In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argued that the only solution for the condition of nature, ravaged by uncertainty and distrust, was a state—a mighty force to keep all in awe. Hobbes claimed that most men did not even trust their own children: they locked their chests before going to sleep at night. If their opinions of their progeny were so poor, how could they possibly trust strangers encountered on the road? The commonwealth would thus mediate the relationships of individuals, guaranteeing the reliability of their exchanges and fortifying the fragile promises of mere words with law and the threat of punishment.² Hobbes is not alone in expecting formal institutions to assuage the anxieties of social exchanges: scholars of social capital have stressed the importance of democratic institutions and low levels of criminality for social trust to arise. In other words, trust has been expected to flourish better in contexts of state stability, strength, and the rule of law. And yet, in practice, this is not necessarily the case. In this paper, I explore the curious case of informal car parkers in Mexico City—usually known by their clients as viene-vienes—to whom middle-class drivers trust their the

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¹ PhD Candidate, Department of Political Science. This is a draft, please do not circulate or quote without permission. All comments are welcome at yunablajer@uchicago.edu. I am grateful to the participants of the Latin America and the Caribbean workshop at the University of Chicago, as well as Milena Ang, John Christian Laursen, Steve Levitt, Talia Nissimyan, Bob Reamer, and Mauricio Tenorio for their careful reading and thoughtful suggestions on previous versions of this text.

² Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapters XIV and XV.
keys to their vehicles with little to no formal guarantee that they will indeed recover their cars. The case of viene-vienes is worth exploring because it disrupts some core expectations dear to scholars of the liberal state and social capital, suggesting that our theoretical insights need some adjusting.

The paper is constructed around fieldwork carried out in situ in the summer of 2016, as well as the responses to a small online poll of middle-class car drivers in Mexico City.

Viene-vienes can be understood as an informal valet-parking, but although they receive and park vehicles just as valet-parking workers would, they lack institutional affiliations, usually work alone, and do not stand in front of signs or podiums. They are often identified by the cleaning cloth they carry to polish cars. Their work is informal and they are self-employed. Drivers do not receive any receipt in exchange for their cars and, most of the time, only know the viene-viene by their first name—if at all. In other words, the following improbable situation is correct: it is completely normal to exit one’s vehicle in one of the largest cities in the world, hand the keys to an unidentified individual standing on a street corner, and reasonably expect to retrieve the car later. In a city known for its impunity and in which most people would not leave their wallets with a stranger in the street, car drivers regularly entrust their vehicles—often one of their most valuable possessions—to a viene-viene, about whom they know close to nothing. How is this improbable trust possible?

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3 The observations of this piece derive from both participant-observation work carried out in the summer of 2016 and 25 years of native experience in Mexico City. I carried out informal semi-structured interviews with viene-vienes in the summer of 2016. Here, I use interviews with three viene-vienes, who I identify as Mauricio, Don Arturo, and Valentina. Each interview lasted a little over an hour. All three viene-vienes work in the south of Mexico City. I will add a note about my own positionality further down.

4 One hundred and twenty nine (129) persons responded to the online poll between May 25th, 2017 and July 28th, 2017. Of those, 127 live or have lived in Mexico City and all but two drive. Ninety-seven of the respondents currently live in Mexico City, seven live in another city in Mexico, and twenty-five live abroad. The respondents constitute a snowball sample whose main purpose is to illustrate the experience of clients of viene-vienes and not establish a causal story. There is a slight overrepresentation of women (n=71), over men (n=58) among respondents. The age distribution is normally distributed, with the majority of respondents being between 25 and 34 years of age.

5 And yes, the driver pays in advance.

6 One hundred and twenty seven of the respondents to the online poll live or have lived in Mexico City. Of those, only 19 said they have neither entrusted their car keys to a viene-viene nor have known of anyone who does. Of those nineteen persons, six no longer live in Mexico City (of which two do not drive), and two live in another urban area of the country. There is thus an overrepresentation of people who do not currently live in Mexico City among those who have never heard of people leaving their car keys to a stranger in the street.
Blaauw and Bothma (2003) wrote one of the few pieces that address the sui-generis work of car-parking helpers by focusing on car guards in South Africa to assess whether their jobs provided a solution for unemployment. Similarly, Chelcea and Iancu (2015) studied “self-appointed parking attendants in Bucharest,” part of the marginalized of the city whose labor provides them with subsistence wages. Both articles look at car-parkers to draw conclusions about economic opportunity and mobility, but none focuses on the social role of the car-parkers and the relationship with drivers that makes their work possible, much less the significance thereof.

Peter Bearman (2005) published a study about doormen in New York City that rings familiar. He describes the interactions between tenants and doormen, how the latter obtain their jobs, why they are perceived to be doing little when they are often very busy, and how tenants think of things such as Christmas bonds or privacy, among other things. Viene-vienes have a relationship with drivers that is similar to that of doormen and tenants because it is both personally close, yet socially distant. Nonetheless, again, what is distinct about the case I present here is the improbable trust that arises between drivers and car-parkers. In the case of doormen, tenants can rely on their building’s management to mediate their interactions with doormen and impose standards under the threat of punishment, a feature absent in the case of viene-vienes.

The case of Mexican viene-vienes is in more fluent conversation with literatures interested in trust. Some scholars have spoken about trust as the interaction between two persons whose interests align. The first steps towards that definition were taken by psychologist Morton Deutsch in the 1970s, but the definition is in line with the conceptual framework of rational-choice theorist Russell Hardin (although Hardin preferred speaking about trustworthiness instead of trust). From a sociopolitical perspective, scholars of social capital consider trust — social trust specifically—to be one

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of the many components of social capital. The more social trust a society has, the more social capital it is endowed with, the latter of which is crucial for economic prosperity and democratic vigor by making “spontaneous sociability” possible. Francis Fukuyama (1995) and Robert Putnam (2000) lauded the virtues of trust for its ability to oil the economic gears of society.\(^{10}\) Fukuyama, for instance, explains that the ability to cooperate socially is often based on prior norms and traditions that can be harnessed to foster democratic institutions. In other words, shared values and a sense of solidarity may be helpful in producing economic growth and stability, as well as sustaining democratic institutions. The biggest threats to this type of sociability, nonetheless, are high crime rates, and either too much individualism (hyper liberalism) or too little (familism). Hence, the literature interested in social trust stresses its virtues and suggests that stable institutions and the rule of law provide necessary conditions that allow for the strengthening of social trust and vice versa. In that line, social trust is, for them, likely to flourish within the purview of the state and the rule of law.

In the case of viene-vienes, their work takes place in a framework of criminality and impunity in Mexico City, and its resulting pessimism about security. In 2015, a survey of the National Institute for Statistics showed that 67.6% of the inhabitants of Mexico City considered insecurity to be the worst problem of the city,\(^{11}\) with 72.4% of those surveyed expecting the situation to remain “just as bad” or to worsen.\(^{12}\) Perhaps in part because of that, in 2014, only 12.4% of Mexicans believed that “most people can be trusted.”\(^{13}\) Behavioral economist David Halpern has shown that low levels of


\(^{11}\) Followed, far away, by unemployment, which was identified by 38% of the respondents and corruption at 36.2%.

\(^{12}\) INEGI, *Encuesta Nacional de Victimización y Percepción sobre Seguridad Pública (ENVÍPE) 2015*.

\(^{13}\) For the sake of comparison, in the same year 64% of Swedes believed most people could be trusted, as did 28% of Russians surveyed. But Mexico is not at the bottom of the list: only 4% of Colombians and 3% of Filipinos thought most people were trustworthy. The data comes from The World Values Survey and can be accessed here: http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWVL.jsp. It is also accessible in a much more user-friendly form through Our World in Data. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Max Roser, “Trust,” *Our World in Data, 2016*, https://ourworldindata.org/trust (accessed on February 3rd, 2017).
social trust are correlated with fear of crime.\textsuperscript{14} Within that context of low social trust and very high crimes rates, it is puzzling that the exchange between viene-vienes and drivers can happen at all. How can trust emerge between strangers without the things that make it possible? In this paper, thus, I propose that trust—or at the very least, something that very much looks and works like trust—can emerge not only because of the successes of the state and its institutions but also as a response to its shortcomings. In the absence of formal institutions that sustain an exchange, mutual interests and inflated perceptions of power that operate along deep social cleavages make the ecosystem of viene-vienes possible. But the work of viene-vienes happens, importantly, not completely outside of the purview of the state, but at its shadows. Even when the state is not looking, it is a looming presence that might turn around. But, more importantly, that \textit{shadow} of the state is necessary for the ecosystem of viene-vienes to thrive.

Viene-vienes are similarly puzzling from the standpoint of economists since “cheating” (stealing a car) would be most profitable for any of these workers. As such, the case of viene-vienes and despite its apparent specificity disrupts some of the core assumptions about the role of the liberal state in fostering social trust and harmony, as well as the working of rational choice. I will show that neither coercion nor the state is completely absent, but the ecosystem of viene-vienes is not one that straightforwardly relies on the rule of law. Quite the contrary, it blossoms on shortcomings and disorder,\textsuperscript{15} not unlike the bees of Bernard Mandeville’s fable.

After briefly describing the work of viene-vienes, I build the argument in three sections: the first sets the stage for the work of vienes-vienes and can be understood as the conditions of possibility for their work. To do so, I draw on the work of James Scott to speak about the work of viene-vienes as existing both at the margins of the state and because of its shortcomings. In that sense, although external to it, the work of viene-vienes can be understood as a product of the state, a state-effect, and to happen under the shadow of the state. Second, I build on Bernard Mandeville’s fable to speak

\textsuperscript{14} David Halpern, \textit{The Hidden Wealth of Nations} (Malden: Polity, 2010), 64.

\textsuperscript{15} A more recent example: Katherine Boo’s, \textit{Behind the Beautiful Forevers}, is a poignant description of the lives of the inhabitants of one slum in Mumbai, whose lives depend on garbage sorting.
about the market dynamics of their work, both considered a perk and an imposition by drivers, stressing the lurking threat of violence that each party retains and reproduces. The third section addresses the deep class cleavages between viene-vienes and drivers. Unlike psychologists who expect class closeness to foster trust, I suggest that it is the depth of class cleavages that makes this improbable trust possible. Moreover, I will speak about amarchantamiento to understand the relationship that may come to develop between drivers and viene-vienes. That, of course, does not amount to say that deep class cleavages are desirable, but that some adjustments to our understanding of trust are in order. My objective is twofold: first, to disrupt the conception of the liberal state as a homogeneous presence that purveys stability and fosters social bonds, and, second, to suggest that trust is a child of despair and not of stability, and that social trust and trust are not the same beast. Trust is necessary to make a society work when the formal system totters; it becomes almost redundant under state strength and the efficient rule of law. It blossoms in ambivalence and uncertainty. In its pursuit of stability, the liberal state might thus reify and codify social bonds to the degree that little trusting is required in them.

**Parking Cars in the City**

"Viene-viene" functions as onomatopoeia. "Viene, viene" can be translated as "come, come" or "bring it, bring it," which is what parking-helpers tell drivers when they are guiding their maneuvers to parallel park into a small spot in one of Mexico City’s crammed streets. Turn, yes, you still have space — viene, viene, stop, forward now, stop, abi buena, it’s fine there. The verb became a noun. Viene-vienes are also called "franeleros" because they often carry a "franela," a piece of fleece used to polish cars and call the attention of drivers from a distance. Others call them "cuida-coches" (car-caretaker), and some viene-vienes prefer one name to the other.\(^{16}\)

\(^{16}\) One of the viene-vienes that I spoke to, Mauricio—who had been working the job for 22 years—suggested that the term “franelero” is derogatory. He would not add anything else about why was that the case, but he self-identified as a “cuida-coche.” Another viene-viene, Valentina, used “franelera” to describe her own work. Among 129 respondents to an online poll, the vast majority replied that they referred to car-parkers as “viene-vienes.” Less frequently, others use
According to estimates by the Ministry of Labor of Mexico City, there were approximately 7,500 viene-vienes in Mexico City in 2010. Viene-vienes do multiple things: at the simplest level, they keep an eye on cars once drivers have parked them. “Ahí se lo cuido,” they say—I will be taking care of it—and usually offer to wash the car for an additional fee. In this simple version, viene-vienes do not have much to offer to drivers, who experience their presence often as an annoyance, tipping them a few pesos when they leave or ignoring them altogether. But viene-vienes offer other services, in which the interaction with drivers becomes longer and increasingly filled with meaning.

Sometimes, viene-vienes open up spaces for parking—either by moving parked cars they have the keys of, or by moving plastic buckets used to reserve spots near the curb. Plastic buckets tend to provoke more irritation among drivers than parked cars that are being moved, since the first are perceived to be an appropriation of public space, while the latter suggest that there is not much public parking space left to be appropriated. And, finally, when there are no available parking spots in the vicinity—a daily matter in certain areas of the city—viene-vienes offer to take care of the car altogether, as valet-parking services would do. This last kind of exchange is the main focus of my discussion here. Nonetheless, given that viene-vienes often do all three things, the other functions they perform must be kept in mind in hopes of interpretive clarity.

When a driver entrusts her car and keys to a viene-viene, no ticket is exchanged, no phone number is given, and probably not even a handshake: nothing more than a quick verbal-agreement. In most cases, the only thing that viene-vienes offer in exchange is their first name, and a few words of reassurance: they always work around the area, people know them, they will be here upon

“franelero,” “cuida-coche,” “el señor” (the Man), or even “el guachicoche” (the one who watches the car, a transliteration from English).


18 Only on very rare occasions do drivers receive a phone number.

19 Only 5 persons in the online poll said they knew the last name of the viene-viene they left their car with. About half of respondents who left their car with a viene-viene said they knew only their first name. The rest did not even remember that information.
their return, no need to fret. “Con confianza,” they are fond of adding, seeking to preempt or calm the nervousness of the driver, which translates to “trustingly,”—[you can leave your car] trustingly. Most viene-vienes who receive keys have fixed fees and request payment at the beginning of the transaction. The fees are small in comparison to those of public parking lots or even regulated street parking. Besides, the service includes some additional benefits that parking lots lack. A respondent to the online poll explained his reasons for repeatedly leaving his vehicle with a viene-viene as follows:

He basically owned the block where I had to park for work, and if I did not leave it with him, I would have had to pay much more for a space in a parking lot (30 pesos per day for the viene-viene would amount to 650 pesos per month, in comparison with 1200 monthly pesos at the parking lot). Besides, it is much more comfortable to come down [from the building] and get in your car instead of having to walk for ten minutes. And the viene-viene dealt with police towing cars when they came.20

Notice how the respondent speaks simultaneously about having no alternative—“he basically owned the block”—and preferring the service of viene-vienes to that of a public parking lot. Viene-vienes offer a cheaper alternative to parking lots, as well as additional perks such as not having to walk from a building to the other or not having to deal with police officers when parked illegally. Understood that way, viene-vienes function as buffers between clients and the streets, just like the doormen of New York City. The job of a doorman, Peter Bearman argued, consists in absorbing disruptions from the busy streets of the city, so that “they do not impact the tenants,”21 who, are of a higher socioeconomic status than the doormen. Additionally, and as I will discuss further below, viene-vienes are not only buffers between the street and drivers, but also between drivers and police officers. Unlike the case of doormen, however, leaving a car with a viene-viene is not merely experienced as a bonus—the way that living in a building with a doorman might be—but simultaneously as a choice, a service and the result of a lack of agency and coercion. “He basically owned the street,” the respondent above said. The majority of the respondents to the online poll

20 Respondent number 63, male, 35-44 years of age. All translations, unless otherwise specified, are mine.
(44%) echoed those mixed feelings about viene-vienes, with one respondent in particular describing them as a “necessary evil.” But after all, drivers do have a choice: they might opt for a parking lot or leave earlier to their destination to have enough time to look for street parking. The choice, of course, is constrained, both by economics resources (maybe drivers cannot afford to pay for public parking) and by time (there are only so many hours in the day), but it is also the expression of preferences and desires, since taking public transportation is always an option.

**The Shadow of the State**

The state in Mexico City is noticeable both because of what it does and because of what it fails to do. Its action is noticeable in infrastructures, rules and regulations, in streets, sidewalks, police officers, street signs, among many other manifestations, big and small. But the state is also noticeable as an absence: it can be noticeable because of insufficient infrastructures, corruption and inefficiency, potholes, and the ingenuity that assuages its shortcomings. But I want to argue here that the presence of the state is not strictly dichotomous. The state is not strongly present, yet absent in some places that it cannot reach. More than an *emmental* Swiss cheese—a whole piece peppered with holes—the state can be present in many shades of gray. Even when it is not looking, it is still present. Under its shadow, many exchanges take place. Of course, a shadow implies that the state might turn around—no longer a shadow, but a scrutinizing gaze. The shadow is necessary for some interactions to happen: it provides for the conditions of possibility for certain ecosystems to flourish, just like delicate moss that cannot survive under a full sun. The work of viene-vienes, I will argue, must be understood as happening under the shadow of the state.

Mexican car-parkers are not present throughout the city. They often work in commercial and residential areas, where there are only a few parking spots available for a large flow of cars, causing constant traffic. Mexico City’s congestion—which gives it the not-so-enviable title of the city with

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22 The next largest group was that of those who said they had a bad opinion of viene-vienes (22% of respondents). The options were “very good,” “good,” “neutral,” “mixed,” “bad,” and “terrible.”
the worst traffic in the world— is relevant to the job of viene-vienes in two ways. First, drivers looking for and not finding any parking spots aggravate congestion. And second, Mexico City’s erratic and unpredictable traffic makes drivers late to their appointments, or, at the very least, pressed for time, making them more willing to leave their cars with a viene-viene than spending even longer circling in the quest for an unlikely parking spot. Valentina, for example, works right in front of two colleges and a bookstore that barely have enough parking spots to cover the demand of one of the institutions. I asked her how she could possibly convince a complete stranger to leave their car with her without any further guarantees. She laughed and answered, “well, very often they are running late and are in a hurry, so they need to make a decision very quickly!” Valentina opens the zipper of the neon-colored fanny-pack she is wearing, which seems close to bursting; it is full of keys, adorned with different car logos. I ask her how many keys she has there. “Right now, about thirty or thirty-five, but I usually go up to fifty in a day,” she explained. When asked how they decided to leave their keys with a viene-viene for the very first time, a little less than half of the respondents of the poll answered they were going on a friend or colleague’s recommendation. But the other half said they had no choice: they were running late and there was not a single parking spot or parking lot nearby.

Viene-vienes are considered a necessary evil in part because they provide a temporary solution for a sticky problem of urban planning that the government of Mexico City is constantly trying — yet

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24 Namely, traffic in Mexico City varies. Traffic does not worsen homogeneously at different hours of the day, which would allow drivers to plan accordingly. Unpredictable traffic is such an ingrained part of life in Mexico City that the entire city’s standards of timeliness have shifted, tolerating delays that would seem preposterous in other cities.

25 I have used pseudonyms for this paper. I have known Valentina since 2004, when I started attending one of the colleges. Her son Marco took care of my car every single day, and I cannot think of any other way in which I could have found a parking spot, except for showing up to school before 7 am every day.

26 “I was on a hurry” was a very common trope; one respondent even added that had it not been for the viene-viene, she would have arrived much later to a meeting she was already running behind for.
failing— to address through massive public projects to ameliorate traffic flow, increased numbers of parking lots, and the development of public transportation and bike shares, among others. Despite all that, unbearable traffic remains a daily problem in the city, especially amid middle- or high-class residential and commercial areas wherein cars move bumper to bumper during peak hours.

Thus, viene-vienes simplify drivers’ commute, often saving them long minutes or even hours. But the relationship of viene-vienes to drivers is not only articulated by the structural deficits of the city. Some drivers additionally believe viene-vienes watch after their cars, preventing theft. Or, at the very least, easing the anxiety of leaving a car parked in the street. “In Mexico City,” a respondent to the online poll wrote, “[the work of viene-vienes] is very often a useful service: given the levels of insecurity, it is important to keep an eye out for the cars”; another respondent explained, “they take care of your car, of their job, and they give you ‘intellectual’ [sic] tranquility about your car and your belongings.” It is precisely within this context of insecurity and distrust of strangers that the work of viene-vienes is both necessary, yet even more puzzling, since drivers decide to address the problem of distrust and insecurity by leaving one of their most valuable possessions to a person in the street they have barely any information about.

Their work thus feeds on the shortcomings of the state. In that sense, viene-vienes are a “state-effect” in the sense articulated by James Scott (2009). In Scott’s story, the hill people of Zomia, in southeast Asia, were a “state-effect” because they were responding to the structural presence of a


28 The number of parking spots grew by 33% between 2009 and 2014 in the city, mainly in four of the sixteen boroughs, all of which are middle or high class. “Menos cajones, más Ciudad: El Estacionamiento en la Ciudad de México,” Instituto de Políticas para el Transporte y el Desarrollo, September 22, 2014, http://tinyurl.com/zju2ber (accessed January 15, 2017).

29 Conveying the severity of Mexico City’s traffic, especially during peak hours, is difficult because most descriptions feel euphemistic. Newspaper articles on the topic abound. Spending less than an hour per day in traffic to commute to and from work is considered fortunate and commutes of two hours each-way are common. See, for instance, “Mexico City Chokes on its Congestion Problem,” The Guardian, July 6, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/06/mexico-city-chokes-on-its-congestion-problem (accessed on September 5, 2017).

30 Respondent 75, male, aged 25-34, and respondent 39, male, aged 35-44.
state they wanted to avoid—they were not left outside of the state as forgotten subjects, but actively fled it. Hill people were the “dark twin” of state-making and state-expansion. In our case, however, viene-vienes can be indeed understood as “state-effects,” but more precisely as an effect of the shortcomings of the state and not its strength—of its holes, hiccups, gasps, and gaps. It is because the state falls short that viene-vienes are perceived to be necessary, even when evil. But, more importantly, viene-vienes cannot be understood in isolation, but only in relationship to the state, and, as such, depend on the state—and an inefficient Leviathan—to justify their work. Their work thus happens under the shadow of a state that is sometimes failing, that sometimes decides to look away, but that is always there as a shadow that some days is more visible than others.

But the work of viene-vienes is informal and not exactly legal. It is not straightforwardly criminal either. It constitutes a small offense against which a few rules about the appropriation of public space can be invoked. Hence viene-vienes conjure mechanisms to evade the presence of that state—or cajole it, when it cannot be evaded—especially in the most pedestrian manifestation of state power: police officers in the streets. Viene-vienes are simultaneously operating outside of the area of direct control of the state, because of it, and in tension with it. Police officers are a perfunctory reminder of the existence of the state: one that is about the disparate and subjective enforcement of rules—not for the sake of order and social harmony—but for the sake of enforcement itself. In the form of police-officers, the state is present as an inconvenience that must be handled: they show up to tow away cars parked in areas with restricted parking or to arrest viene-vienes for working in and “appropriating” public space. Police officers can do very little to ease traffic, find parking spots, or

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32 Police officers exploit the fact that it is forbidden to use public space for work and that no public space can be legally reserved with buckets or plastic cones. Their application of the law is, of course, selective: in some of the wealthiest areas of the city, homeowners block entire sidewalks in front of their houses with concrete blocks or metal chains, and are only very rarely prosecuted, while police officers constantly exploit minor violations carried out by viene-vienes.
even protect vehicles. Their focus on small offenses is too, in a sense, a product of the inabilities of the state.\textsuperscript{33} They are the leftover crumbs of a state that is neither homogenous nor almighty.

An interesting corollary of the behavior of police officers is that, just like the shortcomings of the state, it opens up a space for the viene-vienes to work. Let me explain. In their interactions with informal workers in the street, police officers behave in a way akin to that of low-level mafia members, plundering goods from vulnerable parties. But, they are not alone: in fact, the predatory behavior of police officers makes possible, in turn, a certain predatory behavior of viene-vienes, who are often experienced as extorting their clients into paying a fee. When he was studying Sicilian mafia, Diego Gambetta wrote: “Mafiosi are first and foremost entrepreneurs in one particular commodity – protection.”\textsuperscript{34} This is not very different from what police officers do when they sell protection from their own: viene-vienes routinely have to pay a small contribution – in cash or kind – to police officers to be left alone and be able to carry on with their job. But viene-vienes can also be compared (and are often compared, by drivers) to a mafia racket:\textsuperscript{35} they charge clients to mediate their relationship with the police and shield them from it. Once again, they stand between clients and the street, whether the street is understood as an inconvenient walk, as possible theft, mind-dumbing traffic, or as interactions with police officers that rarely make the workings on the city easier.

Don Arturo, who has worked as a viene-viene for fourteen years in the colonial neighborhood of Coyoacán, tells me that he is often taken to the police station for a short hearing with a judge and to pay a small fine. It is almost routine. Valentina tells me that she is always mindful of where police officers are. The minute that a police car approaches, she puts her red fanela away and pretends to

\textsuperscript{33} One could also argue that their focus on small disturbances is part of the (flawed) logic of “broken windows.” Nonetheless, “broken windows” did not have the influence in Mexico it had in the United States in the nineties and small disturbances are very selectively punished. Additionally, what seem like vicious behavior on the part of police officers must be taken with a grain of salt. Police officers are poorly trained and receive very small salaries in a country with very deep economic disparities.


\textsuperscript{35} Although, in practice, they usually work alone and there is nothing along the lines of a viene-viene mob or union.
be sitting nonchalantly, watching passersby.36 “If they see you with your franela,” she tells me, “they arrest you for being a franela.” She adds that it is based on what is to her a nonsensical rule that the government came up with: “With all the thieves in the streets, with people who kill you because they want to steal your cell phone, you would think police officers have better things to do,” she adds, slightly exasperated. A few days before, they had “caught” Valentina’s grandson, held him by the back of his pants and thrown him in the police car. After driving a few feet, they asked him his age, and, upon hearing he was a minor, let him go. Valentina continues:

The franela who parks cars in front of the bookstore has been arrested a couple of times. Once, he was washing an SUV and climbed over a bucket, so, he did not see them coming. They can lock you up for 36 hours if you cannot pay the fine. But, actually, what they want is a bribe.37 That man who works a little further down the street, he bribes everyone—the fellow with the tow-truck, the policemen, that guy, this other one, everyone! I have told him that if he has money to give away, it is his choice to make, but I don’t make enough money for that.38

Valentina’s description signals how police-officers sometimes operate as a mafia that preys on viene-vienes and demands payment in exchange for protection, understood as the non-enforcement of the law; in turn, viene-vienes also behave as a mafia when they request a fee from clients to protect them from the inconvenience of having to deal with officers.

Another viene-viene, who works in a very crowded area in front of a church, tells me a similar story about his interactions with the police. Some police officers are more difficult than others, he explains. “The ones that have been in charge of the block for the past few months are calmer. They drop their police car off and ask us to wash it—if that will keep me out of trouble, I am happy to do it for free.”39 He explains that before the car-washing deal, police officers would round up viene-

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36 This is, of course, part of the spectacle. Police officers know who is a viene-viene even if they are not shaking their franelas and are sitting nonchalantly.

37 The word for “bribe” in Spanish is “mordida” and it means “a bite.” In this case, it implies that the bribe is requested by the police officer and not initially offered by the viene-viene. Hence, it seems incorrect to say that it is always properly the police officer who is being “bribed,” given that it is often him or her who demands the money. Speaking about extortion would be more appropriate here.

38 I have used pseudonyms for this paper. I have known Valentina since 2004, when I started attending one of the colleges. Her son Marco took care of my car every single day, and I cannot think of any other way in which I could have found a parking spot, except for showing up to class before 7 am every day.

39 Mauricio who has worked in front of a church in southern Mexico City for the past 22 years.
vienes and take them to the police station en parvada, “like a flock of birds.” Things have recently changed, he adds. Now, police officers call them beforehand and tell them, for instance, that they need two cuida-coches to fill up their quota for the day. “So, we get organized and figure out who can leave work for a couple hours to go to the station.”

Hence, at best, the agents of the state are reproducing a spectacle of the rule of law: they follow a script, they pretend to discipline and punish viene-vienes for their transgressions, while the latter pretend to resist. At worst, police officers selectively apply the law in order to create opportunities for extortion. The point is that police officers are not completely innocuous: on a whim, they can decide to actually enforce the law, and the work of viene-vienes often entails reducing the occasions for that to happen or, alternatively, absorbing the consequences when it does. Consequently, the extortion of viene-vienes by police officers makes possible the extortion of clients by viene-vienes. The theatricality is not useless, as Lisa Wedeen has shown, “insofar as spectacles act as instances of intervention[…], the body functions in them to substantiate rather than legitimate power. In other words, spectacles make power palpable, publicly visible, and practical.”

At some point, about seven years ago, the state made a pathetic effort to expand its boundaries to include viene-vienes, by “regularizing” their situation and inscribing them in a list. Viene-vienes were to receive a vest with the logo of the city and an ID card with their name; they had to attend a brief course to get familiarized with the laws they were infringing upon; and they would be provided with avenues to learn other jobs. The program floundered: besides providing viene-vienes with free goodies, it did little else. The counting, listing, and registering of a population is a typical mechanism of state control, but not a very successful one when it is lacks any teeth to elicit long-term compliance. A year later, barely anyone spoke about the program. Even today, however, some viene-

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42 Scott, 93.
vienes wear the vest they received: “The Ministry of Labor gave us those vests,” Mauricio told me, pointing at another viene-viene sporting a neon vest, “sometimes clients feel more at ease if we wear them, but they are relatively new. Police officers also pester us a bit less often when we wear them. I don’t wear it because it is very uncomfortable, I have been working here for so many years and people already know me.”

Under that painfully familiar waltz between public officials, viene-vienes, and drivers, a quotidian action that could be very simple—drivers parking their own cars in spots in the streets or using public transportation—becomes full of apparent disorder. Within this context of avoiding and cajoling the agents of the state, the simple act of parking is filled with semiotic practices. I do not mean to say that these forms are normatively more or less desirable to the alternative of an efficient state, but that—unlike the expectations of theorists of social capital and state making—rich social interactions articulated around improbable trust emerge as an aftereffect of the layered presence of the state. The state is not a mighty Leviathan, and thus it cannot do what Hobbes hoped it would. More than an edifice of strength, the state casts the shadow of an edifice. The state is ineffectual, for sure, but corrupt as well, sometimes clumsy and at times capricious, very far from one that is perceived as the guarantor of the rule of law. The failures of the state provide for the conditions of possibility for the existence of viene-vienes, but the daily frustrations of a big city are far from sufficient in explaining the work of viene-vienes: New York City also suffers from traffic and very few parking spots, and yet leaving a car with a stranger in the street with reasonable expectations of retrieving it sounds ridiculous. There is thus something besides an inefficient state doing the work: both drivers and viene-vienes must have incentives to be part of the exchange. It is to that discussion that I now turn.

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43 The interview with Mauricio took place on September 6th, 2016 at noon.
44 Interestingly, in areas where street parking –parquímetros— have been installed, viene-vienes have slowly disappeared and open parking spots appear to be much easier to find. And yet, in a country with the sort of inequalities that Mexico has, I am uncertain that this transformation is unambiguously worth celebrating.
THE NOT SO DISORDERED MARKET

The work of viene-vienes must thus be understood in relationship to the state. There, under the shadow of the state, the exchanges between viene-vienes and their clients happen, despite all of Hobbes’ predictions, as something of a market equilibrium that makes possible trust in the least likely of places. Or perhaps, the shadow of the state is an ideal space for the emergence of a market that does not behave so disorderly after all. In *The Illusion of Free Markets*, Bernard Harcourt argues that the free market, understood, idealized, and idolized in industrialized countries, has never been all that free:

A modern economist might ask whether I am denying the first theorem of welfare economics […] The answer is no. What I am contesting is the *interpretation* of what the theorem tells us. Most people understand it to mean that free markets are more efficient. But what it tells us, instead, is that massive government intervention (the kind necessary, for instance, to make possible a wheat pit at the Chicago Board of Trade) is necessary to achieve what we call a “free market”; that there are a myriad ways to structure those interventions; and that typically they include significant manipulation.45

Harcourt’s argument about the illusion of a “free” market that is actually very much dependent on a plethora of small regulations ought perhaps to be, in the case of viene-vienes, flipped upside down. Here, amidst the illusion of disorder, emerges a market that not only lacks, but simultaneously hopes to escape formal regulation, and yet thrives because of the failures of those formal regulatory mechanisms. The absence of formal regulations, nonetheless, does not mean that informal norms do not arise.

In the eighteenth century, Bernard Mandeville wrote an (in)famous fable, *The Fable of the Bees*. In it, Mandeville argued that many private vices benefit the public: criminals, for instance, make the jobs of locksmiths, lawyers, judges, and cops possible; promiscuity makes chastity more desirable, and so on. Otherwise stated, out of the vices of innumerable individuals, emerges growth, almost as if organized by an invisible player. “Thus,” wrote Mandeville, “every Part was full of Vice, Yet the

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whole Mass a Paradise.” Mandeville would have probably relished watching viene-vienes at work. For viene-vienes, it is not only private individuals who produce vice and disorder—driving to areas where they know parking is limited or succumbing to laziness or impatience—but also the state, both as a structure that fails to guarantee safety and order, and as police officers who meet quotas by focusing on small parking violations. As I will explain below, however, the state is withheld as the source of a credible threat to viene-vienes by their clients. Put otherwise, clients might at any point decide to tap the state on the shoulder to make it look around, and—because of that—depend as well on its shadowy presence. The state is not the source of regulations and is not an efficient administrator either, but it is sticky: it appears sometimes as police officers that need to be contained, but remains a snoring beast that can be summoned by the most powerful—middle- and high- class drivers—when they so desire.

The improbable trust in viene-vienes is possible because, simply put, car-parkers have an interest in maintaining their jobs and clients benefit from their presence. But, additionally, because both sides can credibly, although tacitly, threaten the other if the verbal agreement is broken, partly because of the classist tropes that undergird their relationship. To discuss this point I will begin with the perspective of the client. I have already spoken about the many ways in which the work of viene-vienes is of interest to drivers: they provide a quick solution for parking in areas in which finding a parking spot might be nothing short of miraculous, and they also do it for cheaper than public parking lots that are few and far between. A lengthy, but telling, response from one of the online respondents conveys it nicely:

Ramiro is a man of about 56 years old and he only works Mondays to Fridays. He stands in the street and receives the cars of bureaucrats [los godines] from 6:30 am to 5:00 or 6:00 pm, depending on the rain and daylight savings times. He doesn’t work during holidays. He washes cars and motorcycles as well. He charges a lot of money for his services [es muy caro]: about 150 pesos per carwash, and so I never ask him to wash mine. But he washes many cars per day. I only ask him to park my car, and he knows exactly where I like him to leave the car when he goes home. […] We have a system: he

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charges me 20 pesos to park the car, and then drops off the keys when he leaves later in the day. He
yells my name (he no longer rings the doorbell because my dog gets nervous) and, with a little cord, I
lower a bag with money through the window, he takes it and puts they keys in the bag, and voilà! I
don’t have to come down from my apartment. All neighbors do the same. Sometimes, if I have to
leave, I ask him to drop off the keys in the mailbox. I have his cell phone number in case “anything
comes up” and sometimes his wife and kids come help him after school. He happens to be very
Christian, and I don’t know why but that makes him feel very confident –he is super honest when it
comes to money. He is doing pretty well for himself, and even rents a little room in a neighborhood
not far from mine. He goes on holidays to Acapulco and he always wears clean clothes (he is
cultivated, but also super intense when it comes to religion, which is why I no longer make small talk,
I only say hi and thank you).

I find this response interesting for many reasons. First, the relationship between the driver and
Ramiro has become personally close, although social distance remains. In addition, the response
shows how viene-vienes, after some time interacting with a client, can work out “systems” that are
very much personalized to the taste of the driver and that appear to be harmonious. Finally, the
mention of the holidays in Acapulco suggests the possibilities of social mobility for viene-vienes,
which is simultaneously unlikely and seductive. Notice, however, how the quotidian harmony of the
driver shatters when Ramiro is not there:

In the survey, I did not say that I completely trusted him because he has already “disappeared” twice,
once for four months and the other for six months. All the neighbors, even those who work at the
tortilleria, have their theories; some say he was sick and others that he was in jail? But I asked him
about it: the first time he said he left because he wanted to try another job and he was bored of being
a viene-viene, and the second time he said he had tried another area in the city but that it had not
worked out. While he was gone, I never left my keys with another one of the three viene-vienes who
are fighting for our street, because I do not trust them. So, those nine months, I suffered trying to
find a parking spot, sometimes for over an hour!!! When Ramiro came back, I was so desperate of
not finding parking spots and having to deal with the shady others, that I did not care why Ramiro
had left in the first place and I gave him my keys right away to park my car and find a spot.

Although the respondent knew the viene-viene by name, about his family and religious beliefs,
the personal closeness is more superficial than it might appear to be in the first half of the quote.

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47 Twenty pesos is a little over a dollar, at a banking currency conversion rate. But taking into consideration
purchase power parity conversion rates, it would be about $2.30.
48 Respondent number 17, female, 25-34 years old.
49 I will dwell on the ways in which the relationships between viene-vienes and drivers evolve in the third section.
50 Respondent number 17, female, 25-34 years old.
There is, as well, a lurking sense of danger. What is interesting is not whether Ramiro was in jail or not, but the ways in which criminality is summoned as a possibility in neighborhood gossip.

Moreover, the quote highlights how the absence of Ramiro produces great disorder and distress in the respondent’s everyday life.

But besides being perceived as providing a service that might not seem like much but is sorely needed when absent, viene-vienes are usually also perceived as intimidating their clients, even if direct threats are rare. I find the perception of threat interesting because the damage viene-vienes inflict is infrequent and usually limited. When asked if they have had a bad experience with viene-vienes (or if they knew firsthand of someone who had), out of 108 persons who replied to the open question, thirty-seven say that they had never had a bad experience or heard of anyone who had. About a dozen wrote about feeling threatened or uncomfortable, getting into an argument, or being cursed at once or twice.51 A common trope when speaking about viene-vienes is that they scratch vehicles of drivers who refuse to pay a fee. These cases are often interactions between drivers and viene-vienes who were reserving a spot in the streets with plastic buckets, and not those who took care of the vehicle altogether. Other complaints are about small annoyances: their car smelled bad when they entered it, the radio station was changed, or the viene-vienes of the block were listening to loud music. A set of respondents said that viene-vienes failed to stop police officers from giving them a fine or towing their car.52 In these two latter cases, viene-vienes are either not filtering the interactions between drivers and the street, or failing at cajoling police officers into inaction.

There are, however, more serious cases, although they are rare. A couple of respondents wrote that they knew of someone whose car was stolen after they had left it with a viene-viene, which suggests that either some viene-vienes do “cheat” and choose to steal a car or that some thieves pretend to be viene-vienes. One serious case is worth noticing. A respondent explained that he and his brother were severely beaten by a group of viene-vienes when they refused to pay the fee.

51 Another six or so replied with general statements about what they think viene-vienes do, but had no personal experience.
52 Note that most of these drivers are aware that they are parking in an area of restricted parking.
“I ended up in the hospital with a broken nose, dislocated jaw, moderate brain trauma and broken ribs. My brother’s nose was fractured in eleven different places.” The cases of violence are rare. The numbers I mention are, of course, not representative in any statistical sense, but help give a sense of the ways in which viene-vienes are perceived and understood by drivers and, more specifically, the ambivalence that undergirds the relationship towards them. That ambiguity, in addition to the belief that viene-vienes could be threatening sustains an inflated perception of the danger that drivers constantly allude to. The rare threats, if any, are veiled and the exchange is not straightforwardly presented as being one of plata o plomo, like the ones of drug lords. But, importantly, drivers understand them to be such and repeatedly express that interactions with viene-vienes can either go smoothly or devolve. I do not mean to say that drivers mistakenly believe that viene-vienes have a power that in reality they do not have but that the probabilities of a violent altercation, although very low, are perceived to be high cost, not only because the value of their car is high, but because an altercation would disrupt the classist orchestration of the exchange.

The perceptions of viene-vienes as possible thugs is, of course, deeply classist in at the very least two ways: first, in the assumption that viene-vienes would be particularly prone to violence or revengeful behavior. And second, in the class anxiety of drivers: when viene-vienes indeed scratch their cars, leave the car dirty, make them feel uncomfortable, or even become violent, the deep socio-economic divide of Mexico is flipped upside-down, putting briefly the viene-viene in a position to take control of the exchange away from the driver—if only through car scratches. But also, what is understood as a bad experience with a viene-viene unsettles and dislocates the semiotic practices that sustain Mexico’s classist divides, in which the lives of the rich are characterized by

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53 Interestingly, although the respondent and the brother came with the police the day after, nothing was done to the viene-vienes who were, the respondent claims, hidden in an office building by the employees who said they needed viene-vienes to be able to park.

54 “Plata o plomo” is a shorthand to signal the kind of deal that drug dealers offer to people (whether civilians, bureaucrats or elected officials) they want to co-opt: either they agree to receive a bribe (plata means silver) or they will be executed (plomo, refers to a bullet). See Ernest Dal Bó, Pedro Dal Bó, and Rafael di Tella, “Plata o Plomo?: Bribe and Punishment in a Theory of Political Influence,” American Political Science Review 100, no. 1 (2006): 41-53.

55 One respondent to the poll replied that although she had never had a bad experience, she always remembered a story she once heard in the news about a man, who worked as a viene-viene who had stabbed a young man.
smooth, clean, and undisturbed exchanges facilitated by the underclass(es). Recall that respondents to the online poll mentioned being cursed at when asked if they had ever had a bad experience with a viene-viene, others mentioned some other small disturbances, such as finding leftover magazines or perceived a bad smell. It seems that the class sensibilities of the drivers could not withstand such minor disruptions that are remembered as “bad experiences” (although drivers pay very little for the services of viene-vienes in comparison with parking lots). By requesting a fee, playing loud music, or becoming threatening, the viene-vienes chafe the class convictions and assumptions of Mexico’s middle and high classes. Of course, the nuisance is only temporary – the roots of Mexico’s inequality are not in the ecosystem of viene-vienes –, but the interaction is bothersome to drivers, in part, because it suggests that conceptions of high status are fabrications that do not correlate with intrinsic virtues or natural superiority.

Viene-vienes are imagined thus to have recourse to non-sanctioned street violence against wayward drivers. This recourse functions both literally (a driver who fails to pay or otherwise behaves unacceptably can literally be beaten up) as well as symbolically. By drawing on class-based tropes of violence that give viene-viene and other members of lower social classes a reputation for thuggery, the mere possibility of violence serves to keep drivers in check.

Let me now move to the perspective of the viene-viene and the ways in which their interactions with clients are both driven by an interest in the exchange and sustained by an inflated perception of power in the hands of the client. Besides the obvious fact that working in the streets of Mexico City is their job, working as a viene-viene can be an avenue for social mobility. The few existing analyses of car parkers suggest that the job is not a solution for unemployment (Blauuw and Bothma, 2003) and that car-parkers barely survive in their situation of marginality and poverty (Chelcea and Iancu, 2015). In the case of Mexico City, a slightly different picture comes to the fore.
In 2016, a brief article in the newspaper *El Financiero* claimed that, in Mexico City, *franeleros* made more money than professionals with a graduate degree. The article suggested that a *franelero* interviewed in the city said that his monthly income ranged between 24 and 30 thousand pesos (a little under $1,400). The numbers of the piece are based on a discussion with one viene-viene, but, although I suspect this kind of story of the “Viene-Viene Dream” is the exception rather than the rule, working as a viene-viene might indeed be a channel for social mobility if a viene-viene manages to secure a particularly coveted street corner. In one of my interviews, a viene-viene explained how he decided to pursue his line of work: “well, before this, I had other jobs, but, as you know, with the minimum income established by law, you can barely get by.” The minimum income was set at 48 pesos per day in 2007. Recently, it was augmented to 80 pesos. Although the increase was necessary and well received, the minimum salary is still disgracefully low. Even if one were to work every day, a minimum salary would provide an income of 2,400 pesos per month (about $120), which is hardly enough to get by in a city where the kilo of tortillas costs 12 pesos and a subway ride 5 pesos.

My interviewee continued to explain that since he started working as a viene-viene, he has been able to put a little money aside. Now, he tells me proudly, one of his sons has already finished his university degree, while the other two are studying at the National University (UNAM). “Thank God, I can at least make enough money to send *them* to school,” he adds. Additionally, viene-vienes have an ability to “be their own-bosses” over their dusty street corner, a situation that would be almost impossible were they to look for another job since starting to work as a viene-vienes does not require any capital upfront. It just requires a piece of clothing and a little bit of luck finding a good corner (or moving into a good corner if a viene-vienes leaves or dies). As a matter of fact, every viene-viene that I spoke with told me that they did not know how to drive when they started working; they had to either learn on the spot or would have to ask help from another viene-viene who *did* know how to park. In opposition, other jobs that viene-vienes would qualify for would

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imply working as unskilled labor for little money and under the orders of an employer. In their jobs, viene-vienes are entrepreneurs in their own small sphere, entrepreneurs of trust, if one will.

Despite all this, stories of success might be exceptional in many ways, although they weigh heavily when someone comes to imagine what kind of opportunities might open up with a dollop of good fortune working as a car-parker. This is an important point because it helps explain why viene-vienes do not “cheat,” to use the parlance of economists. Why don’t they steal one good car –luxury cars might be harder to sell given their rarity and added security features— and move to a new neighborhood to start over? Besides the self-evident point that being poor does not make someone a thief, part of the explanation resides on the fact that not all streets in Mexico City are little “goldmines” to viene-vienes. Some streets corners might barely provide enough to get by. Some might be good, although not great, but worth preserving since there are no guarantees that the next corner will be more profitable. Thus, how much money a viene-viene can make per day depends on the specific corner in which she works and the degree to which the viene-viene can persuade clients to leave their cars with her. Stealing a car and finding a new corner that is just as profitable is not an easy feat. This is where the perception of the clients’ power comes into the picture: viene-vienes have an interest in keeping the jobs they have, and –the better the area—the more costly the loss of the job would be.

Thus, if a driver were to decide to call the police on a viene-viene to have him arrested in retaliation for poor treatment, the viene-viene would risk losing his source of income, but –more importantly—the specific spot in which he works. Because of that, when drivers are asked how they come to decide, within a few seconds, if they will trust a viene-viene they did not know with their keys, the two most frequent responses are that they decide based on the neighborhood or that their decision depends on how many sets of keys the viene-viene seems to be already carrying around. A viene-viene with many keys has more to lose than one with only a couple, even if the former has more opportunities to steal an expensive car than the latter. Notice as well that given the signs that drivers look for when they try to assess whether a viene-viene is trustworthy or not, the “market” is not solely driven by the price of the service. It is unlikely that a driver would choose to leave his car
with the viene-viene who was offering the cheapest option: the better the spot at which a viene-
vienie works the more incentives he has to want to keep it; but also, the better the spot, the higher
the price. Hence, in the absence of formal regulatory mechanisms, higher prices end up conveying
reliability in the absence of other indicators. Put otherwise, the price that a viene-viene can charge is
reputational: high prices provide information about how successful and thus trustworthy a viene-
vienie is. Conversely, of course, viene-vienes cannot charge prices that are too high since part of the
attractiveness of their service is its relatively low cost, and high prices are only read as a positive sign
in certain neighborhoods, surrounded by certain cars, and so on.

From the perspective of viene-vienes, then, car drivers can credibly threaten them. The
threat, on the side of drivers, is not about scratches or physical violence, but about summoning the
power of the state that they have held “in reserve.” By virtue of their higher social class, the car
drivers have preferred access to systems of state authority, which they can invoke—or threaten to
invoke—as a final resort should the viene-viene violate the terms of their agreement. On an
individual level, police might be summoned to harass or arrest an individual viene-viene. And at a
collective level, the middle-class drivers could even invoke notions of law to shut down entire zones
of viene-viene operations (something that might be thought of as the equivalent of invoking the
“nuclear option” in international affairs, since it would destroy both the viene-viene and the services
that drivers depend on). In that sense, the state as police enforcement —held more or less at bay by
both viene-vienes and drivers until the latter decide to summon it— also behave as thugs of sorts
when the oral agreement between drivers and viene-vienes is not maintained. In that sense, police
officers operate as the drivers’ thugs.

These mutual threats and perceptions of power are, of course, asymmetrical, since in the end the
drivers’ privileged access to the state trumps any vigilante violence—real or reputational—that could
be mustered by the viene-viene. In this sense, it is important not to overstate the “equilibrium” that
makes the viene-viene ecosystem possible. Ultimately, viene-vienes are permitted to exist because of
the deliberate blind eye of the state, an indifference that might be threatened at any time by the
middle class constituency the state represents. But, as I mentioned, the inflated perceptions of power
come in as something of a guarantee for an exchange that, after all, benefits both parties. Hence, the trust that sustains the job of viene-vienes can be understood through the approach of theorist Russell Hardin: trust is possible because both parties have an interest in sustaining their relationship.\textsuperscript{58} But mutual interest is still insufficient in telling a story in which thefts almost never happen. The depth of the class cleavage separating drivers and viene-vienes will, I hope, weave the pieces together.

**ON CLASSIST WAYS**

Trust is a delicate matter and, among others, has been studied extensively by psychologists. One of their key insights is that people tend to trust members that are legible to them as being of their same social group more than members of groups they do not belong to. ‘When people trust strangers, they usually do not do so blindly, and instead use cues for trustworthiness associated with the stranger,’ write psychologists Foddy, Platow and Yamagishi. They continue: ‘Among the cues often used is the social category of that person. In particular, people may trust strangers with whom they share a salient social category more strongly than those with whom they do not; we call this group-based trust.’\textsuperscript{59} Their experiments consistently showed that their hypothesis was correct. In light of that research, the ecosystem of viene-vienes is, yet again, counterintuitive.

Despite being overall a strong economy, Mexico’s is a deeply unequal society, in which there is not much of a middle class.\textsuperscript{60} Those who self-identify as middle class are, by any economic standards, better understood as wealthy. Among the poor of the city, those who become viene-vienes are some of the poorest: they are classified in the lower socio-economic stratum by the System of Classification of Occupations (SINCO) established by the National Institute for Statistic

\textsuperscript{58} See, for instance, Russell Hardin, *Trust* (Malden-Cambridge: Polity, 2006).


\textsuperscript{60} Gerardo Esquivel explains that despite being the fourteenth economy of the world, Mexico is among the 25% most unequal countries in the world. In Mexico, 1% of the population concentrates 21% of the income, while 10% of the population lives in conditions of extreme poverty. Gerardo Esquivel, “Desigualdad Extrema en México,” Report, *Oxfam México*, June 2015, 5 and 12.
and Geography in Mexico (INEGI). The classificatory system provided by SINCO has 9 categories that form a social pyramid, the lowest one of which is defined as “workers in elementary or supportive jobs,” to which viene-vienes are ascribed.\(^{61}\) In other words, viene-vienes are part of the poor and unskilled labor of the city.\(^{62}\) On the other side, drivers —by the mere fact of having a car,\(^{63}\) and because they are driving to areas where viene-vienes are needed— are at the very least middle- and sometimes high-class. There is definitely a racial dynamic at work: viene-vienes often have darker skin than drivers.\(^{64}\) But, although race plays a role in the interactions between viene-vienes and drivers, it is importantly read as a proxy for class. Put otherwise, the color of someone’s skin is read as signaling an inclusion into a socioeconomic class in which whiteness is read as a more or less reliable indicator of wealth and possibly European descent. But a set of cues about status —dress, garb, behavior, and speech, among others— are far more important than the color of someone’s skin, and override skin color in determining how someone is read. Because of that, people who are read as being of high class by the poor in Mexico —those who exist on the other side of the economic ravine— are called güera or güiera. The adjective literally means “blond,” but it is often applied to those with dark hair,\(^{65}\) and it could also be applied to someone with darker skin who behaved in a manner that is considered refined or dignified. In that sense, were Barack Obama to

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\(^{62}\) I should note that, in Mexico, perhaps in part because of the agricultural roots of the revolution of the early 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century, poverty is not considered to walk hand in hand with criminality. Pobre pero honrado, poor but honest, is an important trope in the shared imaginaries of the city.

\(^{63}\) In the country, over a third of households have cars (versus 88% in the United States), a percentage similar to that of Tunisia or Venezuela. “Car, Bike, or Motorcycle? Depends on Where you Live,” Pew Research Center, April 2015, https://tinyurl.com/jqi3xyq, (accessed January 31, 2017). According to the statistic of AMAI (Asociación Mexicana de Inteligencia de Mercado y de Opinión), 7% of households have two cars or more. Those who have between one and two cars constitute the next socio-economic stratum and represent 14% of the population, while the members of the stratum that follows usually opt for used cars.

\(^{64}\) A note about my own positionality: I am few inches taller than the average Mexican woman and I am read in the street as being güiera. How I am perceived, of course, colored the interviews I had with viene-vienes.

\(^{65}\) Such as myself. I am grateful to Mauricio Tenorio for helping me think through this point.
walk the streets of Mexico City, he would probably be considered much more güerito than a blue-eyed Mexican viene-viene with pale skin.\[^{66}\]

This is a story that would fit right into Bourdieu’s *Distinction*: the very measurable economic cleavage between drivers and viene-vienes is, of course, not directly read by both parties, since nobody walks with a price tag on his or her forefront. Many other things mediate the ways in which the other is perceived. The point is intuitive, but clearly articulated by Bourdieu:

> [...] A class or a portion of a class is defined not only by its position within the relationships of production as could be surmised through categories such as profession, income, or education level, but also through a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution of geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and an entire set of auxiliary characteristics that, understood as tacit requirements, might function as real selection or exclusion principles without ever being straightforwardly stated.\[^{67}\]

The class cleavage is visible to anyone who is familiar with viene-vienes: someone working as a viene-viene would be thought to be doing well for herself if she can take time off or perhaps provide a better education for her children. In the meantime, the drivers who use their services leave brand new Mercedes, Audis, BMWs, and Fiats in their care.

The inequality is both cause and consequence of an almost aristocratic set of practices of meaning-making familiar to most Mexicans that are also reminiscent of Pocock’s discussion of classical deference theory, in which “deference [to members of higher status] is expected to be spontaneously exhibited rather than enforced.”\[^{68}\] Because of deep class divides, viene-vienes and drivers who might be complete strangers to each other are more connected than they might appear at first blush. In a way, actually, even if they have never met before, they are *not* complete strangers since they fit neatly into recognizable roles. Even further, while it might be difficult to understand the dynamics between groups that resemble each other—groups that are, in a way, closer—the deep class divide between viene-vienes and drivers makes the exchange easily legible. In other words,

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\[^{66}\] Perhaps in part because of that, the PERLA project of Princeton University did not find as much of a correlation between skin color and economic class in Mexico as in the other Latin American countries they analyzed. PERLA Project, Princeton University, https://perla.princeton.edu.


while it may be difficult to separate two hues of green from each other, yellow and blue can be easily distinguished. Part of what sustains the improbable trust in viene-vienes has to do with the recognizable roles that viene-vienes represent in Mexico City’s ecosystem which are only legible because of the depth of the class cleavage. Viene-vienes reproduce behaviors and tropes that are familiar to middle- and high-class drivers in Mexico City, and drivers reproduce behaviors that viene-vienes have seen countless times.

Take for example, the case of Mauricio who has worked in front of a church in southern Mexico City for the past 22 years. This one particular church is nested in the middle of a very wealthy residential neighborhood. Two narrow streets surround the church, and cafés and small restaurants are at walking distance. Although the area is relatively calm during most of the day, it is overflowing with activity and waves of cars around mass times, meal times, and other brief bursts of activity. Within a couple of minutes, the area in front of the Church can go from being calm and rather empty to blocked by cars and SUVs competing for one of the very limited parking spaces. On a Tuesday morning of the summer of 2016, I had been sitting for a couple of hours in front of the Church. The morning had been relatively quiet. Suddenly, cars started arriving from all directions—in less than two minutes, the streets were completely blocked and the tranquility of the morning was replaced by exasperated honking. Mauricio and the other viene-vienes quickly started to work. The moment a car started slowing down, they waved their franelas and whistled loudly. The entire exchange probably took less than a minute: the driver slowed down and stopped the car right in the middle of the street, the viene-viene held the door open as the driver stepped out of the car, before the cuida-coches jumped in to take the wheel. In one particular instance, I noticed an older woman who stopped her car in the middle of the street. She walked out, leaving the door wide open and not even waiting for one of the viene-vienes. Before the drivers behind her could start protesting, Mauricio had run to the car, jumped in, quickly parked the car in a double-row—which restored traffic flow—closed the door of the car, put the keys in his pocket and went back to his previous spot, in front of a Mercedes SUV that he was meticulously washing. The entire movement happened in less than two minutes. This entire exchange, of course, is only possible because of deep classist
divides in Mexico. Mauricio, the old lady, and the cops that do not come, all follow patterns, carefully threaded together and recognized after a thousand similar interactions.

Another example: Don Arturo must be in his fifties, although he looks much older, as if he had been standing in the sun for long hours, his skin thick and leathery, marked both by deep wrinkles that carve the expressions of his face and by minuscule ones that make his skin seem at times papery. His hair is dark grey and short, peeking under a yellow baseball cap, which sports an old logo of the city. Don Arturo does not look straight at me during our conversation, which lasts about an hour. We stand next to each other, leaning against a black SUV parked in the street. We both look straight in front of us, while we talk. He only meets my eyes a couple of times, when he says something and I agree. Then he looks at me, nods, opens his eyes wide, and smiles. He explains that he has been working at this exact spot for the past fourteen years. He arrives every morning between five and six, sweeps the street, works all day, and does not leave until eleven in the evening. “People already know me,” he explains, “they know I will take good care of their car.” While I was speaking to Don Arturo, a bright blue SUV drove by, slowed down, and made a right in front of us, parking a few feet away. Don Arturo shook his franela and said very loudly “¡Ahí está bien!” A white man, with white hair dressed up in a suit gets out of the car. The man says, calmly and without raising his voice, “¿ahí está bien?” Don Arturo nods. I ask him if he knows the man who just parked. He nods while he exclaims “¡Buenos días!” to the white-haired man, who walks away in a hurried pace, seemingly very focused and holding paperwork in his right hand. He makes a quick hand gesture to Don Arturo, without looking at him directly.

These exchanges are in line with Erving Goffman observations in Encounters, where he wrote that, “in performing a role the individual must see to it that the impressions of him that are conveyed in the situation are compatible with role-appropriate personal qualities effectively imputed to him.”60 Put otherwise, people behave –perform, really— according to the roles ascribed to them

60 Which is a quick way of conveying, “Where you left the car is fine.”
by others.\textsuperscript{71} The deep class divide between car-parkers and the drivers who barely look at them or would step out of their cars without waiting has many aristocratic tinges of the kind Tocqueville wrote about.\textsuperscript{72} More precisely, however, the exchanges illustrates the ways in which the relationship between a driver and a viene-viene changes after repeated interactions. With time, the relationship between the driver and the viene-viene—at first heavily articulated by mutual interest and tacit threats—becomes one of \textit{amarchantamiento}.

\textit{Amarchantarse} means becoming someone’s \textit{marchante}. The dictionary of Mexican idioms published by the Mexican Academy of Language provides two definitions for \textit{marchante}:

1. Seller of a market or a \textit{tianguis} [a market in wheels] that has habitual buyers. “I buy fruit from the \textit{marchante} of the stand at the corner.”
2. Any buyer at a market or \textit{tianguis}. “Today, there were few \textit{marchantes}.”\textsuperscript{73}

Namely, \textit{marchante} is used to speak both of someone providing a service and of the person who is purchasing the service. Both the driver and the viene-viene become each other’s \textit{marchante}.

\textit{Amarchantamiento} is about trust, but also about clientelism, it is about aristocratic remnants and patrimonial bonds. The streets of Mexico City—just like the streets of any megalopolis of the globe—are inhospitable. Creating a relationship of \textit{amarchantamiento} between a viene-viene and a driver allows the latter to have a familiar point of reference in the street that makes it less daunting, not only because the viene-viene makes the commute much easier in several practical senses, but also because she is a familiar face that the driver knows to look for when he returns to a certain space. Relationships of \textit{amarchantamiento} have functioned for generations in Mexico: feeding on and reproducing class cleavages. They imply a close personal connection despite the social distance and a

\textsuperscript{71} Gerald A. Cohen published a brief article in 1967, titled “Beliefs and Roles.” In the theoretical setup of his argument, he discusses the idea of “social roles,” and distinguishes between the roles or positions we occupy and those we play, while cautioning that “[it] is also possible to occupy one’s rôle [sic] without playing it. This can happen through a refusal or an inability to perform.” Gerald A. Cohen, “Beliefs and Roles,” \textit{Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society} 67 (1966-1967), 21.


\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Diccionario de mexicanismos} (Mexico City: Academia de la Lengua Mexicana, 2016), sv. marchante. Available here: http://www.academia.org.mx/DiccionarioDeMexicanismos
certain willingness of both parties to protect the other. It is a sort of unsigned agreement between the poor and the wealthy of the city that has functioned for decades, an ingenuous solution to a society with deep inequalities and a state that falls short of Hobbes’ vision.

For instance, one of the viene-vienes explained that when a section of the street that he used to work on was being renovated, his clients would give him a little extra money: “Those who normally give me 5 pesos, would give me 10; those who give me 10, would give me 20; and those who give me 20, would even give me 50,” he told me. “They would say to me, ‘here, because I know that right now you don’t have a lot of work.’ They do understand they kind of job that one has.” For someone driving a Mercedes, adding 30 pesos to their daily expenses is not much, but it is experienced as a manifestation of care, recognition, and a bond. Another example from my own experience: when I was in college in Mexico City, Valentina’s son asked me if he could borrow some money. It was not much, 200 or 300 pesos. Of course, we did not sign any contract: I gave him the money and he offered to pay it back through car washes.

I do not mean to romanticize amarchantamiento: it is a product of class cleavages. I do not know, however, if it is normatively good or normatively bad. It is probably both things. What I can say, nonetheless, is that it is part of the workings of a city that would collapse in its contradictions were it not for these relationships. But amarchantamiento and the classist roles it feeds upon have an underside that nurtures a series of classist tropes that, as I argued above, sustain the delicate equilibrium of the work of viene-vienes. Before bonds of amarchantamiento have had time to flourish, drivers and viene-vienes rely on the underbelly of the classist tropes: viene-vienes are frequently read by drivers as being prone to thuggery or violence, while the high status of clients make them

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74 Not only frequently, but also increasingly. Amarchantamiento was the ways in which the generation of my grandparents navigated the city. Today, there has been a movement towards contractual bonds between service providers and buyers. That enables greater legal protections for those who work, while reducing spaces of exchange and contact between former marchantes. In a city as unequal as Mexico City, the reduction of spaces of interaction might also be dangerous. For a wonderful discussion about São Paulo and the ways in which the architecture of the city has reduced the spaces of interaction between the poor and the wealthy, see Teresa Caldeira, City of Walls. Crime, Segregation, and Citizenship in São Paulo (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).
seem as having an unbridled access to the forces of the state or economic resources. Either as thugs, pedantic rich, or marchantes, class cleavages do much of the work in the ecosystem of Mexican car-parkers.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: IS THIS TRUST THAT I AM FEELING?

The work of viene-vienes might seem borderline lunatic to any unfamiliar observer. At first blush, it makes little sense that a driver would leave their car with a person they know close to nothing about and have a reasonable expectation that they will recover their vehicle. This is even more puzzling bearing in mind the context of criminality and impunity of Mexico City that shatters social trust and reduces the general willingness to deem others trustworthy.

And yet, trust arises in the least likely of places and sustains the quotidian exchange of drivers and viene-vienes. I have argued that this improbable trust is possible because of three different factors, whose logics are closely imbricated. First, there is a state that is inefficient, but not completely absent. The trifold fact that the state is there, but that it is looking away, and that it might turn around, is a necessary condition for the work of viene-vienes. Second, the ecosystem is sustained by a market logic wherein both parties benefit from the exchange and would be worse off if it did not happen. But what remains perplexing despite those two conditions is that thefts are very rare. This is where the third factor—class dynamics—come into the exchange. When the relationship between the driver and the viene-viene is relatively new and they do not yet know each other, each perceives the other as having a certain amount of reserved power that they can summon if the unwritten contract is broken. The tacit threat goes both ways and makes the interaction possible. But, as time passes, drivers and viene-vienes might come to develop a peculiar type of bond: they become each other marchantes. The tacit threat might never completely disappear and doubts lurk in the exchange, even if they have been quieted down by the repeated interactions and the sense of personal closeness that flourishes despite the vast social distance. Hence, the ecosystem of viene-vienes and drivers depends on deep class cleavages and reproduces them: it allows the wealthy to navigate the city more easily; it protects them from the disturbances of the street and the police; and
it provides drivers with personalized service. But class boundaries—just like any other border—are points of contact as well.

In being perceived as a possible thug, in perhaps scratching a car, or leaving newspapers in a vehicle, viene-vienes can disrupt the deep class divide, veering outside of the behavior that is conveyed and expected from them. Moreover, in having a job in which they are their own bosses, they unsettle class expectations in which the many are the employed workforce and the few are the professionals who employ them. In that sense, and although I would certainly prefer a more equal society, the ecosystem of viene-vienes is one of the very few sites in which the edges of class cleavages may be suspended, although most of the time they are only further reproduced. But the possibility of a disruption—an unpredictable, perhaps small, but sometimes violent disruption—challenges the structures of a society wherein, as Pocock wrote, deference is spontaneously expected.\footnote{Pocock, “The Classical Theory of Deference,” 516.} In that sense, the fears of drivers of the possible thuggery of viene-vienes are not merely fears of physical violence, but class anxieties about challenges to the hierarchical order. In hopes of avoiding a confrontation that might burst open the logics of class inequality, drivers abide by the demands of viene-vienes. And yet, at the same time, the ecosystem of viene-vienes operates because of and reproduces class cleavages.

The question of whether the work of viene-vienes is normatively good or bad is too simplistic and it misses the complexity of the exchange. But, at the end of the day, the hundreds of exchanges, whistles, scratches, and car-washes that happen every day in Mexico City—those small disruptions that are at times even illegal—are part of the many pieces that stop a massive city with a shady and shadowy state from falling into absolute chaos. It is also one of the many pieces that make a deeply unequal society continue to function without solving its class inequalities, but also perhaps without deepening them even further: the ecosystem of viene-vienes forces drivers and viene-vienes to interact with each other and perhaps be confronted with their own contradictions and frustrations. If I am to take as a point of departure the deep economic equality of Mexico that will not be solved
overnight (and this is a big if), I prefer having a city in which deep class cleavages give rise to points of contact in the public space, that having a city in which the rich have buttressed themselves in massive complexes that isolate them from the rest of the population.\textsuperscript{76}

The work of viene-vienes, additionally, challenges core liberal assumptions about the reliance on the state and the law to foster spontaneous cooperation and trust. Their work, additionally, is not as exceptional as it might at first seem: car parkers of the sort abound in places such as Egypt or Thailand, and might thus have something to teach us about the kind of trust that arises when structures that foster social trust flounder. It is also not completely different from the work of nannies, babysitters or even bodyguards to whom we entrust the lives of those we love.

But, is this really a case of trust? According to many scholars of trust, the answer is a resolute yes, since the exchange relies on the shared interests of two parties. Indeed, the story fits rather nicely into the analyses of thinkers such as Russell Hardin. Nonetheless, the lurking doubt that a viene-viene might steal a car or that a driver could call the cops might signal otherwise. I want to close with the following: despite the possible doubts, despite the little voice in the backs of the heads of drivers that might tell them there is a chance they will never see the viene-viene or their car again, I think this is in fact a case of trust. Adam Seligman argues that it is precisely when there is doubt, precisely when we lack assurances, that we must rely on trust.\textsuperscript{77} If rationality and formal guarantees are sufficient, trust becomes superfluous: leaving a car with a valet-parking does not require much trust since the driver knows she can complain or sue the company if her car disappears. It is precisely because there are no guarantees when one leaves a car with a viene-viene that trust is necessary. When formal guarantees are strengthened, trust becomes superfluous. When the state moves closer to the utopian conception of a powerful state that Hobbes imagines, trust is no longer necessary.

\textsuperscript{76} This is what Teresa Caldeira describes in \textit{City of Walls}. It is also what has happened in certain areas of Mexico City such as Santa Fe.

\textsuperscript{77} Adam Seligman wrote an interesting book about the ways in which trust emerges when familiar categories can no longer be used to predict behavior. In that sense, trust is almost akin to faith. See Adam B. Seligman, \textit{The Problem of Trust} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).
This was, after all, what Hobbes hoped in part because he did not believe humans were capable of much trusting. Strong liberal states might thus strengthen social trust, while reducing the necessity of the most ordinary and interpersonal sort of trust. The work of viene-vienes is perhaps an archetypical act of trust: the kind of trust that happens not only despite the lack of social trust, but perhaps as a way to make up for that weakness. It should be understood, then, I think, as a case of trust without social trust.
WORKS QUOTED


