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The digitalizing para-state: epistemic violence and the messiness of everyday life in Tequila, Mexico

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, Jose Cuervo, the largest tequila producer in the world, partnered with IBM and the local government to transform the town of Tequila, in western Mexico, into a smart city by 2040. The project, Smart Tequila, was an ambitious “preventive model” meant to forestall chaotic urban growth and contribute to the corporation’s wider tourism promotion and city-branding efforts. By 2023, though, Smart Tequila mainly existed on paper, as high running costs, operational challenges, and the trajectories of other sociospatial processes hindered the project. Despite this apparent failure, the project’s vision of urbanism lives on. Inspired by critical interventions that ask us to investigate smart urbanism acknowledging the fabric of everyday life and attending to the privatization of urban governance, this paper seeks to explore the interplay between space, power, and colonial remains in Smart Tequila. Expanding the concept of the “digitalizing state,” I argue that Smart Tequila’s urbanization efforts enacted epistemic violence through the process of defining *what to know*, *how to know it*, and to *what end*. The digitalizing para-state’s experiment with smart urbanism highlights the unexpected turns, contradictions, and enduring effects of epistemic violence that emerge when the smart city intersects with the messiness of everyday life.

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Introduction

It was 2023 in the town of Tequila, western Mexico, and none of the research participants could agree on what *Tequila Inteligente*, Smart Tequila, was. One resident had understood it was a jukebox-style device where you could search for restaurants, another one a machine that would replace the tourist guides in town. A third person believed it was a drone connected to a security system, while a fourth thought it was a network of heat cameras that could count the people transiting through the historic center. Others had understood the project was supposed to provide free internet for all, while a second group had imagined encountering robots in the street – like in an episode of *The Jetsons*. What they could all agree on was: they had not heard much about the project lately. The story of Smart Tequila begins in 2014, when Jose Cuervo, the

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largest tequila producer in the world, teamed up with IBM and local government through a public-private partnership (PPP) to transform the town of Tequila into a smart village by 2020 and a smart city by 2040. The ambitious project was advertised as a “preventive model” meant to forestall chaotic urban growth in the municipality and serve as a future blueprint for other Mexican secondary cities (Forbes Staff, 2014; Notimex, 2015). After securing financing from the state, stage one of the project was successfully running by 2015 within a limited area in the town’s historic center. The aims were to harness big data to improve mobility, connectivity, and public safety in the short term. In the long term, the project promised to address issues related to e-government, sustainability, and public health (de Arteaga, 2018). Not existing in a vacuum, Smart Tequila was the outcome of a city-branding strategy and cultural tourism promotion that had been set in motion in 2003 by Jose Cuervo in a context of corporate-led governance. In the eyes of the corporation, the humble town of Tequila epitomized “Mexicanness” and had the potential to become a world-class tourist destination in the footsteps of successful European examples.

This paper is grounded in work that asks us to pay more attention to the sociopolitical embeddedness of smart cities (Karvonen et al., 2019; Luque-Ayala & Marvin, 2015; Shelton et al., 2015), post-colonial approaches that aim to unpack Eurocentric practices underpinning “smart” interventions (Burns et al., 2021; Datta, 2015), and interventions that have analyzed the privatization of urban governance via data-driven urbanism (Bartmanski et al., 2023; Datta, 2023; Sadowski, 2021). Against this background, the paper seeks to explore the interplay between space, power, and colonial remains in the project of Smart Tequila, paying attention to the fabric of everyday life. With this, my aim is to shed light on the context-specific realities of what Guma and Monstadt (2021) would refer to as “smart city making” in a location within the global South and to expand our understanding of what Sadowski (2021) has conceptualized as the “urbanisation of technology capital.” I do this work by looking at power in two forms – as it underpins the structures of urban governance in Tequila and as it is manifested in the discourse surrounding Smart Tequila. My argument draws on five weeks of fieldwork and fourteen semi-structured interviews with residents, stakeholders, and decision-makers (i.e. government officials and corporate actors). Nine of the interviews took place on-site in Tequila, while five were carried out online via Zoom after the fieldwork period. This material is complemented with gray literature, Smart Tequila promotional material (i.e. YouTube channel, book, and blog), and newspaper articles. The paper is divided into four parts. In section one, I provide a brief literature review to highlight the paper’s contribution and introduce my conceptual tools: (a) an understanding of everyday life in the context of smart cities, (b) the digitalizing para-state building on the work of Datta (2023), and (c) a conceptualization of epistemic violence informed by the contributions of Jirón et al. (2022) and Castro-Gómez (2002). I then use section two to set the context and situate the project of Smart Tequila against a background of city-branding. In section three, I explore elements of the digitalizing para-state to highlight features of corporate-led governance and reflect on how Smart Tequila’s urbanization efforts are a form of epistemic violence. I show that power manifests through depoliticized decision-making practices in a context where the notion of the smart city is shaped and wielded according to Jose Cuervo’s broader and shifting monetary interests – despite claims of corporate responsibility. Power is wielded through a production of knowledge that ignores the fabric of everyday life and through a colonial-infused vision of modernity

encapsulated in what I refer to as an “*hacienda-chic*” esthetic, a vision of urban salvation and a specific type of materiality. I then proceed to briefly explore the intersections between Smart Tequila and the messiness of everyday life in section four. The epistemic violence enacted through Smart Tequila and Jose Cuervo’s broader corporate interests crashes with and merges into the trajectories of other sociospatial processes. I conclude with a reflection on what smart city failure means at the level of everyday life.

Conceptualizing smart urbanism in Latin America

A well-established body of literature on smart urbanism has criticized the lack of attention in smart city projects given to context, place, and societal dynamics. Functioning almost as a wildcard, smart cities have been described by Miller et al. (2021) as an “empty signifier” or in the words of Odendaal (2021, p. 641) as a “vessel for encapsulating the many dimensions of the relationship between technology and cities.” Along similar lines, Luque-Ayala and Marvin (2015) emphasize how smart city narratives promise to harness technology to solve a broad collection of nebulous “urban maladies.” In addition to their ambiguity and lack of embedding in context, smart city models tend to prioritize economic development to the neglect of democracy, equity, and human-centered infrastructure (Halegoua, 2020). Despite these shortcomings, the smart city has become “the most emblematic contemporary expression of the fusion of urbanism and digital technologies” (Rosol & Blue, 2022, p. 684).¹ Critical urban scholarship has focused on the phenomenon, (a) exploring whether smart cities exacerbate existing social inequalities, (b) questioning corporate interests driving the design of cities, and (c) highlighting the challenges to democracy posed by neoliberal governmentality (Fonseca Alfaro et al., 2022).

However, work remains to examine existing smart cities against the background of everyday geographies (Yeo, 2023). Smart city projects, after all, are not static but, instead, are contested and molded by everyday urban practices (Guma & Monstadt, 2021). Faced with what Odendaal (2021) describes as the “messiness and textures” of the urban, data-driven technologies encounter the will of users, the boundaries of resources, the limits of materiality, and their own “glitchiness,” or “the unexpected and unavoidable errors of operation” (Sadowski, 2024). When operationalized, smart urbanism is implemented not only in messy and contradictory ways, but also in unforeseen ones, intersecting with other spatial processes (Shelton & Lodato, 2019) and, many times, failing (Filion et al., 2023; Lynch & Muñoz-Viso, 2024). As Yeo (2023, p. 701) argues, there is a “chasm between the discourse of smart urbanism and how that discourse is translated and experienced on the ground.” Actually existing smart urbanism (cf. Shelton et al., 2015), after all, sometimes has less to do with the technology it tries to deploy than with the bodies and everyday spaces it attempts to control and organize (Yeo, 2023). To capture the “messiness” of the smart city in the case under study, I conceptualize everyday life and the urban by drawing on a Lefebvrian understanding.² For Lefebvre (2003), everyday life is the level of the urban where the accumulative activities of capitalism meet the non-accumulative sectors. In other words, everyday life is the ground where capitalism is reproduced but also the site where it meets hurdles. This conceptualization also implies a Lefebvrian interpretation of space as a social product at the intersection of materiality, imaginaries, and lived experience.

Reacting to calls that urge us to expand the empirical underpinnings of smart urbanism scholarship beyond the EuroAmerican heartland, there has been progress in exploring the specific dynamics of smart city projects in locations within the global South, for example, in India, the Philippines, South America, and the African continent (Datta, 2019; Guma, 2019; Jirón et al., 2021; Luque-Ayala & Neves Maia, 2019; Mouton, 2021; Watson, 2014). Zooming in on the Latin American context, Irazábal and Jirón (2021, p. 511) argue that, while the implementation of smart cities has been slow in the region, urban decision-makers are increasingly under pressure to “adopt [a smart city] discourse as a rite of passage to attain worldly recognition for their modernising path.” Information and Communications Technology (ICT) companies such as AT&T, CISCO, Huawei, and IBM have been strong promoters of the smart city idea, relying on public-private partnerships to launch their initiatives against a background of Latin American “infatuation” with “best practice” smart city models promoted in congresses and summits based in the global North (Irazábal and Jirón 2021). The smart governance model that is favored in Latin America is, unfortunately, as pointed out by Irazábal and Jirón (2021), defined by technological determinism, a profit-oriented approach, and a lack of citizen participation (also see Linares García & Vásquez Santos, 2018; Marchetti et al., 2019). The limitations in the smart city projects implemented in Latin America reflect concerns that have already been raised in the literature on the global North. Kitchin (2014) and Hollands (2015) have, for example, pondered the negative political ramifications of corporate-led governance models in data-driven interventions, while Shelton and Lodato (2019) have criticized the ambiguous role that citizens play in smart city projects. However, more research is needed to understand the specific governance dynamics of public-private partnerships, particularly in secondary cities of the global South, in order to unpack the impacts on the urban and its residents (Irazábal & Jirón, 2021; Ranchod, 2020). I find Datta’s (2023, p. 153) work on the “digitalizing state” – an entity that seeks to operationalize digital tools to govern and urbanize through partnerships with private and global actors – helpful not only for understanding the link between digital interventions and urbanization, but also for investigating the role of “colonial entanglements” in the making of the smart city. However, while Datta’s (2023) intervention is a good starting point for conceptualizing public-private modes of governance in the global South, I would like to suggest that the digitalizing *para*-state can do more to unpack the particularities of the case at hand.³

Alongside these contributions is work that has explored “smart” knowledge production and its connection to symbolic violence. Cook and Karvonen (2024), for example, argue that epistemic injustice is often a built-in element of data-driven solutions to urban “problems” since the knowledge that algorithms produce tends to mirror the priorities of those in power. These priorities, unfortunately, often fail to align with the needs and perspectives of the communities where “smart” solutions are deployed. The inability to see this limitation in data-driven urbanism not only creates the risk of a depoliticized decision-making environment, but also generates what Safransky (2020, p. 200) calls “algorithmic violence” or the “repetitive and standardized form of violence that contributes to the racialization of space and spatialization of poverty.” Smart cities, thus, can end up reproducing and normalizing the structural violence that already exists within the urban, engendered by the interplay of capitalism, globalization, and the residues of colonialism (Datta & Odendaal, 2019). Examining Chile and expanding the notion of colonial

legacies, Jirón et al. (2022) argue that the smart city narratives promoted in the country are examples of “epistemic colonialism” or a process of “evangelization” based on ideas of “salvation” and “superiority” that has its roots in the European conquest of what is now known as Latin America. Epistemic colonialism is an erasure of situated knowledges, an imposition of a Eurocentric type of modernity, and an act of violence – something that Jirón et al. (2022) hint at but do not develop. I suggest these interventions open the door to exploring forms of epistemic violence embedded in smart urbanism and reproduced through colonial remains. Here, I rely on the analysis of Latin America modernity developed by Castro-Gómez (2002) and on his understanding of epistemic violence as an act of disciplinary power that arises from a colonial understanding of what it means to be “rational” and “civilized.”

Used together, these conceptual tools are productive to begin capturing the interplay between space, power, and colonial remains underpinning the smart city in Latin America.

Cuervo World: the corporate master plan

It is hard to pinpoint exactly how the idea of the smart city landed in the town of Tequila and in the brains of the directors at Jose Cuervo, the spirits giant known for its raven logo. What can be said with certainty is that the launch in 2014 of what came to be known as Smart Tequila was the outcome of a strategy that was set in motion in 2003 with the creation of *Mundo Cuervo*, Cuervo World, the hospitality division of the tequila manufacturer. Mundo Cuervo’s goal was to promote the town of Tequila as a cultural tourist destination, highlighting and maintaining the town’s “authenticity and essence” (Fernández, 2016), and to elevate tequila from associations with binge drinking (Source: Interview J, 4 February 2023). The plan was, according to a research participant with 20 years of working experience at José Cuervo Foundation,⁴ to emulate sophisticated European towns that were built and branded around the identity and culture of a drink (Source: Interview M, 9 March 2023). Supported at times by different branches of government, but always spearheaded by Jose Cuervo, several milestones, in the eyes of the corporation, were achieved during this period. In 2003, Tequila became a member of *Programa Pueblos Mágicos*, Magical Towns Program, a network created by the federal Secretariat of Tourism (SECTUR) to provide monetary support to the unique corners of Mexico that epitomize the country’s “folklore, traditions, culture, history, nature and cuisine” (SECTUR, n.d.). Three years later, the agave landscape and the historic haciendas and distilleries of the region were added to UNESCO’s World Heritage List. That same year, 2006, *Ruta del Tequila*, the Tequila Trail, was launched with financing from the Inter-American Development Bank’s (IDB) Multilateral Investment Fund and José Cuervo Foundation (Soler et al., 2006; Venegas Trujillo, 2012).

While these achievements contributed to the branding of the town of Tequila, efforts were also made by the corporation to shape the built environment. In 2008, Jose Cuervo released its vision of Tequila in 2040, *Plan de Ordenamiento*, a blueprint for the tourist development of the town (de Arteaga, 2018). The corporate master plan included a luxury hotel, museums, a train route, a convention center, and an aerial cable car (El Informador, 2014; Romo, 2011, 2014). It is important to highlight that while these actions (i.e. tourism promotion and city-branding) happened in a context of

corporate-led governance, there was a strong sense of social responsibility. Jose Cuervo is deeply intertwined with the socioeconomic context of Tequila and embedded in the imaginaries of the locals. It is not hard to understand why. Jose Cuervo is the biggest producer of tequila in the world, controlling 29% of the global market in terms of volume (Becke, 2022). Cuervo's La Rojeña factory in Tequila is the oldest distillery in the Americas and the company has been in the same family for eleven generations (Forbes, 2021; Mundo Cuervo, n.d.). The corporation's philanthropic efforts in Tequila extend back to the nineteenth century and have included investment in basic infrastructure, donations to schools and care homes, entrepreneurship courses, actions to promote healthy lifestyles, and art and sports patronage (Fundación Beckmann, 2023). Local and corporate lore tells the story that Juan Beckmann Vidal, current patriarch and Cuervo's Honorary Chairman of the Board of Directors, made a promise to his father to "give back to Tequila and to its people some of what they have given us for so many years" (Forbes, 2021). It was in this context of gift-giving arising from a strong position in local governance that the vision of Cuervo World broadened once the corporation assessed that technology, such as internet, was needed to accomplish its tourism development goals and urban planning efforts in Tequila. In the words of Héctor Fernández Rousselon, a Jose Cuervo corporate director interviewed when Smart Tequila was launched, "We realized that it was no longer enough to build a street. We need to go much further and build a smart city" (Forbes Staff, 2014, my translation).

Perhaps it was not strange that Jose Cuervo pivoted toward the idea of smart urbanism. The launch of Smart Tequila in 2014 happened against a background in which smart city initiatives were almost mushrooming in Mexico. In 2012, the city of Toluca was chosen to be part of IBM's Smarter Cities Challenge (Redacción, 2012), while Guadalajara won a competition organized by the federal government to host the country's first "creative digital city" (Gobierno de la República, 2012). A year later, in 2013, Smart City Maderas was launched in the state of Querétaro (Ayala, 2019). Examples that came after Smart Tequila include two projects from 2017. One initiative was to set up a network of smart *barrios*, neighborhoods, in the state of Puebla (Wattenbarger, 2018), while the second was a partnership between AT&T and the state of Quintana Roo to transform the Mayan Riviera into a smart beach destination (AT&T, 2017). Additional proof that smart cities were gaining traction in Mexico in the 2010s was the creation of the Mexican Association of Smart Cities, AMECI, in 2016 (Córdova, 2017). There was also international recognition that the smart city epicenter in Latin America was moving toward Mexico. In 2014, the city of Puebla was chosen to host one of the international editions of the Smart City Expo World Congress (SCEWC) under the name Smart City Expo LATAM (Fira Barcelona, 2014). Annually held in Barcelona, SCEWC is an important conference on smart cities and one of the main policy mobility channels in Latin America (Cardullo & Kitchin, 2019; Irazábal & Jirón, 2021). The Smart City Expo LATAM Congress was held for the 9th time in Mexico in July 2024 (Fira Barcelona, 2023).

The epistemic violence of Smart Tequila 2040

Against the background described above, Smart Tequila evolved into an ambitious project with goals not only to promote tourism but also to impact the urban development

of Tequila through what I would describe as a digitalizing para-state governance structure, building on the work of Datta (2023). Anchored in the vision of Mundo Cuervo but inspired by discourses of sustainability, cultural tourism and controlled urban growth, the proponents of Smart Tequila believed the town could become a smart village by 2020 and a smart city by 2040. Smart Tequila was seen as a “preventive model” that, through the harnessing of data, could place the town in a trajectory toward efficiency, quality of life, and order (de Arteaga, 2018). It is in these aims that I detect the need to unpack the workings of power while paying attention to context-specific dynamics. As argued by Datta (2023), the digitalizing state (and by extension the para-state, as the author hints) exerts its control by prioritizing certain forms of knowledge production. The process of deciding “whose” knowledge and “what” knowledge matters unfolds against a background of historical legacies, colonial entanglements, and knowledge systems arising from modernity. The problematization of Tequila’s urban challenges and, subsequently, the conceptualization of Smart Tequila 2040 were not innocuous decisions. Instead, the process of defining *what to know*, *how to know it*, and *to what end* embedded forms of epistemic violence.

What to know

Despite the corporate master plan from 2008 and the level of certainty with which Smart Tequila was later promoted (i.e. a clear vision and straightforward timeline), the project was a fuzzy idea at first, with changing names, partners, and goals. For some time, what came to be known as Smart Tequila overlapped with the aims of *Tequila Espiritu de México*, Tequila Spirit of Mexico, another Mundo Cuervo project (cf. Redacción, 2014). During a subsequent period, the project was known as Tequila Smart Magical Village in what seemed like an attempt to connect with the federal Magical Towns Program. The project’s partners have included national actors such as Telmex and TV Azteca, and international players such as IBM, National Geographic, Hitachi Vantara, Google for Education, Coca-Cola and Spain’s Secretariat for Tourism (de Arteaga, 2018; Grupo JB, n.d.a). While the goals with these partners tended to be of a digital nature and shared buzzwords such as “connectivity,” “sustainability,” “mobility,” “big data,” and “governance,” the specifics differed. For example, when partnered with National Geographic, the goal was for Tequila to become Mexico’s first “geotourist” location included in MapGuide, an interactive platform that highlighted “lesser-known destinations with unique cultural offerings” (Shapiro, 2016). When partnered with Spain’s Secretariat for Tourism, the aim was for Tequila to become certified as the first “smart tourist destination” in Mexico and Latin America (Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, 2021). Instead of a linear evolution guided by a master plan to improve urban development in Tequila, Smart Tequila’s background story suggests a changing environment with constant attempts by Jose Cuervo to establish strategic alignments with external actors (each of which had different aims).

It is important to highlight that, although Smart Tequila was the outcome of Jose Cuervo’s strategies, the project was launched through a public-private partnership with the municipality of Tequila. Smart Tequila was steered by *Consejo de Desarrollo Integral de Tequila* (CODIT), the Council for the Comprehensive Development of Tequila. CODIT was created in 2013 with funding from IDB and had a mandate to

“support and advise” local authorities to promote “comprehensive development” in the municipality through an engagement with “social, economic, territorial, and environmental” issues (Grupo JB, n.d.b; Persson & Bloomgarden, 2013). The council was made up of representatives from the three levels of government (i.e. municipal, state, and federal), tequila producers, hotel owners, restaurateurs, tourist guides, and other local actors such as historians (Padilla, 2018). According to research participants, the governance structure enabled by CODIT was a model that helped circumvent the challenges that Mexican municipalities usually face: partisan politics. In this context, master-plans for the development of a town are shelved every time a new administration comes to power, particularly when there is a change of political party. Governance, thus, runs on a cycle of three years (the time a municipal administration can be in power), creating a fragmented landscape. The model created by CODIT, on the other hand, was able to provide continuity by functioning regardless of the changes in government, claimed research participants. The structure allowed the municipal president in turn to always be part of the council. Furthermore, interviewees perceived CODIT provided the space to address something else that plagues small Mexican municipalities: insufficient government revenue. Research participants described how CODIT was a council where a municipal problem, say the need to paint the façades of historic houses in the town’s center, could be solved in “five minutes.” The private actors assembled had access to resources and would offer donations or in-kind payments (e.g. goods, services, or labor).

However, research participants also highlighted something conflictive: the unequal power structure between the major tequila producers, particularly Jose Cuervo, and the rest of the members, specifically Tequila municipality (in addition to the power imbalance across the levels of government created by the fact that federal and state representatives were hardly ever present). Instead of an arena for deliberation across the public and private sectors, CODIT was sometimes reduced to a meeting space where the municipal president simply signed permits and projects that were put in front of them. This was the case with Smart Tequila. According to a key interviewee, the smart city project was never fully understood by the municipality (Source: Interview D, 12 January 2023). However, with the municipality’s support, Jose Cuervo, via CODIT, was able to access federal and state funds, USD 2 million to be exact,⁵ from the Magical Towns program to kickstart Smart Tequila (SEGOB, 2015; Interview K, 25 February 2023). While a good model on paper, CODIT was, at times, an enabler of the Jose Cuervo vision and functioned as a body that gave credibility to the corporation’s outreach efforts and unlocked legal mechanisms and funds for the company plans to go forward (e.g. municipal authorization for actions that pertain to the state).

It is in this constellation of power that I see the corporate-led governance model behind Smart Tequila as an example of the digitalizing para-state. Through CODIT, Jose Cuervo was able to create an alternative arena to the municipal council where decisions were made, at times with restricted debate. Thinking with Shelton and Lodato (2019), in trying to fix the inadequacy of the local state, CODIT allowed Jose Cuervo to further insert itself into the process of municipal administration. The diffused power that the corporation already held in the municipality was reinforced in a concrete instrument of governance. While perhaps efficient against political weakness and limited fiscal strength, the digitalizing para-state, however, is not subjected to a democratic process. It cannot be asked for accountability or be kicked out from office.

The digitalizing para-state did not only impact democracy by promoting depoliticized decision-making practices and enabling Jose Cuervo's attempts to possess what Sadowski (2021) would refer to as "urban sovereignty." The governance structure in place also encouraged a pivot toward a profit-oriented approach. The work of Irazábal and Jirón (2021) reports that smart cities in Latin America enacted through public-private partnerships tend to overshadow the needs of citizens in their search for profit. Despite the best intentions of some of the council members to bring benefits to the "people of Tequila" (Source: Interview J, 4 February 2023), citizens in the municipality became vague figures. In other words, the digitalizing para-state blurred "the people of Tequila" through its vision of governance, creating a situation where "the citizen" became a discursive tool and an unspecified character that could represent diverse groups such as business owners, tourists, or the municipal government itself. The digitalizing para-state framed the "*what to know*" around strategies for profit-making in a depoliticized environment of its making. The instances of epistemic violence were the assumption that the smart city undoubtedly brings universal benefits (without the need for democratic engagement), and the expectation that any economic growth brought by tourism and Smart Tequila would automatically benefit citizens.

How to know it

Smart Tequila came to have a specific vision of the town's urban challenges and what the strategies to solve these problems should be. In the words of a corporate director from Jose Cuervo involved in the launch of the project, "The [town of] Tequila that we have imagined, the Tequila that we have dreamed of is a community different from the current one" (Forbes Staff, 2014). Smart Tequila was divided into three stages. The first phase revolved around Tequila's historic center and the goals by 2016–2018 were to set up a free-access Wi-Fi network, construct a platform for big data, launch an app for tourists, and run a system to monitor social media. The second phase envisioned expanding the project's impact area to the whole of the town's center by 2020 and foresaw – harnessing the data accumulated in previous years – actions to digitalize public administration, improve traffic flows, and achieve the sustainable management of resources (e.g. water and energy). The third phase, to be completed by 2040, seeks to cover the whole city and promises to deal with issues related to smart buildings, health, and education (de Arteaga, 2018; Guzmán Solorio, 2016). With the support of internet infrastructure provided by Telmex, the Mexican telecommunications giant, and a trial period of free IBM technology (i.e. Social Media Analytics and Intelligent Operation Center), the first phase of Smart Tequila was running by 2015 within 5 km² of the town's most important tourist area within the historic center. At this stage, Smart Tequila consisted of a wireless network with 20 Access Points, 20 security cameras, and 80 air quality sensors. The network provided free Wi-Fi to smartphone users that signed up and allowed Smart Tequila staff to monitor users' social media activity (Guzmán Solorio, 2016). The camera feed could be monitored from a control center (Source: Interview D, 12 January 2023). The accompanying app was released shortly after and allowed tourists to plan their visit. An IT Manager at Jose Cuervo designed and implemented this first stage of the project and was confident Tequila could be transformed with data (Source: Interview J, 4 February 2023). While the IT

manager believed in the potential of building a city with objective information, it is important to highlight that these efforts would not happen in a vacuum. Smart Tequila's urbanization plans would inevitably be carried out against a Mundo Cuervo vision and Jose Cuervo's prioritization of the societal needs in Tequila – which differed from the lived experience of residents.

In 2013, a year before the launch of Smart Tequila, the Jalisco State government and the federal Tourism Secretariat (SECTUR) released the results of a study that assessed Tequila's sustainability and competitiveness in relation to tourism. The report concluded that the municipality and its population of 40,697 residents faced several challenges, from environmental risks to the loss of cultural identity (SECTUR, 2013). Some issues arose from lax implementation of the law, such as a lack of wastewater treatment plants in the municipality. Despite the heavy presence of tequila manufacturing in the region, only one of the big producers, Sauza, had a system in place to treat its industrial discharge. Other problems seemed to be caused by a combination of weak local governance and lack of government revenue, creating a landscape of insufficient health care facilities, inadequate public transport, and poor solid waste management systems. Additional challenges were the consequence of the growth of tourism. In 2003, 18,000 tourists had visited Tequila while in 2012, the number had grown to 220,000 visitors. The impacts of this “floating population,” the majority of whom arrived by car, were beginning to be felt on the built environment in the form of problems with traffic and parking. Residents also began to feel the pressure of tourism's growth through a significant increase in land value around the town's center that made it difficult for locals to purchase real estate. Furthermore, the SECTUR report cautioned that sociocultural patterns in Tequila were starting to be disrupted as tourists reconfigured the public space that was important to residents (e.g. the main square and the municipal market). The report concluded that these societal challenges were happening against a background of a lack of citizen participation in the development of tourism strategies (SECTUR, 2013).

While some of Smart Tequila's goals seemed aimed at addressing the environmental and spatial challenges that the town was beginning to face in the early 2010s, the project lacked grounding in lived experience. Despite a considerable number of experts, consultants, and professionals that had been hired through the years to fulfill the Mundo Cuervo vision, Smart Tequila failed to engage residents and understand their needs (Source: Interview M, 9 March 2023). In my view, this points to a significant issue embedded in Smart Tequila's conceptual framings. Smart Tequila and its governance structure, CODIT, had a will and vision to improve Tequila; the shortcoming was in the process of assessing whose knowledge deserved attention. Epistemic violence can be seen in a production of knowledge that prioritized “experts” and ignored the fabric of everyday life in the process of defining *how to know it*.⁶ First, residents did not only transform into blurry figures, but also became “absent citizens,” to borrow Shelton and Lodato's (2019) term, by not being invited to participate in the making of the smart city. In contrast, the voices of experts and practitioners sounded loud and clear, providing a corporate definition of the smart city drawing on “global” ideas of urbanity and modernity. This categorization of knowledge according to internal corporate parameters was evident in a second instance. Smart Tequila sought to build a city based on objective data. However, this data was meant to come from variables that the corporation deemed important, the patterns and opinions of tourists, in an area that the corporation deemed important, the

historic center. The places that mattered in the town's center were those that could increase profit for Jose Cuervo and its partners. Again, this is not to say that the actors managing Smart Tequila were unconcerned with the rest of the town or its residents. As described earlier, the plan was to harness the data that had been collected in the pilot area to expand the smart city project to all corners of Tequila. However, it does not seem as though there was ever a reflection on how a tourist-centered analysis in a visitor-oriented part of town would yield data that would be relevant for residents. The Smart Tequila proponents seemed to have assumed a degree of homogeneity across the different neighborhoods in Tequila, thus thinking that the patterns seen in the historic center through the movements of tourists would be relevant elsewhere. The trust that the increase of tourism in the historic center would automatically bring economic benefits to *all* of Tequila's residents was what defined the societal purpose of Smart Tequila. These ideas were not simple assumptions but acts of disciplinary power, as will become clearer in the next section.

To what end

Smart Tequila's built-in epistemic violence is reminiscent of what has already been reported in the literature: the tendency of data-driven urban solutions to mirror the priorities of those in power (cf. Cook & Karvonen, 2024). Despite the rhetoric that Smart Tequila was for its people, the ultimate aim was to increase profit for the corporation. What is important to draw out as well are the context-specific colonial entanglements that the smart city project intersected with. Jose Cuervo's wider city-branding and tourism promotion efforts enacted colonial remains through its Mundo Cuervo vision. For Jose Cuervo and its philanthropic leader, Juan Beckmann Vidal, Tequila was not only an economically important location, but also a culturally significant place. In the view of the corporation, Tequila epitomized Mexicanness, "tradition," and "heritage" through its eponymous and world-famous drink (Navarrete, 2015). However, for Jose Cuervo, these elements were hidden by the town's industrial activity and needed to be "saved" through Tequila's transformation into a cultural destination (El Informador, 2018; Forbes Staff, 2014). While it cannot be denied that Tequila, its landscape, and people are part of a unique cultural tradition – as evidenced, for example, by its listing as one of UNESCO'S World Heritage sites – the corporation's understanding of culture exhibits a homegrown Eurocentric imaginary of modernity. By this, I mean, following the work of Castro-Gómez (2002), a vision that tapped into internal colonialism to define what it means to be civilized. In Jose Cuervo's vision, the civilized and cultured Tequila is one that is sanitized, middle-class, and romantically traditional. Jose Cuervo's Eurocentric viewpoint takes concrete form in Mundo Cuervo through what I refer to as a hacienda-chic esthetic. Hacienda-chic is not only a vision of culture but a site that has been produced. The hacienda-chic Tequila is a place where the sophisticated and light-skinned tourist arrives in Tequila on the Jose Cuervo Express train, stays at the luxurious hotel *Solar de las Ánimas*, listens to mariachi in *Foro José Cuervo*, visits the patios and agave fields of the distillery-cum-hacienda *La Rojeña*, samples a range of expensive tequila in *Reserva de la Familia* cellar, visits the Juan Beckmann Gallardo cultural center, shops in the exclusive Cuervo gift stores, and walks the manicured and pedestrian-only José Cuervo street.

The epistemic violence embedded in this produced space comes from erasure and a simulation. Most of the Mundo Cuervo buildings are new constructions from the last decade, designed to resemble viceregal architecture (i.e. sixteenth to nineteenth centuries). The 10,000 m² of the Juan Beckmann Gallardo cultural center, for example, were built in 2017. The design attempts to replicate a building from 1,732 located in Mexico City, Colegio de San Ignacio de Loyola Vizcaínas (Colegio Vizcaínas, n.d.; Mundo Cuervo, 2022). A second example is Hotel Solar de las Ánimas. Built in 2015, the luxurious 93-room hotel is supposed to resemble a criollo⁷ colonial house (Redacción Obras, 2014). As evidenced by the work of García and Méndez (2018), the construction of these neo-viceregal buildings is part of a general trend in the tequila-producing region where corporations have assessed it is cheaper to construct than to rescue industrial ruins and old traditional houses. Jose Cuervo carries out epistemic violence by following this trend and building something that fits its vision of what Tequila should look like. The corporation's epistemic violence includes what Jirón et al. (2022) would refer to as “evangelization” practices based on the idea that Tequila's Mexicanness will be “saved.” Salvation, in turn, comes with concrete disciplinary practices: the “fabrication,” to borrow the concept developed by Bartmanski et al. (2023), of a new everyday life enacted by the digitalizing para-state.⁸ For example, Jose Cuervo strives to elevate Tequila's heritage through the promotion of middle-class understandings of culture that can be experienced in performance venues and museums and not in informal popular-culture settings. The corporation also attempts to regulate public conduct through its efforts to disassociate tequila from binge drinking (Source: Interview J, 4 February 2023). There is also a ban on sidewalk vendors around Jose Cuervo Street (Source: Interview H, 15 January 2023). As an offshoot of Mundo Cuervo, it is no surprise that there are echoes of this epistemic violence embedded in Smart Tequila. The promotional material developed for Smart Tequila reproduces the hacienda-chic aesthetic (i.e. narratives that draw on Mexicanness, heritage, and light-skinned tourists) and through the claim to be a “preventive model” points to ideas of urban salvation (i.e. bringing about an organized and acceptable type of urban growth and attracting the right type of consumer, middle-class tourists).

The messiness of Smart Tequila

The digitalizing para-state translates ideas of city-ness and modernity into materiality and protects this vision through disciplinary practices. However, this epistemic violence does not happen unhindered or in isolation. As Smart Tequila intersected with the messiness of everyday life and other processes, the outcomes were unexpected. By 2023, Tequila found itself amid a wave of mass tourism as it welcomed a record of 1.25 million visitors (Casa Sauza, 2023). Research participants are hesitant, though, to give credit to the Mundo Cuervo strategy. In their view, it was a telenovela from 2007, *Destilando Amor*, that put Tequila on the tourist map, not the strategies carried out by Jose Cuervo. Despite recognition by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site, tourist development programs (e.g. the Tequila Trail financed by IDB), and certifications (e.g. becoming Mexico's first “geotourist” destination), what drew tourists to Tequila was a desire to experience the locations showcased in the soap opera: the tree where the star-crossed protagonists shared their first kiss, the agave fields where their love blossomed or the church where their union was finally blessed in marriage (Source: Interview C, 11

January 2023; Interview M, 9 March 2023). A second driver that also went beyond what the corporation could control was the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. While tourism almost came to a stop during the health emergency, after a series of lockdowns, visitors were eager to return to a place known informally as “the world’s biggest cantina,” according to research participants. Changing tourist patterns and governance structures transformed a visit to Tequila from a weekend occurrence where one savored the town’s famous *cantaritos*⁹ within a limited drinking zone to an open-air party in the historic center during the week.¹⁰

Tequila experienced economic growth because of mass tourism but this came at the expense of the exacerbation of societal challenges with origins that can be traced back to 2013. Nuisances have become grievances and while visitors tend to concentrate in the town’s historic center, the impacts of tourism extend to all corners of Tequila. Residents perceive a town center that has been “invaded”: impacted by a car frenzy that brings traffic to a stop, mountains of trash that the municipality struggles to collect, and crowds of drunk visitors that make excessive noise, urinate in public and vomit next to people’s front doors. In addition to this, residents lament the transformation of the central *mercado municipal* from a place where one could have a simple meal, or buy fresh produce, meat and tortillas, to an “over-priced” market that now caters to tourists. Reflecting on municipal-wide consequences, research participants report a housing crisis fueled by short-term rentals for tourists, a real estate market out of reach for the majority, and infrastructural networks (e.g. roads) under stress and in need of maintenance. The impacts of mass tourism have encroached on all aspects of everyday life, erasing spaces of livability, taking over places of cultural and religious significance, changing shopping habits, and impacting labor markets. As explained by one resident, this has left people feeling as “permanent tourists”: surrounded by an atmosphere of carefree leisure and high prices but without the possibility to leave behind the impacts of mass tourism once the holiday ends. While Smart Tequila cannot be blamed for the unforeseen growth in tourism, it bears responsibility for a lack of attention to the fabric of everyday life – despite the project’s best intentions.

Conclusion: smart city failure?

By 2023, the operating status of Smart Tequila was hard to assess. Research participants had not only struggled to agree on what the initiative was but also could not concur on whether the project was still running. The majority believed Smart Tequila had ended but were unable to specify when. The rest did not know the status or had simply never heard of the scheme. Only practitioners with stakes in the project claimed that Smart Tequila was still running.¹¹ What can be said with certainty is that the early success of the project (i.e. the implementation of phase one within a year of Smart Tequila’s launch in 2014) soon slowed down. According to the Jose Cuervo IT Manager in charge of the early execution of the project, by 2016, “[Smart Tequila] only existed on paper” as the power of materiality complicated the vision found on PowerPoint slides (Source: Interview K, 25 February 2023). As the free IBM licenses expired, the digitalizing para-state soon realized the high costs of running the project. This problem was compounded by several operational challenges related to obsolescence and technological compatibility.

The lack of continued political support, despite the role that CODIT, a public-private partnership, played in Smart Tequila's launch, also affected the operating status of the project. According to research participants from the local government, it was the COVID-19 pandemic that diminished the power of the digitalizing para-state and finally brought Smart Tequila to an end – at least as it was originally envisioned.

Despite these setbacks, Smart Tequila's experiment with smart urbanism lives on in discursive practices and as an aspiration. In 2019, Smart Tequila formed an alliance with Hitachi to deliver the Smart Tequila 2040 vision (Hitachi, 2019), stating that previous partners “had not really understood the scale of the project, or got involved to the extent we needed them to” (Tequila Inteligente, 2019). In 2021, Smart Tequila fulfilled its goal of becoming certified as the first Smart Tourist Destination in Latin America by SEGITTUR, a state company affiliated with Spain's Secretariat for Tourism (Gobierno del Estado de Jalisco, 2021; SEGITTUR, n.d.). Mostly led by the efforts of Federico de Arteaga, a former Jose Cuervo director who was and continues to be one of the main proponents of the project, Smart Tequila has become a best-practice case in webinars and video podcasts aimed at other, mostly Latin American municipalities interested in launching their own smart city projects. Smart Tequila has also been presented at conferences such as the 2014 Smart City Expo LATAM Congress (Source: Interview J, 4 February 2023), won minor awards like the WeGo Smart Sustainable City Award in Russia (Vidales Astello, 2018), and has held the presidency of the Ibero-American Network of Smart Tourist Destinations since June 2024 (Tequila Inteligente, 2024). As of 2024, Smart Tequila continues to be advertised as one of Hitachi's ongoing and successful smart city projects (Hitachi, 2024). It is important to highlight that, although Smart Tequila emerged from Mundo Cuervo, it does not seem that Jose Cuervo or the digitalizing para-state are behind the actions in the post-pandemic period. Smart Tequila has become rhetorically successful on its own terms.

This paper has sought to explore the interplay between space, power, and colonial remains in Smart Tequila with an approach that pays attention to the fabric and messiness of everyday life. A project envisioned through a public-private partnership between Jose Cuervo (the largest tequila producer in the world), IBM and local government, Smart Tequila was an ambitious “preventive model” meant to provide a blueprint for urban growth, tourism development, and modernity. Looking at power in two forms – as it operates in corporate-led governance and discourse – I have argued that Smart Tequila's urbanization efforts embed epistemic violence. In other words, the problematization of Tequila's urban challenges and, subsequently, the conceptualization of Smart Tequila 2040 – i.e. the process of defining *what to know*, *how to know it*, and *to what end* – were not innocuous decisions but instead are laden with power dynamics that impose, control, and erase. These instances of power manifest through what I describe as a digitalizing para-state governance structure, drawing on the work of Datta (2023). Specifically, the digitalizing para-state enacted epistemic violence in three ways. First, the digitalizing para-state created an alternative arena to the municipal council where decisions that pertained to local government were made. This not only impacted democracy through depoliticization but also encouraged a pivot toward a profit-oriented type of urbanism. Second, the digitalizing para-state exercised control by deciding “whose” knowledge and “what” knowledge mattered. The governance structure behind Smart

Tequila was aware of the infrastructural and tourist-related challenges being faced by the residents of Tequila. However, instead of being guided by the fabric of everyday life, Smart Tequila relied on experts and their “global” ideas of city-ness and technological modernity. Third, the digitalizing para-state translated its ideas of city-ness and modernity into materiality through the production of space that I refer to as a “hacienda-chic” esthetic (i.e. a civilized city that is sanitized, middle-class and romantically traditional). In turn, the digitalizing para-state protected this vision through disciplinary practices that attempted to curb informality and control popular expressions of culture. In short, the power and epistemic violence of the digitalizing para-state manifested through depoliticized decision-making practices, a production of knowledge that ignores context, and a colonial-infused vision of modernity. The drivers of this epistemic violence are reminiscent of what has already been reported in the literature: the belief that the smart city undoubtedly brings universal benefits, a homogenized understanding of the city, the blurring of the citizen, and an unfaltering trust in the automatic trickle-down of economic growth.

The digitalizing para-state’s experiment with smart urbanism calls attention to the limitations of public-private partnerships when there are marked power imbalances (i.e. a small municipality collaborating with a global corporation). In addition to this, the story of Smart Tequila highlights the contradictions and unexpected turns when the smart city intersects with the messiness of everyday life and the trajectories of other sociospatial processes. The analysis has shown that Smart Tequila was contested and molded by the fabric of everyday life in three ways. First, the people of Tequila outside the circles of governance connected to Jose Cuervo did not embrace Smart Tequila. The project emerged in a context of gift-giving because of Jose Cuervo’s strong belief in corporate responsibility and genuine interest in the town of Tequila. The limitation was that the gift, which took shape through the Mundo Cuervo vision, prioritized a tourist-centered and profit-making approach. Second, the messiness of everyday life showed the complexity of materializing ideas shown on PowerPoint slides and master plans. Smart Tequila did not only face problems related to technological obsolescence and lack of budgeting for the costs of running the project, but also ignored how the social and mobility patterns seen in the town’s center are not representative of the rest of the municipality. Third, the fabric of everyday life was the site where an unexpected wave of mass tourism intersected. The proponents of Smart Tequila ignored the context-specific realities of the town: the tourist “floating population” of Tequila creates more sociospatial challenges besides traffic congestion. There are also infrastructural networks in need of maintenance, public services under stress, limited housing options, and a real estate market out of reach for the majority. Furthermore, the type of tourism that is promoted around the consumption of tequila has created grievances that affect residents’ quality of life. In short, everyday life was the ground where Smart Tequila was supposed to expand and thrive through the expansion of tourism and subsequent economic growth. However, everyday life was also the site where Smart Tequila faced its biggest challenges. Despite this failure at the level of everyday life, Smart Tequila has been rhetorically successful – its vision of urbanism endures in the smart city echo chamber. This is another sign of Smart Tequila’s lingering epistemic violence and a reminder that the impacts of the privatization of

urban governance reverberate in the fabric of everyday life, even when the attempts are short-lived.

Notes

1. Here it is important to make two clarifications: (1) The smart city is not a static model but instead spreads through a myriad of permutations, and (2) smart urbanism is but a chapter in a longer trajectory of capitalist efforts to enact entrepreneurial forms of governance (Sadowski, 2021).
2. For the limitations and strengths of operationalizing Lefebvre in a Latin American context, see Fonseca Alfaro (2023).
3. To add a short clarification, the “digitalizing state,” according to Datta (2023, p. 153), “neither completely recedes nor aims at full control [but] rather embraces the organisational practices of private and global actors within the state.” The digitalizing para-state, in contrast, is a masquerade of the state attempting to control what Sadowski (2021) would refer to as “urban sovereignty,” or the power to “exercise dominion over space.” In other words, the digitalizing para-state does not try to embrace entrepreneurial practices *within* the state but instead strives to be a force *beyond* the state.
4. Now Beckmann Foundation.
5. Adjusted for inflation to reflect value in 2023. The original amount is 25 million pesos (2015), which using an exchange rate from 2015 is USD 1.6 million. Own calculation with data from OECD (2023) and the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis’ Inflation Calculator.
6. Datta (2023) would describe this as the collection of information without fidelity to everyday life. There was a wish to gather *information*, but *knowledge* was never pursued.
7. A Mexican of pure Spanish descent.
8. Thinking with Lefebvre, for Bartmanski et al. (2023, p. 690), “fabrication” is a form of production of space where corporate governance creates “a montage-like symbolic representation of something that is not quite there, possibly concealing another reality, or promising in advance more than could be delivered.”
9. A tequila cocktail drink served in a *cántaro*, a traditional cup made of clay.
10. During fieldwork, there were also rumors that organized crime was behind some of the changes in Tequila’s governance structures concerning drinking zones. However, investigating this was beyond the scope of my work.
11. I found no evidence during my visit to Tequila that supports these claims.

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Research ethics and consent

This research was conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines for qualitative social research and followed the ethical guidelines of Malmö University, where the research project was hosted. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Interviews were audio- or video-recorded with participants’ consent. To protect anonymity, all names and identifying details have been removed or anonymized.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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