

Emilio Pradilla Cobos (ed.) (2011)

Ciudades compactas, dispersas, fragmentadas

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Periurban wasteland and a few corn fields alongside thousands of identical, tiny terraced single-family houses packed so tightly there is almost no public space – Cuautitlán de Romero Rubio could be deemed a typical outskirts of Mexico City. Twenty years have passed since this kind of peripheral urbanization began to thrive as a result of the neoliberalization of Mexican housing policies. It is not least in these bedroom suburbs now springing up everywhere in the periphery that Mexico City resembles “a low-rise, dispersed and porous city with low density”.¹ From a morphological point of view, this seems to link the Mexican capital to many a North American city, but also the notorious “social” housing complexes of Santiago de Chile. However, a more profound analysis is required to grasp the current urban realities of Latin America. This is the promise of Pradilla Cobos’ 2011 compilation with the agglutinating title *Ciudades compactas, dispersas, fragmentadas*.

When it comes to processes of re-densification, urban sprawl, and suburbanization, North American and

European analyses and phenomena have been widely discussed and differ clearly. The publication targets a region which so far has not formed a core part of this debate, thus raising questions of specific Latin American perspectives on current processes of urbanization. The book sets out to start a critical debate in the Spanish-speaking research community on the effects of neoliberalization on urban morphology and dominant Anglo-American discourses in this realm (6/10). The publication stems from a 2006-2008 research project by the academic research group Territorio, tecnología y medio ambiente, based at Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco in Mexico City. It is likely to be widely received in the region, as the book’s editor Emilio Pradilla Cobos is one of Mexico’s longest-standing and best-known urban researchers. Rod Burgess’ contribution to the book serves as a link to the Anglo-American debate on smart growth and uneven economic development.

The publication combines the work of nine authors and is split in two sections. The first is dedicated to the theoretical debate on urban fragmentation under neoliberal conditions.

¹ “una ciudad baja, dispersa, porosa y de poca densidad” (257)

Section two focuses on “concrete realities”, combining findings from urban Mexico and Spain. In the theoretical part, Burgess identifies three commonly-discussed dimensions of urban fragmentation: cultural, political-socioeconomic, and technological. He argues that both the “global city” concept (Sassen et al.) and the “space of flows” (Castells) are an offspring of technological determinism, much in line with modernist conceptualizations of the city as a machine (66). Kozak’s contribution is an extensive literature review that provides a critical introduction to European and Anglo-American concepts of urban fragmentation and neoliberalization, followed by an overview of how the supposedly fragmented urban spaces resulting from those processes are conceptualized – Splintering Urbanism probably being the most prominent one. Yet both Burgess and Kozak fail to clearly distinguish fragmentation from segregation (56/89), defining it loosely as “a way of spatial organization [...] where hard limits [...] and obstacles play a main part”.² Deepening the debate on the relation of technologies and urbanization, Rozga Luter wraps up European positions, stressing the defining role of the socio-political over the technological formation of cities (120). Castro Ramírez in turn elaborates on utopias of modern urbanism, their relation to nature, and the compact city model.

Pradilla Cobos rejects universal and “mechanical” models of cities (272), generally questioning their applicability to

the Latin American city (285). In his empirical contribution on Mexico City, he consequently provides a profound analysis of social processes shaping urban space while particularly opposing a global city analysis (in contrast, see Parnreiter 2010). In a similar vein, Ramírez Velázquez and Rivera Flores analyze the role of labor mobility and transport in relation to urban expansion. In his text about segregation and processes of dispersion in Mexican cities, Bazant suggests that the compact city is only viable in higher-income societies with predominantly formal labor markets (212). This is somewhat contradicted by Marinero Peral and de las Rivas Sanz’ text on experiences with the regulation of urban growth in pre-crisis Spain. There, applying the compact city model was a limited success, not least under conditions of real estate speculation and strong foreign capital inflow. Similarly, López Rangel sketches a historic outline of (attempts of formal) urban regulation in Mexico City over the last century.

Instead of following down the well-trodden path of indifferently adopting what Pradilla calls “descriptive concepts ennobled to the rank of theoretical concepts, which are imported from historical and socioeconomic realities very different from ours”,³ the volume promises to start a debate on current concepts of urban fragmentation. Unfortunately, it eludes controversial input while at the same time failing to take a clear stance; oscillating between policy assessment, theoretical debate, and empirical study. *Ciudades compactas, dispersas, fragmentadas* thus

² “Fragmentación urbana implica una forma de organización espacial [...] en la que los límites duros [...] y los obstáculos adquieren un papel central” (57)

³ “conceptos descriptivos elevados al rango de teóricos, importados de realidades históricas y socioeconómicas muy distintas a las nuestras” (6)

is more of a “Neoliberalization and the Compact City-Reader” than the presentation of an original and coherent theoretical argument. The absence of a concluding chapter only reinforces this impression.

The theoretical section is dominated by a harsh critique of Castells, Sassen et al., and Graham and Marvin, whose concepts are deemed instances of technological determinism (71). It is notable that throughout the book authors are more concerned with a critique of theoretical urban “ideal types” than with spatial theory itself. Would a relational conceptualization of urban space not precisely be of use to avoid the unreflected application of hegemonic urban models? Frehse (2001) and others have presented a number of such conceptual reflections, stemming mainly from the Brazilian context. Conceptualizing urban territory rather than urban (relational) space sustains the gap between historical-material and cultural approaches (such as Canclini’s *imaginarios*) engrained in Latin American urban research. The volume thus bypasses the spatial turn, missing out on the rich contributions Bhaskar, Lefebvre, Harvey and the like have made to the very historical-dialectic materialism called for by the editor.

In an astonishing normative twist, several contributions turn to the compact city concept as a means of impeding urban sprawl (290). Burgess’ call for the compact city, for instance, oddly reflects the same logic he criticizes earlier as being technological determinism in the tradition of modernist city planning and a mechanical understanding of the urban. Surprisingly, and despite his

critical stance towards postmodern urban ideologies, Pradilla Cobos also repeatedly refers to Mexico City as megacity (257).

All in all, the authors provide theoretical and empirical material to enrich a yet-to-be-deepened debate on neoliberalism and urbanization in the Spanish-spoken research community, which is the main audience of this publication. However, proper conceptual contributions to this debate as provided by the editor and other authors elsewhere (Pradilla Cobos 2009) are missing in the book. Lacking a clear definition of “the urban”, the empirical part of the publication is mainly concerned with causes of urban growth, residential segregation, population densities, and resulting morphological patterns. This diverse compilation of critical introductions into theoretical concepts, policy assessment, and empirical case studies hence resembles the very dispersion and fragmentation the editor deems emblematic for Mexico City’s morphology.

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