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### Xela stories of transformation

*A commons perspectives on (peri-)urban resource use, territoriality, and cultural representation*

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## Xela stories of transformation: A commons perspectives on (peri-)urban resource use, territoriality, and cultural representation

### 23/07/18 Fragmentation and Commoning: Our last blog (for the moment)

Two weeks ago we engaged into an academic adventure. Driven by our curiosity about social changes in intermediate Latin American cities, we went to Xela to experiment with collective fieldwork. At a place new to most of us, we wanted to see whether such a joint project by a multidisciplinary team of seven CEDLA researchers would allow us to get a better sense of commoning and decommoning processes.

Doing fieldwork together turned out to be even more fruitful and integrative than we had hoped for. While each of us had an individual research question within the overarching theme, in daily reality we often operated in alternating small teams. We also kept an eye and ear out for relevant information for our colleagues. And in the evening we had lively dinner debates where we would share our stories and discuss our understandings of all the new impressions and data. As we shared information, observations, interviews, and understandings on a daily basis, we deepened our understanding of Xela's reality and developed our analytical and theoretical focus. While researching the commons in Xela, we were simultaneously commoning our research, sharing insights and ideas.

Increasingly we also came to see the multiple links between our topics: we realized that markets and cemeteries as public spaces where people come together and try to shape their lives, were more similar than we had thought. They showed the failed ordering projects by the municipal government and, at the same time, the complex and often contradictory efforts to create a common environment by people who use the public space. We realized that gravel mining in the rural areas is connected to the increasing problems of flooding in Xela's urban area during the rainy season. We saw that organic farming and weaving schools are just as well efforts to create a Xela identity, as is the Maya movement. We realized that the feeling of insecurity in a relatively safe city like Quetzaltenango is inextricably linked to the feelings of fragmentation and the failure of the authorities.

On our last day we presented some [preliminary findings at a seminar](#) at CUNOC's Architecture department. Besides academics, many of our 'informants' attended: from municipal officers, journalists, to representatives of NGO's and civil society. Although many of the people we had interviewed stressed the disorder and divisions in Xela's society, in our presentation we pointed out the importance of collective initiatives and commoning practices in the urban and rural territories. In the discussion that followed, several participants expressed concern about the multiple challenges facing Xela. 'Por qué somos tan divididos?' someone asked. More than initiatives, they experience disinterest and fragmentation. Other participants were happy with our approach. They liked our social science and humanities approach and welcomed our effort to stress collective accomplishments in Xela society. These contrasting views are unavoidable, stressing not only the complexities of Xela, but moving from multidisciplinary to interdisciplinary research. And they show that still a lot of research needs to be done to really understand Xela's complex realities.

While Xela's problems are many, we have been impressed by the openness and generosity of its people. Whether in the municipality, academia (CUNOC), cultural organizations, rural communities, the markets, tejedora initiatives, social movements, the police, organic farming collectives, cemeteries, civic committees, or business organizations, we always experienced willingness to frankly share views and information. This has been an important ingredient for making this pilot project into a very productive and simultaneously immensely pleasant experience.



CEDLA agradece mucho a tod@s in Xela. ¡Hasta pronto!

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## 22/07/18 (Un)commoning the police: security in Xela's barrios

"In our street, unfortunately next to our house, a clandestine bar has been functioning for the past 11 years, the owner of this bar is actually Mr (...) who ironically works as a policeman." This remark comes from a formal letter (to which I was granted access) written by a vecino of Quetzaltenango's urban periphery. The letter was addressed to the coordinator of his neighborhood's Comité Comunal de Desarrollo (Cocode) who took upon himself the voluntary task to convey these and similar complaints to the city mayor. The statement is just one of the many examples in which Xela citizens express their distrust towards its police, the Policía Nacional Civil (PNC). During my work on commoning security I encountered various forms of collective mobilization by vecinos to strengthen the security in their neighborhoods, but all in one way or the other seek the active engagement of the state. This means not only more effective policing by the PNC but also the improvement of urban space and services, such as street pavements, maintenance, and public lighting, or the closing down of hotspots of neighborly harassment and illicit activities such as bars or brothels.



This means that the commoning of security by collective action of Xela's urbanites has its limitations because it depends, in the end, on security organized by the state. However, the PNC is more often than not incapable or unwilling to take on this role. The distrust towards the police rests above all on its perceived ineptitude and corruption. Within the police, one easily finds examples of what I call 'internal abandonment'. There is no doubt that the resources of the PNC and the working conditions of many policemen and -women are extremely precarious. Patrol cars are few, and often broken down or worn down. Salaries are low (around €350 a month for the lowest ranks). Police officers regularly pay from their own pockets for uniforms, station internet connections, fuel, vehicle repair, and even ammunition. This hinders the effectiveness of the institution and eats into the motivation of the force. "That's why the population has low trust in the institution", a dismayed officer told me during a nightly interview in his subestación. Yet, he was not prepared to give up: a round of fundraising among his 'friends' in the neighborhood enabled him to improve the premises of the small station to make the working environment a bit more tolerable.

What goes around comes around. If the PNC at the urban grass roots is starved of material and human resources, ineptitude and corruption will follow suit, trust will stay low, and residents' collective action for security will remain an uphill battle.

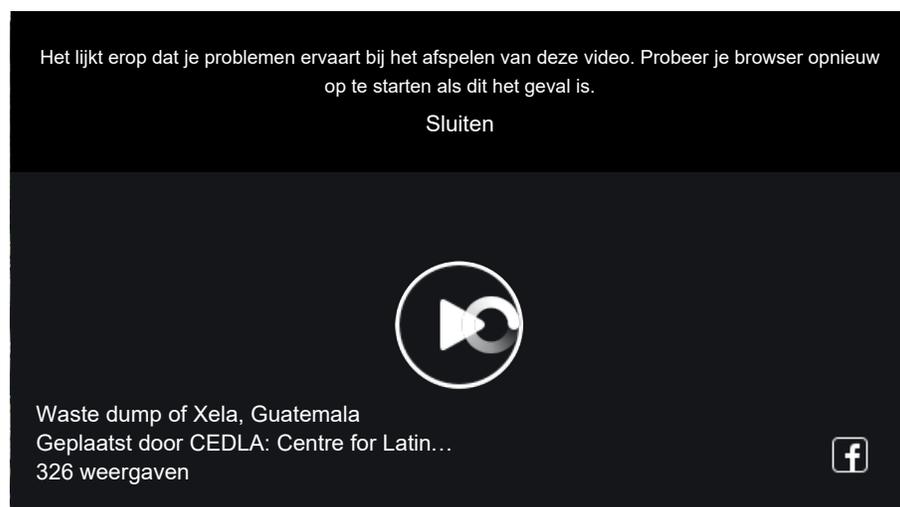


Kees Koonings

## 20/07/18 Trash and hope

When we started our investigation more than a week ago, we talked about Xela's infrastructure with three young directors of different municipal departments. They described the manifold problems faced by the city authorities; but with great enthusiasm they explained how they would solve these problems. They talked about the POT and new measures, and how they would convince the population of the advantages of modernization and order. Of course, they said, not everyone agreed or understood, but as representatives of the municipio they had to act. After all, the city was responsible for the lives of its citizens and the upholding of the 'normas técnicas'.

Today we visited 'El Botadero', the city's dump. It is located in one of the most beautiful valleys of the region right at the foot of the impressive Santa Maria volcano. However, it takes an effort to enjoy this beauty because in the middle of the valley, on a surface of 37 hectares, all the city's trash is dumped. This Botadero is impressive for other reasons. The smell and filth of the immense heaps of trash literally take your breath away. The director, however, is full of hope about covering the waste with land. While he is talking, we see trucks arriving, dumping their bags on the places indicated by the informal groups that select the trash and sell the plastic to processing plants. Their work is dirty and unhealthy, and their children are playing around in the trash hills. The director explains that these people do not have a license – "how can we give a license for this kind of work?" – but it is clear that the public officials and the informales closely work together, and probably money changes hands sometimes. Moreover, the informal groups defend their livelihood tooth and nail against potential intruders. So here again, just like in the markets, cemeteries and other public places, you see a mixed governance structure, where public and private interests collide, where formal rules are adapted to daily, informal realities.



In light of this situation, the dedication and enthusiasm of the young public officials is amazing. This comes with successes and failures. In the case of the dump some real solutions are sought. Hopefully, these plans do not end up the same way as the project of the organic recycling (reciclaje orgánico), financed by EU and CARE, which was abandoned for several years and is only picked up again now. These different outcomes give a clear indication of the predicaments of working for the state in a poor country like Guatemala. Many officials work with great dedication for the improvement of their country or their city. Others seem to live in a parallel universe where plans and designs are considered reality. They ignore the gap between the visions and projects designed in the municipalidad and the crude and chaotic reality of their implementation. One of the things they all have to accept is that in daily reality rich and poor are pursuing their own, very different commoning projects, outside of, and often against the state...

Michiel Baud

## 18/07/18 El territorio en orden? Mining and protest in Xela's rural area

"Till recently, the mine's stone crushers operated 24/7, we couldn't sleep. Now, it's from 5 AM till 22 PM, including Saturdays and Sundays, a terrible noise. They also use dynamite; houses tremble and fracture. We cannot live this way! In 2011, after heavy rains, the mine's mud flooded large part of our community. Therefore we started to organize as COPREDAM, Committee to Prevent Environmental Disasters. Now [after organizing a lengthy road blockade], they have sued us for five crimes: being terrorists, kidnappers, organizing illicit coercion, illegal gathering, and being extortionists".

A rural leader in Xecaracoj community, tells us about the injustices they face when confronted with the powerful AGRECA mining company. Besides small-artisanal mines, socio-environmental destruction of Quetzaltenango's Palajunoj valley by capitalist gravel mining has become a major issue. So far, territorial planning debates triggered by the new Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial (POT) had largely ignored the mining issue. Tensions mostly concentrated (and continue to do so) around rural-urban frictions: "ordering", yes, but: whose "order", whose territory? Where BID ("Xelajú Sostenible" 2010) and POT (2017) plans strongly focus on ordering chaos, using a 'commoning' discourse, communities fear that territorial planning will bring rural areas under bureaucratic control. Pacaja's rural mayor explains how they see 'commons' differently, claiming recognition of communal authorities, rural territories, customary rules, rights and ways of life, and autonomous project development (see Barbara's blog).

Though many officials misunderstand rural claims (“they don’t understand good norms” and “they have no soil management plan nor education for this”), a municipal official of Territorial Management argues: “We should be wise. For instance, sometimes they know far better where and how zones are in danger of flooding. They told us, ‘this is a risk zone’; our technicians said ‘no’, and when rains fell they proved to be right”. Farmer leaders, indeed, experienced since long that ‘mining’ and ‘flooding’ are two sides of the same extractivist coin. Another municipality official explains how rural communities and private companies – each with their own interests to cherish their non-official rules - are the ones most fiercely protesting against the POT, but for the mining issue municipality and communities join: “Mining devours rural communities and micro-watersheds, the ‘alcaldes rurales’ fiercely protest: there we join hands”.



Of 14 in total, there are three large mines in the valley, AGRECA, Xela Azúl, and La Roca or Real Madrid, property of the Spanish soccer club owner. BID and POT reports extensively examine flooding – caused by nature and ‘society’ - but say no word about its causal relationship with mining: inundation is ‘naturalized’ and presented as a technical problem (“fenómenos naturales”, BID, p.16). BID chapter “Territorio en Orden” (Ordering the Territory) outlines just technical and management solutions. As the municipal official explains: “Modelling was done by a Spanish consultancy based on scarce digital internet information”.

Contrarily, rural mayors see flooding as a human-made and political construction caused by mining. The leader of mine-affected Tierra Colorada community (and vice-president of the national federation of indigenous peoples) shows us how Real Madrid flooded their houses and harvests. “In May all was inundated, before the mine we had no flooding”. A municipal investigator confirms this. In his small office, filled with the advanced computer systems (“we are few but generate powerful information”), drone-images take us inside the mine’s operation area. “Mines generate ephemeral rivers – only filled when raining -, which cause inundation. We can prove how the mines fail to mitigate erosion problems”. With emphasis: “It’s now proven that the mines cause flooding. Extractivism is out of control, without regulation”. The mines do not welcome such investigations, “They have questioned us, asking about our drone activities. Visitors came to supposedly work together to benefit the communities, but they wanted to spy, getting access to communities and know about our mining investigations. Very smart.”

Meanwhile, mining impacts not just rural ecology and economy but also health. A community nurse in Xecaracoj says: “The mine lorries pass by every moment, the dust is terrible, all day through mine-affected people come to us, with lung and intestinal infections, very tough”. Here colleague confirms this: “Health impacts are severe, it’s all about making money”.

But communities are resisting. The Tierra Colorado leader relates: “After flooding our houses and fields we could not stand it any longer. Together with Xecaracoj, with 350 families we took action and blocked the road for six weeks”. The opening quote explains how blockade leaders were instantly criminalized. “I am very worried”, this Xecaracoj leader says, “because how can I defend myself against such accusations? Most of all I am worried about my family.” His Tierra Colorado colleague agrees: “Telling us that we are terrorists!, they say that ‘right to work’ and ‘right to free passage’ are more prominent than the right to live”.



Last Saturday, the rural protest broadened to a rural-urban territorial alliance: rural mayors, NGOs, women groups, urban neighbourhoods. As the Tierra Colorado leader makes clear: “One firewood makes no fire, but 5 or 10 do so, and they burn! ... If national court does not listen, we go to the international human rights court”.

We meet an urban neighbourhood leader in Xela. “So far, only rural communities have organized against mining, flooding, the city remained indifferent, but it affects all of us ... This Saturday we have organized the Social Movement for Quetzaltenango’s Territorial Defence, gathering some 50 persons. We’ll first examine the legal situation, next, the environmental destruction and inundations, and how the mines affect people’s health”. He narrates how flooding has brought rural and urban people together, they drowned his neighbourhood, “but communities as Tierra Colorado are worse off. I got to know their leader through the mobilizations against the mine, now we form a network”. That same moment, he is phone-called: television. Half an hour later Barbara and I witness how TeleCable interviews him. As he manifests: “This is our first press conference. Rural areas don’t have easy access to the press, this way we mutually strengthen the movement”.

Both the urban and rural movement leaders expound how they will mobilize ILO Convention 169, “it states that indigenous communities have to be consulted, that has not happened here, we will force compliance”. According to the urban neighbourhood leader, urban/rural complementarity goes beyond city people’s contact and information sharing. “We also need the rural area: to enforce Convention 169. Because our rural brothers and sisters are more easily recognized as indigenous”. Strategic identity games are part of making the commons.

Rutgerd Boelens

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### 17/07/18 Long Live the Traveling Souls

The large Cementerio El Calvario of Quetzaltenango is the only public cemetery of Xela. Like most other urban cemeteries in Latin America it doesn’t appear on the political priority list of maintenance and improvement. Since burial and memorialization practices are closely intertwined, I am here to explore questions like: does the state’s neglect of provisioning a dignified final destination affect people? And if so, how? Are there any commoning initiatives in dealing with the deceased in Xela?

The first impression of this cemetery is one of neglect and fragmentation. Two consecutive fields named Cementerio 1 and Cementerio 2 divide the graveyard. The first one is a historical graveyard with neo-classical tombs and more modern vertical constructions containing burial niches. The second one is a meadow with earth graves known as The Hill, or The Comunal Area; a euphemistic way of denoting the poor-people’s burial area. This area caters to the Maya community from the surrounding villages, who pay 1 euro to have their loved ones buried in the ground.



Although neglected and stigmatized for being a second-rank burial ground, this is not a place of total sadness. The Comunal Area looks colorful and lively. What is more, this area has become an international meeting place. Many Maya from the Xela region have migrated to the U.S. Deceased migrants are often repatriated home, to be buried in Xela ground on this particular hillside. On a Sunday, you can hear Spanish, K'iche' and English languages. Families visit the graves of their loved ones to celebrate the deceased's life and the travel of their soul. Yet it is the mundane activities that caught my attention most. People pick cherries from the large cherry trees providing shadow. Children play football or chase the stray dogs, while their parents drink liquor.

We met such a family last Sunday. They were cheerful and proud of their transnational family history, despite the hardships it had brought them. Two Los-Angeles-born children accompanied their Maya abuelita to visit the graves of Grandpa and other relatives. With a mouth full of cherries from the tree waking over Grandpa's grave, they told us the story of their physical travel to another country, which happened to take place on the very same day of Grandpa's travel to the hereafter. I saw how this physically neglected space is kept alive by its visitors. How they co-create the Maya stories of life and dead. Although the expanding range of their travels distinguishes the 21st-century version of Maya memory making from earlier ones, the new life histories still remain anchored to Xela's general cemetery - turning it into a transnational cultural commons.



Christien Klaufus

#### 15/07/18 Good food?

We made a trip through Almolonga yesterday, an enclave of intensive vegetable farming production a few miles away from Xela. This trip reminded me of my visit to the Colectivo Orgánico Regional Occidental, in Quetzaltenango (Photo 1). For the members of this network, composed of a dozen organizations representing small scale producers and consumers, Almolonga represents all the problems of the neoliberal agricultural model - chemical input, export market, and unequal distribution of land and resources (Photo 2). Alternatively, they promote agroecological practices, solidarity economy and food sovereignty by bringing producers and consumers closer to each other.

Among their initiatives are the monthly organic market, Día Orgánico, agroecology training programs, dissemination of information on agroecology among urban citizens, and facilitation of cooperation between consumers and producers. An example of such a cooperation is La Hojita in which 25 consumers are committed to weekly collect their basket with a dozen products for a fixed price delivered by a handful of farmers (Photo 3).



These initiatives not only promote alternative market and consumption patterns but they also raise awareness among urban consumers and rural producers. A closer look at this agroecological network reveals both contradictions and innovations. In contrast to other Latin American countries, where agroecology and food sovereignty movement were built by peasant social movements, in Guatemala, agroecology was first introduced by the State. Created in 2007, the National Program for Organic Agriculture and Agroecology was more about organic than agroecology as a way to expand certification of a few export crops such as coffee, sesame seeds, cardamom, macadamia. Seven Colectivos Orgánicos were designed as a top-down participatory platform to legitimize this certification program. Interestingly, the Colectivo Orgánico Regional Occidental is the only active to date. This is because the members already cooperated informally and saw this platform as an opportunity to strengthen their network. Despite several challenges, they have been able to keep their autonomy and, at the same time, to enjoy access to the state institutional infrastructure to develop their initiatives.



What does this story have to do with the 'commons'? Colectivo Orgánico reminds us that the state can play a key role in commoning processes. It also sheds some light on what is more relevant in the analysis of the commons – who designs it or how is it shaped? In Xela, the members of the Colectivo Orgánico took over the state-designed platform and turned it into a co-production space of agroecological discourse and practice. This also raises some questions regarding power relations. How do different actors in this network - namely consumers, solidarity economy business, and producers - negotiate their views, knowledge and interests? To what extent can this sharing experience lead to a transformative process of an alternative economic and farming model in the region? A more nuanced perspective to the commons allows us to address these and other aspects of such commoning experiences.



Fabio de Castro

#### 14/07/18 Nosotros y ellos



Nosotros y ellos. When professionals in the urban area talk about rural resistance against Xela's new territorial ordering plan (POT), often the difference between "them" and "us" is mentioned: people in the rural parts don't understand the plan, and they are not used to follow municipal rules. Supposedly, "they" are also manipulated by their community mayors, who see municipal licensing as a threat to informal arrangements from which they can make an earning.

After three days in the centre, it is time to see the other side of Xela with our own eyes, and visit Pacajá. Community mayor David García shows Michiel, Rutgerd and me around in the peri-urban neighbourhood of zona 10 with 8,000 inhabitants. He explains how the POT has good parts, but the new licenses are complicated, restrictive and expensive, especially for poor families. Once you apply for a construction permit you are also automatically registered for national real estate tax. Unfortunately, these concerns were ignored because communities hardly participated in the design of the POT. An alcalde comunitario performs many tasks. Don David negotiates with municipal institutions for public services to reach Pacajá, looks for funding for projects, solves problems between neighbours, and takes all kinds of initiatives. Every year, he organizes a litter collection day in which hundreds of people participate, even the policemen of the local station, with whom he holds good relations. For what may easily be a fulltime job, community mayors receive no salary and no budget. But there are other ways of getting things done. When an outsider of Pacajá built a condominium of a few houses, David went to talk to him. Since he would make use of roads built by the community, what contribution could he make in return? Considering David's reciprocity claim, the investor bought an electricity transformer that now serves several streets.

People in the centre mention the long history of abandonment of Xela's rural parts, but are they aware how 'they' in the communities have built community facilities and arrangements of their own? This would help to understand the resistance against the POT.



Barbara Hogenboom

### 12/07/18 Resident-authority divides over crime and public security

This Thursday afternoon we had the opportunity to observe a meeting of the Comité Municipal de Desarrollo of Quetzaltenango. This Committee brings together representatives of city neighborhoods and rural communities with municipal authorities, including the mayor. The proceedings gave us a sense of the often strenuous relationships between citizens and the local state. Citizens vent their dissatisfaction about the lack of infrastructural projects while the authorities defend themselves by pointing at the complexity of Xela's problems, the tough task of setting priorities, and bureaucratic obstacles.



This divide between residents and authorities is perhaps most tangible when it comes to crime and public security. Guatemala seems to be in the grip of petty and organized crime, ranging from ordinary street robbery and burglary to extortion by urban youth gangs and the operations of large scale drug cartels. This situation has been generating moral panics and largely ineffective responses. My endeavor is to search for examples of 'commoning' in this minefield. Bottom-up initiatives from urban residents try to counter the crime wave and the widespread sense of insecurity. After the municipal meeting I talked to a small assembly of concerned middle class citizens living in Zona 1, the historical center of Quetzaltenango. Their aim is to establish a formal Community Development Committee to deal with the security problem. The coordinator of the group, a senior citizen and journalist, evoked memories of the city's past when Xela was safe and peaceful and the town center home to quiet cantinas, poets and bohemians. In contrast, he told me, Xela today is the stage for crime. In particular, the rise of gangs (maras, pandillas) troubles the residents.

Encroaching from the poor periphery upon the city center, the gangs' main 'business' is extortion of local shops and residents. Only through unity and joint efforts the residents feel that they stand a chance to turn the tide. What struck me as positive was that this group of decent citizens abhorred the methods of many so-called 'neighbors organized against crime' who put up banners to warn criminals and gangsters (mareros) to stay away or face the 'popular justice' of lynching (see picture). While this practice can be seen as a perverse form of 'commoning', my spokespersons rejected it as futile: it is immoral and only provokes the reprisal of the criminals. You cannot fight fire with fire, they seem to imply. But peaceful neighbors by themselves are unlikely to put out the fire just by themselves. To them, it ultimately

comes down to the state which brings me to the sticky question of policing in Quetzaltenango. To be continued...

Kees Koonings

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### 11/07/18 Maya weaving as contemporary cultural commoning

Located at 21 Avenida in Zona 3, a huge hangar represents the dark history of Guatemala. Built as a tramway depot in 1930, it became a military base in 1945. During the armed conflict, it served as a counterinsurgent detention and torture centre. As recently as last May, four military were sentenced to imprisonment of between 33 and 58 years for their involvement in the torture and rape of a young woman at the base in 1981 and the disappearance of her 14-year old brother. Since the military left in 2004, the hangar and its surroundings are the location of the Intercultural Centre with two museums and an art workshop. Even with this transformation, it remains a contested place. In 2012, the government wanted to turn it into a regional police academy which provoked heavy protests from civic society and artists. In January of this year, the Historic Museum of Quetzaltenango was opened. It received severe criticism for its (mis)representation of Xela's contemporary history, Mayan culture and the armed conflict.



An important component of the Intercultural Centre is the Museum Ixkik' which was established in 2006 and is dedicated to Mayan clothing. Last Monday, its director Raquel Garcia showed us around. She opened room after room filled with weaving utensils, pottery and Mayan costumes in a wide variety. The museum intends to revive Mayan values and practices. Identifying as a Maya herself, she regrets that she only has a basic knowledge of the K'iche language and the art of weaving. In her endeavour to promote Mayan culture she doesn't stand alone. In Xela, several textile associations intend to revive Mayan culture and to recuperate from the armed conflict that hit the Maya population particularly hard. The efforts of all these women I see as a process of cultural commoning.

The women benefit from the steadily growing number of tourists in Xela who come to study Spanish at one of its many language schools or sign up as volunteers to work in a development project. Yesterday, I went back to the Ixkik' museum to interview Raquel Garcia. In the middle of her story, we had to stop because a language teacher and two students entered. Raquel invited them to take a seat. While I left, she started her exposé, explaining how she and her colleagues studied the Mayan Codices to conclude that the Mayan culture is both age-old and very much alive.

Annelou Ypeij

Photo courtesy of Amparo de Leon and Charlotte Middleton, teacher and student at Trama Textiles

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### 10/07/18 The market between disorder and informal organization

Before I go to bed after a long Xela day, I eat a banana which I bought at the Mercado Minerva this afternoon. Xela has two big city markets. Minerva is the biggest. Its name comes from a structure that looks like a Greek temple towering over the entrance. It is also called El Terminal because of a noisy and bustling bus station at the other end. In between you find a labyrinth of alleys, small buildings and stalls, that make up the market. It is in many ways a typical Latin American market but its chaotic make-up and variety of activities gives it a unique character: Something between a North African zouk and a Brazilian favela!

Indigenous women sell all kinds of fruits and vegetables. Some of the fruits come from farther away, but most of the vegetables are produced at the outskirts of the city. The enormous radish and broccoli testify to the region's fame of harbouring some of the most fertile agricultural land in the world. The small alleys are filled with customers and boys with wheel barrows who bring and take products. The inside part of the market is solidly covered. Outside vendors protect themselves against the rain and the sun by makeshift plastic covers that blow in the wind.



Despite the chaotic and unregulated appearance it is easy to see an 'order'. Some stalls are almost like little shops or are located on the best spots. Towards the periphery, poor women sit on the cement to sell small quantities of tomatoes or lychee. In between, young people walk around selling odd products like ice cream or computer cables.

There is no doubt about the economic importance of the market, both for the city, the consumers and the vendedores. The absence of any form of visible regulation is therefore remarkable. The office that regulates the market has four paid officials. The order is mostly 'informal' - some people say 'illegal' - based on informal agreements between sindicatos of market vendors and officials.

The local press, shop owners, residents and local entrepreneurs regularly complain about the informality of the markets. Some of their complaints are real. A deadly fire inside the Minerva market last year testifies to that, just as the dangerous traffic situations everyone can see. But they ignore the informal organization within the markets, the varied ways in which it allows the market to keep functioning every day. Can we understand these processes through the concept of the commons? That is the question we try to answer!

Michiel Baud

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#### 09/07/18 CEDLA goes Xela! Testing joint fieldwork on commons in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

**What?** Today we start an exciting experiment: joint fieldwork on commons in Latin America. For the first time in CEDLA's history, we are doing fieldwork with a team of seven researchers (two of them are still on the plane as we speak). By doing so we will practice multidisciplinary research 'on the spot', in order to learn from each other's approaches and insights. The project's working title is 'Xela stories of transformation: A commons perspectives on (peri-)urban resource use, territoriality, and cultural representation'. Through this collective endeavour, we hope to better understand the reshaping of society, and contribute to key social science and humanities debates on the region's particular trajectory of development.



**Where?** We are based in the country's second city: Quetzaltenango – locally known as Xela (short for Xelajú Noj, its K'iche name). It is located in the Western highlands of Guatemala. While the commons and processes of commoning and decommoning can be studied almost anywhere, we opted for Central America because in recent years CEDLA has worked less on this part of Latin America. Among the

reasons to select Xela was that this medium-sized city holds an interesting mix of urban and rural areas in its territory, and also social and ethnical (indigenous and rural) diversity. At this first day walking around Xela we have indeed witnessed the diversity of this lively city.

**Why?** This experimental joint fieldwork aims to jump start CEDLA's new research programme 'Reshaping society and the commons in Latin America'. The commons approach has become a vibrant interdisciplinary field, and we use it as a connecting analytical perspective. We will analyze social processes around traditional commons - natural resources such as water, land and forest - as well as so-called new commons - identities, urban public spaces, collective practices and knowledge. Territory and identity are key concepts in our understanding of the commons and (de-)commoning in Latin America.

**How?** We will do research on commoning around 'Maya' tourism, cemeteries and security, as well as around agriculture, water and markets. These themes evidently flow from each one's research interests, but in Xela we will also join one another in activities and have group visits and interviews. As with any experiment, some methods of doing joint research and connecting themes and insights have to be developed while doing. Last night over pizza, for instance, we ended up discussing if commons and commoning require a fixed group of people, or if may also be transitory (to be continued).



Over the next 12 days we will share our Xela experiences through a series of blogs.

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