

Repair, maintenance, and ordinary politics: Patronage relations in the Mexico City public markets' network

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Abstract

This article discusses the significance of understanding repair and maintenance and their political salience as embedded in the broader field of ordinary politics. By drawing on recent literature about repair and maintenance and their political salience, and on political ethnographic definitions of politics, it provides an approach that can enable an exploration of the paradoxical and multifaceted political nature of repair and maintenance and their political outcomes. The article follows the experience of repair and maintenance in the Mexico City public markets' network to shed light on the capacity of these practices to preserve and transform both urban infrastructures and socio-political orders. Focusing on the ordinary political encounters through which traders, government officials, and politicians negotiate the restoration of deteriorated public markets, repair and maintenance emerge as a central factor in the reproduction of patronage relations in Mexico City. Through cyclical encounters in which repair and maintenance are exchanged for political support, the former are transformed into a point of convergence where political actors and agendas meet and mesh. The perpetuation of patronage in the markets' network further reveals the ambivalent and contentious political effects of repair and maintenance, as they help to simultaneously reassert state power and preserve the markets as socially valuable urban infrastructure. The article thus contributes to an ongoing discussion concerning the political reach of everyday practices and their variegated political outcomes.

Keywords

Infrastructure, politics, repair, maintenance, Mexico City

Introduction

The Mexico City public markets' network is one of the largest in Latin America. Officially, it consists of 329 commercial facilities and accommodates more than 72,000 traders, although recently, traders and authorities speak of 336 facilities (Jefatura De Gobierno, 2022). The public markets' network expands across 16 *alcaldías* (boroughs) and has been a central feature in Mexico

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City's urban landscape for around 70 years.¹ The history of this network makes it one of the most fascinating infrastructural projects that the Mexican state has put in motion to modernise the Mexico City's urban food system. Today, these markets play a key role in supplying city residents with food and other basic staples, and some have a significant impact at the metropolitan and national scales functioning as large hubs of economic activity (Giglia, 2018). For its size and dynamics, the public markets' network constantly brings together traders, government officials, and politicians to debate and negotiate the future of this commercial urban infrastructure in politically contentious encounters.

As this article shows, repair and maintenance practices emerge as two central themes in those encounters, raising questions about the political reach of such practices as they restore more than the public markets' material conditions. In Mexico City, the labour-intensive political work that trader leaders, government officials, and politicians perform around repair and maintenance reminds us of Graham and Thrift's original question about what is exactly repaired and maintained when things (are about to) break down: "Is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some 'larger' entity?" (2007: 4). The cyclical encounters between Mexico City public markets' stakeholders shed light on this matter, as negotiations for repair and maintenance also involve the restoration of long-standing patronage relations.

Two main contributions emerge from this article. First, it provides the rationale for the study of repair and maintenance as practices embedded in ordinary politics to better understand their paradoxical, multifaceted, and contentious political salience and outcomes. This approach is developed by linking the debates about the political salience of repair and maintenance (Deflorian, 2021; Graham and Thrift, 2007; Velho and Ureta, 2019) to the political ethnographic understandings of politics (Auyero, 2004, 2007, Auyero et al., 2009; Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017). Both analytical strands contribute here to outlining the complex role of repair and maintenance in the making of larger socio-political orders. Second, the article sheds light on the historical processes that embedded repair and maintenance in Mexico City's ordinary politics. By examining the cyclical encounters between traders and state agents around repair and maintenance, the article reveals the capacity of these humble practices to perpetuate the long-standing patron-client structures that have characterised the political life of the public markets' network since its inception.

To unpack the embeddedness of repair and maintenance in ordinary politics, the article proceeds as follows. The first section explores how the notions of repair, maintenance, their political salience, and ordinary politics have been discussed in the literature. This helps to outline the conceptual overlaps and tensions between infrastructural and political ethnographic approaches to repair, maintenance, and politics. The second section focuses on key historical processes that transformed repair and maintenance into one of the most critical and negotiated issues among traders, government officials, and politicians in Mexico City. After exploring the nexus infrastructure provision-clientelism-deterioration, the section examines the cyclical logics of repair and maintenance negotiation and their significance in the reproduction of patronage relations in the public markets' network. In addition to outlining the central ideas in this article, the conclusion reflects on the significance of the proposed approach to study the political nature and political reach of repair and maintenance.

Repair, maintenance, and ordinary politics

Repair, maintenance, and their political salience and outcomes have been the object of an increasingly systematic enquiry over the past decades. The study of these practices and their politics has provided significant insights into their empirically complex dynamics and multifaceted economic, political, social, and cultural outcomes. In this section, I examine some key insights from the

literature and put them in conversation with political ethnographic approaches to politics to develop an understanding of repair and maintenance as practices embedded in ordinary politics. By embedding the political salience of repair and maintenance in ordinary politics, we can better understand their paradoxical, multifaceted, and contentious political logics and outcomes. To advance this argument, we first need to define what repair and maintenance are and why they are considered inherently political.

Defining repair and maintenance

In their broader sense and from a philosophical perspective, repair and maintenance are twin processes located in between the continual decay and breakdown of our material world and the restoration of its practical equilibrium (Graham and Thrift, 2007). More empirically, repair and maintenance comprise a wide range of ongoing collective activities that simultaneously have the capacity to preserve and transform socio-technical systems (Graham and Thrift, 2007; Jackson, 2014; Meißner, 2021). In this vein, the literature provides many examples of what is maintained and repaired and how, from buildings (Strebel, 2011) to water pipes (Anand, 2015; Buser and Boyer, 2021), canals and ditches (Barnes, 2017), electricity networks (Baptista, 2019), electronic devices (Corwin, 2018), and banknotes (Pink et al., 2019). This literature also highlights that both ordinary people, public and private agencies, and expert teams and individuals carry out these activities.

These studies have coined definitions of repair and maintenance that implicitly emphasise their interconnectedness and complementary capacity to restore the order and meaning of socio-technical systems. In doing so, the literature demarcates the diverse economic, political, and cultural possibilities of repair and maintenance. Jackson (2014), for example, conceives repair and maintenance as forms of tailoring, appropriating, and resisting artifacts, systems, and technologies. When linked to an ethics of care, the works of repair and maintenance emerge not only as sites of innovation but also of (deep emotional) attachment to artifacts and technologies that preserve and extend human value (Jackson, 2014: 222 and 232). This analytical vein has been empirically explored through the study of Repair Cafes where maintenance and repair means “enacting or doing care in multiple ways” (Meißner, 2021; see also Madon, 2022). Similarly, Buser and Boyer (2021: 73) conceive repair and maintenance as “an assemblage of care” for objects and people.

While repair and maintenance are often used and defined jointly and interchangeably as illustrated above (see also Fredericks, 2018; Sim, 1997), some scholars have sought to capture the differences and tensions between them. In exploring flood control infrastructure, Henke (2007) defines *repair* as a form of “maintenance” or “transformation” to differentiate between works that only “tweak” the structure of a system and those that substantially reorder its relationship with its environment. Similarly, De Coss-Corzo (2021) stays with *repair* and defines it as adaptive, improvisational, and incremental practices that help hydraulic infrastructure to adjust to changing environmental conditions. In contrast, maintenance is defined as “preventative” actions that take place before breakdown and that return infrastructure “to a previously stable, officially sanctioned state” (De Coss-Corzo, 2021: 240 and 242). Opting instead for *maintenance*, Strebel (2011) understands it as “repair-before-failure” to prevent “repair-after-failure” in housing management and building service, thus drawing a temporal distinction between them. Similarly, Barnes (2017) adopts an emic perspective and uses *maintenance* as the primary concept, differentiating between state-led and farmers-led maintenance to signal the different political outcomes they lead to, namely, the reassertion of state power or the construction of communal relations.

These definitions already suggest tensions in and between repair and maintenance in at least two ways. First, tensions between notions of preservation and change, particularly around the extent of the change. Second, tensions in relation to the political actors and agendas behind practices of repair and maintenance, which is more clearly addressed by Barnes and De Coss-Corzo by linking (state-

led) maintenance to resource exploitation, labour control, and territorial stability, and repair, in the case of [De Coss-Corzo \(2021: 238\)](#), to a practice whose logics can exceed or transform those of maintenance. While repair and maintenance can be associated separately with particular actors and agendas, it is essential to explore their paradoxical, multifaceted, and contentious political role to avoid rigid distinctions between these intertwined practices. This implies understanding repair and maintenance as practices where diverse political agendas meet and mesh. For this reason, in this article I understand repair and maintenance as co-constitutive practices that operate together in temporal and spatial terms. They are two inseparable and often overlapping sets of practices that shape artifacts, infrastructures, systems, and technologies as these respond to their own decay and changing environments.

Addressing this interconnectedness is even more important to explore the political paradoxes of repair and maintenance as mediated by institutional, financial, and regulatory frameworks. Focusing on their co-constitution can contribute to problematising the capacity and the ways in which repair and maintenance simultaneously preserve or change infrastructures and political entities. This is precisely what approaching repair and maintenance as embedded in ordinary politics seeks to achieve. Before examining the notion of ordinary politics, it is necessary to analyse how the political salience of repair and maintenance has been discussed. This will provide further elements to support the significance of developing an approach that captures the paradoxical and multifaceted nature and outcomes of repair and maintenance.

Inherently political practices

Repair and maintenance are inherently political practices, just as the socio-technical entities they contribute to preserve and change. In most instances, the political salience of repair and maintenance has been described as a double-sidedness given the ways in which they are mobilised in power relations and the economic, social, political, and cultural outcomes they contribute to producing ([Anand, 2015](#); [Anand et al., 2018](#); [Corwin and Gidwani, 2021](#); [De Coss-Corzo, 2021](#); [McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008](#); [Venkatesan et al., 2018](#)). This focus on the role and the outcomes of repair and maintenance addresses their conflictive role in the making of artifacts, infrastructures, and technologies as well as socio-political orders throughout their lifespan ([Graham and Thrift, 2007](#); [Jackson, 2015](#)). The empirical instances in which this political salience has been studied provide critical insights into such conflicts, ambivalence, and contentiousness. An understanding of repair and maintenance as embedded in ordinary politics relies on such insights, particularly in the exploration of paradoxes and tensions, which are constitutive of other forms of infrastructural politics ([Téllez Contreras, 2024](#)).

As [Corwin and Gwidani \(2021\)](#) point out, the double-sidedness of repair and maintenance results from their capacity to reproduce, alongside artifacts, infrastructures, or technologies, different forms of power relations, from exploitation to control, violence and neglect, or mutual care. In this sense, repair and maintenance practices are imbued with a sense of political ambivalence and ambiguity. In Dakar, for example, [Fredericks \(2018\)](#) unveils the devastating effects of precarious maintenance and makeshift repair on waste workers' bodies but also the communal solidarities that emerge among vulnerable urban groups in their attempts to restore a sense of stability in a disruptive neoliberal city. In the US, [Knuth \(2019\)](#) captures the ambivalent effects of energy retrofitting as a form of repair as it advances decarbonisation strategies at the urban level while creating murky economies of repair that prop up capitalist accumulation and ruination as usual. As noted by [Graham and Thrift \(2007\)](#), the politics of repair and maintenance emerge in many different arenas and scales, overlapping with struggles for better wages and working conditions but also with the concealed repair expenditure of the military-industrial complex, or the uneven distribution of risk among classed and racialised populations that arises from the lack of repair and maintenance.

This multifaceted political salience is further captured by exploring the state-subaltern relationship, which permeates repair and maintenance with both the interests, values, beliefs, and projects of authorities and subordinate groups. Such is the case of Barnes' (2017) and Boudreau's (2022) respective notions of "state-led maintenance" and repair as "aspirational politics." Both concepts foreground the role of repair and maintenance in reasserting state power and its economic, political, and social agendas (see also Humphrey, 2005; Mukerji, 2009). In contrast, the farmers' "unsung maintenance" of irrigation ditches in Egypt (Barnes, 2017), the "anticipatory politics" to repair oneself and the community in Mexico City (Boudreau, 2022), or the housing repair practices of Indian urban dwellers (Bhan, 2019) speak of practices that strengthen communal ties, the constant search for solutions to contingencies, and the value of learning from the urban poor's repair and maintenance practices to imagine urban alternatives. Similarly, De Coss-Corzo (2021) captures the political possibilities of repair politics through the notion of "patchwork." Performed by street-level water infrastructure workers in Mexico City, patchwork reveals repair as an incremental practice of adaptation and improvisation that sustains the water system after breakdown without restoring its previously officially sanctioned order. Patchwork is defined as neither entirely official nor unofficial.

The discussion around the political salience of repair and maintenance has also condemned the injustices these practices perpetuate by restoring socio-technical and political entities historically associated with the oppression, dispossession, and exploitation of racialised and marginalised groups—including repair and maintenance workers. Thus, the critique has denounced the complicity of repair and maintenance in state and corporate violence and corruption (Gupta, 2018; Harvey, 2018; Hobbis, 2019), for example, in the case of profit-driven, exploitative, and discriminatory outsourced cleaning and catering services (Davies and Ollus, 2019; Froud et al., 2017; Tripathy and Carrière, 2020; Zuberi, 2013). In opposition to these tendencies, the critique has also considered the emancipatory potential of repair and maintenance (Graham and Thrift, 2007) and the possibility of infusing them with an ethics of care (Jackson, 2014). Thus, repair and maintenance have been associated with struggles against heteropatriarchy (Krasny, 2017; Song et al., 2023) and for democratic governance, freedom of movement, workers' rights, and environmental causes (De Coss-Corzo, 2021; Fredericks, 2018; Holcombe et al., 2018; Meißner, 2021; Mora-Gámez, 2020; Naiga et al., 2017).

Considering these attributes, the political salience of repair and maintenance can be defined as multifaceted, paradoxical, and contentious. This addresses Graham and Thrift's question about the role of repair and maintenance in reproducing the material entities, its surrounding order, and the larger structures they are part of. The proposed articulation between these debates and a political ethnographic approach to politics moves in this direction. By embedding repair and maintenance in ordinary politics, it recognises how the discussed ambiguities and oscillations also translate into multifarious political outcomes, while its relational approach to the making of repair and maintenance sheds light on the multiple political encounters in which these practices and their political salience are negotiated.

Embedded in ordinary politics

In political ethnography, politics is primarily understood as an ongoing relational practice rather than only as a specialised arena demarcated by dominant institutions (parties), events (elections), and professionals (politicians) (Auyero, 2000; Baiocchi and Connor, 2008; Kubik, 2009; Tilly, 2006). Politics is thus a dynamic dimension of social life produced by ordinary people's interactions, discourses, and perceptions (Auyero, 2012; Benzecry and Baiocchi, 2017; Joseph and Auyero, 2007; Lichterman, 1998). From this perspective, the relationship between politics and everyday life is that of a continuum, imbuing politics with a sense of mundanity and ordinariness and giving the nitty-gritty of everyday life a more prominent place in the making of socio-political

orders. This continuum is also visible as ordinary politics operates through interrelated routine and contentious repertoires of action. Routine politics consist of ordinary interactions between ordinary people and state agents and institutions. They are the “unimportant [political] happenings that never make it to the news” (Auyero, 2012: 30) but in fact are the backbone of our political lives, preceding and succeeding the emergence of contentious politics. Contentious politics consist of explosive collective actions, violent and non-violent, in which conflict but also forms of coordination arises between ordinary people and state agents (Auyero et al., 2009; Passy, 2009; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Because of their recursive relationship, routine and contentious politics connect official meetings, petitions, and other institutional actions with protests, campaigns, rallies, and riots in a continuum of political activity (Auyero, 2004, 2010; Scott, 1990).

Auyero’s political ethnographies of urban Argentina provide exceptional examples of the workings of ordinary politics as they assert the power of the state and the role of the urban poor in the making, preservation, and transformation of built environments and political orders. Auyero’s descriptions of the problem-solving networks and clientelist systems that help the urban poor to secure their survival with the mediation of political brokers (Auyero, 2000), of the semi-secret interactions between state agents and poor people to generate collective violence (Auyero, 2007), and of the acts of waiting imposed on the poor as a successful strategy of domination in institutional contexts (Auyero, 2012); all of them render ordinary politics a relational field of practice that transcends rigid political dichotomies. Primarily, attention is given to political encounters, their paradoxical and multifaceted political outcomes, and the diverse perceptions that ordinary people have of these politics. Patronage is one of these paradoxical outcomes, as its underpinning patron-client relationships are, simultaneously, instances of domination and control and mutual support and resistance, from which both state agents and subaltern actors unevenly benefit (Auyero et al., 2009; Passy, 2009; Tilly, 2002).

As a broader field of political activity where overlapping and conflicting agendas converge (Lee, 2006; Scott, 1998; Thompson, 1991), ordinary politics can function as a framework in which repair and maintenance and their political salience are embedded (Téllez Contreras, 2024). Not only do they share a sense of ordinariness, mundanity, and diversity, but they have also been rendered as relatively invisible and characterised by a pragmatic focus centred around problem solving. Because of this, repair and maintenance align with an understanding of ordinary politics that is attentive to the practical strategies with which diverse groups and communities negotiate the logics of their social reproduction, including the socio-technical systems supporting it. Embedding repair and maintenance in ordinary politics is not only a conceptual move, as these practices are often subjected to negotiations in ordinary political encounters in a diversity of empirical instances. The struggles for infrastructure provision, maintenance, and repair are perhaps one of the more extended. As noted, in the consolidation of formal and informal settlements and the care or neglect of poor neighbourhoods, repair and maintenance appear as a central in the agenda (Andrisani, 2019; Baptista, 2019; Silver and McFarlane, 2019). They become one of those agenda items to which urban dwellers, state agents, and other ordinary political actors return routinely but also contentiously, as a state obligation and as a social demand.

Embedded in ordinary politics, repair and maintenance stimulate routine and contentious political practices. On the one hand, state agents and ordinary people routinely negotiate the regulatory, financial, and practical frameworks of repair and maintenance works concerning roads, water and energy infrastructures, housing, etc. (Anand, 2015; Bachmann et al., 2022; Castán Broto, 2019). On the other, the lack of repair and maintenance (and associated risks) often trigger highly contentious actions to demand such negotiations and interventions (Chance, 2015; Danewid, 2020; McFarlane and Silver, 2017). Considering the embeddedness of repair and maintenance in Mexico City’s ordinary politics, and the ways in which they become routine and contentious political practices, can

further expand our understanding of how these humble activities participate simultaneously in the making of urban infrastructure and larger socio-political structures.

Repair, maintenance, and patronage in the public markets

The analysis of repair and maintenance as ordinary politics in Mexico City is primarily based on ethnographic research conducted in its public markets' network between January and October 2018 and May 2022. The following sections draw on documentary research conducted alongside participant observation and semi-structured interviews with trader leaders, government officials, and politicians. Given the political significance of repair and maintenance, a data sub-set was developed and analysed through open and selective coding to identify key narratives and events shaping the preservation of public markets. This allows to unpack the political patterns shaping repair and maintenance allocation for public markets in the following pages.

Through this examination, repair and maintenance emerged as infrastructural practices embedded in Mexico City's ordinary politics as described above. The extent of the public markets' material deterioration and the continuous demand of repair and maintenance works make these practices mundane, everyday political issues. Not only are they permanent items in traders' politico-infrastructural agendas but routinely discussed and negotiated vis-à-vis ordinary political actors, including trader leaders, borough and central government officials, and politicians. As ordinary politics, repair and maintenance politics mirror the characteristics of routine and contentious politics. They are routine politics to the extent that repair and maintenance negotiations take place all year round within broader material, regulatory, and institutional cycles and appear as "unimportant" and almost hidden in plain sight when not strategically concealed by public markets' stakeholders. State logics are thus constitutive of Mexico City's repair and maintenance politics, further infusing their ordinariness with paradoxes and tensions. In the continuum of ordinary politics, repair and maintenance in Mexico City are also contentious politics, as routine negotiations often precede and succeed the traders' discontent and mobilisation in the face of infrastructural breakdown (e.g., fires) and the uneven distribution of resources, risk, and vulnerability. In this sense, repair and maintenance realise in Mexico City's ordinary politics in multifaceted and paradoxical ways. One of them being their role in the reproduction of the traders-state patronage relationship, as repair and maintenance are exchanged for political support, facilitating both the preservation of public markets and existing power structures at the urban scale.

Markets and clientelism

Over the past three decades, repair and maintenance in the public markets' network has become a more routine and contested political issue, but their political significance dates from the early 1950s. Between 1951 and 1966, the government sought to revolutionise the city's food supply system by building and refurbishing around 200 public markets. This unparalleled intervention was part of the so-called "Mexican Miracle," a time of state investment and construction of universal and capacious infrastructures (Ziccardi, 1991). In addition to roads, dams, and airports, public markets condensed the economic and political aspirations of the post-revolutionary regime (Monroy, 2005; Zenteno, 2016) and became a means to build patronage networks. Thus, as part of the negotiations to receive a public market, traders were affiliated to corporatist and clientelist networks such as the National Confederation of Popular Organisations (CNOP)—a political organisation of the then hegemonic Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Cross and Camacho, 1996, Cross, 1998). Trader communities then also served as vote banks and political supporters of official candidates.

Accompanied by legislative reforms—such as the 1951 Markets Bylaw—public markets responded to widespread cries for modern commercial infrastructure and the control of street vending

(Castillo, 2017; Iturriaga, 2012). As a result, in less than 15 years, the government quintuplicated the number of markets and relocated around 55,000 street vendors in these premises while creating a strong clientelist political base (Meneses, 2011). Strong political ties that are still visible in the markets notwithstanding the PRI's debacle in Mexico City in recent years. After 1966, new urban priorities came into play and public investment was redirected (Davis, 1991, 1994; Ziccardi, 1991), making the public markets' network grow at a lower speed. Notwithstanding, more than 130 commercial facilities have been built since 1966, creating a network of more than 300 public markets.

The networks' expansion is crucial to understanding the political significance of repair and maintenance, as the past 70 years set three conditions for their embeddedness in ordinary politics. First, a large commercial infrastructure network was created and with it, the network's large repair and maintenance requirements as roofs, walls, corridors, stalls, electric systems, drainage, and so on, demand attention due to their intensive use in these commercial spaces. Second, a legal and institutional framework obliging the state to provide resources for repair and maintenance for public markets with was enacted to guarantee their functioning (article 115 of the Federal Constitution and the 1951 Markets Bylaw). Third, trader associations, federations, and confederations were established to organise patronage networks, through which traders were able to negotiate access to public resources and confirm their support for the regime. Such a large network, regulatory obligations, and social structures create an environment in which both repair and maintenance works are constantly needed and permanently politically charged.

Neoliberal turn and deterioration

From the 1980s onwards, the state has increasingly deemed the public markets' network as financially and politically unsustainable (Cross, 1998; Meneses, 2011). This decade inaugurated a period of neglect, marginalisation, deterioration, and decay for public markets. After a "golden era" between 1952 and 1966, the markets' construction steadily declined between 1967 and 2012 (Téllez Contreras, 2020), and repair and maintenance became scarce as the markets were seen more as a financial burden. Three neoliberal tendencies underlie this transformation. First, the expansion of transnational supermarket chains (Gasca-Zamora, 2017; López et al., 2013). Linked to free trade international treaties, retail corporations rapidly grew in number and controlled food sales as early as 1975 (Gasca and Torres, 2014; Giglia, 2018; Schatan, 1982). Second, the prioritisation of mobile and low-cost forms of popular trade such as *tianguis*, *mercados sobre ruedas*, and *concentraciones* over public markets' construction, to the extent that in 2009 they accommodate more than 100,000 vendors (Gómez, 2012).² Third, the various attempts, particularly in the past two decades, to reform the 1951 Markets Bylaw. Although unsuccessful, some of these initiatives have sought to withdraw state subsidies for repair and maintenance and transfer these responsibilities to traders (Téllez Contreras, 2020).

This neoliberal shift has contributed to the rampant deterioration of the public markets' network in the past 30 years, confirming the nexus neoliberalism-infrastructure poverty also recorded in other latitudes (Amin and Thrift, 2017; Velho and Ureta, 2019). Extensively reported in media, academic, and government outlets (Calvo, 1995; CES-CDMX, 2017; Giglia, 2018; SEDECO, 2013), neglect and deterioration have become the public markets' signature. Descriptions of clogged drainpipes, rusty doors, blown bulbs, peeled-paint walls, broken tiles, leaky roofs, unsafe makeshift electrical systems, poor waste and pest management, incomplete risk and safety assessments, and fires reveal the extent of this neglect and material deterioration. Between 2015 and 2019, at least 132 fires were reported (La Central and 06000 Plataforma Vecinal y Observatorio del Centro Histórico, 2020). The lack of repair and maintenance transform public markets into "infrastructures of despair" (Velho and Ureta, 2019: 429) that materialise neoliberal and revanchist urban policies

(Buser and Boyer, 2021; González, 2018) that, in Mexico City, also dismantle the post-revolutionary socio-political order and its imageries.

Deepened by these tendencies, the markets' infrastructural problems and lack of repair and maintenance have become focal points in traders-state political encounters. As Mario—a former *alcaldía* official—puts it, they are the “pending issues” in a shared agenda.³ Particularly for traders, these issues represent a breach of the politico-infrastructural contract signed by the state in the 1950s. For Alfonso and other trader leaders, the PRI-affiliated technocratic authorities elected in 1988—but also subsequent governments until these days—were the first to “forget its ties with the markets” and transform traders into “orphans, [into the state's] illegitimate children.” Concerns about the larger political entity and not only about the infrastructure in need of repair and maintenance are signalled here. After decades of neglect, traders routinely demand the solution of these pending material issues but also de restoration of what they consider were better times in traders-government relations. Times when the allocation of resources for the upkeep of public markets was perceived more efficient thanks to the clientelist networks built by the PRI.

Politico-infrastructural cycles

Since 1997, with the electoral defeat of the PRI at the hands of the left-wing Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD), Mexico City has experienced a political transition that promised the dismantling of clientelist networks and the rise of a more democratic society. Patronage and its patron-client relations, however, remain a strong political structure now deeply embedded in a multi-party electoral system. In the markets' network, this has meant that repair and maintenance continue to be one of the main currencies in the reproduction of patronage, as the material conditions of these public facilities depend on the lengthy, labour-intensive, cyclical political work of traders, politicians, and government officials. But how does this cyclical political work look like?

From the traders' perspective, this political work is routinely performed as a problem-solving strategy to keep the markets going in the best possible infrastructural conditions. It primarily involves navigating Mexico City institutional and regulatory landscapes to secure financial and human resources for repair and maintenance, as well as multiple instances in which these practices are negotiated, implemented, and celebrated. In addition to a variable number of trader organisations, at least three key public bodies participate in this politico-infrastructural engagement: the *alcaldía* (borough government), the Economic Development Office (SEDECO), and the City Congress. Respectively, they are responsible for delivering repair and maintenance, designing policies, and allocating public funds for public markets. These are therefore the three primary arenas for traders-state political encounters around repair and maintenance.

As a cycle, these political encounters begin with the acknowledgement of the markets' deterioration and the city's annual budget planning process. As deeply entrenched bureaucratic and political procedures led by *alcaldía* governments and the City Congress, they set the initial terms for a discussion on repair and maintenance for the public markets. For various decades now, trader leaders, government officials, and politicians have engaged every year, all year round in several episodes of inter-institutional and political negotiation and conflict around repair and maintenance. Between July and September, trader leaders and *alcaldía* governments meet and negotiate the allocation of earmarked financial resources for repair and maintenance in the Annual Operative Programme (AOP). Later, between November and December, trader leaders and *alcaldía* governments present and negotiate AOPs with City Congress representatives, who discuss, adjust, and approve them as part of the city's annual budget planning process. Finally, between January and March the following year, when *alcaldía* governments can partially access the earmarked resources, the politics of repair and maintenance enter a new phase on negotiation, implementation, and celebration—if successful.

For decades, repair and maintenance in the markets' network mainly relied on the *alcaldías'* resources, allowing only limited works in a small number of markets. This is still the case, but in 2014, SEDECO (2013) created an earmarked special fund of 70 million pesos (US\$3.4 million) for markets' repair and maintenance, which later increased to 200 million pesos (US\$9.8 million) (SEDECO, 2019). Allocated on a project basis, for which SEDECO provides 60% and the *alcaldía* 40% of the total costs, these funds remain insufficient to tackle the network's deterioration. For example, the fund was exhausted in 13 projects for 13 markets in 2014, 53 in 2019, and 64 in 2020. Repair and maintenance projects, which are co-written by traders and officials, have included the cleaning or refurbishment of floors, façades, roofs, grease traps, stalls, toilets, and electrical, gas, lighting, and waste management systems, as well as the re-construction of one market damaged by heavy rain (SEDECO, 2016).

These meetings often take place away from public eye and only among stakeholders in trader organisations and borough and central government offices, although they can take place over food and drinks in cafes and restaurants (Vargas, 2023). In these political spaces, trader leaders, officials, and politicians negotiate the amounts of money that will go into AOP's standard administrative templates—a series of codified budget planners whose codes concerning public buildings' maintenance, conservation, and rehabilitation become the main objects of dispute and political exchange. As primary stakeholders, market traders bear most of the political work needed to negotiate larger budgets for repair and maintenance projects and their inclusion in the *alcaldía's* AOPs. As Omar—a young trader leader—succinctly puts it, traders must do all they can “to be part of the AOP” year after year. Through a combination of claim-making practices, traders demand government official to know how their needs will be included in the annual budgets (Ayala, 2021).

Not all trader representatives participate, nor all markets' infrastructural needs are voiced in these processes. These encounters reflect pre-existing political hierarchies among trader organisations and markets, and therefore there are exclusions. As Raúl—a former government official—said, “Traders that attend AOP meetings are the ones who get the benefits.” He referred to the *alcaldía* Tlalpan, where a local organisation representing 10 public markets had controlled the allocation of earmarked funds for at least three consecutive years. For Raúl, but also for some trader leaders and other city officials interviewed, resource allocation for repair and maintenance in the AOPs is perceived as arbitrary and uncertain. In the context of Mexico City, this sense of arbitrariness and uncertainty is influenced by the short 3-year government periods at borough level, the change of budgetary agendas in line with emergent electoral priorities, and the fall and rise of trader leadership in a politically fragmented public markets' network. This is particularly visible when the City Congress and *alcaldía* governments reduce, deny, or struggle around repair and maintenance funds while re-negotiating and adjusting AOPs (Alcaldía Miguel Hidalgo, 2023), or when traders and *alcaldía*- and city-level politicians negotiate and allocate additional resources for specific markets (Télez Contreras, 2020).

The cycle continues when repair and maintenance are negotiated at a market level. Equally volatile, traders' decision-making processes about repair and maintenance are highly contested. As deterioration and decay are directly experienced by trader communities, setting project priorities, and implementing approved repair and maintenance works are subject to intensive negotiation in politically plural markets whose members range from eight to 4200. Raúl described a typical scene: “You may have the leaders on board for the project, but they're only 10 or 15. In the market you have to convince 400, 200, 100 traders, and not everybody agrees with the project.” Antonio—an experienced trader leader—expands on this frustration: “If the traders are divided, it doesn't matter how much you've done, those who oppose the project will block its implementation.” At this stage, the markets' internal political life can render meaningless previous stages of negotiation around repair and maintenance, as political actors often point out (e.g., Milenio Diario, 2022).

Tensions about which trader organisations lead the negotiations, which markets benefit from a budget allocation round, and which infrastructural problems are solved first are very common. Constrained by these tensions, scarce resources, and the threat of breakdown, repair and maintenance are cyclically negotiated under the logics of what has been called “imperfect repairs” (Blokus and Dziula, 2021). This means that public markets’ stakeholders must adapt their projects so that they focus on resolving at the lowest cost the minimum number of repair and maintenance issues so that these infrastructures keep working. At AOP meetings, for example, markets’ representatives like Omar—whose organisation actively engages in these cycles—have been urged by authorities to choose “only five out of 20 problems” and the markets where they will be tackled. In this context, the most badly deteriorated markets might not be prioritised but those affiliated to the most politically active trader organisations. A detailed analysis of budget reports produced between 2016 and 2018 at an *alcaldía* level reveals the unequal and fluctuating resource allocation dynamics and the capacity of a few number of markets to capture resources for two or more funding rounds (Téllez Contreras, 2020: 143-145). Besides, only disasters such as the ones in La Merced or Río Blanco markets in 2013 and 2014 or calls to build new markets seem to justify larger investments on repair and maintenance (e.g., ALDF, 2016; Lozano, 2022).

Such routine and contentious cycles reveal that the politics of repair and maintenance function as a conduit to renegotiate and reactivate the long-standing traders-state patronage relationship. Traders engage in these cycles facing new political circumstances in which the original terms of the exchange with the state are not tenable as before under widespread deterioration and multiparty competition (Castellanos, 2022). Nonetheless, as Angela—a former *alcaldía* mayor—points out, the underlying logics of the patron-client relationship continue in operation: “Although all this [preserving the markets] is about fulfilling the traders’ demands, there’s a political condition, so we ask the traders: ‘Are you going to support my government?’” Often framed as consented and mutual, the exchange of political support for repair and maintenance results from episodes in which the traders’ political leverage is mobilised, tested, and defeated against state power; however, they also reflect the subjective dispositions of the clients (traders) to ensure the reproduction of the arrangement with state agents (the patron) (Auyero et al., 2009). When the withdrawal of resources or political support is the outcome, it fuels discontent and contentious encounters, including the neglect of the markets and public protests against it, which are often recorded in the traders’ media platforms (e.g., Salvemos La Merced, 2018).

But before a new cycle begins, traders, politicians, and government officials more clearly reaffirm patronage when celebrating successful negotiations and the completion of repair and maintenance works—however selective, limited, or imperfect. In this final stage, these political actors gather around formal and informal events, including massive public feasts, to mark the end of one more round of ordinary politics around repair and maintenance. This was the case of the combined celebration of Romero Rubio Market’s 56th anniversary and façade refurbishment in 2018. As a promotional video made for the occasion reveals (Delegación Venustiano Carranza, 2018), food, streamers, festoons, balloons, music bands, and fair stalls are there for traders, authorities, and residents to celebrate and showcase repair and maintenance works.

In a very competitive election year as 2018 but not only (see Milenio Diario, 2022, for example), the celebrations undoubtedly took a more spectacular character, and the speeches were full of deferential and the most grateful words. Traders, politicians, and government officials spoke of the virtues of their hard work and solid relations to achieve repair and maintenance. Manuel—a City Congress representative—thanked “the traders that year after year visit the *alcaldía* offices and present a petition,” and Rodrigo—a trader leader—thanked Manuel and other political figures “on behalf of the traders, for [their] wholehearted support, without which these beautiful works wouldn’t have been completed.” This was also an exceptional opportunity to remind everyone of the virtues of patronage. Addressing the multitudinous audience, Esther, a City Congress representative, and

Mónica, the *alcaldía* mayor, emphasised that “[These works were] not an ‘It’s fixed and that’s it situation” but one with “long- and medium-term projects for the markets” that can be accomplished providing “you [the traders and the public] keep working with [voting for] us.” And so, the mayor concluded: “If you keep trusting us, we’ll keep working for you.”

Months after the party, the election took place, and regardless of who won it, from July to September, traders, government officials, and politicians once again began negotiations to allocate resources for repair and maintenance in the AOPs. Their goal: to have the figures ready for further discussion, negotiation, and approval by City Representatives, expecting to have access to earmarked resources by March the following year for repair and maintenance works begin just a few months after. And thus, another cycle of ordinary politics starts and unfolds to sustain both urban infrastructures and socio-political orders.

Conclusion

This article has discussed the significance of understanding repair and maintenance as practices embedded in the broader field of ordinary politics as a way to further examine their paradoxical, multifaceted, and contentious political salience and outcomes. This approach defines repair and maintenance through their interconnectedness and co-constitution rather than as separate practices with distinctive political attributes. For its relational focus, this approach describes repair and maintenance as practices whose political salience emerges in ordinary political encounters in which ordinary political actors and their agendas meet and mesh. From this perspective, repair and maintenance constitute a point of convergence in ordinary politics and their political outcomes are therefore infused with ambivalent values, principles, and interests. By bridging insights from the literature on repair and maintenance and the political ethnographic approach to ordinary politics, the article thus provides a rationale for the study of the embeddedness of repair and maintenance in both routine and contentious ordinary political encounters. In this way, it seeks to contribute to better understanding the role of these infrastructural practices in the making of larger socio-political orders.

The political encounters between Mexico City public markets’ stakeholders serve here as an example of the embeddedness of repair and maintenance in ordinary politics. A form of ordinary politics shaped by state-dominated historical processes that have transformed repair and maintenance into highly political practices. The expansion of the commercial network, the state’s obligation to preserve it, the clientelist networks created alongside trader organisations, and the markets’ widespread deterioration since the 1980s locate repair and maintenance at the heart of routine and contentious politics. The article shows that repair and maintenance are negotiated cyclically within regulatory and institutional frameworks, and that such negotiations lead not only to the preservation of public markets but the perpetuation of patronage relationships between traders and state agents. In this context, repair and maintenance are a resource to be negotiated, often in exchange of some form of political support to governments and political parties and figures. As one of the main political outcomes of these interactions, patronage is infused with ambivalent attributes. On the one hand, it is criticised and opposed by traders as a form of political control and by state agents as a form of economic and political burden. However, on the other hand, it is recognised as a political structure that ensures both the reproduction of valuable social infrastructure and the provision of political support for governments and political parties.

As the empirical insights show, this approach can help to unpack how repair and maintenance become politically salient and contribute to produce multifaceted, paradoxical, and contentious political orders through mundane encounters. This highlights the role of repair and maintenance as drivers of routine and contentious political practices in Mexico City and other geographies. In a context in which repair and maintenance are debated as oppressive and exploitative but also as prefigurative practices that can help to build the infrastructural and political otherwise, the question

about their multifaceted, paradoxical, and contentious nature needs to be further examined. As with patronage, we may need to ask what the relationship between repair and maintenance and other political structures across the political spectrum is, and what their infrastructural and political outcomes in those different contexts. The experience in the public markets' network suggests that repair and maintenance still create opportunities for social justice within instances of control and subordination, as markets are preserved as shelters and sources of income, belonging, and provision for low-income traders and city residents.

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Notes

1. Markets are distributed across 16 *alcaldías* as follows: Álvaro Obregón: 16; Azcapotzalco: 19; Benito Juárez: 16; Coyoacán: 22; Cuajimalpa: 5; Cuauhtémoc: 39; Gustavo A. Madero: 51; Iztacalco: 16; Iztapalapa: 20; Magdalena Contreras: 5; Miguel Hidalgo: 19; Milpa Alta: 9; Tláhuac: 19; Tlalpan: 20; Venustiano Carranza: 42; Xochimilco: 11.
2. *Tianguis* are traditional marketplaces that operate in one location one or more days per week. *Mercados sobre ruedas* ("wheeled" markets) are mobile marketplaces created in the late 1960s. They operate in different locations along pre-determined routes one or more days per week. *Concentraciones* are marketplaces awaiting official recognition as public markets. They operate permanently in one location as civil associations.
3. All names are pseudonyms.

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