Rendering territory (in)visible

Approaching urban struggles through a socio-territorial lens

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Everyday resistances and struggles over contested urban territories are particularly instructive for those interested in urban futures in the making. However, moving beyond the 'territorial trap' of narrow definitions of fixed and bounded territory closely associated with the nation state and state actors is critical for further developing a relational understanding of space and power. Processes of territorialization, with reference to socio-territorial concepts emerging from Latin American Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and feminist social movements and scholarship, help show how urban territories materialize from spatial regulations, collective imaginaries, and everyday practices. Urban territories do therefore serve as both the site of and what is at stake in social struggle. This chapter's empirical case study of Mexico City foregrounds urbanization and territorialization as key to a situated understanding of territory as a social product. Furthermore we engage in a decentered perspective that focuses on the spatial dimension of power relations, with an emphasis on non-state actors such as city inhabitants and their ordinary urban practices and resistance against a large-scale infrastructure project. By grasping the epistemological and empirical complexities of a socio-territorial approach, this contribution aims to put territory to use for the transdisciplinary field of urban studies.

Introduction

The grainy picture shows a group of about twenty people – most of them male, some uniformed – standing in front of a colorful mural. Behind their backs, a large portrait of the Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata seems to make direct eye contact with the photographer. However, only one eye is visible. The other is in the process of being covered with white paint by two men standing on ladders and wielding paint rollers on extension poles, who are painting over the entire mural. This photograph of the destruction of the mural 'Alerta mi general Emiliano Zapata en la lucha de Atenco' [Alert my general Emiliano Zapata in the struggle of Atenco] on December 12, 2013, was published the following day on the blog of the Frente de Pueblos en Defensa de la Tierra [People's Front in Defense of the Land, or FPDT] (FPDT 2013), a social movement set out to stop the large-scale infrastructure project of a new international airport on land of the municipality of San Salvador Atenco on the eastern outskirts of Mexico City. The image, taken by an unnamed photographer, is illustrative of what we have introduced elsewhere as 'contested urban territories' (Schwarz and Streule 2020). Taking the violent erasure of the mural as a starting point for this chapter, we examine contemporary urban contestations through a socio-territorial lens. Like layers of paint, the transformation of urban territories always leaves traces of former uses and points to the ways in which questions of representation, identity, and group formation as well as economics and ecology are constantly being negotiated over, in and through space. Such contested spatial representations – or, as Andrea Brighenti (2010) puts it, inscriptions in the (publicly) visible – are but one of the myriad ways of how urban territories are appropriated, adapted, and transformed. Whereas the mural

of Atenco serves to illustrate one of the many means of how ordinary people produce urban territories on an everyday basis, the erasure of the mural exemplifies a specific take on 'territoriology,' differing significantly from prevailing definitions of the term which we will further develop in this chapter and condense here in two basic points: First, territorial practices are not always directly related to the nation state or to state actors. Second, territorial practices are not limited to human or animal behavior of a group or individual defending a 'home turf.'

In this chapter, we outline a socio-territorial perspective on the urban that puts non-state actors and everyday practices center stage.[1] Urban territories, as we understand them, emerge from collective imaginaries as well as spatial regulations, both of which materialize in space and are in constant transformation. We therefore conceive of territory as a social process, always in the making. Framing territory as a social process highlights the significance of urban territories as both the site of and what is at stake in contemporary contestations in cities. As urban scholars, our main questions analyzing social struggles in the context of urbanization are: What is contested? Who are the actors involved? What are their claims? What are their strategies? And where are the different actors socially and geographically situated? To tackle these questions, we propose to move beyond statism and its narrower definitions of fixed and bounded territory closely associated with the nation state to open new perspectives on relational territory. This conceptual engagement implies joining in a critical debate about relational power, a central tenet of any socio-territorial approach providing a way to avert the 'territorial trap,' as John Agnew (1994) famously called the problematic reification of territory.

To drive a shift of perspective in the anglophone human geography field – a 'transposition of territory,' as we have called it elsewhere (Schwarz and Streule 2016) – we draw on socio-territorial concepts emerging from Latin American Indigenous, Afrodescendant and feminist social movements and scholarship.[2] Currently, it seems that large-scale natural resource extraction – framed as neoextractivism with dramatic transformation of landscapes, usually accompanied and driven by large-scale infrastructure projects – is the main domain in which activists and scholars fruitfully apply the concept of territory (e.g. Svampa 2015; Bartra 2015; Escobar 2016; Anthias 2018). Neoextractivism also applies to the urban context, as Maristella Svampa and Enrique Viale (2014: 10) show by using this lens to analyze the process that

[1] Methodologically, our chapter draws on methods including cartography, document research, interviews and ethnographic insights into the case study of San Salvador Atenco in Mexico City to elaborate on a situated understanding of territorialization as a social process (Streule 2020).

[2] This relational concept of territory differs significantly from the common definition in anglophone geography where territory is mainly considered to be a political technology, resulting from social and political strategies to delimit and control space (see Sack 1986; Sassen 2013; Elden 2019).

produces exclusive urban territories. Closely related is the work of feminist decolonial scholars linking questions of bodies with territories through collaborative methods of research and reflection (e.g. Ulloa 2016; Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo 2017; Zaragocín and Caretta 2020).

These various recent approaches generally build on longstanding debates on a relational approach on territory, particularly put forth by Latin America-based scholars, in which territory is mainly understood as a spatial social product deeply shaped by unequal power relations (e.g. Becker 1985; Porto-Gonçalves 2001, 2006; Saquet and Sposito 2009; Haesbaert 2013; Santos 2017). An interdisciplinary approach at the intersections between human geography, sociocultural anthropology, architecture, planning and sociology forms the basis for research in this emerging field of inquiry. Explicitly urban perspectives, while still somehow fragmented, are receiving increasing interest in recent debates (see Echeverría and Rincón 2000; Lindón 2019 and other contributions in our 2018 *Geographica Helvetica* special issue: Schwarz and Streule 2020). We thus consider territory an analytical category that is crucial to understand today's urban transformations because it is a particularly helpful focus for inquiring into the social production of urban space and 'the spatial dimension of power relations' (Haesbaert 2011. By grasping the epistemological and empirical complexities of a socio-territorial approach, this contribution aims to put territory to use for the transdisciplinary field of urban studies.

Zapata at Atenco: Defending the commons

In the municipality of San Salvador Atenco at the periphery of Mexico City, plans for a new international airport have been the focal point of resistance by local inhabitants, many of whom work in farming. A quick overview of the recent history of contestations over land in the context of this large-scale infrastructure project will help to gauge the relevance of rendering a mural visible or invisible.

Adorning the walls of the municipal auditorium on the main square of Atenco until its destruction in 2013, the mural by Mexican artist Javier Campos 'Cienfuegos' was originally painted in 2001 (Figure 7.1). It is a telling example of our understanding of territories as being produced precisely in moments of social struggle over the practices, meanings and tenures of urban space.

Figure 7.1 Original mural 'Alerta mi general Emiliano Zapata en la lucha de Atenco' by J. Campos 'Cienfuegos' before it was erased with white paint (Image: Monika Streule, 2013).

Prior to the start of construction of the airport on the plains of the former Lake Texcoco – a vast area of state-owned land in the eastern part of Mexico City – the government planned to expropriate land adjacent to the municipality of Atenco as early as 2001. It abandoned the plans in the following years and never carried out this large-scale confiscation in part a result of successful local organizing by the social movement around the People's Front in Defense of the Land. Brutal police repression, including sexualized violence against protesters, followed in 2006 and was condemned internationally (see Giordano 2006).

However, plans for the airport have been relaunched since the state governor responsible for this police operation, Enrique Peña Nieto, became president of Mexico in 2012. The very same land was again earmarked for an upscaled project pushing a massive urban transformation: a private developers' project, the Ciudad Futura [Future City], not only intended to build a major international airport hub serving the whole region of the Americas and with a passenger capacity four times bigger than that of the existing airport, but also intended to develop large parts of the former lake bed of Texcoco Lake into a business district with condominium towers and other real estate projects.

This is the backdrop upon which to measure the symbolic value of the destruction of the mural, which stands for the collective memory of socio-territorial struggles in Atenco since at least 2001. The mural serves as a highly visible reference to the unfinished project of the Mexican Revolution some eight decades before. The huge portrait of Mexican revolutionary Emiliano Zapata, considered an icon of radical land reform, provides the most direct hint towards the main issue at stake in this whitewashing: communal land used for agriculture according to *ejido* territorial regulation, a form of collective land use established in the 1930s in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution and modeled upon precolonial agricultural commons.

From a socio-territorial perspective, ejidal land tenure is key to understanding the ongoing conflict in Atenco and other peripheral communities of Mexico City. Its main feature is collective ownership of plots which are cultivated for the individual usufruct of each member of the ejido. Land uses were originally restricted to agricultural purposes, and land could not be legally sold nor urbanized. Even after a reform in 1992 introduced drastic legal changes, the commodification of ejido land still depends on the consent of a majority of the Ejidatarixs, the members of the ejido committee (Varley and Salazar 2021). This unique form of territorial regulation thus represents a major obstacle to urbanization and land use change. At the same time, the ejido as a territory is also stabilized and reproduced through agricultural practices.

Tilling the soil means defending the land, as one of the leaders of the People's Front told us during an interview in 2013:

> The land is not for sale. No, our slogan is: The land is loved and defended. ... Because we know it, because we grew up there, because this is where we have experienced happiness and also a lot of sadness. We know it and therefore we defend it. How do we defend it? By planting the land, cultivating it.

(Interview with Doña Trinidad Ramírez, Mexico City, November 19, 2013; authors' translation)

This illustrates how making and sustaining territory is an active process: one of active and ongoing production much more than of passive inheritance or autochthonous entitlement. It also shows how territory serves as both a source and an expression of power in several ways, as two following examples will further clarify.

A very different kind of territory is, for instance, sketched in urbanist visions and architects' renderings of the same time. Inspiring or inhibiting certain future actions through territorialization is particularly present in design interventions of urban planners and architects alike. Bearing the programmatic title Ciudad Futura, the airport project displayed glowing landscapes full of greenery and modern buildings. Despite drafting an infrastructural megaproject such as an international airport with several runways and significant environmental impact, it also claimed to promote sustainability. Absent in these computer-generated images and the accompanying texts are current inhabitants and their uses of the land, in particular ejidal agriculture. Through these omissions, architectural discourses mirror the symbolic violence of the destruction of the mural in Atenco. Making territory is, in other words, by no means automatically a counter-hegemonic exercise. On the ground, the lines between acting 'from above' and 'from below' are blurred in multiple ways, complicating attempts to narrate these contestations in binary terms. We will return to this point later. As such, these symbolic strategies resemble each other in striving to render certain territorial practices and land uses invisible in what could be called a strategic appropriation based on de-territorialization. The apparent void which results from rendering pre-existing territorialities invisible may then be filled with a multiplicity of new visions.

Although the mural bearing the memory of Atenco's socio-territorial struggles was effaced with white paint, the vision of ejidal land as commons lives on in other forms. The People's Front blog, reporting about a local festival titled *¡La memoria y la cultura, no se borran con pintura!* [Memory and culture cannot be erased by paint!] held a couple of months later, recalls

the mural not only as a victim but as a protagonist and motivation to continue organizing: ‘This time we will not have our mural as a witness and, at the same time, a testimony of so much history, for by “erasing” it, it has already turned into another reason to fight’ (FPDT 2014, authors’ translation). As of early 2021, the municipal auditorium of Atenco continues to bear Zapatas’s name, and the mural has been temporarily resurrected, printed on a makeshift plastic tarp. After years of conflict and confrontations, the airport project was partly built but was ultimately stopped by the incoming López Obrador administration in late 2018, with plans to construct a new airport elsewhere. Recent satellite images of the area reveal that little in terms of architectural features of the airport terminals has been realized. However, a widespread network of access roads and highways has been constructed, providing a strong incentive for and acting as a driver of further urbanization of the lacustrine zone. Alternative visions for the region are being put forward through the *#YoPrefieroElLago* campaign, addressing past, present, and future human and non-human inhabitants of the lake bed through a ‘letter to the lake’ (Hackear el Aeropuerto 2018; see also Rivera 2020). Socio-territorial urban struggles over forests, land, and water are currently reaching well beyond this specific case and include contested urban territories in the wider urban peripheries of Mexico City (Streule 2019; Sawyer et al. 2021).

Urban territories: A socio-territorial approach

Conceptualizations of territory, territoriality, and territorialization are subject to profound, longstanding debates in the field of human geography. A relational understanding of territory – of critical importance for examining urban socio-territorial struggles – is widely debated by francophone geographers in particular (e.g. Gottmann 1973; Raffestin 1980; Moine 2006; Giraut 2013) and increasingly discussed in the field of urban studies (e.g. Schwarz and Streule 2016) and related disciplines such as architecture (e.g. ETH Studio Basel 2016). Others have shed light on the concept’s widespread use in fascist ideologies, particularly fascist reifications in National Socialist-slogans such as ‘blood and soil’ (Barnes and Minca 2012; Minca and Rowan 2016; Michel 2018). Taking a critical stance against essentialist and exclusive understandings of territorialization, current debates in political and social geography also oppose prevailing understandings of territoriality because they too often serve as an aggressive

defense of home or place against ‘others; they misleadingly suggest seemingly fixed and clearly defined borders.[3]

The socio-territorial approach proposed here contributes to the analysis of urban contestations and radically challenges essentialist and behavioristic approaches to territoriology through (1) understanding urban territory as a relational social product and (2) analyzing territorialization with a focus on power relations. This goes together with the study of different key dimensions of urban territory, namely: (3) materiality and the built environment, (4) urban imaginaries and representations of territory, and (5) lived experiences and everyday practices. In the following, we will briefly outline each of these interrelated aspects.

(1) Urban territory as a relational social product

Research in line with the socio-territorial approach is attentive to the ways in which territories are made and remade in constantly shifting coalitions and situations rather than assuming an intrinsic or innate human territoriality. A socio-territorial perspective is interested in the process of territorialization and its diverse actors. Beyond the scale of the nation state, which is often prioritized in political geography, a socio-territorial approach helps to shift focus towards processes of territorializations related to urban transformations. Here, the oeuvre of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and other debates on relational space (e.g. Massey 1994; Hart 2018) provide a particularly useful backdrop as they propose to conceive urbanization as an ongoing social process:

> Spatial practice regulates life – it does not create it. Space has no power ‘in itself,’ nor does space as such determine spatial contradictions. These are contradictions of society … that simply emerge in space, at the level of space, and so engender the contradictions of space.
>
> (Lefebvre 1991: 358)

A similar relational approach to urban territories provides a socio-territorial lens that is useful for analyzing ongoing processes of de- and reterritorialization and their inherent questions of power, as the next section will illustrate in more detail. Latin America-based conceptualizations

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[3] Such a reified idea of territory is commonly employed in the natural sciences, specifically in animal ecology – though even within this field, definitions of territoriality tend to differ significantly (e.g. Maher and Lott 1995; Bartlett and Light 2017). For example, research along this line observes song birds’ use of acoustic markers to outline their territory during breeding time, or herbivorous fish defending ‘their’ algae against competing corals. Applications of this approach to humans and human territorial behavior have also been made, particularly in the field of anthropology.

of territory revolving around such questions of relationality are closely linked to an understanding of urban space as socially produced.

(2) Territorialization through power relations

Socio-territorial perspectives revolve around the above outlined understanding of territory as a relational concept and additionally engage with a particular focus on power relations (see e.g. Raffestin 1980). Such a notion of territory seeks to lift the veil on 'the spatial dimension of power relations' (Haesbaert 2011: 281). Being able to exert influence upon processes of territorialization is crucial for gaining and increasing social visibility and recognition (Zibechi 2008; 2012). We can observe a diverse set of social subjects with individual and collective memories, interests, capitals and powers, who express and practice their territoriality from a broad set of different social positions (Echeverría and Rincón 2000: 12). In this context, it is pertinent to link a subject's spatial practices and knowledge production back to their social position, and consequently, questions of power (e.g. Best 2014; Schwarz 2017). These subjects are always situated in contexts which both circumscribe and affect them. Social inequalities organized along categories such as gender, race, and class are reproduced or contested by every subject through their everyday practice. The meaning of such contestations and struggles is, as Fernandes (2009) argues, basic to the territory concept. Territory, understood as a social product, is thus made by these subjects and is at the same time aware of social contradictions:

> Territories do not exist if not for the social relations and power relations that form them and thus, they always affirm the social subjects by whom they are realized. Therefore, rather than idealizing any territoriality, it is necessary to verify the relations which shape them.
>
> (Porto-Gonçalves 2006: 179; authors' translation)

Rather than something arising from a certain geographical location or ecology, territories are contingent and fragile products in constant need of stabilization and renegotiation. Therefore, 'conflicts, powers, subversions and resistances belong to all territorial construction, which means to recognize the constantly fragile quality of territory. Its consistency is permanently imprecise, its coherence is an illusion, a never-ending search' (Echeverría and Rincón 2000: 12; authors' translation). The production of urban territory is the precise instance in which social relations are disputed, stabilized, and mediated. At the same time, it seems prudent to keep things complicated. The task ahead is to carefully analyze 'ordinary' socio-territorial

urban constellations and negotiations rather than to romanticize them. Just as ordinary lifeworlds, and very much as part of them, heterotopian places, resistances, and alternative worlds are messily interwoven with social contradictions and unequal power relations.[4] Yet there are, as Penelope Anthias (2019: 71) writes with a view to Indigenous lifeworlds affected by extractivism, 'challenges to sustaining a pluriverse on a gas field.' To understand how such exceptional and ordinary urban territories are produced and contested, a socio-territorial approach attends to materiality, meaning, and the everyday as key dimensions of urban territorializations.

(3) Materiality and the built environment

Power relations and social processes of negotiation concerning territorial practices and meanings unfold in the material conditions of urban territories. As it applies a specific focus on the concrete, material conditions of urbanization, a socio-territorial perspective is particularly useful for an urbanist analysis (Schmid 2015: 293). Current debates on the concept of territory in the social sciences are further nourished by interpretations stemming from the field of architecture. The concept of territory has circulated for a while particularly in the field of architectural research and is based strongly on conceptualizations by André Corboz (2001) along with Saverio Muratori (1967) and Alberto Magnaghi (1998). Thus, in this approach of architectural research, territory differs also from the conventional framing as the bounded space of the anglophone tradition. Conversely, it is mainly understood as a concrete, physical reality with its own specific characteristics. In that sense, social processes like urbanization are inscribed into territory and materialize as such in a particular space and time. Corboz, for instance, describes this inscription as follows:

> Most layers are both very thin and filled with lacunae. Above all, we do not just add to these layers, we erase. Some strata have even been deleted on purpose. … The territory, so heavily charged with traces and with past readings, seems very similar to a palimpsest.
>
> (Corboz 2001: 228; authors' translation)

[4] Along the way, it would appear that such a relational stance also has the potential to respect and include latent territories created by human/non-human interactions and interspecies relations, such as those beautifully traced by Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2015) in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. To live (and die) well together in capitalist ruins may depend on our skills to track down, create, and shape possible future territories (Tsing 2015; Haraway 2016).

In this view, urbanization – or more specifically, large-scale urban infrastructures like dams, highways or airports – comes up against concrete conditions: that is, the land with its specific characteristics and social and economic constellations as it is shaped and transformed by processes of urbanization (Schmid 2015: 290). Moreover, power relations are profoundly embedded in territory; they tend to reproduce themselves through materialization and hence intensify hegemonic territorial relations. Thus, processes of territorialization are deeply engraved in the land, materialized in the built environment with its specific features of long duration and sometimes resistant to change, like transport infrastructures, real estate, or landscape engineering. This interpretation resonates productively with the relational conceptualization of territory defined above, upon which we draw in this chapter for the elaboration of a relational socio-territorial approach (see also Schwarz and Streule 2016; Streule 2018).

(4) Urban imaginaries and representations of territory

Despite this material inertia, a conceptualization of territory as socially produced renders urban territory contestable – and it does so via both materiality and meaning:

> In this process of territorialization, space undergoes variations of meaning over time. This can take millenniums, decades, or years, but … it can also happen fast, as in transformations through the abrupt impact of planned or incidental interventions, or due to the emergence of protagonists with a strong ability to control pre-existing logics. Those expressions … constitute a system of codes, which provide it with a particular meaning. In this context, space, while territory, is only as stable or instable as the practices of territoriality it stems from.
>
> (Echeverría and Rincón 2000: 18; authors' translation)

Territorial protagonists, equipped with diverse individual and collective memories and urban imaginaries (Silva 1992), establish relations and negotiate with each other to fix particular meanings of territories. Hence, a socio-territorial perspective on urbanization foregrounds the intentions of social actors and the meanings they assign to territory. Or, as Carlos Walter Porto-Gonçalves writes, 'places do not exist a priori but are constructed in the shifting terrain of social struggles, which are also struggles over the attribution of meaning' (2001: 15). This attribution of meaning is a collective, a social endeavor, and again, it is deeply inscribed with

social contradictions and inequalities reflected in multiple concurrent representations of territory.

To name just three of the many sources of such representations of territory in the context of our case study, there are, first, the visual devices of professional planners, cartographers, and engineers – maps, master plans, and architectural renderings. Computer-generated images such as the ones employed by Ciudad Futura described above frequently serve as tools of neoliberal urbanism, representing 'distinctive forms of visualizing and marketing the urban' (Degen et al. 2017: 3). Second, complex sets of spatial regulations and legal frameworks regarding land use and urbanist development plans of all kinds stand for another, closely related path: statist territorial representations (Wilson 2014). Yet urban territories come forth through powerful collective imaginaries which emerge along, beyond, and, at times, in spite of such professional or statist interventions. Third, these representations of territory emerge from an everyday making-sense-of-the-urban guided by urban imaginaries, and take a wide spectrum of shapes. They range in scale and scope from reproducing a dominant status quo to engaging in resistance and radical change (Lindón 2019), as well as from an outward-looking 'global sense of place' (Massey 1994) to an identitarian and exclusionary perspective creating seemingly 'authentic communities' (Ince 2011). Such homogenizing or essentializing visions regarding the shape and character of urban entities – say, 'the banlieue' or 'the European city' – are conjured up (Schwarz 2022). Some of these tropes tend to feed on and contribute to territorial stigmatization (Wacquant et al. 2014) and related struggles for recognition (Sisson 2021. Understanding territorial representations thus as contingent and in constant transformation, a socio-territorial approach focuses on urban imaginaries to highlight various ways of representations of diverse and powerful territorializations. As such, this approach mirrors affects along representations' entire spectrum, from hope to despair.

(5) Lived experiences and everyday practices

Following Milton Santos's call to heed 'banal spaces' (2000), Latin America-based scholars propose to examine the 'territories of the everyday' (Fernandes 2009) to understand the impact of global spatial regulations in the production of specific urban territories.

> Consequently, there is an escalating conflict between local space, a space lived by all neighbours, and global space, inhabited by a rationalizing process and with an ideological content of distant origin. This process and content arrive at each place with objects and rules established to serve them; hence, the interest in reclaiming the notion

> of banal space, that is, the territory of everyone, which is often contained in the limits of the work of everyone.
>
> (Santos 2017: 29)

It is in the vast terrain of everyday practices that people's territorial practices are most intimately interwoven with the co-production of materiality and meaning. Ordinary urban situations are when and where 'to territorialize is to turn stone, clay, or even dust into a vehicle of transformative power' (Brighenti and Kärrholm 2020: 2).[5]

In contrast to other already fully built up municipalities in the peripheries of Mexico City, many inhabitants of Atenco work cultivating the ejido land. 'These projects, the airport or Ciudad Futura, are not for us,' says Trinidad Ramírez in an interview conducted 19 November 2013. 'We know that urbanization will happen, but we want to control these processes ourselves' (*ibid.*). A specific use value is given to land as it is often the only income source for families and thus the sole inheritance for future generations. Back in November 2013, everything seemed peaceful in Atenco, but Ramírez was expecting the next 'blow of the beast,' as she puts it. 'The government conceals its intentions and keeps sending other people into the village to buy up land' (*ibid.*).

At the same time, there were other struggles over urban territories going on in Atenco: The election for leaders of the ejidal committee was just won over by the members in favor of the airport project in October 2013 – the representation of the more than 950 Ejiditarixs, which until then had been made up of people loyal to the People's Front in Defense of the Land. Though the vote was corrupted, offering 2,500 pesos for those who put their cross in the right place, this change in local politics is an example of the different interests and urban imaginaries within the inhabitants themselves. It remains uncertain where the new airport for Mexico City will actually be built. The government is keeping a low profile, considering a compromise in which the landing strips would be laid on the state-owned land of the lake basin before the project was just completely stopped in 2018. Although the territorial conflict over the construction of the new airport seems to be over, the dispute over urban development in the much sought-after territory of the former Texcoco Lake has not yet been decided. In Atenco, urban imaginaries and everyday practices as well as the future of Mexico City are contested;

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5 That resonates strongly with Sylvaine Bulle's (2019: 215) reflection on ordinary discourse in the context of the Zad, a former land occupation against the construction of an airport near Nantes, France, describing the occupation as a set of customary practices, gestures, and even aesthetics that brings people together to evaluate events and to assemble individual stories in a collective narrative with a particular attention to living spaces.

expressed clearly in their opposition to the idea of their land being accessed again, as Ramírez concludes: ‘The land is not for sale.’

It is important to note that we separate the socio-territorial approach into five aspects here for narrative clarity; whereas on the ground, the reality is much messier and more entwined. When urban territories are created, all above-mentioned aspects are present at the same time, and only reveal themselves as distinct when analyzed from a specific angle. The urban understood as territory can be analyzed simultaneously in its material dimension, as everyday urban experiences, and as techniques of spatial regulation and representation, each with a focus on unequal power relations (Schwarz and Streule 2020: 13). Moreover, it is key to remember that territorialization, while conducted by individual subjects, is always a collective undertaking.

Conclusions

Prevailing understandings frame territory to be a spatial unit that has a certain extent, is delimited from neighboring territories by borders, and is often characterized by specific forms of governance. Basically, this definition regards territory as a bounded area over which a social or political institution, foremost the nation state, exerts power and control. Although the national state territory has not remained the only scale of analysis, territorial conflicts are generally interpreted as struggles for hegemony and an aggressive defense of one’s home or place against ‘others.’ Instead, this chapter suggests approaching contemporary social struggles in Mexico City through a socio-territorial lens based on an understanding of urban territories as a relational social product, and by analyzing territorialization with a focus on power relations. By looking at materiality, urban imaginaries, and representations, as well as at everyday practices such as the mural at the municipality hall, the professional renderings of real estate development, or the cultivation of the land and defense of the commons by inhabitants, it is possible to delineate different yet deeply interrelated dimensions of urban territories. In understanding the ways and strategies in which the social movement around the People’s Front in Defense of the Land resisted the airport project, the focus on processes of urbanization and territorialization proved significant.

The socio-territorial approach offered here has highlighted the destruction of the Atenco mural as an attempt to efface the urban imaginary of inhabitants resisting the airport project and defend instead their vision of urbanity based on collective land tenure in which community members have usufruct rights rather than individual ownership rights to land. A socio-territorial approach can move the discussion of territoriology beyond a focus on borders and boundaries and towards a more relational understanding of space and power. In sharp contrast to

essentializing both ideas of territoriality and the territorial nation state, the relational urban territories in question are conceived as contingent, multiple, potentially unbounded, ambiguous, and/or overlapping. Drawing, stabilizing, and defining sharp boundaries is not imperative to a socio-territorial approach. Rogério Haesbaert (2013) has fittingly named this 'multi-territoriality:' It is precisely in these more-than-bounded territories that multiply-scaled processes of urbanization are most approximately reflected.

We have argued that a socio-territorial approach in urban studies allows us to see the possibilities of emphasizing unequal power relations among social subjects involved in the making of urban territories, as they are reflected in contradictions, contingencies, and stakes of urban struggles. This perspective takes us beyond the limitations of a simplified understanding of territorialization either involving actors 'from above' or 'from below' by replacing them with a more careful analysis of unequal power relations and social difference. As the case study of Mexico City has demonstrated, such a territorial complexity does often happen through blurred adversaries between urban social movements and state actors such as functionaries, urbanists, or planners. Yet even where it appears to play out almost horizontally such as between members of the ejidal committee associated to different political parties, such struggles are infused with and informed and formed by unequal positions of power. Tackling the complexity of territorialization is messy but crucial for a situated analysis of socio-territorial relations that render questions of power and difference visible in urban analysis. Approached through a socio-territorial lens, a relational concept of urban territory can make discernible how people struggle for different lifeworlds, meanings, and everyday practices, and how they can find ways to begin to lay the basis for more just urban worlds.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Doña Trinidad Ramírez for sharing her knowledge, and to the editors for feedback on an earlier version of this text. The Heinrich Böll Foundation and the Swiss National Science Foundation provided funding for our research in Mexico in 2013. Research and writing by Monika Streule leading to this publication has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Sklodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101024446.

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