2 Urban mobility governance flows
Ethical bases of political becomings

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Mobility governance in Mexico City is being shaped by recent fluctuations in countrywide political configurations. Once dominated by a single party, soft dictatorial regime, the national political arena is now a stage open to competition among various parties and with an increasing presence of non-state actors. Decisions about mobility are now less centrally controlled, involve diverse stakeholders and take into account the needs of more actors than previously. My analysis of the situation is that mobility activists have spurred a series of debates and practices as they pioneer novel ethical habits in the city. By this, I mean that some urban dwellers have learned to navigate through the streets and infrastructures of Mexico City by using new visions of what is possible or desirable. The aggregation of such behaviors, combined with outright political action by activists and others involved, has shaped new horizons of what urban dwellers aspire to regarding the governance of their city. Whereas there seems to be a single-party nostalgia among politicians, civil society organizations and market-driven actors are assertively increasing their demands for improved forms of inclusive decision-making for urban-wide policies and projects. The result is that changing expectations and practices, which I term ‘governance flows,’ have opened up novel conceptions of belonging and ownership of the city, which I call ‘political becomings.’ The emerging networks that increasingly take decisions entail not only an active participation of civil society organizations (Acosta 2020) but also and crucially an ethics of dwelling (Zigon 2018).

This chapter presents some of the findings of an anthropological analysis of the mobility milieu in Mexico City. I conducted eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mexico City from 2018 to 2020. I carried out informal and in-depth interviews with activists, government officials, workers of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), mobility experts, academics, entrepreneurs, cycling aficionados and other urban dwellers. I also undertook several exercises of participant observation, especially in activist interventions and cycling events, as well as observations of meetings and gatherings, examination of documents and publications, and analyses of reporting of activities and policies in mainstream and social media. I undertook this investigation as part of the Urban Ethics Research Group (Dürr et al. 2019; Ege and Moser 2020b), which provided a space for debates about central concepts and approaches across disciplinary fields. Each researcher focused on a different city and issue area of interest and determined frameworks and definitions. As an

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anthropological study, my approach is informed by what I witnessed and analyzed from events and encounters on the ground and by debates on anthropological theorizations. The identities of those I interviewed are pseudonymized in what follows, except those of public figures.

Urban mobility comprises transportation (public and private), infrastructure, space, vehicles, practices and discourses. It is not only relevant for the movement of people and goods but also because the infrastructures it requires are fundamental for cities. The majority of public space in cities, for example, consists of streets and avenues. The conveyance of individuals and materials, nevertheless, is of utmost importance for urban economic and social life. Urban dwellers and traversers have a permanent need to move from one place to another, either to go to work or to buy foodstuffs, seek entertainment, visit friends and/or family or take part in collective ceremonies (religious or otherwise). City governments, thus, focus a great part of their attention on managing the needs of mobility in altering urban landscapes, i.e. building expressways, bridges and tunnels, or public services, such as bus lines and trams. Governments also determine norms and regulations that oversee the streams of people and vehicles. In each of these issues, government officials engage in discussions with those involved (e.g. users and neighbors) that delve into the urban ethics. This development is partly due to neoliberal policies through which the Mexico City authorities seek to thin the state apparatus by privatizing public services and decision-making (Kamat 2004). Instead of the depoliticization that some analysts interpret from this style of rule (Wilson and Swyngedouw 2014), my analysis in this chapter points to new forms of urban dweller politicization. Mobility activists have spurred an effervescence of street life that is not limited to cycling or pedestrian infrastructures or regulations but goes to the heart of a sense of community. It is in renewed forms of discourse and behavior among urban dwellers I qualify as ethical that I notice how some individuals point to alternative forms of managing public affairs. In my view, the resulting altered expectations have enabled fresh reflections about what are considered adequate or inadequate conducts and opinions.

One of these quotidian scenes I experienced on several occasions in Mexico City is the weekly event called ‘Move on a bike’ (Muévete en bici). Since May 2007, every Sunday from 8 am to 2 pm, several avenues and streets have been closed off to motorized traffic in order to free up the space for cyclists, skaters, runners and others. The first city to institute this policy – now widespread worldwide – was Bogotá in 1976 (Montero 2017, 118). When it was first instituted in Mexico City, the ride’s length was 10 kilometers, but it spanned 55 kilometers at the time of my fieldwork. I often attended while I was in the city, sometimes riding the whole distance as fast as I could, and other times a bit more slowly to take photos and videos of the scenes around me. I also stopped to talk to people, enjoy the atmosphere and take notes. A government official in her early thirties, who I call Francisca, explained the weekly event’s purpose to me as the “promotion of cycling culture.” On the Sundays I joined the ride, I noticed the pedagogical element in the voice of an army of university students who worked on the corners to ensure cyclists respected the traffic signals (as motorized traffic on other roads...
continued) and gave out advice while the red light lasted. I also noticed how some cyclists on the weekly ride would actually make suggestions to each other, or seek to reduce risks by pointing out better ways of riding (e.g. “slower cyclists, please remain in the right lane”).

When I first met Francisca, she worked in the office in charge of both the Sunday Ride and the bicycle-sharing scheme Ecobici within Mexico City’s Ministry of Environmental Affairs. Ecobici is one of the world’s largest public bicycle-sharing schemes. A new city government took office in December 2018, and she was promoted to director of “road safety and sustainable urban mobility” in the brand new Ministry of Mobility, within which everything related to cycling was incorporated. During an interview in her office, she told me how she had started out as a mobility activist during her university studies in public administration in a renowned local university. She wrote her thesis on policymaking for cycling promotion and once she graduated, she was invited to work in the government office dedicated precisely to it. Her early work among activists has ensured that she maintains a constant dialogue with civil society groups and is often invited to events discussing the benefits of sustainable mobility. Her path is not unique, as along the way, I met several activists who had moved into government or other roles (NGOs, private consultancy firms and academia). These activists-turned-otherwise maintain a conviction of their roles as fundamental to secure an improvement in the quality of life in urban mobility.

The weekly Sunday Ride epitomizes the changes in the mobility milieu. It is a highly visible event that invites urban dwellers to get involved and to dare and try a new way of moving. Spurred by activists and aided by NGO workers, it is supported by government officials. As a common space for everyone in the city, it has become a meeting area for people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as tourists, visitors and others. Most of all, the weekly event is a learning opportunity: for novice cyclists, for families wishing to teach their children, for more experienced cyclists to learn to navigate city streets and for everyone to appreciate bicycles and public space. The crisscrossing routes of runners, cyclists, skaters and others also provide ongoing opportunities for emerging ethical choices. How can one organize the flow of cyclists better? When should we stop to let pedestrians cross? All of these opportunities add up, I argue below and shape fresh ways for people to feel about the city in which they live. By participating on a weekly basis, they increasingly feel that the city and the urban social life respond to what they do, to their choices and actions. This may, in turn, produce senses of ownership and nascent political awareness. This is what I term political becomings. It is a concept, as I will expand below, related to Zigon’s ethics of dwelling, with which he refers to “a reflective process of working on both oneself and the world in which one finds oneself for the purpose of changing both so as to once again dwell” (2018, 95, emphasis in original).

My main argument in this chapter is that changes in the mobility milieu, spurred by activists but accomplished by multiple institutions and individuals, have allowed for novel forms of sociability in Mexico City’s streets through which urban dwellers make decisions not only about their own transportation needs but also about
the city’s makeup. My research shows that the spaces which have opened up – for cyclists, pedestrians and public transport users – have multiplied ethical negotiations on the street level. People’s decisions about how to navigate the city influence the way in which planners make decisions about infrastructures and regulations. The political becomings I refer to are these: Urban dwellers who may have wished to avoid becoming involved in politics but whose realization of the shared spaces and infrastructures may make them more aware of their sense of political community, with all its rights and obligations. I argue that those individuals who got involved in activism became politicized in wishing to engage directly with government authorities and planners. The multiple styles of urban ethics involved, thus, provide for interesting conceptualizations. In order to develop my arguments, the rest of this chapter is divided into three parts. In the first section, I clarify my use of the term ‘governance flows,’ especially regarding the trends toward collaborative decision-making concerning mobility issues that are continuously changing. In the second part, I include two ethnographic vignettes of events I witnessed in Mexico City, where many of the issues I analyze play a role. In the third and last section, I bring issues together in my conceptualization of political becomings.

I refer to ‘urban ethics’ in the plural to emphasize the multiple processes through which city dwellers make decisions about good and proper behaviors or judgments. It is perhaps a case of ordinary ethics (Lambek 2010b), which “implies an ethics that is relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself” (Lambek 2010a, 2). Cities, as sites where humans live in close contact with each other, are built environments where differences are often the cause of friction. Urban ethics, therefore, represent a “means with which people and institutions negotiate urban life” (Dürr et al. 2019, 1). In the project that informs this chapter, urban ethics are constructed both in discourses and practices, constituting a basis for life in common. It is, thus, a process of subjectivation, inasmuch as it involves the incorporation by individuals of ideas and habitus shared by a collective. This means that the individual stated becomes a member of the collective by enacting its common practices and replicating its shared views. Although the city government maintains a particular sense of authority and legitimacy in the eyes of city dwellers, recent changes in circumstances have allowed them more freedom of decision-making than they were accustomed to. The urban ethics I refer to, thus, operate on two levels: on the street level (of quotidian life for all urban dwellers) and in the planning circles (among policymakers and others who join the political arena). Both are crucial for my analysis, which is better explained by my conceptualization of governance flows.

**Governance flows**

I refer to ‘urban governance flows’ in order to capture the dynamic character of decision-making mechanisms in the city. Grounded in an anthropological approach to collective decision-making (Boholm, Henning and Krzyworzeka 2013), I seek to conceptualize the manner in which stakeholders shape mechanisms
of policymaking and urban design regarding mobility issues within the new, diversified public arena that sets the context for decision-making in the city. In this context, I consider stakeholders to include organizations of various sizes and bureaucratization levels as well as some individuals who seek to engage with policies regarding public transport or infrastructures. Governance is useful as a concept that refers to how issues that are common to a group of people are decided upon. Although it is usually directly related to the act of governing – which implies issues of legitimacy, power and authority (Shore and Wright 1997) – recent debates about policymaking have related it to a desire for the inclusion of stakeholders involved directly with the issue at the center of debates (Da Cruz, Rode and McQuarrie 2019; Pradel-Miquel, Cano-Hila and Marisol 2020). ‘Good governance’ has, therefore, come to mean a process whereby solutions to certain problems are sought in dialogue with those most affected by such problems, taking into account their interests and concerns. The Mexico City mobility governance nexus encompasses public transport, motorized vehicles, pedestrian and road infrastructures, parking spaces, streetscapes and policies about these issues. Historically, the actors involved in decision-making would be planners, construction companies and transport entrepreneurs but not users. This is precisely where demands for change focus: a broadening of the mobility milieu. Demands usually follow the new urban agenda (Caprotti et al. 2017) which is inspired by Jane Jacobs, whose activism helped reform urban design in the second half of the 20th century. Jacobs insisted sixty years ago that streets and avenues are the “main public spaces of a city” (Jacobs 2011 [1961], 37). The social interactions that occur in such spaces, therefore, end up shaping the city. By demanding more voice for urban dwellers and users of public transport, activists and NGO advocates make a stand for a bottom-up approach. This has not been easy because there are so many aspects to consider, from infrastructure, to economic interests of transport companies, to regulations and traffic planning. The resulting negotiations have tended to sway sometimes in favor of activists and NGOs, sometimes in favor of business owners and other power holders. The government itself houses tensions within, as contrasting interests dominate different ministries or even contend within a single ministry. For this reason, I refer to governance flows as tidal cycles where changing winds and political opportunities sometimes help one cause more than another. In mobility issues, the case for sustainable mobility has gained significant advances due to environmental aspects (such as reducing emissions and procuring a growth in green areas) and social demands for better conviviality (by reducing car-centric infrastructures and promoting more areas for pedestrians and cyclists). The car and construction lobbies, nevertheless, continue to determine large-scale construction projects (e.g. of bridges, tunnels) and favorable policies (e.g. the much-criticized condoning of the annual tax on cars).

My emphasis on flows is also related to the comings and goings of individuals between the different groups involved in mobility in Mexico City. I have explained how Francisca started out as an activist and moved into government. Many others have followed similar changes in various directions. Some have started out as activists and become so enamored with everything related to mobility that they
decided to pursue studies in areas relating to it, for example, in urban design or transport engineering. A few have joined influential international NGOs that are deeply involved with these issues in the city, such as the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP) and the World Resources Institute. These two NGOs have offices in Mexico City and are strongly involved with policymakers. They carry out technical studies and evaluations which they combine with campaigns for sustainable transportation. A few people also have no problems having several affiliations at the same time. One case was Sara, who combined her work at an NGO with organizing events for ‘bikepackers’ or cycle travelers, i.e. cyclists who make long journeys. Another was Adrián, who worked as an independent journalist dedicated to mobility issues, while also doing activism and maintaining a strong social media presence promoting cycling. The fact that many of those involved in mobility activism have become so engaged with technical knowledge and public debates that this has helped to raise the profile of such topics in Mexico City’s public spheres.

As one of the largest cities in the world, Mexico City has suffered considerable problems deriving from motorized traffic in its streets and avenues. The high number of cars and aging road infrastructures constantly lead to long traffic jams. Other problems include air and noise pollution, as well as road insecurity. One of the key issues that mobilized international policymaking agendas to help improve urban mobility around the world was a concern over greenhouse gas emissions from cities. Once international financial institutions and development agencies agreed that helping to reduce traffic jams would contribute a reduction in such gases, they offered special funds to city governments to get them to adjust local policies. This is where NGOs got involved, as they became mediators between international institutions and local governments. Mexico City authorities launched a series of plans in the 1990s to reduce emissions. One was the circulation restriction policy for private vehicles and another was the phased relocation of major industries out of the urban area. The first, called “Hoy no circula” (today [your car] does not circulate), started in 1989 and consisted of a one-day-per-week car ban determined by the ending number of the license plate. Contrary to what had been expected, pollution levels did not go down in any significant manner (Davis 2008). This may have been due to the fact that many middle-class families simply resorted to buying or using a second vehicle (Guerra and Millard-Ball 2017). Other policies followed, focused especially on improving public transport and the organization of motorized traffic. As has happened elsewhere around the world, these areas were eventually bundled into governmental bureaucracy under the new concept of urban mobility in order to stress the correlations between road infrastructures, transportation and city dwellers (Jones 2014).

I mark 1997 as the start of the current wave of mobility activism, which is the year when Bicitekas was founded (Hidalgo Vivas 2021). Bicitekas is an organization dedicated to promoting the bicycle as a form of transportation in Mexico City. Their work has brought public attention to mobility issues beyond the bicycle. Adriana Lobo, the executive director of the Mexican chapter of the World Resources Institute, told me that although there were incentives through
international organizations to help the Mexico City government transition toward a more sustainable mobility model, cycloactivists were of crucial importance to garner public attention and political support for the necessary changes. In her view, “the cycling movement is extremely powerful in all this,” as she told me in an interview we held in her office in Coyoacán. Nevertheless, she added that the design and launch of the Metrobus, Mexico City’s Bus Rapid Transit system, was also fundamental for the shaping of the mobility agenda in the city and the country. She was deeply involved with the Metrobus, helping design and implement the first few lines. But she insisted that by itself, it could have remained caught between power negotiations of the sort that had plagued the city. Activists made a difference by raising the profile of mobility as a cause for concern for all city dwellers.

In this sense, I argue that the work that activists and NGO advocates have carried out is part and parcel of the wider democratization process of the country. Up until the early 1990s, the vast majority of elections had been won by one political party, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. Some scholars have labeled it a ‘soft dictatorship’ (dictablanda) (Gillingham and Smith 2014; Vaughan 2018). Democracy was enacted as a pretense for most of the 20th century. State violence against dissenters was swift and brutal; control of the media was almost total; and government policies and projects were done more to gain political support than address needs or with a view to the future. The political system was overtly centralized and demanded allegiance, regardless of ideologies or beliefs. The resulting multiplication of favors and kickbacks represented a complex corporatist and clientelist web. This is what Davis refers to when she describes Mexico City as an Urban Leviathan (Davis 1994). After explaining the way in which large-scale works, such as the Metro (underground), were done without considering population projections or actual needs, Davis noticed cracks in the system. These started showing in the 1980s, especially after the large earthquake that destroyed numerous buildings and showed that civil society was more ready to help than government authorities. By the 1990s, the system started collapsing, and this is when opposition parties started winning elections. In this context, citizen initiatives started gaining unprecedented levels of attention and support.

Nevertheless, I prefer to avoid a linear understanding of ‘democratization’ as a learning curve toward a steady improvement of mechanisms and practices. The wider process of the liberalization of political competition was not straightforward. Several new political parties have tended to adopt practices of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, seeking corporatist and clientelist networks as bases for their power. Therefore, in effect, it is a flow between tensions that liberate and others that bring things back into a semi-authoritarian model. It is somewhat similar for civil society initiatives, as there are fluctuations between acting as part of wider networks of political interest, actually enacting cynical simulations of citizen voices and others, where urban dwellers seek to change even small things in their surroundings. In this context, whenever government officials call for consultations, exercises of citizen participation or other techniques to include voices of urban dwellers, the actual undertakings vary greatly in both form and significance. But it is not only practices of government or organized civil society that fluctuate; urban
dwellers’ own expectations, demands and opinions also vary. While there are more frequent calls for changes in how decisions are taken, there is no consensus as to what form new procedures should take. There is no clear compass that points toward good governance, nor an agenda that helps stakeholders navigate the difficult terrain to reach it. This is where urban ethics play a crucial role, as the ongoing frictions and agreements that come with everyday negotiations may start shaping collective views on what the city is and should become.

In these circumstances, I argue that mobility activists have shaped a series of ethical bases of what may constitute new political practices. The empathic connection spurs an ethical imagination by insisting on the need to think of others while moving oneself through the city. I believe such exercises foster ‘political becomings’ because they allow people to reflect on their place and role in the city. Activists have helped shape common spaces through performative actions that help urban dwellers’ navigation of life in the city as the two ethnographic vignettes that follow the show. The ethical bases I refer to are concrete principles of conviviality that are experienced every day in the city, and which help everyone involved decide good versus bad practices. While these exercises may not yield immediate results – such as working methodologies for good governance – their value lies in a potential alteration of the manner in which urban dwellers engage with their city. They promote mobility as an experiential activity through which people not only passively use their city’s infrastructures and services but also actively shape them. This, in effect, becomes a subjectivation process of political engagement. People realize they are not solely users of the city, but are its owners, and this may alter the way in which they state their demands to authorities and others around them.

Ethnographic vignettes of urban mobility

I investigated mobility activism in Mexico City in light of environmental concerns from an anthropological perspective within the umbrella project of our research group on urban ethics. It was an investigation into how the work of those involved in mobility issues has changed some of the infrastructures and spaces of Mexico City, as well as the practices of its inhabitants. Equally, it illustrates how their work has altered the visions of the desired future for the city. This, in turn, affects upcoming plans, projects and policymaking.

It is important to note that my definition of activism is broader than most others I know, especially those focused on social movements (Melucci 1989; Tilly 1994; McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996). While scholarship on activism has usually emphasized the value of collective contentious action (Tarrow 1998 [1993]), I include, for example, NGO advocacy as part of the activism milieu, even though their activities are often closer to a privatized bureaucracy than to protest movements. I define activism as the manner in which a group of individuals act to achieve a change in their social surroundings or in government plans that would not have occurred without inducement. I consider that some activists who move on to work in government continue doing activism despite their new job title. This is because they continue to be guided by their aspiration to achieve a desired change. In any
case, in my view, activism plays a crucial role in policymaking by insisting on specific aspects of issues that would otherwise not have been considered. Anthropologists have often reflected on the transposing priorities in research on activism as a sign of changing geopolitical times (Chari and Donner 2010). Some scholars have addressed similar approaches to mine by using the term ‘advocacy’ (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith 1993; Reid 2000; Reid and Molina 2001, 2003; Andrews and Edwards 2004), although these studies tend to focus solely on the diplomatic efforts of NGOs and similar groupings. Regarding those attentive to revolts and revolutions, there seems to be a search for purity, for isolating violent acts as vents for accumulated grievances. I prefer a middle ground, as I consider that, in a similar vein to a social movement perspective, there is an advantage to including a wider range of interventions, from grassroots protests to high-level civil diplomacy. For some, such as Swyngedouw, the fact that the state has shrunk and actively seeks to privatize the public interest (Day and Goddard 2010) means that all action that emerges is marked by a neoliberal tinge (Swyngedouw 2017, 54). But could there be an unforeseen political emergence from neoliberal policies? I think so.

The following two ethnographic vignettes or scenes I witnessed illustrate the phenomenon I put forth here. One is part of an annual campaign to promote safer routes for students to reach their schools by cycling or on foot, which, although it is called the “Day of walking and cycling to school,” lasts for a whole week with different activities located in various schools around the city. The other is part of ‘Mission: Zero,’ a separate campaign to promote improved infrastructures in order to reduce lethal accidents involving cyclists or pedestrians. Activists were the key actors, within wider networks of organizations and institutions, in both cases. They provided a wealth of ideas and opportunities for the public performance of dissent and ethical negotiations.

**Safe cycling to school**

I reached the square in front of the Cuauhtemoc municipal government buildings on my bicycle around 8 am on Thursday, October 11, 2018. I rode for over half an hour from the Roma neighborhood to get there. Most of the ride was on the cycleway along the Reforma. Because I rode early in the morning, several men in suits overtook me. Some were using Ecobici shared bicycles, but many others were using the bicycle lane, including women in dresses, young men in informal clothes and middle-aged-looking men in work clothes (apparently builders). Up to a dozen of us would have to wait for the green light at traffic signals. On a few occasions, faster cyclists would go out of the protected lane and invade the car lane to overtake us, and only rejoin ahead later. Overall, this part of my ride was quite easy. The green lane was protected from motorized traffic by concrete blocks that impeded cars from invading it. However, when I had to leave this avenue to travel toward my destination, I needed to navigate more difficult terrain.

This was a reminder of the purpose of the activity I was there to visit, as part of the “Safe cycling and walking to school day.” The NGO personnel involved teachers, students and authorities from a school, local government officials, activists, as
well as cycling trainers and invited reporters from various media outlets in each event organized by the ITDP. The purpose was to highlight the benefit that walking or cycling to school would have for all involved.

For students, it is a way of promoting active mobility […] they can concentrate a lot better after riding a bit instead of being bored in their parents’ car or in public transport, stuck in traffic; for the neighborhood, it would mean fewer cars in the area, which would reduce congestion, pollution, and noise.

Sofía told me one day over lunch. But as things are now, cycling or walking to school is not feasible for many children, partly because of problems in the way streets are made. Sofía works in the ITDP and is in charge of urban design with integrated mobility plans: “The idea is to think about how we could redesign the area so that it would be safer for children.” Furthermore, the ITDP seeks to strengthen its case to improve street design and convince decision-makers to incorporate their views of how things could be better by involving students, their teachers, school authorities and government officials.

As I was taking off my helmet, Sofía came to greet me but soon had to go and welcome some authorities from the Ministry for Mobility. Several cyclists were already there, as well as NGO workers, a few government officials and reporters. The square is at a corner of two avenues, so the sound of motorized vehicles was a constant hum in the background. Not too long afterward, a group of teenagers arrived in their white school uniforms with green cardigans. They were led by one of their teachers. A few cycling instructors greeted them and gave each a T-shirt with the logo of the campaign. Once everyone had put on their T-shirts, the instructors led a series of warming-up exercises for the students. After a few minutes, the instructors gave each a helmet, an instructor explained some basic issues and then we all set off toward the school. We rode two kilometers, first, along Juan Aldama street, and then we took the Mexico-Tenochtitlan Avenue. Although there was a painted line that marked a space dedicated to bicycles, the proximity of cars, buses, trucks and minibuses to our left was loud and menacing. The avenue has six lanes; three in each direction. At one point, we needed to cross Insurgentes Avenue, and I went ahead with the first part of the group, but a large number of students and others were stuck at the red light. We waited on the other side until the light was green and the whole group could continue together.

When we reached a corner with a small park, we were instructed to dismount and walk along the sidewalk to the school entrance. It was about one hundred meters. The reason for this was that we could not ride because it was a one-way street in the opposite direction. As we arrived to the school, a few teachers and school staff were waiting for us, and they let us in. After a photo shoot, we all walked together into the school theater for a series of talks that followed. The speakers were from the ITDP, the local government and the school. Sofía led the educational meeting, introducing each speaker and including a few comments about how good cycling was for children.
As Sofia had explained, the main purpose of the campaign was to convince the authorities about the need for an improved mobility infrastructure around schools in order to make it safer for children to travel by bicycle or walking. But the fact that the activity involved so many people provided it with more than simply that message. Sofia later told me that the preparations had lasted several months. “The teachers had to select students with cycling experience who would not be afraid to do that ride,” she said. Most of the event held just after the talk – attended by school staff and students – was devoted to imagining how good it would be for everyone if the youngsters could cycle to school. I believe that this combination of messages and practice triggers a series of reflections that redefine aspirations and habits in the city. It is an ethical process through which those involved prioritize consensus-oriented resolutions to urban conflicts (Dürr et al. 2019, 9). This partially helps to extend the pressure on the government to actually change their policies and planning to meet those emerging expectations better. But it also means that children talk to their parents about it and may start considering cycling, or at least thinking about it in a different way to what they had been used to.

**Mission: Zero**

A truck of a well-known Mexican cement company ran over a cyclist in a central Mexico City avenue in June 2017. After protests by activist groups, the company decided to set up a strategy to reduce the possibility of accidents by engaging with activists and other organizations. They, thus, decided to fund a campaign in three cities (Mexico City, Guadalajara and Monterrey) implemented by activists to demand improved infrastructures and promote better behaviors among all road users in order to reduce lethal accidents. The result was Mission: Zero.

On the morning of Saturday, October 27, 2018, I visited a busy crossing in Mexico City close to where the aforementioned accident had happened. The first thing I noticed as I was coming out of the underground station was that a lot of people with bright yellow vests were busy at several points of the crossing. It became evident to me that they were the ones carrying out the Mission: Zero intervention I had read about in social media. Some were painting colorful pedestrian crossings on a side street, others were distributing a booklet about pedestrian rights to motorists and passersby, and a small group was carrying large signs asking drivers to respect people crossing the streets. I was surprised to find out that most of those distributing the booklets and talking to drivers were actually drivers of the cement company. One explained to me with a smile that their participation was part of a training course to sensitize them about street life and safe driving. “It helps to make streets safer,” he added.

Most of those wearing vests, however, were activists from several groups. One of such groups was the *Liga Peatonal* (Pedestrian League), a dynamic activist group that frequently held interventions and other events in the city. I spoke to several of its leaders during the intervention and interviewed them separately a few days later. Reporters from news outlets were busy interviewing activists, passersby and drivers. The whole intervention appeared to be designed to provide a lot of
photo opportunities. The colorful crossings they painted caught the attention, as did the large signs that at one point some started carrying from one corner to the other when the red light was on at the crossing. Each sign, which must have been around 1.20 by 1.60 meters, had the image of a person. There were a mother with her son, an older person with a walking stick, a woman jogging, a man with his dog and a cyclist.

At one point, a group of cyclists took smaller signs that were laying around, wrote something on them and hung them on their backs. The signs stated: “I am _____ and I am one less car,” followed by the campaign name and logo. Each cyclist filled out the blank: ‘an engineer,’ ‘a teacher’ and ‘a mother.’ After they all had their signs, they posed together for photos, got on their bicycles and started pedaling along the Revolución Avenue. They purposely did not use the segregated cycleway on the right of this six-lane one-way avenue but went straight into the traffic. Although busy, the Saturday traffic was less than it is during the week. They apparently sought to be as visible as possible not only to drivers but also to bus passengers and pedestrians.

This campaign had also taken a long time to prepare. One of Biciteka’s leaders told me she had been part of the committee that the cement company formed to brainstorm about the possible designs for activities. But not everyone was positive about the campaign. A former member of Bicitekas, who had worked in the ITDP and in the government and at the time of my fieldwork ran his own consulting company, told me that instead of putting money into a few interventions, the company should invest in their trucks. He showed me a photo of the trucks the same company uses in the United Kingdom, whose characteristics help reduce risks of accidents of several types. “They simply follow the regulations of where they operate […] if the government here does not demand they do more, they don’t,” he said. “The problem is when activists play along to their tune and miss a chance for true change,” he added with a twisted smile.

The actions of all those involved in the intervention I witnessed served a purpose. They helped to make a series of demands visible. At one point, an activist in a wheelchair started giving out booklets to passing cars. I saw the gestures of the drivers as they took the booklets and heard what he had to say, and they seemed attentive and polite. Although part of the purpose of the campaign is to convince governmental authorities of the necessity of improving road infrastructures to reduce risks, the clearest effort of the activists was trying to persuade drivers to change their way of driving so as to be less threatening toward pedestrians and cyclists.

The mobility milieu is much more diverse than the interventions described here are able to convey. Nevertheless, both are good examples of a general characteristic of the field, inasmuch as they are networked efforts between activists, NGO advocates, government officials, specialists and others. In both cases, furthermore, the activists’ aim was not limited to a specific project but sought to convey a multilayered message promoting both improvements in urban infrastructures on the part of the government and a rethink of daily mobility practices among urban dwellers. As performative events on streets, their purpose was meant to both be seen and communicate the experience of those taking part in the activities. These interventions
served as experiential activities for those taking part and in situ examples of what is being demanded. In showing by doing, those involved sought to establish a level of empathy among urban dwellers that would help them understand what the cyclist or pedestrian goes through on the streets. They exercised a type of embodied persuasion (Acosta García 2018).

Both interventions, thus, emphasize a subjectivation process through which a few individuals spur onlookers to think about others. In doing so, they constitute ‘patterns of ethicization’ (Dürr et al. 2019, 9) that showcase what a better life in the city would look like. The choice of highlighting everyday paths, to school or otherwise, stresses the ethical dimension of “microlevel interactions in the everyday and mundane” (Ege and Moser 2020a, 14). Activists in both settings did not only use the interventions for photos, videos and documents, but crucially as scenarios where urban dwellers could see their lives in their quotidian movements as in a mirror. By promoting a reflexive process of what the good life in the city looks like, they laid the basis for urban dwellers to notice their own sense of community anew.

**Political becomings and its ethical foundations**

A classic anthropological method to find out underlying social norms that are not usually talked about is to take the role of the clown. Clowns “speak strangely with a flawed grammar; they ask surprising and sometimes tactless questions, and tend to break many rules regarding how things ought to be done” (Eriksen 2001, 24). In doing so, we learn hints about accepted behaviors or discourses. It is similar to activists: By performing exaggerated and unusual characters, they make people turn to see. But while anthropologists do this to find out cultural cues, activists use it to highlight ethical conundrums. Is it acceptable for children to risk their lives on their way to school? Should not a mother feel safe cycling? For Jarrett Zigon, activists’ political action “often takes the form of experimentation,” in the configuration of an ethics of dwelling that “opens possibilities for building new worlds because it is an ethics that begins not with a predefined political subject, but rather with a demand made by a broken-world that demands change” (Zigon 2018, 94–95, 103). Activists open up urban dwellers’ imagination to new possibilities by inciting reflections among onlookers about the repercussions for others of their behavior in public ways.

The recent ethical turn in anthropology and other disciplines has come to refer explicitly to the manner in which humans apply decisions about what they consider good or bad in practice (Faubion 2011; Fassin 2014). However, when trying to examine freedom and virtue as ethical ideals (Laidlaw 2014), the result has been what Puig de la Bellacasa described as a hegemonic ethics which embodies “the aspiration to a higher morality or is depoliticized” (2017, 130). Puig de la Bellacasa argues that such perspectives overlook a “possible politics of ethical engagement” (2017, 135), which is the manner in which dynamics within collectives establish a foundation of potential political relationships. Mexico City’s mobility milieu provides a case in point. Mobility activists promote novel ways of understanding and practicing urban life in movement. They do so by combining outright political
action (consistent with diplomatic negotiations with policymakers) with public performances (such as the interventions portrayed above). The resulting spaces that are opened up for urban dwellers to experience mobility anew for themselves, therefore, also enable fresh opportunities for ethical negotiations between urban dwellers. It is here where I notice the most important legacy of mobility activism: By laying an ethical foundation, it may (or may not) lead to more widespread political becomings, but the possibility of thinking and living the city anew are there.

Reports in mainstream and social media about activists’ interventions served to send out the message to both urban dwellers and government authorities. Thus, the images of activists in the street carrying their signs and making demands were reproduced alongside their eloquent demands that they had related to reporters. Activists and others involved sought to shape debates about urban ethics by enacting and explaining what could be better in the city. Thousands of chance encounters among urban dwellers every day bring about spontaneous decisions where they need to solve a situation quickly and come to an enacted decision of how to do it. This may be a gridlock in traffic, an encounter on a pedestrian crossing or something else. Decisions about who to let through, what to privilege or how to behave constitute the result of a quick evaluation that shapes broader ideas about what is a good life in cities. There are also thousands of spoken conversations, debates in print or reflections in mainstream and social media about what is a good practice and what is not. The frequent presence of activists and others in Mexico City’s streets and public sphere, thus, reinforces the configuration of ethical appraisements. These are not limited to planners and policymakers but entail urban dwellers, those who either live in the city or traverse it.

As I left both interventions, one on a bicycle and another using the underground, I paid attention to my surroundings. As I cycled, I saw some cars honking violently at cyclists but most of the time I saw peaceful coexistence between both. Cyclists sometimes even smiled and thanked taxi drivers who had stopped to let them through. As I walked into the underground station, I noticed how people kept to their right on the escalators to allow those in a hurry to walk on the left side, something that had been unthinkable a few years back. It may be the case that small changes in individual behavior are aided by the type of activity I have described above. The role of such interventions, however, is not to dictate a solution and expect everyone to follow it, but rather to help everyone think of other people using the same space as them (be it on the streets, in the underground or on the sidewalks). Many activists say that cars are the ultimate individualizing machine, as one travels in a bubble, so, there is little connection to the outside world. On a bicycle, they claim, one sees the city on a more human scale. Eye contact comes more easily with everyone around.

Both interventions were part of wider efforts to modify legislation, infrastructures and government projects. They were attempts to try a more inclusive governance for urban mobility policies. But these activities in themselves were not about political haggling, technical arguments or specific points of legislation. These interventions in the public sphere – on the streets in plain sight of motorists, cyclists and pedestrians – were about showing how the street can be shared with less risk
to the vulnerable. Their main message was about recognizing ethical behaviors, distinguishing ways of acting that are good or safe from those that are bad or dangerous. In doing so, activists pointed out that the city is made up in a great part of the aggregated interactions that take place in its public spaces. This is in itself an emergent form of civic awareness and engagement; a realization through micro-ethical negotiations about a potential sense of political entitlement among urban dwellers; a multilayered process that makes up what I term political becomings.

References


