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BETTER MEGACITY GOVERNANCE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

LOCAL RESPONSES AND ADAPTIVE MODERNITY

Edited by
Yuan Ren



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Urbanization in Latin America

There are currently 33 megacities in the world (urban agglomerations that exceed 10,000,000 inhabitants) and six can be located in Latin America (México City, San Pablo, Río de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Bogotá and Lima), which is, furthermore, one of the most urbanized regions in the world (Buzai, 2020). The process of constant transformation in the cities throughout this region is deeply connected to our colonial history, adding specific dynamics given by immigration, industrialization during the second half of the 20th century and the fragmentation that took place during the early stages of globalization. These “territorial settings” provide a picture where we can appreciate not only the effects of changing infrastructure and development in these areas, but also the interactions of the populations in these territories and their movements throughout it. The need of implementing effective policies and urban governance structures in these regions cannot neglect these realities.

Urbanization is considered as a process of population concentration in a reduced number of settlements. This process, along with the modernization of society and industrialization, became one of the most characteristic social phenomena of the 20th century. In this sense, urbanization processes occurred first in the industrialized countries, modifying the production pattern and thus driving massive displacements from the countryside to the industrial city. This process also spread to Third-World countries (“global south” today), driving the polarization of their resources in privileged enclaves and, at the same time, the unequal development and internal differentiation of their territories and societies.

This situation was reproduced in Latin America more markedly than in other regions of the world, giving rise to urbanization with distinctive characteristics. After World War II, due to the voluminous transfer of population from the countryside to the cities, the increase in the urban population caused by large flows of migrants fleeing the war and the high rates of vegetative growth, the urbanization process was consolidated in this region as an unusual

and unstoppable phenomenon. With the accelerated process of urbanization in Latin America, responsible for metropolitan concentration, the crudeness of the injustices of the social system implemented in its territory had also surfaced (Panadero Moya, 2001).

Latin America is the developing region with the highest urbanization rate on the planet. Today, the urban population in the region represents more than 82% of the total and this percentage is expected to reach 90% by 2050 (Serebrisky, 2014). As a result, cities in the region show a significant concentration of economic activity, but at the same time present high levels of inequality, unemployment, insecurity, environmental pollution, lack of housing and deficient public services, among others.

The urbanization process, despite its differences between countries in the region, had three central features: informality and precariousness of housing, reverse urbanization and a type of consolidation of the urban structure and conditions organized by commercialization and asymmetry in the relationship between social, public and private actors. In other words, this urbanization process brought with it structural problems in the mode of production of urban space that affected the quality of life of its residents and configured a regime of multiple urban

inequalities. At some point, urban debates assumed that access to housing was a private matter and that housing policies should be approached from an economic policy perspective. Urban social policy, in many cases, was assumed to be the partial improvement of certain areas of public access. In most cases, urban fragmentation was imposed not only as a city model, but also as a strategy for public and private intervention (Dammert, 2020).

Although it is difficult to put together particular urban processes and problems in Latin American countries, we can group some urban models that have taken shape throughout history. Segura (2021) citing Borsdorf (2003) brings a proposal for modelling the urbanization process of large Latin American cities, which have gone through four stages:

(1) The compact city: characteristic of the colonial period, with its centre in the main square. Consisting on a grid of streets in which the distance of the house from the central square expressed the social position of its inhabitants, which was decreasing from the centrality to the urban periphery.

(2) The sectoral city: characteristic of the first phase of rapid urbanization (1820-1920), in which the typical spatial structuring principle was sectoral differentiation guided by linear structures.

The development of the first industrial zones established near the accesses is also observed.

(3) The polarized city: it is characteristic of the second phase of rapid urbanization (1920-1970). In this period, a marked contrast between the rich city and the poor city is consolidated, as a result of the industrialization process and the massive rural exodus, which generated a rapid growth of the urban population through internal migratory flows.

(4) The fragmented city: from the 1970s to the present, neoliberal economic dynamics are expressed through a

principle of socio-spatial structuring characterized by the reduction of the distance between social groups and the proliferation of barriers and security devices.

This study through the main configurations and organizations of urban space allows us to diachronically consider the changes produced in the cities of our region. And how the territorial transformations are expressed in relation to the actors, the processes and the actions carried out. The current pattern of urbanization is increasingly contested by non-state actors.

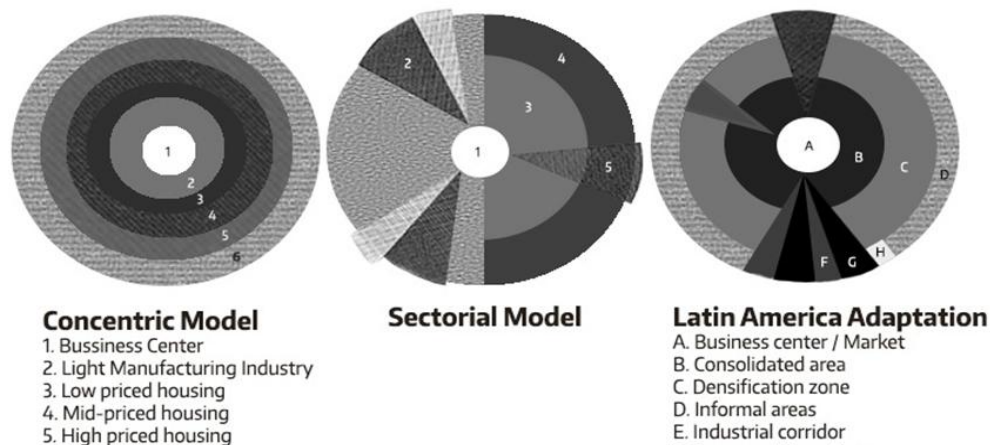


Figure 1. The three models of segregation of social space.
Source: prepared by the authors, based on Segura (2021) citing Borsdorf (2003).

Housing Informality and the Urban Gap

The studies collected on the subject of informal settlements date back to the 1960s, when the phenomenon was characterized by the rise of Developmentalist Policies. Policies that considered that the phenomenon of the “Villas” would disappear once the population that they considered “leftovers” would be incorporated into the productive system of the “new modernity”.

In reality, the “myth” of progress did not materialize the expected growth rates, giving rise to processes such as polarization and hyper-urbanization of the periphery, generating a scenario of deterritorialization ¹ accentuating marginality (urban gap) and progressive deterioration, both of public services and the labour market.

From the mid 1970’s onwards, with the opening of most Latin American countries to international capital (FDI) and the drastic reduction of the role of the State, successive policies were implemented that only aggravated the socioeconomic situation.

The 1980s, on the other hand, marked the “democratization” of poverty in Latin America. This period witnessed the proliferation of the formation of popular settlements through the occupation of land, which was a novel practice in several countries of the region².

In the 1990s, the neoliberal model was imposed, which deepened the precarious socioeconomic situation of large social groups. This period witnessed the adoption of neoliberal policies, under the prescriptions of the called Washington Consensus, which had great repercussions in urban contexts, generating processes of privatization of public services (water and sanitation, gas, electricity, telephony, railroad and subway transportation, highways, post services, etc.), which eventually resulted in deficit and costly services. This situation was compounded by the growing unemployment of the most disadvantaged urban sectors of society and the development of labour flexibility policies that produced situations of vulnerability of the social fabric at all levels (Cravino, 2018).

However, housing informality should not be understood only in terms of the “settlements” of the popular sectors. In

¹ Dissolution of constructions in the territory of the different social actors, over time.

² In the case of Argentina in particular, these

neighborhoods are known as “asentamientos” (settlements) or peripheries.

this sense, Segura (2021) restates the ideas and urban attributes of informality in the Latin American context, where Ananya Roy (2010, 2013) draws her attention to the fact that European and North American theories make informality invisible, even those critical theories on the production of space (Segura, 2021). The role of the State in these processes of urban informality is also noteworthy. A key actor in most urban planning and management policies. In this sense, Segura (2021) brings the postulates of Ananya Roy who questioned three common assumptions when thinking about informality:

(1) Informality does not imply the absence of the State per se, but rather a form of State presence. In this sense, it is the State that determines what is informal from what is not. In many cases, it is the State itself that operates informally.

(2) Informality is not a traditional or pre-capitalist remnant. On the contrary, it is an increasingly generalized form of capitalist production of space that reproduces an unequal geography and increases the poverty gap.

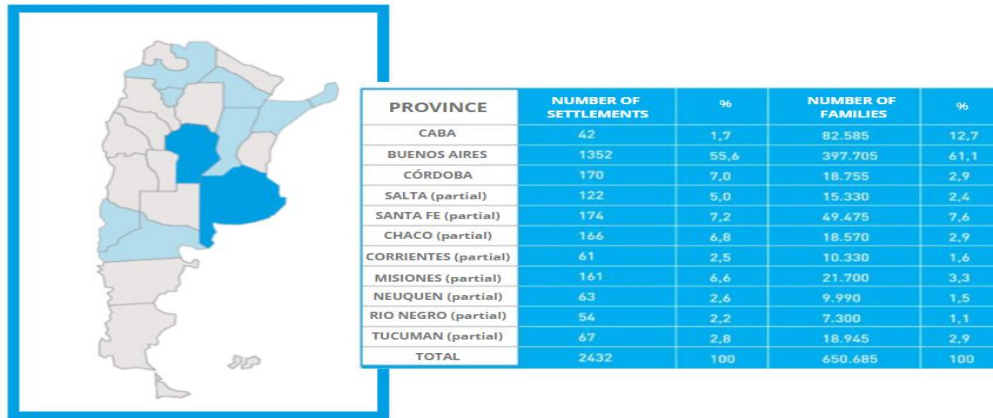
(3) It is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but it is internally differentiated. Informality is not limited to marginal spaces, but rather is a characteristic of

private urban enterprises.

It is a fact that income inequality is increasing in many urban areas, which means that low-income groups will be increasingly excluded from employment opportunities, basic services, access to housing, political representation, social and legal protection and recreation. Urban poverty carries with it a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability, both individual and communitarian (World Bank, 2000). Moreover, it has been demonstrated that successive international macroeconomic crises have had a very serious impact on the global south, where the possibilities for recovery are always slower, more costly and generate an increase in the social gap. This situation has also been seen in the crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic in Latin America.

Based on the 2016 Survey of Informal Settlements of the Techo Organization in Argentina ¹, there are at least 2,400 informal settlements where more than 650,000 families live. This gives as a result that one in ten people live in a precarious habitat in the eleven provincial territories surveyed (only Buenos Aires, the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and Córdoba completely), which cover 67% of the country's population.

¹ Last available statistic.



Source: Techo Organization. Year 2016

But in the first place we have to explain that the concept of informal settlements includes two types of spatial appropriation: one is the slums or emergency villas and others are the settlements. Although both have in common the informality of land tenure and occupation, we must clarify their particularities.

In this sense, Cravino (2001) describes slums based on the following characteristics:

(a) They produce very irregular urban plots. In other words, they are not blocky neighbourhoods, but rather organized around intricate corridors, where vehicles generally cannot pass.

(b) The houses are built with waste materials. Over time, some inhabitants build their masonry houses, but the result is always deficit housing without urban

planning.

(c) They have a high population density.

(d) They generally have a good location, in relation to production and consumption centres, in areas where land is currently scarce.

(e) In the city of Buenos Aires, they settled on fiscally owned lands.

(f) The settlers originally considered them a transitory habitat towards a “possible” expectation of change, which in general did not materialize.

(g) The inhabitants are low-skilled or informal workers.

(h) Its inhabitants are stigmatized by the surrounding society.

For his part, Cravino (2001) maintains

that in the 1980s and 1990s a series of occupations with their own characteristics began to develop in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. The new “settlements” are distinguished by:

(i) Their urban layouts tend to be regular and planned, resembling the usual blockage of lots sold on the land market, that is, in the form of a grid.

(ii) The residents perceive it as an improvement in the short and medium term and not as a transitory solution (as is the case in slums).

(iii) They are generally organized collectively, with a prior strategy (obtaining cadastral data, forming a group that will initiate the taking, seeking support from nearby organizations, etc.).

(iv) They are mostly located on private land. The lands were generally dumps, grasslands, or flooded, so the owners had no interest or possibility in exploiting it economically or suffered regulatory restrictions for this.

(v) Immediately after the invasion of the land, they seek to mediate its “legitimation” with the State, claiming the opportunity to pay for it and own it.

In both cases (slums and settlements) we witness similar dynamics playing their roles to enhance the presence of informal settlements: a process of internal

migration to the metropolitan area from other areas of the country; a raising development that demands intensive human capital but is unable to provide these new populations the adequate means of living; urban tissue that cannot address properly the housing demands and with a State that, as described earlier, presents also an “informal” addressing to these issues.



Urban gap. Source: Política Argentina (2016)

Informal Housing Strategies

According to forecasts made by several multilateral agencies (United Nations, World Bank, International Organization for Migration, among others), the rate of urbanization in developing countries (or global south) is increasing. Informal housing by self-construction has been a recurrent typology that has occupied 32% of the total housing built in Latin America (Burgos et al., 2011). These challenges

depend fundamentally on the quality of urban management and on the national and local policies developed by the States (World Bank, 2000).

The main causes of the problem of the increase in informal housing in the global south have been the product of: low incomes -explained above- which therefore generate limited capacity of households to pay for land or housing; the lack of investment in infrastructure by local governments and their inability to anticipate, articulate and implement well-designed land and housing policies (Acioly, 2006) and the development of informal strategies (privatization of informal urbanization¹) to access housing and land, all of which has had an impact on the increase in precariousness.

In this regard, the main informal housing strategies proposed in the global south have been the following:

(1) Implementation of basic improvements in social and economic services and security in poor neighbourhoods (urban upgrading). In this sense, the development of this type of urban settlement upgrading programs requires adopting a participatory, comprehensive and financially

sustainable approach, as well as including solutions created with the affected community (King et. al., 2017).

(2) Diagramming of programs for the regularization of the titling of individual properties. These programs are generally costly and of long duration, but they are efficient in helping to reduce informality if they are accompanied by other housing improvement projects. Other programs are aimed at promoting various forms of horizontal property and the establishment of special zones of social interest, as a way of protecting the territory from the “urban poor” (Acioly, 2006)².

(3) Programs that aim to increase the value of land due to public action by local governments are then captured to finance the area’s infrastructure. These actions require a very active government with technical and political backing to be successful. It will also require training professionals who are capable of developing urban economy programs (market logic, establishment of correlations between land prices, land scarcity, regulations, informal land and housing markets, etc.) (Acioly, 2006).

(4) Rental housing support programs (especially in lower-income market

regularizing informal settlements with figures such as usucapion or acquisitive prescription.

¹ According to the United Nations.

² This initiative was carried out in Brazil (Recife and Belo Horizonte), with the objective of

segments) have proven to be effective measures in practice. Governments are required to recognize the wide variety of rental possibilities in informal and formal markets and to develop a well-structured subsidy scheme to avoid distortions that harm the under-served population (King et. al., 2017).

Change the Neoliberal City

Our main reflections will refer to the neoliberal city or those cities where planning is diluted from the gaze and state action, to succumb to the needs and demands of globalization and the market. For Ladizesky (2019), we are currently witnessing the construction of the neoliberal city, that of globalized businesses, bristling with the star skyscrapers of corporations and the high towers where their ruling classes live. On the other hand, it is surrounded by a chaotic industrial periphery, an anarchic belt bisected by highways, mostly inhabited by a working population, where large pockets of misery alternate with comfortable residential enclaves built on filled and landscaped land, close to the highways, provided with all kinds of collective equipment.

The neoliberal city (NLC) focuses on an urban planning of highways and road corridors and the exploitation of

infrastructure and urban services by private companies. In its current version, neoliberal governments grant social subsidies only to the extent that they are essential to ensure governability or to favor private sectors. Suburban areas of poverty only come to the fore during electoral times, through the inauguration of minor but widely publicized social facilities (Ladizesky, 2019).

The development of large (and insecure) cities in Latin America has definitely revealed the enormous social gap that exists. Likewise, there has been a change in the image of the city in the last decades: on the one hand we find “fortified citadels” (private neighborhoods of wealthy classes) and on the other, poor ghettos and, between them, gated neighborhoods with private security (Svampa, 2006). This reality refers to the idea of the existence of social borders that dismiss any desire for equality.

Neoliberalism supports the idea of open markets, competitive and deregulated from state action and any social group. This phenomenon was accompanied by a change in the mode of urban management based on a decrease in intervention and public-state investment. This positioned the private capital at the center of urban development and configuration, while stimulating the development of a Neoliberal dynamics in the production of the city. The State thus stopped acting on

the territory, merely fulfilling a subsidiary role as conditioner and promoter of the transformations of the urban space, which was fundamentally controlled by business strategies with a strong privatization bias (Zapata, 2017). The dual effect of the State withdrawal and the role played by private entrepreneurship contributed to shape an urban geography with substantial gaps that generated an increase in informal housing. On one hand, more developed zones, attractive to capital investment in terms of expected revenue, and marginalized areas with no attention and financing of any source on the other.

Finally, regarding the urbanization in Latin American cities, the present essay finds common areas in the process and

solutions allocated in the most populated urban centers. In these scenarios we find the colonial past and relation with the former metropolis not only as a key element to find these common areas, but also to analyze the continuities and changes that took place in the countries after the independence and through the former and present centuries. The economic transformations, urban developments and social changes in this region of the global south provide us with an overview to address the specific issues in the “urban settings” of megacities as plausible alternatives to the art of governance both vertically (different levels of administration within of the State) and horizontally (joint initiatives between States at all levels).