

Title : **Creative knowledge and alternative food networks in Mexican cities**

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This work analyze alternative food networks formed by producers and consumers from a knowledge perspective and based primary on Actor-network Theory. First, some problems of the global food system are described as a background information. Then, some examples of knowledge dynamics in farmer's markets from the *Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Orgánicos* are presented. Finally, some reflexions are made about better ways of understanding alternative food spaces.

Nowadays, Mexico is experiencing the consequences of a food system disconnected from health concerns as manifested by diseases derived from malnutrition, being overweight and obesity or the high levels of diabetes in urban areas. These are the result of complex process of industrialization and globalization of food. For example, in low-income urban households the consumption of beans has decreased whereas the consumption of processed meat has increased since the operation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which has favored the industrial food system. In other words, production systems from the global food markets have been able to make significant changes in food consumption habits (Santos, 2014). Meanwhile, small scale producers who could provide local and healthy food to cities are overlooked (FAO). Only about 30% of rural inhabitants carry out activities related to the production of food. In most of the cases, farming is not their main source of income, because under the present economic model it is not possible for a small producer to make a living from it. Indeed, the ones whose income depend only on farming are the poorest of the poor (Carton de Grammont, 2009).

Under these circumstances farmers and consumers are trying to re-connect by building alternative food networks. According to Latour association provides agency (Murdoch, 2005) or the capacity to decide what kind of food is produced and eaten. At the heart of such networks lays the sharing of knowledge, they creatively shape spaces where tacit and codified knowledge about other ways of eating and farming are shared and transformed.

One of this networks is represented by the Red Mexicana de Tianguis y Mercados Organicos (RMTMO). RMTMO was founded in 2004 at the *Universidad Autónoma de Chapingo* to link four farmer's markets or *tianguis* from different cities. Today there are more than 30 *tianguis* in cities throughout Mexico. One important instrument which links the *tianguis* and promotes organic production is a peer review called the Participatory Organic Certification (POC). Different from an agency certification process, POC involves the interaction of consumers, producers, specialist, etc. POC also allows the exchange of different kinds of knowledge; scientific knowledge from biologists and agronomists, traditional knowledge from farmers acquired in social and family relations. The aim of the certification process is to observe the compliance of organic standards. However, other objectives are equally important such as the socialization of consumers and producers in

order to build trust, or the learning process derived from the observation and knowledge exchange between certifiers and producers.

In a *tianguis*, peasants can be seen as educators that provide “moral knowledge” about food practices. They often give information about the nutrient properties of the food, this knowledge can be based on scientific research, but also can be traditional knowledge in form of recipes. On the other hand, consumers encounters with food in a *tianguis* has a tacit and non-representational dimension since they can taste, touch or smell their food, which help them to develop new values about the appearance of organic food.

Some *tianguis* more than others, become the meeting point for multiple networks of producers, consumers, activists and scholars with the possibilities of *forming communities of ecological practices* (Goodman *et al*, 2012). In Latour terms, they can function as *centers of calculation*, so knowledge about the production process flows from *tianguis* to farms, as well as food habits which can be introduced to the consumers table. In these processes two professionals become very important; the agronomist that contributes to implement natural food production process which can gradually become organic; the nutritionist who help to inform and educate consumers about better food habits, she also support producers to label their products with nutritional information.

Nonetheless, *tianguis* are far from being ideal places and power relations and conflicts do exist. Among producers, inconformity emerges when peer evaluation is perceived very strict, or when norms and standards produced by scientists from cities must be followed, regardless the local and traditional knowledge which has evolved in a local and rural context. Because these and other differences several *tianguis* have broken apart. Yet, at the same time dissidents form new spaces based on the previous experiences.

In summary, the *tianguis* might not represent a fixed and enduring space but a discontinued and emergent one formed by several kinds of relations, negotiations, segregations and knowledge exchange. Such alternative food spaces are in a constant state of becoming, making and remaking ecological practices, negotiating inside the network-space; and at the same time trespassing the spaces of conventional food systems.

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