

# Philosophy in the City, a project in Mexico City Practice

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to describe the process of constitution of the project Philosophy in the City, which aims to bring philosophical reflection to the streets through philosophical cafés and philosophy workshops with children. The first Cafe Filosófico in Mexico City was created by Esther Charabati 22 years ago and is still being held weekly. Philosophy in the City is a project born in Mexico City in 2016, at the Facultad de Filosofía y Letras in the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. It is an interdisciplinary group of young people -from the careers of Philosophy, Pedagogy, and Psychology- committed to taking philosophy out of the classroom and taking it in public spaces. In 2022 its members carried on more than 700 philosophical cafes in public spaces. Philosophy in the city has a permanent presence in libraries, book fairs, and in various social networks.

**Key-words:** Philosophy; philosophical practice; philosophical reflection; philocafe; non formal-education;

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## **Filosofía en la ciudad (Philosophy in the city)**

Philosophy in the City is a project that was born in 2016 in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National Autonomous University of Mexico to promote philosophical reflection in public spaces through philosophical cafés. The first challenge it faces is the legitimization of the project: Can philosophy really be done outside the classroom? What happens in Philocafés can be called philosophy? What is the difference between self-help and philocafés? What is the place of the animator?

### *What do we mean by a philocafé?*

It is an activity that happens in places open to the public, to passers-by, to coffee drinkers; the purpose is that each participant learns from his or her intellectual development, from listening to the interventions and from the confrontation of his or her ideas with those of others.

The challenges are many: to convene, to motivate the participants, to choose the topics and to dialogue, to establish a climate of respect and cordiality that stimulates participation, to provoke and sustain a quality debate, to give coherence to the framework that is being formed, to promote an attitude of listening, to understand what each one - with his style - wants to communicate, to accompany him so that he can deepen his ideas, and to maintain humor. This, under two fundamental conditions: hospitality and democracy, understood as the possibility for everyone to express themselves freely and for everyone to have equal access to speech. Perhaps the greatest challenge faced by the animator is to sustain interest during the meeting, taking into account that there is no unalterable exposition or common thread: he or she requires the necessary flexibility and ability to move from one topic to another without getting lost. In addition, he/she must show the necessary authority and tolerance to prevent any attendee from monopolizing the microphone and to encourage interventions, although no one is obliged to intervene. (Charabati, 2020)

In the debates, the sources are there as a reference, but we avoid the "parade of personalities" to focus on the ideas, and let each one defend his or her own based on arguments. The philocafés are usually open, which means that it is a group that is permanently reconfigured. The diversity of

ideas, interests, and experiences gives the meeting a great richness, since new people modify the dynamics, preventing them from becoming routine. Another fundamental element in the meetings is respect: everyone has the right to disagree, but no one has the right to offend. For a time, a sustained effort is required to achieve a cordial climate in which aggression is immediately stopped. Gradually, the group dynamics set the tone for the interventions.

*What motivates participants to return to the Philocafé?*

Perhaps what gives it life is precisely what it is not, but is somehow present: the possibility of acquiring culture, addressing existential questions, obtaining answers or consolation, debating their social ideas, of relating to other people.

Perhaps the philocafé makes sense in an individualistic society in which the dissolution of ties, the difficulties that the city imposes on encounters, and the few occasions for dialogue contribute to people's interest in participating in an interesting discussion.

*Can these meetings be described as philosophical? What is philosophical about the philocafé?*

I started this project after having had and maintained for 16 years the first Philocafé in Mexico City, so I had no doubts about the possibility of philosophizing with others in informal spaces. However, I had to come to that conclusion with the 10 philosophy and pedagogy students who had graciously signed up for the project called "Philosophy in the City". One aspect that I do not want to overlook is that the seminar, and later the team, were never exclusively for philosophy students, precisely because we consider that all people can philosophize and that what is needed is an attitude that favors reflection.

We went down several avenues: analyzing self-help books, reading texts by philosophers who propose philosophy as an activity that anyone can do, and learning about the proposals of various authors on philosophical initiatives to do philosophy outside the classroom, specifically the UNESCO book *Philosophizing for Freedom* (Goucha, 2007)

Step by step, as they animated cafés, they accepted that philosophizing is not synonymous with knowing the history of philosophy.

How can we ensure that no one appropriates the word? How can we learn to listen to others? What kinds of questions provoke discussion? How can we relate philosophical ideas to everyday life? How do we relinquish the power that most educational initiatives imply? How do we keep the discussion open so that no conclusion is imposed? One of the exercises that I think was most useful was that each team member presented *philocafés* within the seminar for others to observe and critique. This meant, of course, working with frustration tolerance.

The answer to these questions was built throughout the seminar and the opportunities that arose to make *philocafés* in the public space: bookstores, libraries, plazas, public institutions, and, of course, *cafés*. Perhaps one of the biggest challenges was to get the spaces, since the practice was new, but little by little, protected by the magic of the word "philosophy", we were getting them. And we began to work on a modality of philosophical reflection that interests several members of the team: philosophy with children.

*Slowly, spaces were opening up to work:*

In 2018, an educational and cultural institution in Mexico City, with a presence in a large number of marginalized areas, contacted us with two proposals: that team members would enter to work there to make *philocafés*, and that we would give a diploma course for their philosophy teachers. The agreement was made, several students joined to PILARES (translation: Meeting Points, Innovation, Freedom, Art, Education and Knowledge. These are non-formal education spaces promoted by the government of Mexico City in response to the urgent need for leisure, recreation, and training almost free of charge for inhabitants of areas with no cultural offerings) and we gave the diploma course; simultaneously, we started *Filolab* in the Faculty for the students interested in continuing with this initiative to join the team or work on their own.

One day, we were surprised by the pandemic. After the initial shock, and despite the uncertainty it brought with it, we decided to continue our work through the Zoom platform. Over three years, we held philosophical *cafés* three times a week, sometimes with 100 people, in addition to the *philocafé* marathons that lasted about 8 to 10 hours. Any pretext was good: the day of love and friendship, gay pride day, world philosophy day... I won't say that the pandemic brought benefits, but I have to admit that

during the time of the Zoom, cafés and the subsequent critique, the members of the team were able to exercise, review our weaknesses and observe our colleagues to learn new strategies from them.

### *Academic work*

In 2018 we also became a faculty research project, which opened doors to several institutions. One of them is the Vasconcelos Library, the largest in the city: currently weekly philocafés are given. We also have other spaces, such as two homes for the elderly, children's libraries, the International Organization for the Promotion of Reading, IBBY, and some cafeterias. Today we hold philocafes with different frequencies or on a weekly and biweekly basis in 16 fixed spaces and events such as book fairs. Last year the Philosophy in the City team held more than 700 philocafés and philosophy workshops with children. We organized virtually the first international colloquium "Thinking outside the Classroom. Philosophy in the City" with researchers from different countries. Several members of the team are working on their thesis within this project on different topics: a manual for animators of philosophy cafés (published), a psychology thesis on the Socratic dialogue, an evaluation of the impact of the philocafés on the café-thinkers and others on philosophy for children. We also made some publications: a book on the topics of the colloquium and a manual for animators. This is, roughly speaking, the history of the project of Philosophy in the city.

### *The team*

Perhaps one of the most interesting things are the achievements that are difficult to measure, for example, the cohesion of the group and the friendly and supportive atmosphere that has characterized it: on the one hand a great respect for people and their positions, and on the other a great cooperation between them either to prepare Philocafés or to support each other in the realization of their theses. I think this is one of the greatest achievements and one of the reasons why new members have been joining the team. We currently have 25 members and are starting a new *Filolab* to respond to students who have requested it. The team meets weekly to present proposals, follow up on particular projects, raise doubts, and reflect on them.

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