was prohibited, in-kind exchange was allowed at the discretion of the President).⁵⁶ In exchange, they were promised a new *ejido* grant in state of Veracruz approximately 230 miles to the east (though it is unclear if this ever materialized). For many decades, residents of Los Reyes were unsuccessful in gaining collective rights to the land they considered part of their town's territory. In a denial of their 1948 petition, the state affirmed their eligibility for communal land but concluded that there was no more land eligible for expropriation and reapportionment near their town.⁵⁷ They were encouraged to apply for an *ejido* grant but appear never to have pursued this option.

However, both cases were reopened in the late 1950s and the government initiated a series of investigations to determine who, exactly, owned the land claimed by the two towns. Arguing that town representatives had presented documents serving as “indelible proof” that the town has had property rights to the land since 1888, this time the government decided in favor of

⁵⁵ A presidential resolution directing the Secretary of Agriculture to execute the expropriation was published in the *DOF* on April 5, 1924, p. 1239. Two expropriation decrees were published by the Secretary of Agriculture in the *DOF* on January 20, 1928, p. 3 and March 11, 1929, p. 1. Resolution by the Department of the Federal District published in the *DOF*, May 21, 1935, p. 349.

⁵⁶ A presidential decree published in the *DOF* on April 24, 1959, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Resolution by the Agrarian Department published in the *DOF*, July 2, 1951, p. 14.

Los Reyes.⁵⁸ A whole paragraph of the report recounts how the town dates back to the time of the Aztec Empire and has a long history of using the area to fish, cultivate crops, and forage flowers, among other activities. Shortly after the report was written, the president ordered the execution of a communal land grant in 1961, though the decree was not immediately published in the official record, as was normal. It is unclear whether a similar decision was made in favor of La Candelaria, though later government documents refer to “the communal lands of La Candelaria.” With this decree, a large expanse of land—increasingly under urbanization pressures from the rapidly expanding city—was removed from the market.

The 1961 presidential decree confirming the communal land grant for Los Reyes was finally published in the official record a decade later, in late November 1971. Less than two months prior, several thousand families had arrived in a mass “land invasion” to informally settle the land under question—constituting what would become the Santo Domingo neighborhood. The timing of the late publication of the 1961 is clear: in light of the “invasion,” it was in the government’s interest to clear up residual ambiguities as to the ownership regime of the land in question. Only four days later the government published a second decree expropriating the entirety of the communal lands of Los Reyes.

As mentioned earlier, informal settlements were a central motor of Mexico City’s urban growth in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Between 1950 and 1980, Mexico City’s population more than quadrupled from 3.5 million to 14.5 million, fueled largely by rural-urban migration. At first, newly arrived migrant families settled in downtown tenements. However, by the end of the 1960s, increasingly overcrowded conditions and a shift toward pro-urban growth policies at

⁵⁸ Report addressed to the Director of the Office of Lands, March 12, 1960 (*AEEZ*).

both the local and federal levels led a growing number of families to locate in the outskirts of the city (Davis 1994). By the mid-1970s, most of Mexico City's urban poor were living in under-serviced settlements in the urban periphery (Ward 1976).

But informal settlements were more than an escape valve for an increasingly tight housing market—they were a motor of that market's expansion. The pattern described in the case of Los Reyes (the communal land grant town) and Santo Domingo (the informal settlement) was replicated around the city: in searching for a place to live, poor urban migrants flocked to the undeveloped non-market land held collectively in social tenure by towns close to the urban center of the city. As of 1950, there were 91 *ejido* and communal plots within the Federal District, covering slightly over half of the total territory.⁵⁹ By law, the only way that *ejido* and communal lands could be released back into the real estate market (until a 1992 reform) was through a presidential decree of expropriation in response to some identified public need. The need to regularize property and provide services to informal settlements became a common reason for the expropriation of land held in social tenure in Mexico City.

In the case of the communal land of Los Reyes, which was expropriated in early December 1971, ownership was passed first to Mexico City's social housing authority, which was charged with building homes for those informally occupying the area. However, as I will discuss in further detail below, this project was unsuccessful due to significant opposition from residents. Ultimately, the land was subdivided and sold at a discounted rate to the informal dwellers as individual plots. The area claimed as communal land by La Candelaria was expropriated in 1970 to regularize another informal settlement. There—where the ownership

⁵⁹ Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), *Censo Agrícola, Ganadero y Ejidal - 1950*.

status was never as clear—the decree expropriated the *informal dwellers* (not the town). Many of the informal dwellers had entered into informal transactions to “purchase” their plots from a company that declared itself the owner of the land.

Among these neighborhoods, each inflection in the transformation of the ownership regime—from private corporate ownership to non-market communal ownership to public ownership and back to private ownership—was driven by the actions of organized groups of residents. The collective experience of unmaking and then re-making a market in land laid the groundwork for the emergence of shared understandings among these groups as to the rules that *should* guide the production, exchange and consumption of property. I now turn to a description of these collective experiences.

Collective Pathways to Ownership, Shared Understandings of Legitimate Market Practices

Residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria experienced property collectively largely because the dictates of agrarian reform law *required* that they experience it collectively. Post-Revolutionary land redistribution was only enacted on groups of dispossessed farmers, not individuals. And once a communal land grant was made, owners were directed to work the land *in common*. In fact, the new forms of social tenure were specifically designed by the architects of Post-Revolutionary Mexican agrarian law to create communities (Kourí 2017). But even before the new social tenure regimes were available to residents of these two towns, their relationship to the land had collective underpinnings. While residents had their own houses and plots within the towns proper, the larger expanse that comprised their productive *territory*—the areas that were later informally settled by migrants—was always conceived as a collective resource of the towns.

Both Los Reyes and La Candelaria were—and remain—recognized for their expertise in “the art of the flower,” as one resident described to me. The once abundant sources of water in

the area facilitated the cultivation of many species of flowers, and residents developed techniques for the elaboration of intricate flower façades and flower arrangements used in funerals, celebrations, and religious ceremonies. Many residents made their living—even through the in the mid-twentieth century—by selling flowers in the main downtown plant market or in small flower stalls in upscale neighborhoods near the city center. Residents also adorned their churches with these elaborate flower displays during the numerous religious festivities that they celebrated (and continue to celebrate) throughout the year.

This collectively imagined territory also provided the town residents with the materials they used to construct their spaces of reproduction and socialization. Residents used stones, sand, and adobe from the area to build their houses. When residents of Los Reyes decided to expand their church in the 1950s, they used these materials for the construction.⁶⁰ The church, which today remains the focal point and central gathering place, is a reminder of how the social and material worlds of the neighborhoods are intricately connected.

Residents also interacted with this expansive territory as a space of leisure and socialization. Children played among the rock formations and caves, and families organized social gatherings and picnics there. The land—viewed by outsiders as inhospitable and even treacherous⁶¹—was intimately familiar to residents of the surrounding towns. Residents fondly

⁶⁰ This was recounted to me in interviews, but a presidential decree published in the *DOF* on July 20, 1981, provides additional evidence. The decree, which nationalized the church and gave it the status of historical patrimony, noted that the construction material includes volcanic rock.

⁶¹ Charles A. Hodson (1926), an American Catholic priest who visited the area, described it in the following terms: “This basaltic rock is in places smooth, then again it has sunk, forming holes, some of which extend as far as one can see. Enormous quantities of gases have caused bubbles in the lava and, elsewhere, great caves. The result of all this titanic action is the veritable chaos that we now see. Doubtless some of the Indians can find their way through this appalling Dantesque solitude, just as some trappers could traverse the *mauvaises terres* of Dakota. One would not care to venture the experience in either place, even with a guide.”

recall specific rock formations that they came to know from their childhood adventures—one that looked like a cross, or another that looked like a snake. They remember how, after the rains, the expansive landscape would turn white with tiny flowers they called *estrellitas* (“little stars”). During the rainy season, water would pool in depressed areas of the lava rock, creating small lakes where children learned to swim. Around Christmas, residents would forage a specific plant that they used to create the thatched roofs in their nativity scenes.

As soon as social tenure became available at the close of the Revolution, residents of La Candelaria and Los Reyes set about formalizing their relationship to this territory by petitioning for communal land grants. La Candelaria submitted its first petition in 1922; Los Reyes in 1935. Since neither of these original petitions was successful, residents of the towns continued filing petitions and legal motions over the following decades. In fact, the residents of these towns continued these efforts through the 1980s, 1990s and into the 2000s. Over this decades long process, residents were obliged to carry out multiple censuses to identify which families would become property owners under the requested communal grant. A government report from 1960 describes the “notable unity” among residents of Los Reyes, observing that “they have maintained themselves as one singular man in the defense of their communal land.”⁶²

The livelihoods of the residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria were firmly connected to the land both in the town centers and in the surrounding landscape that constituted their territory. This is true both in the pastoral history residents fondly recounted to me and in the components of that history that they omitted in their retellings of the past. Indeed, the historical record suggests that another source of land-based livelihood was the renting out and selling of this

⁶² Report addressed to the Director of the Office of Lands, March 12, 1960 (*AEEZ*).

territory to outsiders. Government investigations into the mass “land invasion” that took place in September 1971 (and formed the Santo Domingo neighborhood) indicate that residents of the towns had long engaged in transactions with poor migrant families, offering them the right to live on their expansive territory for a price. Several residents from Santo Domingo told me that they had arrived several years prior to the large “invasion” when the “*comuneros*” gave them permission to erect modest homes on the rocky landscape. Even within the towns themselves, families with origins elsewhere rented the spare rooms of the residents of Los Reyes.

In Santo Domingo, most of the residents who took up residence in this undeveloped expanse of rocky land were rural migrants from states like Oaxaca, Guerrero, Hidalgo, and Michoacán. Many had previously lived in expensive, overcrowded conditions elsewhere in the city. Desperate for “a little piece of land” to call their own, they decided to participate in the “invasion” when they heard of the opportunity through kinship networks. Many of the first to set up makeshift camps and houses on the rocky, rural landscape were women, often with children in tow and sometimes against the wishes of their husbands. While their husbands worked during the day, the women defended their plots against other squatters, the police, and residents of the nearby communities (including Los Reyes and La Candelaria) who sought to drive them away.

The residents quickly organized themselves, eventually forming a civil association that would negotiate with the government for the collective interests of residents. One of the first dilemmas that residents confronted was the government’s intention of building social housing units for the families residing in the area. As discussed above, ownership of the expropriated area was initially transferred to Mexico City’s social housing authority (INDECO), which was ordered to build housing and install basic infrastructure. INDECO built a handful of prototype homes in the neighborhood, but by May 1972—about eight months after the “invasion”—

residents had organized an opposition to INDECO. Residents organized protests, wielding signs that read “We want lands. We don’t want houses. We want the regularization of our plots.”⁶³

When construction crews showed up to begin work, residents blockaded the entrance points to the neighborhood. Three women who had been young adults when their families participated in the “invasion” recounted the episode for me: “The machines and everything were here, ready to begin, but we all united and we didn’t allow them to enter. And they left!” One of the women interjected: “They didn’t leave, we ran them out!” INDECO had, in fact, built a handful of prototype houses, which the women described disparagingly as “bird houses” in reference to their small size. I heard this phrase repeatedly when residents recounted this episode in their neighborhood’s history.

Residents were clear: they wanted the freedom to build their neighborhood as they saw fit, and they were willing to invest the necessary labor. In the end, INDECO was forced to abandon the project and, after the agency was dissolved, was replaced by a new agency tasked with resolving irregular tenancy. This agency was subsequently dissolved and replaced with another. The process of regularization took over two decades and the involvement of multiple government agencies to accomplish. The first property titles were given out between 1983 and 1988, but these were later annulled when many were found not to match property boundaries or even correspond with the name of the property holder. In 1994, the government re-expropriated the entirety of the neighborhood and set about re-titling all of the property owners. To this day, most homes have two house numbers on their front door—corresponding to the “old” and “new” addresses.

⁶³ Photograph labeled “Residents of Santo Domingo de los Reyes at FIDEURBE,” January 24, 1973 (*MAF*, inventory number 13726-16).

But while formal ownership titles were being sorted out by a series of government agencies, residents went about building their neighborhood. They organized *faenas*—collective work parties—on the weekends in which they would all pitch in to excavate large boulders and lay gravel to establish the neighborhood’s first roads. Many of the women prepared food and brought water for those who performed the physical labor. Maintaining a supply of drinking water was not a simple task: women and children walked or rode on donkeys to a communal water supply about a mile away to bring back water for cooking and laundry. Some travelled to nearby neighborhoods with communal washing stations where they hand washed their clothes. On the block level, residents paid dues to purchase materials for construction of public goods, like electrical wire which they ran to illegally hook up in nearby neighborhoods. Later, they struck a deal with the city to provide their own labor to dig the holes for electricity posts in exchange for a discounted fee for connecting the neighborhood to the city’s the electric grid. Neighbors also helped each other construct their houses, sharing expertise in different aspects of homebuilding. Many of the men were employed as construction workers on the city’s many major public infrastructure projects of the period (e.g., highways, the metro system, stadiums).

As residents of Santo Domingo set about transforming the area from rural landscape to urban neighborhood, the residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria set about seeking recognition of their communal ownership of the area. They wrote letters to different government officials and agencies, pressing their case. They also submitted lawsuits seeking to annul the regularization efforts underway in Santo Domingo. In a 1977 letter to the Mexico’s president and the head of Mexico City’s government, a representative of the Union of Comuneros of Los Reyes writes:

With this expropriation our sources of work—which we conserved with sacrifice over the years—disappeared. But we are aware that that thousands of Mexican brothers have been provided with land and that for many years they have been in search of a piece of land in our national homeland.

But we have the right that our indemnity be paid.⁶⁴

The letter appealed to the President and the head of the Mexico City government to deliver on the promises made in the 1971 expropriation decree that deprived them of their communal lands. Each *comunero* had been promised both an indemnity payment as well as two “urbanized plots” within the Santo Domingo neighborhood. As of 1977, they attested to only having received a partial payment. To this day, many claim they never received what they were owed. This letter sheds light on their understanding about legitimate consumption of property at the time. First, they articulate a recognition that the social reproductive needs of the informal dwellers constituted a legitimate form of land consumption and legitimate basis for redistribution. Second, they assert that even as their communal territory is transformed into private property, they continue to have a right to derive their livelihoods from it, albeit in a new format.

Residents of Santo Domingo were ultimately successful in their demand for property instead of housing. But they are quick to clarify that they did not expect handouts from the government and were eager to invest their own labor and capital in constructing their homes and their neighborhood. The civic association that represented residents ultimately negotiated a deal with the Mexico City government for the regularization of their property. They were assessed a modest fee per square meter that they would be able to pay out over several years of installments. Residents I spoke with viewed this deal as fair, especially given all they endured and invested in the neighborhood over the years. They articulate a belief that anyone willing to make those sorts

⁶⁴ Letter from Unión de Comuneros Pro-Granjas de Santo Domingo Los Reyes, Coyoacán, D.F., Asc. Civ. to President José López Portillo, March 14, 1977 (*AGA/Los Reyes*, p.27-31).

of investments should have a right to make their own place in the city. I had expected to hear stories about the trials of living under juridical insecurity for so many years. Yet residents told me that, even in the very early years of the settlement, they knew they would be able to stay because there were simply so many of them. Proponents of property titling campaigns argue that lack of formal ownership inhibits development because residents are disincentivized from making investments in their property (de Soto 2000). This argument rests on the individualizing “bundle of rights” understanding of property—an assumption not borne out in the experience of Santo Domingo. Here, property was constituted through their collective labor investments and protected by collective social contract long before the state conferred official property rights.

THE DYNAMIC MORAL ECONOMY: REINTERPRETING PROPERTY TRADITIONS AND THE MORAL PAST

However, collective understandings about the proper organization of property markets have evolved over the decades. Rather than rest on objective sets of past traditions, I argue that moral economies are always filtered through a layer of interpretation. How we make sense our experiences or the experiences of the community to which we belong is necessarily conditioned by our present context, experiences, needs, and desires. In this way, I show how moral economies are intrinsically dynamic, not static. Residents of Los Reyes, La Candelaria, and Santo Domingo are continually reinterpreting the property traditions and the “moral past” upon which present day understandings of legitimate property practices rest. These reinterpretations respond to changes in the structural position of property owners, the evolving functions and meanings of urban property, the need to transmit these understandings to new generations of residents.

Pueblos Originarios: Turning Territory into Property and the Rise of Indigenous Claims

In the *pueblos*, the main revision is an intensification of indigenous claims to land. For many decades, residents of the *pueblos* articulated a vision that their rights were based in their longstanding collective cultivation of the land. However, their claims have evolved to prioritize *innate* rights based on primordial connection to land that is passed down through bloodlines.

Few of the communal land grant petitions that residents of the towns submitted mentioned of the nature or length of their towns' connection to the land. One of the government responses to a petition submitted by Los Reyes in 1935 acknowledges that town had existed "since Colonial times." However, these petitions—and the government's responses to them—generally rest on their claims on their status as agricultural producers lacking formal rights to land for cultivation. Only decades removed from the end of the Revolution, this articulation is in line with the mandate that undergirds Mexican agrarian reform: "Land for those who work it." The two requirements for making petitions under the newly constituted agrarian reform laws were to be trained in agricultural occupations and to demonstrate a lack of land. Communal land petitions—distinct from *ejido* petitions—additionally required evidence that the petitioners had previously cultivated the lands they were requesting.

In La Candelaria, for example, the archival record from the 1950s indicates repeated instances of residents petitioning the state to revoke the *ejido* rights of community members who were accused as having abandoned their plots, in favor of new members who were willing to put in the work required. This treatment of property rights stands in stark contrast to contemporary articulations of community property rights, which are based solely on one's descent from an original bloodline in the community. Which families "count" as original, rightful bloodlines? Colloquially, residents answer this question by proclaiming that they all know each other and so can identify outsiders from rightful heirs. But residents have also made concerted efforts to locate

probatory evidence of their “primordial” connection to the land, even hiring experts in pre-colonial history to interpret maps and codices in search of proof of such ties. Residents of Los Reyes use the list of rightful claimants published in the 1971 state resolution (discussed above) to designate rightful heirs.

This evolution of basis for the moral economy of property in the towns has occurred alongside several important broader shifts in the socio-cultural context. For one, the shift away from use-based property claims towards claims that their rights stem from a primordial connection between people and territory occurred as another class of people—poor informal dwellers in autoconstructed neighborhoods—began obtaining formal property rights based on their relationship “working” the land. By the 1980s, this group was able to successfully gain property rights—and in fact *displace* the rights of the *pueblos*—through a use-rights framework.

At the same time, the end of the twentieth century saw the rise of an indigenous rights framework both within Mexico and on a global level. The 1994 Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico captivated the world and also changed the discourse around indigeneity in Mexico from being a condition for exclusion to being a source of power. This was when the notion of *pueblos originarios* (“original towns”) first entered the lexicon in Mexico City. The new social-spatial category was created by residents in the 1990s as a way to assert their longstanding ties to the land while simultaneously distancing themselves from the stigma of indigeneity. Eventually, the category was adopted into the city’s formal urban planning regimes. By 2007, it became an official designation that the Mexico City can government bestow on neighborhoods able document their existence as *pueblos* (“towns”) to the 1800s or earlier. Today, *pueblos originarios*

are afforded special political considerations,⁶⁵ special resources (e.g., community grants reserved for *pueblos originarios*), and governed by special land use constraints.

And while the word “*originario*” was likely chosen for its distance from the concept of indigeneity, the category of *pueblo originario* is also increasingly adjacent to traditional conceptions of indigeneity. Mexico City’s new constitution, which went into effect in 2018, specifically mentions *pueblos originarios* in a segment regarding indigenous rights. Similarly, a new Mexico City government agency was put in charge of protecting the rights of both traditionally defined indigenous groups and *pueblos originarios*. The grouping of *pueblos originarios* with traditionally defined indigenous groups—while still maintaining a distinction between the two—demonstrates the inchoate relationship between *pueblos originarios* and indigeneity.

In 2017, the city was preparing for a major political reform that would reorganize political representation in the city. This included new voting districts. During this time, I accompanied a group of residents from Los Reyes to a meeting with local government officials that they had scheduled to propose alternative voting district boundaries that would unify the *pueblos originarios* into a single (though non-contiguous) voting district. As they discussed their strategy in the taxi to the meeting, one young leader of Los Reyes slapped the inside of his forearm and declared, laughing: “Indigenous blood runs in our veins, dammit!” He continued, more seriously, insisting that their “indigenous blood” meant that government officials would have no choice but to listen to them. He cited “international laws.” The others nodded their heads.

⁶⁵ For example, a 2010 electoral reform created elected “Citizen Committees” in each conventional neighborhood (“*colonia*”) and “Village Councils” in each *pueblo originario*.

In the United States, individuals are granted membership into tribes based on the principle of blood quantum and indigenous status is as much a political identity as an ethno-racial one. By contrast, in Mexico, indigeneity is largely a linguistic identity. Until recently, it was not typically understood as a category that individuals could opt into or out of according to their own identification practices. Thus, this sort of self-expression is striking, even if it is also increasingly common (Flores, Vignau Loría and Casas 2023). Residents of the *pueblos* with whom I spoke seemed to be grappling with how to incorporate indigenous identity into the narratives of their *pueblos* and bring indigeneity to their political demands. While I was conducting fieldwork, residents of the *pueblos* were trying to normalize the addition of Nahuatl names—which they learned of through their research in the archives—to the Spanish names of their *pueblos*. Los Reyes, for example, became Los Reyes Hueytilac. Understanding this context helps to explain the shift away from property rights claims based on *use* towards claims based on an innate, indigenous connection to their neighborhood’s territory. Both claims construct a moral economy of property where status—as land user or land inheritor—dictates differential levels of access and rights.

Residents are also acutely aware of the stakes of maintaining their status as *pueblo originario*, upon which their moral economy based around indigenous rights to land is based. Indeed, this was a constant topic of discussion in community meetings, conversations, and my interviews. At a community meeting in Los Reyes, a woman expressed her concern over the proliferation of construction in the pueblo, adding: “Being a *pueblo* is what gives us protection. If they take that away, they will be able to do whatever they want with us!”

At one point, I observed a meeting between residents of La Candelaria and a representative from real estate development company that was planning a building inside the

pueblo. Residents had convinced a representative to meet with them in a community room located in the neighborhood's cemetery—a very important meeting space in the community. Most of them residents were strongly opposed to the constructed because they saw it as a threat to their *pueblo*. However, others expressed an attitude that their opposition was rooted in a belief that the building violated the laws and zoning codes that applied to them *specifically* as a *pueblo originario*. As long as the building was in accordance with the laws and zoning code, they would not oppose. They discussed the option of hiring a neutral party to adjudicate whether the building plan conformed with the appropriate code. One resident of La Candelaria objected: “We don’t need a third party to tell us if its ok or no. The law clearly says [that it is not]. You [the representative for the developer] are in a *pueblo* that is protected. If the city gives you a permit despite the fact that you are in violation of that code, there will be disagreement from the *pueblo*.” Another man worried that the building would bring outsiders who would not like their “customs” in the *pueblo*. “The identity of the *pueblo* will be lost. They want to break the norms of the *pueblo* and the *pueblo* is not in agreement because [the construction] is outside of the law. If it was in line with the law, you wouldn’t have to get our permission. But you want to build tall buildings and it is outside of the law and that why you are going to have problems [with us].”

But maintaining the designation of *pueblo originario* is not guaranteed. Rosario, a middle-aged woman, was participating in the Citizen’s Assembly as a representative of Los Reyes. The Citizen’s Assembly was created in 2016 and tasked with participating in writing a new constitution for Mexico City that would accompany the redistricting and other political changes. Neighborhoods were represented by “citizen committees” whereas *pueblos originarios* were represented by “village councils.” Rosario explained how Los Reyes was incorporated as a regular neighborhood with a “citizen committee” rather than as a *pueblo originario*. Despite the

fact that Los Reyes met all of the requirements of being a *pueblo originario*, according to Rosario, Mexico City's Legislative Assembly had not recognized it as such for the purposes of the Citizen's Assembly. She and the other representatives from Los Reyes were petitioning for this to be changed because, she explained, when you get this designation, "everything has to be decided on through a vote of the community." She gave the example of how, with that designation, proposed real estate projects would have to be approved through such a vote. It was clear she saw this *designation* as a key tool for protecting Los Reyes from further outside development.

Indeed, none of the *pueblos originarios* in Coyoacán were designated as such for the purposes of the Citizen's Assembly. Part of what made a neighborhood eligible for the designation of *pueblo originario* was its ability to prove its existence from before its absorption into Mexico City. However, other characteristics influenced this designation as well: *pueblos originarios* had to maintain a "traditional" political authority, as well as "traditional procedures and practices."⁶⁶

But residents perceive that the key cultural events that are constitutive to *pueblo* identity, such as annual religious festivities and the use of fireworks, are being actively circumscribed by outsiders. Residents explained that newly arrived outsiders have actively sought to undermine the traditions of the *pueblos* by complaining that religious festivities, which are accompanied by street closures and firecrackers, are inconvenient and disruptive. Some of these newly arrived outsider residents have even circulated petitions and taken formal steps to curtail these activities.

⁶⁶ See Article 6, Fraction XI of the 2010 Ley de Participación Ciudadana del Distrito Federal.

Another characteristic that differentiates *pueblos* from conventional neighborhoods is that they have their own, internally organized cemeteries. As one resident explained, the *pueblos* are differentiated from the rest of the city through the fact that *pueblo* residents are born, die, and buried in their *pueblo*. Furthermore, having internal *pueblo* cemeteries—a literal and figurative fusion of *pueblo* bodies and *pueblo* soil—gives authority and weight to their hereditary-based claims to urban space.

Indeed, residents of the *pueblos* are quick to defend their cemeteries. Both Los Reyes and La Candelaria joined a city-wide coalition of *pueblos* in 2006 to prevent the proposed “privatization” of *pueblo* cemeteries. While *pueblo* residents describe this episode as the state’s proposed “privatization” of their cemeteries, the city’s proposal might be more aptly described as the opposite: the city government proposed that all cemeteries in Mexico City be administered centrally by the city government, subjecting the autonomous and community-based cemeteries in the *pueblos* to government regulation (and, importantly, government fees). Residents successfully mobilized to prevent the state from interfering with their community-run cemeteries.

Los Reyes and La Candelaria face a complex set of pressures to maintain their legitimacy as *pueblos originarios*—a classification they understand as providing them with protections from unwanted urban development. Yet without these protections, they fear that they will be unable to maintain the “traditional” character that allows them to maintain that status. This helps clarify why traditions of renting out and selling land—which clearly date back to the time before the “invasion” and were, in fact, a contributing factor to the “invasion”—are dropped from their narratives of neighborhood history.

Autoconstructed Neighborhood: Social Reproduction, Livelihood, and a Labor Theory of Ownership

Ideas about the appropriate rules organizing property rights have changed over time in the autoconstructed neighborhoods as well. In the 1970s, when residents fought for titles and regularization of their claims, they based their arguments around their right to a space for social reproduction. Their appeals to the state to avoid eviction and to gain formal titles were all based in demonstrating their basic need for shelter—a place to raise their children in the city.

One of the factors that made the titling process so convoluted was the fact that—despite a lack of formal property titles—there was a very active real estate market in the neighborhood. In 1994—when the government admitted the failure of its two decades long attempt to regularize property in the neighborhood and opted to re-expropriate all property owners and start again—it noted that:

Currently, one of the principal problems facing neighborhood residents [...] consists of the irregularity of land tenure, derived principally from disputes over the possession of plots; sale agreements, concessions of rights, and exchanges of plots in a fraudulent manner or occurring in the margins of the law; the passage of property through inheritance without the proper documentation; subdivisions of plots without the proper authorizations; and forged legal documents.

Interviewees recounted engaging in these types of transactions—exchanging plots with families in different quadrants of the neighborhood or making arrangements with neighbors to buy their plots in installments paid out over several years. Laura, a woman with whom I interacted frequently, repeatedly remarked how she had been “stupid” when she and her brothers—originally from a small town in Hidalgo—arrived in the neighborhood as young adults: her brothers had all claimed plots, but it did not occur to her to stake a claim on her own. She was only 16 when she arrived. Today, her brothers have turned their properties into profitable ventures, running butcher shops out of the ground floors and building up and renting out apartments above. Laura lives with her husband and their adult son in one section of a property that legally belongs to her brother-in-law. Three other families live in the property with

them: two belong to her husband's side of the family and the other is an unrelated family that rents. These types of living arrangements are common in the neighborhood (Ortega Alcázar 2016). Laura's situation is referred to as being "*arrimada*"—the status of living rent-free with friends or family. This condition is so common in a neighborhood like Santo Domingo that advertisements for subsidized condominiums posted around the neighborhood ask in bold letters: "Renting or *arrimado*? This will interest you!"

But one consequence of their experience is that legal documents outlining formal ownership mean little. After all, they built their neighborhood, their homes, and, in many cases, their businesses over two decades before ever having legal documents formalizing their property claim. When I spoke with residents who had inherited property from their parents, most admitted that they had never gone through the formal process of transferring titles. Those whose parents had passed away, found themselves once again in a state of legal vulnerability. But at the same time, when I pressed them on their plans, they did not indicate an urgency to fix their legal predicament. In an interview with an older woman, I asked her when she finally obtained her formal property titles and she shrugged. Who knows, she said, I have so many sets of papers that I'm not even sure which ones are the right ones.

Even today, residents continue the tradition of autoconstruction by building up or altering their properties—usually without formal permits—to accommodate growing families or to secure their livelihoods through home-based businesses or by renting out rooms and apartments. Duhau and Giglia (2008) describe the resulting organization of space in these sorts of autoconstructed neighborhoods as being somewhere between public and private. "The space of the city block is used collectively and is considered as "their street" by those who inhabit it. This is to say not that it is public, but that those who reside on it have more rights to establish and decide what to do

with their block” (p. 349, translated from Spanish). The result, argue Duhau and Giglia, is a “negotiated” space where residents feel collective ownership over the neighborhood. This includes an implied understanding that one must tolerate the needs of others who have equal rights. And, indeed, the tradition of autoconstruction in Santo Domingo is not limited to private dwellings: residents erect public shrines on street corners, alter the sidewalks in front of their houses, occupy sidewalks and streets as part of their businesses (e.g., a family that runs an auto mechanic workshop out of their home will use the street as an extension of their workshop), and so on.

Today, most residents in the neighborhood rely on their status as property owners for their livelihoods—renting out rooms and using their properties to run fruit stands, restaurants, autobody shops, bodegas, and beauty salons. As Mexico City real estate prices skyrocket and the city’s economy transitions to one based on global business, tech, and tourism, the working-class residents of Santo Domingo depend on their status as property owners to scratch out a living in the increasingly inaccessible and expensive city. No longer marginalized poor occupying peripheral and “worthless” land, today the neighborhood’s entrepreneurial working class are owners of valuable property by virtue of its location in a prime rental market in the city.

Residents have organized an understanding of property in which labor investments form the basis for legitimate property claims. However, like in the *pueblos*, one threat to the strength of this community consensus is the gradual replacement by outsiders of those who participated in both the invasion and subsequent autoconstruction of the neighborhood. A key dilemma, thus, is how to maintain the history of the neighborhood’s construction alive in the collective consciousness of residents. Specifically, storytelling and mythmaking play important roles in these processes of transmission. In a similar fashion to how renting out and selling have

disappeared from the *pueblos*' understanding of property traditions, residents of Santo Domingo have crystallized a simplified origin story that smooths over irregularities that would complicate a labor-theory of ownership. For one, they tend to reject the legitimacy of the *comuneros* social tenure claims to the land or paint them as greedy villains of the story. Second, they also downplay the fact that many residents arrived prior to the mass "invasion" through informal transactions with the *comuneros*. Rather, the story—as told in pictures books published by a community center in the neighborhood—is one of spontaneous occupation of the land and a desire to uphold the revolutionary mandate of "Land for those who work it." Murals around the neighborhood depict residents with shovels and picks, breaking up the rocky landscape. The previously mentioned community center is named after Emiliano Zapata, to whom the phrase "Land for those who work it" is attributed.

DEFENDING THE MORAL ECONOMY: CONTENTIOUS ACTION AS POPULAR MARKET REGULATION

In this section I discuss how the *moral economies* in these neighborhoods shape the form of community organizing against urban development. Specifically, I consider an episode where residents of the *pueblos* and the autoconstructed neighborhoods formed a unified movement against a luxury residential development. However, the movement quickly split along neighborhood lines. I argue that the incompatible moral economies in the two types of neighborhood help explain the movement's fragmentation. Lastly, I examine how Thompson's concept of moral economy provides tools for analyzing social movement outcomes.

Moral Economy as a Source of Movement Fragmentation

While these neighborhoods once occupied the urban periphery and were barely integrated into the city's systems of urban services and transportation, today they occupy a central position in a globalized city. Coyoacán—the borough where the neighborhoods are located—has long functioned as an enclave for the wealthy and as a hub of tourism. But the area has experienced heavy capital-driven development in recent years. This includes the inauguration of an upscale mall in 2015 and, more recently, one of the most highly anticipated luxury residential high-rise buildings in the city. Notably, the luxury high rise generated criticism and protest given its impacts on a nearby *pueblo originario*. These and many other less notable residential and commercial developments in the area leave residents of Los Reyes, La Candelaria, and Santo Domingo concerned about the prospect of being displaced from their neighborhoods. A commonly articulated belief is that the relatively earthquake-proof lava rock landscape on which the neighborhoods sit—as well as their relative centrality in the city and proximity to desirable amenities—makes them prime targets for investment. I often heard the phrase “they want us to disappear” so “they” can do with they want with the valuable land, though who constituted the “they” in the sentence was rarely specified.

Over several years, I observed a concrete example of urban development that residents of these neighborhoods perceived as one such threat. A multi-family residential building—described in advertisements as offering luxury amenities—was proposed in the heart of the three neighborhoods, not far from where their boundaries meet. At first, the proposed development and the beginning of its construction did not provoke much attention. However, residents of nearby buildings—who could monitor progress from their rooftops while tending clothes to dry or changing their cylinders of cooking gas—noticed that the construction site had filled with water. As news of this peculiar development spread, residents took notice.

By the spring of 2016, a group of residents from both Los Reyes and Santo Domingo began to organize a protest march against the development. Later, other adjacent neighborhoods—including La Candelaria and another autoconstructed neighborhood—formalized their movement. By the summer, they had established an encampment—a tent made of tarps—on the sidewalk and one lane of the busy thoroughfare on which the construction site was located. The encampment was “staffed” by residents around the clock and contained both a communal area where assembly meetings were held and a private area with a mattress where volunteers and movement leaders could rest. The common area included a large table and over a dozen folding chairs. Throughout the day, residents congregated to prepare quesadillas over a coal fired *comal*, play cards, drink coffee, and chat. The plywood walls surrounding the construction site, as well as the tarps that made the encampment structure, were covered with handwritten posters, drawings, photographs, and newspaper clippings. On Friday evenings, the group held “general assembly” meetings where they discussed movement strategy and voted on decisions.

But by the time I arrived in the summer of 2016, the residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria had stopped participating. They no longer frequented the encampment, nor did they participate in the weekly meetings. Residents of Los Reyes—who were more directly impacted by the development since the construction was within their neighborhood boundaries—continued to organize against the development but were no longer affiliated with the organized coalition or the encampment. The encampment became a space maintained almost exclusively by residents of Santo Domingo and another autoconstructed neighborhood. While the two movements retained the same official goals—the cancellation of the development and the conversion of the natural spring into a park or (if possible) a water pumping station from the area—they worked towards

those goals separately. In fact, sometimes the two groups clashed when it came to deciding who would occupy the role of “community representative” in meetings with government officials.

The fragmentation of the movement, I argue, is driven by the incompatibility of the neighborhoods’ *moral economies* surrounding property. When I pressed members of each group about the reasons for the movement’s split, they tended to avoid discussing the topic. One leader from Los Reyes shrugged and stated that they had “different methods and objectives.” Another woman from Los Reyes—the only who continued to visit the encampment, though made clear she represented only herself—told me that although the two groups had the same goals. The disagreement was more about “processes.”

Indeed, movement strategy and tactics were an important point of disagreement. Residents of the *pueblos* preferred to follow a legalistic strategy, submitting petitions and complaints to government agencies. The residents of Santo Domingo and the other autoconstructed neighborhoods, on the other hand, saw these efforts as a waste of time. I argue, however, that disagreements over “processes” reflect the vastly different experiences and *moral economies* surrounding property in these neighborhoods.

As discussed above, residents of Los Reyes and La Candelaria see laws and norms as important sources of power—both as threats against the integrity of *pueblo* property, and resources for protecting it. Residents of the *pueblos* objected to the insistence by residents of Santo Domingo on occupying public space and preferred to use the “juridical route.” The encampment, for example, blockaded a major street each Friday for its assembly meeting *without* getting permits from the state—a practice that residents of the *pueblos* viewed unfavorably. But residents of Santo Domingo declared that the street belonged to them because they had built it.

At one point during an assembly meeting, the residents from Santo Domingo discussed the pros and cons of forming a civil association (“AC”), which would be similar to forming a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization in the United States. An older man from one of the nearby autoconstructed neighborhoods took the microphone to weigh in against forming an AC: “The problems in [autoconstructed neighborhood] have never been resolved through legal pathways; always through social struggle.” They opted against the idea. Another older man from Santo Domingo recounted how—in their fight against social housing in the 1970s—they would go at night to break down any progress that had been made on the construction during the day. “Just like we won then, we will win here,” he stated confidently.

Residents from Los Reyes, on the other hand, highlighted the importance of documents rather than protests in the streets. “*We’re* the ones submitting all of the documents,” one leader from Los Reyes told me, implying that residents of Santo Domingo were not engaged in that kind of work. “Documents are important because otherwise the government ignores you.”

At one point, residents from a nearby, wealthier neighborhood called Ciudad Jardín (“Garden City”) came to the encampment. They were organizing to oppose the construction of a residential building in their neighborhood by the same real estate developer. The residents had come to the encampment to offer support and see how they could collaborate. But a durable relationship between the encampment and the residents from this other neighborhood never materialized. One man from Santo Domingo explained why his group was not very interested in trying to work together. He told me that they the two groups had “different perspectives.” Residents from Ciudad Jardín, he explained, were only concerned about whether the construction would damage their homes.

In fact, I had attended several meetings between residents from Ciudad Jardín and government officials. One of their concerns was, indeed, that the vibrations from the heavy machinery was causing cracks to form in the walls of nearby houses. After one such meeting, in which they demanded that the construction be suspended for what they viewed as violations of various zoning codes and local laws, I chatted with one of the women leaders of their group. I asked her what they planned next if they were successful in getting the construction suspended. She explained that they would demand that the building conform zoning restrictions. The building was located between a major thoroughfare and a residential street in their neighborhood. Although the official address of the building was on the major thoroughfare, the main entrance would be on the residential street. They argued that this meant it should conform with the zoning code for the residential area, not the major thoroughfare. As such, it should have a maximum of three floors, not the six that were planned. They also wanted the developer to promise not to cut down any more trees and to ensure that no more damage was inflicted on nearby houses. “Because, of course, we can’t stop them from building,” she reasoned. In contrast to the *moral economies* of the *pueblos* and the autoconstructed neighborhoods, residents from Ciudad Jardín see price and contract as legitimate organizers of the real estate market, so long as the law—and the rights of other property owners—are respected.

At the core of the movement’s fragmentation (as well as its failure to expand to include Ciudad Jardín) were the fundamentally incompatible *moral economies* surrounding property ownership in the neighborhoods. The *pueblos* oriented their appeals for state protection from gentrification and displacement in discourses of primordial connections and innate rights by virtue of their descentance through select bloodlines. The residents of Santo Domingo, on the other hand, highlight their rights through production of the neighborhood itself and through their

reliance on property for livelihood and sustenance. To acknowledge that rights to property could be earned through investments of labor would weaken the claims upon which *pueblo* residents depended for their continued special treatment and protection by the state. In a similar way, acknowledging the natural, inherited rights of the *pueblos* undermined the narratives that residents of Santo Domingo had crafted about their arrival in the area and their claims to property rights which hinged on the idea of “land for those who work it.”

Reinterpreting the Goals of Collective Market Action

Despite continued efforts by both groups to halt the construction, the condominiums were ultimately built. However, the General Assembly—run almost entirely by residents of Santo Domingo—does not see the episode as a loss. Indeed, they successfully lobbied the Mexico City government to force the developer to fund the construction of a new well and water pumping station—dubbed by residents “The Well for the People”—that will provide more regular access to running water for residents of Santo Domingo and other surrounding neighborhoods. Additionally, the city forced the developer to pay for a major remodel of the neighborhood’s community center where new generations of residents will learn the story of the neighborhood’s origins through the books that the community center publishes, the neighborhood history museum it houses, and the annual commemorative events it holds to preserve narratives of neighborhood history.

The organization born from the encampment also lives on through a WhatsApp group. While the water station was being constructed, residents organized daily foot patrols to monitor the progress. Each day, they sent photos and videos as proof that construction crews had shown up to work, contacting government officials when progress stalled. The WhatsApp group has now evolved to monitor water supply levels around the neighborhood. Residents send messages

reporting when they have good water pressure and, conversely, when no water flows from their taps. During instances of water scarcity, residents organize to contact the local government to send water trucks to fill residents' cisterns—not unlike how residents organized water access in the early days of their neighborhood's establishment.

There are multiple interpretations of the trajectory of the movement to block the construction of the condominium complex. One interpretation sees residents' impulse to act in accordance with their neighborhood specific moral economy as provoking the movement's failure: the condominium development was built, perhaps in part because of the movement's diminished power. In this interpretation, the defense of moral economy is a source of vulnerability that fragments already marginalized residents with shared material interests.

However, an alternative interpretation that draws on Thompson's account of food riots might lead us to see the construction of the condominium complex as a short-term concession in favor of the long-term benefits of consolidating community support for and state recognition of neighborhood specific moral economies. In this view, the collective action in which residents engaged was ultimately not about determining the fate of a single condominium complex. Rather, residents' collective action served as a form of popular market regulation in which residents forced the state to recognize the legitimacy of their moral economic claims to property and strengthened community commitment to the narratives that bolster these claims.

To this point, at one Friday assembly meeting at the encampment, a woman from Santo Domingo declared: "Even though we're talking about the water [in the construction site] right now, we can't forget the real reason we're here: the real estate developers!" Another woman agreed: "Even if we lose this battle, let our efforts serve to help future movements against real

estate developers.” She continued, likening their efforts to a (metal) spring: “We may be going down now, but only to get power to spring back stronger.”

CONCLUSION

The concept of *moral economy* promises to make important contributions to economic sociology and the study of markets, specifically. First, the concept of moral economy helps define the market as a *social* object. Rather than see markets on a spectrum where they lose their “marketness” as they become more socially structured, Thompson’s *moral economy* helps us understand how markets—as sites of exchange—can be governed by different sets of norms about what constitutes appropriate forms of production, exchange, distribution, and consumption. Yet, at the same time, we need not flatten all markets as “moral markets.” Moral economies describe markets in which the price mechanism is subordinated to other forms of organization, such as along lines of status, rank, or hierarchy. In what Thompson calls “political economy” and Polanyi refers to as the self-regulating market, price is seen as the most just and moral mechanism since it functions to “equalize” transactors, eliminating status, rank, and hierarchy as rationale for organizing exchange.

Second, Thompson’s writings provide clues as to when and in which contexts we might expect to find such a moral economy. Some, including Thompson himself, have cautioned against loose applications of the concept that equate moral economy with the architecture of social norms and beliefs of a community (Siméant 2015; Thompson 1993). When applied to discussions around the construction of general norms and beliefs—in other words, applications that drop the economic dimension—the concept loses its analytical utility. The idea of moral economy is best employed to discuss how, in the struggle for subsistence, communities arrive at shared conclusions about the proper way to organize the economy of social goods that are central

to their livelihood and survival (Thompson 1993). However, this also suggests that moral economies will be highly context specific. For example, the moral economy surrounding land will be different in Northern Brazil versus Southern Brazil because of the different histories of landholding, production, colonization, and slavery (Wolford 2010). In Mexico, moral economy may be constructed around the production and exchange of corn, while water is the object of moral economy in mountainous and arid Bolivia (Simmons 2016).

Third, the concept of *moral economy* helps clarify the function of market-related collective action as a form of popular market regulation. While the food riots described by Thompson may have been interpreted as failures because of their effect of raising bread prices, Thompson argues that they were successful when seen for what they really were: not attempts to satisfy acute hunger, but efforts to protect the broader moral economy in which bread was perceived as a *right* of the poor, rather than a source of profit generation. Such a view offers an alternative way of assessing the purpose and outcomes of market-related collective action. In the empirical case presented in this paper, the inability of residents from different neighborhoods to join forces in what, on the surface, appears to be a common goal might be interpreted as the fatal flaw that led to the construction of the condominium they opposed. However, this interpretation assumes that the ultimate goal of residents was simply to halt the construction—it is yet to be seen whether they might have been successful in the longer-term goal of protecting the moral economies through which they were able to become—and remain—unlikely property owners.

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APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. List of Archive Collections Referenced.

Citation Shorthand	Location	Collection	Archive
<i>DFS/Santo Domingo</i>	Caja AC33-4223, Expediente 9-390, Legajo 1	Dirección Federal de Seguridad	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>DFS/Ajusco</i>	Caja AC32.4223, Expediente 9-368, Legajo 1	Dirección Federal de Seguridad	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>IPS/InvasionesB</i>	Caja 1801B, Expediente 4	Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>IPS/InvasionesA</i>	Caja1801A, Expediente 4	Investigaciones Políticas y Sociales	Archivo General de la Nación
<i>AGA/Los Reyes</i>	Caja 272.2/1820, Legajo 1	N/A	Archivo General Agrario
<i>MAF</i>	N/A	N/A	Museo del Archivo Fotográfico
<i>AEEZ</i>	N/A	N/A	Archivo Escuelita Emiliano Zapata

Chapter 3: Municipalized Neighborhoods: Community-Controlled Poverty Governance and Differentiated Citizenship in Milwaukee

ABSTRACT

Much scholarship has focused on how the management of poverty in the United States has been transformed by the rising dependence of local governments on private organizations for the delivery of social services. Yet, another privatizing force has received less attention from poverty scholars: the proliferation of “private governments” (e.g., Homeowner Associations, Business Improvement Districts) that operate underneath or parallel to municipal authorities. How does the state’s delegation of *both* the provision of social services *and* the very powers government reshape poverty governance? I examine this question using the case of Milwaukee’s Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs)—community-controlled special assessment districts—which I theorize as a form of neighborhood “municipalization.” Through the analysis of interviews, documents, and observational data, I examine Milwaukee’s NIDs as a novel form of poverty governance organized around property. I argue that NIDs go beyond the standard model of the delegated welfare state by imbuing private actors with novel governmental power over poor *places* and their populations. The transformation of poverty governance through neighborhood municipalization has several consequences. First, I draw on labor theories of poverty governance to show how NIDs involve residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods in their own governance and surveillance through a logic of “sweat equity.” Second, I show how NIDs drive the differentiation of neighborhood stakeholders into a hierarchy of citizen classes built around their relationship to property: homeowners, investors, and renters. The rights enjoyed by these different classes of NID citizens are determined by a calculus that assesses their perceived financial and moral contributions to the neighborhood.

Keywords: poverty governance; delegated welfare state; citizenship; improvement districts; property tax

INTRODUCTION

“The whole concept of a NID is that you are *municipalizing your own neighborhood*. You are making your own choices for how you divert your resources, your own choices with the activities you want to do and where you want to invest.”

– Staff member of a community-based organization to the board of a Neighborhood Improvement District (*emphasis added*)

A wealth of scholarship has examined how the state manages poverty directly through public assistance programs (Piven and Cloward 1993), as well as indirectly through adjacent institutions, such as courtrooms (Clair 2021), jails and prisons (Wacquant 2009), police

departments (Forrest 2016), child protective services (Fong 2020; Smith 2024), and hospitals (Lara-Millán 2014). Over the past half century, an increasing share of poverty governance work has been delegated to private sector actors (Dunning 2022; Marwell 2004; McQuarrie 2013). Scholars have argued that the mediation of poverty governance through non-state actors subjects the delivery of social services to intensified market logics, turning citizens into consumers and rights into commodities (McCabe 2023; Morgan and Campbell 2011; Parker 2024; Seim 2017).

Over the same period, another type of privatization has increased the distance between citizens and their governments, especially in metropolitan areas: the proliferation of “private governments” that operate underneath or parallel to municipal authorities (McKenzie 1996; Morçöl and Zimmermann 2006; Tao and McCabe 2012). Scholarly discussions regarding the rise of private government have generally framed this phenomenon as secession-in-place by status-privileged groups. In other words, private government (e.g., homeowner associations, business improvement districts) create urban districts with the more specialized, intensive, and responsive governance that affluent residents would usually only be able to access in elite suburban municipalities (Baer 2008). We know less, however, about how this mode of state delegation impacts the management of urban poverty.

How is poverty governance impacted when the state delegates *both* the responsibility to provide social services *and* the very powers of government? What are the consequences of this dual delegation for the governed? I examine this question using the case of Milwaukee’s Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs), which I theorize as a form of neighborhood “municipalization.” On their face, NIDs are neighborhood-level property tax authorities, initiated and managed by the owners and occupants of residential property. However, I argue that Milwaukee’s NIDs operate as a novel form of poverty governance that imbue private actors with

governmental power over poor *places* and their populations. I show how community-based organizations (CBOs) have used NIDs to replace other forms of insecure and labor-intensive funding. The use of NIDs to sustain delegated social service provision does more than just stabilize funding: it shifts the subject of poverty governance from individuals to places and expands a core domain of *public* government—taxation—into the private sphere. This model also gives rise to a new set of competing imperatives for CBOs: to empower community members as leaders, and secure stable funding through NID revenue.

Next, I discuss several implications of this model for its subjects. First, I draw on labor theories of poverty governance to show how NIDs involve residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods in their own governance through a logic of “sweat equity.” In so doing, residents are also empowered to monitor and evaluate the activities and behaviors of program recipients, diffusing the standard surveillance imperative of poverty governance among neighbors. Second, I show how NIDs drive the differentiation of neighborhood stakeholders into a hierarchy of citizen classes—homeowners, investors, and renters—and foster the creation of a calculus that determines a citizen’s rights according to their financial and moral contribution to the neighborhood.

DELEGATING THE PROVISION OF SOCIAL SERVICES

A wealth of scholarship has examined how the delegated welfare state—the model of governance in which states delegate the provision of social services to private actors—shapes how poor people are managed, controlled, and surveilled. While private associations have long played an outsized role in administering services for economically disadvantaged groups in the United States (Clemens 2020; Simmons 2020), the nature of the relationship between private organizations and public authorities was transformed in the post-WWII era (Dunning 2022;

Smith and Lipsky 1995). Under a system of privatized social service delivery, citizens become customers and are subjected to market logics in myriad ways (Morgan and Campbell 2011). For one, the deservingness of applicants is adjudicated along metrics of “market readiness”—or how closely behaviors and values align with those of the private market. In the realm of low-income rental housing, the shift from direct state provision to a system mediated by private landlords (e.g., the Housing Choice Voucher program) leads private actors train their tenants how to behave as model market consumers (Rosen and Garboden 2020). Even the public agencies that oversee voucher programs participate in this effort by selecting applicants who demonstrate higher capacity for market performance (McCabe 2023). A delegated system also subjects the poor to the labor pressures experienced by workers employed by both non-profit and for-profit service providers (Seim 2017).

Monitoring and surveillance are core components of poverty governance. Even in arenas of poverty governance that are still largely performed directly by the state, adjacent systems and actors are recruited into performing surveillance tasks (Fong 2020). For example, Fong shows how Child Protective Services relies on a host of actors—teachers, neighbors, medical professionals—to help government workers see far into the private reaches of domestic life, rendering poor families hyper-visible to the state. This experience of hyper-visibility can engender institutional distrust amongst targeted families, who contrive protective strategies to limit exposure to institutional environments they deem unsafe (Smith 2024). In delegated realms of poverty governance, this diffusion can extend even further into private life. For example, the private cash bail industry offloads financial risk by recruiting close family and friends as cosigners of bail bonds (Deckard 2024). This arrangement transforms cosigners into

“instruments of surveillance” and, in the process, also subjects them to increased surveillance themselves.

Beyond adjudicating deservingness through metrics of market performance and diffusing the surveillance to an array of private actors, the delegation of social service delivery reshapes how program participants conceive of services. While the presence of private intermediaries potentially decreases the stigma associated with public assistance, the reduced visibility of the state’s involvement may also disempower users from fully understanding or claiming their rights (Parker 2024). Furthermore, the delegated model reshapes the market as well. For example, the guarantee of voucher funding incentivizes landlords to funnel the most disempowered applicants into the least desirable (and hardest to rent) units, thus bolstering a substandard market and reproducing segregation (Rosen 2014). The delegated model also incentivizes non-profit partners to conform to “business-like” practices (e.g., prioritizing efficiency over mission, or prioritizing quantifiable metrics over tailored attention to recipient need) or reconfigure their organization and activities to best compete for government contracts and grants (Smith and Lipsky 1995).

The mechanisms of contracting and grant-making put private organizations at the forefront of publicly funded social service delivery (Marwell 2004), often under the logic that locally-embedded actors are better attuned to the needs of communities (Defilippis, Fisher and Shragge 2006; Levine 2016). However, while assumed to represent the “interests of the community,” the organizations are often dominated by elite interests (Robinson 2020) and may be more strongly beholden to the priorities of funders than to those of residents (Levine 2021). Grant-making and contracting also put these organizations in direct competition with each other and mean that neighborhoods with higher organizational capacity are better positioned to secure and maintain funding. Residents’ ability to meaningfully respond to policies are also limited

when governing is channeled through private actors since they are not subject to the same democratic controls as elected officials (Levine 2016).

DELEGATING THE POWER OF GOVERNMENT

In a parallel transformation, local governments increasingly delegate governing responsibility to private authorities. The sharp rise in the presence of “private governments”—such as homeowner associations (HOAs) and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs)—have come to fill the gaps left by shrinking municipal capacity. But private governments also contribute to the “hollowing out” of local governments and promote the fragmentation of the urban social fabric by allowing segments of the city to withdraw from participation in collective civic life (Milward and Provan 2000; Tao and McCabe 2012). For example, homeowner associations (HOAs) reduce residents’ sense of responsibility for city as a whole and HOA residents display a reluctance to pay municipal taxes for services that their HOA fees already provide (McKenzie 1996). In the case of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), some scholars downplay their quasi-governmental nature, preferring to see them as a public policy tool that foments urban revitalization (Justice and Goldsmith 2008). However, most scholars acknowledge that they have many characteristics that give them a governmental quality: they have a defined territory, levy taxes on members of that territory, set budgets for spending this tax revenue, and provide many of the same services expected of municipal governments.

While their name varies across states, BIDs are generally understood as quasi-public taxing authorities that levy special assessments in commercial districts and use those funds for marketing, security, landscaping, and other services to make the district more attractive to consumers. Initially, BIDs sprung up in struggling central business districts (e.g., Times Square in New York, Center City in Philadelphia) to fill the vacuum of state fiscal capacity—funding

basic maintenance, beautification, and security in an attempt to entice shoppers and tourists back to the city—and to revive property values (Steel and Symes 2005; Unger 2016). In the decades since, BIDs have become a ubiquitous feature of U.S. cities: as of 2010 there were an estimated 1,000 BIDs in the country (Morçöl and Karagoz 2020).

The improvement district model allows states to overcome the tension between demands from privileged constituents for greater control of the poor and increasing need for social services among the disadvantaged, on the one hand, and resistance to public financing of these programs, on the other (Robinson, Headworth and Karp 2024). Improvement districts put constituents in control if—and on the hook for—governing and financing desired programs and services, with the state involved only insofar as it responds to and supports constituent decisions. Some argue that these “nested governments” are better able to respond to the needs of a more localized community, giving residents and property owners an alternative to “voting with their feet” and leaving the city when they feel public services are failing to meet their needs or expectations (Baer 2008). Other scholars see BIDs as forces that erode state power, producing balkanized governments that further partition cities by race and income, and generate unequal tiers of citizenship based on metrics like property value and tax contributions (Schaller and Modan 2005). Notably, these interpretations of BIDs as private governments are not mutually exclusive.

Rarely, however, are these twin forms of delegated governance—that of welfare provision and governing power—discussed as intertwined expressions of state transformation. This is, perhaps, because they are largely seen as catering to and impacting distinct segments of the population: the delegated welfare state shapes how poor people are governed, while the increasing scope of private government transforms how status-privileged constituencies

experience the state. In this chapter, I show how these two forms of state delegation layer to create novel strategies for the management of urban poverty. Specifically, when combined, this new model of poverty governance transforms the subjects of poverty governance from poor *individuals* or *households* to poor *places* (see Figure 1). In Milwaukee, this double delegation reaches poor neighborhoods in the form of Neighborhood Improvement Districts that have—as I will show—been organized largely around the institution of homeownership.

INDEPENDENT AND INVESTED: CITIZENSHIP IN THE OWNERSHIP SOCIETY

Homeownership has long been tied up with understandings of citizenship in the United States. Until the mid-1800s, property ownership⁶⁷ was a requirement for voting in most of the United States (Einstein and Palmer 2021). First, property ownership was understood as a requisite for true independence (Keyssar 2000). As John Adams explained, “Few men, who have no property, have any judgment of their own. They talk and vote as they are directed by some man of property, who has attached their minds to his interest.”⁶⁸ Giving dependent men—made dependent by virtue of poverty or their lack of property—the privilege to vote was risky as dependent men were more liable to fall under the control of demagogues. Second, landowners were understood as having a greater personal stake in the society (Keyssar 2000). Landownership made an individual more attached to a community, but also afforded him a greater *right* in deciding that community’s laws—especially with regards to taxation—because landowners were understood as more directly affected by them. Just as women were deemed best

⁶⁷ In some states, a specified monetary amount of personal property was acceptable; in others, real property was required.

⁶⁸ John Adams, “John Adams Explains Why People Without Property Should Not Be Able to Vote,” *SHEC: Resources for Teachers*, accessed July 10, 2024, <https://shec.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1645>.

represented by the men on which they depended, the interests of the property-less were best safeguarded when left in the hands of landowners. Even today, the property-less are largely represented by property owners (Einstein, Ornstein and Palmer 2023).

Eventually, the status of wage earner was revised to represent a sort of property ownership over one's own labor and skills, lending a state of independence to a new class of white working class men (Glenn 2004; Roediger 2007). As Glenn (2004) notes, once all white men were reconfigured as *potential* owners and entrepreneurs, the status of dependence became inscribed as a gendered and racialized condition. Indeed, even low wage work came to be seen as a liberating experience and a pathway to independence for the poor (Collins and Mayer 2010). Yet, as Collins and Mayer argue, while work and welfare are often conceived as opposite conditions—the first associated with moral virtuosity and the second with moral failing—they co-exist in the lives of the poor. When single mothers struggle to maintain employment in the absence of basic workplace benefits and protections, they turn to public assistance to fill those gaps (Collins and Mayer 2010). Today, welfare programs *constitute* the low-wage labor market.

In a similar way, tenancy and homeownership are also gendered and racialized conditions, imagined as occupying opposite and morally charged poles (McCabe 2018). Homeownership—like working—operates as a marker of economic success (or unearned economic privilege, as the case may be), but is also imagined as a pathway for exiting poverty and obtaining independence. President George W. Bush echoed the ideas espoused centuries earlier when he advocated for strengthening the country as an “ownership society”: “...if you own something, you have a vital stake in the future of our country. The more ownership there is

in America, the more vitality there is in America, and the more people have a vital stake in the future of this country.”⁶⁹ In this view, homeownership makes people better citizens.

However, like employment in the low-wage labor market, homeownership is unsustainable for vulnerable families without the aid of a robust social safety net. For non-white households—especially Black women—homeownership has rarely delivered the benefits and freedoms that it confers to white households because it was not designed to do so (Hauptert 2019; Taylor 2019).

On one cold Saturday morning in November, I accompanied staff from a community organization to survey residents in the Sherman Park NID. The goal was to understand the housing needs of residents living in homes that had been previously identified as needing two or more major exterior repairs. We knocked at the door of a 1920s bungalow with a sagging front porch and a visibly old roof. A Black woman in a pink and white striped bathrobe answered. She appeared to be in her 60s. I later reflected on the interaction in my fieldnotes:

At first, the woman seems suspicious of us and talks to us through a wrought iron security door with a plastic screen, so her voice is muffled. Ruth [organization staff] introduces herself and offers the woman a packet of resources for homeowners. The woman unlocks the screen door to take the packet, but I notice she locks it again as we continue to talk. She’s a homeowner and indicates that she lives in the house with her elderly mother who has mobility issues. She tells us that her roof leaks, that most of her doors and windows are drafty, and that an undetected toilet leak left her bathroom floor with significant water damage and mold. She mentions that sometimes she has mice: “You know how they [perhaps her children or nephews?] leave the door open and then the mice come in.” Ruth responds, shaking her head: “Yeah, they’ll come right in.” I wonder if providing us with this detail is a way for the woman to acknowledge a mouse infestation while deflecting the possibility that the cause is uncleanliness. I have noticed that I feel uncomfortable asking people this question from the questionnaire—it seems to carry a moral judgement.

⁶⁹ George W. Bush, quoted on June 17, 2004. “Fact Sheet: America’s Ownership Society: Expanding Opportunities,” *Office of the Press Secretary*, August 9, 2004. Access on July 19, 2024, at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040809-9.html>.

The woman tells us that she really needs help with her roof, her water-damaged bathroom, and mobility accommodations for her mother. As we talk, I notice that several of the windows in the front of the house are cracked and have softball-sized holes in them. The woman says she really struggles with getting her mother's wheelchair up the steps into the house, so Ruth speaks at length about options for installing a ramp or lift. In fact, the woman tells us that her nephew recently injured himself helping with the wheelchair during the unexpected October snow. He wasn't wearing appropriate shoes, she says shaking her head and chuckling. The woman adds that she foresees needing mobility accommodations for herself in the not-so-distant future. Ruth asks whether she has any trouble making her payments. The woman acknowledges that she's "a bit behind" on her property tax payments, so Ruth tells her that she may be able to get some assistance from the city ("leftover COVID money") to help get her caught up with her bills. It's clear to me that this woman is really struggling.

My fieldnotes from the days that I accompanied organization staff to conduct housing surveys or home visits are filled with similar stories. Over the course of my fieldwork, I would talk to homeowners worried about losing their homes due to unresolved code violations, a consequence of their inability to afford both routine maintenance and their mortgage/property tax payments. Some were elderly and had lived in their homes for decades. Others were single working mothers who had recently bought houses already burdened by decades of deferred maintenance. Some homes had previously been owned by absentee landlords, who had applied shoddy "fixes" to problems, such as boarding over broken windows rather than replacing them or using scrap wood to resize an original door frame to a smaller, standard size door. The housing stock in these neighborhoods was old, with most built between the 1890s and the 1930s.

These stories contrast sharply with the image of homeownership as vehicle for independence and a pathway out of poverty. Yet, this image—homeownership as the surest motor for upward mobility—was repeatedly on display at neighborhood organization events. At these events, organization staff would announce the number of families that they had helped become homeowners in the previous month and the room would erupt in applause. This contrast—the image of homeownership painted at these events and the experiences of homeownership I observed while accompanying those same organization staff out in the neighborhood—was

jarring. As I will show, Milwaukee's Neighborhood Improvement Districts are built around these contrasting images of homeownership: they embody moralized understandings of homeownership in the United States, while recognize that homeownership for vulnerable families does not work as a pathway for prosperity and freedom without social supports.

CASE AND BACKGROUND

Fiscal Crisis and Neighborhood Disinvestment in Milwaukee

The post-war period was one of profound change for cities in the United States, and Milwaukee was no exception. Federal programs promoted entry into homeownership for middle class white families, and the expansion of freeways made suburban life attractive and logistically feasible (Jackson 1985). In Milwaukee, the city's attempt to annex suburban townships in the 1950s provoked a fierce and coordinated opposition by suburban residents who were motivated by racist concerns about property value and anti-redistributive sentiments. This conflict resulted in the preemptive incorporation of ring of suburban municipalities—thus foreclosing the possibility of Milwaukee's further expansion—that used tools like zoning and restrictive covenants to construct fortified, white communities (Freund 2007; McCarthy 2009; Rast 2007).

Beginning in the mid-1960s, real estate agents in Milwaukee targeted middle-class white neighborhoods in central cities for blockbusting, facilitating the out-movement of white families to the newly fortified suburbs and the arrival of Black families into those homes under predatory terms (Bonds 2019; Taylor 2019). As white residents moved out of the city and into the suburbs, property values—which are inherently racialized (Besbris and Korver-Glenn 2022; Freund 2007; Zaimi 2020)—followed. Deindustrialization further contributed to the shrinking of Milwaukee's tax base and the city struggled to fund basic services. Like many U.S. cities, Milwaukee entered

a period of fiscal crisis at a time when Reagan-era economic policy reduced federal spending on urban programs.

By the 1990s, many of Milwaukee's majority Black neighborhoods had fallen into physical disrepair as homeowners struggled to access financing to maintain their homes, many of which were built around the turn of the twentieth century. The increasing number of landlord-owned homes also disintegrated as a result of disinvestment, given that profits in depressed markets are derived not from materially improving and reselling homes, but by extracting rents. In the aftermath of the 2008 recession, foreclosure rates in these neighborhoods rose, with many blocks in NID areas experiencing cumulative foreclosure rates of over 32% for the period between 2007 and 2016 (Johnson 2023).

The Improvement District Model in Milwaukee

Since the 1980s, Milwaukee has aggressively pursued BIDs as a strategy to promote reinvestment and property value appreciation. Today, Milwaukee far outstrips all other U.S. cities in the number BIDs per capita (Public Policy Forum 2017). In 2006, Milwaukee expanded the BID model by empowering *residential* property owners to design and oversee Neighborhood Improvement Districts (NIDs) (Wisconsin Statutes, section 66.1110).⁷⁰ Like BIDs, NIDs are quasi-governmental special assessment districts. Unlike BIDs, however, NIDs can assess *both* residential and commercial property, giving them broader power than BIDs. In their original formulation under the 2006 law, NIDs could only assess residential properties of at least 8 units. However, a subsequent amendment to the law was passed in 2010 that removed this limit for

⁷⁰ Available at <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/66.pdf#page=175>

NIDs in “first class cities”, allowing all single- and multi-family residential properties to be assessed within a NID. Milwaukee is the only city in Wisconsin currently classified as “first class” and, thus, the only municipality in the state where single-family homes, duplexes, and other small rental properties can be assessed by a NID.

To begin the process of creating a NID, property owners communicate their intent with Milwaukee’s Department of City Development (DCD), including a proposal for the district’s boundaries. Notably, the process of starting could be (and has been) started by a single property owner. Based on these boundaries, DCD then generates a list of properties that would be subject to the proposed NID. This property list allows organizers to generate an estimate of the annual revenue that would be generated by the NID, depending on the method of assessment that the organizers intend to apply. Organizers then draft a proposed operating plan, which outlines how the NID will spend its revenue. Often, organizers will gather input from neighborhood stakeholders through community meetings, though this step is not formally required. Once the proposed operating plan is finalized, NID organizers must send a copy of the plan to all property owners within the district by certified mail and notify them of two public hearings where they can voice their support or opposition to the proposal.

The first public hearing is held by the City Plan Commission, a committee of individuals appointed to serve on the commission by the mayor. Typically, NID organizers will present an overview of their proposal for the NID, including a rationale, evidence of community support, and a summary of their proposed activities. Members of the commission may ask questions and then open the floor to testimony by members of the public. If, based on the discussion, the City Plan Commission recommends the NID for approval, it then goes to the second public hearing. The second hearing is held before the Community and Economic Development Committee of the

Common Council, which is comprised of several of the City's 15 elected Council Members. The dynamic of the second committee is much the same as the first. If the Community and Economic Development Committee votes to recommend approval, the proposed NID goes to a full vote before the Common Council. For all existing NIDs, the Common Council has affirmed the decisions of the City Plan Commission and the Community and Economic Development Committee without additional discussion. Thus, in practice, the decision-making power lies with these two governmental bodies.

Once a NID is established, the additional property assessment that will be collected by the NID is added to the property tax bill of all properties within the district. The method of assessment (i.e. how much the NID will tax) is determined by the NID organizers and described in the approved operating plan. These NID assessments are collected by the city and then disbursed back to the NID's board, which is determined through a required annual election. Anyone who owns or occupies property within the NID is eligible to nominate themselves for the board and to vote in the election. At a minimum, NIDs are required to meet once per year at their annual election and they must notify property owners of the election through an official mailing. However, most NIDs—and all of the NIDs examined in this chapter—hold quarterly or monthly NID board meetings, which are open to the public by law. As quasi-governmental entities, NIDs are subject to state public notice requirements and open records laws, and NID board members must take an oath of public office.

The state statute offers few details directing or limiting the type of activities in which NIDs may engage. In a letter supporting the passage of the 2010 law allowing NIDs to assess single-family and small multi-family properties, State Representative Jon Richards explained that the purpose of NIDs is to “provide extra amenities or services to a neighborhood that may

improve its appearance, livability, or safety.”⁷¹ He added, “Basically anything that serves a clear public purpose and that meets with the approval of the NID board and the home municipality would be a permissible use of NID funds.”

While the power of local governments to create NIDs is not restricted to Milwaukee, it appears that only the City of Milwaukee has established them.⁷² This is likely because *all* property types (e.g., single-family homes, duplexes, triplexes, commercial) are assessable by NIDs in Milwaukee. This is not true in any other municipality in the state, where only large-scale residential property and commercial property are assessable. In that sense, the geographic concentration of NIDs in Milwaukee is by design, not by accident. Today, Milwaukee is home to 10 active NIDs, formed between 2009 and 2023 (see Figure 2 for a map). Three other NIDs met resident opposition--two were prevented from forming and the other was disbanded shortly after formation. At of the time of writing, two additional NIDs are in the process of formation.

City staff informally classify NIDs into three distinct “personalities,” as one city employee explained to me.⁷³ Beginning in 2021, the Department of City Development began publishing an annual report on the status and trends of BIDs and NIDs in the city and these reports classify NIDs according to these types: “Mixed Use” (1 NID) “Community Focused Residential” (6 NIDs), and “Homeowner Associations” (3 NIDs).

⁷¹ Testimony of Representative Jon Richards in reference to Assembly Bill 165 during the Public Hearing of the Senate Committee on Labor, Elections and Urban Affairs, September 2, 2009.

⁷² Since the state law empowers *local legislative bodies* with the ability to approve NIDs, an exhaustive search would require review of 585 municipalities (villages and cities) and 1,265 towns in Wisconsin. While I have not conducted such a search, I have only found evidence of organizing efforts around creation of NIDs in the cities of Madison and Green Bay. As of writing, those efforts have not resulted in the actual creation of NIDs in those places.

⁷³ Interview 2 (June 15, 2021).

The city's first NID, created in 2009 in the Brewery District, is the only NID classified by city staff as "Mixed Use." It is comprised exclusively of large, luxury apartment buildings and restaurants. Functionally, it is similar to a BID. The three NIDs that fall into the category of "Homeowner Associations" were established to fund existing HOAs. The line separating these NIDs and their respective HOAs is quite blurry, since they often consist of the same board members and combine their meetings. In fact, one neighborhood leader admitted that most residents probably do not distinguish between the two entities in his neighborhood.⁷⁴ All three are located in newer, wealthier subdivisions on Milwaukee's far northwest side and comprise fewer than 220 properties. They were formed to automate the collection of HOA dues because of the need to maintain and common property in the subdivision, such as the storm water management systems which need to be recertified every five years.⁷⁵

The remaining six NIDs fall under the category of "Community Focused Residential." These NIDs range in size from a few hundred properties to over 2,000 properties. They are all located in low-income neighborhoods where a majority of residents are Black (68-92%), a majority are renters (71-80%) (see Table 2), and most of the housing stock is either single-family homes or duplexes. All of these NIDs were initiated by existing community-based organizations (CBOs) in the neighborhoods, though not all CBOs have maintained the same level of involvement after the NIDs were established. They all designate some or most of their revenue to support home repair grants. Some sponsor additional activities related to resident engagement

⁷⁴ Conversation with a board member of NID 10 (February 12, 2014).

⁷⁵ Interview 1 (June 15, 2021) and Interview 9 (November 15, 2023).

and neighborhood safety. The remainder of this paper will focus only on these NIDs, as they sit at the nexus of the state's delegation of both its social services and its governing power.

DATA AND METHODS

I use the case of Milwaukee's Neighborhood Improvement Districts to examine how the dual delegation of both state responsibility and state power modifies how poor places and their populations are governed. The data used in this paper are drawn from a larger study on NIDs in Milwaukee, although this paper is concerned with only a subset of the city's NIDs: those classified by city staff as "Community Focused Residential," which are all located in neighborhoods with substantial social need.

I conceive of this subset of NIDs as a "case" rather than approach each NID as its own case. There are important relationships among this subset of NIDs and their corresponding CBOs. For example, in the formation process, NID organizers will often consult either informally or formally with individuals from existing NIDs for assistance. This means that the structures and activities of NIDs are similar where this collaboration has taken place. Some of the of NIDs are also connected to each other through membership in broader coalitions of neighborhood organizations in Milwaukee. Among the subset of NIDs considered in this paper, the CBOs connected to the Washington Park, Sherman Park, Harambee, and Lindsay Heights NIDs are members of a city-wide coalition of CBOs organizing to improve housing conditions. These NIDs have closer ongoing relationships because the CBOs and individuals involved in them participate in the same coalition meetings and activities, and thus adopt shared frames and language for understanding and articulating neighborhood issues (Martin 2003; Small 2002).

Additionally, elected officials and city staff play a role in promoting and diffusing information about NIDs. For example, in multiple cases, I found that the idea to create a NID

was first proffered by district representatives on Milwaukee’s Common Council.⁷⁶ Council members suggested the NID to their constituents as a tool to structure and fund community initiatives. Some Council members have become enthusiastic supporters of NIDs, encouraging neighborhoods in their districts to form them. One Council Member told me that they wished there were a NID in every neighborhood in their district.⁷⁷ Three of the “Community Focused Residential” NIDs are located in this Council Member’s district. Finally, staff at the Department of City Planning hosts an annual NID council meeting, which gives NID organizers the chance to share their efforts with other NIDs. What this means for research design is that NIDs cannot be understood as fully independent cases in analysis. Accordingly, I consider the linkages *between* NIDs in my analysis to offer a more robust understanding of NIDs as mode of poverty governance and privatization.

I use a variety of data sources in my analysis, including interviews, participant- and non-participant observation, policy documents, and historical records. I conducted 50 formal interviews with people occupying different—and often multiple—positions with respect to the neighborhoods and their respective NIDs: current and former NID board members, homeowners, tenants, landlords, staff of community organizations, and city officials. Most participants were recruited during meetings that I attended or via email. I focused on recruiting members of NID boards, staff at the CBOs that administer NIDs, and residents that I met via their attendance of NID and community events. The resulting sample is fairly evenly balanced between men and

⁷⁶ Each of Milwaukee’s 15 Aldermanic Districts elects a representative to serve on the city’s Common Council. These representatives are sometimes referred to as *Aldermen* or *Alderwomen*, but I will use the gender-neutral term *Council Member*.

⁷⁷ Conversation with the Council Member at a neighborhood event on December 11, 2023.

women, as well as between Black and white respondents (See Table 1). Most participants live within a NID (84%) and, of those, a majority own their homes (74%). About a quarter of participants own investment property in a NID, regardless of whether they resided within the NID and independent of their relationship to the NID. Slightly over half (56%) are current or former members of a NID board, and handful (10%) are staff at CBOs involved in managing a NID. As mentioned previously, some interviewees occupied multiple positions in relation to the NIDs (e.g., a NID resident who used to sit on a NID board and now works at a CBO managing a NID; or a resident of one NID who owns a duplex in another; or a CBO staff person that owns multiple rental properties in the NID).

Interviews followed a loosely structured format, generally beginning with each participant's personal history; their relationship to the neighborhood, including where they have lived and their experience as renters, homeowners, or investor-owners; and their views on the neighborhood's strengths and challenges. Next, I asked participants to describe their involvement with the NID and the relevant CBO, and to reflect on their understanding of the NID's purpose, successes, challenges, and future promise. Participants were offered a \$20 payment at the conclusion of the interview if they 1) resided in the NID and 2) they were not full-time employees whose jobs related to NIDs (e.g., payment was not offered to staff at CBOs managing NIDs, nor to city employees whose jobs were related to NID management). On average, interviews lasted 1.5 hours (ranging from 28 minutes to 3.5 hours). Most interviews (60%) were conducted in-person at a location of the participant's choosing (often a coffee shop or their home), but some requested to conduct the interview by Zoom (28%) or phone (12%).

I conducted 9 months of ethnographic data collection in Milwaukee and continued to attend meetings virtually (when possible) for two additional months. Over this time, I attended or

participated in 101 meetings and events (representing over 180 observation hours), including NID board meetings (n=34), NID-related events (n=17), NID annual meetings/elections (N=4), meetings with CBO staff (n=5), and neighborhood activities, such as door-to-door canvassing, home inspections, and neighborhood clean-ups (n=41). Participant observation gave me frequent opportunities to informally interview residents, NID board members, organization staff, and city officials. I took field jottings and audio memos during and after these events, which I then turned into detailed field notes.

An additional source of observational data are video recordings of the public hearings required in the NID-creation process and on an annual basis for reapproval. The city makes video recordings of all official proceedings (from 2012 onwards) available on their website. In total, I reviewed and transcribed videos of 51 NID-related hearings hosted by Milwaukee's City Plan Commission and Community and Economic Development Committee since 2012. In total, these hearings amount to nearly 18 hours of discussion, which includes presentations from NID organizers, questions by city officials, and testimony by members of the public, both in favor and against the formation of specific NIDs.

I also reviewed the initial proposal materials and subsequent annual operating plans and reports for each of the NIDs. These documents include public comments (for and against) regarding the formation of specific NIDs, initial operating plans, and presentation slides created by NID organizers and used during public hearings. I also collected NID-produced materials during my time in the field, including NID meeting minutes, informational fliers, materials produced for the NID annual elections, and applications produced by NIDs for the programs and resources they offer.

Finally, I consulted multiple collections held at the Milwaukee Public Library and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee that contain documents from community groups and neighborhood associations, and records from government offices related housing issues.⁷⁸ In total, I scanned over 12,000 pages of records that I deemed relevant. These records, which generally span from the 1960s through the early 2000s, allow me to situate NIDs in the broader city and neighborhood contexts of resident organizing and housing policy. In the case of the Sherman Park neighborhood, these records included interviews, conducted in the mid-1990s, with 30 resident leaders and founders of the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA). Interviewers asked many of the same questions that I asked in my own interviews, covering the participants' relationship to the neighborhood, views on neighborhood challenges and strengths, and activities and programs of the SPCA.

BEYOND WELFARE DELEGATION: WHEN PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS HARNESS PUBLIC POWER

In this section, I examine the subset of “community-focused residential” NIDs as a case in which two forms of state delegation operate in concert: the outsourcing of social services and poverty governance, and the empowerment of private governments. First, I show how private CBOs turned to NIDs as a strategy to stabilize funding for neighborhood social services when other funding sources became harder to secure. NIDs are an attractive alternative mechanism for funding these activities precisely because they provide CBOs with a reliable stream of revenue by affording them a power normally reserved for public government authorities: universal

⁷⁸ I use abbreviations for each archive collection referenced. See Appendix 1 for a list of collections and their locations.

taxation within a defined territory. In line with scholarship that finds the delegated welfare state also transforms the structures and activities of civic organizations (Smith and Lipsky 1995), I find that CBOs can become operationally dependent on NIDs, raising ethical and practical quandaries for CBO staff, NID board members, and community residents.

A New Model for Financing the Provision of Social Services in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods

The legislation allowing for Neighborhood Improvement Districts, which passed in 2006, was not originally imagined as a tool for social service provision. Rather, it was pushed by a powerful real estate developer who had long been a leader in the city's largest Business Improvement District in downtown Milwaukee. A former employee of the development company explained how the shift from the business association model to the BID model had been a watershed moment for Milwaukee's downtown, ushering in an era of renaissance: "The [Downtown] Association saw it as a very stable funding source versus having to go, you know, to get people to renew dues every year or hold a fundraiser."⁷⁹ As the developer embarked on major redevelopment project in the early 2000s to turn the abandoned Pabst Brewery into a destination district for nightlife and luxury living called The Brewery District, they knew that they wanted to establish an improvement district even before ground had been broken on the development. The plans for the development included state of the art storm water management systems and other amenities that the city supported, but for which they were reluctant to guarantee long-term maintenance funding. The creation of an improvement district would guarantee a revenue stream to fund infrastructural maintenance and other services, such as public safety. Referencing

⁷⁹ Interview 27 (March 27, 2024).

Milwaukee's Near North Side—which refers to the core of Milwaukee's historically Black neighborhoods—he explained:

[We knew] public safety would be an ongoing issue. It just *is* in urban areas. And we were... you know... not in an outpost, but—uh—we were in a spot where the city meets the Near North Side neighborhoods. The demographic disparity between those two neighborhoods [The Brewery District and the Near North Side] is dramatic. And so having some level of public safety presence was really import, and to augment what the Milwaukee Police Department would do in the normal course of business.

The problem, however, was that most of the property in the district was slated to be occupied by residential apartment buildings, which are exempt from assessment under BID legislation. “The thinking behind all this,” he continued, “is that those residential properties—ownership and residents—gain as much from these management district activities as anybody.” It was only fair, he explained, that residential properties contribute along with the commercial properties.

However, today, The Brewery NID is the *only* mixed-use NID. All subsequent successful NIDs have been located in residential neighborhoods and derive the vast majority of their revenue from assessments on single-family properties or duplexes. For the subset of NIDs examined in this chapter, their activities and aims are also strikingly different from The Brewery NID. Rather than “augment” public services—landscaping, park management, and policing—in an effort maintain the district as an oasis for the privileged, they provide an additional set of resources meant to complement existing social programs for residents of poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods. While The Brewery NID was organized by a real estate developer, these NIDs were organized by existing CBOs with longstanding ties in their communities. Like The Brewery, however, they were enticed by the stable revenue stream provided by annual NID assessments.

The first of these NIDs to form was in the Washington Park neighborhood on Milwaukee's west side, which was approved by the City in October 2012. Washington Park, like many of the neighborhoods on Milwaukee's west and north sides, is a majority Black neighborhood that has struggled against decades of disinvestment. A primary concern in the neighborhood is the deterioration of its housing stock, both because owner-occupants often lack the means to cover the cost of routine maintenance, and because the neighborhood has seen a steady rise in the number of properties owned by out-of-city or out-of-state corporations who defer maintenance costs to boost profits. Foreclosure, abandonment, and vacant lots have also become a critical problem, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 foreclosure crisis. In 2010, the area comprising the Washington Park NID had a vacancy rate of 22.0%, though it dropped to 14.7% by 2020 (see Table 2).

David, a homeowner in the neighborhood and staff member of a community organization involved in the creation of the NID, explained that the NID was an outgrowth of a community-based neighborhood planning initiative.⁸⁰ Specifically, a coalition of local organizations who called themselves the Washington Park Partners (WPP) had secured funding to create a "Quality of Life Plan" for the neighborhood based on resident-identified priorities. Among these priorities, two stood out: housing support for existing homeowners, and job development. However, David explained, while there was plenty of foundation support for creating these types of neighborhood plans, the WPP struggled to find suitable funding to oversee the plan's implementation.

And a big part of that Washington Park plan was supporting existing homeowners. And so we looked at the, you know, viable options. And we knew that home funds were deteriorating from the Federal government. CBDG [Community Development Block Grants] funds were going down. You know, public funds—just in general, because of larger state policy—were being

⁸⁰ Interview 25 (February 7, 2024)

choked out. So we needed to come up with a long term mechanism to provide funding for efforts to support existing homeowners.

David went on to explain that, because of his experience with a nearby BID, he was familiar with the concept of improvement districts. NIDs, however, were still new and largely untested. The Brewery was the only existing NID at the time and, in David's estimation, "was not really a NID." But David and his colleagues saw an opportunity: "What if we did a neighborhood improvement district that was truly, you know, a neighborhood-based improvement district?"

Thus, over the next two years, the WPP recruited residents to sit on a series of committees to assess the feasibility of a NID that would fund the implementation of the Quality of Life Plan. The steering committee formally adopted a plan to create a NID in July 2011. Subsequently, WPP conducted a series of informational meetings, outreach to neighborhood associations, and door-to-door canvassing to raise awareness and support for the proposed NID.⁸¹ An informational sheet answering Frequently Asked Questions about the NID was attached to the initial operating plan and mailed to every property owner in the proposed NID—a requirement in the NID legislation. The FAQ sheet highlights how the WPP understood and pitched the NID as way to fill the funding gap needed to provide the services required by the neighborhood plan priorities:

Although WPP has been able to recruit Community First and Habitat for Humanity to help low-income homeowners, the resources are limited and not everyone qualifies. To sustain the efforts of the WPP and to create jobs and a grant pool for homeowners, the WPP is proposing a Neighborhood Improvement District.

⁸¹ "Washington Park Neighborhood Improvement District – Year 1 Operating Documents," proposed operating plan submitted to the Common Council for approval. Available at <https://milwaukee.legistar.com/> under File #120603.

Following the establishment of the Washington Park NID, David went on to support the creation of another NID in the adjacent Sherman Park neighborhood. During the development of the Washington Park NID, staff at the Sherman Park Community Association (SPCA) became interested in the NID model and asked David to lend his expertise. The SPCA, established in 1971, is one of the longest standing neighborhood associations still in existence in Milwaukee. The association was formed by progressive residents—largely white homeowners—who wanted to build a stable, racially diverse neighborhood at a time when block-busting and white flight was rapidly changing neighborhood dynamics on Milwaukee’s west side.

While housing has always been at the core of the SPCA’s mission, the prevailing housing-related concerns have evolved over the years: from countering the racist tactics of realtors seeking to “scare” white residents into selling their homes in the 1970s, to managing the rise of absentee landlordism and emerging tensions between existing (white) homeowners and a growing (Black) tenant population in the 1980s and 1990s, to combatting the abandonment and the deterioration of housing stock by the 2000s.⁸² Throughout the decades, the SPCA has conducted an annual survey of exterior housing conditions in the neighborhood, which the SPCA continues today. They primarily use this data to identify “nuisance properties” and pressure owners—mostly landlords—to make necessary repairs. For decades, the SPCA has relied on Community Development Block Grants to supplement its membership dues model. Yet, as

⁸² Review of the substantial collection of SPCA records held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee’s Area Research Center. See *SPCA* and *SPCA/Oral History*.

CDBG funds dwindled alongside homeownership rates in the neighborhood, the SPCA has struggled to stay afloat and maintain a paid staff.⁸³

According to David, the process of creating a NID in Sherman Park was considerably more fraught than it had been in Washington Park:

You had a few people that were just very anti-tax, you know? And despite the \$50 [per year] going to their neighbors, they didn't want any more taxes. And these are liberal, progressive people. You can't live in this neighborhood being a, you know, no-tax conservative. But a little bit of that came out. So the Sherman Park [NID] was much harder to get done.

A former staff member of the SPCA recalled how the NID was started: Around 2013, in the wake of the housing crisis, he remembered, the Housing Committee of the SPCA realized “that homeowners needed some assistance in terms of keeping their homes up. At about that time, the whole NID concept came into being and we were—even though we were NID 4—there was only one other NID in the city, which was Washington Park.”⁸⁴ In fact, there were two existing NIDs—The Brewery and Washington Park—but I find that many “community-focused residential” NIDs discount the Brewery and, sometimes, the HOA NIDs. While the SPCA had long administered a “minor home repair” grant program with funds from CDBG, he recalled that this program was “dying out” by the time the NID discussions began. The SPCA no longer operates any home repair programs beyond assisting the Sherman Park NID administer its grant program.

The Havenwoods NID has a similar origin story. The Havenwoods Neighborhood Partnership (a community development organization in the neighborhood) proposed a NID to

⁸³ Remarks by the SPCA Executive Director at the 2024 Annual Meeting, held on January 25, 2024. See also, for example, interview with Greta Hansen, Box 1, Folder 8, *SPCA/Oral History*.

⁸⁴ Discussion from a special NID Board Meeting that was scheduled to provide current board members an overview of the NID’s history. May 13, 2024.

raise the funds necessary to continue a community organizer staff, whose funding was drying up. One of the main functions of the organizer was to organize Block Watch groups and seek solutions to residents' concerns, often functioning as a liaison between residents, the police, elected officials, and government offices. A staff member of the Havenwoods Neighborhood Partnership explained that the NID boundaries were drawn to mimic the boundaries of prior community investment initiatives.⁸⁵ Like the Sherman Park NID, the Havenwoods NID encompasses only a portion of the broader community area serviced by the CBO (e.g., SPCA, Havenwoods Neighborhood Partnership).

The Harambee NID is another that follows this general pattern. Unlike Washington Park, Sherman Park, and Havenwoods—where white flight and disinvestment began in or after the 1970s—Black families began settling in Harambee in the 1930s. By 1970, the area was an important center of Black Milwaukee and officially adopted the name “Harambee”, which means “pulling together” in Swahili. In 1971, using funding granted under Title I of the Higher Education Act of 1965, the University of Wisconsin Extension began efforts to create what would eventually become the Harambee Revitalization Project to promote the “comprehensive revitalization” of the area, including the community’s “physical, mental, economic, political, social and education health.”⁸⁶ The problem of “housing shortage and deterioration” was identified as one of the first problems to be tackled by the new organization.⁸⁷ In fact, housing-related needs were so prominent that a second organization—the Harambee Development

⁸⁵ Conversation at the Havenwoods Neighborhood Partnership office on January 17, 2024.

⁸⁶ “Revitalization Project for Milwaukee Central City Neighborhood. BY-LAWS.” December 17, 1971. Box 8, folder 11, *UWEX*.

⁸⁷ Memo related to the Harambee Revitalization Project’s “Pre-Planning Phase”, October 20, 1971. Box 8, folder 11, *UWEX*.

Corporation (HDC)—was eventually created as a spin-off by 1974 that would focus more specifically on housing and economic, leaving “social” issues (e.g., youth development, “political apathy”) to the Harambee Revitalization Project.⁸⁸ After the first major project—a partnership with the Wisconsin Housing Corporation to develop a 55-unit federal low-income housing project—stalled, the HDC decided to turn its attention to housing rehabilitation. In their assessment, the “current economic conditions make new construction in the inner city extremely difficult, if not impossible,” so the HDC decided to follow the hypothesis that “as the housing stock improves, the neighborhood will begin to stabilize thus paving the way for future commercial development.”⁸⁹

The HDC provided several resources and services to assist residents in repairing and maintaining their homes. A primary problem, they identified, was homeowners’ “inability to pay for repairs without some type of financing” and cited the need to allow homeowners to spread the payment over several months rather than as a lump sum. Given that many residents could not qualify for commercial financing, HDC developed a revolving no-interest loan fund, offering to finance up to \$150 (approximately \$850 in 2024 dollars; this amount was slowly increased over time) of the project’s costs. The focus of the program was primarily small projects, with HDC providing many project management services at no cost: assessing and triaging home repair needs; connecting homeowners to contractors or, in some cases, providing the labor directly at a heavily discounted rate; sourcing materials at bulk rate prices; and even providing tools and

⁸⁸ Untitled and undated document recounting the history of the organizations (c. 1975). See also the document titled “Neighborhood Improvement Through Housing Renovation,” undated (c. 1975). Box 2, folder 26, *UWEX*.

⁸⁹ Document titled “Neighborhood Improvement Through Housing Renovation,” undated (c. 1975). Box 2, folder 26, *UWEX*.

training to homeowners so they could perform work themselves. The HDC decided to concentrate these activities in a pilot area (approximately 20 square blocks) within the greater Harambee neighborhood, hoping that concentrated rehabilitation would be “more visible than it would be in a scattered site approach and will therefore encourage other residents to renovate their homes.”⁹⁰ The HDC received funding from a variety of public (state, county) and private (foundations, business) sources, partnering closely with a third community-based organization—the Harambee Ombudsman Project—which began in 1975 and was largely funded by the Ford Foundation. These efforts to stem disinvestment in Harambee’s housing stock—itsself understood as a critical first step in overall neighborhood revitalization—continued into the 1990s, but then dwindled and ceased altogether by 2010. In explaining the demise of these housing-focused CBOs, one longtime community organizer in Harambee explained: “Like a lot of these housing groups in Milwaukee, there’s so much need out here but there’s not a lot of resources.”⁹¹

In the meantime, the Riverworks Redevelopment Corporation (henceforth Riverworks) was created in 1992 to redevelop an industrial corridor on Harambee’s northeast side that had been left vacant after several large manufacturing businesses left. The non-profit organization’s goals were to rehabilitate the industrial land, attract new employers to the area, and revive what had previously been an important source of middle-class jobs for residents of the neighborhood. In 2002, Riverworks created and began administering the Riverworks Business Improvement District to advance those goals.

⁹⁰ “Harambee Development Corporate: Pilot Home Maintenance Project,” undated (c. 1975). Box 2, folder 26, *UWEX*.

⁹¹ Interview 48, May 14, 2024.

Around this time, Riverworks joined the Steering Committee for the Harambee Great Neighborhood Initiative (HGNI). HGNI was led by Habitat for Humanity in partnership with Milwaukee’s Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) and, later, several philanthropic foundations. Over roughly a decade (2005-2015), the HGNI produced dozens of new housing units for low-income families, though frictions between local residents and the largely non-local organizations, staff, and volunteers generated distrust and attenuated resident enthusiasm for the project (Bonds, Kenny and Wolfe 2015). In the final round of HGNI-related neighborhood Quality of Life Planning—led by Riverworks—home maintenance support for homeowners was again identified as a critical need. At this point (around 2015), leaders began discussing the prospect of a NID to fund the implementation of the Plan, after seeing other neighborhoods (e.g., Washington Park, Sherman Park) successfully create housing-focused NIDs.

After some staff turnover at HGNI due to “uncertain funding”, a lead organizer for the HGNI began, “really pushing the creation of the NID,” according to a Riverworks employee. The HGNI organizer also owned multiple rental properties in the neighborhood and served on the City Plan Commission when the Harambee NID came up for approval. When LISC pulled funding from the HGNI after a change in leadership, this lead organizer and an AmeriCorps volunteer on the project took staff positions with Riverworks. Ultimately, after a highly contentious public hearing at the City Plan Commission, the lead HGNI organizer (who was also a Riverworks employee) cast the tie-breaking vote that allowed the Harambee NID to continue to final approval.⁹² Thus, with the HGNI winding down and previous housing-related initiatives in

⁹² Video recording of the public hearing at the City Plan Commission on November 7, 2016 (available at <https://milwaukee.legistar.com/> under File #160894).

Harambee defunct, the NID filled an important vacuum for the persistent problem of housing repairs.

The final case that follows this general pattern is the recent attempt to form a NID in the Riverwest neighborhood, spearheaded by Riverworks. The Riverwest neighborhood is located immediately east of Harambee and is also served by the Riverworks organization. In many ways, the Riverwest and Harambee neighborhoods are socially and economically linked, in addition to (and perhaps because of) their geographic proximity. For example, the problem of rising property assessments in Harambee—a concern to many because longtime homeowners struggle to pay the increased property tax bills that follow—are often blamed on the neighborhood’s proximity to the more valuable properties in Riverwest. Two of members of the Harambee NID’s board live in Riverwest and serve on the Harambee NID board by virtue of their role as investor-owners in Harambee. I frequently heard Holton Street, which separates Harambee to the west and Riverwest to the east, referred to as “the Mason-Dixon line.” While it was never clear to me how residents understood the utility of this reference for describing the relationship between Harambee and Riverwest (i.e., which neighborhood was supposed to represent the confederacy and which the free states?), my guess is that the reference served to indicate the stark racial divide between the two neighborhoods. Harambee is a majority Black neighborhood while Riverwest is a majority white neighborhood, though Riverwest residents like to think about their neighborhood as racially diverse (Perry 2017).

Riverworks staff explained to me the reason why they decided to initiate a NID in Riverwest by invoking the neighborhood’s identity as a Do-It-Yourself and independent community (see Perry 2017). Liliana, a Riverworks staff organizer and Riverwest resident also

described it as a “stick-it-to-the-man” neighborhood. I heard Riverworks staff pitch the idea of a Riverwest NID at four community feedback sessions,⁹³ all using the same basic script:

People always come to us [Riverworks] and ask us about things that they want to do in the community, but I think they think... We're a non-profit. So we have to go find the money to do it. So we're constantly writing grants, or, you know... So we're also looking for money, obviously at a bigger scale. But we realized that there's a lot of small groups that really want to do projects, but there's not a lot—outside of community improvement project grants which you have to match—there's not a lot out there for the community to do things. [...] This is a response to people looking to do projects and not having the resources to do it.

Liliana explained to me that Riverwest used to have active neighborhood and business associations, but that after those went dormant, there was no corporate actors that could lead community projects. The NID envisioned by Riverworks would, unlike many other “community-focused residential” NIDs, assess both commercial and residential properties in the hopes that the NID would represent both. Most businesses in Riverwest, Liliana explained, were small businesses owned by residents so this “model makes sense for our neighborhood.” At one of the community meetings, residents began recollecting how difficult it was for the neighborhood association to do any of the projects they envisioned because it was so hard to generate revenue by “begging small businesses for money all the time.” In fact, one attendee remarked that many of the projects being discussed as potential activities of the NID were the types of projects the neighborhood association had always wanted—but not been able—to do.⁹⁴

However, the original idea that spurred Riverworks' interest in creating a NID came from the Council Member representing the Aldermanic District in which Riverwest is located.

⁹³ Public community meetings were held on: April 24, 2024; May 11, 2024; May 15, 2024; and July 2, 2024 (I did not attend this one, but a resident posted an audio recording of the meeting to Facebook after the fact).

⁹⁴ Community meeting organized by Riverworks to discuss the proposed Riverwest NID on May 11, 2024.

Privately, Liliana recounted to me how the Council Member had come to her about the creation of a BID on one of the main streets in Riverwest. Businesses were threatening not to hold a long-running summer festival on the street, due to frustrations over lack of support from the city. A BID, the Council Member had suggested, could raise the money to ensure the festival was held annually without issue. However, Liliana was doubtful that a BID would work: neither the street in question nor Riverwest in general had the commercial density that worked well for a BID. When she took the Council Member's suggestion to the Riverworks Executive Director, he suggested a NID instead. Liliana took the idea back to the Council Member, who approved. She recalled that the city staff at the Department of City Development (who manage the city's BIDs and NIDs) were excited about the prospect of the Riverwest NID.

In the presentations that Riverworks staff gave at the community meetings, they suggested example projects that the NID could support: murals, neighborhood musical bands, block parties, parklets. Previously, I had heard Riverworks staff refer to the proposed NID as an "Arts and Culture NID" and state that it would have a very different focus than the Harambee NID, which has been used exclusively for home repair. Before the Riverwest NID idea had been floated publicly, I attended another small community meeting where the NID was discussed, although not the focus of the meeting. During a discussion of rampant reckless driving and speeding in the neighborhood, I mentioned that the Garden Homes NID had covered the cost of installing speed humps—a cost usually born by property owners of the street where they were installed. By using NID funds, the costs were spread out across the whole neighborhood. But Liliana, who was facilitating the meeting, responded that such a scheme "would never work in Riverwest." She explained that people would be angry over collective funds benefiting only

small number of property owners. It worked in Garden Homes, she hypothesized, because the neighborhood was much smaller.

The first three Riverwest NID feedback sessions that I attended were modestly attended by between 10 to 20 residents. However, after the final session I attended at the end of May, discussion about the NID exploded on the neighborhood Facebook page. Post after post generated hundreds of comments, with the general tenor being skepticism or outright opposition. In response, Riverworks organized two additional feedback sessions.⁹⁵ At this point, Riverworks had already worked with city staff to schedule the first public hearing before the City Plan Commission and had sent a mailing to all property owners in the proposed NID boundary. At the contentious July 2 meeting, the overwhelming sentiment was opposed to the NID and, at the end of the meeting, Liliana announced her decision to halt the NID creation process and cancel the scheduled public hearing.

Reasons for opposition to the NID were varied, though a few themes stood out. The first was concern about increased housing costs for current residents and property owners (e.g., increased property tax assessments and increased rent costs). Another common concern was that the NID could be taken over by corporate landlords, who would wield outsized power over the NID by virtue of the large amount of neighborhood property value they represented. A final common concern was about the perceived non-democratic nature of the NID. Overwhelmingly, residents expressed that they felt the NID was being imposed on the neighborhood, against its wishes. Many residents saw the NID as a “power grab” by Riverworks, citing the large administrative fee that Riverworks intended to collect. Indeed, Riverworks staff had told

⁹⁵ I did not attend either but a resident posted an audio recording of the first meeting (July 2, 2024) on the neighborhood Facebook page.

attendees of the NID community feedback sessions that they expected Riverworks to collect an \$80,000 administration fee from the estimated annual NID budget of \$335,125, or just shy of a quarter of the annual revenue. When pressed by attendees on this topic, Riverworks staff clarified that, while the NID would require some entity to act as administrator (as most NIDs do), it was ultimately up to the NID board to decide which organization they would contract with. It need not be Riverworks.

Even those residents who supported the creation of the Riverwest NID recognized that the NID, in part, would function as a support for Riverworks. One resident explained his support of the NID: “We are a society that is supported by non-profits. Right? We’ve gutted our systems in this country so that they can’t properly support our communities. And when you look at the people who are running these non-profits, they are struggling. [...] So when I look at ways that I, as a resident of my community, can help support those people, I think that that’s a really positive thing and a way that I can contribute to my community, because I also don’t have time or the energy to do some of those things.”⁹⁶

While these five NIDs—Washington Park, Sherman Park, Havenwoods, Harambee, and Riverwest—highlight how “community-focused residential” NIDs are often initiated by CBOs to support the provision of social services in disadvantaged neighborhoods, two additional NIDs do not fit this pattern. The Garden Homes NID—the smallest of the “community-focused residential” NIDs—was spearheaded by a longtime resident and neighborhood organizer who envisioned that the NID would operate as a neighborhood “foundation.” In other words, the NID itself does not undertake projects, but rather they receive funding requests from other

⁹⁶ Community meeting about the proposed Riverwest NID, held on July 2, 2024.

neighborhood organizations for proposed projects. The Garden Homes Neighborhood Association runs the largest project that the NID funds: a rebate program for home repairs.

The Lindsay Heights NID, which is the most recently formed NID (2022), is another “community-focused residential” NID that does not conform to this general pattern described above. Like many of the other NIDs, the Lindsay Heights NID came out of a community planning initiative spearheaded by a neighborhood-based CBO, the Walnut Way Conservation Corporation (henceforth Walnut Way). Walnut Way organized a series of community-wide visioning sessions and ultimately helped establish the Lindsay Heights NID. However, from the beginning, Walnut Way was not interested in administering the NID or receiving any payments from it. Rather, the staff at Walnut Way envisioned the NID as a truly community-run NID that would operate as a fully separate entity from their organization. While Walnut Way serves as the NID’s fiscal agent, it receives only a 3% administrative fee and assumes no leadership role in the NID’s management. During my observation of the Lindsay Heights NID board meetings, Walnut Way staff were rarely present. When the executive director of Walnut Way attended, he sat in the audience section rather than at the board table and spoke only when invited by the board to provide updates on relevant matters.

Competing Imperatives: Organizational Resource or Resident Empowerment?

The adoption of NIDs by CBOs as a funding tool, however, has given rise to new challenges for CBOs. In particular, I highlight tensions that arise between some NID boards and the CBOs that manage them. NID boards sometime question whether the destination of NID funds to CBO staff salary is an ethical or appropriate use of “public money.” This questioning of CBO power often elicits defensive responses from CBO staff, who express proprietary feelings over NIDs. Defensive responses from CBO staff to assertions of NID autonomy reflect the

partial financial dependence of CBOs on NID revenue. Beyond financial considerations, CBO staff feels a sense of ownership over the NIDs because of the important role they have played in founding and running NIDs. For many CBOs, the administration of NIDs has become a core tenet of the CBO's mission. However, these feelings of propriety conflict with the stated mission of resident empowerment as well as with the legal autonomy of the NID.

I witnessed this type of questioning by the boards of the Sherman Park and Havenwoods NIDs on several occasions, usually in the form of questions about the administrative fees paid to their respective CBOs. In both cases, NID board members framed their questioning not as an attack on the CBO, but as a desire for transparency as to how the NID's revenue—which residents viewed as especially valuable by virtue of it being “public money”—was being spent. Specifically, NID board members requested documentation displaying the breakdown of the services that the CBO provided in return for the fee.

CBO staff responded to these requests defensively, arguing that it was difficult to entangle the CBO's non-NID costs from its NID-related expenses (e.g., staff time, equipment, supplies, internet service, phone service, heating, office space). Unable to adequately resolve these disputes, I witnessed multiple instances (across multiple NIDs) of staff offering that they could reduce or eliminate their fee if board members wished to perform administrative labor themselves. While NID boards sometimes entertained and discussed this idea, those conversations usually concluded with a decision to maintain the status quo.

I did not observe the same degree of questioning from the members of the Harambee NID board at official meetings. However, I did hear concerns about discrete responsibilities that the board felt that Riverworks—the manager of the NID—could improve. For example, the

organization of the Harambee NID's 2024 annual meeting and election⁹⁷ had disappointed some community members and NID board members. Only around 20 people attended the annual meeting, and some community members pointed out the low attendance and expressed frustration about the low visibility of the NID in the neighborhood. Additionally, the postcard announcing the annual meeting that Riverworks had sent to homes in the NID district advertised an online voting option with a QR code. However, many complained that the online ballot was not working. At the next NID board meeting following the annual meeting, board members gently scolded Riverworks for what they viewed as poor organization of the annual meeting.

Riverworks staff carefully balance how they portray their role with the Harambee NID, depending on the context. Speaking with me, some Riverworks staff highlight the independence of the NID creation and their organization. "This [the NID] isn't something that we [Riverworks] created. It actually came out of the Neighborhood Initiative [HGNI]. We just kept our distance and said 'whatever happens, happens.'" Of course, the relationship between HGNI and Riverworks had been very close at the time of the NID's formation. HGNI organizers were on Riverworks payroll by the time the NID was being seriously considered and Riverworks served as the HGNI's fiscal agent. After its creation, the NID accepted applications from organizations to serve as the NID's administering agent. Riverworks applied and was selected. According to various accounts, no other organizations applied for the role. However, in other contexts, Riverworks staff touted their central role in the formation of the NID. For example, when staff

⁹⁷ March 9, 2024

was pitching the idea of the Riverwest NID to residents at a community meeting, the narrative changed: “We [Riverworks] started the Harambee NID in 2016.”⁹⁸

These sorts of challenging discussions did not occur at the NIDs in Washington Park, Garden Homes, or the Lindsay Heights. In these NIDs, the relationship between the NID and the CBO are less dependent, albeit for different reasons. In Washington Park, the initial organizers who formed the NID worked at several different CBOs under the umbrella of the Washington Park Partners coalition. That coalition later disbanded, at which point the NID entered a period that I heard referred to as “hibernation” or “dysfunction.” This past year, a new CBO took over as the NID’s fiscal agent. Though the organization has long ties in the community and—under different management—was involved in the Washington Park Partners coalition, the staff has undergone a complete turnover. As a non-profit housing developer and manager, the CBO is also less dependent on public and private sector grants to fund its activity.⁹⁹ The CBO charges a lower administrative fee than many of the other NIDs. The Garden Homes and Lindsay Heights NIDs do not have the same sort of relationship with an administering CBO, as both are primarily led by residents with very minimal oversight or involvement of the organization serving as the NID fiscal agent.

HELPING POOR PLACES HELP THEMSELVES: THE LOGIC OF COLLECTIVE SWEAT EQUITY

⁹⁸ Riverwest community meeting held at the Riverworks office on January 22, 2024.

⁹⁹ In 2022, the organization (Rooted & Rising Washington Park) generated about 16% of its income from government grants, 46% through private sector grants, 12% from donations, and about 22% from their property management and childcare activities. 2022 Annual Report available at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/651ad33a13d317580445dfbb/t/658dc1a5314c52777f8308a2/1703788973789/UMCS+Annual+Report+2022.pdf>

Recent scholarship has argued that increased attention must be paid to the consequences of poverty governance beyond the level of the individual by asking how the systems and institutions established to manage, control, and surveil the poor have spatial effects and community impacts (Simes, Beck and Eason 2023). Additionally, scholars of poverty governance have pushed researchers to consider how the experiences of individuals are shaped the labor conditions of the actors employed by service-providing institutions (Seim 2017). Here I show how NIDs are a form of poverty governance that acts on *places* rather than on individuals, and how residents of poor neighborhoods are induced to govern themselves, constituting a form of collective sweat equity in poverty governance. By putting residents in charge of neighborhood poverty governance, the surveillance, control, and evaluation of poor people's behavior and choices is assumed not by state actors, but by neighbors. Previous scholarship has identified how delegated poverty governance recruits an array of private actors to become the eyes and ears of the state—expanding the state's view into increasingly private domains of life. Here, I show how, through NIDs, residents replicate and assume the tasks of monitoring and evaluation on their own—not on behalf of state but through their own constitution of municipalized neighborhoods.

Rescaling Sweat Equity from the Home to the Neighborhood

With regards to housing, the concept of “sweat equity” refers to labor investments by owners into their homes. By investing their own time, knowledge, and energy, owners increase the value of their homes without expending additional financial resources, thus increasing their share of equity in the asset. Inducing poor individuals or families to invest sweat equity is a long-running strategy of social programs, including in the area of housing. Such sweat equity requirements serve several purposes in social programs. First, requiring homeowners to participate in home repair or construction reduces overall costs and makes programs more

affordable to low-income homeowners. Second, by training homeowners to conduct repairs or make improvements, these programs hope to increase the long-term sustainability of homeownership for low-income homeowners. Finally, some organizations and programs see sweat equity requirements as serving a disciplining role, in line with understandings that poor people must demonstrate deservingness to receive services. Sweat equity investments constitute a form of payment in return for services and demonstrate that program participants display characteristics that mark them as deserving, such as responsibility and discipline. In line with the conception of an “ownership society,” participants—who, by virtue of the participation in these programs, make less (or no) financial investment—are induced to invest in the community through their labor.

Some of the NID neighborhoods have a long history of being subjected to this logic (such as the home repair grant programs in Harambee, discussed above). More recently, Milwaukee’s Habitat for Humanity is an important supplier of homes to low-income residents across the city. Habitat for Humanity famously operates around the principal of sweat equity, requiring individual who become homeowners through their programs to perform a certain number of hours of “sweat equity” labor. Milwaukee’s Habitat for Humanity requires program participants to perform 210 hours of labor on construction sites or in stores that they operate. The version of sweat equity practiced by CBOs in these neighborhoods in prior decades reflect the imperatives of cost reduction and sustainable homeownership, whereas the model used by Habitat for Humanity today more closely reflects the disciplining imperative.

I frequently heard residents and CBO staff lament that knowledge about home repair and maintenance is less and less common among homeowners. While conducting a survey of housing conditions in Sherman Park with SPCA staff and residents, one factor that was discussed as

contributing to the state of the neighborhood’s dilapidated housing stock was a lack of ability or willingness among homeowners to invest sweat equity.¹⁰⁰ Elijah, a NID board member and community leader in Washington Park, recalled how paint companies used to provide homeowners in his neighborhood with free exterior paint with the intention that they invest “sweat equity” into their homes and contribute their labor for repainting.¹⁰¹ However, with rising awareness about the dangers of lead-based paint, those programs ceased. “But that’s why we’re in this mess with our housing stock.” He went on to explain: “That knowledge of how to repair your own house—you know, residents coming together with a six-pack of beer and saying ‘let’s fix this porch’—that stuff just went away.”

The NID model draws on the notion of sweat equity but moves from the individual to the collective level and from the home to the neighborhood. That NIDs are “by the community, for the community” is often cited by CBO staff, NID residents and board members, and city officials as what makes them attractive as a neighborhood-level social program. Indeed, NIDs are far from the only program for home maintenance and repair available to low-income homeowners. Numerous city-run programs provide grants and loans for struggling homeowners, particularly around weatherization and roof repair. NIDs are differentiated from similar public and private programs in that NIDs are run and funded by residents of the places they serve. This “self-help” mentality echoes the patterns observed by Levine (2016) in that NIDs are seen as more responsive to the distinct needs of different neighborhoods. For the city, the value of the NID model is that it provides residents of disadvantaged neighborhood with access to much-needed

¹⁰⁰ I participated in 6 canvassing trips to conduct surveys of neighborhood properties in Sherman Park, and one trip in Lindsay Heights. In all trips, I accompanied CBO staff and/or neighborhood residents.

¹⁰¹ Interview 15 (January 18, 2024).

home maintenance and repair services without requiring city funding and by leveraging the unremunerated labor of neighborhood residents who make up the boards of the quasi-governmental entities.

One consequence of shifting the subject of poverty governance from poor individuals to poor places—and leaving program design and management in the hands of residents—is that benefit and burden may be stratified and unequally distributed. Among NIDs, I found that relatively privileged residents of these places wield disproportionate power and receive disproportionate benefits. Largely, this stratification occurs because NIDs are dominated by homeowners—as both decision-makers and benefit recipients—in majority renter neighborhoods. But even among homeowners, non-poor and white homeowners are disproportionate decision-makers and beneficiaries in some NIDs.

Reproducing the Surveillance and Evaluation of Poverty Governance

What are the consequences of the configuration of labor (Seim 2017) in this place-based model of poverty governance? Although many NID board members and CBO staff explicitly see the benefits of NIDs as providing a greater amount of flexibility and fewer requirements than city-run programs, most NIDs have replicated some aspects of these burdensome application requirements, as well as the surveillance and evaluation that accompanies the enforcement of these requirements. These tasks are mandated and performed not by the city, but by residents themselves who design and oversee the NIDs. NID board members—and non-board member residents—are largely aware of their implication in these tasks, and their willingness and comfort in performing them varies. NID board members dedicate a significant amount of time not just to performing these tasks, but to discussing and generating guidelines for the proper forms of peer surveillance and evaluation.

While “community-focused residential” NIDs vary in terms of how much of their activities revolve around home repair grants, as well as in the manner in which they administer the grants, they generally share several broad characteristics: First, they predominantly or exclusively offer grants to owner-occupants of NID properties. Second, homeowners must apply for the grants via the submission of an application form, often with supporting documentation. Third, the ultimate decision as to which applicants are offered grants is left to the NID board, but the administration of the grants is usually performed by paid CBO staff.

The nature of housing programs administered by NIDs hinges on decisions about what information should be used to determine eligibility (and thus what questions be included in the application forms), about how the application files ought to be received and reviewed, and about how final determinations about grant awards should be made. These decisions are in the hands of NID board members—owners or occupants of properties within the NID who are elected by fellow “NID citizens” and sworn into their positions through a public oath of office.

The different NIDs have adopted different models for these processes. Some NIDs direct applicants to submit their applications directly to paid CBO staff, who organize the information and then present the details of the applications to the NID board for a determination on an applicant-by-applicant basis. In the case of the Havenwoods NID, this is done over email and at least two board members need to approve an applicant for the grant to be awarded. In the case of the Harambee NID, Riverworks staff receive the applicants and compile the information into a spreadsheet, in which the identities of the applicants are redacted. The decision to anonymize applications responds to a desire for the Harambee NID to avoid the appearance of favoritism and to prevent neighborly friendships or conflicts from influencing the distribution of NID resources.

The Sherman Park NID follows a different model, in which the board—not CBO staff—receive, process, and adjudicate applicants. They require that applicants submit a physical copy of their application and supporting documents during a several month window. However, in practice, most of the available grant money is distributed on the first day that this window opens, so prospective applicants line up outside of the Sherman Park Community Association office on the day that the NID begins receiving applications—typically on a Saturday in April. I showed up to the SPCA office early on a cold, overcast Saturday morning in late April. Despite unseasonably warm weather the prior weekend, the temperature hovered around 39 degrees that morning. I had attended a meeting the previous Saturday, in which we had run through the different roles each board member and a handful of volunteers would assume. I, along with a board member and a volunteer, was slated to help pass out numbers to those waiting in line outside, collect their information on a registration sheet, and visually check that they had all the required forms and documents. During the planning meetings leading up to the application intake day, the board had decided to adhere to a strict rule that they would only receive complete applications. Apparently, leniency in previous years had caused problems for SPCA staff as they administered the grants.

I was instructed to log the name, address, and phone number of applicants waiting in line on a registration sheet, as well as to check that they had all the required documents. I then handed them a piece of laminated paper with a number (and logged that number on the registration sheet). I was instructed to turn away anyone with an incomplete application. Along with the completed application form, applicants were required to provide proof of total adjusted gross income (e.g., a copy of their 1040 tax form), a bid from a fully licensed contractor on official letterhead, proof of paid property taxes, and a Letter of Appropriateness if the applicant's

property was located in one of the NID's historic districts. The board, at the suggestion of the SPCA staff, had decided that W-2 forms were insufficient as proof of income, since they worried that people could hide other sources of income. SPCA staff and board members were particularly concerned that applicants would not disclose income derived from rental property. Thus, the board had opted to require the complete 1040 form and they purposefully scheduled the application intake day for after April 15. For those whose properties were located in the two historic districts within the NID's boundaries, they also had to provide a Letter of Appropriateness, which the city provides as proof that the proposed work meets the requirements of designated historic properties.

Once the applicant was registered and received a number, they were free to wait in their cars, a nearby coffee shop, or return home. We gave them a phone call as their number approached so they could return to the SPCA office. At 9am, when we opened the SPCA doors and the first applicants entered to have their applications reviewed by two teams of board members, we had registered close to 40 people. More continued to arrive throughout the morning. Given the cold weather, many opted to wait somewhere warm, though some preferred to wait on the sidewalk outside of the SPCA office—not wanting to miss their turn. As I walked down the line, chatting with applicants and registering them on the sheet attached to my clipboard, I struggled to hold the pen and shuffle papers with my cold hands. One of the other volunteers working outside with me offered me an extra pair of hand knit mittens, which I gladly accepted.

Most of the applicants I encountered had complete packets of application materials, but I encountered a few with incomplete or questionable applications. For example, when I asked one older Black woman for the contractor bid, she produced a handwritten note with a few lines

describing the project and a total cost. Confronted with the possibility of needing to tell her application would not be accepted, I went to find the NID board member, Maddy, who was also outside checking documents. I presented Maddy with the scrawled note and she responded, exasperated, that it had to be on letterhead. “Who is this guy?,” she asked rhetorically, referring to the contractor. Maddy went on to explain that they could not know for sure, based on a note written on scratch paper, that the contractor was appropriately licensed and prepared to properly complete the work. She sent me back to the woman, with instructions to turn her away. I explained to the woman that she needed to have a formal bid on letterhead to ensure that the person was a legitimate, licensed, and bonded contractor and not some “random guy.” I found myself deflecting responsibility, explaining that the handwritten note did not meet “their”—referring to the NID board—requirements. “They told me,” I explained, “that they need the bid on letterhead.” Another woman in line, waiting to submit her application, interjected to clarify my remarks for the woman: “Let’s say—and I’m not saying you did this—but let’s say it’s someone you know, like a friend, and you want them to get this grant money. They [the NID] just want to make sure it’s someone legitimate who can get the work done.” I told the woman that if she could get the contractor to write the estimate on their letterhead, she could come back with it later that morning. Dejected, she said quietly that she did not think she could get it today, given it was the weekend. Searching for a way to soften the blow, I suggested that she could try to get the formal bid on letterhead on Monday and she might be able to still get a grant if not all of the money was allocated today. Or she could possibly get on the waitlist. The other woman waiting in line interjected to ask whether she could get on the waitlist today, even with the incomplete application. I had to explain that the NID had decided not to accept incomplete applications, even for the waitlist.

I had to turn away a few other applicants, either due to missing or insufficiently formal contractor bids, or because they had not provided adequate proof of income. Despite the fact the application instructions stated that W-2 forms were not sufficient, I had to turn away a man who had only brought a copy of his W-2. In all of these uncomfortable interactions, it was not lost on me that the three of us registering (and turning away) applicants outside—the NID board member, the volunteer, and I—were all white women, while the majority of those formed in the line, waiting for the chance to submit their applications, were Black.

As the flow of people arriving slowed to a trickle and many left to wait in their cars, I jumped at the opportunity to leave my post outside and join the board members inside, who were meeting with each applicant to review and adjudicate their applications. I wanted to get out of the cold as much as I wanted to avoid having to turn any more applicants away. Applicants were attended individually in one of two rooms by application review committees. One of the review committees was comprised of board members, and the other included an SPCA staff member as well. Over the next several hours, I observed both committees receive, review, and issue decisions for each of the NID applicants. The board had decided to receive only one applicant at a time (letting the rest wait outside for their turn) to ensure the privacy for each applicant. Once the review committee had verified that all of the required documentation was in order, they checked the applicant's name and address against a database of prior grant recipients. The Sherman Park NID had decided that each resident would be eligible for \$5,000 within a five-year period. In other words, someone who had used \$3,000 of grant money three years ago would still be eligible for \$2,000 in the current year.

Before issuing a grant, the review committees needed to verify that the applicant was an owner-occupant of the property in question, that the proposed project was in line with the list of

projects that the NID had deemed eligible for funding, and that they had secured a formal contractor bid. They also needed to determine whether the applicant would need to supply matching funds or whether the grant could cover all of the project costs. The Sherman Park NID board had long operated under a tiered grant model, where higher income households had to fund 25% or 50% of the project costs with their own money, while lower income households would not be required to put any of their own money into the project. This determination was made based on the income documentation supplied by the applicant and an attestation as to the total number of household members. They then cross referenced this information with a chart of the median Milwaukee County household income. Households at or below the median household income (adjusted for household size) were not be required to provide matching funds.

These determinations took up the bulk of the discussions regarding each application. In some cases, the proposed project (e.g., house trim painting, repair of cracked cement walkway, installation of a security door) was the subject of scrutiny. For example, the NID board had devoted previous board meetings to differentiating between “structurally necessary” projects—which they wanted to fund—and unnecessary upgrades, which they viewed as falling outside of the NID’s purpose. For example, was walkway repair “structurally necessary”? Perhaps if the concrete walkway was cracked to the point of constituting a tripping hazard for an elderly homeowner. While the board had intended to create a clear-cut list of approved and unapproved projects, these distinctions were more difficult to make in the moment.

In other cases, projects that clearly fell into “structurally necessary”—such as rebuilding a rotted porch—generated debate among the board members because of concerns that the result of the project would downgrade the aesthetics of the house. One board member reflected on the fact that many of the projects they funded ultimately degraded the housing quality in the

neighborhood because they replaced original features of 1920s and 1930s homes with generic, low-quality work. She gave the example of vinyl windows replacing wood windows and original porches being replaced with porches built in the style of decks.

The most fraught determination was often whether the applicant was required to provide matching funds, based on the income documentation they provided. In one case, a woman had called the SPCA staff ahead of the application day to ask about the required documentation. She told SPCA staff that she did not have a tax return from the previous year showing her adjusted gross income because she had no income that year. She told the SPCA that the reason she had not worked was because she was caring for her aging mother and that her son had died. She wanted to know whether she could still apply. SPCA staff brought the question to the NID board during a board meeting, which they discussed at length. Many expressed skepticisms at the veracity of her claim, stating that she needed to explain to them how she had paid her bills over the past year. They suspected that she was hiding rental income. Others expressed discomfort at violating her privacy in this way. Maybe, they suggested, she was living on savings or off the support of family. Either way, it wasn't their business, some reasoned. In the end, they directed the SPCA staff to allow her to apply.

On the application day, a woman was called in to present her application. It was towards the end of the day and the NID board members were tired and hungry. She handed them her papers and they immediately noted that she had not provided proof of income. She explained that she had not worked in the previous year, so she did not have a 1040 form. I immediately suspected that this was the woman they had discussed in the board meeting several weeks ago, but I said nothing. After some back-and-forth, the woman started to appear frustrated and stated that she had already talked to someone who had told her she could apply. Then, she began to cry.

She said, quietly through tears, that her son had died and she had not been working. The board members then remembered her case from the previous discussions. They comforted her and proceeded with her application, which was ultimately approved.

However, at a subsequent board meeting, SPCA staff shared with the board that they suspected that a NID grant recipient had “committed fraud.” They shared a dossier of “research” they had compiled on the woman, showing that she owned multiple properties—some within the Sherman Park NID and some outside its boundaries. This, they suggested, meant she was likely living off rental income that she had failed to disclose in her application. Further digging had revealed that the registered address of her properties was in Georgia, suggesting that she was not an owner-occupant. She had already received about half of her NID grant, but the other half was still pending. After much discussion, the NID board directed SPCA staff to send the woman a certified letter, expressing their suspicions that she had not presented accurate information in her application and that they would not provide the second installment of her project reimbursement.

The bulk of scrutiny was directed at applicants who claimed low income or no income at all, whereas higher income applicants did not receive the same detailed review and skepticism as to whether they had disclosed all of their income sources. The reason for the skepticism was that low income (or no income) applicants were not required to provide matching funds for their projects and the NID board reviewed those applications more closely. During a board meeting, SPCA staff commented that the number of applicants who fell into the “no match” category had increased over the years—a trend they attributed not to a rising share of low-income applicants but to applicants learning how to “game” the system.

Unlike most systems of delegated poverty governance, the surveillance, monitoring, and evaluation work conducted by NIDs is not done by private actors on behalf of the state. Rather,

NID board members and CBO staff perform these tasks for the programs that they themselves designed, replicating the requirements and evaluation processes of other, public programs.

DIFFERENTIATED CITIZENSHIP AND A FORMALIZED CALCULUS OF CONTRIBUTIONS AND RIGHTS

Under the state statute, NIDs must be proposed by property *owners* and NID assessments are attached to properties, to be paid by the owners. However, in all other ways, the statute conceives of NID “citizens” as anyone who owns or occupies property in the NID. The statute clearly states that everyone who “owns or occupies property” in the NID is eligible to vote and be elected to the NID board. However, NIDs differentiate “NID citizens” into distinct categories, which they understand as having distinct interests: homeowners, investors, and renters. This is, of course, despite the fact that some residents occupy multiple positions or fail fit neatly into any. While actors recognize these categorical misalignments (Menjívar 2023), they opt to fit individuals imperfectly into categories rather than expand or reassess their categories.

As with most projects of social differentiation, the process is accompanied by the creation of categorical inequality (Massey 2007). Homeowner-citizens are seen as the most authentic representations of the neighborhood’s “true” interests and needs. NIDs are used to “punish” certain property-uses that fail to align with the homeowner ideal, namely by designing their assessment methods in ways that charge investor-owners more than homeowners. NIDs then channel this revenue towards homeowners, often explicitly barring investor-owners and renters from direct benefits.

How do actors understand and justify these decisions? I find that NID board members and CBO staff apply a calculus that determines a NID citizens’ rights and the benefits they are owed based on their perceived financial and moral contributions to the neighborhood. NID

organizers, their supporters, and city staff feel compelled to justify the decision to assess investor-owners (often at higher rates) while excluding them from direct benefits. They justify this decision by highlighting the indirect benefits that investor-owners enjoy because of a consensus that rising property values benefit *all* property owners.

However, while great efforts are made to explain the apparent discordance of taxing non-occupant property owners while excluding them from direct benefits, no similar concern is raised—nor justification provided—for the exclusion of renters from direct NID benefits. When probed, I find that actors view renters as non-parties with respect to NIDs: they do not directly contribute, so they are owed no direct benefits. That renters are viewed as parties unaffected by the presence of the NID is perplexing, given that actors broadly acknowledge the likelihood that investor-owners pass rising costs (including NID assessments) on to their tenants.

DISCUSSION: THE MUNICIPALIZED NEIGHBORHOOD AS A NEW FORM OF POVERTY GOVERNANCE

In this chapter, I have discussed Milwaukee’s Neighborhood Improvement Districts as a novel form of poverty governance that goes beyond the standard model of the delegated welfare state by also delegating a core power of public government—the power to collect and disburse tax revenue—to private actors. The result is a “municipalized neighborhood” that combines aspects of privatized social service delivery with aspects of privatized government. These two forms of state delegation have largely been studied as distinct phenomena, affecting distinct segments of the population. Yet, as I show, their combination presents unique consequences for the urban residents who come under their purview.

First, I showed how community-based organizations (CBOs) have come to see NIDs a tool to replace or complement other sources funding that are less stable and require more

significant labor investments to secure. NIDs, on the other hand, provide a reliable stream of funding by harnessing a central domain of public government: taxation. In line with previous research on delegated poverty governance, I find that this form of funding alters the structure and mission of CBOs and also raises new challenges. Foremost, I find that CBOs have to contend with new pressures from NID board members, who question whether they have earned their receipt of “public money.” These pressures highlight competing imperatives faced by CBOs: their growing financial and operational dependence on NIDs, and their stated goals of resident empowerment and NID autonomy.

Second, I discussed how the “municipalized neighborhood” transforms the subjects of poverty governance from individuals to places and rescales the object of “sweat equity” from the home to the neighborhood. One consequence of this transformation is that non-poor residents of poor places, and white residents of Black neighborhoods wield disproportionate power and receive disproportionate benefits. By involving residents in the design, financing, and management of their own poverty governance, I show how residents also put themselves in charge of the surveillance, monitoring, and evaluation of poor people. But rather than perform these activities on behalf of the state—as research on delegated poverty governance has previously documented—residents opt into this role of their own accord.

Finally, I discussed how NIDs promote the differentiation of residents into three citizen classes based on their relationship to property: homeowners, investors, and tenants. The rights and benefits owed to these different classes of citizens are determined by assessing their perceived financial and moral contributions to the neighborhoods. Investors, who directly contribute to the NID, are often barred from accessing direct benefits but are viewed as indirectly benefitting from rising neighborhood property values. Tenants, who do not directly contribute to

the NID, are viewed as non-parties with respect to NIDs, even though they are widely acknowledged as contributing indirectly through the rents they pay.

When the Improvement District model was pioneered over four decades ago, it was conceived as tool for reviving central business districts. However, today, Milwaukee has pioneered its transformation into a novel technology of poverty governance. After the first “Community Focused Residential” NID was created in 2012, their number has steadily grown as CBOs have come to see their utility as funding sources and city officials recognize their value as a tool for addressing Milwaukee’s decaying housing stock without requiring additional public funding. In this light—as we might expect similar models in other cities and states—its critical to understand their consequences.

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TABLES

Table 1. Summary Statistics of Interview Sample

	Count (N=50)	Percent
Total interviews	50	
Gender		
Women	26	52%
Men	23	46%
Non-Binary	1	2%
Race		
Black	25	50%
White	22	44%
Latino	2	4%
MENA	1	2%
Resides in a NID*		
No	8	16%
Yes	42	84%
Homeowner	37	74% of NID residents
Tenant	5	10% of NID residents
Owens investment property in a NID	12	24%
NID board member	28	56%
CBO staff	5	10%
NID-related government employee	2	4%

* At time of involvement in NID. For example, I would still count someone as a NID resident if they lived in the NID during their time on the NID board, even if they have since moved and are no longer involved.

Table 2. Estimates of Demographic and Housing Characteristics of NIDs

NID	Population	Owner-Occupied (%)	Vacant Housing (%)	Black (%)	White (%)	Latino (%)	Asian (%)
3- Washington Park	8,751	21.8	14.6	67.9	5.0	4.9	19.6
4- Sherman Park	10,335	28.7	12.2	85.6	6.4	4.8	1.5
6- Garden Homes	780	19.8	13.9	91.5	1.7	3.1	0.0
7- Harambee	8,725	23.4	17.4	80.5	9.0	9.8	0.5
9- Havenwoods	6,203	29.1	8.2	70.0	6.5	4.0	16.5
12-Lindsay Heights	7,959	20.3	12.8	88.5	3.6	7.2	1.1

Source: 2020 Decennial Census block counts

Note: NID-level statistics were estimated by aggregating block counts to the NID geographies. However, because NID boundaries do not perfectly conform to Census block boundaries, areal weighting was used to estimate counts for partial blocks.

FIGURES

Figure 1. The Subjects of State Delegation

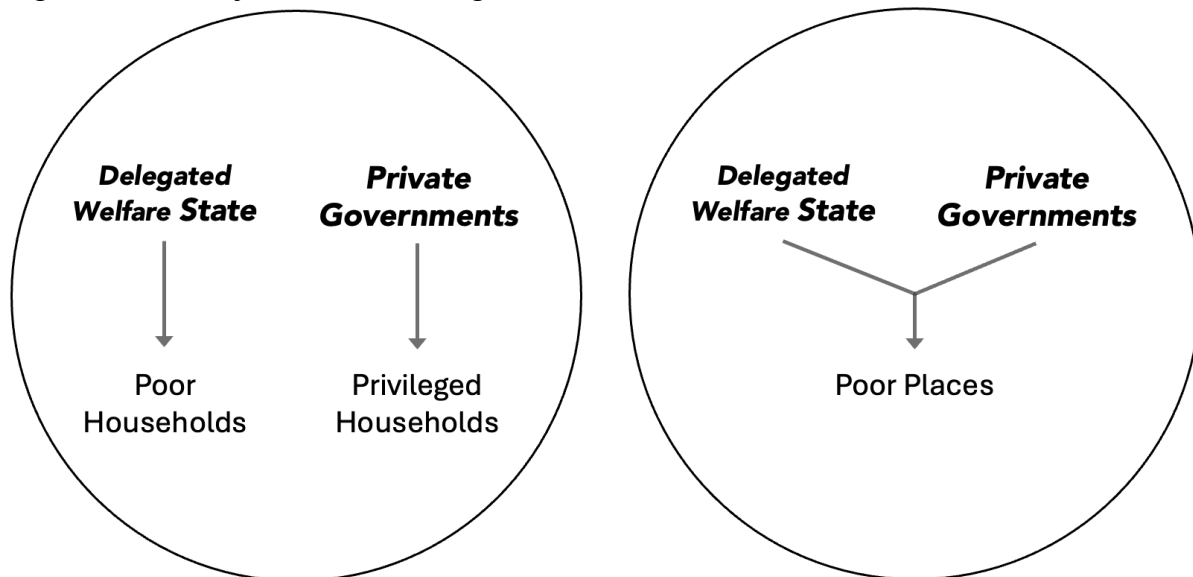
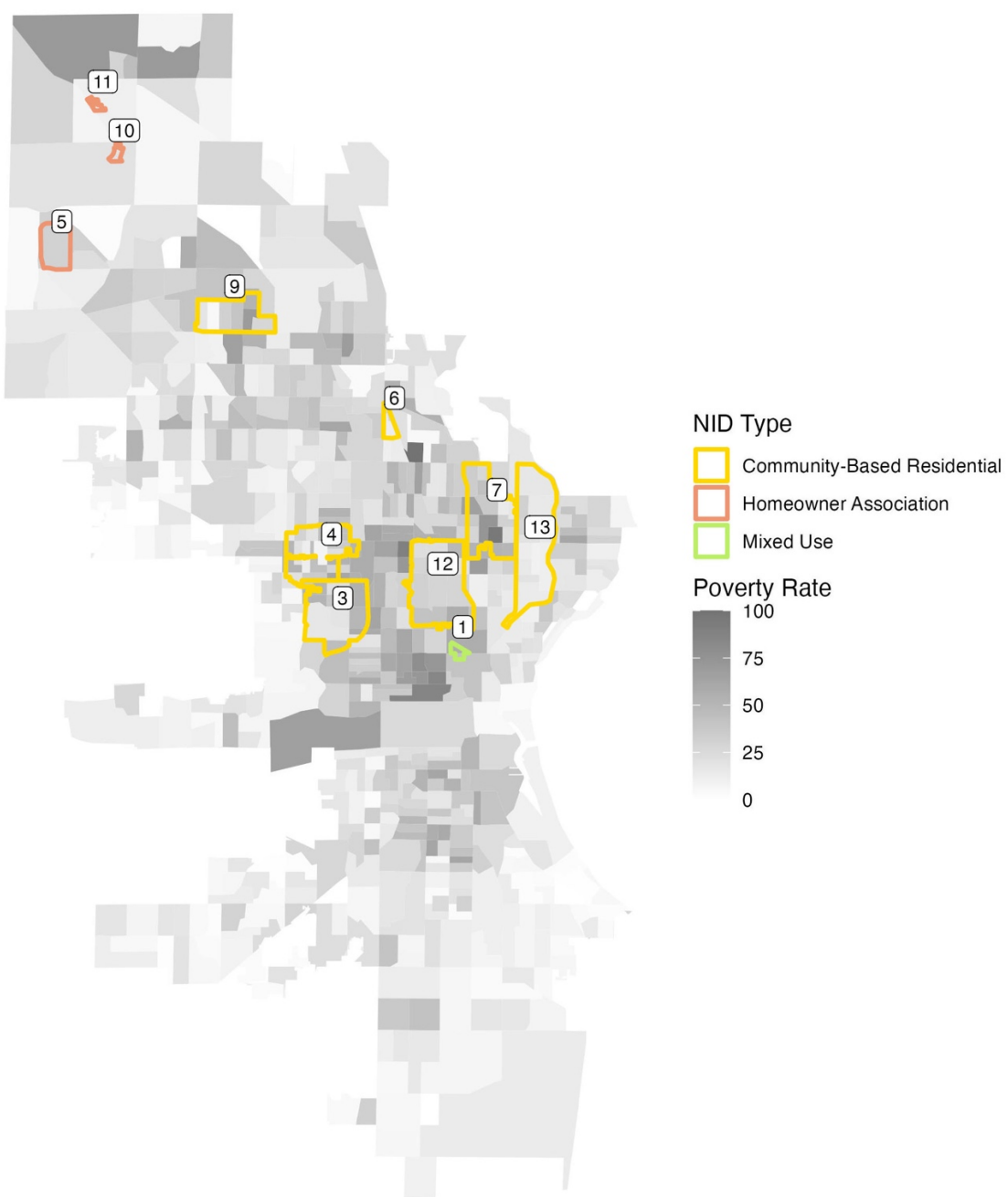


Figure 2. Map of Poverty Rate and Milwaukee's NIDs



- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 – The Brewery | 9 – Havenwoods |
| 3 – Washington Park | 10 – Riverview |
| 4 – Sherman Park | 11 – River Ridge |
| 5 – Heritage Heights | 12 – Lindsay Heights |
| 6 – Garden Homes | 13 – Riverwest (blocked from forming) |
| 7 – Harambee | |

Note: Poverty rate data from 2022 American Community Survey 5-year estimates at the block group level.

APPENDIX

Appendix Table 1. List of Archive Collections Referenced.

Citation Shorthand	Collection Name	Collection Location
SPCA	Sherman Park Community Association Records, 1971-2002	UW-Milwaukee Archives
SPCA/Oral History	Sherman Park Community Association 1992 Oral History Project Records, 1991-1996	UW-Milwaukee Archives
UWEX	UW-Extension Center for Community Economic Development Records, 1965-1992	UW-Milwaukee Archives

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined how property relations shape the formation of social groups, organize collective behavior, and mold beliefs about how resources and rights ought to be distributed in society. My three empirical chapters draw from separate projects in two very different settings: Mexico City and Milwaukee. In the first chapter, I argued that negotiations over the state's redistribution of property rights generated enclaved social groups in twentieth century Mexico City. As private property replaced collective, non-market forms of property, these groups were further differentiated from each other through their demands for protections against market-based dispossession. The second chapter examined how these distinct collective experiences of property gave rise to neighborhood-specific understandings of legitimate and illegitimate practices in the production, exchange, and consumption of property. These *moral economies* surrounding property shaped how residents of these neighborhoods mobilized against intensified capital-driven urban development. Finally, in the third empirical chapter, I turned to Milwaukee to examine how residents and community-based organizations (CBOs) transformed tools normally used to govern commercial districts and wealthy urban enclaves into a form of community-controlled poverty governance. Through "neighborhood municipalization"—the creation of neighborhood-level property tax districts—CBOs also transformed the *subjects* of poverty governance from poor households to *poor places* and their populations. Below, I discuss several core implications of these findings.

The first surrounds how property relations constitute an important scaffolding around which we construct a sense of ourselves and a sense of group belonging. Social scientists have long observed that homeownership shapes how we think about ourselves, determines the communities to which we belong and the resources we can access, molds our social networks, and is even tied to understandings of national citizenship. I contribute to these discussions by

highlighting how a sense of group belonging and self-identity is forged through the mundane work of managing the social relations that constitute property. In other words, property ownership is not a status that, once achieved, is settled business. Property ownership is a set of social relations and agreements that require continual maintenance, renewal, and redefinition. This work is an important arena through which we forge a sense of group belonging, sometimes through the definition of out-groups. Chapters 1 and 2 highlight how group identities were quite literally constructed and consolidated through collective entry into property ownership. Furthermore, the state's application of different sets of property rules and rights amplified a sense of group difference. In chapter 3, I show how the "municipalization" of neighborhoods encourages the differentiation of residents and property owners into different classes of citizens based on their relationship to property. These groups are understood as deserving of different citizenship benefits, depending on their perceived contributions to the neighborhood.

A second implication relates to how we understand the sources, expressions, and consequences of value in urban space. In most contemporary societies, homes are market commodities. Yet their emplaced nature ties the value of homes to their surrounding landscapes and communities, connecting proximate homeowners to each other as well as to the various actors that produce and maintain collective community resources. The homeowner's imperative to protect their home's value (financial and otherwise) requires them to engage with these other actors. In Chapter 2, I show how when residents work collectively to produce landscapes, places, and even dwellings, they construct shared understandings about the value of these products and the rules that ought to govern how they are consumed and exchanged. In Chapter 3, I show how residents mobilize state-supplied tools to support their efforts to reshape the value of homes and neighborhoods. They construct methods for financing these efforts that reinforce shared

understandings about the legitimate uses of property and redistribute resources to those deemed most deserving. Across both cases, I show how the values of homes and neighborhoods—whether as commodities for exchange, sources of livelihood, or spaces for social reproduction—rest on fragile collective agreements and require collective effort to protect.

Finally, this dissertation sheds light on how property operates as a lens that can focus, diffuse, and refract power. By organizing disparate actors into coordinated projects, property can concentrate power. In Chapter 3, this concentration is enabled and even encouraged by local interpretations of state law, concentrating power into the hands of community organizations and non-poor homeowners of poor, majority-renter neighborhoods. Here, too, I show how efforts to manage property have the effect of diffusing certain powers—once reserved for public governments—into the hands of private organizations and citizens. Property can also refract and fragment power, as I show in Chapters 1 and 2, when different understandings and experiences of property made cross-neighborhood organizing impossible to sustain. Across both cases, I highlight the importance of property as a pathway through which the state manages poverty and controls poor families. In Chapter 1, the state's use of property as a technology of poverty governance resulted in the consolidation of new social identities. In Chapter 3, I show how the state delegates the governance of poor neighborhoods to private property owners.