

Paola Alfaro d'Alençon, Walter Alejandro Imilan and Lina María Sánchez (eds.) (2011)
Lateinamerikanische Städte im Wandel. Zwischen lokaler Stadtgesellschaft und globalem Einfluss

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Increasing rates of migration, the changing role of the state and the liberalization of the market – among other globalization processes – have had a strong impact on Latin American cities. They have led to very diverse and rapidly changing forms of socio-spatial structures. Therefore, research on urban questions is getting increasingly complex and thus calls for a broad range of interdisciplinary approaches.

The publication *Lateinamerikanische Städte im Wandel: Zwischen lokaler Stadtgesellschaft und globalem Einfluss* (Latin American Cities in Transformation: Between Local Urban Society and Global Influence) is the result of a workshop organized by the Technische Universität Berlin and the Bauhaus-Universität Weimar in 2008. Young researchers from German-speaking countries were invited to present and publish their recent work, creating a forum for the exchange of knowledge on Latin American cities. The volume was edited by Paola Alfaro d'Alençon, Walter Alejandro Imilan and Lina María Sánchez and published by the LIT-Verlag in 2011.

The volume samples current studies on the phenomenon of urbanization in Latin America. It provides insights into ongoing debates on the development of urban socio-spatial structures and processes on the continent: from private urban renewal in Buenos Aires (17-25) to governance programs in Bogotá facing competing demands of social inclusion and competitiveness (147-155), to the effects of changing housing policies on settlements in Mexico (187-195).

The book is divided into five sections and further subdivided into a total of 25 chapters, written in German, Spanish, and English. The publication's geographical focus mainly lies on Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Chile. Each section starts with an introductory chapter, which points out research gaps, places the topics in a broader context and therefore highlights unanswered questions.

In the first section, questions of urban governance and new control strategies are raised. Urban security and participation processes are also discussed, contextualizing them within the wider debate surrounding

the neoliberal shift in Latin America. The second section focuses on the former highly-industrialized countries of Mexico and Argentina and their structural, institutional, and territorial transformations. The globalized division of labor and its local effects in those countries are analyzed. Section three provides innovative approaches to classical problems of cities, such as poverty, segregation or environmental degradation which take on a new dimension in Latin America.

Inter-urban competition and the role of so-called mega-cities from the global south are the topics of the fourth section. Competitive pressure and growing spatial disparities – mainly between one mega-city as a center and other national regions as its periphery – are discussed.

Section five raises the question of how migration influences urbanization processes in Latin America. Different forms and causes of migration – lifestyle migration, retirement migration, intra-urban migration, intra-national migration, forced displacement – and its effects are analyzed.

The volume can be recommended to those wishing to gain insights into urban development in Latin America and its present state of research in the corresponding German-speaking field of study. In addition, its perspectives might be of interest to someone already familiar with the field as new research questions are raised and some contributions enrich long-lasting debates by inserting new topics. The introductory parts of each section create interesting

connections between chapters. However, due to a missing final chapter the book does not contain overall remarks or an outlook.

Due to limitations of space it should suffice to highlight the following points:

Firstly, as Sabine Knierbein mentions in her introductory chapter, the debate on the immaterial city and the discursive production of the urban seems to be less popular among the book's authors (11). This is evident in Anja Feth's article on the Argentine National Crime Prevention Plan (PNPD) and its implementation in Buenos Aires (50-59). She finds that the PNPD's cooperative and participatory approach are impractical. However, her article fails to deconstruct urban security governance as discursively generated and as part of current neoliberal urban transformation processes. Confronting urban governance theories with debates on the immaterial city – such as the concept of the *imaginario* – could be a fruitful avenue for future research. The concept of the *imaginario* was developed by Latin-American anthropologists precisely to describe the efficiency of social imaginations and their impact on the social production of space.

Secondly, the book's focus mainly lies on mega-cities such as Mexico City. Less attention is devoted to urbanization processes in small or medium-sized cities. Yet, as shown by Carla Marchant and Rafael Sánchez in the example of Chile, economic growth, immigration and the liberalization of the planning system have had a strong

impact on medium sized cities in Latin America (221-231).

Thirdly – and related to the former point of critique – contributions in the third section are especially refreshing by inserting new topics such as sustainability, planning, verticalization (rapid increase of inner city apartment high-rise buildings), and the new role of the state in long-standing debates. Tanja Michaela Thung analyzes the verticalization of urbanization processes in Brazilian cities (112-119). She concludes that centrally-located high-rise apartment buildings cause gentrification, yet this happens over long periods of time and leads to social mixture. Thus, gentrification should not just be considered an unwanted effect in the Brazilian context (117). Thung makes it very clear that “classical” problems get ever more complex and have to be seen as consequences of the intersection of global power relations and local specificities. As Renato d’Alençon concludes, new scientific technologies and methods need to be developed in order to tackle the increasing complexity of numerous problems (98).

The articles assembled in the volume often use terms and concepts such as “gentrification”, “urban governance” or “suburbanism”. All of these are founded in particular ideas of urbanity developed by sociologists like Simmel, Park or Wirth through their observations on European and American cities. However, this criticism extends beyond the volume’s articles to the academic discourse on the phenomenon of urbanization in Latin America at large. As Sabine Knierbein puts it: “The coexistence

of European and Latin American urban research manifests itself in eurocentrist norms and values evident in scientific studies and their conclusions [...]”.¹

Bearing this in mind, it might be useful to consider the postcolonial turn in urban theory production as proclaimed by Jennifer Robinson (2006). A postcolonial approach would imply a redefinition of these ideas of urbanity. As a result, existing Western urban theory would be confronted *inter alia* with Latin American literature and concepts – like the *imaginario* – in order to arrive at a transnational research agenda on Latin American cities.

Bibliography

Robinson, Jennifer (2006): *Ordinary Cities*, London/New York: Routledge.

¹ „Das Nebeneinander der europäischen und lateinamerikanischen Stadtforschung manifestiert sich weiterhin in eurozentristisch geprägten Wert- und Moralvorstellungen, die bei der Untersuchung, bei den Schlussfolgerungen und speziell bei den Handlungsempfehlungen zu Tage treten [...]“ (14)