

**The Socio-Territorial Construction: Reflections from Environment,
Rootedness, and the Cares in a Mexican Locality****Construcción socioterritorial: reflexiones a partir del entorno,
el arraigo y los cuidados en una localidad mexicana**Cecilia Maldonado¹

ABSTRACT

This article presents an approach to socio-territorial construction based on the conceptual overlap between context or natural environment, rootedness, and reproductive care. For this, exploratory and descriptive research is carried out that triangulated three qualitative research techniques using the deductive method. The main findings show that how a community in Guanajuato configures its roots in a territory is associated with the characteristics of its production-consumption process, anchored in the natural conditions of the territory and the social bonds of care that emanate from this process and conditions. One of the contributions of this analysis is that it incorporates the perspective of reproductive care into the construction of territories, being necessary to deepen regional studies to advance in this type of knowledge.

Keywords: 1. natural context, 2. reproduction, 3. cares, 4. production-consumption, 5. Guanajuato, Mexico.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se presenta un acercamiento a la construcción socioterritorial, partiendo de la imbricación conceptual entre contexto o entorno natural, arraigo y cuidados reproductivos. Con esta finalidad se realiza una investigación exploratoria y descriptiva que triangula tres técnicas de investigación cualitativa empleando el método deductivo. Los principales hallazgos muestran que la forma en que una comunidad en Guanajuato configura su arraigo a un territorio está asociada a las características de su proceso de producción-consumo, el cual está anclado en las condiciones naturales del territorio y en los vínculos sociales de cuidado que de ese proceso y condiciones emanen. Uno de los aportes de este análisis radica en que incorpora la perspectiva de los cuidados reproductivos a la construcción de territorios, siendo necesario profundizar en estudios regionales para avanzar en este tipo de conocimientos.

Palabras clave: 1. contexto natural, 2. reproducción, 3. cuidados, 4. producción-consumo, 5. Guanajuato México.

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INTRODUCTION

El Comedero Grande is a rural² locality in the municipality of Irapuato, in the enclave of the mountains of the state of Guanajuato³, which is part of the Bajío region. This population is characterized by carrying out economic activities predominantly aimed at agricultural production, since “most of the territory of Irapuato corresponds to plains (66.51%), which facilitate all types of irrigation for agriculture” (Ruiz, 2010, p. 26), as well as the presence of rugged terrain, whose plateaus and valleys are followed by hills and ridges.

El Comedero Grande⁴ and, in general, the state of Guanajuato, are experiencing an environmental crisis, which is most expressed in the water sector, as “the aquifers located in the industrial corridor already show severe signs of depletion due to the intensive consumption of water, caused by the strong pressure of residential, agricultural, industrial and commercial use” (Tagle Zamora, 2017, p. 209). For its part, basin B of the Lerma-Salamanca River of the “hydrological region No. 12 called Lerma-Chapala-Santiago” (Ruiz, 2010, p. 19), in which the municipality of Irapuato and El Comedero are located, are in an intermediate ban. This crisis has been aggravated by the delay or scarcity of rain, which evidences a significant drought. Additionally, this has caused rural producers to focus on rainfed agriculture and, therefore, production depends on the abundance of rain and investment in seeds and fertilizers. In view of the above, the production-consumption relationship that a group of people carry out to satisfy a system of needs from their natural context⁵ is explored, and that, based on that relationship and condition, create and sustain links of care and territorial management. It is suggested to name this interweaving of social and territorial characteristics as the social construction of the territory.

In other words, the community creates social bonds and networks of collaboration that allow for the formation of a sociality aimed at organizing the collective reproduction of life, this means that the production, care, and management of vital material goods - such as water or food- which satisfy biological needs, as well as subjective goods such as care, affection, and a sense of belonging, are coordinated. Together, these form what is referred to here as socio-territorial rootedness.

² In Mexico, rural localities are considered those that do not exceed 2 500 inhabitants, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (Instituto Nacional de Geografía y Estadística [INEGI]).

³ The state has a population of 6 166 934 people and is divided into four regions and 10 subregions. The region comprising the municipalities of Irapuato, Salamanca, León, and Laja corresponds to the center of Guanajuato’s Bajío region. Of these, Irapuato is the most populous municipality, with 592 953 inhabitants (INEGI, 2020), and the third most important municipality in Guanajuato in terms of migration, after León and Celaya. Its business sector has a strong economic dynamism, a situation that attracts an economically active population.

⁴ Most of the locality has availability of public lighting and transportation. The latter provides an average of five daily departures to the municipal seat, but has limited road, educational, and cultural infrastructure.

⁵ By natural context, we understand the essential natural conditions of the territory, such as soil, water, trees, and minerals.

In a strict sense, rootedness (in Spanish *arraigo*) means to take root, to become deeply connected or attached to something,⁶ (RAE, 2014). For the purposes of this work, *rootedness* will be understood as the process through which an emotional bond is established with a territory that expands beyond the limits of the home, in a certain geographical space, where meanings are created that are intimately related to the experiences of people and the space itself. Although rootedness can have a variety of motivations, three can be distinguished: “By personal choice and decision, by life circumstances that are accepted with more or less enthusiasm or resignation, against personal choice and decision, but forced by various external situations” (Quezada Ortega, 2007, p. 43). Through gradual settlement, “communities deploy relationships with those who are especially close, by virtue of the principle of neighborliness” (Acebo Ibáñez, 1992, p. 26), and from that closeness they intervene and shape their territory.

In order to understand this relationship, this work is located within the perspective of critical theory and political ecology, along with the decolonial feminism of Abya Yala and the Caribbean. From this position, we invite weaving a perspective that links territory, feelings, and the body in research and struggles in the construction and for the construction of territories. Critical theory proposes that “theoretical activity derives from practice” (Spirkin, 1969, p. 10). This praxis demands a deep analysis of the facts of life: “to truly know the object, one must study all its aspects, all its connections and ‘mediatizations’” (Spirkin, 1969, p. 88). Therefore, in this research, it was considered a priority to develop a qualitative methodology, including dense descriptions of rather small samples (Salinas Meruane & Cárdenas Castro, 2009, p. 349), that provide an analytical basis of the concrete sociality (a term coined by Echeverría, 2010) that allows characterizing the relationship or relationships established among the inhabitants of the studied locality.

For the development of a descriptive exploratory⁷ research of a qualitative nature, a triangulation of research techniques was used in order to complement the information obtained through each of them. The data collection techniques consisted of conducting in-depth interviews, conversations with focus groups, and a workshop in which participatory methodologies were employed. Specifically, five interviews were conducted with key actors of the locality, considered as such for the representative work they perform in the community; they were the delegate of the locality, the president of the Water Committee, the *ejido* (communal land used for agriculture) president, a local government worker, and a migrant.

The interviews were conducted from September 2021 to February 2022 and were processed with the help of a computer system. Additionally, two focus groups were conducted: one including six women who participate in the community savings group, and the other including a group of *ejidatarios* (five men and two women). Both meetings took place in the multipurpose room of the community during December 2021. Finally, in April 2022, a workshop was conducted designed to include the use of participatory methodologies.

⁶ Definition translated from the Royal Spanish Academy.

⁷ Research carried out within the 2021 postdoctoral stay program, with funding from the National Council of Science and Technology (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología [CONACYT]), under the title “Community management of biofuels”.

The four established dimensions of analysis were: the collective work carried out by the inhabitants, with the aim of understanding their production-consumption process; the role and organizing capacity of women within the community, in order to highlight the care work they perform; the emotional connection they build in relation to their natural environment and/or territory, in order to approach their feelings and thoughts about their place of living; and the historical construction of the locality in terms of an immediate historical memory of the place. These dimensions served so that, from the analysis of the data, a deductive interpretation of the information gathered could be carried out in order to understand the socio-territorial construction of El Comedero, Guanajuato.

A KALEIDOSCOPIC LOOK AT THE SOCIO-TERRITORIAL CONSTRUCTION

One of the most important references on the topic of social construction of territory is the work carried out by Hiernaux et al. (2000) in the municipality of Valle de Chalco in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. Later on, Alicia Lindón (2002) proposes that, from this perspective, the researcher's approach consists of "penetrating and unraveling a world of meanings that the micro-society has constructed about its space" (p. 33). From this perspective, it is recognized that people construct and reconstruct society and territory in an unfinished process, permeated by social subjectivity. Such subjectivity contains ideas, meanings, and images, specifically related to the territory. In the course of this process, these "are intermingled to build a shared knowledge, a conception of the world that is not the exclusive property of an individual but of a collective" (p. 32) and that includes ways of conceiving oneself (identity).

However, from the perspective presented here, this research distances itself from this latter aspect related to identity, while still recognizing its importance, but prioritizing the caution with which it must be handled. In this regard, it should be noted that, from critical theory, there is an interesting and rich discussion around this notion (Holloway, 2010, 2011). While it will not be addressed in this work due to methodological issues and because it exceeds the purposes of this study, the proposal of the present approach is to analyze the socio-territorial construction from the richness of links and strengths that the community produces to organize its reproduction and satisfy its vital needs based on the material and/or natural characteristics offered by the territory. The richness of these social ties is analyzed considering the juxtaposition of characteristics that are linked in this path, which consist of the production-consumption process—a term taken from Echeverría (2010)—; the natural context—a concept recovered from ecological Marxism by Schmidt (1977)—and the socio-territorial rootedness. Together, these allow us to visualize the collective care work of the common goods that the population carries out in the territory to sustain their social reproduction.

Reproduction involves producing and consuming material and immaterial goods and giving them meaning motivated by one's own reproductive need and sharing cognitive appropriation of external reality. Therefore, the daily process of reproduction encompasses a set of production and reproduction relationships that involve always being aware, first and foremost, that "we are not isolated individuals, but rather we are always inserted in dynamic sets of links and relationships

that precede us and that, at the same time, we produce through our daily actions” (Gago, 2016, p. 12), which are shared, in the same space, by the inhabitants or members who are in it.

These social relationships involve “social landscapes of collective practices of large volumes of work and energy made invisible: those carried out by women and other companion species” (Gutiérrez Aguilar & Navarro Trujillo, 2019, p. 300) and imply the deployment of care bonds in the active (antagonistic, painful, conflicting, joyful and/or complacent) relationship among the members of a community, finding in such sociality the mediation with the nature of their immediate environment, mediation that is established to satisfy their material and holistic reproduction needs. So, for society to provide the food, housing, and basic daily requirements that allow life to be sustained and reproduced, networks of sociality are woven that are intended to care for immediate beings, with whom one lives, and the environment.

Incorporating the perspective of care, not without tension, aims to broaden the analysis of the processes of territorial construction and to examine the daily practices of organization by highlighting the capacity of women to provide care. It should be clarified that this perspective “should not be approached from essentialism, but from the analysis of historical processes and sociocultural constructions that delegate (and relegate) the care of nature to them within the framework of a capitalist, patriarchal, and androcentric system” (Trentini & Pérez, 2021, p. 89). This perspective also attempts to highlight the efforts that such sociocultural constructions imply for women, allowing them to build meanings and practices of care that arise from social self-organization and enable the generation of strategies for sustaining life in the territory, beyond state subsistence supports.

In this sense, the approach to care in this work transcends the four colloquial spheres of reference: “State, family, market, and community organizations” (Rodríguez, 2015, cited by Martínez Buján & Vega Solís, 2021, p. 3), and refers to the ways in which, in their daily spheres of production-consumption of material goods, society ensures care for the territory, the goods produced by the community, and those provided by their environment to sustain the cycle of life.

Therefore, the interest in presenting an analysis of socio-territorial construction based on the convergence of the aforementioned dimensions of analysis and taken from the social praxis of the inhabitants of the locality, has to do with the aim of gaining knowledge about how spaces, places, and territories are constructed from the ways in which situated and concrete actors weave organizational and affective ties with the space-place in which they reproduce their lives.

In this sense, it is proposed that, in order to survive in their living space, human beings often adapt to certain natural conditions present in the territory, and the relationship that a group of people establishes with their natural context will determine, along with other elements, their production-consumption process. This dynamic is permeated by biological processes of energy and matter in continuous exchange with nature. Víctor Toledo (2008) calls the society-nature metabolism the “process by which the members of any society are materially articulated to nature through the process of work” (p. 5). In this transformative relationship, a certain amount of matter transits between nature and society, since work efforts involve the deployment of the energy

necessary to manage the common material goods that help sustain life and care. However, fractures and tensions also occur within this relationship.

To observe these processes of fracture, it is suggested to revisit the contributions of Karl Marx from political ecology, who introduced the concept of “organic exchange” (Marx, cited by Schmidt, 1977, p. 86) which he took from German physiologists who referred primarily to “the material exchanges that occur within the human body in relation to respiration” (Foster, 2000, p. 247). Marx used the notion of fracture to refer to the existence of imbalances in these material exchanges, in order to address them from the metabolic relationship established between human beings and nature.

Within the framework of Latin American political ecology,⁸ this study alludes to the metaphor of society-nature metabolism, referring to the metabolic pathways that, in biological terms, occur in human physiology and allow for the acquisition of energy (through the degradation of organic matter) or the transformation of matter (consuming energy); however, fractures arise during these dynamics. Metaphorically, there are fractures in situations of overexploitation of nature and in situations of different power positions in societies with differentiated resources. This situation allows for the assertion of interests that result in the inequitable distribution of environmental costs and benefits, affecting the living environment of rural communities and their inhabitants.

In this relationship, the transformation of the natural context takes place through work: humans transform nature while nature transforms humans. This dual movement performs functions of production, circulation, and excretion. These metabolic processes are interdependent, meaning that one cannot exist without the other, so that an accumulation, alteration, rupture, break, or fracture of these processes, of the metabolic routes of nutrition, energy, and material circulation, has consequences on the metabolism of life. In this sense, the social form of a locality or region is based on an important biological foundation, and to live, humans must care for and preserve the natural context since the community builds its material and subjective base of the territory linked to the security and care provided by the environment.

In recent years, an extensive literature has emerged in Abya Yala and the Caribbean on care, understood as the realization of acts and the provision of inputs, such as food, water, health, education for new generations, etc., aimed at sustaining daily life. A community attends to and cares not only for those natural goods that guarantee collective life, but also “the ties and links that produce community fabric” (Gutiérrez Aguilar et al., 2017, p. 394). Care provides subsistence and well-being and “encompasses the indispensable daily provision of physical, affective, and emotional well-being throughout the entire life cycle of individuals” (Sojo, 2014, p. 12).

Batthyány (2020) asserts that in the Latin American region, the conceptualization of care has followed a trajectory that stems primarily from analyses of “the sexual division of labor, the

⁸ Perspective originated in the Anglo-Saxon traditions of human ecology, geography, urban studies, and anthropology, whose particularity is to have opened new interdisciplinary keys based on the popular social struggles in Latin America that emerged as a critical and political response to socio-political subjects and crucial issues such as consumerism, overexploitation of nature, and certain civilizing assumptions.

reproductive system, and domestic work, concepts that have their earliest formulations in Marxist and socialist feminism” (p. 11). Care includes three dimensions: physical and sexual; relational of interaction and communication; and emotional. To these is added the spatial dimension, linked to the territory-nature as an essential condition for well-being, assuming that “the projection of a future that promises a ‘good life’ in the eyes of the recipient of care” (Anderson, 2020, p. 75) is linked to the bonds and to the territory where these life projections are erected.

Although care also takes place in rural areas, for the socio-territorial analysis in this research, the perspective of care in the urban context is recovered, as it is more widely disseminated, although it is not intended to take it out of context. The idea is to pave the way to visualize the care performed in this context in relation to the production-consumption⁹ process, because care “actually constitutes the basis of our forms of socialization and the principle of our most significant relationships” (Chinchilla, 2020, p. 13). Additionally, considering the affective component that links those involved in the process of gestation and sustenance, this allows for a broad reading of the processes involved in social formation and that arise in territories, because “caring means carrying out tasks in everyday life and, simultaneously, developing a bond and managing emotions in the different areas where it is carried out” (Mascheroni, 2021, p. 36). However, it is necessary to refer to some central features of the historical formation of the locality to understand the links of care with the territory in the present.

*Producing for Self-Consumption and its Use-Value,
an Inheritance that Continues to this Day*

In the 19th century, the native inhabitants of the town of El Comedero Grande were workers of the El Copalillo *hacienda*¹⁰ (large estate), dedicated to raising large livestock (horses and donkeys) for transportation and cultivating agricultural lands. They founded, perhaps unknowingly, what is known as El Comedero Grande in the northeastern part of the lands near the mountains that initially occupied the hacienda. In that place, there was an area for feeding the wild animals, where the workers built some houses to settle and take care of the livestock. The factor that determined their settlement there was the production-consumption process oriented towards satisfying basic reproductive needs: food, shelter, and clothing.

The economic context of this time calls for a reminder that haciendas were the basic unit of economic production in the countryside, and wages were not a determining factor for choosing a job; rather, haciendas guaranteed their workers their livelihood in kind: housing, food, health care, and religious festivities, while indebtedness in the “*tiendas de raya*” (company stores) acted as a coercive element for workers to acquire basic food and hygiene supplies through indebtedness, which was paid to the guarantor—the hacienda owner—with work. Therefore, it can be considered

⁹ Understood as the production of material goods for consumption, but also of common use goods, for example, the community’s multipurpose hall, the church, the reforestation area, in short, spaces that have a use and a symbolic and immaterial meaning, in addition to the commercial value they may have.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that in the 18th and 19th centuries, the *hacienda* was the core of production par excellence, even after Mexico’s independence.

that monetary payment through daily wages was important for the subsistence of the original populations in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but it was not conclusive.

At the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, in the context of land reform, the lands of the El Copalillo and the adjacent San Juan haciendas were taken to form the ejido nucleus in the locality. Over the years, grandparents, parents, and children continued the hacienda's economic-productive tradition, which was adopted by the inhabitants of the locality: livestock breeding and grain cultivation. However, the breeding of large livestock was replaced by that of small livestock, as this type of herd implied lower expenses for ejidatarios and farmers. Similarly, the cultivation of grains carried out in the hacienda became the planting of corn, beans, and sorghum for family consumption. Thus, only when the harvest was—and is—abundant, the inhabitants divided the product, allocating some for self-consumption, some for animal feed, and the rest for sale.

The crisis in the Mexican countryside beginning in 1970 led to national agricultural products facing open and rapid competition in the international market. Later on, a deep structural crisis of the ejido¹¹ took place. After the land reform¹² was completed, the conditions were created to fragment and privatize the collective land ownership. Although the ejido did not immediately disappear, the groundwork was established for this to happen in the long term.

In a context marked by these characteristics, it is plausible to consider that the agrarian reform guaranteed access to land for farming to people dedicated to agricultural work, however, this did not lead to the provision of tools, supplies, technologies, and financing to face an increasingly aggressive international market that affected the national production of the primary sector. This situation of structural and generalized crisis at the national level greatly affected localities that were not fully integrated into the dynamics of the investment market, such as El Comedero, which ended up reinforcing the migration of peasant population to the city and to the United States: “I went to the United States and bought a tractor, an old one, from the seventies, but with that I work on my father's and my own land” (anonymous, personal communication, April 4, 2022).

Currently, it is frequent in the community to find that the adult children of the older ejidatarios help their parents to sow the land. However, working in the field continues to be a traditional activity inherited from ancestors that satisfies certain immediate needs of the reproduction process. If we add to this the existence of small gardens that some families have in their homes, it is observed that the land continues to be the nurturing element that provides the basic consumption goods to reproduce life in the community.

At this point, critical theory is taken up again in order to understand production for self-consumption, based on use-value. Human beings reproduce themselves through the consumption

¹¹ This was encouraged by the reforms to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution (Decree of 1992). Such reforms repealed section X and eliminated the provision of land and water to population centers that lacked them.

¹² Supposedly, the land reform gave the peasants the opportunity to decide on the property regime that best suited them: the collective regime (*ejido*) or the individual regime (private property).

of certain material goods, whose production is not given as such in nature, but is the result of the transformative action that workers exercise on it. In other words, this is known as the labor or workforce that is put into motion to produce certain goods required for human consumption; this labor force produces goods for self-consumption.

Therefore, we are dealing with products endowed with a use value that satisfies a system of needs and/or has a utility according to the development of society and the specific moment. Referring to Marx (2001), it is possible to consider that the values created or produced by the force of labor are considered for use and, at the same time, contain an exchange value, which is precisely the investment in labor time.

The product for self-consumption involves a use-value created by useful work, but the raw materials and tools used by the producer—necessarily acquired as commodities—contain past labor in the means of production, which is preserved by being transferred through concrete labor to the final product as constant capital (García Vela, 2011). For example, the tractor, the seed, the fertilizer, the animal feed—in short, the inputs and instruments used to produce use-values—always have a past value added to the value of the final product.

In the case of self-consumption, planting ensures the food that families need to sustain their process of reproduction, so its value to the inhabitants is much higher. Since it has a use-value (food consumption), it contains within itself a production and work process that required care, attention, and support, which was carried out by the children or the family during the planting process. Therefore, although money does have a value, the strategy of producing for self-consumption relaunches other life reproduction processes that do not depend solely on obtaining a salary to buy food. In this sense, the production-consumption process that starts from the natural context is sustained by the production of use-values that guarantee, to some extent, the reproduction of the household unit.

In production for self-consumption, there is a process of transformation of goods obtained from the natural context, using tools with a past value of use and exchange—since they were acquired in a market—. However, it is a work that does not exclusively derive in sale, but also enables self-consumption. Therefore, it moves from the realm of the mercantile to that of consumption, which satisfies a set of needs, making the daily reproduction of life possible. Thus, traditional cultivation and self-consumption observed in the production-consumption process in the community occur based on a system of needs, which is satisfied with strategies inherited from ancestors in their productive work and a given natural context. The combination of these variables shapes the production-consumption system of the locality.

Despite this, the world of use-values—in this case, of self-consumption—“is permanently dominated, conditioned, harassed, and deformed by the rhythms and demands of capital” (Linsalata, 2015, p. 327). Productivity and the national and global overexploitation of natural resources are increasingly overwhelming. These dynamics break, fracture, and disrupt metabolic processes of exchange of energy and care between society and nature.

The Metabolic Fracture Between Ecosystem and Society

The current economic devastation that has plunged rural populations into a structural crisis is not a new issue. In fact, competitiveness and processes of overexploitation that dominate much of the human production-consumption process—among many other factors that fuel the frenetic pace of productivity—are causing severe disruptions in climate change, reflected in either excessive or scarce rainfall and the depletion of subsurface resources such as minerals or water for domestic use.

Conceiving the territory as an ecosystem—that is, as a large interdependent sphere between inhabitants, natural resources, and land use along with biotic and abiotic communities—allows us to reflect that when it is overexploited, it will affect others, as we are immersed in a continuous territory. In this sense, the community of El Comedero, being located in an area of intermediate water catchment closure and semi-arid zone, experiences the acute consequences derived from the structural economic crisis of the countryside and the ruptures of the society-nature metabolic pathways.

Based on the results of the participatory research workshop called “Collective care in the management of material goods for daily reproduction”, it is possible to affirm that the participants recognized the havoc caused by the climate change crisis in their locality. The workshop allowed the detection of four interrelated problems with the natural context: deforestation, the cutting of firewood to replace the use of gas due to its high cost, water scarcity-drought in seasonal farming, and open-air burning of garbage.

These problems are closely linked to daily reproduction and respond to a metabolic fracture in their relationship with nature. In the search to direct a part of their production towards commerce and thus obtain the monetary income they require to cover other goods of production, in recent months the villagers have increased livestock breeding, for which they needed to expand the pasture that serves as a feeding place for the animals.

Products that have a use-value for the reproduction of life are crucial (for example, cleaning the river that runs through the community or planting maize for self-consumption), but they are insufficient to sustain life. In this context, inhabitants also require monetary income that allows them to acquire necessary and/or complementary products for their daily reproduction. For this purpose, the ejidatarios have opened up land for pasture in order to expand the zone of bush feeding for the animals and achieve greater control of free grazing that affects plant biodiversity. At the same time, the *comuneros* (communal landowners) have requested the restitution of lands that the ejido owners are occupying as pasture, while the local settlers have settled on other lands to build homes. As a counterpart, the growing disorganization among the ejidatarios, comuneros, and *avecindados* (local settlers) has greatly hindered the possibility of establishing clear and common rules among those involved in matters related to livestock breeding and land use for grazing.

In the face of this panorama, the natural environment is the most affected, since the loss of vegetation cover is mainly a consequence of deforestation carried out to gain land for agriculture, overgrazing, and the use of firewood for cooking, which is compounded by soil erosion caused by the aggressiveness of the wind. These circumstances subject soil and water resources to great stress,

“since they reduce the fertility of the arable layer and diminish the soil’s capacity to retain, release, and transport water, whether it be for crops, grass species, shrubs or trees” (FAO / ONUAA, 2015).

This is expressed in prolonged drought, high temperature and low humidity, which together cause a deterioration of physical, chemical and biological properties due to the disarticulation of the plant-soil binomial.

One of the problems is that the trees are running out; I think that from the time I have been here and from what I saw when we were children, the community was more beautiful because there were fewer people, more trees, more spaces, but now it is overcrowded because of the people or because we don’t have awareness or don’t see the situation we are causing, and anyone builds anywhere and that has affected the community a lot. Rather, if you had a piece of land, you should plant trees to have vegetation and oxygen, but we don’t do it (anonymous, personal communication, December 13, 2021).

One of the main consequences of disturbing vegetation is soil degradation. This situation leads to a greater dependence on irrigated crops as they put pressure on aquifers, which results in higher costs for producers. However, faced with rising prices to establish and expand irrigation areas, local farmers have opted for rainfed agriculture, which sometimes, due to climate change, delays harvest or reduces yields, exacerbating the structural crisis of domestic units in terms of production costs.

Another practice that is tied to the disruption of the society-nature metabolic pathways, which exacerbates climate change and functions as a family reproduction strategy, is related to tree felling. In the municipality, mesquite trees commonly grow, which are characteristic trees of the arid and semi-arid areas of Mexico. Mesquite is an excellent soil fixer that improves fertility and prevents desertification because its deep roots help retain water; this could improve soil moisture management, which is essential for food production.

However, among the municipalities with the highest consumption of firewood used for heating or cooking, Irapuato ranks third (INEGI, 2020). Unfortunately, the mesquite is strongly affected by these actions. In El Comedero, families often use firewood to reduce the combustion costs involved in cooking. Occasionally, firewood obtained from logging is sold within and outside the locality. Families buy firewood bales from their neighbors, while some villagers go to the mountains to bring back denser firewood. Another group of people uses the already dry wood on the ground.

Upon realizing the existence of this environmental problem, the population has focused its attention on solutions that, although partial,¹³ are well-intentioned and above all linked to their capacity for social organization, such as the promotion of reforestation activities.

Although the residents reported having started a reforestation program in the town the previous year, they acknowledge that it did not yield the expected results, as the trees donated by the

¹³ It must be remembered that an ecosystem includes more than one locality and that what affects one territory has repercussions in another.

government for planting required a lot of water and did not survive the climate. They also expressed the need for environmental education workshops.

Well, I think that nature, in a way, has charged us for what we have done to it. It would be important to make people more aware of not throwing more garbage, burning less garbage, or also being mindful that, if I have a dry tree, then try to plant another one (participant of the “Reproductive Care” workshop, personal communication, April 1, 2022).

The residents also urged to pay attention to education processes aimed at promoting knowledge about environmental care. An alternative that could be considered in these types of localities is the implementation of long-range *popular education processes* that promote sustained environmental care. This involves making much more organized efforts involving a larger number of people so that the actions taken have long-term results.

For example, for reforestation to produce expected results, efforts made should be adapted to the topographic characteristics of the locality and incorporate the knowledge, wisdom, and practices of the population in the field and understand their customs, rhythms, and time of care, because the residents themselves vividly know the natural species prone to develop in the area: “when I go to the hill, I carry a handful of seeds to plant and see if they grow” (participant of the “Reproductive Care” workshop, personal communication, April 1, 2022). The imposition of entirely new processes in environmental care can result—as happened in the locality—in reforestation failure.

In the last activity of the workshop, called “Collective care and management of material goods in rural communities,” in a combination of responses, the participants expressed their collective desires and needs in their territory; that is, they thought and expressed what they would like to exist in the locality. These desires were related to better care for the environment and, to achieve them, made evident the need to implement collective work, which they have already been developing, but which requires more frequency to consolidate them and greater capacity for co-responsibility; in colloquial terms, “to come to an agreement”.

It should be noted that at least once a year, the community organizes cleaning days; for this purpose, the neighbors self-organize at the church, without the intervention of a formal authority, except for the delegate, who calls the community through the *trumpeter*, the person who plays the trumpet and announces that there will be a neighborhood meeting. The meetings serve to determine, jointly and publicly deliberating, who will be part of the cleaning day. Generally, the groups of participants are distributed by rotation. This means that the group of people who participate in one cleaning day do not participate in the next one, and a different group is selected, and so on until the cycle is completed and the group that participated in the first cleaning day is reached again.

In terms of environmental care, it was observed that the community has two opposing practices: on the one hand, environmental care is perceived, and on the other hand, the fracture in the care provided to the ecosystem is evident. This is called *border territory*, meaning that it is on the borderline between care and the fracture of it. Thus, although environmental care is not overlooked, it is blurred because at times the priority is to achieve an economic income that is a

complement and source of other goods required to sustain the production-consumption process, which ultimately satisfies other vital needs from the context of the inhabitants.

In this sense, El Comedero is a border territory because it has very clear signs of collective and public environmental care, but at the same time, it is experiencing internal ruptures in these relationships. These ruptures create a border between a breakdown of the social fabric rooted in the place and a disconnection from the space.

Rootedness and Affection to the Territory

In El Comedero, three ways were identified through which inhabitants build connections or roots with their territory. The first is that land, as a space or place to build a house, is donated by parents or grandparents to current generations; the second is related to emotions and the joy of living in the territory, as it generates in its inhabitants a sense of freedom and tranquility; and the third refers to participatory organizational processes for managing and caring for common goods, which generate links between members and with the space-territory.

According to what was observed in the community, the relationships with the land as a material condition for reproduction, treating it as their own, make the reproduction and conservation of the community possible. Therefore, the primary objective is not the creation of surplus value or exchange value, although it is possible to create it through the market relations they undertake, but rather the functional goal is the personal, domestic, and collective reproduction of the community entity, which is produced and reproduced thanks to collective work organized in social ties and expressed in the management of common goods that satisfy immediate requirements of life. Therefore, immediately, the land appears to them as a wealth of means of life, and from them, individuals and the community relate to themselves as producers of the conditions of their reality.

The first type of connection mentioned—the donation of land from parents to their children—arises from *customary law*, “in which custom becomes a converging right in a social and cultural heritage” (Acebo Ibáñez, 1996, p. 51). Families in the community are descendants of people who worked on the hacienda, and when the ejido nucleus was created as a result of the agrarian reform, their ancestors received the proportional ejido allotment corresponding to each family’s distribution of hectares. Over time, extended families reproduced in the area and their living space remained in El Comedero, based on customary rights¹⁴ to land and work.

In addition, there is another group of families made up of much more recent generations; generally, they lack documentation to prove their ownership and settle on the land through a verbal donation or assignment from their parents. It should be noted that the ejido holders often *make verbal commitments* and donate meters of land to family members who require a space to build their home. Such practices remain part of customary law, even though in institutional normative terms the

¹⁴ These families have the documentation that supports their right, delivered by the Federal Program for the Regularization of Parcel Certificates (Programa Federal de Regularización de Certificados Parcelarios [PROCEDE]).

documentation may not meet the requirements of the state and the law; among them, they respect intra-family commitments as part of oral rules transmitted from generation to generation.

In general, the inhabitants expressed openness to immigration by accepting the arrival of new neighbors to the locality. However, discrepancies in social relations regarding population growth can be observed. The first of these discrepancies is evident in the status of titular ejidatarios and those who are not. Clearly, titular members have a voice and vote in ejidal assemblies, which organize work and tasks often directly related to some collective management that includes the inhabitants. For example, for the construction of the multipurpose hall, the ejido donated the land, while the inhabitants and ejido members cooperated with labor and made a financial contribution to carry out the works.

On the other hand, families in El Comedero have grown thanks to the kinship they have cultivated with people from other localities, who have settled in this locality through family networks, as well as through the residency established by ejidatarios who previously did not live in the locality. Before potable water, electricity, and internet arrived in the locality, ejidatarios who were landowners did not live in the ranch but in Irapuato. When these services were introduced in the locality, they returned to take part in their lands and work them. Compared to the *avecindados* (individuals who have settled in the town of El Comedero, but who are not landowners), ejidatarios perform an important role in convening and managing within the community.

Certainly, the second circumstance that contributes to rooting themselves to the place was observed in the focus groups, when people expressed their interest in living in the locality and stated that they have no prospects of moving for the following reasons: a) their parents inherited that land to them, b) in previous decades, when there was no electricity, people went to the city of Irapuato, but there they perceived a lot of insecurity and little “freedom”.

I worked in Irapuato for a long time and honestly, I didn't like it; I used to talk to my husband because his parents moved there, but I didn't like leaving my ranch, because here I can go into my room and see all the trees; there, you're locked up and don't see anything. Here, there is security and a lot of peace (participant of the focus group with women, personal communication, December 2022).

The places-territories allow experiencing emotions that give meaning to a space and confirm “the importance of spatial dimension in determining what we like to look at and where we like to be” (Ellard, 2016, p. 37). The people who participated in the focus group perceive their locality as their home: “when one comes by the road from the ravine and one enters here, one feels ‘now it is really my land’” (participant of the focus group with women, personal communication, December 2022).

The exclusivity of space, spatial boundaries, local fixation of proximity or distance, all influence social formations, and living in a space generates rooting, not only due to cultural and social factors, which are highly binding for its residents, but also due to the history that such belonging generates and the “*genetic* (race), *geographic* (environment), *economic* (function or occupation), and *psychological* (thought) factors” (Acebo Ibáñez, 1996, p. 160).

In subjective terms, it was observed that the participants associated freedom, security, tranquility, and happiness with their territory as their place of living; in fact, the words tranquility and freedom are the most frequently mentioned in the in-depth interviews and focus groups. Interestingly, the term most expressed by men was tranquility, while in the case of women it was freedom, which may be associated with the fact that in the locality of El Comedero assaults and unsafe routes are rare while in urban spaces they are experienced more frequently. It may also be associated with the spaciousness of the rural environment, which allows for the enjoyment of open spaces, while in urban areas, constructions and population density create a sense of space constriction. In the case of men, the expressed perception of tranquility is likely associated with work in the field, which is often quiet and removed from city noise.

Evidence suggests today that exposure to natural landscapes produces a series of beneficial consequences ranging from better health, both mental and physical, to better relationships with neighbors and happier and safer living environments (Ellard, 2016, p. 41).

From psychology, it has been observed that our attraction to nature is related to its fractal properties, that is, to the geometric figures that repeat themselves in it at various scales. These figures are perceived in branches, plants, and generate a spectrum of energy that “could be related to our patterns of preference” (Ellard, 2016, p. 45).

These patterns linked to the natural context and the sensations of trust and security they convey, as well as choice and cultural inheritance, root residents and families in their origins and generate collective bonds. Thus, people “tend ‘to settle’ locally in a space that is shaped by its uniformity” (Acebo Ibáñez, 1996, p. 3). When there is a sense of belonging to groups and organizations that involve people intimately, a social rootedness is generated linked to the way the individual participates in the bonds that have taken shape, so to speak, in the land; this gives rise to a common inheritance between ancestors and contemporary inhabitants.

Rootedness implies the existence of a terrestrial space, appropriated and valued—both symbolically and instrumentally—by human beings to generate living conditions that allow them to enhance their creative being when satisfying symbolic and meaningful needs of reproduction through care, security, and freedom found in space. It should be noted that being born or living in a particular territory does not automatically produce the construction of symbolic rootedness in it. Rootedness implies a struggle to defend what is considered common and one’s own.

The territorial rootedness of the people of El Comedero is associated with their homes:

I have lived here all my life, and I have shared everything with my family here. When I go to Irapuato or somewhere else, it’s a headache because of the noise and stress, but here I am happy. (...) when I return, I say, “I’m back”, from here to there is my home, and it feels that way (anonymous, personal communication, April 3, 2022).

This provides clues that the construction of territory has to do with seeking, living, and feeling at home, taking care of it and perceiving it as a safe place. Home spaces “shape our first routines of thought and memory” (Ellard, 2016, p. 76) and are often associated with a set of positive values: privacy, acceptance, comfort, shelter, awe, and intimacy. Therefore, in rural inhabitants, it is

common to find a preference for open, spacious spaces that, due to their low population density and extended families, provide a certain level of privacy and sense of security.

The feelings of attachment to our homes are also influenced by our personal histories, and “the places where they occurred shape our adult attraction or rejection of certain types of spatial organizations, depending on the influence of those early life experiences” (Ellard, 2016, p. 83). Small agrarian communities place a great deal of value on an interior life linked to the social group of relatives and acquaintances and trust in the territory, where sociality is generated because they live in a place that they believe they are quite familiar with. This situation is reinforced by the rootedness to the place, to the space, to the collectively constructed territory, which, consequently, is cared for because of its symbolic, socializing, and materially basic value for the daily reproduction of the inhabitants.

Reproductive Care Deployed in the Collective Organization

The third of the links that generate rootedness, among others, which is also constructed as a moment of socialization and as a vehicle that enables the production-consumption process for the reproduction of life, is that of the care carried out to satisfy collective needs, since producing and consuming material goods, managing them, administering them, caring for them, and sustaining them imply a process of social organization.

Inside the homes of El Comedero, there is a tendency for women to take on unpaid domestic and care work, while men operate as the *economic providers for the family's maintenance*, a model that, in turn, imposes the formation of a nuclear family. Upon delving deeper into this binary division of roles in in-depth interviews, it was possible to understand that the difference in work is not total or all-encompassing.

Women generate their own reproductive strategies within households, which basically include three actions: one of them consists of working outside the home, either in the factory area of the industrial corridor or by cleaning urban neighborhoods in Irapuato; in this case, daughters take care of the home during the day. Another action is related to their own homes, which includes setting up gardens, collecting firewood from the mountain or performing tasks in their homes; these are functional activities for them that allow them not to neglect reproductive care in their homes. The third action involves working in the fields during planting and harvest seasons; together with their family, they perform agricultural tasks, sow, fumigate and provide food to workers.

Women's participation is doubly active: as mentioned, inside the household they provide reproductive care to their members; in addition, in certain cases, they complement the purely monetary income with money saved in a popular savings box. This was formed from an invitation from the Choice¹⁵ organization, which has brought various in-kind benefits to the community. This

¹⁵ Choice is a non-profit organization that carries out activities related to humanitarian work, including technical training and the creation of small economic cooperatives to combat poverty. It operates at an international level and has a branch in Irapuato.

box made it possible for women to build a network of economic support. The contributions range from 10 Mexican pesos (MXN) to whatever the participant wishes to contribute. They commented that, usually, savings come from what is left over weekly from daily expenses, which on average does not exceed 50 MXN, but serves to deposit it into the box and withdraw money from there when needed.

Regarding the organization of the savings fund, the women rotate the board of directors monthly and hold a weekly meeting to report on the state of the administration. Every time the composition of the board changes, the key to the box and the account book, which is public because it records all the women who contribute savings, are handed over. During the weekly meetings to review the accounts of the savings group, they also take the opportunity to discuss a public topic or local management issue.

The savings box represents another reproductive strategy that allows for supplementing the insufficient family income. In case of problems in meeting the expense of food or other necessary expenses, the savings box represents an immediate resource for women which is available for them at any time; they can even withdraw all their money and rejoin when they are able to do so. This formation of the women's group has functioned as a material and social support to satisfy life needs in a continuous and ongoing process of reinvention and constant creation of social relationships (Gutiérrez Aguilar et al., 2017); that is, the organization of women enables collaborative activities and reciprocal obligation in multiple works and energies of family and community reproduction.

It is important to highlight that in addition to carrying out essential tasks for family subsistence within the home, contributing to the monetary income, and performing caretaking work, women also engage in other actions that extend to the community. Generally, they are the ones who organize community activities and often assign tasks in which men will cooperate. As representative figures, women take the lead in their management.

On the other hand, there is an exception in the case of the ejido board, as it is an area dominated by men. Currently, there are only five women who own plots of land and can participate with voice and vote in their assemblies. Therefore, women are the ones who usually call public meetings, for which a bell located in the house of a former trumpeter is rung to make the call, either by ringing the bell or playing his trumpet a few minutes before the meeting. The meetings are usually held at the school, the community hall, or the church, public places located in the center of the town, easily accessible to the population.

In organizational matters, rotation of positions is planned for practically all existing committees in the community: those related to the ejido, water, delegation, and the local women's group. The work carried out in these committees is considered as a service to the community and is not measured in terms of salary. Therefore, collective work such as cleaning the streets and the river that runs through the community, reforestation, and clearing of pipes, among others, are common. These are actions of collective care for the territory and a commitment to service to take care of their home, which transcends the domestic space.

According to Rolnik (2019), it can be interpreted that this sociality has a causal relationship, among others, with the vital and social drive to “create modes of existence” (p. 29). This contributes to building territory and collectively managing the common goods of the inhabitants, since “interactions between people nurture feelings of trust, sincerity, and affection. Similarly, our history of visits to a place, the time we spend there, and the experiences we have can awaken a powerful sense of attachment” (Ellard, 2016, p. 93).

Particularly, the committee for water management is led by a woman along with a group of other women, who accompany her in the activities; they teach us that the ability to convene is mediated by a respectful treatment with their neighbors and that the work they do is common and day-to-day, without economic remuneration, but is carried out because it is necessary for people’s daily reproduction. The president of the committee calls for meetings by ringing the public bell and, once the attendees, mostly women, have gathered, she proceeds to explain the topic that motivated the meeting. While attendees can freely express their opinions on the topic, when opinions veer towards personal matters, the president tries, with respect, to redirect the participation towards the central topic, as there are sometimes disagreements among neighbors on matters unrelated to water.

In the community, it is possible to observe that people have a high sense of collaboration and responsibility, both among themselves and with their living space. In this sense, although women primarily attend the calls, when it comes to assigning tasks for cleaning pipes or for their repair, they commit to having their partners attend the collective work call on the assigned day and time to do it. Participants usually attend the work because they believe it is a commitment to the common good. “The thing is, it’s a commitment or a right that we have to go help because all people are supposed to help in the work because it’s for the community” (anonymous, personal communication, April 4, 2022).

The criteria for distributing collaborative work hours are based on the participation that individuals have had in previous activities; if a family has already attended previous work sessions, another family—usually led by a man but represented by a woman in the meetings—may rotate to cover their place. This is how the list of participants is formed. If any of the household heads (male or female) cannot attend, they are replaced by another family member, and the family is responsible for covering their participation. If this does not happen, their support is requested for the fulfillment of a double work shift in the next activity. Sometimes, newly arrived residents may miss these activities due to their lack of knowledge about the established community activities, but they are invited to participate in order to integrate them into these collaborative actions.

FINAL THOUGHTS

In the study locality, the socio-territorial construction is built upon rootedness to the territory, not only as a material space but as a *binding space of care*; that is, the territory has certain biological conditions, which we generally refer to as the *natural context*. This context provides the material elements of subsistence: the soil, the water, the oxygen, among others, and the settled population there—for the general reasons already explained, which led them to inhabit that locality—in order

to reproduce their life, they must necessarily produce their consumer goods through work. Inherently, this production-consumption process requires a sociality, a set of social care relationships that allow the inhabitants to establish—in more or less formal terms—rules of coexistence among themselves, of management of their common goods.

The relationship with the natural environment can be compared to social metabolic processes, but when the relationship is one of overexploitation and droughts or floods occur, a fracture in the metabolic processes can be observed. In the studied locality, the existence of a fracture that affects rainfed agriculture, tree felling, deforestation, overgrazing, and waste disposal, was noted. These fractures are also experienced at the social level, that is, when society faces a fracture in its relationships caused by various circumstances, border territories appear, a border between social cohesion and disconnection. Nevertheless, the population has developed a care-based relationship with the territory, led by women and characterized by collaborative work during the *daily process of life reproduction*.

Translation: Erika Morales.

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