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Latin American and Caribbean Urban Development

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Abstract

The new development agendas confirmed in the year 2015 evidence an increased global interest in cities and urban challenges. In Latin America and the Caribbean, cities have long been an established topic of study and debate. This exploration gives a brief overview of current research on urban development in the region and suggests fruitful avenues for future research. Following different ideological trends in twentieth-century urban studies, we currently see more pragmatic frameworks and a belief in technocratic solutions. Some scholars consider Latin American and Caribbean cities to be the world's new signposts in urban development, given their role as sites of innovations in politics, architecture and urban design; we see potential here for urban scholars of the region to move beyond technocratic language. In addition, we argue for an area studies approach to these cities that uses the framework of the region as a heuristic device to unsettle global urbanist epistemologies that privilege North-to-South mobilities in both policy and theory. *Keywords:* urban studies, urban development, policy mobilities, Latin America, Caribbean.

Resumen: El desarrollo urbano latinoamericano y caribeño

Las nuevas agendas de desarrollo confirmadas en el año 2015 reflejan un mayor interés mundial en las ciudades y en los retos urbanos. En Latinoamérica y en el Caribe, las ciudades llevan mucho tiempo siendo un tema habitual de estudio y debate. Esta exploración ofrece un resumen breve de las investigaciones actuales sobre desarrollo urbano en la región y sugiere caminos fructíferos para futuras investigaciones. Siguiendo las distintas tendencias ideológicas en los estudios urbanos del siglo XX, actualmente observamos marcos más pragmáticos y una creencia en soluciones tecnocráticas. Algunos investigadores consideran las ciudades latinoamericanas y caribeñas como los nuevos referentes mundiales en desarrollo urbano, dado su papel como centros de innovación en política, arquitectura y diseño urbano; vemos potencial para que los investigadores urbanos de la región traspasen el discurso tecnocrático. Además, abogamos por un enfoque de estudios regionales para estas ciudades que utilice el marco de la región como un instrumento heurístico para desequilibrar las epistemologías urbanistas globales que privilegian las movilidades del Norte al Sur tanto en políticas como en teorías. *Palabras clave:* estudios urbanos, desarrollo urbano, movilidades de política, Latinoamérica, Caribe.

Trends in Latin American and Caribbean urban development

The year 2015 is one in which new development agendas are being set – as we write, in late 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have just been confirmed, and the preparations for Habitat III (the UN urban development conference and agenda) are in full swing. These events and the discussions surrounding them evidence an increased global interest in cities and urban challenges, especially in the Global South. In Latin America and the Caribbean, cities have been an established topic of study and debate for decades. A discussion of the past and the future of Latin American and Caribbean studies, the focus of this special issue of *ERLACS*, would be incomplete without a reflection on urban development and theory.

This exploration gives a brief overview of the current state of urban studies in the region and suggests new fruitful avenues for future research. After exploring several dimensions of urban development that characterized the region in recent years, we move on to reflect on broader analytical approaches that have been in vogue among urbanists. While many studies lump together Latin America and the Caribbean as one region, it is a given that there are major differences between Latin American urbanism and Caribbean urbanism in terms of scale and historical development, as well as much differentiation within each region (for example between South and Central America, or between the Francophone and the Anglophone Caribbean). However, there are sufficient parallels in urban trajectories, policy challenges and theories for us to analyse regional patterns of urban development and trends in urban research.

Urban form and mobilities

While much earlier urban research emphasized the specific challenges of rapid urban growth faced by Latin American megacities, often addressing the negative social consequences of spatial segregation, recent studies have highlighted new types of urban form emerging in the region. As the growth of megacities such as Mexico City or Lima slowed down in the second half of the twentieth century, urbanization has intensified in other areas. Smaller and secondary cities have grown, and peri-urbanization and con-urbanization processes have resulted in new and differently shaped urban regions, blurring the urban-rural divide (Klaufus, 2010; UN Habitat, 2012). The Caribbean situation is more mixed, but on average some two thirds of the population lives in urban areas, with the Bahamas and Cayman Island heading the list. The small scale of Caribbean territories means that only the larger islands have secondary cities of any significance. In smaller Caribbean islands, the tendency of middle-class urban residents to commute to cities from fishing or agrarian communities along the coast has resulted in ‘coastal gentrification’ (Valdés Pizzini, 2006).

Migration between rural and urban areas has been complemented by urban-to-urban migration (including between cities in different nations). The decreas-

ing costs of transportation enable populations that dwell in multiple cities, whether within one country or transnationally. For instance, residents of Peruvian cities such as Huancayo or Ayacucho often have second homes in Lima, while many people in the Caribbean diaspora – especially retirees – may circulate between cities in North America and Europe and in their home countries. These flows sustain the role of cities as multicultural nodes in global networks that have been long established in the region.

Climate change and sustainable urban development

The impact of global forces on Latin American and Caribbean cities is also evident in the challenges posed by climate change. Stimulated by international donors and funding, various cities have developed climate change mitigation policies, seeking to reduce emissions by, for instance, developing new public transportation systems (such as Bus Rapid Transit systems) or alternative mobility systems focused on bicycling. Ecological and economic motives often coincide in such policies. In addition, the efforts of urban administrations concentrate on adaptation to increased incidences of drought, flooding and hurricanes (Hardoy & Romero Lankao, 2011). Critical scholars question the social implications of mitigation policies, which tend to affect the poor disproportionately (Nygren, 2015). Especially in the Caribbean, where the majority of cities are located in flood-prone coastal zones, there is growing concern regarding the social and economic implications of climate change.

The impact of climate change on urban life is not always immediate, in contrast to the ‘brown environmental problems’ of garbage, sewage, and air pollution (Jaffe, 2016). In many cases, the region’s sustained patterns of urban growth (albeit in changing constellations) have gone hand in hand with an awareness of the need to address urban environmental problems. Attempts to improve solid waste management, reduce air pollution and enhance potable water systems have gained prominence. Efforts to make cities more sustainable are also evident in resilience programming (Grove, 2014) and post-disaster urban reconstruction. These efforts have been directed at the damages wrought by El Niño flooding or hurricanes, but the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which destroyed much of Port-au-Prince, also highlighted the desire to ‘build back better’.

Inequality, violence and exclusion

Current socio-economic statistics show a reduction of the region’s urban population living in poverty, a positive development informed by various factors, from increased remittances to conditional cash programmes such as those in Brazil. However, this reduction in poverty levels has not resulted in decreased levels of social inequality. In fact, many cities are characterized by even greater disparities between rich and poor residents than in previous decades, a ten-

dency that is expressed in the increased socio-spatial polarization (UN-Habitat, 2012; Dinzey-Flores, 2013).

These inequalities are often connected to insecurity, discrimination and everyday crime and violence, although it should be noted that there is major variation within the region. The high levels of violence associated with (transnational) criminal organizations are found primarily in the ‘murder capitals’ of Central America, Mexico, Brazil and Venezuela, and in select Caribbean cities (Kingston, Santo Domingo, Haiti). In many Latin American and Caribbean cities, criminal violence is not as urgent a concern.

In cities such as Rio de Janeiro, San Salvador or Santo Domingo, city governments have promoted forms of punitive policing that tend to exacerbate urban inequalities, targeting not only the poor but specific racialized populations (e.g. Jones & Rodgers, 2015). In contrast, a number of urban administrations have sought to counter insecurity, segregation and discrimination through progressive ‘social urbanism’ policies, for example by investing in centrally located affordable housing (such as the Quinta Monroy project in Iquique, Chile, designed by Elemental) or by developing transportation systems that connect marginalized *barrios* to city centres (such as the Metrocables in Caracas, Rio de Janeiro and Medellín). Across the region, affordable housing policies have become more efficient and demand-driven, to minimize the flow of money to construction companies and to avoid corruption. Most popular is the conditional ‘A-B-C model’, which allocates subsidies and mortgages to vulnerable households provided they have bank savings.

Urban regeneration policies targeting impoverished inner-city neighbourhoods have had both punitive and ameliorative effects – in cities such as Quito or Willemstad, historical city centres have become safer and livelier, creating new economic opportunities related to tourism. However, these processes often involve gentrification and sometimes violent displacement of low-income residents and their economic activities (Bromley and Mackie, 2009). Current regeneration activities also connect to the global trends of developing ‘creative cities’ and ‘smart cities’.

Social movements, democratization, participation

The region’s inequalities have not gone uncontested – Latin American cities in particular have a long tradition of social movements utilizing urban public space to claim a range of rights, from labour and housing rights to LGBT rights. Recent social mobilizations have also revived the Right to the City debate, with activists, academics and politicians endeavouring to embed full citizenship rights in urban law. The 2001 City Statute in Brazil is at the forefront of developments to establish such a new legal-urban order (Fernandes, 2007). In recent years such forms of collective claims-making have become more spontaneous, taking a less formal and more ephemeral form, often mobilizing crowds rapidly through social media. We see new forms of activism emerging,

such as the *Pokemones* of Santiago de Chile, where young people engaged in anti-establishment ‘kiss-ins’ at dance parties to challenge elite norms of propriety. Another example is São Paulo’s *rolezinhos*, which involved youngsters from the city’s favelas organizing meet-ups in shopping malls, with thousands of them descending on these spaces of consumption at the same time, to have fun but also to assert their belonging. Collective mobilizations in public space are not always progressive; in Jamaica, for instance, which has a limited history of social movements, the organization of homophobic protests has resulted in much larger numbers of demonstrators in the streets of Kingston than any other cause.

A range of cities has moved towards more participatory modes of governance, both in response to public indignation about political indifference or marginalization, and in connection to broader development trends. Examples of this move include the incorporation of participatory planning and budgeting, and different forms of community governance. While these shifts in governance can involve increased democratization, they are not always effective in reducing social gaps. Participatory programmes sometimes produce new inequalities as the poorest residents are rarely involved, or (as in the case of security governance) are associated with neoliberal forms of responsabilization (e.g. Nuijten, et al., 2012).

Shifts in urban analysis and new avenues for future research

The various developments in urban life described briefly above have been analysed through what can be termed ‘pendular paradigms’, alternating between a political economy approach and a more culturalist frame (Klaufus, 2015; cf. Rodgers et al., 2012). The early culturalists drew on a utopian urban imaginary, approaching the city as a site of modernity and progress, where social development could be achieved, and modern citizens moulded, through urban planning and design. Later iterations of this approach focused on urban cultural heritage – from colonial architecture to indigenous, Afro-Latin American and Afro-Caribbean popular culture – as a powerful resource for (tourism-driven) development. This hopeful focus tended to overlook power struggles and inequality. In contrast, the political economy paradigm has resonated with a more dystopian urban imaginary. Early scholars working in this tradition emphasized the dependent and disadvantaged position of Latin American and Caribbean cities in the world system (e.g. Cross, 1979). This was followed by a large body of work that called attention to urban exclusion, exploitation and suffering, in the wake of structural adjustment and neoliberal policies, although this literature did not always account for the creative capacities of the poor (e.g. Portes & Roberts, 2005).

Only recently do we see a more integrated approach in paradigms, with scholars approaching the city as a dynamic site of cultural and social innovation, without losing sight of the persistence of inequality and both new and old

forms of exclusion. In this vein, we expect to see Latin American and Caribbean urban studies in the near future attending more closely to different forms of urban popular culture in relation to urban political economy and socio-spatial inequality. The increased intertwining of real and virtual space can be expected to generate new approaches in urban studies on the divides of gender, class and ethnicity (e.g. Friedman, 2005). Musical genres and traditions of street dances, such as dancehall, *funk proibidão* and reggaeton, are not only discursive spaces where critiques of urban inequality may be formulated. They also have a political potential, and a range of powerful actors – from political parties to gangs – may seek to harness the popularity of these cultural expressions to make their governance role appear more legitimate (Jaffe, 2012; Sneed, 2007). As digital technology – from illegally downloadable mp3s of the latest hits to YouTube channels dedicated to street dances – allows the Latin American and Caribbean diaspora in North America and Europe to participate in these forms of popular culture, these musical genres also reinforce the transnational connections between urban spaces ‘here’ and ‘there’.

As scholars begin to move beyond the culturalist/political economy dichotomous paradigms, we see the emergence of (seemingly) less ideological theoretical frameworks. Following the ideological shifts in twentieth-century Latin American urban studies, from urbanism to developmentalism and culturalism, twenty-first-century scholarship can seem overly pragmatic. Many discussions of on Latin American and Caribbean urban development are dominated by a belief in technocratic solutions, with much emphasis on model cities, ‘best practices’ or ‘what works’.

Some scholars consider this pragmatist approach to be a powerful bridgehead in overcoming the region’s peripheral position in the world, with Latin American and Caribbean cities as the world’s new signposts (McGuirk, 2014). We see potential here for urban scholars of the region to go beyond technocratic language and address the politics at stake more explicitly. Not that there are no grounds for optimism or ‘idealistic pragmatism’ – Latin American and Caribbean cities have decades of on-the-ground experience with phenomena such as the solidarity economy, the Right to the City debate, and other forms of urban organizing that are currently gaining ground in the rest of the world. But how do small-scale urban initiatives gain larger purchase? Who decides which urban practices are ‘best’ and who lobbies for their implementation? Which institutions act as urban power brokers in contexts where the traditional role of labour unions or the Catholic Church have diminished?

Taking up such questions could lead urban scholars to focus more critical attention on the increasingly important role of Latin American mayors – empowered by decentralization – in developing, promoting and exporting ‘the Curitiba model’ or ‘the Bogotá model’. (With the exception of a number of influential urban politicians such as Martinique’s Serge Letchimy, the small scale of many Caribbean territories has limited the impact of role of local government and that of mayors.) Analyses of Latin American mayors and their

models have been relatively uncritical; they tend to reproduce the ‘best cities’ language of development organizations, although they also point to enduring corruption and inequality (Berney, 2010; Gilbert, 2006, 2015).

Similarly, we propose that future research should pay more attention to the transnational roots and routes of specific urban policy models or paradigms. This could involve drawing on recent ‘policy mobilities’ literature, much of which traces the movement of urban policies between different cities and studies their mutations, as exogenous elements become embedded in new institutional contexts (e.g. McCann & Ward, 2012). For Latin American and Caribbean cities, such an approach would mean problematizing formally non-ideological urban buzzwords and studying the political fields in which urban ‘success’ models are produced, as well as analysing the increased interconnectedness of mayors, planners and consultants worldwide. It would also mean attending more critically to the mismatches that occur when trendy solutions (from transport systems to democratic innovations) are imported or exported without accounting for local political economy and culture. If policy strategies move faster than policy evaluations, urban success stories may become cautionary urban tales. As with the mobilities of popular music, studying policy mobilities not only encourages a comparative perspective to the cities of the region – it also emphasizes the need to understand these cities as always interconnected, as part of both intra-regional and inter-regional urban networks.

Conclusion

Compared with African or Asian urban studies, Latin American and Caribbean urban studies is a well-established academic field of knowledge that continues to be expanded and renewed as scholars elaborate new approaches and develop cross-disciplinary insights. Case studies and theories developed in Latin American and Caribbean cities also contribute to understandings of cities elsewhere. The ‘proto-globalization’ that heralded the birth of Caribbean cities as nodes in global exchange networks is only one example of how specific urban genealogies can inform trans-regional theoretical debates. Such analyses obviously transcend the pragmatic approaches of mobile policies and ‘best practices’ lists. The established body of literature developed in and on the region’s cities presents a foundation of knowledge from which research can be developed that works towards a more encompassing and comparative scope. This is especially relevant as urban scholars across the world are increasingly interested in forms of comparative urbanism that study intra-regional parallels and variations, in ways that avoid schematic typologies of ‘the Latin American city’ or ‘the African city’ to establish a geographically more nuanced field of urban studies (e.g. Robinson, 2011; Ernstson et al., 2014; Ren & Luger, 2015; Waley 2012). This type of comparative urbanism seeks to retain the advantages offered by an area studies approach – such as an attentiveness to the specificities of history, terri-

tory and place and the importance of proximity – without suggesting regional exceptionalism or developing new forms of parochialism.

Such explorations of regional forms of urbanism connect to global debates on urban theory and area studies. Urban studies scholars such as Ananya Roy (2009) have called for a critical epistemological examination of the ‘geographies of theory’. Emphasizing the locatedness of urban theory, this scholarship recognizes and interrogates genealogies of regional theorization, in a process that both locates and dislocates urban theory. This involves developing an area studies approach to cities that uses the framework of the region as a heuristic device, in a strategically essentialist fashion, but explores the connections between multiple area-based knowledges. As an established field of study with a robust future, then, the role of Latin American and Caribbean urban scholarship goes beyond analysing and critiquing local and regional political and intellectual agendas – this research can also play an important role in unsettling global urbanist epistemologies that privilege traditional North-to-South mobilities in both policy and theory.

* * *

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