Latin American Urbanization and the Political Economy of Inequality

by
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Tom Angotti (ed.) *Urban Latin America: Inequalities and Neoliberal Reforms.* Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X211029289

A review of *Urban Latin America: Inequalities and Neoliberal Reforms* is especially fitting for *Latin American Perspectives*, since the book emerged from three special issues of the journal edited by Tom Angotti, including two with Clara Irazábal (Angotti, 2013; Angotti and Irazábal, 2017; Irazábal and Angotti, 2017). Collectively, these issues considered Latin American urbanization in its political economic context. Angotti's contributions to the book foreground the relations between urban Latin America and the global political economy, the inequalities resulting from them, and the struggles shaping the region's cities. The interdisciplinary collection includes works by well-known Latin Americanists positioning the paradox of Latin America's inequalities in the context of neoliberal reforms and globalization. Neoliberalism, an ideology associated with economic liberalization and free-market capitalism, plays a key role in producing urban inequality, which has been explained in terms of uneven geographies and accumulation by dispossession whereby expanded growth produces "ever greater levels of social inequality, as indeed has been the global trend over the last thirty years of neoliberalism" (Harvey, 2004: 73). *Urban Latin America* provides a compelling rationale for studying the urbanization of the region, detailing broad trends and exceptions to the rule. Through rich empirical material, this collection contributes to a deeper understanding of the profound transformations experienced by Latin American cities in response to larger social, economic, and political forces. Since Latin America is exceedingly urban, cities are central to understanding the challenges and inequalities across the region.

Set within the capitalist political economy at local and global levels, *Urban Latin America* highlights three key contradictions defining urban Latin America with particular consequences for its cities—violence, enclaves, and land struggles. For Angotti, violence, such as police violence in Brazilian favelas and drug-related crime in Mexico and Central America, marks Latin America's history of urbanization. Alan Gilbert's chapter shows that violence is intimately linked to inequalities as a feature of the region, although some countries, such as Chile, are highly unequal without exhibiting much violence. Another feature of Latin American urban contexts is the formation of enclaves, including exclusive gated communities in São Paulo (Caldeira, 2000) and the communities at cities' geographic periphery described by Lorena Zárate. While informal settlements are known by many terms, as Zárate explains, they are largely "produced by the people" (30), going beyond 'informal' to recognize multiple practices and struggles involved in city building. Finally, land struggles and the risk of displacement have been pervasive across the region, shaping cities' growth during the twentieth century and access to land and housing. As Irazábal aptly describes, these struggles involve citizenship claims to the right to the city, challenging the neoliberal reforms prevalent across the region. Critical issues include lack of access to formal titles and basic urban services.

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Theoretically, Angotti's focus on structural forces helps to propose alternatives to what he terms the "urban fallacy," the tendency to attribute fundamental challenges to the city rather than to larger structures (Castells, 1977). His discussion is situated within debates on the political economy in which "concrete urban processes" are understood as structurally "conditioned by their connection with economic exigencies, political arrangements, and the socio-cultural milieu" (Walton, 1981: 376). *Urban Latin America* thus shows how a structural understanding frames key problems of Latin American cities that have been the subject of considerable research (Goldfrank and Schrank, 2009; Roberts, 1979). Rather than exhibiting the developed-vs.-underdeveloped dichotomy heavily critiqued by Edward Said's (1979) work on Orientalism, Latin American cities are sites of contestation, diversity, and complexity. In São Paulo, for example, Goldsmith and Acca see "historical contradictions" as epitomizing "the city of industry, misery, and resistance" (77).

By analyzing "the social, economic, and political forces at play" (4), this approach highlights cities as sites of struggle and contestation. Such a position underlines debates on the right to the city as a process and struggle in the realm of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1968). As Harvey (2008: 23) notes, the right to the city entails "a right to change ourselves by changing the city," framed as "the freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves." These ideas are often regarded as a social utopia that leads to urban transformations and social justice, and they have been used to support the collective demands of social movements for better urban conditions. Such debates have produced considerable resonance across Latin America (Friendly, 2020), highlighted by Irazábal in reference to the formation of citizenship practices and challenges to neoliberalism. The 2013 protests around transportation across Brazil are a clear example of a struggle over the type of city that is desired and a confrontation with the increasing commodification of Brazilian cities (Friendly, 2017). Debates on the right to the city are therefore key for understanding the paradoxical nature of urban Latin America.

Another key theme of *Urban Latin America* is the connections between poverty, informality, and peripheral cities. The case for understanding inequality in relation to the political economy is well developed by Zárate, who explains that the "social production of habitat" provides a structural understanding of the causes of informal settlements. Zárate cites several examples, including peasants' and indigenous peoples' expulsion from rural areas because of shortcomings in government agricultural policies and conflict over land and resources. In addition, Gilbert's chapter provides insight into the increase in poverty and inequality in Latin American cities. Making a connection to urban dwellers' poor conditions, Erminia Maricato's chapter highlights the way cities have been shaped in direct relation to peripheral capitalism. As she explains, peripheries across Latin America result from a dependence on globalized capital marking subsequent development in the region. Indeed, the nature of peripheral capitalism has profound relevance for the way planning proceeds in much of Latin America, where the city's periphery is often a "repository" for people in an environmentally fragile area poorly served by urban infrastructure and with limited access to services. The chapter by Tobias Franz on the "Medellín miracle," in particular, calls attention to the impact of the political economy on urban inequality. As Eduardo Galeano (1997: 2) has explained, "the history of Latin America's underdevelopment is . . . an integral part of the history of world capitalism's development."

Moving away from a broad account of Latin American urbanization, another theme in *Urban Latin America* is what the peripheral city means at the city scale. Chapters focusing on São Paulo and Mexico City explore struggles surrounding the development of these cities in historical perspective. A further theme is struggles over urban policies in response to neoliberal reforms, among them policy reform on the private production of social housing in Mexico and on participatory budgeting. This section also includes critical perspectives on well-known phenomena such as Medellín's "social urbanism," Curitiba's bus rapid transit (BRT), and elite enclaves in Rio de Janeiro's Barra da Tijuca

neighborhood. As Angotti and Irazábal (2017: 8) have noted, "best practices need to be examined critically and understood within their local and national contexts." The chapter by Stacy Hunt documents how Bogotá's BRT, copied from the Curitiba model, reveals competing knowledge claims between technocrats and citizens, who use and reject expert claims to knowledge, thus helping to identify the system's successes and failures. As Hunt explains, much of the literature on Bogotá's BRT, or TransMilenio, is celebratory of technocratic knowledge, failing to include the role of local citizens as active agents of change and contestation over its meaning and use. Exceptions to some of the trends identified in the book include egalitarian housing distribution in Cuba to "challenge many of the myths about Cuba and socialism" (11) and housing cooperatives in Uruguay. The final section explores urban struggles, citizenship, and public space. Cities are thus sites of protests against inequalities and neoliberal policies, which are key because of the way social movements are redrafting struggles around citizenship, housing rights, and the right to a healthy city.

Angotti's book provides insights into the distinctive nature of Latin America's urban experience in relation to social and economic inequalities. The book's rich empirical material illustrates how the urban political economy is inherently tied to inequality in Latin America. *Urban Latin America* should thus serve as an important resource at the university level and across the social sciences, for students and experts alike. Indeed, such detailed empirical material is needed to understand the prospects for change in Latin America. The book provides considerable opportunities to more thoroughly understand Latin American urbanization through the lens of the political economy of inequality and the struggles shaping everyday practices.

The book's key shortcoming is that it reflects only briefly on the urban future. A concluding chapter on Latin America's future urban transformations could provide concrete directions for future research and practice, as suggested by ongoing academic and policy discussions, including on the new urban agenda, a global urban plan adopted at the Habitat III conference in 2016 (Caprotti, 2018; Pradilla Cobos, 2018). A radical way forward for Latin American cities should tackle structural inequalities and involve local people in deciding on a vision for their city. In *Urban Latin America*, Angotti illustrates the need to go beyond the notion of the urban fallacy through addressing structural problems and adopting a political economy focus. Thus, Latin American cities can be understood as sites of contestation, diversity, and complexity. As several chapters show, Latin America's urban future relies on cities as sites of urban struggles, claims to insurgent citizenship, and, as Irazábal notes, a range of rights that "catalyze a vision for an alternative social and political project" (214). These claims need to be the starting point for rethinking the future of Latin American cities and reviving hope for the improvement of urban conditions.

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The Crystallization of Human Rights in Latin American Perspective

by
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Luis Roniger *Historia minima de los derechos humanos en América Latina*. Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 2018.

DOI: 10.1177/0094582X211031891

Human rights are political claims and normative expectations that intersect in uneasy ways with the practice of human rights that has been wanting throughout history. In Latin America this tension can be traced back centuries. Luis Roniger's *Historia minima de los derechos humanos en América Latina* offers a holistic longitudinal, in-depth analysis of the processes and dynamics that have shaped the evolution of human rights in this region. The book addresses many of the controversies that have

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