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Urban Problems and Policies in Latin America: Truths and Fallacies

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Introduction

I will attempt to summarize, in this presentation, some of the research I have carried out during different periods of my academic career, and to reframe some of its conclusions in the context of the conditions that prevailed at the time. I will also explain why we began to explore new ways of reinterpreting data already analyzed. This review will be placed in the context of the field of Latin American urban studies and specifically within certain thematic and theoretical trends. Our research was part of a collective work which at the outset was linked to a group of investigators engaged in a continued process of theoretical discussions and presentation of research advances and results. Likewise, in order to be able to reflect on the veracity and relevance of the aforementioned conclusions, I will attempt to compare them with recent perspectives on the status of Latin American cities, dealing mainly with social and urban policies. Commenting on proposed solutions and programs, in light of certain studies undertaken, is a useful way of revealing the social influence of urban studies, even if they do not fall into the category of action-research.

With 8.5% of the world population, 14% of the urban population and four of the world's 20 mega cities in the year 2000 (Mexico City, São Paulo, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro), Latin America has a high level of urbanization, far exceeding that of other Third World regions. Nevertheless, the similarity of this level of urbanization with that of the world's more developed regions does not mean that it shares the same level of economic development. Whereas in 1970, 37% of the poor were urban residents, by 1999 this figure had risen to 62%, since nowadays the largest concentration of poor families is found precisely in cities. As for the differences between countries and their evolution in recent decades, in 1950, only three of the 22 countries included in the region (Uruguay, Argentina and Chile) had over 50% of their population in urban areas, whereas by 2000, this was the case in 18 countries (Lattes, Rodríguez and Villa, 2004).

Studies within the Context of Latin American Urban Research

Beginning in the 1960s urban research in Latin America has evolved at different rates according to the historical specificities of each country. Together with the definition of new research issues and various conceptual approaches, urban studies progressed from the search for explanations of hyper-urbanization and marginalization within the framework of the theory of modernization, particularly during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, to theorizations based on political economy and Marxist urban sociology during the following period, until the mid 1980s, when there was a predominance of more local perspectives. These perspectives were less focused on dominant paradigms, and there was a clear emergence of new thematic concerns that led, particularly from the 1990s onwards, to the consideration of globalization as a useful resource for explaining several aspects of urbanization. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s differences were found among the topics researched in various groups of countries¹, the changes that took place during the 1980s led to a noticeable rapprochement among the topics. For a variety of reasons, these topics became critical cross sections of Latin American societies. They were related to urban poverty, social division of space, local government, social movements, environment and security².

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1. In the early 1990s, I took part in an evaluation of Latin American urban research, which was part of a broader study on Third World countries, coordinated by Richard Stren and the Center for Urban and Community Studies of the University of Toronto, Canada. Latin America was divided into three sub-regions and the researchers in charge of each one submitted full reports on the issues and disciplines involved, as well as the institutional context of each case (Stren, 1995).
 2. Although the issues dealt with are undoubtedly linked to the problems existing in each country, they have not all received the same amount of attention from the academic community, which also depends on the theoretical and methodological advances of the disciplines involved, researchers' access to information, training, skills and experience as well as institutional, financial and political factors. But research processes also have their own dynamics, linked to researchers' scientific priorities and academic evolution, their belonging to certain groups or trends within their area of study, not to mention the influence, particularly in our field, of scholars from large centers that produce new ideas and conceptual frameworks (Schteingart 1995 and 2000).

Within this context, I think it is essential to comment on the succession of issues selected, as well as their links with studies by other Latin American colleagues with similar analytical perspectives with whom I have worked for years, either by engaging in shared studies within the same research project, or independently, while exchanging points of view and interpretations of the changing reality through academic meetings that contributed to the consolidation of our field at both the national and the regional level.

Housing and Urban Land Issues in the 1970s and 1980s

This has been a recurrent topic within urban studies although, in recent years, the housing problem has been less important than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, due to the emergence, as I mentioned earlier, of new urban research issues.

From the mid 1970s onwards, in certain Latin American countries, particularly Mexico, a new approach to housing studies began to arise. This happened due to a certain degree of political openness that encouraged the development of new critical approaches in the social sciences, together with the creation of housing and land institutions and programs that produced a demand for studies and proposals together with a propitious climate for the development of research on these issues. During this period, our studies included housing policies in Mexico, at a time when different orientations began to change the approach that had predominated during the previous two decades. For example, it was thought at the time that defining the housing problem entailed describing the physical characteristics of housing and pointing out the discrepancies between them and what people actually needed. This, in turn, determined the actions to be taken. Such an orientation was based on the conception of the capitalist state and its limitations because of its class definition, the theoretical developments concerning the social agents who produced the city's built environment as well as the accumulation of capital in the promotional and construction sectors (which in turn were based on the cycle of capital and the economic logic of the real estate business). These categories were at the center of the analyses and emerged as new, attractive approaches for providing an explanatory framework that overcame the severe limitations of more traditional theories. A major change occurred between the

3. This did not happen in Southern Cone countries such as Chile, Argentina and to a certain extent Brazil, due to the presence of dictatorships that prevented the free development of the social sciences.

housing studies of the 1950s and 1960s and those that began to be developed from the mid-1970s onwards, which, with a few minor differences, have prevailed until the present days, at least among a considerable number of researchers.

In the first study we conducted in Mexico on public housing policy, we emphasized the processes of production, exchange and consumption that took place within a certain economic and political context. It occurred at a time when, instead of referring to the state's withdrawal, as we shall see below, we described the establishment of new institutions created to deal with different social groups, while pointing out their structural class limitations and their relations with the capitalist sector of construction (Garza and Schteingart, 1977). In this study, however, these relations were not very clear. Only later, as a result of our research on the promotional sector, were we able to determine the specific practices of other social actors who operated within the process of housing production⁴ (Schteingart, 1989). It should be pointed out that studies on the capitalist agents that participate in the production process of the built environment were not very common, despite the fact that there was an awareness of their importance in explaining their influence on the high cost of a basic asset for families. The emphasis on other issues as well as the theoretical and empirical difficulties inherent in this type of analysis prevented further research.

Urban land is an intrinsic part of the housing problem, which has undergone a steep price increase particularly in large cities, with negative consequences on the organization of urban space. Although studies on land prices began to proliferate, it was difficult to prove their link with the increase in housing prices, the inability of large sectors of the population to gain access to the formal land market and to explain the issue of irregular settlements.

Conversely, we felt that the urbanization of land corresponding to agrarian nuclei (communal and "ejido" land)) was useful for describing the social processes involved in the expansion of cities, specifically in Mexico City, where the rapid growth of its periphery became a key issue for urban researchers. In the late 1970s, we showed how the capital city had spread over

4. Real estate promotion research that took some of the theoretical elements presented by French urban sociology, enabled us to discover the broad network of social relations and capitals invested in the housing production, supported by both private and public financing, since the 1970s, which underwent a series of transformations over the past two decades.

communal and “ejido” land through mechanisms that implied ambiguous links with the laws in force and had adverse social consequences for poor families (Schteingart, 1989). Many other studies on both Mexico City and other cities in the country helped explain the role of this type of land in urban development.

Irregular settlements

The issue of irregular settlements, which is partly linked to the preceding one, has undoubtedly played a key role in Latin American urban studies since they are extremely important in the spatial organization of cities in the region. This importance varies according to the social structure and historic development of each country but has also increased owing to the limitations of housing programs in the context of trade liberalization, adjustment programs and the development of neo-liberal policies.

Studies in the 1970s and 1980s, unlike previous ones on marginalization, were characterized by the fact that they analyzed illegal means of appropriating land, the processes of regularization and consolidation of neighborhoods and the urban struggles that led poor settlers to confront the state and other social agents. It became increasingly obvious that there was a need to examine their insertion in the labor force in order to disprove theory regarding the possible coincidence between “marginalization” at work and spatial “marginalization”. Another important aspect of these settlements at that time was linked to popular housing production and self-construction, which enabled key elements to be compiled on the various forms of housing production, whether modern or backward, simple or combined, within the Latin American context. It is worth pointing out that research on these urban phenomena was carried out on the basis of case studies, which partly restricted the possibility of making broad generalizations, since it was not until very recently that the National Population and Housing Censuses included specific information on irregular settlements as *favelas* in Brazil and *villas miseria* in Argentina. However, in other countries such vital information has yet to be included in these national survey instruments that can cover a country’s entire urban environment.⁵

5. However, case studies provide more in-depth knowledge of certain urban social processes, even though there is a risk of choosing examples that may not be very representative of a more global reality.

One crucial aspect that partly defines and characterizes irregular settlements is precisely the question of access to urban land, but it is also important to point out that this irregularity may reveal differences in Latin American countries, since there are several legal situations and ways of violating the laws in force, as well as programs for regularizing land ownership in the various national and urban contexts (Azuela and Schteingart, 1991).⁶

During that period, using a case study to examine how illegality emerged in Mexico on land that was not privately owned, we analyzed the largest popular settlement in the Mexico City Metropolitan Zone (MCMZ), and probably in the country (Nezahualcōyotl, largely state-owned). We found out that illegality was partly a consequence of confusion regarding the history of land ownership, which was not in the interest of either the public sector or illegal property developers to clarify. We also studied the strategies used by real estate promoters in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to acquire land reserves that would enable them to produce large housing developments on the metropolitan periphery. In hindsight, these case studies certainly helped to explain how urban sprawl, the social division of space and the concentration of different social strata have taken place. We will return to these issues later (Schteingart, 1989).

Taking Stock of Social and Urban Policies in the 1990s and 2000s

The 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century witnessed the consolidation of socio-political reforms that had begun years earlier and that pointed to a significant changes in state intervention in general, and in urban issues in particular. This new scenario, which, albeit to varying degrees, emerged in several countries in the region, led us to incorporate new aspects that had not previously been included in urban studies, deal with other issues, and place more emphasis on the reduction of the state's role and the negative effects of

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