Spaces of trust: crime, surveillance and the social control of space in Latin American Megacities

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ABSTRACT: Crime rates in Latin American Megacities have been consistently higher than the rest of the region, raising questions on social integration, civic participation and social control of space. The article assesses the relationship between social control of space, surveillance and rule of Law, suggesting that communitarian strategies may serve as the ultimate resort for effectively addressing urban crime. In Latin America, different approaches had been taken to tackle crime and revitalize citizenship, from Antanas Mockus' emotionally-charged strategies, Enrique Peñalosa's provision of Public spaces in Bogotá, Mário Covas' Ombudsman office in Sao Paolo, to Marcelo Ebrard's blitzing occupations of criminal haunts in Mexico City. One central question is looking at the way in which these Mayors addressed crime, security, the quality of life and the rule of Law along with emergent democracies and citizenships. The expression of social solidarity and the creation of "spaces of trust" among citizens seem to be leading the way towards social integration and civic participation in the immediate future.

Urban crime and the rule of Law

The rule of Law is based upon fundamental principles that support a legal framework of human conduct. In Latin American cities, struggling democracies have not yet been able to permeate the institutions of security. A long history of State's disrespect for civil rights and a deep disbelief in the justice systems seems to prevail, despite later efforts by progressive Mayors in Bogotá, Sao Paolo and Mexico City. Police as an institution in charge of providing protection and assistance to the community has been largely discredited in the region. In Sao Paolo, an extended history of authoritarism inherited from dictatorships (last ending in 1985), had the Police accustomed to act outside the boundaries of legality. However, elected Mayors such as Mario Covas endorsed the establishment of control on police violence and corruption, as well as making police abide by democratic principles. However, resistance came from the police in the form of blockages, strikes and boycotting of proposals in the National Assembly and served to deter institutional changes. Police corporations in Sao Paolo have often been credited for engaging in extra-legal execution of crime suspects, accounting for 10% of the killings equivalent to more than 700 civilians a year. Nonetheless, this behavior is supported by the population which perpetuates violent schemes for addressing crime. The media has also played their part in the perception of crime and criminals, accounting at least for a third of air time in the news programs. In Sao Paolo, a few years ago, the kidnapping of one of the most famous Brazilian entertainers was transmitted live as well as the negotiation process leading to his liberation. In Mexico City, the lynching of three police officers was broadcasted in real-time illustrating the citizens' aversion to police as well as the incompetence of the corporation to rescue their peers alive. Another key issue in enforcing the rule of Law has been the contrast between privileges and the abuse of force. As each treatment depended on who the subject is, a deep disbelief in the fairness of the system of justice and its unbiased functioning prevails in society.

Nevertheless, Mário Covas, former Mayor and later elected governor of Sao Paolo (1995-2001), undertook the task to document, punish and prevent police abuses. Covas had replicated at State level President Enrique Cardoso's National Plan for Human Rights enacted in 1997, and as a result, a Police Ombudsman Office was created. At the end of Covas' administration the office was responsible for the prosecution and punishment of more than 2,800 policemen. The assessment undertaken by the referred office, tried to unveil the "cultural lethal police action" as the cause of the extreme use of force (Ouvidoira, 2001). The *Ouvidoira* reported also the Police intention to kill than to subdue the subjects (86% of the shot were in the back or in the head), and suspects were mostly blacks, young and poor (although more than half with no criminal records). Another later trend in security issues has been the creation of private security firms along with the proliferation of clandestine security services. For instance, Mexico City registered 50% more private than regular police while in Sao Paolo, 88% of policemen killings between 1999 and 2001 were slay in off-duty hours, that is, working as private guards (Ouvidoira, 2001). In Sao Paolo as in Mexico City, policemen are often associated to criminal gangs, kidnapping organizations and drug business. Moreover, both share a similar background, lifestyle and values. Therefore, in cities where the rule of Law is inconsistent and ineffective, people start considering taking action in their own hands. As Helio luz, former Police Chief of Rio de Janeiro elaborates on crime and inequality: "The police is an institution designed to be violent and corrupt…yet people still wonders. Why do I say that?, because the police was created to serve the State and the Elite. I enforce the Law to protect and serve the Status Quo, just like that. How do you keep two million *favelados* under control? Engaging in repression practices? Of course, how else? This is a political police. This is an unjust society. We are here to protect this unjust society."

Social control of space and territorial strategies

During the 1990s, two progressive Mayors in Bogotá addressed security issues, values and quality of life with a certain amount of success. First, Antanas Mockus approach was to educate citizens and recover civil values as a general framework for relating to each other. A philosopher and mathematician, Mockus undertook the city of Bogotá as a social experiment in which to try his theories involving symbolic actions, humor, metaphors and their pedagogical return. His policies were informed by Jürgen Habermas communicational theory where dialogue creates social capital, as well as Nobel-prize winning economist Douglass North work on the tension between formal and informal rules. Mockus stressed the power of knowledge in society, on the rule of law to regain basic forms of conviviality as well as sensitizing the people through humor, art and creativity to accept change in behavior. Among his ground-breaking initiatives was a 50,000 people campaign in which the people would receive a symbolic "vaccination" against violence. Mockus also embraced community police schemes, creating more than 7,000 local security fronts which peacefully surveilled their neighborhoods. A campaign of voluntary disarmament indirectly accounted for the homicides' rate to drop 26% as well as the perception that citizens needed a gun to protect themselves. Other strategies involved hiring 400 mimes for traffic calming and distributing 350,000 thumbs-up and thumbs-down cards to citizens. The cards were used to disapprove or disapprove fellow citizens' behavior in a civilized and friendly manner. Mockus also took a moral stand for the sacredness of life as the "main right and duty of citizens", and to many people's surprise, the homicide rates fell from 80 to 22 homicides per 100,000 as one of his major achievements. The following elected Mayor Enrique Peñalosa centered his policies in upgrading marginal neighborhoods as well as improving the equality of life in the city. Peñalosa based his policies on paradigm shifts, new urban vision and the change of priorities in public expenditure.

However, Peñalosa engaged as well in hard-line policies to take-back sectors of the city allegedly occupied by street-vendors and criminal organizations. Also, a wide ranging strategy of public spaces was undertaken involving three major pedestrian projects: the 20 Has. *Tercer Milenio* park (for which 600 buildings were demolished), the *Juan Amarillo-Molinos-Cordoba* linear park and the *Alameda del Porvenir* park, built around suburban low-income settlements. Peñalosa was inspired by former New York Mayor R. Giuliani and Wilson and Kelling's "Broken Windows" approach (1982). Peñalosa was endorsed the rationale of ordered spaces as the expression of concerned citizens for their environment as well as the pedagogical value of communitarian work. He also argued that after his administration, citizens came to develop a sense of belonging, pride and love for the city changing their habitual apathy and despair for the future.

Surveillance and the "electronic eyes of justice"

The elected Mayor of Mexico City Marcelo Ebrard, was a former Secretary of Public Security (2002-2004), for which he was quite aware of the crime situation before taking office in December of 2006. During his tenure as secretary, Ebrard had Rudolph Giuliani team to conduct an assessment of the crime situation in Mexico City (worth 4 million dollars on consultation fees). Later, Ebrard selectively used the following recommendations, such as improving the policemen living conditions, to have the Police accountable to the community, cracking on corruption and improving the legal and judicial systems. Later, as newly elected Mayor in 2006, Ebrard followed the Broken Windows paradigm along with increasing numbers of patrols and police officers. Environmental decay, graffiti and aggressive panhandling were also under a more proactive response and communitarian policing was also introduced. Ebrard was informed by Peñalosa's example in Bogotá and undertook unprecedented actions in areas of high incidence of crime to crack on delinquency and at the same time acquire large areas to develop projects right in the center of the city. Among those interventions (which were later extended to a couple of dozens) were the formerly known as *Fortaleza* in the traditional borough of Tepito which was raided on alleged charges of drug dealing and other illegal activities. Therefore, Police were deployed all over the place confiscating items and impounded the whole property for future construction of medical services, nurseries and social services. Another area known as *La Ford*, famous for being a place for disassembling stolen cars and reselling the parts in a vast illegal market, was dismantled in a similar fashion and the land was expropriated to build a cultural center, a sports complex, and other services for the community. Even when several financial networks related to illegal activities are said to have been pulled apart with the operatives, concerns were expressed by the Federal District Commission of Human Rights regarding the procedures as well as the interventions on the basis of presumption of crime.

The largest, and maybe the most concerning initiative has been the proposal to invest 400 million dollars for surveilling technologies. Installing more than 8,000 CCTV cameras has been proudly announced to be the first step to turn Mexico City as the "Most surveilled city on earth" (a title challenged by other cities like Shenzhen Chicago and Seoul). The strategy is called *Proyecto C-41*, a surveillance system with CCTV cameras watching infrastructures, public buildings and public spaces. The "electronic eyes" will be connected to a COMPSAT-like system of police intelligence following the already existing private surveillance infrastructure put in place by media tycoon Carlos Slim a few years ago. However, there has not been a minimal concern by the population on whether the systems represent a treat to human rights or to the public sphere. Surveillance has taken closed circuit television systems (CCTV) as key instruments for crime prevention. However, even when crime has not registered a significant change after installing the systems, some evidence exists of being a valuable device to deter and catch offenders.

City governments have been willing to install CCTV systems but the greatest impact has come from private schemes by building owners. These schemes survey both private and public spaces, raising concerns over the privatization of the public realm which may eventually, dictate how these systems are designed and used. CCTV systems have been criticized to be largely unmonitored and apparently ineffective to solving crime. According to some experts, people have growing expectations that technology will solve the problem of safety and protection.

Civic responses to insecurity and further social transformations

The most common response of governments to rising rates of crime has been to strengthen their legal and judicial systems, increasing law enforcement expenditures and toughening penalties. However, the number of offenders prosecuted and incarcerated made the costs of maintaining the criminal, justice and correctional systems rise to unprecedented levels. Policing and security may emphasize the deployment and coercion to fight the criminal sources of insecurity. Although people may feel that something is being done when tough measures are taken against crime, the approaches do not deal with the long-term consequences for families or help to prevent future delinquency. However, those measures have not reduced the number of offences committed, raising questions on alternative ways to spend resources on preventive social actions. Moreover, it is argued that preventive action can be up to ten times more cost effective than traditional control measures such as incarceration. Crime prevention was seen as largely the responsibility of the police. Only recently these problems were conceived as intrinsically linked to the health of the neighborhoods, their quality of life, as well as a wider concern about community safety and urban security. As a result, several police departments across the Latin America have undertaken communitarian police schemes instead aiming to improve their rapport with the community. For instance, problem-oriented policing was introduced as a model of rapid-response approach to incidents usually caused by underlying community issues. Community policing has been reconsidered in recent times and supporters argue that this approach fosters the mobilization of resources in the community bringing along stability in the long term. This latest variation proposes that agents ought to be agents of community tradition and consensus, working with local and grass-roots organizations aiming to help residents to take direct action for their own security provision. The communitarian-policing model involves police engaged in a wider range of security activities along with other institutions and in the solution and management of social problems. However, some critics to this model emphasizes that the police may become a center for professional advising on security issues, creating an endless demand of security solutions only available from experts in that field. Nevertheless, alternative approaches have been undertaken in which partnerships between local governments, the police and the organized communities are established to address crime. Other than the repressive approach to crime, the city creates security contracts where the state subsidizes a set of initiatives undertaken by the population at risk. Members of the community may also participate in "Crime prevention councils" to discuss crime related problems and define or coordinate the correspondent programs. Special programs targeted to socially disadvantaged groups such as probationers, unemployed youth, single mothers, etc. have been proved crucial for long-term prevention. However, this approach stresses the importance of key political figures taking responsibility on prioritizing crime prevention strategies as well as keeping them on the political agenda to recover and enhance the quality of life in the city.

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