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## **Book Review: Cities in Latin America: More Inequality**

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## **Cities in Latin America**

### **More Inequality**

*by*  
**Tom Angotti**

**Otília Arantes, Carlos Vainer, and Ermínia Maricato** *A cidade do pensamento único: Desmascarando consensos*. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2000. 192 pp.

**Daniel Chavez and Benjamin Goldfrank (eds.)** *The Left in the City: Participatory Local Governments in Latin America*. London: Latin American Bureau, 2004. 231 pp.

**Clara Irazábal** *City Making and Urban Governance in the Americas: Curitiba and Portland*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005. 335 pp.

**Setha M. Low** *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000. 274 pp.

**Marco Negrón** *Ciudad y modernidad: El rol del sistema de ciudades en la modernización de Venezuela, 1936–2000*. Caracas: Ediciones Instituto de Urbanismo, 2001. 128 pp.

**Joseph L. Scarpaci** *Plazas and Barrios: Heritage Tourism and Globalization in the Latin American Centro Histórico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005. 267 pp.

**Joseph L. Scarpaci, Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula** *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 437 pp.

**Hugh Schwartz** *Urban Renewal, Municipal Revitalization: The Case of Curitiba, Brazil*. Alexandria, VA: Hugh Schwartz, 2004. 156 pp.

**María Teresa Vázquez Castillo** *Land Privatization in Mexico: Urbanization, Formation of Regions, and Globalization in Ejidos*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 236 pp.

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One of the most telling commentaries on urbanization in Latin America appears in Eduardo Galeano's *Upside Down* (2000: 11–12), where he contrasts the lives of typical rich and poor children. The rich live on “islands of privilege” in an “ocean of deprivation.” He describes the rich enclaves and gated communities as centers of power engulfed in fear:

They are luxurious concentration camps where the powerful meet only the powerful and never, for even a moment, forget how powerful they are. In some Latin American cities where kidnappings have become commonplace, rich kids grow up sealed inside bubbles of fear. They live in fortresslike mansions or groups of homes ringed by electrified fences and guardhouses, watched day and night by bodyguards and closed-circuit security cameras. They travel like money in armored cars. They don't know their own city except by sight. They grow up rootless. In the midst of globalization, the children belong to no place, but those who have more things are even more placeless.<sup>1</sup>

Galeano has put his finger on one of the great contradictions of urbanization in a globalized capitalist world. At the same time that the urban territory is being carved up into separate and exclusive enclaves, there is an unprecedented level of mobility, both forced and voluntary, that literally drives people around the globe. It is a world in which *place* is increasingly globalized and people are increasingly *placeless*. Half of the children in Latin America, says Galeano, live in poverty, forced to roam wherever they have to in order to survive. “Everywhere on earth, these kids, the children of people who work hard or who have neither work nor home, must from an early age spend their waking hours at whatever breadwinning activity they can find, breaking their backs in return for food and little else” (2000: 14).

This selection of books published since 2000 deals in one way or another with this central contradiction. Some of them, particularly the books on Curitiba and Havana, discuss unique urban planning approaches that attempt to make urban places more stable, if not more inclusive. Some of them deal with issues of local governance and the role played by progressives and the left. The list is by no means exhaustive of the literature about Latin American cities in the latest wave of expansion of globalized capital. Brazil and Mexico, two of the most urbanized countries of Latin America, continue to generate large volumes of excellent and critical literature that are worthy of separate treatment. This selection mostly includes significant additions to the English-language literature.

*The Left in the City* reviews five examples of local left-run governments over the past two decades: Lima under Alfonso Barrantes Lingán of Izquierda Unida, Porto Alegre under the Partido dos Trabalhadores, Montevideo under the Frente Amplio, La Libertador in Caracas under Causa R, and Mexico City under the Partido de la Revolución Democrática. The contributors look at the extent to which these local governments contributed to the growth of new popular and left-wing

movements at the national level. The Barrantes administration in Lima and the Cárdenas administration in Mexico City were launching points for near-successful attempts to win national elections; Porto Alegre, Montevideo, and Caracas contributed to the eventual ascendancy of national governments with left participation. They all instituted some form of participatory local democracy and experimented with new forms of popular governance. They opposed the neoliberal approach to local governance that would reduce central government support for social programs. There have been other left-led local governments—in San Salvador, São Paulo, Fortaleza, Belém, Ciudad Guayana, and Rosario, for example—that have received less attention and are not dealt with in this volume, but the selection is a good sampling that allows for some general conclusions about the political significance of local governance.

Radical democratic governance can bring more people into the public arena, stop the displacement of people and communities, and reduce the segregation created by globalized capital. It can also address the spatial divisions erected by local capital, particularly the real estate market. But “governance” has also become a favorite topic of the World Bank and neoliberal ideologues who are anxious to develop efficient local government institutions to which they can download national government responsibilities. Nevertheless, it is of great concern to the left, which must also learn how to govern efficiently to serve its constituents and, to be true to its political promises, make changes directed toward greater equity and social justice. The editors and contributors to *The Left in the City* approach their study with salutary balance. They do not accept uncritically the claims made by local left governments, blow them out of proportion, or discount them out of ideological prejudice. The editors say that “the city-level experiments with popular participation and inverting economic priorities described here represent important steps towards challenging the current orthodoxy of neoliberalism and liberal (or minimal) democracy. They also provide at least some elements for building a new democratic socialist project” (2004: 195) They point to important lessons: the need for left governments to show results by producing public projects and improved services, the role of direct democracy in building popular support, and the decentralization of decision-making power. They perhaps underestimate the problems of political conservatism that tend to arise from local experiences and that persist in the left-leaning and populist national governments that increasingly dominate Latin America today. They assume that local government has been a useful training ground for left governance, which is no doubt true in part, but the conservatism and parochialism of local governance may also contribute to the timidity of left parties and coalitions once they win national elections.

*A Cidade do Pensamento Único* is a sharp analytical critique of neoliberal urban theory. It focuses on the influence among local governments in Latin America of theories that originated in Europe and North America and view the city as essentially a commodity to be traded in the international marketplace. The role of local government is, then, to identify the “comparative advantage” of every city so that it can be marketed globally. Such a determination is made through “strategic

planning”—a concept that originated in the Pentagon, became widely diffused in corporate culture, and is now a favorite technique advanced by the World Bank. Strategic planning is based on a supposed consensus of local “stakeholders” in which property owners and the business community are often dominant. There have, however, been examples of progressive and left-led strategic planning, for example, in Rosario (Argentina) and Ciudad Guayana (Venezuela). In practice, this methodology is really nothing more than a set of techniques for convoking a discussion about the future of the city and can be organized as either exclusive or inclusive, business-oriented or labor-oriented, truly participatory or phony. The authors, however, focus less on practice than on theory.

Coming in for special criticism by the authors of *A Cidade do Pensamento Único* are the views of Jordi Borja and Manuel Castells (1997), two urbanists from Cataluña whose work has influenced local planning strategies in many Brazilian and Latin American cities. Castells is known for his earlier critique of bourgeois urbanism (1977) and analysis and friendly critique of the urban movements (1983), both popular in the Latin American left, but recently he has moved toward more mainstream approaches and no longer considers Marxism and class analysis as central to the understanding of cities (Marcuse, 2002). Arantes, Vainer, and Maricato trace the strategic planning initiatives undertaken in Brazil and other Latin American countries to the influence of Castells and Borja, among others. Castells and Borja frequently serve as consultants to local governments in Latin America and advocate urban policies similar to those of the social democratic government in their native Barcelona. After the end of Franco’s rule in Spain, Barcelona’s left-led government was a leading force in promoting and financing a dynamic wave of growth crowned by the Barcelona Olympic Games, which started an ambitious program to build public infrastructure and improve public spaces. The formula for growth included participation by many of the neighborhood groups that had survived Francoism and in this respect may offer some parallels with postdictatorship urban politics in Latin America. The issue for the early Castells was to what extent neighborhood-based groups that advocate democracy during periods of dictatorship are loyal to their local territorial interests over and above larger interests of class solidarity and social justice. This issue appears to have dropped off the Castells agenda, but in pointing this out the authors of *A Cidade do Pensamento Único* may also be overlooking some progressive strategies for improving the quality of life in cities that have migrated from Europe but do not necessarily entail turning cities into commodities.

## THE CURITIBA MODEL

Curitiba, in the state of Paraná, Brazil, is touted throughout the world as a shining example of progressive urban governance, a “best practice” to be emulated. Its highly efficient bus network, recycling system, and attention to the design of public spaces have been developed over the past five decades. Curitiba, like Barcelona, has

some of the best-designed and best-maintained public places. But are these socially exclusive domains, and to what extent have Curitiba's poor been displaced to create them?

The Curitiba model of a planned, sustainable city is aggressively marketed as a commodity throughout the world. Government officials, architects, and planners from around the world visit Curitiba and study at a local institute established to school people in the skills of urban planning and Curitiba-style urban management. At the same time, local officials continue to market the city as an ideal location for foreign capital (for an excellent analysis of Curitiba's marketing strategy, see Sánchez García, 1997).

In *Urban Renewal, Municipal Revitalization*, Hugh Schwartz paints a rosy picture of the Curitiba model based on an extensive series of interviews with the urban planners and local political leaders who were central to its evolution. There is a good deal of descriptive information here and some helpful anecdotal information that emphasizes the significant successes of urban planning in Curitiba. Whatever criticisms one may have of this model, one should not discount the benefits that accrue to residents and workers as a result of Curitiba's reforms, including better and cleaner mass transportation, superior public spaces, and a more efficient municipal infrastructure. Who would want transportation chaos, dangerous public spaces, and expensive, ineffective municipal services?

Although Schwartz briefly touches on some of the contradictions and the unique conditions that gave rise to the Curitiba model, Clara Irazábal's *City Making and Urban Governance in the Americas* offers a more critical and balanced analysis. While comparative urban studies often stretch the imagination when looking at two or more cities in vastly different national contexts, her comparison of Curitiba with Portland, Oregon, is revealing. Portland has become a "best practice" in the United States for its unique experiment in establishing an urban growth boundary and attempting to limit suburban sprawl. Behind these models lie histories and contradictions that are not revealed in the marketing propaganda. Portland is a relatively small, wealthy, and white city in a region with very limited growth pressures—conditions not typical of the large metropolitan regions in which two-thirds of the U.S. population live.

Irazábal points out that Curitiba is one of the more industrially developed cities in southern Brazil, a region that has been most hospitable to foreign capital. The planning and design of the new Curitiba, including the street layout and public architecture, reflect the cultural hegemony of elites with strong European identities. Submerged are the images that relate to Brazil's African heritage and its placement within Latin America. Curitiba's planning reforms were initiated by technocrats appointed under military rule, and, while they won consensus among the city's elites, opportunities for broad participation in the planning of the city were minimal. In contrast, under the leadership of the Partido dos Trabalhadores in nearby Porto Alegre, also a major industrial center, every year some 40,000 people take part in the budget-making process. This process seeks to engage people throughout the city in the allocation of scarce public resources, challenging them to set the priorities

that have too often been left to deal-making elected officials. Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting has also become a "best practice" marketed around the world, and while it undoubtedly contributes more than Curitiba to the development of popular democracy and often produces more equitable outcomes, it is too easy for progressives to fall into the trap of adopting formulas for governance instead of trying to empower people to develop formulas of their own that are appropriate to the conditions they live in.

Both Schwartz and Irazábal point to another glaring contradiction of the Curitiba model. The municipality of Curitiba is now the central city of a metropolitan region of more than 2 million. The central city is a relatively wealthy, well-planned enclave while the suburbs are increasingly poor and outside the sphere of the model. Curitiba has become like Buenos Aires and so many other Latin American cities with wealthy enclaves in the central city surrounded by *villas miserias* and *favelas*. This is a reproduction of the historic colonial model established by the Law of the Indies, in which the plaza and central core of cities were laid out with rational precision and the masses were left out in the urban peripheries. The central cities, then, are, as Galeano suggests, where the powerful meet only the powerful and never forget that they are in power.

## HAVANA'S CONTRIBUTION TO URBANISM

Since the Cuban Revolution, Havana has never been presented as a model of urban planning. On the contrary, Cubans have been aware that after the revolution the national priority was to build schools and clinics in the countryside, invest in the provincial capitals, and help rectify the enormous imbalance between city and countryside. As a result, Havana was more or less frozen in time, and needed improvements to the infrastructure and housing were postponed. It was not until the 1970s that new housing was built, though much of it is now looked at by Havana's planners as a mindless copy of European planning models. Since the Special Period in the early 1990s very little new has been developed. However, Havana does offer some unique experiences in urban planning that merit study. Almost a third of the fresh food consumed by residents is produced within the city, the air is relatively clean because there is little traffic, and there are interesting community development and housing initiatives incorporating marginal neighborhoods and low-energy, environmentally sound design.

*Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* is a rare comprehensive look at one of the Caribbean's major cities, examining the physical, social, economic, and political aspects of urban life and Cuba's unique historical context. The authors trace the city's development through the revolution, the institutionalization of the 1970s, the rectification process in the 1980s, and the Special Period and beyond. This rich analysis benefits from the contribution of two architects who have participated in the formation of Cuba's urban policies since the revolution's early years—Mario Coyula, former codirector of the pioneering Group for the Comprehensive

Development of the Capital, and Roberto Segre, now a professor of architecture and urbanism at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. The third author, Joseph Scarpaci, is a professor of urban affairs and planning at Virginia Tech. Their combined analysis produces a rich and balanced insider's view of Havana in the context of the revolution. It avoids the temptation of raising Havana's experience to the level of romantic exceptionalism. It also goes far beyond the usual North American practice of explaining Latin American cities by simply describing their problems and inequalities and identifying their "slums." This is a rich and nuanced historical and political analysis, the kind that is missing in so much of the English-language literature. However, the authors do not go into great depth in analyzing the role that tourism has played in the past decade in expanding inequalities or the danger that preservation of the historic center may result in the establishment of an exclusive central-city enclave. Their call for the reappearance of "the shiny face of Havana's streets and plazas" seems to reflect a growing fixation on the physical city to the detriment of social equity.

Joseph Scarpaci's *Plazas and Barrios* also focuses on the physical city and the role of tourism. It is a rather eclectic analysis of nine historic city centers in Latin America: Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Cartagena, Cuenca, Havana, Montevideo, Puebla, Quito, and Trinidad (Cuba). Scarpaci explores some of the problems and prospects of "heritage tourism" aimed at preserving historic city centers principally as tourist sites. He combines his personal, on-site observations about the way these central public places are used with analyses of the historic and urban context. He ends up lamenting that there are few examples of historic preservation aimed less at commercial tourism than at preserving lively urban environments for residents (and not just wealthy singles). He points out that only in Trinidad has the local government invested significantly in the preservation of individual homes as well as public buildings.

A much finer look at Latin America's premier public space, the plaza, is to be found in Setha Low's *On the Plaza*. Low examines the social and political history of the plaza from the colonial period on and suggests that plazas may be places for art and exchange and contested spaces that reflect differences in social histories and identities. Her book presents her direct observations of everyday life in plazas, particularly the Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura in San José, Costa Rica. She deals with the symbolic aspects of the plaza and offers a theoretical framework that emphasizes the social production of space. Her narrative slips from the detailed analysis of the plazas she has studied to more general observations about the political, economic, and social division of space, but sometimes this transition is abrupt.

Teresa Vázquez provides us with another excellent picture of the effects of neoliberal policies on urban structure in Latin America and the resulting commodification of urban and rural space. *Land Privatization in Mexico* is based on three case studies in Mexico—La Poza in Guerrero, San Luis Río Colorado in Sonora, and Ixtaltepec in Oaxaca—which demonstrate how the privatization of *ejidos* has contributed to the depopulation of rural areas and the release of urban

land for speculative development. Consistent with the establishment of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the reform of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution in 1992 permitted the privatization of these rural enclaves that were established after the Mexican Revolution of 1910 as an alternative to *latifundios*. The process of privatization was already under way before 1992, and transnational capital was already invading the ejidos; the changes to Article 27 speeded up the process.

While the effects of privatization on economic inequality have been understood by progressives, this research makes a unique contribution by illustrating the spatial dimensions of inequality. Vázquez shows how the privatization of ejidos contributes to existing urban and regional imbalances, particularly with respect to Mexico's indigenous population in the south. The emergence of the Zapatistas during the 1990s is, of course, not coincidental, nor is their conscious identification of NAFTA and the Mexican government's neoliberal reforms as major contributors to the exclusion and displacement of indigenous communities. As Galeano suggests, neoliberal policies create urbanization trends that constantly uproot people from the places where they live and work—that is, until they refuse to move.

While unequal capitalist development may have been the source of rapid urbanization in Latin America and contributed to the concurrent growth of large metropolitan regions and decline of rural populations, does this mean that progressives in government should view urban growth with suspicion? Since revolutionary Cuba channeled investment to rural areas to correct historic inequalities, should that be the model? The answer is not so simple. In *Ciudad y Modernidad*, Marco Negrón addresses one of the major underlying myths of urban policies in Venezuela for many decades—that large cities, in particular Caracas and the coastal cities near it, are growing too fast and government, therefore, should act to stop their growth. This kind of thinking was common throughout Latin America in the 1950s and was actively promoted by multilateral and bilateral aid agencies that were more interested in investing in roads, energy, and irrigation projects that opened up the interiors of countries to capitalist penetration than in making costly improvements to the urban infrastructure.

In 1960, the reform government of Rómulo Betancourt in Venezuela sought to funnel immigration away from the large cities of the north by creating a “growth pole” in the undeveloped south. Betancourt established a state-led corporation that brought steel and aluminum industries to the small towns of Puerto Ordaz and San Félix. The new city of Ciudad Guayana is now approaching a population of 1 million and in this respect might be considered somewhat successful. However, its economic base continues to be shaky as the state-owned industries are privatized and downsized, and a new progressive local government has sought to reverse decades of top-down technocratic planning and replace it with more democratic means of governance (see Angotti, 2001; Harnecker, 1994). As it turns out, however, the premise on which Ciudad Guayana was built was rather overstated from the beginning. Negrón's analysis of demographic trends shows that the growth rates of the nation's largest cities are relatively stable and not greater than those of other Venezuelan cities that also have significant growth potential. He points out that their

growth rates cannot be compared with those of small interior cities whose growth is constrained by unique geographic conditions. In sum, the growth rate of Caracas is not significantly out of line with that of other Venezuelan cities.

The trend in Venezuela is consistent with the urbanization patterns throughout Latin America for at least the past two decades. The largest metropolitan regions are no longer the fastest-growing; instead, the medium-sized and smaller cities are growing at much faster rates. This pattern follows the latest trend in the movement of globalized capital, which is increasingly finding its way to smaller settlements where the cost of reproducing labor is lower than in the large cities. This turn of events forces the left to develop more nuanced and complex urban policies and leave behind simplistic urban-rural dualisms once and for all. Thus, for example, Brazil's Partido dos Trabalhadores has had to come to terms with the enormous pent-up demand for infrastructure in many of Brazil's largest cities and growing demands for support from a rural population without land while at the same time helping to improve the quality of life in the dozen-or-so medium-sized cities. Whether the powerful combined interests of global and local capital will allow enough room for Lula's government to implement the comprehensive national-level policies that are called for is of critical interest to all progressive and left forces in the Americas that find themselves in the halls of government, even if they are not yet in a position to undertake truly democratic, transformative, and revolutionary changes.

## NOTE

1. The last sentence is my own translation. This sentence is key to the point made by Galeano about being "placeless," and its meaning in the English version is not entirely clear.

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