
BOOKS IN REVIEW

FROM CITIES TO SYSTEMS: Recent Research on Latin American Urbanization

THIRD WORLD URBANIZATION. Edited by JANET ABU-LUGHOD and RICHARD HAY, JR. (Chicago, Il.: Maaroufa Press, 1977. Pp. 395.)

URBAN POPULATION GROWTH TRENDS IN LATIN AMERICA. by ROBERT W. FOX. (Washington, D.C.: Inter-American Development Bank, 1975. Pp. 103.)

LAS CIUDADES LATINOAMERICANAS: 1. ANTECEDENTES. 2. DESARROLLO HISTORICO. By RICHARD M. MORSE. (México, D.F.: SepSetentas, 1973. Pp. 215, 250. \$10.00, \$10.00.)

TIERRA Y URBE. By LUIS ORTIZ DE ZEVALLOS. (La Habana: UNESCO Occasional Paper, 1976. Pp. 28.)

For the purpose of briefly reviewing recent work on Latin American urbanization it is convenient to focus on events of the last decade since this period seems to bracket a major reorientation in research and theory. On the one hand, the past ten years have witnessed the production of an extraordinary amount of research as indicated by the appearance of the annual series *Latin American Urban Research* and the journal *Latin American Perspectives*, the flowering of the *Latin American Research Review*, and the expanded offerings of university and commercial presses throughout the Americas. Of signal importance within this expansionary trend has been a closer integration of scholarship made possible by the translation and greater accessibility of work originally limited to North (e.g., the Morse works reviewed here) or South American (e.g., Hardoy) audiences. On the other hand, the past decade seems to represent a watershed of theoretical change. From a conceptual standpoint the period may be circumscribed by the meteoric rise of the dependency perspective in the late 1960s (although its origins, naturally, must be traced further, see Cardoso), through its elaboration, critical evaluation, and contemporary synthesis within a world system framework. As I shall attempt to show, the course of this change has led to important advances in how urban Latin America is to be understood, as well as the generation of new issues and research questions that will go far toward setting the agenda for the next decade.

Some years ago Richard M. Morse (1965, 1971) published two excellent essays on Latin American urbanization, the second of these covering the period 1965–70. No comparable effort deals with the ensuing years despite the increasing volume of work. Accordingly, this essay will attempt to fill in some of the gaps, although space limitations require a rather selective and cursory treatment. We shall not attempt to comment on specific research contributions, but characterize general developments in several key areas. This, in turn, will lead to a consideration of new theoretical approaches and the questions they pose.

While empirical science never rests, it would appear accurate to say that a number of issues that once animated Latin American urban research have now been laid to rest. Since Oscar Lewis originally made the point and countless others corroborated it, the process of urbanization is no longer regarded as conducive to various forms of “social disorganization” as the term is conventionally understood. Similarly, and ideological fears notwithstanding, rapid urbanization has not led directly to political “instability” in the form of revolutionary or populist regimes. Although “marginality” has only recently been labeled a myth (Perlman), it has been recognized for some time that the new urban groups are conscious and rational participants in the political process however restricted their influence or precarious their economic situation. Urban squatters and the lower classes are to be understood neither as “available masses” nor revolutionary cadres, but, rather, as transitorily organized groups with concrete instrumental goals. And, finally, urbanization is not concomitant with national development, but may often generate the conditions for new forms of underdevelopment and inequality. Each of these early formulations is not without a germ of truth. Collectively, however, they suffer from a mechanistic and diachronic mode of analysis that may now be losing ground to a more complex systemic approach.

Parallel to these changes at the empirical level are some noteworthy theoretical developments. The controversies that once raged over dependency theory seem to have abated recently, or at least to have become tiresome. Several circumstances explain this change. First, judging from the work of many younger Latin Americanists as well as the remarkable new literature based on Africa and Asia, it would appear that a *generalized dependency perspective* has gained wide acceptance. In the wake of unsuccessful and unrealistic models associated with developmental stages and evolution, structural differentiation, or diffusion, the dependency perspective has succeeded in providing a valuable corrective. Second, since its initial vogue, and as a result of careful criticism, the approach has become more sophisticated. The formulations of Paul Baran and André Gunder Frank (1969) have been usefully elaborated by such “new dependency” (Chilcote 1974 and in Abu-Lughod) advocates as Santos and Cardoso and Faletto. Indeed, one can read the expositions of the various strands within the dependency paradigm (e.g., Chilcote, O’Brien) as matters of emphasis rather than categorical differences. It is doubtful, for example, that the work of Frank (e.g., 1972) would exclude attention to the “internal” manifestations of metropolitan influence although the new dependency theorists give this matter more attention. Third, many partisans of the approach seem to agree that there is no

such thing as a dependency "theory" in the proper sense of the term so much as a perspective with its own problems and prospects for less grandiose theories of concrete phenomena (Leys). Finally, theories change almost as rapidly as the societies that they are intended to comprehend. Contemporary formulations based on unequal exchange (Emmanuel), accumulation on a world scale (Amin), and world-systems (Wallerstein) have synthesized and moved beyond earlier theories of imperialism and of dependency (cf. Frank 1974). Consequently, we turn next to recent developments in urban research and how these relate to emerging theoretical perspectives.

A concern for what we shall call systemic approaches to urbanization in Latin America is by no means a late occurrence, nor the inspiration of a particular theoretical tradition (e.g., Marxist or non-Marxist). For example, in an essay that appeared originally in 1967, Quijano distinguishes between urbanization *in* society and urbanization *of* society stressing that the former standpoint understands urbanization in relation to a broad set of social processes (economic, demographic, political, cultural, etc.) while the latter, which has been the norm, mistakenly views urbanization in isolation. Similarly, Morse's historical essays stress a frame of reference that "introduces national-level economic and political factors and removes one somewhat from a consideration of the city *qua* city" (*Las Ciudades* 1:155). Nevertheless, it would appear that systemic considerations have only recently overshadowed more circumscribed analyses of phenomena such as urban population growth, migration, migrant adaptation, urban politics, ecology, and so forth, all seen in isolation from their structural roots and interrelatedness. In what follows we shall attempt to demonstrate that systemic considerations are the key issue in the current research under review. Systemic considerations are understood to entail a concern for the interrelatedness of levels and processes of urbanization; they seek "causes" at least in the proximate sense of relating one set of events to its antecedents or consequences. This kind of concern should become evident in a brief review of developments in several important substantive areas.

A fundamental and perennial research effort focuses on demographic change, particularly rates and levels of urbanization. Recent research has begun to qualify broad generalizations about the "natural" and inexorable force of urbanization. In the collection of essays on historical patterns of urbanization in a variety of countries (*Las Ciudades* 2) it is shown that urban primacy actually declined from the period of independence until the late nineteenth century due, perhaps, to the relaxation of the state centralization of the colonial period. Later, with the consolidation of the independent state and new commercial export ties with mercantile powers, urban primacy reasserts itself in the late nineteenth century. McGreevey (in *Las Ciudades* 2) employs longitudinal data from eight countries to demonstrate a strong correlation between primacy and the per capita value of exports concluding that the increasing concentration of population in one or two large capital and/or port cities is mainly a twentieth-century phenomenon. While the rationalization of the economy around the extraction and export of primary materials is one important cause of this pattern of urbanization, other factors such as the expansion of the public sector and economies of scale must also be seen as contributory. Similarly, Morse concludes that an

exclusively commercial explanation ignores important political factors encouraging urbanization such as the example of *coronelismo* in Brazil (*Las Ciudades* 2:47). In view of these historical studies a challenging task for contemporary analysts would be to account for the recent pattern of change in urban systems demonstrated by Fox in which secondary cities appear to be growing faster than capitals in the last decade. A systemic approach similar to those illustrated would pursue an explanation based on the changing pattern of external dependence as well as internal responses to that situation and autonomous initiatives at the political (planning) and economic levels.

A second and closely related area in which systemic approaches are becoming more common concerns migration at the national and international levels. The imposing study of Balán, Browning, and Jelin, for example, focuses not only on a sample of urban migrants, their motives for coming to the city and their adjustment to the change, but also considers a sample of ruralites in a typical sending community, why they do not migrate, and the conditions they live under. Similarly, Cornelius (1976) and Portes (1977) have traced Mexican migrants from their communities of origin through Mexican cities, to the United States and, in some cases, their return home. These and related studies regularly identify the causes of individual migration as underemployment, wage differentials, landlessness, and commercialized, capital-intensive agriculture. Beyond these endeavors based on samples of individual migrants, a number of impressive recent analyses are cast at the level of migratory systems (Arrighi, Buroway, Castells 1975, Portes 1976). Generally these are based on a theory of uneven development in which advanced capitalist societies rely on a cheap and expendable labor force to hold down domestic wages and externalize the social costs of maintaining and reproducing the work force. From the standpoint of this discussion, an explanation for the existence and functioning of migratory labor systems is located in the political economy of uneven capitalist development.

A third maturing body of research has focused on the relation between urbanization and national development. Early efforts at equating these two processes and simplistic distinctions between generative and parasitic cities have given ground to more refined studies of the impact of urbanization on regional and social inequality (e.g., Cornelius and Trueblood). Relative to the advanced industrial societies the countries of Latin America are declining in per capita income, that is, the gap between developed and underdeveloped nations is widening (Hay in Abu-Lughod and Hay). At the most general level urbanization has been accompanied by greater unemployment and a pattern of "urban involution" (McGee 1974 and in Abu-Lughod and Hay) or the "overcrowding" of the labor force in commerce and services as capital-intensive (often foreign controlled) industry absorbs a declining proportion of workers (Castells 1977 esp. chap. 3). Nevertheless, the "tertiarization thesis" does not assume the status of a general law and must be qualified with respect to concrete historical events that, as in the case of Brazil (Morse, *Las Ciudades* 1), suggest when this tendency does and does not take place. Moreover, recent fine-grained analyses show that the tertiary sector may not contribute to a great deal of migrant absorption and petty entrepreneurship (Peattie) and that small enterprise func-

tions as a complement to the large-scale, capital-intensive sector rather than as a residual or separate economy (Roberts 1975 and in Abu-Lughod and Hay). From a systemic point of view underemployment and the contours of the urban labor market must be understood as complex resultants of patterns of national and foreign capital investment, commercialization of agriculture, and the political and economic options available to the national bourgeoisie.

A fourth important tradition in Latin American research centers on urban politics, the role of elites and popular movements. In the last decade an enormous amount of research has been devoted to the theme of lower-class politics, squatters, and the political potential of the new urban groups (for a detailed summary see Portes and Walton chaps. 2 and 3 in Abu-Lughod and Hay). To a somewhat lesser extent research has also focused on urban elites and the structure of power (for a summary see Portes and Walton, chap. 5). Recent systemic approaches to urban politics embody two key features. First, concern has extended to the interface between elites and popular groups, the manner in which the activity of either segment is structurally constrained by the other. As a result of this perspective the mythical omnipotence of the ruling classes and the powerlessness of the lower classes is exposed. Political choices come to be viewed in a delicate balance between the factions within the elite stratum and the limits to power set by the need to maintain legitimacy and some threshold of popular allegiance. Moreover, this approach suggests the bases on which national elites may be able to resist the incursions of metropolitan powers when popular support can be mobilized as, for example, in the nationalization of basic resources (Portes and Walton, chap. 6). Second, recent research has begun to analyze lower-class politics from a contextual or holistic standpoint. For example, Cornelius' (1975) study of the migrant poor in Mexico City is grounded in a comparison of six neighborhood or urban communities and the major explanation of various political styles is found in community characteristics such as the manner of settlement, level of development, and age. Similarly, Leeds and Leeds criticize the past tendency of research to view political behavior of squatters in terms of immanent characteristics of populations themselves rather than the forms of the political systems they confront. They then contrast the political systems of Brazil, Peru, and Chile, which varied widely (at the time) in the degree of repressiveness vs democratization, and these system differences, in turn, explained the content and style of political behavior. My own work of late (Walton 1977a) compares the developmental experience of four urban regions strategically chosen according to national context, the timing, and level of development. In these settings class structure, external dependence, and the political organization of elites explain differential success in quantitative and qualitative aspects of development. Like most insights, the point, once stated, may appear obvious but only recently have these systemic approaches become integral to comparative research.

A fifth and final research area that illustrates this argument concerns spatial form and urban ecology. Previous work on urban ecology focused mainly on matters of land use, segmentation, functional specialization, and the question of whether the Latin American city was "evolving" toward a form of spatial

organization characteristic of North America (e.g., Schnore). Though cast at a very general level, Harvey's recent work has major implications for effecting a link between urban spatial organization and broader systems of social and economic organization. Essentially Harvey argues that distinct patterns of urban spatial organization correspond to different historical modes of production and the circulation of capital. Urbanization is regarded as necessary for capitalist economic development and advanced capitalist cities increasingly reflect a pattern of ecological and class segregation. Related and more historically concrete studies have been devoted to developing countries generally (Soja and Tobin 1975 and in Abu-Lughod, Walton 1977b, Ortiz), Tanzania (Slater 1974 and in Abu-Lughod), Peru (Slater 1974, Wilson), and Mexico (Walton 1978). While patterns of urban spatial organization are obviously the product of a variety of particular circumstances such as the physical landscape and cultural practices, the important contribution of this new research is to suggest also that urban form is not independent of political and economic systems.

Examples of new systemic approaches in urban research could be found in additional substantive areas, but these five adequately illustrate the perspective and seem to touch on the more salient topics. It remains for us to provide a general characterization of this approach and to indicate some of the important issues it should address.

A fundamental tenet of the new urban research is, paradoxically, that the city per se is not an appropriate unit of analysis. Increasingly, urban research is discovering the obvious but methodologically troublesome fact that much of what is often crucial in explaining local phenomena is extra-local in origin. International economic interests and policies, national political decisions on developmental strategy or infrastructure services, and technological change in the countryside all set up a series of reverberating forces that combine in the city. While conventional urban studies are capable of noting the consequences of this confluence of forces acting upon local conditions, they are hard pressed to explain them since their causes and origins lie outside methodologically proscribed limits of inquiry. What is called for, and beginning to emerge in recent urban research, is a new unit of analysis based on distinctive *vertically integrated processes* passing through a network from the international level to the urban hinterland. Another definitive feature of the new urban research is a closer integration of historical and contemporary analyses, particularly greater emphasis on the manner in which the colonial heritage and process of incorporation into the world economy variously condition the social, economic, and spatial organization of cities. Finally, the new urban research avoids any kind of mechanistic or economic determinism that may have been associated with dependency theory through a prevailing concern with how the state and the political process condition the urban environment.

A number of critical empirical and theoretical issues are amenable to scrutiny from this new systemic perspective. Contemporary models of urbanization under peripheral capitalism (Amin, Wallerstein) entail a number of hypotheses about the consequences of this process that require testing and, quite probably, modification or historical specification. Some of the more compelling

of these involve, first, a disaggregated analysis of the "winners and losers" (Hobsbawm, chaps. 7 and 8) in the commercialization and capitalist penetration of traditional agriculture. Current theory maintains a rather systematic view of the dispossession and proletarianization of the peasantry forced to migrate to cities by the corporate monopolization of production for export. Yet the process is doubtless more complex, producing some unexpected beneficiaries and new class alignments (e.g., Williams, Morris, Hobsbawm). Second, as we have suggested previously, the urban labor force in general and the tertiary sector in particular require closer examination. Again, current theory has assumed somewhat uncritically the twin theses of labor aristocracy and tertiarization or urban involution despite some evidence that industrial workers are not a distinct class fraction (Lubeck) and that the tertiary sector shows signs of monopolization and low absorption of urban migrants (Peattie). Third, and in a complementary vein, more work is needed on the composition of the "national (dependent or auxiliary) bourgeoisie." Facile use of the term suggests a certain homogeneity of this class that may be belied by internal segmentation and conflict between state bureaucrats and the private sector, national entrepreneurial groups and those affiliated with multinational enterprise, agricultural and industrial capital, and so on. Fourth, and combining the previous two points, new research is needed on urban class conflict; circumstances that occasion it, the forms it takes, the material conditions fought over, and the manner in which it is conditioned by broad systemic changes such as incorporation in a world economy (Lubeck and Walton). Fifth, an intriguing if neglected topic concerns the relation between peasant risings, urban social movements, and national revolts. Studies of peasant movements have viewed these events in isolation despite the evidence that they frequently have urban support and urban counterparts and that some of the more dramatic national rebellions, such as the Mau Mau in Kenya, result from the forging of rural-urban alliances. What we need to know are the systemic forces that may have differential impact on the city and countryside though emanating from a common set of circumstances.

Lastly we turn to the relationship between cities of the advanced capitalist countries and the Third World. We have suggested that these distinct urban forms reflect different modes of economic organization and deserve comparison in the interests of a broader theory of urban political economy. Here we take the point a bit further by stressing the fact that world cities are, to some considerable extent, interrelated in hierarchies of unequal exchange. As David Harvey suggests: "Within countries functioning hierarchies of city types provide channels for the circulation and concentration of surplus value while at the same time providing for the spatial integration of the economy. Swirls in circulation occur too within the large metropoli (between, for example, city and suburb in the contemporary United States): these, however, are minor compared to the massive global circulation of surplus value in which contemporary metropolitanism is embedded" (p. 232). Cities of the advanced capitalist states depend on Third World markets for raw materials, and, very often, migrant labor, to indicate only the barest outlines of interdependence. The economic organization and very survival of certain capitalist cities may depend on this exchange, just as less

potent urban centers, like the New England shoe and textile manufacturing towns, may die out with the export of industries to Third World cities where costs of production are lower (and profits higher). Similarly, the structural imbalances, poverty, and underemployment of Third World cities are closely linked to production for export to the metropolitan centers. This latter fact has become a central concern in research on the underdevelopment of Third World cities and societies. The reverse is not true. Perhaps the most serious challenge for the new urban political economy is analysis of the international networks within which cities are located and shaped.

Obviously this is a broad and demanding agenda for continuing research and, even at that, does not include a number of important issues. The questions raised here should be understood as illustrative rather than definitive or rank-ordered priorities. What we would conclude with some confidence, however, is that systemic approaches to the political economy of Latin American urbanization are increasingly common and appear to have considerable promise. As this research moves forward we must be careful to avoid any new orthodoxy that would substitute rhetoric for a genuine sense of puzzlement about the nature and role of urbanization in social change.

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