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## Street Music, Governance, and Cultural Policy in San Cristóbal de Las Casas

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*This article takes an ethnographic perspective to explore the changing ways in which the municipal government of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, a city in southern Mexico whose economy is highly dependent on tourism, has regulated street musicians over the last five years. It focuses on permits given to street musicians which served to exert spatial and temporal control over street performance, while giving musicians no substantial rights in practice. Engaging the so-called ‘anarchist turn’ in anthropology, it shows that this policy instrument effectively sidelined non-monetary forms of exchange between musicians and their various publics, and privileged the commercial interests of restaurants and bars. Further, in practice, it pushed some street musicians onto the margins of the city’s economic life, where their performances were often more, rather than less, disruptive. Nonetheless, this situation altered significantly in the wake of social unrest in Summer 2016, which caused a precipitous drop in tourism to the city. The municipal government’s response to the ensuing economic crisis signified a belated recognition of the economic value of street musicianship.*

When, during an interview, I asked a government official working for the municipality of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, about the purpose of their regulation of street musicians, I was given a one-word answer: ‘Order’.<sup>1</sup> Used in a context of governance, this response indexed long-standing debates concerning power, authority, and human nature. It also drew attention to the ‘infrapolitical’ status of street music, a practice which lies ‘outside the visible spectrum of what usually passes for political activity’ (Scott 2012: xx). ‘The

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<sup>1</sup> Interview, Areli, 01-08-16. Note that some names and information have been altered for this article.

street' is celebrated in countless songs as spaces of freedom, authenticity, and danger (Perry 2004, Osumare 2001). Yet the realities of performing music in public spaces can be legally and economically precarious. If music's economic value is agonistic, dependent on an ongoing process of commodification (Beaster-Jones 2014, 337; Taylor 2007; Baym 2011), street music is a form of creative labour whose value is recognized especially infrequently, and which occurs at the margins of the political.

The scholarly literature on street music highlights its marginality, spontaneity and informality, as 'a sophisticated and complex business of appropriating, maintaining, and exploiting liminal space' (Bywater 2007, 118). Such liminality has created challenging questions for governance in both the past and the present day. Johnson (2018) argues that policy crackdowns on street music in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century London reflected a broader transition to literate modernity, and increasing suspicion of orality. Meanwhile, Simpson (2014, 160) highlights a tendency for governments in the present to recognize the value of street musicianship only 'by way of a caveat to the introduction of some form of legislation or imposed control'. In response, he emphasizes 'the role street music plays in the production of convivial urban public places' (160). Street performances can be celebrated as a form of democratic, free expression that contribute to the vitality of particular places; but some may equally view them as 'a threat that needs to be managed, regulated, mapped out [and] timetabled' (Simpson 2011, 427). As the sense of excitement and danger that may emerge during such performances contributes to the vitality of public spaces, so Simpson is concerned that regulation might 'remove key elements of street performing—freedom, democratic or informal access, and importantly, spontaneity' (427).

At stake within these studies is the relationship of street music to the state; state actors' ability to understand and effectively respond to the value of these performances; and the state's role as guardian of perceived order. Yet I want to suggest that to juxtapose street performers' 'freedom' with government-assured 'control' is to risk overlooking ways that these performers may

effectively regulate public spaces themselves. Anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has critiqued what he labels the ‘totalized metaphysics of order’, which presumes a human nature ‘so avaricious [...] that, unless it is somehow governed, it will reduce society to anarchy’ (2008, 1). By contrast, there is abundant ethnographic evidence of human beings’ capacity to self-organize, without the coercive influence of the state (cf. Graeber 2004), and some of the ethnographic literature on music has explored non-state societies in which musical performances help to maintain egalitarian social organization (e.g. Feld 1982).

This article places the study of street musicianship into dialogue with what has been called the ‘anarchist turn’ in anthropology (Ssorin-Chaikov 2015), led by scholars such as James C. Scott (1998, 2009, 2012) and David Graeber (2004, 2007, 2011). These thinkers bring out the ways that political states privilege ‘rational’ forms of order to which competing forms of social organization are understood as a threat. In particular, the work of James C. Scott presents a potent critical perspective on statecraft (1998, 2009). Analyzing a variety of cases from south-east Asia, he explores how ‘projects of administrative, economic, and cultural standardization are hard-wired into the architecture of the modern state’ (2009, 4). States seek control by encouraging regularity, standardization and visibility in the cultural and biological spheres. This makes the lives of their subjects ‘legible’ to state actors (1998, 2-3), so as to ‘integrate and monetize [...] people, lands, and resources’ (2009, 4). Conversely, Scott demonstrates how groups may adopt fluid agricultural and cultural practices allowing them to evade state assimilation. The shifting, illegible activities of these groups are perceived by state actors to represent ‘disorder’, yet their emergence is a direct consequence of state activity. Building on this argument, Scott forcefully argues that the story of state-guaranteed ‘order’ arising from ‘chaos’ – that is, the ‘the standard civilizational story of social evolution’ – is principally a self-flattering fiction that state actors tell about themselves (2009, 8).

An appropriate scholarly response, Scott has recently argued, is to assume a non-nomothetic ‘anarchist squint’ to reveal ‘insights [...] that are obscured from almost any other angle’

(2012, xii). Such a perspective may help us to understand how government efforts to order space often achieve the opposite, and draw attention to informal, spontaneous and playful ways in which human beings organize. Assuming such a perspective can reveal ways that ‘anarchist principles are active in the aspirations and political action of people who have never heard of anarchism or anarchist philosophy’ (xii). We may take music, a practice important to identity formation, communities and ‘collective, public experiences’ (Hesmondhalgh, 2013, 1-2), as a key proving-ground for such a claim.

While Scott does not provide a methodological guide, this article constitutes an exploration of what an ‘anarchist squint’ might look like when extended to the study of musical creativity. Although musical and acoustic practices are topics of concern for Scott, he does not explore questions about how state actors might *listen*, or apply principles of legibility to music and the auditory realm. Nonetheless, the open-ended and multisensory gesture of the ‘squint’ promises to move beyond visual forms of inquiring and knowing; we often squint in order to hear, as well as to see. Further, the idiographic nature of this gesture is consequential; we squint in order to perceive fine details. Equally, the nuance and humility implicit in this gesture (which both arises from and performs a lack of understanding) make the reflexivity and attention to close social detail of ethnography especially valuable. Ethnography, in its emphasis on the particular, as well as on often undocumented lived experience, provides important tools for perceiving forms of value not recognized by state actors; in this sense, it presents the possibility of developing an ‘anti-theory’ of value (Otto and Willerslev 2013, 5).

Following these observations, then, here I build on a focused ethnographic case study with street musicians performing in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, carried out in the ‘high seasons’ for tourism of 2015 and 2016. I conducted 40 interviews with street musicians, workers in and owners of commercial spaces, and municipal government officials. I also observed many street performances, noting details such as the number of observers and audiences’ responses; the

organization of physical space and the ways that it influenced, or was influenced by, street performances; the practices of exchange, monetary or otherwise, that arose around street music; and any satellite commercial practices that might emerge alongside it. My conversations with participants in San Cristobal's street music scene attempted to unpick the multiple forms of valuing, and ways of seeing and hearing, that informed various groups' actions within this scene, and such participants' experiences of the municipal government's attempts to regulate street music. Adapting Scott's 'anarchist squint' to make sense of the practical realities of street musicianship and government attempts to regularize street musicianship here helps to underline how cultural policy curtailed performer freedom, while overlooking diverse ways that street musicians contributed to the city's economic life.

### **San Cristóbal de Las Casas, tourism, and magic**

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century San Cristóbal has attracted many national and international tourists. Chiapas is the site of many different languages, cultural practices and history; much of its population speaks Mayan languages such as Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, and Tojolabal. Tourists' attraction to the state has long been rooted in the consumption of apparently 'exotic' indigenous culture (Van Den Berghe, 1994), but the city's tourism sector has expanded greatly since the 1990s. In 1994 a rebel army called the Zapatista Army of National Liberation, populated mostly by indigenous people from eastern Chiapas, took the city and a number of nearby towns, before retreating into the countryside and agreeing a ceasefire. The Mexican government's response to the 1994 uprising has defined the trajectory of tourism in the region until the present day. It invested heavily in the Chiapas tourist economy, launching a nationwide advertising campaign to paint the state as a 'peaceful and enticing' place to visit (Pitts 1996, 226), and constructing several pedestrianized streets in the centre of San Cristóbal.

Most significantly, in 2003 San Cristóbal was declared a so-called *pueblo mágico* ('magic town') as part of Programa Pueblos Mágicos, a government programme created in 2001 to drive tourism to places understood to be 'culturally rich'. Subsequently, in 2010, it was declared the 'most magic of the magic towns'.<sup>2</sup> In order to be deemed a *pueblo mágico*, a venue must fulfil quantifiable criteria connected to the quality and number of tourist services and attractions on offer, and the existence of 'instruments of planning and regulation' (Castillo and Lara 2008, 121). The Secretary of Tourism states that a *pueblo mágico* will:

possess symbolic features, legends, stories, transcendent occurrences, the everyday, that is: magic which emanates in each one of its socio-cultural manifestations [...] Their authenticity, their Mexicanness, their ancestral charm, their colour and smells, their inhabitants, their unique features together require today their revalorization, to be elevated to a state of distinction, as an icon of Mexican tourism. (SECTUR 2008, author's translation)

*Pueblos mágicos* stand to receive investment from state and federal public bodies to develop tourism-oriented 'improvement of the urban image' (Castillo and Lara 2008, 120; cf. Velarde Vasquéz et al. 2009).

Thus, in the late 1990s and 2000s, San Cristóbal's centre became an increasingly popular tourist destination; the number of high-end hotels, restaurants and bars increased, while the city's population rose dramatically with opportunities to work in the service sector (Propin Frejomil and Sánchez Crespin 2007, 154). Meanwhile, the expansion of tourism in San Cristóbal has been accompanied by a rhetoric of 'magic' which emphasizes the experience of capital-rich visitors. Trujillo Correa and López Lecona argue that *pueblos mágicos* are rooted in an exoticist dynamic which turns the cultural practices of the 'other' into an empty commodity, while 'masking deep social inequalities' (2016, 125). This is apparent in San Cristóbal, whose historic centre presents tourists with two faces of indigeneity: the first, dancers who perform in pastiche dress, replete with

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.turismochiapas.gob.mx/sectur/san-cristbal-de-las-casas-> (accessed 21-05-17).

flowers and colour but reflective only of an imagined pre-Hispanic indigenous identity (cf. Rostas 2009), in this way making ‘indigeneity legible to the consumer of otherness’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 142); the second, indigenous child beggars whose activity reflects the real poverty that many families in the majority-indigenous ‘belt of misery’ around the city suffer (París Pombo 2000, 91). In this context the commodification of indigeneity simultaneously results from and fails to mask ‘the attenuation of other modes of producing incomes’, rather than being the straightforward product of a generalized postmodern alienation (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 139).

The musicians with whom I conducted research were highly aware of the status of San Cristóbal as a ‘magic town’, some linking it to the cultural vibrancy of the city. For instance, son jarocho performer Joel stated that: ‘It’s a magical place [...] it’s like a musical laboratory, this place. Because it’s a vortex of cultures, of musical influences’.<sup>3</sup> Another felt that the sounds of ‘banjos, trumpets, guitars [...] from bluegrass to Bob Dylan or even older things’ gave the city ‘a ton of magic’.<sup>4</sup> These characterizations of ‘magic’ as a product of diverse sensory experience connected street music with the city’s official economic strategy in a way that municipal officials typically avoided within their own discourse. Equally, as I explore below, the governance of street musicianship involved circulation among, and mediating between, ‘incommensurate systems of value’ (Myers 2002, 127). Musical variety could be heard as chaotic, as well as vibrant, and it could also be understood in (non-auditory) economic terms.

### **Street music, space and exchange**

In San Cristóbal, the line distinguishing commercial and street musicianship was blurry. Street musicians often performed in restaurants and bars, and some saw their street performances as a

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<sup>3</sup> Interview, Joel, 07-08-15.

<sup>4</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache, 02-08-16.

means of gaining the attention of potential employers; equally, many of those who earned a living performing in commercial spaces still played in the street, sometimes to rehearse. Yet perceptions of street and commercial performance correlated with notions of creative autonomy, which often connected strongly to musicians' identities as performers. One protest singer told me that he performed in a restaurant because he thought that the police would prevent protest songs being sung in public.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, street musicians characterized commercial spaces as sites of creative compromise. Joel, for example, stated that while 'the street' was 'a very experimental site of expression', in restaurants performers were told to play 'a certain type of music so that people come and consume'.<sup>6</sup> Another street musician had been drawn to San Cristóbal by its reputation for musical diversity, and was disappointed to find this reflected little in commercial spaces.<sup>7</sup>

Street music, by contrast, was a highly diverse practice. The street musicians with whom I conducted research performed in a great variety of genres, including (but not limited to) jazz, *son jarocho*, rock, pop, cumbia, and Western classical music, but many performers intertwined musical styles. Some played as part of ensembles, while others performed alone; some musicians had been playing their instruments for decades and were also active in teaching and recording music, while others had learned to play only recently – in some cases for the sole purpose of playing in the street. Most were highly mobile, and had performed street music in other major tourist destinations in other parts of Mexico; some of the more experienced practitioners had performed in Europe and elsewhere in the Americas, and could place their experiences in San Cristóbal in a broader context. Some, for example, compared San Cristóbal favourably to cities with more onerous restrictions on street music, or in which streets were controlled by gangs.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Interview, Hernán, 23-07-15.

<sup>6</sup> Interview, Joel, 07-08-15.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, Oscar, 09-08-16.

<sup>8</sup> Interview, Joe, 15-08-15.

Street musicians frequently interacted with restaurant owners and workers, participating in informal networks of exchange in which musical performance played a part.<sup>9</sup> A key aspect of this picture was how street music was ascribed value among those involved in the day-to-day operation of restaurants and bars. During interviews, street musicians defended the economic worth of their performances by alluding to the time and effort it took to reach a high technical standard (in effect, the labour theory of value), as well as their need to pay for food and rent; in this reading, street musicianship was ‘just like anyone else’s job’.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, these performers were aware of the fact that they could help to attract and retain audiences, drive custom, and contribute to a profitable atmosphere.<sup>11</sup> Street musicians also fulfilled a vital monetary function: since San Cristóbal remained a comparatively isolated city, businesses frequently found themselves without small change, but street performers helped to gather coins and channel them to commercial spaces with which they had favourable relationships.<sup>12</sup> Commercial spaces often reciprocated by donating hot beverages, water, beer, or food, and providing street musicians with a source of electricity;<sup>13</sup> sympathetic spaces would also support street musicians when threatened by the police or government workers.<sup>14</sup> Often, such informal networks of exchange effectively constituted webs of friendships: for example, one street performer affectionately said of the workers in a café outside which he often performed: ‘the staff here are really cool. They’re the gang’ [*son la banda*].<sup>15</sup> Street musicians built up highly personal relationships with restaurant workers and owners in which reciprocity came wrapped in idiosyncrasy, affect, humour and camaraderie.

Not all workers or owners of commercial spaces were co-operative. Oscar was a multi-instrumentalist and composer from Mexico City who at the time of my research had been a

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<sup>9</sup> One musician characterized this interchange in the following way: ‘It’s a benefit for them and for us. Between us, we help each other so that the tourist consume the products made here.’ (Interview, León, 04-08-16).

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Oscar, 08-08-16.

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache, 02-08-16; Interview, Oscar, 08-08-16.

<sup>12</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache, 02-08-16.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Oscar Ide, 05-08-16; Interview, Valentín, 31-07-16; Interview, León, 04-08-16.

<sup>14</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache, 02-08-16.

<sup>15</sup> Interview, León, 04-08-16.

musician for more than a decade, and had performed in the street for four years. In San Cristóbal he earned money improvising in the street with an electric guitar over pre-recorded backing tracks. Oscar cited an occasion during which a nearby restaurant owner raised the volume of their music in order to drown out his performances, in turn obliging him to play louder, creating auditory conflict. He reflected that his performance

directly benefits them, of course. The problem is that commercial spaces don't see that perspective [...] The funniest thing is that the audience applauding me were the diners of the same restaurant [...] it was benefiting the people sat in the restaurant, but the restaurant doesn't visualize it like that. (Interview, Oscar, 08-08-16).

Oscar found such attitudes especially difficult to comprehend given that 'we don't trade in coffee or food' – in other words, in any product that this restaurant offered.<sup>16</sup> In fact, most of the service sector workers I spoke to were positive about the contribution that street performance made to San Cristóbal's economy.<sup>17</sup> However, some perceived street musicians as a potential nuisance, complaining that their performances drew attention away from musical performances inside their spaces, and could make it difficult for them to communicate with customers.<sup>18</sup> Finally, some high-end restaurants sought to attract a 'more discerning' and 'more select' public, and perceived street musicianship as, at best, irrelevant to this aim.<sup>19</sup>

Musicians' interactions with passers-by were 'in process and still at stake' (Haraway 2003, 20), marked by complexity, care, speculation and interpretation. During a typical performance, musicians would begin to perform in a public space, leaving a hat in front of the performance area so that those watching could walk forward and place monetary donations inside it, and occasionally approach those seated within hearing range to ask for donations. While musicians rarely got to know the people who gave them money, many were preoccupied with the subtle and nuanced

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<sup>16</sup> Municipal government workers did not charge street performers for a permit because, unlike street vendors, these performers were not in direct competition with commercial spaces (Interview, Areli, 01-08-16).

<sup>17</sup> Interview, Silvia, 17-08-15; Interview, Julio, 14-08-15; Interview, Rosaura, 16-08-15; Interview, Jorge, 15-08-15.

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Karla, 17-08-15; Interview, Valeska, 10-08-15; Interview, Francesca, 07-08-15.

<sup>19</sup> Interview, Sergio, 17-08-15.

ways in which this occurred, and concerned themselves with the underlying motivations behind this apparent act of generosity. For instance, when asked about audiences' valuing of music, Ángel, who performed in the street as part of a string quartet, responded:

Irrespective of money, it comes across in people's attitudes. For instance there are people who leave the money and thank us for playing, there are others who just throw us the money and that's all. So I don't think it's the amount of money they leave, but the attitude (Interview, 03-08-16).

As Ángel's response indicates, despite its typical brevity and apparent simplicity, this interaction frequently provoked street performers to 'reflect on the arbitrariness of value' (Graeber 2005, 412) as it related to music. Throughout, both the act of performing music in the street and that of donating money to musicians were narrated as gifts, rather than the direct exchange of money for a (musical) service. The musicians I interviewed refused to consider the monetary value of cash donations from passers-by to be a reflection of the actual value of their performances. Instead, they valued the specific nature of the gesture with which money was donated, and the ways that it was socially framed. Thus, one street musician, León, characterized donations as 'symbolic': 'It's the appreciation they're showing for your work [...] I don't think you can calculate the value of something like music' (Interview, 04-08-16). Another musician had a jar full of redundant foreign currency which he called 'a little treasure', which he valued as an embodiment of goodwill: 'that's part of the payment, that smile you see in people'.<sup>20</sup> These interactions were experienced by musicians as highly relational and affective; in these kinds of exchange, currency accumulated history, attained status as precious objects, and upon occasion became effectively obsolete for monetary exchange.<sup>21</sup> In a broad sense, during these transactions currency ceased to be 'frictionless', gaining value in relation to specific experiences and encounters (Graeber 2001, 94).

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<sup>20</sup> Interview, Oscar Ide, 05-08-16.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the example of the musician collecting gifted foreign currency presents a variation on a tendency discussed by Graeber (2001: 94-9): in becoming part of a musician's private, invisible collection, currency lost power yet gained affective, relational specificity.

Finally, musicians also developed complex forms of interaction with one another. There were plenty of incentives to compete – over, for example, access to finite audiences that tended to frequent the same spaces in the city’s centre – and conflicts occurred sporadically. One musician recounted an occasion upon which an accordionist impinged upon his performance space:

This time I was playing by Oh La La [a bakery and café] on this block, and the guy arrived and sat right in front of me [...] Luckily he hasn’t done it again, and I think he cottoned on [*agarró la onda*] that it’s really rude to do that (Interview, Perro Mapache, 02-08-16).

Nonetheless, the conclusion to this anecdote pointed towards the reason that conflicts between musicians for space were comparatively rare: the fact that musicians tended to adhere a set of norms which emphasized the importance of respecting other musicians’ performance space. To violate that respect was narrated as *grosero* (‘rude’), and if street musicians did so they could be challenged by members of the public as well as other musicians. Conversely, there were incentives for street musicians to participate in the same web of social relations. In most cases, street musicians who were new to San Cristóbal would seek out other street performers and ask for advice;<sup>22</sup> street musicians often formed friendships, and many ended up performing together. Co-operation between street performers was seen as a mutual benefit, which this musician characterized as follows: ‘if [another musician] is finishing a show, I go to occupy that space, they go to the space I was playing in before, and we keep the spaces warm [and] maintain harmony between street musicians’.<sup>23</sup> Built on an effective set of incentives and disincentives, such ‘harmony’ seemed remarkably durable; street musicians came into conflict with each other comparatively infrequently. Indeed, after my research ended I became aware of one musician who had made a proposal to the municipality to have musicians regulate street musicianship themselves. While they considered the existence of a body to organize street life to be necessary, they felt that

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<sup>22</sup> This advice could be highly specific to particular places – for instance, in Oaxaca City, musicians advised newcomers to play by churches, where it was considered that the police would not remove them (Interview, Valentín, 31-07-16).

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache 02-08-16.

street musicians had a better understanding of the nuanced realities of street performance, and would carry out this task more effectively.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout these complex and heterospecific forms of exchange – built on open-ended and often highly personal webs of social interaction – musicians were engaged in a certain way of ordering social life. Equally, such exchange was often dependent on the physical layout of the city’s pedestrianized centre. The pedestrian walkways (*andadores*) concentrated visitors to the city – and hence much of its economic activity – into a comparatively small space. While there was much space in the city square, sound in this location tended to dissipate quickly, whereas the acoustics within the comparatively narrow pedestrian walkways were more favourable for performers. One of the key features of pedestrianized zones was the presence of exterior seating areas outside cafés extending onto the pavement (usually as far as the municipal government would allow). I witnessed several occasions on which street musicians performed in such seating areas, allowing them to sidestep municipal regulations concerning street performance while still being able to reach an audience of passers-by. Equally, musicians would often play while seated on benches in the pedestrianized street. It was important, then, that in 2016 the municipal government removed a number of these benches, including one that extended from – and was often used in conjunction with – a café’s outside seating area. In doing so, they removed a small but significant grey area between ‘the street’ and privately owned space.

It is important, then, to consider the ways that local government policies – in theory and implementation – constrained and facilitated certain forms of street performance. These effects, as Cloonan (2007, 24) points out, may be vicarious as well as intentional, resulting from policy not directed towards the cultural sphere. In turn, it is significant that the patterns and regularities of street musicianship in San Cristóbal were considered little by those involved in regulating the city’s street economy. In other words, as I show in the next section, the fluid activities and social relations

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<sup>24</sup> Interview, Beppe, 14-08-18.

of street musicians were not ‘administratively legible’ (Scott 2009, 92); they resisted incorporation into the bureaucracy of the municipal government.

### **Governance, street music, and order**

The several government representatives with whom I conducted interviews in San Cristóbal were concerned with the ‘disorder’ that would characterize the city’s street economy when unregulated. One told me that, in the past, they had been ‘saturated’ with street musicians, making it necessary to create and administer a timetable.<sup>25</sup> There had been few street performers prior to the construction of the pedestrian walkways in the early 2000s,<sup>26</sup> which had led to street sellers and performers overcrowding the centre of the city, leading to complaints from owners of local restaurants and bars.<sup>27</sup> In response, the municipal government had created a permit to perform in the street, which was to be administered by the Department of Public Services and the Department of Culture, Education and Recreation (DCER). The permit provided musicians with a specific timeslot (up to four hours) and location for performance, while performers also had to provide a description of their musical style. Initially, it had to be renewed each week, but in 2016 the municipal government extended the validity of the permit to a month, so as to reduce the administrative burden placed on its employees. Within the narrative of government officials, the comparative lack of conflict witnessed in the city’s centre had resulted from the introduction of permits, preventing musicians from fighting over space.<sup>28</sup> However, there was good reason to believe that the permits’ real effects were ambivalent. As noted above, while such conflicts did occasionally happen, they were rare; street performers had incentives to co-operate with one another, and many musicians performed without permits in any case.

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<sup>25</sup> Interview, Areli, 01-08-16.

<sup>26</sup> See the rich description of San Cristóbal street performance in the 1990s given by Vargas Cetina (2000).

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Areli, 01-08-16.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, Pedro, 22-07-15.

It would be incorrect to suggest that the municipal government acted in a monolithic fashion. In the case of San Cristóbal, the priorities of the Department of Public Services and DCER differed in significant ways. Public Services were involved in regulating the street economy, as well as keeping the city clean, maintaining public spaces, regulating the city's markets, and administering licenses for commercial spaces in the city. Meanwhile, DCER aimed to 'generate human development, generate productive development, through culture, through the promotion, dissemination and education of local cultural actors' (Pedro, 22-07-15). This description dovetailed with the aim of the *Programa Pueblos Mágicos* to use cultural policy as a means of creating 'sustainable development' in tourism, a connection that was clarified when DCER was later renamed the Department for the Promotion of Culture and Economic Development (henceforth DFCDE) after a change in administration. It is notable that Public Services had a far larger workforce (including personnel employed to inspect public spaces) than DCER, who declared themselves to be 'financially very limited' (Pedro, 22-07-15). Thus, in the case of disagreements, the priorities of the former department were likely to take priority. In one interview, an official from Public Services complained that DCER often gave out inappropriate permits to street musicians, 'without considering the noise that they are going to produce'. In those cases, he stated, they would withdraw the permit and discuss the matter with DCER, since Public Services were 'constantly limiting the activity of these people [street musicians]' (Interview, Juan López, 11-08-15).

In *Seeing Like A State*, Scott explores ways in which state actors filter human sociality through the lens of standardization in order to respond to and control it (1998, 1-8). By contrast, underlying government actors' decisions concerning street music in the context studied here were complex, multifaceted practices of listening to and evaluating music which suggested 'hearing like a state'. During interviews, government officials occasionally made comments pointing towards aesthetic and social judgements concerning street music, and the status pertaining to the individuals who performed it. One, from Public Services, told me that 'the people' would typically complain if music was overly loud or percussive, whereas instrumental music performed on solo instruments

such as the guitar, cello or violin was more acceptable, as ‘a smooth [*suave*] music, a fine music’ (Interview, Juan López, 11-08-15). Nonetheless, the homogeneous category ‘people’ soon broke down within this interview itself, when this speaker began to distinguish between ‘youths’ who tolerated loud music, and the ‘adults’ (apparently favoured by these policies) who would frequently complain about it.

Equally, one official from Education and Culture constructed a different version of this narrative: for him, it was particular *locatarios* (managers of commercial spaces, which were often called *locales*) who were most likely to complain about loud music, and for whom ‘artists with classical instruments [were] always most welcomed’. This official emphasized instead a division between musicians from San Cristóbal (who, he claimed, tended to perform in bars and restaurants) and musicians from elsewhere in Mexico and around the world ‘who come just to visit’, and lacked musical training, learning to play music ‘in the street’ rather than at a music school.<sup>29</sup> It was this group of visitors whose activity, according to this official, the regime of permits was most engaged with regulating. While this statement was plausible in statistical terms, it overlooked the merits of street performance for musicians, portraying it as a poor second choice for professional, trained musicians. In fact, as highlighted above, many of the musicians I spoke to, both from the city and elsewhere, had practiced and performed on their instruments for decades (often at conservatoires or schools of music), were technically excellent, and saw street performances as an opportunity to play a more interesting and varied repertoire.

Thus, upon observing the rough edges of this policy assemblage, complex effects of the introduction of permits emerged. Street musicians could be at a significant disadvantage if they followed the stipulations of these legal instruments too rigidly. This was down to two things: first, while permits gave musicians authorization to perform at a given time of the day (ordinarily within a two-hour period), during the summer peak period for tourism San Cristóbal sees heavy rains fall

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<sup>29</sup> Interview, Pedro, 22-07-15.

for one or two hours at varying times each afternoon. If a street musician were to stick to their designated performance times, they would frequently be unable to perform at all. Second, if musicians performed in the same location for too long, they could see their income drop over time as passers-by became bored of their music or ceased to notice their presence.<sup>30</sup> In order to successfully earn an income, street musicians required flexibility that the municipality's permits were not constructed to provide. Greater mobility presented opportunities for musicians to seek out audiences. For instance, in one hour in the summer of 2016, singer-songwriter Andrés performed songs from the rock tradition on his acoustic guitar; he started singing to the general public in a pedestrianized street, then moved to sing for clients of a specific café, and subsequently went to perform for the customers of a stall selling empanadas. He made a healthy sum of 150 pesos, which is more than the daily minimum wage in Mexico.

In part because complying with these rules could place street musicians at a disadvantage, many decided not to engage with the government's regulation of the street. For this reason, one could argue that the municipal government's regime of permits caused performers to play at times and places in which their performance were *more* disruptive. One street performance I observed in August 2015 was carried out by a drumming ensemble which had been formed by two long-term residents of the city, but which also featured several travellers. At 11:30pm, by the outside seating areas of two bars located on one of the city's pedestrianized streets, four musicians played percussion instruments from West Africa (including a *djembe* and *dunun*), performing upbeat, insistent rhythms interspersed with chants, while a dancer moved in and out of the centre of the street. Their performance drew much attention, the sound of their drumming reverberating strongly within the narrow street; while the audience remained mostly passive, the dancing hinted at an interactive, egalitarian and sociable form of creativity. The drumming ensemble drew a crowd of about thirty-five people, mostly tourists, both sat outside these bars and stood in a circle around

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<sup>30</sup> Interview, Oscar, 09-08-16.

the performing space. This group frequently occupied the same space at late hours to sell jewellery as well as play, while the performance also attracted a pair of itinerant confectionery and cigarette vendors. They had placed a bag in the centre of the street to act as a receptacle for donations, and to mark the edge of the performance space; when they finished playing, they received a warm round of applause.

During the peak summer seasons of 2015 and 2016, I witnessed this group perform several times, and on each occasion they occupied the same location. They did not have a permit, and multiple conversations with both members of this group and municipal government officials – who used ‘drummers’ to exemplify the kind of musician to whom they would *not* hand out a permit<sup>31</sup> – indicated that they were unlikely to obtain one. A member of the group told me that, whenever they played in the afternoon, ‘the police always get rid of us’. They recounted one incident, during a performance which they had put on in the street in the previous week, when four policemen had arrived to put a halt to the performance; expressing some anger, they demanded that the group disperse, even after they had decided to stop playing. The reason, then, that this ensemble played so close to midnight was that, at this time, most police officers and inspectors had either already gone home or strongly desired to do so (‘At 10pm, apparently that’s when they stop working. But like I tell you, really it’s not the best time because there’s almost nobody around’<sup>32</sup>). In turn, the only significant concentration of people on this pedestrianized walkway at such a late time was typically to be found in the outside seating areas of these two bars.

Thus, while I was initially taken in by the apparently bohemian, free-spirited nature of this group’s late-night performances, in reality they performed on the fringes of the city’s street economy. This group’s relationship to the two bars opposite their chosen performance space was ambivalent. On the one hand, a worker in one of these bars conceded that street music could

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<sup>31</sup> Interview, Juan López, 11-08-15.

<sup>32</sup> Interview, Fernando, 07-08-15.

motivate customers to stay and consume for longer than they otherwise might (something that appeared to be the case for the example just described); on the other, this worker was unhappy about the volume of these drummers' performances, since they sometimes clashed with bands hired to perform inside the venue.<sup>33</sup> Further, although this pedestrianized street was dominated by commerce, people also lived along it. Performing at this late hour thus created greater inconvenience to those in the vicinity; yet since this group had been marginalized by the municipality's regime of permits, they were left with little other choice.

Equally, many musicians felt that the permits principally served the interests of local commerce, since they contained two clauses weakening their legal force: a note in lower-case letters stating that they would be invalidated should 'any anomaly or complaint [be] received', and a stamp which declared the permit 'subject to revision'. Since these clauses were not given a prominent place on the permit itself, many street musicians were unaware of their existence. In practice, then, musicians were often removed from their designated performing areas. This, in the main, was in response to complaints by restaurants and bars; indeed the municipal government officials I interviewed casually equated, at several revealing points, people who complained with representatives of local businesses,<sup>34</sup> and one told me that complaints were upheld 'in all cases'.<sup>35</sup> Street musicians were therefore obliged to constantly anticipate the wishes and interests of local commercial spaces.

Many street musicians responded by working around this system of permits, moving so as to evade the police. Some even openly objected to the permits on principle, one performer of acoustic rock covers telling me that 'you're not going to go around asking for permission to play rock in the street'.<sup>36</sup> Equally, during my research some musicians who had previously engaged with this system began to voice open opposition to it. One young musician from San Cristóbal, who

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<sup>33</sup> Interview, Valeska, 10-08-15.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, Areli, 01-08-16.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, Juan López, 11-08-15.

<sup>36</sup> Interview, Andrés, 08-08-16.

performed under the stage name Perro Mapache, performed as a one-man band incorporating vocals, acoustic guitar, kick drum, tambourine, and harmonica; combining original music with British rock covers, his performances often attracted large crowds, and he was one of the most economically successful street musicians I interviewed in San Cristóbal. I first got to know Perro Mapache in 2015, just after he had been removed by the police during an afternoon performance for which he had a permit. He responded in two ways: first, he walked around San Cristóbal communicating the situation to other street musicians, asking if others had been removed, and checking whether other performers' permits were still considered valid. Second, he took a letter to the municipal government denouncing the violation of his rights:

I took a new request [for a permit], but one founded legally – that is, in those Articles [of the national Constitution] which cover me as a citizen to practice this, to play in the street. They didn't even read it [...] They said 'ah, you've just come to renew [the permit]?' And without reading the new letter they gave me another one for the whole week. That was it. (Interview, Perro Mapache, 18-08-15)

Following this experience, Perro Mapache became critical of the way that the municipality operated. Upon discovering that the workers at DCER were not aware that he had been removed, he reached the conclusion that the government 'was not working together as a team in the way that it should'<sup>37</sup> – a suspicion indicative both of the substantive differences between the priorities of this department and those of Public Services, and of the fact that the latter department was responsible for annulling or withdrawing permits issued by the former.

The experiences of both Perro Mapache and the drummers highlighted limits to the government officials' stated aim to create 'order' in the San Cristóbal street economy. Indeed, this vision of 'order' corresponded to the interests of the city's businesses, for whom street music was often useful to driving consumption and thus short-term profit. This policy assemblage – that is, the permit, the way in which it was constructed, and performers' and officials' interpretations of it

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<sup>37</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache, 18-08-15.

– restricted street musicians under the pretext of giving them legal rights, subordinating their performances to the commercial interests of restaurants and bars. This process, as one jazz musician observed, helped the municipal government to accumulate information about street performers: ‘they want to have us documented [...] that’s why they asked us what we do, where we play, even where we want to play’.<sup>38</sup> Through the permit, complex street music practices, in which music was valued in varied, multifaceted and specific ways, were sidelined in favour of the tourism around which the city’s broader economy was structured, whose success was always related to the accumulation of profit. Indeed, in this sense one may understand the permit as a means of translating complex and non-scalable forms of value into simple monetary ones (cf. Tsing 2015, 5-6), as well as a way to make street musicianship ‘legible’ (Scott 1998, 2-6).

### **Conflict, value and snap festivals**

Throughout the 2000s until 2016, the government’s approach to street performance was regulative: placing spatial and temporal limits on street musicians. These policy priorities may be connected to the national *Programa Pueblos Mágicos*, which links local cultural diversity and vitality with the tourist sector, under a broader neoliberal ideological framework. Nonetheless, as Homan et al (2016, 112) state, ‘global template[s] for cultural success’ in fomenting creative cities are limited, and ‘localised concerns and histories’ remain important. In this context, ongoing conflict within Chiapas was to reveal fractures within, and ultimately lead to changes in, the way that the municipality regulated street musicianship.

Some discontent with cultural policy was apparent during my research in 2015, when I spoke to several musicians who wanted the municipality to create designated performance spaces for musicians. It was also reflected among government officials; during one interview, an official

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<sup>38</sup> Interview, Adrian, 01-08-16.

from DCER indicated broad dissatisfaction with a lack of government investment in culture in Mexico,<sup>39</sup> while another from DFCDE identified street music as a key attraction for tourists.<sup>40</sup> The municipal government's regulative approach to street musicianship, therefore, did not reflect a uniform shared ideology among officials, some of whom favoured a more proactive approach and saw street music as a vital part of the tourist experience. Discussing the governance of the market for Aboriginal art in Australia, Myers points out that changes in cultural policy often reflected shifts in emphasis among conflicting 'discursive grids', rather than wholesale reconsiderations of policy (2002, 144-5). Similarly, within San Cristobal's municipal government the discursive groundwork for a change of strategy already existed, and could be mobilized in response to transformations in the economic and political landscape.

Such a transformation was presented by political mobilizations of a teacher's union, called CNTE (National Coordinator of Education Workers) in Chiapas in 2016. CNTE had been organizing anti-government activities for several years across southern Mexico, where they had carried out strikes and blockades in protest at education reforms passed by the federal government in 2012. The ongoing conflict between CNTE and the government came to a head in June 2016, when federal police attacked a blockade outside the city of Nochixtlán, in the southern state of Oaxaca, shooting dead between six and eleven residents of the city and leaving over a hundred protesters injured.<sup>41</sup> A lower-profile clash also occurred in Chiapas in the following month, when on 20 July a combination of municipal and state police and masked, government-backed paramilitaries assaulted a blockade on the San Cristóbal-Tuxtla highway, launching tear gas and gunshots, burning the teachers' tents and leaving two injured.<sup>42</sup> The attack had unintended

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<sup>39</sup> '[A]t a national level, there aren't public policies which can stimulate the development of artistic activities, so that [artists] are well remunerated' (Pedro, 22-07-15).

<sup>40</sup> Areli, 01-08-16.

<sup>41</sup> The figures vary according to the source – see <http://aristeguinoticias.com/0308/mexico/nochixtlan-entre-gas-lacrimogeno-balazos-y-llanto-testigos-en-cnn/> (accessed 01-06-17) and [http://www.milenio.com/politica/policias\\_federales\\_aceptan\\_uso\\_armas\\_cargo\\_Nochixtlan\\_Oaxaca\\_Milenio\\_Noticias\\_0\\_794920770.html](http://www.milenio.com/politica/policias_federales_aceptan_uso_armas_cargo_Nochixtlan_Oaxaca_Milenio_Noticias_0_794920770.html) (accessed 01-06-17).

<sup>42</sup> See <http://www.proceso.com.mx/447970/desalojan-bloqueo-de-la-cnte-en-autopista-de-chiapas-hay-dos-heridos> (accessed 28-12-16).

consequences: while the initial blockade disappeared, teachers established another at a different point on the highway a few hours afterwards; meanwhile, a group of radical CNTE supporters then took the centre of San Cristóbal, setting cars ablaze at crucial junctions to prevent vehicles entering, and taking the municipal building, which they covered in anti-government graffiti. Later, another group of masked vandals – which protesting teachers alleged to have been in the pay of the government – sacked two convenience stores in the city.<sup>43</sup>

This conflict, which occurred at the beginning of the holiday period and gained the attention of media outlets across Mexico, had two notable effects for street musicians. First, it took up the attentions of the local police, leaving more freedom for street performance. Second, and most important, it was disastrous for San Cristóbal's tourist economy, causing a large drop in visitors. This was a concern for workers and business owners in the city's service sector, and it also preoccupied many within the municipal government, who arranged a meeting with representatives of the city's businesses at the beginning of August. At this meeting, local business actors demanded that 'culture' be foregrounded in the response to the crisis, with one highlighting a need 'to demonstrate why we are recognized as the cultural capital [of Chiapas]', and another calling for cohesion between 'government, business, culture, society and gastronomy'.<sup>44</sup>

For their part, the municipal government arrived to this meeting with a plan to hold a cultural festival in the city from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> of August. The 'First Festival of the Historic Centre' was organized – within a time frame of just one week – by the workers of DFCDE. It was promoted on social media and local radio, and the poster made to promote the event carried the symbols of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network<sup>45</sup> and the Programa Pueblos Mágicos, alongside a slogan that made clear the festival's purpose: 'Reactivating The Economy, And Promoting

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<sup>43</sup> [http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/07/21/videos/1469064736\\_041178.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2016/07/21/videos/1469064736_041178.html) (accessed 28-12-16).

<sup>44</sup> <http://periodistassancristobal.org/2016/08/03/comercio-organizado-del-centro-de-sclc-se-une-al-primer-festival-cultural-centro-historico/> (accessed 29-12-16).

<sup>45</sup> San Cristóbal became a UNESCO Creative City of Crafts and Folk Art in 2015 (<https://en.unesco.org/creative-cities/san-crist%C3%B3bal-de-las-casas>, accessed 09-05-18).

Culture'. The festival included various interventions designed to stimulate consumption – including a chocolate and beer fair – but heavily featured open-air performances by musicians from San Cristóbal, many of whom were street performers. Therefore, although street performers welcomed this decision as a belated recognition of the value of their work, it was best understood as a strategic response to external factors, an instance of ‘muddling through’ (Lindblom 1959). This festival had to be organized quickly, to attract visitors before the holiday season ended. Such urgency, combined with potential difficulties in travelling to the city, made it impossible to bring in national and international artists, forcing organizers to hire local acts. It was out of necessity, in other words, that officials began to emphasize the ‘expediency’ of local street musicians’ performances (Yúdice 2003).

The participating musicians I spoke to had been asked to perform only three days prior to the opening of the festival. Indeed, many of those hired to play during this festival were musicians who had previously been granted permits to perform in the street, and municipal officials therefore kept records on them. Notably, these musicians were all paid a significant sum by the municipal government in return, equivalent to roughly twenty times the pay they could expect to earn for a single performance in one of San Cristóbal’s bars or restaurants. Most significantly, although the municipality paid for a large stage to be erected directly in front of the municipal building, most of the performances during the festival took place on several one-foot-high stages erected in the city’s pedestrian walkways, attracting significant numbers of people to gather in the street and sit in the surrounding commercial spaces. Indeed, while the overall impact of the festival was difficult to verify using ethnography, the director of DFCDE claimed that it had provoked a marked increase in hotel and restaurant reservations.<sup>46</sup>

This incident revealed fragilities in government policies to maintain order, both in the wake of the failure to gain control by force at the blockade, and in the economic crisis that this failure

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<sup>46</sup> Interview, Cristián, 08-08-16.

provoked. In turn, in these circumstances the municipal government began to perceive economic value in previously marginal cultural practices, such as street music. Indeed, officials from DFDCE stated their desire to maintain the platforms for street musicians after the end of the festival (although this did not transpire). Interviews indicated that this had not resulted from any form of discursive transformation among municipal workers. Rather, working within a context marked by a multiplicity of competing interests and ideas, and faced with a novel set of circumstances, officials began to lend greater weight to already present discourses portraying street music as a part of San Cristóbal's cultural vitality.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this article I have examined the changing attitudes to street musicianship on the part of the municipal government of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Here, a familiar metaphysics of order and disorder underpinned key government decisions towards the sound of the street: officials treated street music principally as a potential nuisance that required state regulation. Nonetheless, this approach revealed significant blind spots, overlooking how street musicians themselves, along with those running commercial spaces, were involved in the creation of common norms of behaviour, sharing spaces, and developing personal networks of exchange with other musicians and service sector workers. Arguably, the comparative lack of conflict between street musicians was not the result of government interventions. Rather, street musicians' relationships with each other were, in many ways, effectively regulative. As one musician put it: 'This system that should exist, how the permits should work, in a way we're doing it ourselves, informally'.<sup>47</sup>

The tensions between spontaneous organization and state-led control that emerged in this setting make it valuable to engage with the 'anarchist turn'. This implies not that street musicians

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<sup>47</sup> Interview, Perro Mapache, 02-08-16.

subscribed to anarchism as a philosophy, but that such scholarship may help us to better understand their relationship to the local state. Applying Scott's gesture of the 'anarchist squint' to ethnographic research into street music can help to reveal (multi-sensory) details and experiences excluded from a simplifying narrative of legibility informing state action. Municipal cultural policies prior to 2016 led to the emergence of modes of street musicianship that were more, rather than less, disruptive for many local inhabitants, while creating spaces of legibility for municipal officials. They overlooked informal modes of organization and exchange, at the intersection of street musicianship and commerce, in which music assumed complex and multi-faceted non-monetary value. Scott (2012, 45) suggests that '[t]he more highly planned, regulated, and formal a social or economic order is, the more likely it is to be parasitic on informal processes that the formal scheme does not recognize'. The municipal government's overall policy approach privileged commerce as the central source of value or profit, ignoring the complex ways in which street performers and commercial spaces co-operated to produce a richer tourist experience and aid in the smooth running of economic affairs. Rather than simply taking advantage of the audiences gathered at commercial spaces' outside seating areas, street musicians contributed value to these spaces in performing; it was in interaction that this entanglement attained significance. This small-scale, highly specific instance of street musicians' co-operation with other actors exemplifies the multiple, mutually defining relationships in which street musicians participated.

The municipal government's decision to sponsor street musicians to perform at the Festival of the Historic Centre, in turn, was intended to stimulate consumption and safeguard San Cristóbal's image as a cultural centre. In this sense, the government effected a transition away from what Cross labels a 'modern' approach to informal economies, in which policy is used to constrain people's behaviour, to a 'postmodern' one in which governments create spaces for certain forms of activity (2000, 30, 47). It remains to be seen, at the time of writing, whether such interventions have respected street musicians' vernacular forms of organization, in addition to their contributions to the city's tourist experience.

Despite the small-scale focus of this article, there were policy-making trends in this context that are witnessed in many others. Modern modes of governance centre around exerting control over, and placing limitations upon, human social life. This attitude to governance is highly scalable, apparent at a local level as well as nationally; in this context it emerged within an abstract, consistent and universalizable policy frame of 'development'. Yet this article has also pointed towards unpredictable, unstable connections between statecraft and listening; legibility and music. Ultimately, the contentious politics of San Cristobal street musicianship concerned 'how value itself [was] to be defined' (Graeber 2001, 115). Seen and heard by municipal officials as 'chaotic' and 'disorderly', everyday practices of street musicianship were highly particular, and resisted easy assimilation into simple, scalable frames.

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