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**FOOD IDENTITIES AT HOME AND ON THE MOVE. EXPLORATIONS AT THE INTERSECTION OF FOOD,
BELONGING AND DWELLING**

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“It’s the comedor that dwells in me!”

Food aid and construction of urban citizenship in San Luis Potosí, Mexico

Charles-Édouard de Suremain

Abstract – Food aid is often based on the premise that vulnerable populations passively “benefit” from numerous forms of public assistance and charitable activities intended to meet their daily food needs. In this context, questions of the beneficiaries’ room for manoeuvre, adhesion or participation do not arise, since aid is thought of as “for them” and “in their best interest”. Based on the ethnography of a canteen (*comedor*) in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, which is overseen by the Catholic Church and funded by the public sector and private donations, I will show how the beneficiaries make use of the canteen, produce conviviality, and undertake forms of reciprocity not only between themselves, but also with the staff. I will also demonstrate how the meal serves not only to simply satisfy the beneficiaries’ nutritional needs, but also to contribute to the creation of new forms of “urban citizenship” through the successive moments that punctuate the meal (paying, praying, eating, singing, washing, talking, dancing).

Keywords – food aid; beneficiaries; meal; urban citizenship; Mexico

Introduction

The Mexican nation, a true “laboratory for social policies and the fight against poverty” (Lautier 1998), was constructed based on a rhetoric of bringing the poorest citizens into modernity. It is true that, although Mexico has been a member of the OECD¹ since 1994, almost half its total population (around 120 million people, about 80% of whom live in urban areas) is still categorised as “poor”. There has therefore been a proliferation of conditional aid programmes, in particular food aid, targeted at very diverse social categories: *indígenas* (indigenous people), women, children, adolescents or the elderly, in both rural and urban contexts.² Most of these programmes differ from the initiative described in this chapter because they are aimed at populations of Mexican nationality who have, as a minimum, a fixed abode and a bank account.

Direct food aid, whether it is free or subject to a financial contribution, benefits everybody irrespective of status or nationality. Most *comedores* (canteens) in Mexico – both free *comedores comunitarios* (soup kitchens) and low-cost *comedores populares* (welfare kitchens) – depend on a federal programme, the *Programa comedores populares*, overseen by the DIF (*Dirección de Infancia y Familia*). They also receive funding from local government. The programme’s mission is to promote social

¹ The *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development*, a group of 34 “developed”, industrialized and democratic countries with liberal economies.

² Out of 63 programmes of this sort in the world in 2014, 22 are related to Latin America and the Caribbean (Fao 2015: 29).

action to benefit the most impoverished through the “right to food”, here understood as everyday access to food with dignity.³

The beneficiaries of the *comedores* have extremely varied social and economic profiles, even if the majority are men and women in poverty. Although some are unemployed and on the margins of society, most work in the streets (as car attendants, car window cleaners, fire-eaters, clowns, shoe-shiners, etc.).⁴ In addition to these “regular” beneficiaries, there are increasing numbers of homeless refugees and/or migrants from Central America without administrative documents. The Mexican press claims that around 100,000 migrant refugees are currently on Mexican soil, although sources for such figures are not often cited. The number of migrants returning to Mexico, which was already significant in the Obama years when migratory controls at the US border intensified considerably, has risen steadily under the Trump administration (Faret 2018). Migratory flows number five to ten thousand people each year,⁵ and move particularly towards industrial cities like San Luis Potosí. Located in a semi-desert region 400km north-west of Mexico City, San Luis Potosí has around 2.8 million inhabitants.

In this context, *comedores* offer a privileged site of observation for analysing forms of food consumption, exchange and aid, and for better understanding how the most impoverished populations fit into society and urban space. I will advance the hypothesis that new forms of urban citizenship are possible, despite the difficulties encountered by these people. I will thus move away from a prescriptive idea of food aid in which beneficiaries are perceived as passive recipients, who can only accept interventions that are necessarily “good” for them.⁶ Instead, I will reveal the social interactions at play within a *comedor*, showing that food aid – far from reproducing asymmetrical relationships – contributes to the creation of a form of citizenship founded on dignity and rooted in everyday practices. It is these relationships, values and practices, which interest me in this text. Here, I understand the term citizenship in its most widespread meaning: the condition of an individual who fits into a society or an organization, and whose rights and responsibilities are recognized.

The ethnographic fieldwork took place over the course of several visits to a Caritas *comedor* between 2017 and 2019.⁷ Following Fainzang (1994), I will endeavour to give a complete description of a single meal in the *comedor*, which seemed to me to be “exemplary” when considered alongside the other meals that I was able to observe. Although it may not be “representative” in the statistical sense of the term, it is nevertheless particularly meaningful for the analyses that guide the text.

An ordinary meal at La Esperanza

The working-class neighbourhood where the *comedor* La Esperanza is located offers a striking contrast from the image presented by San Luis Potosí’s city centre, although

³ See the DIF website: <https://www.dif.cdmx.gob.mx/programas/programa/programa-comedores-populares>; and the FAO website (2009): www.fao.org/3/k8093e/k8093e.pdf (see p. 15 on the “right to food”).

⁴ On *comedores populares* in Mexico City, see: <https://munchies.vice.com/es/article/ypxb3y/asi-funcionan-los-comedores-comunitarios-en-la-ciudad-de-mexico>. For an analysis across Mexico, see Arzate Salgado *et al.* (2009).

⁵ See also: <https://noticieros.televisa.com/ultimas-noticias/durante-2018-flujo-migrantes-aumento-doble-san-luis-potosi/>.

⁶ This type of paternalistic position is the subject of lively criticism in the anthropology of development (Escobar 1991; Olivier de Sardan 2005).

⁷ Caritas is an international confederation of Catholic charitable organizations with a presence in over 200 countries, which has operated in Mexico since 1973 (<https://www.caritas.org/where-caritas-work/latin-america/mexico/>).

it is only a few streets away. The houses are neglected, the pavements have not been resurfaced, electrical wires hang down all around, and refuse is strewn across the ground under the disillusioned eyes of the rare passers-by. Here we are outside the town's "historic" boundary, inscribed on UNESCO's world heritage list in 2010 as part of the *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*.⁸ The city centre, which has been completely restored, brings together most of the city's commercial activity and attracts locals and tourists. A few streets away is the *comedor*, which has a sign over the door reading, "To give is to love".⁹

Shortly before opening time (1pm), some men are waiting outside the front door; the oldest of them are seated on the steps. A young girl aged about ten, who suffers from a language delay, comes to take in the smells of cooking which are emerging from the windows. We hear voices from the men and women who are busying themselves inside. At exactly 1pm, the doors open.

There is a short queue to pay the 5 (0,23 Euros) pesos that the meal costs for those who pay. I offer a 100 pesos bill (4,66 Euros) to Doña Coco, the woman of about fifty who is staffing the till, explaining that I wish to make a "donation". She gives me a slip of paper with a number (7) which corresponds to the order of my arrival; the last number in the pile is 60. A man wearing a polo shirt with an embroidered "Caritas" crest seats me on a bench. Each of the six tables is ready to welcome ten guests.

The rectangular room is about 30m², and is extended by another, square room of around 20m², opening onto the kitchen. According to a little plaque, a new kitchen was installed in 2014 thanks to a donation of 150,000 pesos (about 7,000 euros) from the *Secretaría de Desarrollo Social (Sedesol)*.

In a few minutes, a dozen people take their places. Some are allocated seats, while others choose freely. José Antonio, who is aged about 30 and wearing a mask over his mouth, comes to greet the guests. In a jovial tone, he explains that he is going to give the "blessing". In fact, José Antonio¹⁰ begins reading from a Wikipedia article he has downloaded onto his phone, about the hagiography of Santa Rosa de Lima, "the patron saint of all Latinos". He reminds us that "everyone here is Latin American or from somewhere in America". Following this, he recites the *Pater Noster* with most guests whispering along. Several elderly men stand during the prayer. Only once the ceremony is finished does the distribution of dishes begin.

As I go to wash my hands, José Antonio calls to me: he leads me to the sink, and asks me where I come from and what my name is. José Antonio is keen that we become "friends" because, he says, he loves France and its religious culture. His profile photo on WhatsApp is a picture of Saint Francis of Assisi, founder of the eponymous order built on values of joy, poverty and evangelization. The backyard where the sink is located is clean, with a second sink for washing dishes, a large basin for leftover food, another for partly-eaten loaves, and a third for the sweet bread (*pan dulce*). At the far end there are two small rooms for storing food.

Mario, a man of about 50 who is wearing a stained cooking apron, serves the food. He fills each dish with pasta with Maggi sauce, rice, a third of an avocado, and a piece of grilled chicken. A roll and a glass of watermelon juice complete the meal.

⁸ A former silver trading route that stretches over 2500km, linking central Mexico with Texas and New Mexico in the USA.

⁹ See the *comedor*'s website: <https://caritassanluispotosi.org/programas/comedores/>

¹⁰ In accordance with their wishes, my informers' identities have been changed, except that of José Antonio.

Mario comes round again during the meal offering more bread and juice, since the custom is to be waited on rather than to ask.

Meanwhile, a thin man with white hair has come to sit opposite me. He responds immediately to my greeting, which I interpret as an invitation to start a conversation. The conversation really gets going later, when a guest at the neighbouring table asks me where I come from. However, we first begin eating in silence, as if we need to concentrate on our food. Twenty or so guests, both women and men, are having their meal. The girl from the door quickly finishes her meal and goes to chat with Doña Coco at the front desk; other children arrive and eat, accompanied by elderly people.

A crucifix adorns one wall of the room, while at the front desk there is an altar, topped with a holy image. On other walls there are posters of the virgin of Guadalupe – a key figure from the popular Mexican religious pantheon. Nearby, a print reminds visitors of the rules of “good conduct”: “say please and thank-you”, “no foul language”, “wash your hands”, “wash up your plate and glass”. On the wall by the entrance there are four little plastic storage boxes, for guests to drop in papers on which they have written their names. Each box corresponds to an affliction which the *comedor*'s management seems to think is common among the visitors: “if you are suffering from addiction”; “if you have health problems”; “if you are seeking work”; if you are a woman in need of help”. As I leave, I notice that these boxes are still empty, as if people do not recognize themselves in these descriptions, or simply do not want to comply.

During the meal, older men – alone and sometimes tipsy – come to collect bags full of bread. The woman sitting next to me explains that one can buy these bags for 5 pesos each – that is, the equivalent of the meal. One can also buy sweet bread and biscuits. She seems to have been drinking or taking hard drugs, like her partner who soon comes to join her. The couple pretend to fight; the boyfriend leaves to sit with other guests; the couple end up getting back together and intertwining their fingers.

On the advice of her boyfriend, the woman makes sure to wipe clean her bowl of sauce, which she had to pour onto her plate as she does not have a spoon and did not use his. Immediately afterwards, she tells me she has two children, a boy and a girl; she does not wish to dwell on the subject, and we move on to other things.

I ask whether there are other *comedores* in San Luis, and the man beside me explains that there are three: “Santremo” (or a similar name, which I have not been able to identify since), Los Milagros (or “The Miracles”) and La Esperanza. They offer menus of varying quality on different dates. For example, the *comedor* El Milagro, built next to the Sagrado Corazón de Jesús church, only serves on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, whereas La Esperanza serves from Monday to Saturday. Everyone agrees that La Esperanza is “better” than the others. The man beside me adds that one can even get an extra portion of juice. The guests share details of their food itineraries around the town, emphasising the fact that it is sometimes “necessary” to change *comedor* for reasons of personal affinity.

The guests begin to leave the *comedor* after 30-40 minutes. A passing young salesman, selling biscuits, offers me a chocolate bar “for my children”. The woman beside me jokingly retorts “get him to give them out to the whole table!”. Earlier, she had offered me the religious image that Doña Coco had given her when she went to pay (also saying it was for my children). As for her husband, he keeps his in his shirt pocket, close to his heart.

At the end of the meal, a guest plugs a microphone into a battery-powered speaker (the electricity is never switched on) and begins to sing old Mexican popular songs. He starts off a few little dance steps, and is joined by a few couples. As he packs away

his equipment, he looks at them and says to me: "these ones never get tired!" Meanwhile, the man I had been sitting near takes my plate and cutlery to wash them.

José Antonio takes this moment to sit down next to me and explain how the *comedor* works. As well as the two cooks (Doña Lupita and Doña María), who have worked at the *comedor* for 13 and 6 years respectively, there are two maintenance men and three drivers. Each morning, the drivers shuttle between large stores and the supply centre to collect donated food. All the staff are volunteers, although Caritas pays their travel expenses. José Antonio invites me to return to the *comedor* in order to continue our discussions. He offers to accompany me to the *Casa de la Caridad Hogar del Migrante*, a "very beautiful project" for children and young people stopping off on their way to the United States.

The meal's key moments

At this stage, it is pertinent to revisit the key moments of the meal (paying, praying, eating, singing, washing, talking, dancing) in order to understand the issues surrounding them, beyond simply nutritional satisfaction.

The first key moment of the meal is paying the entrance fee. Although the amount in question seems modest (5 pesos, about 20 euro cents), the guests do not always have that sum of money. Where this is the case, an acquaintance pays the fee. The transaction is carried out discreetly, in order to avoid provoking sarcastic remarks. The recipient delicately touches the coins to their lips, or even presses them to their heart by way of thanks. In Mexico, there are coins worth one, two, five or ten pesos; in the *comedor*, guests generally use the smallest coins to pay for the meal, judging by the cash drawer, which contains no notes.¹¹ Guests with a free meal ticket (*vale*) distributed by the Caritas office are even more reticent than those who lack money, as if the advantage of a providential "free ride" is difficult to accept. This is evidenced by their body language, which expresses embarrassment and an eagerness to disappear into the group of guests. Based on my observations at the Caritas office, there are flexible criteria for distributing these tickets. The person at the front desk distributes fixed number each day (around fifty). Does this mean that potential beneficiaries can be turned away? I never saw this happen.

The question of whether assistance should be paid-for or free, personalized or voluntary, is a subject of controversy in academic, institutional and activist literature.¹² The challenge is to recognize the beneficiaries' "objective poverty" and take into consideration their level of insolvency (partial or total), in the knowledge that the final decision will never be fair for everyone. Traditionally, the pendulum of aid moves between one pole which emphasizes the "right to access food" with dignity, and another which emphasizes the "duty to assist" according to priorities and degrees of urgency set by institutions. The formula selected does not take account of the perceptions or feelings of beneficiaries, for whom there is no ideal solution. Contrary to received wisdom, providing food for free does not please everyone. Free food is assumed to be of worse quality, and it subjects beneficiaries to the negative image of being "eternally helpless" or "social parasites". Shut out of the logic of exchange and financial transactions that form the basis for social interactions, they feel like "a burden" on society. One of the guests confided in me that some women would prefer not to eat than to have to "scrounge" meals, a step which risks compromising their already tarnished image as the person who should be responsible for feeding their family in the eyes of those around them. Of course, the presence of women in the

¹¹ The smallest note in Mexico is worth 20 pesos (less than one euro).

¹² See McMillan (1991) for an anthropological reflection on food policies, based on several case studies from around the world. See also the dossier coordinated by Pisani (2009).

comedor – although they remain a minority compared to the men – serves to qualify this ideal of modesty based on a division of labour that is impossible to maintain in conditions of poverty. Regardless, the “denial of history, of reality, of actors” (Bensa 2006) characterizes the ideology of free provision: “giving something” in return for the aid received is a means of escaping the condition of helplessness, and positioning oneself as an active agent of one’s own destiny. The guests themselves say that payment amounts to “participating” in the aid and recovering a place in society, as well as a form of dignity – which is eroded by the ostracism and stigmatization conveyed by the status of “beneficiary”.

The modalities of food aid follow on from the theoretical discussions on exchange introduced by Mauss and continued by Lévi-Strauss (1950). The three obligations involved in exchange (giving, receiving, giving back), which are said to be at the foundation of the social order, also seem to contribute to the construction of social hierarchies, rights, prerogatives, duties and statuses for the beneficiaries. As Verdon (2010: 2) very aptly summarizes: “(...) to give is to affirm one’s social superiority, to refuse is a breach of decorum, and to receive without giving back is to place oneself in a situation of inferiority for the donation received thus transforms into a *debt* and engenders a form of dependency (...)” In the *comedor*, paying is not simply a mechanical act of transferring money; paying contributes to the construction of the individual’s personal identity and changes the way in which they appear and compare in society.¹³

The second key moment of the meal is the “blessing”, in the Christian vocabulary used by José Antonio who is responsible for it. This is a new way of saying grace:¹⁴ just before the dishes are served, José Antonio announces the meaning of the blessing and whom it is addressed to. However, rather than blessing someone or something through words and gestures, he improvises a commentary based on an extract from a text which he had downloaded on his phone. This may be a gospel, a hagiography, a parable or a moment from religious history that is likely to “light the way”, “open the spirit” or “brighten the day” for the guests. Blessings are followed by the *Pater noster*, which most guests know and recite at varied volumes while others remain silent, in observation of a collective reverence.

Whereas the *Pater noster* mentions the charitable distribution of food (“*Give us this day our daily bread*”), the readings, particularly the Saints hagiographies, recall the guests’ social status. In his introductory comments, José Antonio seeks to relieve the guests’ worries by likening their destiny to that of the Saint in question. For example, Saint Martin of Porres, a black Peruvian man carrying a broom, evokes “humility”, “exclusion” and “the conversion of all those who are here today”. Saint Rose of Lima, another Peruvian, is presented as the “patron saint of migrants” (rather than the first woman of the Peruvian church to be canonized). Similarly, Saint Charbel, a Lebanese hermit and ascetic, “specializes in difficult causes”: illness, unemployment, isolation. The blessings establish both a kind of normative identity and a form of identification – simultaneously ephemeral and comforting – between the guests and the saints being venerated. These saints embody redemptive victims, sent by God, come to atone for sinners in order to liberate them from the ills that fetter their existence.

In Mexico, despite massive conversions to Protestantism by the poorest populations (Dow and Sandstrom 2001), worship and devotion to Saints and holy images are

¹³ This analysis joins Bloch and Parry’s 1989 edited volume on the “moral” dimensions associated with uses of money in the contemporary capitalist system.

¹⁴ It is a brief prayer, or a little Christian song, with variable and often improvised contents, recited by the guests before the meal in order to thank God for the food.

multitude and omnipresent: they are part of most citizens' everyday life.¹⁵ This is why the moment of the blessing goes beyond the symbolic exchange of good feeling between society's outcasts: evidently, the guests do not participate in normative religious practice and the register of good conscience. Praying is a concrete act, engaging the body and the emotions, aimed at constructing a spiritual family of the poor, with Jesus Christ and all the Saints presented as the "father" and "friends". Everything about this practice suggests that participation in the blessing allows the guests to be integrated into the spiritual routine shared by most of their compatriots.

The expectation of the "daily bread" which is about to be distributed is not sufficient to explain the guests' engaged, understated and cooperative reverence. The kind of exchange which is established during the blessing – between José Antonio and the guests and between the different guests – seems to be in agreement with the critical analyses of Godelier (1996) on the Maussian interpretation of the "gift", a notion which he prefers to substitute with the notion of "system of total services" (*système de prestations totales*). Unlike gifts, systems of total services are embedded in concrete social relations, and involve the whole society, including all actors and groups of which it is formed. The guests' participation in the blessing cannot be reduced to an act of grace addressed at God; it reflects a recognition and sharing of the concrete conditions of existence (migrant experience, illness, poverty), which are illustrated in the lives of the Saints with whom the guests identify and for whom they pray in the same way as most Mexicans. The blessing is addressed to the guests, as much as to the pantheon of exceptional beings who share their destitution.

A meal in the *comedor* is not over without music, which is an essential ingredient for conviviality, although it is never planned. Singing and/or dancing is an improvised activity, undertaken at the initiative of an individual guest. A guitar, an accordion, a harmonica, or even a mobile phone – connected to speakers or not – does the job. The music, dances and songs are from a popular and regional register, which boosts enthusiasm among the guests, including those who are only passing through. Dancing pairs form, made up of men and/or women. The fact that they have just shared a meal encourages them to sing and/or dance together.¹⁶ One of the guests remarked that "it feels like a restaurant here". It is true that most restaurants, including street stalls, play music. Although the remark could seem trivial, in reality it highlights unconcealed pride: pride in being part of a kind of normality, and feeling that you are treated in an ordinary manner, like any anonymous diner.

Just after the musical interlude, the guests go to wash their plates and cutlery in the basin in the courtyard. "Singing while we work!" one woman cheers as she is washing her plate. She even takes the other guests' plates, adding: "it's my turn today!" This is probably associated with recollections of domestic tasks, and the woman humorously expresses her satisfaction in undertaking the work of the lady of the house. During this time, the guests place the unfinished pieces of bread in another basin. It is notable that this bread is never thrown away, but is offered to people of more modest means or put aside to make *pain-perdu*.

The post-meal period continues the real and symbolic exchange of gifts and services between the *comedor* and the guests, and between the different guests. This reinforces the "citizenship" dimension of the meal: through their gestures, words, reflections or emotions, the guests establish bridges between themselves and the

¹⁵ There is abundant literature on these questions. See, for example, Perrée (2014), Mancini (2015) or Grunzinski (1992).

¹⁶ The construction of gender relations through dance in this context would be an interesting research avenue to explore. See the work of Cowan (1990) on these questions in Greece.

society surrounding them. These forms of modest identification with people or moments that evoke normal, ordinary life are the seeds of a dignity which is as hard-won as it is appreciated.

“Cocinar con cariño”: nutrition, affection and temporality

In the swell of conversation in the period after the meal, which constitutes a moment in itself, one of the cooks openly criticized the fact that the *comedor* was presented as a “service business” in the town directory.¹⁷ She explained that it was neither a business intended to “make money” nor a “service provision” involving a “seller” and a “customer”. This comment suggests it is worth pausing for a moment to consider how beneficiaries perceive the aid given.

Despite its canteen-like appearance, the *comedor* tries to resemble one of the city's restaurants as closely as possible: the till, the table service, the way guests are seated, and the atmospheric music and songs all aim to “normalize” the place, the time spent there and the activity occurring. However, this parallel does not emerge naturally. Instead, the attendees' comments on the “spirit” of the place and the “state of mind” are more evocative of eating with “family” or “friends”. The fact that the kitchens do not have doors brings the cooks closer to the guests, and the former come out of the kitchen to greet the latter. All this contributes to reinforcing the feeling of being more or less at home, despite the ephemeral nature of the experience.

In addition, the cooks' curiosity about whether the guests enjoyed the dishes is a notable element. When I visited the kitchen, a cook lifted the lid of a basin and drew my attention to the “affection” (*el cariño*) that was released – as if an intangible sentiment had found a tangible field of expression in the smell of her cooking. More than a smell or an ingredient, *el cariño* is linked to a sort of sociability that contributes to the success of the cooking. Although affection is not measured in volume, the time spent cooking allows us to grasp its contours: according to the cooks, there is the “time needed to cook”, and the time needed “for it to taste good”, “for it to smell good”, and “for it to look beautiful”. Emotional investment, which refers to the time that is necessary and sufficient to make a good dish, is an essential component of *cariño*. In the popular imagination of food, *cariño* is specific to recipes women cook for their families; it is not a cardinal value of restaurants, canteens or catering companies. Much more than a service provision, *cariño* is a kind of comprehensive social service (*prestación*) – largely, but not solely, founded on the notion of Christian charity – involving food, feelings and emotions.¹⁸

The cooks' *cariño* seems to extend beyond the domain of cooking, into the use of nicknames for individual guests. It is true that the everyday nature of the meal encourages attendees to get to know one another (Le Chêne 2004); and on the flipside, the guests are comfortable around the cooks. For the cooks, nicknames can be described as “nicknames of address” (Hassoun 2004) which contribute to making social relations more fluid. One could also claim that nicknames encourage a levelling of statuses between the protagonists – albeit on a temporary basis. This is all the more true since in Mexico nicknames are often given in the diminutive mode, a custom which reinforces emotional closeness: *reynita* (“little queen”) *guërito* (“little blond” or “little white boy”), *princesita* (“little princess”) or *señorcito* (“little lord” or “little sir”). The use of the possessive pronoun (“my”) before the nickname further contributes to the levelling process and introduces a degree of complicity. Addressing someone by their

¹⁷ The directory describes the *comedor* as a “family” sized business, offering “community food services provided by the private sector”.

¹⁸ The subject of emotions has been little considered in anthropology (Crapanzano 1994), and even less so in food anthropology (Lorcy 2010).

nickname, accompanied by a diminutive and a possessive, is not simply a greeting; it is a way of respecting them. In this way, the cooks situate themselves at the same level as the most humble attendees, if not “in their service”, thereby establishing an equal social and emotional footing. The use of nicknames is evidence that a strong bond has developed between the guests and the cooks; this bond, which contributes to the same logic as the *cariño*, makes the official social function of the *comedor* as recorded in the directory (“service business”) seem even more erroneous.

Conclusion: eating as a citizen

My starting hypothesis was that interactions in the *comedor* promote the articulation of food practices and other practices (paying, praying, singing, washing, talking or dancing) which together produce real and symbolic exchanges, as well as the circulation of feelings and emotions¹⁹ between the beneficiaries, the canteen staff and the institution as an operating figure.²⁰ My analysis, which has focused on various key moments of a meal in the *comedor*, has shown that all the meaning of this aid stems from the activation of these various practices. Finally, I have explained how aid contributes to the emergence of forms of urban citizenship, even if these are fragile and ephemeral.

The meal in the *comedor* includes a series of key moments that go well beyond its nutritional function. Ultimately, feelings, money, prayers and food are given, offered and exchanged within the *comedor*, in an intense manner and within a limited period of time, between the various guests and between the guests and the staff. To that extent, the *comedor* resembles a real “melting pot”²¹ where society’s most diverse actors meet, disperse again, and then return another day. To a certain extent, the *comedor* is a point of anchorage within often-itinerant existences. It allows people not only to settle down for a short time, but also to position themselves socially, recognising themselves among the most humble. The practices of prayer, which partially identify guests with a saint, seem in some sense to extend this positioning, by allowing guests to share their situations, and thereby put them into perspective by joining a larger group of needy people who are suffering. Somewhat surprisingly, the practices of the *comedor*, staff and guests seem to combine to encourage a temporary identification with an ideal of “family life”. Ultimately, the acts of doing dishes, praying before the meal, speaking in confidence, giving each other nicknames and bickering are some of the most ordinary moments that make up domestic and family life. From this perspective, the *comedor* appears as a spatial and social hub.

Despite all this, the *comedor* remains a reflection of a significant and cruel social divide, which conviviality cannot fully conceal. Ultimately, the exchanges that take place there – in the form of money, prayers, service or food – implicitly reflect the increasing economic inequalities and the rigid social hierarchies that are operating at the societal level. Although there is undeniably extremely strong symbolic value in the levelling gestures, words and moments which punctuate the meal, it must be emphasized that they also reveal the real and symbolic violence of the “food uncertainty” (Suremain and Razy 2011) which marks the guests’ everyday lives. This is a state of mind (fear, fatality), a bodily situation and a set of everyday survival practices which cannot be measured by the criteria usually employed by studies on food insecurity (Janin and Suremain 2005, 2012). Unlike food insecurity, food

¹⁹ Here understood in the emic and localized sense, not the universal and psychological (Lutz and White 1986).

²⁰ This is the idea espoused by Douglas in her analysis of institutions (1986).

²¹ The “melting-pot” echoes the idea of “*small places, large issues*” which is characteristic of Eriksen’s approach (2000).

uncertainty takes into account interpersonal networks in the way people handle daily problems with food. As commendable as it may be, food aid – whether free, paying or conditional²² – can only serve to relieve, for a few moments, the deleterious effects of chronic and extended poverty, which can only be meaningfully addressed by sustainable public policies.

When all is said and done, in the course of the meal, the guests find something that is essential to the development of social relations: dignity. As indicated by the “beneficiaries” of the aid themselves, this cannot be reduced to consumption, the possession of material foods, or social equality (see also Winkler 2012; Fischer 2014). More profoundly, it includes the dreams, aspirations and intense social relationships (Calestani 2009) which give meaning to existence. In the words of one of the guests describing a day wandering the town: “it’s not me that dwells in the *comedor*, it’s the *comedor* that dwells in me ...” This phrase is much more than just a witty remark; it indicates the importance of the *comedor* in this guest’s existence. Although it is indeed a landmark in spatial and food terms, it is above all (at least for those who frequent it) essential in sustaining a form of dignity, incorporated and embedded within the most ordinary practices of social life, without which no citizenship is possible.

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²² On the negative effects of conditional food aid in a Mexican village, see also Suremain (in press).

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