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Blue Maize Pollinates IIPE's Network by Feeling and Thinking: The 2022 Excursion to San Mateo Tlaltenango, Mexico

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Introduction

We are living in an age of fragility: critical situations threaten the existence of the web of life. Inequality, social division, exclusion, rupture of the social fabric, exploitation of natural resources, and the contamination of air, water, and soil, all this fosters competition, conflicts and war-making. As soon as 1944, Karl Polanyi, a Viennese scholar who had fled to the USA, described in *The Great Transformation* the social, ecological, and economic injustices inherent to the mechanisms and structures of our current formal economic model. Polanyi used the term *market society* to confirm that for the first time in human history, society is embedded within the economic system. (Spash 2020) That is, interrelations of any sort are performed and valued in monetary terms, disregarding other human values such as gratitude, responsibility, sensitivity. Moreover, the interplay between the economic and the social realm in a market society (capitalist market society) instills the belief that our choices are only rational, as if we were insensitive beings (machine-like humans). (Spash 2017) Moral or ethical values are left in a second place. Essentially, the only value that counts is the commercial one set by price-making markets. (Spash 2017).

This dominant economic paradigm is causing, to a significant extent and on a global level, an ecological crisis because of its way of operating. For several decades now, there have been warnings that a formal economy system – mainstream economics or neoclassical economics – damages the natural environment. (Kapp 1971) Its mechanisms include extraction of natural resources, transporting and transforming them to be sold, done for the most

part without respect or concern for the damages to ecosystems. Extractive and transporting procedures create waste and pollution, using up energy sources and materials taken from nature. (Spash 2020) A most striking shift in beliefs has led people to disconnect from nature. Modern human societies believe that nature must be kept under control, that nature is something people have to protect themselves from. The climate crisis is showing us that living as if detached from nature is problematic to maintain life on Earth. This detachment has led to the further destructive delusion that paying an ecosystem service will save the ecosystem.

Nevertheless, there are still places in the world where the market is embedded within the society, and not the other way round, and where social and ecological interrelations are not subsumed by monetary modes. One such place is San Mateo Tlaltenango, a highland village at the periphery of Mexico City. Rich in natural resources and historical traditions, San Mateo Tlaltenango is also a place affected by rapid transformation and conflicts. As elsewhere, people have begun to believe that monetary transactions are the only mean to satisfy needs and solve problems. Yet, despite its exposure to urbanization and changing lifestyles, San Mateo Tlaltenango as a *pueblo originario* preserves Mesoamerican non-monetary social relationships. This ‘ancient’ quality was on my mind when I first suggested an excursion to San Mateo Tlaltenango for the International Institute on Peace Education (IIPE) gathering 2022 in Mexico.

This research paper seeks to recount the learnings from the 2022 IIPE excursion day to San Mateo Tlaltenango. It is written from the perspective of an organization team member of IIPE Mexico 2022 who is also a native *tlaltenanguense* and a social sciences researcher, specializing in Peace Studies and Ecological Economics (Common & Stagl 2005; Spash 2017) adding the social realm (Spash 2025). In Part (1), I will first draft the theoretical background for the holistic, transdisciplinary and multiple knowledge approach necessary to address the complexity of our current critical situation. The focus will be on the values of interconnectedness and reciprocity, necessary to sustain the continuity of human and non-human life on planet earth. Part (2) of this paper, “IIPE spores pollination: Crossing oceans from Austria to Cyrus, from Cyprus to Mexico”, locates my access to the IIPE network and the experimental setup of the IIPE excursion day 2022 within core disciplinary developments of Peace Studies. This is also a tribute to eminent IIPE peace researcher and peace educator Janet Gerson, whose expertise, wisdom and attentiveness played a key role in planning the 2022 IIPE excursion day. Listening carefully to the intentions for the San Mateo Tlaltenango community and *fiesta* as I described them and as they unfolded, Janet Gerson supported me, willing to accept challenges to how IIPE had been done. She has become a vital interlocutor, with regard to what Indigenous traditions and wisdoms could contribute to transformations in peace education, especially for new understandings that embrace ecology and peace.

In the case of San Mateo Tlaltenango, aspects of Mesoamerican culture remain embodied in traditional concepts, such as *tequio* (non-remunerated cooperative work), and in collective property institutions such as *ejido* and *comunidad*. *Ejido* is the type of collective land ownership that arose after the Mexican Revolution in the twentieth century. *Comunidad* is also a social-economic and collective property institution, which has its origins in the sixteenth century right after the Spanish conquest. As I will show in Part (3) of this paper, “Conflicts in San Mateo Tlaltenango and two different types of conflict transformation”, territorial conflicts including rivalling *ejido* and *comunidad* collectives continue to divide residents, alongside many other factors. Planning and organizing the IIPE 2022 excursion day as a *fiesta* in the Mesoamerican tradition, however, also meant drawing upon a particular type of conflict transformation process that *pueblo originario* communities have developed historically. Part (4) “The agenda for the excursion day” registers the program of this *fiesta* including IIPE workshops, conceived in a mixed conflict transformation methodology.

In Parts (5), “Mesoamerican organizational perspective to eat and celebrate”, and (6), “IIPE pedagogical methodology intersecting with Mesoamerican cultural heritage”, the experience of the *fiesta* will be reflected, as I point out the relevance of gifting or working in a *tequio* manner for a *pueblo originario* like San Mateo Tlaltenango. This is where concepts like interdependence, active subjectivity, and regeneration of the social fabric take the center stage, showing that even today people live and value each other beyond monetary social relations. As I draw conclusions in Part (7), “Creation of a social mesh”, possible cross-pollinations with IIPE peace methodology will be resumed.

Theoretical background

Interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity form our main theoretical frame for the process of knowledge generation and mobilization. In the first case, we regard Peace Studies and Social Ecological Economics as two distinct academic disciplines that may well cooperate and reflect their competencies in relation to their objects of study. Social Ecological Economics as a discipline calls for a paradigm shift, adding ecological and social realms to the analysis of economy. Consequently, the market is regarded as only a subsystem of society and not the other way round (see Polanyi’s description of the *market society*). Moreover, the interplay between the economic and social realm in a capitalistic market society instills the belief that our choices are only rational, as if we were insensitive beings like machines. Ethics, justice, and plural and incommensurable values (Spash 2017) need to be taken into account to counteract the crisis we are living. Peace studies, on the other hand, address principally the relational social realm, taking into account intercultural worldviews and focusing beyond violence and ethnocentrism in order to widen

the scope of moral and political consideration toward a culture of peace. Peace Studies competencies include the promotion of social justice and respect for life, non-violence conflict transformation, history, communication skills, coexistence, intercultural understanding of diversity, construction of equity, harmony and peace within individuals, between people and communities with a psychological dimension. As a discipline, Peace Studies aims to eradicate oppression, greed, deadly harm, and also, significantly, to stop the environmental destruction produced by humans.

In the second case, we go beyond the limits of disciplinary fields and seek the integration of knowledge from different origins such as local communities, practitioners, and academics. Transdisciplinarity highlights the co-production of knowledge. Facing challenging real-world problems, we look for an epistemological ground in bringing together academic scholarship in Peace Pedagogy and Social Ecological Economics and *pueblos originarios* community life. In other words, we assemble formal and non-formal knowledge as well as actors from different areas in order to generate a more holistic knowledge. Two concepts, *sentipensar* and mycelium network, inform our reflection: *Sentipensar* is the Latin American concept of feeling-thinking (Fals-Borda 2009) at the heart of the International Institute on Peace Education (IIPE) Mexico 2022 conference. *Sentipensar* indicates an opening of capacities and sensibilities, informing not only human-to-human relations, but also enhancing the human potential for recognizing and valuing the well-being of all earthly living systems. Mycelium network is what fungi biologist Merlin Sheldrake calls *entangled life*. Mycelium networks are made of webs of stretching, growing root fibers, each reaching toward resources and relationships they need. This metaphor reflects the IIPE peace pedagogy that aims to generate a dynamic global relational network of individuals engaged in peace practices that simultaneously preserve individuality while forming non-hierarchical, flexible and transforming interconnections.

A significant part of this research is to add the feeling component to the bodies of knowledge provided by Peace Studies and Social Ecological Economics. Both academic fields accept pluralist forms of knowledge, multidisciplinary and intercultural approaches, and use qualitative methodologies and methods. While Social Ecological Economics principally aims at deconstructing our current economic system, looking at deep structures and mechanisms that have been damaging the social fabric and the natural environment, Peace Studies engage with the social realm of interrelationships between humans, groups and communities, both locally and globally, and, more recently, towards the natural environment (Gerson, Knox, Pastoors, 2025). Moreover, a thread of evidence supports the idea that there are societies that live well beyond a merely economic development. These people relate to the natural environment by feeling and thinking, which allows nature not to be destroyed but to be part of a daily life in harmony with them.

Concepts like *kawsak sacha* (“living forest”), which serves as a model for living for the Sarayuka people of the Ecuadorian Amazon (Montalvo and Baquero-Diaz 2024, p. 114), or *Ubuntu*, a Zulu language concept in South Africa, express the belief that individuals are interconnected with societal interrelations and physical environments. These Indigenous societal examples also illuminate other ways of living to face the multiple crises that currently confront us.

Iipe Spores Pollination: Crossing Oceans from Austria to Cyprus, from Cyprus to Mexico

I met Janet Gerson, academic director of Iipe, at the summer Iipe conference in Innsbruck, Austria. Since our first meeting, shared interests and mutual appreciation have led us to collaboration on the Iipe Mexico 2022 Excursion Day and to ponder the ecologically related dimensions of peace that inform this paper. Embracing and reflecting upon the term *sentipensar* (thinking-feeling) coming from the amphibious culture at the San Jorge River in Colombian Caribbean, the aim of this paper is to inquire new thinking coming from indigenous ways of understanding the world. Framed by Iipe Mexico 2022, the excursion day at San Mateo Tlaltenango was an experiment that sought to broaden the academic body of knowledge by means of its co-production among local communities and academic researchers.

A graduate of the Innsbruck Peace and Conflict Studies Master program myself, my experience of Iipe Innsbruck 2017 introduced me to the Iipe pedagogy, which consisted of full immersion by living together for a week in the same place. This opened up space and time for learning, discussing, creating, sharing or/and making friends, interrelating through workshops with colleagues from different countries, ages and backgrounds. At the end of the week, we created a dynamical and relational social mesh with non-hierarchies, flexibility, peace practices, and interconnections of woven beings for peace resulting in a colorful social fabric for peace. At the Iipe Cyprus 2019 conference, I experienced again the full immersion Iipe pedagogy, taking more perspective on pedagogical methodology of Iipe as I prepared for being on the planning team for the Iipe conference to take place in Mexico. With this second conference, we interconnected deeper, entering a dialogue on this unique way of sharing and learning for peace. Additionally, I took more responsibility, being more active and supporting at the daily encounters.

The spore pollination of Iipe emerged in Innsbruck in 2017, then it crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Cyprus in 2019, and finally it crossed the Atlantic Ocean and reached Mexico City in 2022 (with a break due to the COVID pandemic). Part of the process was getting acquainted with the practical implications of the institutional development of Iipe, the

development of Peace Education, rooted in the academic field of Peace Studies. Since 1982, when IIPE was first convened at the Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City, IIPE has actively and respectfully interconnected with other cultures and peoples. IIPE's founder, Betty Reardon, was an eminent initiator worldwide in the development of Peace Education. Her body of theoretical work is interdisciplinary, gender-conscious, and offers a holistic framework on the problematic of peace, human security, and education for peace. Her work has always been driven by how to articulate the obstacles to peace, so that human societies might be guided to shift from war economies and relations towards a peace and justice paradigm that would support the transformation of society and human consciousness. Subsequently, a new knowledge has been developed toward respecting and understanding other ways of thinking, worldviews, values, behaviors and relations (Snauwaert 2019). There is a shift of focus from the problematic of violence toward creative, constructive potentialities and alternative practices wherein peace can flourish (Dietrich 2008, Gerson 2019, Kester 2008, Snauwaert 2008). Finally, new insights are leading peace researchers to consider decentralizing human beings as dominant over other living beings, instead considering "more than human beings" (Abram 2017) as central to interpreting experiences and valuing all living systems on which humans depend (Amster 2015, Gerson 2024, Snauwaert 2023).

The knowledge acquired in different IIPE encounters allowed me and other Mexican peace education colleagues to develop not only the concept of IIPE Mexico 2022, but also the excursion day at the *pueblo originario* of San Mateo Tlaltenango in the borough of *Cuajimalpa*, west of Mexico City. The excursion day at San Mateo Tlaltenango was organized mainly by me as a member of the community. Having grown up in the community helped me to have people trust me, and it enabled me to draw on my life experience to invite community members to join in the making of a traditional festival within the forest reserve for which the community is responsible. I drew on my lifelong learning of feeling-thinking, friendship, and peace knowledge acquired in previous IIPEs, where deeper layers of communication and trust are also developed through multiple intercultural interactions during the full immersion week. I was given the confidence to organize that day, from the perspective of a Mexican citizen and native person belonging to a *pueblo originario*, to share local knowledge within the frame of peace, feeling-thinking and ecology. Moreover, I applied my social science knowledge acquired at universities in Mexico and Austria.

The Excursion Day as an Experiment

The idea of creating a social experiment at the excursion day in San Mateo Tlaltenango emerges from an interdisciplinary reflection of peace studies and social ecological economics. Its concrete structure materialized within the

framework of IIPE Mexico 2022, in an elicitive and flexible manner. The goal was an immersive experience, aimed to generate new learning through cross-pollination of ancient wisdom and modern knowledge, embodied in the mixture of participants. The excursion day was an experiment in a dynamic, natural, and social setting, with people being the main factor to work with, taking the risk of unpredicted behaviors. Within the frame of IIPE peace pedagogy, we provided a structured environment and a program for an entire day and with a fixed structure. We also invited key people and local institutions from the San Mateo Tlaltenango community, trying to elicit conflict transformation among them. This can be seen as a control setup; however, it was guided by Participatory Action Research and Reflexivity. IIPE participants elicited conflict transformation among locals, provoking them to move forward by giving a framework but not a formula or guideline. Accordingly, this research does not test a hypothesis; the aim was rather to understand and to carry out a collective inquiry and experiment with the members of both local and IIPE communities, in a real-life setting. We thus catalyzed ancient and local knowledge to transform a range of different conflicts, drawing also on a mixture of knowledge from peace studies experts from the international community of IIPE. With this experiment, we sought to articulate aspects of the emerging ecological relational dimension for peace. Applying interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, we sought to bridge peace studies and ecological economics with ancient knowledge, in this case Mesoamerican wisdom.

Methodology and Participatory Action Research

Despite starting as a US Peace Institution, IIPE's subsequent organizers, Janet Gerson and Tony Jenkins, have continued to build the transdisciplinary and transcultural web of peace learning that Dr. Reardon envisioned. IIPE has been an informal learning lab for experiments in peace learning, such as the Excursion Day Encounter and *Fiesta* in San Mateo Tlaltenango. We chose this day to be set up and analyzed from a qualitative methodology perspective, namely Participatory Action Research, considering that the goal is not controlling and predicting but describing, understanding and eliciting conflict transformation. Human experience as a whole was in the center of a collective inquiry, helping us to better generate and analyze data from different points of view, and to provide important information for everybody. Lived experience is relevant for deeper insights into challenging or conflicting behaviors and situations. It is significant to reflect on what happened and worked, eliciting at the right time, towards a peaceful transformation.

Very often it is not easy to get in touch with a *pueblo originario*. Belonging to the community of San Mateo Tlaltenango allowed me to be a participant and researcher at the same time. While being native can sometimes be problematic

as regards methodological approaches, I argue that the value of an insider researcher is relevant and suitable for several reasons. First, there is direct collaboration, an established bridge of communication with trust between insiders and outsiders. The risk of impositions from outsiders is minimal, it is all about jointly interacting with one another. In this case, this resulted in a collaboration within the local community and with IIPE community. Secondly, personal stake and emotional investment are important because the study was done in an everyday life setting, with risks and responsibilities instead of controlling. My academic perspectives as a trained scholarly researcher, with critical theoretical knowledge, lent a conscious and reflexive lens to the research field. This combined, on a personal level, with my informal knowledge acquired by growing up in a *pueblo originario* rooted in Mesoamerican heritage. Furthermore, emotions can positively generate relevant perceptions, knowledge and wisdom for the qualitative research. Our senses make us discern coherently, establishing bonds and empathy towards our social and natural dimensions. This emotional realm was woven into the interactions of this day at the *pueblo originario*.

A key outsider perspective in this case comes from eminent IIPE researcher Janet Gerson. Our positions, as a US citizen and academic on her side, and as a citizen of Mexico City, a *pueblo originario* member as well as a scholarly trained person on my side, were incubating to put ahead IIPE Mexico 2022 with trust and understanding, in an atmosphere of collaboration and reciprocity. In our work together coordinating the gathering in San Mateo Tlaltenango, a relational mindset was created, opening space to combine the active participation of insiders and outsiders. The aim was not only conflict transformation but also to craft a social mesh among local participants from San Mateo Tlaltenango and international participants to experience social interconnections.

Conflicts in San Mateo Tlaltenango and two different types of conflict transformation

Conflicts in San Mateo Tlaltenango can be traced back to the colonial era. The Spanish worldview blended with the Aztec system, in a clash of cultures present up to this day. A document from 1534, the oldest record of the founding of San Mateo Tlaltenango, endorses the territories of the community, designating also borders and neighboring villages. Centuries later, with Mexico's independence from the Spanish kingdom in 1821 and finally the Mexican Revolution in 1910, the Mexican *ejido* emerged, formed from the large territory previously owned by Spanish settlers (*haciendados*). Within the legal framework of Mexico as a republic, and based upon the documentation of 1534, this territory was distributed among local residents. Yet this way territorial conflicts arose, between the *ejido* and the community, between neighboring populations, even between families within the same town.

These conflicts over territory led to divisions between families and individuals. Moreover, modernization began in the 1950s, transforming social relationships considerably. People began to go to work in the city and change their lifestyle, abandoning the land, the cornfields, and the *tequio*. Among the remaining residents, conflicts exacerbated between the *comunidad* group and the *ejido* group, and many representatives used their positions to benefit themselves economically. Though these abuses are not the case anymore nowadays, the desire for money and its quicker availability, among other things, have led to further conflicts. The identity of the residents of San Mateo Tlaltenango has been transforming into a modern one, with money as the primary means of interrelating. Conflicts today are not only about land: social bonds are being ripped apart by poverty and gentrification; there is water shortage, air, water and land pollution, as well as a lot of noise produced by cars and buses, and traffic in general.

However, what has survived to this day, despite so many years, is the *fiesta*, where there is an interdependence among people, and where money is not the means of interrelating. Roger Magazine has described this mindset among residents of highland Mexico with the concept of “active subjectivity”: a way of seeing the world like in the *fiesta*, generating a collaborative spirit of social interaction. This obviously conflicts with a more “civilized” or urbanized worldview: a preference to believe, also among locals from San Mateo Tlaltenango, that only through money one can interrelate with others. Both systems are respectful, yet – following Polanyi’s premonitions regarding the *market society* (capitalistic market society)– the second one is damaging the natural and social realm.

This is also relevant for thinking through conflict transformation. Culturally, we may distinguish between two types, one that is academic and one that is informal but with ancient wisdom heritage: *la fiesta*. The first one belongs to the Social Sciences body of knowledge and follows formal rules. There is the qualitative methodology perspective called Participatory Action Research, considering its goal not as controlling and predicting but as describing, understanding and eliciting conflict transformation. At the Innsbruck Peace Studies School where I was trained, Paul Lederach’s notion of “elicitive” has been especially important for the elaboration of a transnational peace studies methodology: with the own contextual knowledge and resources of the parties in conflict making available the way in which the relational energy between persons, groups or communities should be methodically directed. The other type can be seen in the Mexican *fiesta* with pre-Hispanic features. A *fiesta* offers the space and the means to meet and talk about issues or work them out. The result of months of work, a *fiesta* opens the stage for conflict transformation automatically. When the IIPE team accepted the excursion day 2022 to be organized as a *fiesta* in a *pueblo originario*, I set about to create a mixed conflict transformation methodology,

designed for academic and non-academic people, insiders and outsiders, young people and much older ones, who might be interested in taking part, in a real day setting.

Bringing the IIPE excursion day 2022 to San Mateo Tlaltenango, there was the opportunity of being supported by mediators from the IIPE community, most of them expert in Peace Studies. The pedagogical frame of IIPE was part of the structure to transform conflicts or at least move forward the conflictive parts in San Mateo Tlaltenango. Another formal frame was Participatory Action Research entailing all participants by feeling-thinking, mobilizing formal and informal knowledge not only for the co-production of knowledge but also for the elicitive conflict transformation. With a *fiesta* setting, I also counted upon previous *tequio* work and active subjectivity predispositions among locals. I started contacting and personally visiting people in San Mateo Tlaltenango. Little by little, more people were integrated, making sense of and accepting this *fiesta* event in the community. In what was to become a social mesh, other people were also knitting the social fabric: people from other *pueblos originarios* and Mexico City and the IIPE organization team were interacting.

A *fiesta* works when people just come to take part; it does not matter if the participations are only at the opening ceremony or at the closing ceremony. Each participant contributes in one way or the other, which has an impact on conflict transformation. Many of them come and go; the *fiesta* has an everyday dynamic; nobody is forced to participate. However, it was important to have some key people there from the conflictive parts, for example, official representatives from the group of the *ejidatarios* and *comuneros*. In fact, people from other groups implied in local conflicts were also present. In a *fiesta* setting, persons in conflict decide to transform their attitudes towards a conflict or not. A happy and healthy environment usually makes people take positive and friendly reactions towards issues. With the support of the IIPE community, there were many conflict transformations on a smaller scale and on a larger one.

The agenda for the Excursion Day

The agenda for the excursion day was programmed within the frame of the organization plan for IIPE Mexico 2022. However, what could not be planned was how the different actors in the conflicts affecting San Mateo Tlaltenango would behave in certain situations, the impact of certain activities, events or attitudes where feelings are implied. Different degrees of awareness, accidents, or any other moment of surprise might affect people and the dynamics of the experiment. My Peace Studies colleagues and I were aware of the importance of all these factors as composing a fundamental part of the experiment to be elicited. Clearly, our aim was to direct these factors towards a peaceful conflict transformation.

We started the excursion day with an open air activity between trees and close to the spring water – to breathe the fresh air of the *Tlaltenanguense* forest, to connect to nature, and to enjoy being outside of the city. Then there was a short guided tour to show how *Tlaltenanguense comuneros* enlarge the forest by putting local seeds in a special “nursery” to take care of them as they sprout and grow. After sprouting and beginning to be mini-trees, they are put outside to continue growing near the sprouting house. It takes four years for them to be mature and resilient enough to be planted throughout the forest.

Next, we took a longer walk to see the springs originating from this forest. Situated in the west of Mexico City, San Mateo Tlaltenango is the雨iest region in the large metropolitan area. The conservation of its forest is vital to keep alive an ecosystem where many native plants and animals continue to live and to supply water, clean air and recreation to both the city people and the local, predominantly Indigenous communities. With an altitude of 2670 meters above sea level, the climate of this forest area is cold. We therefore received our special visitors with a typical warming breakfast, with *tamales* made of blue *maize*, from San Mateo Tlaltenango, and *atole*, a hot sweet drink, also made of maize, all this prepared with care by *tlaltenanguense* women.

We then reconvened in the main hall of *Rancho de los Laureles* in the forest, a territory under communal land property. The indoor program opened with a prehispanic ceremonial ritual, a dance, the music of *huehuetl*-drum and a trumpet shell, incense, and an offering of fruits and flowers. With this ceremony, performed as an ancient Mesoamerican ritual, we welcomed the IIPE guests and all the people of the community. Inaugural addresses by representatives of the community – *comuneros* and *ejidatarios* – highlighted this special day for San Mateo Tlaltenango, receiving the visit of people from 15 countries around the world. The community representatives also spoke about the importance of the natural environment and problems related to its preservation. Then, participants from the *Tomás Moro* School presented their work contributing to local communities in the region, specifically by sharing knowledge and work (*tequio*) for the regeneration of the social fabric and natural environment.

A highly esteemed feminist academic, Karla Priego, followed the students and explained why women are important emerging actors in defense of the territory in Mexico. Next, Leonardo Vega Flores, an academic from Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH), talked about the definition of what a *pueblo* is. Born in the *pueblo originario* San Mateo Xalpa, Ciudad de México, his academic interests resonated with our research topics for this day: the *fiesta*, traditional cooking and socio-environmental disasters. His input and feedback from an academic perspective helped participants to connect with these topics. Later, we had poster presentations in the hall, with a variety of contributions by local participants: dancing butlers, muleteers, community members, *ejidatarios*, a teacher of the *Tomás Moro* School, among

others. This was followed by a *Chinelos* dance performed by two kids, a traditional dance usually related to St. Matthew's day (September 21st), honoring the patron saint of San Mateo Tlaltenango.

After lunch, we restarted activities with workshops designed within the framework of IIPE to reinforce and sustain cohesion in the community. Held simultaneously, these workshops offered topics like Roots Theater, Exploring My Narratives of Rivalry, Building the Art of Good Living from the Everyday, Dreaming the Future, Human Rights in Action, and Participatory Arts for Peace. By means of joint participation and reflection, these workshops encompassed conflict transformation. In a follow-up activity, the aim was to interact with members of the IIPE community to reflect together upon local and global problems.

Winding up the excursion day in terms of a *fiesta*, there was a show of dances from different regions of Mexico, as well as Latin-American music and songs to dance or to enjoy listening to. In the closing ceremony, the 40th anniversary of IIPE was celebrated by a group of *Mariachi* musicians – organized by the *ejido* communal group of San Mateo Tlaltenango – as well as by a special cake that was handed over by a *Comunidad* representative (Florencio Guzmán Flores). The very last activity was the closing ceremony, again with a pre-Hispanic ritual to thank the physical and non-physical realms for our gathering, given that a community needs to close circles to keep existing.

Now, the fact that official representatives of conflicting groups, such as the *comunidad*'s agrarian institution and the *ejido*'s agrarian institution, among others, attended the excursion day can already be seen as a step forward, as the conflicting parties felt confident attending and participating. The joint reflection among participants from San Mateo Tlaltenango and the IIPE community in workshops aimed at understanding and transforming conflicts, as well as deepening an understanding for local and global issues. The two main conflicting groups joined at the table and on the podium, welcoming our international and local visitors. Each spoke and expressed in their own words what the day of the excursion meant to them. For the first time, representatives of these two rivalling agrarian institutions met to discuss the problems of the entire local community. Evidently, the IIPE 2022 excursion day to San Mateo Tlaltenango at least made a start in conflict transformation.

Mesoamerican Organizational Perspective to Eat and Celebrate

Let me now reconsider the IIPE 2022 excursion day to San Mateo Tlaltenango as an experiment from the perspective of a native *tlatenanguense* person with an academic background. The idea was also that the IIPE community, where almost everybody comes from a (capitalistic) market society, had full immersion in a non-monetary valuation setting, in other words in a *tequio* and gift-based interrelation social system, where money plays a secondary role.

This included experiencing a traditional *fiesta* in a *pueblo originario*, feeling and thinking, for instance, eating maize *tortillas*.

Developed by people in central Mexico 9000 years ago, maize (*Zea mays*) is the plant at the center of Mesoamerican culture. (Kimmerer, 2018) San Mateo Tlaltenango belongs to this area. My grandfather Angel Guzmán dedicated his life mainly to cultivate maize at the milpa, together with beans and squash. These three plants (“the Three Sisters”) interact and support each other, flourishing better together than they might do apart. They represent, as Kimmerer states, the genius of indigenous agriculture (Kimmerer, 2013). Maize has a deep connection to people; they are interrelated and need each other to exist. Maize forms a culture considered as intrinsically linked to a plant. There is a collective awareness of the importance of the interrelation to nature for both human and non-human life. Blue maize seeds, specifically, are the matter that has shaped history, culture and identity in Mexico, providing a clear sense of who you are and which direction to go. The blue maize tortillas prepared and eaten during the excursion day were made of maize seeds coming from my grandfather’s heritage.

On the other hand, coordinating the local participants went far beyond the IIPE formal organizational framework. Getting food, cooking, and supplies for the *fiesta* had to be done before. Over many months, I visited key people in the community to talk about this event and ask for their participation. This had multiple purposes. One was to give them voice, presence and responsibility as members of a community. This is important also to weave and strengthen the local social fabric. It included bringing different groups together and enlisting their cooperation for the co-realization of the event. All of this without remuneration: neither money nor profit played a direct role for the realization of the excursion day. Instead, the local people cooperated by bringing speakers, microphones, electrical extensions, and in general technical expertise. It was understood in a traditional way that cooperation and personal contributions made the community strong and congenial.

Food, drinks, cooking and serving were a wonderful part of generating a sense of abundance and a spirit of generosity. Warm and cold drinks were continuously available, and *pulque*, a local pre-Hispanic agave wine, was served. These drinks were offered as a present from different people. Other persons brought typical food or helped by working in a *tequio* form, setting the hall with chairs and putting up tarps to protect us from rain. Others collected wood to set the fire to cook *mole*, rice and beans and to make tortillas. Women from the community took over the task of cooking and serving food; they also brought necessary tableware, plates, glasses, spoons, or glasses. All these contributions were realized as gifts by the *tlaltenanguense* people, bringing to fruition a Mesoamerican *fiesta*.

The food served on the IIPE 2022 excursion day to San Mateo Tlaltenango was traditional, in accordance with the set menu for a special

party or ceremony. Especially the lunch followed the organizational procedure of the traditional way a *pueblo originario* celebrates its patron saint. Many people participated for its realization and a previous social interconnection was crucial. This means, the main factor for the materialization of the food at lunch time, breakfast and at the end of the event was *tequio*. *Tequio* is cooperative work that gives status and recognition in the community. Everybody knows about the gift or *tequio* contributed by each person or group, so the person or group is valued for what he/she/they did but not valued in a monetary way.

By means of *tequio* and gifts in the Mesoamerican way, we provided a setting for the IIPE experiment relying on social interaction, cooperation and interdependence. My idea was to organize the entire excursion day without using money, establishing a distance from (capitalistic) market society with its reliance on monetary valuation. Money tends to replace social interrelations based on cooperation and generosity. Even donations in monetary form maintain the formal economic system with its calculations and monetary valuation. Replacing social interrelations, money tends to disintegrate the social fabric, consequently damaging also the natural environment. In a (capitalistic) market society, what counts is money; usually, people are recognized for what they earn or spend, which is detrimental to ethical or moral values based on humility, responsibility, honesty, respect, gratitude, prudence, or sensitivity. The dramatic part of this is that modern people do not believe that another system is possible, namely, to interact and live without money. One of the few things that remain in the market society as a social relation that is not valued in monetary terms is friendship. Gustavo Esteva (2022) sees friendship as the only possibility for societies embedded in the market society to reflect upon this and to illuminate new ways of social interactions.

Friendship, of course, has implications for Peace Studies endeavors like the IIPE gatherings. What the people from San Mateo Tlaltenango did on the IIPE excursion day 2022 was interact in such a gathering, drawing upon the remarkable Mesoamerican tradition of gifting or working in a *tequio* manner, that is an institutionalized cooperation among the members of a community, without remuneration, for the good of everybody.

IIPE Pedagogical Methodology Intersecting With Mesoamerican Cultural Heritage

Through active participation in IIPE peace encounters in different countries and continents, I became familiar with IIPE's pedagogical methodology, which consists of one week of full immersion, including one day when we leave our residency and visit a community to support it. Normally, the community is characterized by a latent conflict or several conflicts, and the IIPE participants are supposed to foster conflict transformation. Contributing

with ideas, workshops, talks or simply their presence in a meeting between the parties in conflict helps to work towards peace. This means, for instance, to discuss the issues of local disagreements and find solutions together, or at least to bring local groups together again to promote a dialogue between the conflicting parties.

Forest, water and land are still the natural wealth of San Mateo Tlaltenango. These natural resources attract people with high economic resources, thus raising the risk of gentrification. Population growth, economic development and modernity are further key factors with detrimental effects on nature, the local economy and the social fabric. There are, however, some aspects of Mesoamerican cultural heritage still present in the community that have helped to counter harmful facets of capitalism and the tearing of the social fabric. Knowing these dynamics, I proposed to the organizing committee of IIPE Mexico 2022 considering a visit to San Mateo Tlaltenango, not only to support and share knowledge of conflict transformation for this community but also to experiment, feel and think together forms of local conflict transformation, spending time in a *pueblo originario* to experience remaining Mesoamerican legacy.

The most significant ancient cultural heritage reference for the purpose of this research is the festivity of Saint Matthew on September 21st. This festivity for the community's patron saint is the main celebration in San Mateo Tlaltenango, a typical example for syncretism in Mexico, with cultural remnants of the old Mesoamerican religion mixed with Catholicism. Organizing a *fiesta* in this syncretic tradition means accounting for a *mayordomía* (stewardships), for *los arrieros* (muleteers), for a *los chinelos* dance and for the *faenas* or *tequio* (cooperative work not remunerated). The most important factor here is the *mayordomía*: it supposes a group of people to work for a whole year, visiting house per house, family per family, to collect *cooperaciones* (economic contributions). The significance of this is not really the sum of money, but the interaction with each family and connecting everybody by organizing *la fiesta*.

To contextualize and explain how the organization of a *fiesta* works, let me refer to the academic work of Roger Magazine, author of *The Village is like a Wheel: Rethinking Cargos, Family, and Ethnicity in Highland Mexico* (2012) and at present a professor of Social Anthropology at the Universidad Iberoamericana. Focusing on the lives of rural highland communities in Mexico, Magazine found out that at the heart of organizing a *fiesta* there was something he termed active subjectivity. People are not only encouraged to participate, but they are inspired to engage willingly and enthusiastically. As Magazine points out, transforming a reticent subjective state of mind to one of enthusiasm, or *gusto*, is what matters. Central to this transformation are the *mayordomos*, the individuals responsible for the coordination of the fiesta:

creating interdependence and a sense of active subjectivity among the inhabitants is their main task. The principle of “doing things together *entre todos*” (Magazine 2012, p. 3) may well be applied to the communal efforts in San Mateo Tlaltenango, where putting on the *fiesta* for the festivity of Saint Matthew is relevant for the social fabric.

Such action rooted in mutual need and interdependence may be viewed as foundational to community regeneration. At its core, the concept of active subjectivity draws attention to an understanding of personhood that transcends Western dichotomies of independence and dependence. It posits interdependence as a necessary condition for action and agency, particularly in communal contexts. Drawing on Jorge Klor de Alva’s work on native Mesoamerican spirituality in colonial times, Roger Magazine points out traces of non-acculturated native thought, where personhood, action and social fabric continue to be perceived differently from a Western worldview: “Consequently, the boundary between the individual self (the sole object of a Christian-type salvation), other selves, and what a Westerner would consider nonanimated objects was completely permeable” (Klor de Alva 1997, p. 185; quoted in Magazine 2012, p. 4).

One of Magazine’s informants captured the reinforcement of social cohesion in a striking metaphor: “The community is like a wheel, with villagers making up the wheel itself and the mayordomo’s *compañeros* (companions or helpers) as the spokes, and the mayordomo’s job is to start it rolling” (Magazine 2012, p. 3). This also holds true for my role at the IIPE excursion day 2022 in San Mateo Tlaltenango: I was like a *mayordomo*, as Magazine describes it, a *mayordomo* who made the community act like a wheel. My task was to get the community rolling, creating enthusiasm among some key inhabitants of San Mateo Tlaltenango, as well as among many others, neighbors and academic people alike, including the organizational team from IIPE Mexico 2022, the IIPE community, and many peace studies academics and practitioners from 15 countries who were to participate in the excursion day 2022. I carried out this task for approximately one year, visiting and being in contact with key local people and many others. Explaining the aims and agenda of the IIPE excursion day, I also created a sense for why it was worthwhile to organize such a unique event in San Mateo Tlaltenango. I was fostering a state of willingness or *gusto* (zest), not coercion or control: each person I visited was free to reflect upon the excursion day and choose to participate or not.

My intention behind the excursion day at the IIPE Mexico 2022 thus was to foster participation and reflection among local groups and international participants, centering on the socio-environmental challenges facing the community of San Mateo Tlaltenango. The metaphor of “rolling the wheel” indicates the mobilization of active subjectivities—encouraging individuals to

engage not out of obligation, but from intrinsic motivation rooted in communal purpose. In other words, the sum of active subjectivities at the excursion day helped to evoke conflict transformation and at the same time provided a unique setting to live through some aspects of Mesoamerican cosmovision for the international IIPE community. By bringing together local residents, peace practitioners, and members of the IIPE community, the event aimed to foster mutual understanding and co-creative learning. Locals could, for instance, participate in the workshops offered by peace practitioners to support conflict transformation efforts, while international participants gained insights into Mesoamerican cultural heritage, experiencing active subjectivities coming from the inner motivation to do something not alone but collectively.

The relevance of Mesoamerican traditions is also evident in the participation of *comuneros* and *ejidatarios*, the groups of people who represent the main social and agrarian collective institutions at San Mateo Tlaltenango. In these entities, too, a mixture of ancient Mesoamerican features as well as modern ones is to be observed. Their territorial property is a collective one, which means an assembly is necessary whenever there are decisions to be taken as a community; decisions on what to do with the land or the resources produced there, or any other issue concerning the *comunidad* or *ejido*. Both agrarian institutions participated in the 2022 excursion day in an active and subjective way, cooperating also with economic resources for specific things such as *mariachi* music or Mexican food. This way of organizing a *fiesta* has Mesoamerican cosmovision features, that is, cooperating, sharing and being together to party allows for repairing the social fabric. The aim is to celebrate. The *fiesta* helps to be interconnected and create a woven mesh of people.

Conclusion: Creation of a Social Mesh

After visiting and inviting so many local people to the IIPE Mexico 2022 excursion day, I helped to create a social mesh that supported and actively welcomed people from the city, from other local communities, as well as other parts of Mexico and other nations. We all celebrated life that day as a woven social fabric.

Participants from San Mateo Tlaltenango

None of the participants from San Mateo Tlaltenango was economically remunerated for taking part in the 2022 IIPE excursion day. Yet we know who participated and what each person did, so each of them got social recognition. There is in fact a word in Mesoamerican culture to denominate this communal work: *tequio*. It is related to the Nahua concept *tequitl*, meaning “all use of physical, spiritual, intellectual, artistic or emotional human energy to accomplish a specific objective, defined in social terms” (Good Eshelman

2004a: 13, translated and quoted in Magazine 2012, p. 5). Working for the benefit of others, in this tradition, means passing along one's force – *chicahualiztli*, in Nahuatl, or *fuerza*, in Spanish – with a generative capacity to make its recipients' work productive and visible. As Roger Magazine emphasizes, “Only by exchanging *tequitl* and *fuerza* with others does work become productive” (2012, p. 5). *Tequitl* is a legacy very much alive in rural highland Mexico; it is, as I hope to have shown, the kind of collective work that made possible the 2022 IIPE excursion day in San Mateo Tlaltenango.

Important participants in the event were the two main agrarian communities in San Mateo Tlaltenango, who supported morally and in matter. They offered a big hall for the gathering and official support. The president of the *ejidatarios* was at the podium table. They also provided the *mariachi* music to celebrate the *fiesta* as a local, national and international gathering as well as an IIPE anniversary. Between these two agrarian communities there are many territorial conflicts, that is why they were the main actors in conflict for the IIPE excursion day. IIPE community opened a space for communication between them. The idea was to create a safe space to foster dialogue between the two conflicting parts.

Other local leaders and cultural groups from San Mateo Tlaltenango were also invited to enter in dialogue with the IIPE community. There was the group of *Calpulli Teoyahualmentitlan Tlaltenco*, who opened and closed the gathering in a spiritual way, with a ritual in which food, flowers, copal, pre-Hispanic music and dances were offered. The dancers of “*Los chinelos*” intervened with a *Chinelos* dance performed by children and an installation with videos and artifacts showing who the *Chinelos* are and what they do. This group of folklore, consisting of young people and children, is conducted by a young dance teacher from San Mateo Tlaltenango. They beautifully presented typical Mexican dances.

Another important group was formed by women, many of them from the organization “*Mujeres emprendedoras*”, who brought and prepared typical food made of corn, among many other things. Some women helped to serve and offer the food. An American woman who has been living in San Mateo Tlaltenango for a long time donated water, coffee and tea. Another woman cooperated bringing more typically Mexican food, with many vegetarian options.

Finally, representatives of the *Tomás Moro* school showed us how they practically support poor communities, teaching non-violence as well as environmental justice and sustainability. Their work in San Mateo Tlaltenango centers particularly on the forest, as they organize brigades among their students to plant more trees. So many children and their parents come to cooperate for the wellbeing of the forest.

Reweaving Myself In My Own Community of San Mateo Tlaltenango

My intentions for the organization of the 2022 IIPE excursion day were not only to show that trust and openness to other ways of seeing the world, as IIPE promotes, play an important role for the system change that we are looking for. I also wanted to offer the possibility of having the experience of a *fiesta mexicana* as an elicitive space for conflict transformation. By means of feeling-thinking, I wanted to show how social interrelations can create an encounter in the manner that a *pueblo originario* does. The organization of the excursion day was felt and thought in a holistic manner, with all participants, locals, nationals and international ones, myself included, to be interwoven in a social mesh. My personal intention was to reweave myself again with the people of the community of San Mateo Tlaltenango. Since I studied abroad, I have been tied apart for many years, losing the social bonds with my native community that offer identity, prestige and belonging. At a time in which both modern economically-driven societies and Indigenous elation-and-land-based belief systems are at a crossroads for survival, it is time to unite forces helping each other to reconnect people and nature.

Cross-Fertilization of Knowledge and Experience Exchange

Regarding the IIPE community, I wanted to share the experience of feeling and thinking the ways in which Mesoamerican culture works up to this day. For the excursion, I first imagined how one could experience feeling-thinking alongside an event organized without monetary social relations – a way of socio-economic disembedding from the capitalistic market society. The *fiesta* provided an ideal social structure for such an experience of Mesoamerican culture, recalling the way the *mayordomos* in a *pueblo originario* organize a *fiesta*, by means of *tequio* and *chicahualitzli*. These concepts involve unpaid labor (*tequio*) and notions like strength, fortitude, firmness, power, spirit, or virtue, and the use of human energy—physical, spiritual, and intellectual—for a purpose (*chicahualitzli*). IIPE's peace education pedagogy, on the other hand, provided another frame and organizational setting, originating from academic, modern critical knowledge, complementing with the knowledge of indigenous heritage: Mesoamerican culture, and local and non-academic and academic people in Mexico City.

Blue maize thus pollinated IIPE's network by feeling and thinking. The social mesh woven in the end was achieved mainly thanks to the joint work with the IIPE team, especially IIPE Academic Director Janet Gerson, who through her mind, body and soul opened to other cultures and ways of thinking. We brought about an intercultural mesh, where ancestral Mesoamerican knowledge as well as current local knowledge of the San Mateo Tlaltenango community and university knowledge were woven,

interrelated, exchanged and experienced. It should be noted that a *tequio* way of working with *chicahualiztli* made our work productive and visible throughout the day of the excursion to San Mateo Tlaltenango, and in general at the peace encounter of IIPE Mexico 2022. By intertwining *saberes* we could face the multiple crises we are living.

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