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⇒ Discussing Urban Research in Latin America, with an Emphasis on Mexico: Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Approaches

Abstract: This paper takes stock of recent urban research in Latin America. Its first section is drawn from an evaluation carried out by GURI (Global Urban Research Initiative), and the second includes an analysis based on my own research. The paper references topics such as housing and urban land issues; social and urban policies in the 1990s and 2000s; irregular settlements and their regularization and upgrading; the social division of space and globalization; the environment, violence and the lack of safety in cities. The paper ends with some remarks concerning the theoretical development of the issues discussed.

Keywords: Urban Research; Interdisciplinary Studies; Social and Urban Policies; Latin America; Mexico; 20th-21st Century.

Resumen: Este trabajo presenta una revisión de la investigación urbana reciente en Latinoamérica. La primera sección se apoya en una evaluación llevada a cabo dentro de GURI (Global Urban Research Initiative); la segunda incluye un análisis basado en mis propias investigaciones. El artículo comprende temas como el de la vivienda y la tierra urbana; las políticas sociales y urbanas en las décadas de 1990 y 2000; los asentamientos irregulares y su regularización y revalorización; la división social del espacio y la globalización; el medioambiente, así como la violencia y la falta de seguridad en las ciudades. Finaliza con algunos comentarios respecto del desarrollo teórico del tema tratado.

Palabras clave: Investigación urbana; Estudios interdisciplinarios; Políticas sociales y urbanas; América Latina; México; Siglos XX-XXI.

Introduction

This paper takes stock of urban research in Latin America and Mexico, focusing on research that adopts a sociological approach. As we shall see, the presence of other,

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closely related, disciplines is evident in the issues that will be analyzed. One section of the paper is drawn from an evaluation of urban research in Latin America carried out by GURI (Global Urban Research Initiative), and another includes an analysis and comments made on the basis of my own research and that of other colleagues with whom I have been in contact in recent decades. This activity entails a collective endeavor requiring ongoing discussion, academic exchange, and at times a clash of points of view regarding key issues in Latin American social reality.

I will begin with an explanation of the way I understand the social or urban sociology approach in this paper. Some authors have regarded urban sociology as a discipline that is mainly concerned with social organization inserted into a particular space. In other words, its focus is not space or the spatial organization of society but rather the processes involved in a particular space (Lamy 2006). Other authors, however, place more importance on studying the way space shapes certain social phenomena. They place more emphasis on the aspects of social reality that are characterized by their links with the organization of urban space. In this paper, I will mainly be addressing issues that are more closely related to the second alternative proposed. Nevertheless, I also think it is important to recall that there has been a growing tendency to look for theoretical coincidences and interdisciplinary dialogue, making the borders of disciplines more elastic (Puga 2008). In this respect, although the field of urban studies is characterized by the convergence of various disciplines, I think that one should also bear in mind this rapprochement, which sometimes makes it difficult to know to which discipline a study belongs.

Most of the topics that will be presented and discussed in this paper have been developed within the field of Urban Sociology; nevertheless, some of them, mainly those more linked to environmental issues, display a more interdisciplinary character because of the intrinsic nature of this subject. It is clear that, in general terms, interdisciplinary studies have evolved quite recently within urban studies, alongside the emergence of new research subjects, and in many of these studies the simultaneous presence of the social and biological sciences implies an exchange of very different kinds of knowledge, which often presents a difficult task for teams of researchers coming from different fields.

But we must also make clear that in this review of urban research in Latin America and Mexico, for example, studies undertaken within the field of urban economics and anthropology have not been included, as they work with different technical languages, theoretical frameworks and general contexts; but I am quite sure that these disciplinary approaches are not in competition, and that they operate in ignorance of other disciplines. As a consequence we find different kinds of studies focusing on the same object of analysis that are unaware of each other's existence, and which therefore miss out on discussion that would undoubtedly be very useful for the advancement of a more complete knowledge of our cities and regions. Although divisions among disciplines, the existence of long traditions, special vocabularies and ways of looking at urban problems are all understandable, I am convinced that the suggested rapprochement will be useful and important for urban research in Latin America and Mexico. I also think that this process of rapprochement could lead, in the long run, to a more interdisciplinary way of dealing with the main problems of urbanization.

The Development of Urban Studies in Latin America and Mexico

Since the 1960s, urban research in Latin America has evolved at different rates according to the historical specificities of each country. The 1960s and the first half of the 1970s were characterized by the search for explanations for hyper-urbanization and marginalization within the framework of the theory of modernization. This was followed by theorizations based on political economy and Marxist urban sociology until the mid-1980s, when there was a predominance of more local perspectives. These were less focused on dominant paradigms, and there was a clear emergence of new thematic concerns that led, particularly from the 1990s onwards, to a consideration of globalization as a useful resource for explaining several aspects of urbanization. In the 1960s and 1970s, differences were found between the topics that were being researched in various groups of countries,¹ Conversely, during the 1980s, the changes that took place in the countries of that region led to a noticeable rapprochement between topics, which, for a variety of reasons, became critical cut-off points of Latin American societies. These topics included urban poverty, the social division of space, local government, social movements, and the environment.²

Urban sociology, which has developed very strongly in most Latin American countries since the 1970s, has become the most prominent area within urban studies. Urban anthropologists have contributed to the field, introducing new perspectives usually linked to urban culture and survival strategies. Urban geographers, historians, demographers and political scientists have also enhanced the development of this sphere, although their participation has been fairly limited. The influence of architecture and planning, prominent in the early stages of urban research, has declined, while the contribution of the social sciences has increased. As mentioned earlier, urban studies comprise a field of research in which a growing number of scientific disciplines converge yet are dominated, in Latin America, by sociology and, to a lesser extent, by anthropology and geography,³ in addition to the interdisciplinary approach mentioned earlier.

For some authors (Rodríguez et al. 1995), in the 1960s and 1970s, in both marginalist theory and from a Marxist perspective, there was a certain optimism about the future development of Latin American countries and their cities. Functionalist or marginalist optimism was expressed in the idea that marginalized sectors would improve their living

¹ In the early 1990s, I participated in an evaluation of Latin American urban research, which was part of a broader study on Third World countries, coordinated by Richard Stren and the Center for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada. Latin America was divided into three sub-regions and the researchers in charge of each one submitted full reports on the issues and disciplines involved, as well as the institutional context of each case (Stren 1995).

² Although the issues dealt with are undoubtedly linked to the problems existing in each country, they have not all received the same amount of attention from the academic community, which also depends on the theoretical and methodological advances of the disciplines involved, researchers' access to information, training, skills and experience as well as institutional, financial and political factors. But research processes also have their own dynamics, linked to researchers' scientific priorities and academic evolution, their belonging to certain groups or trends within their area of study, not to mention the influence, particularly in our field, of scholars from large centers that produce new ideas and conceptual frameworks (Schteingart 1995 and 2000).

³ Conversely, the results of studies on Asia and Africa, also undertaken within the GURI project, show the predominance of disciplines such as geography for Africa and economics for Asia (Stren 1995).

standards and become incorporated into modern culture through the benefits of planning. Conversely, Marxists in the 1970s thought that marginalized sectors could become a revolutionary force that would engage in a political struggle to achieve radical change in society. These optimistic views gradually lost strength and were replaced by more localist or community approaches; at the same time there was a “pulverization” of urban research, focusing more on case analysis.

We will now see how certain issues that have an undeniable importance in Latin American urban studies developed.

Housing and Urban Land Issues

These have been recurrent topics within urban studies, although in recent years the housing problem has become less important than it was in the 1970s and 1980s, due to the emergence of new urban research issues.

From the mid 1970s onwards, a new approach to housing studies began to emerge in certain Latin American countries, particularly in Mexico.⁴ This resulted from a certain degree of political openness, which encouraged the development of new critical approaches in social science. The political climate also led to the creation of housing and land institutions and programs that created a demand for studies and proposals together with a favorable environment for the development of research on these issues. During this period, studies were carried out on housing policies in Mexico, at a time when different orientations began changing the approach that had dominated during the previous two decades. It has previously been thought, for example, that defining the housing problem entailed describing the physical characteristics of housing and pointing out the discrepancies between them and what people actually needed, which would then determine the actions to be taken. This orientation was influenced by the capitalist state and the limitations of its class definition. It was underpinned by the theoretical developments surrounding the social agents who produced the city’s built environment as well as the accumulation of capital in the promotional and construction sectors (which in turn were based on the cycle of capital and the economic logic of the real estate business). These categories were at the center of the analyses and emerged as new, attractive approaches to providing an explanatory framework that overcame the limitations of more traditional theories.

Urban land is an intrinsic part of the housing problem. Housing has undergone a steep price increase, particularly in large cities, with negative consequences for the organization of urban space. Although studies on land prices began to proliferate, it was difficult to prove their link to the increase in housing prices, to the inability of large sectors of the population to gain access to the formal land market or to use this as an explanation for the issue of irregular settlements.

In Mexico the urbanization of land belonging to agrarian nuclei (both *ejidos* and communal land) was useful for describing the social processes involved in the expansion

⁴ This did not happen in Southern Cone countries such as Chile, Argentina and to a certain extent Brazil, due to the presence of dictatorships that prevented the free development of the social sciences.

of cities, specifically in Mexico City, where the rapid growth of its periphery became a key issue for urban researchers. Particularly in the late 1970s, the capital city had spread over communal and *ejido* land through mechanisms that implied ambiguous links with the laws in force and which had adverse social consequences for poor families and urban development. I will not mention all the studies that Mexican researchers undertook on these issues. By the 1970s and 1980s, there were already several general and case studies on these topics, which used censuses, surveys carried out by research teams, and field work that entailed contacting government officials as well as groups and leaders in low-income neighborhoods.

The issue of irregular settlements, which is partly linked to the issue above, has undoubtedly played a key role in Latin American urban studies as such settlements are extremely important in the spatial organization of cities in the region. This importance varies according to the social structure and historical development of each country.

Studies in the 1970s and 1980s, unlike previous ones on marginalization, analyzed illegal means of appropriating land, the regularization and consolidation of neighborhoods, and urban struggles that led poor settlers to confront the state and other social agents. It became increasingly clear that there was a need to examine their insertion into the labor force in order to disprove theorizations regarding the existence of a coincidence between “marginalization” at work and spatial “marginalization.” Another important aspect of these settlements at the time was their link to housing and self-construction. This enabled key studies to be compiled on the various forms of housing production, whether modern or backward, simple or combined, within the Latin American context. It is worth pointing out that research on these urban phenomena was carried out on the basis of case studies, which to a certain extent restricted the possibility of making broad generalizations. It was not until very recently, however, that the National Population and Housing Censuses included specific information on *favelas* and *villas miseria*. In certain countries such as Mexico, however, this vital information has not been included in these instruments that may cover a country’s entire urban environment.⁵

One crucial aspect that partly defines and characterizes irregular settlements is the question of access to urban land. It is also important to point out that this irregularity may reveal differences in Latin American countries, since the legal situation and the ways of violating the laws in force vary, as do programs for regularizing land ownership in the various national and urban contexts (Azuela/Schteingart 1991).⁶

Taking Stock of Social and Urban Policies in the 1990s and 2000s

The 1990s and the early 21st century witnessed the consolidation of socio-political reforms that had begun years earlier and indicated a significant change in state intervention in general and urban issues in particular. This new scenario emerged in several coun-

⁵ However, case studies provide more in-depth knowledge of certain urban social processes, even though there is a risk of choosing examples that may not be very representative of a more global reality.

⁶ These are conclusions from a paper that analyzes some examples of access to land in irregular settlements in various Latin American countries (Venezuela, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico) (Azuela/Schteingart 1991).

tries in the region, albeit to varying degrees. It led urban researchers to incorporate aspects that had not previously been included in urban studies, to deal with different issues and to place more emphasis on the reduction of the state's role and the negative effects of the latter on the majority of the poor population.

Poverty had always been present to a significant degree in Latin America, and irregular settlements, which largely provided shelter for the poor, had begun to emerge in the region in the 1950s and 1960s. Consequently, these phenomena could not be regarded as an issue related to the moment but rather as part of an ongoing, structural problem of these cities, which was exacerbated by the increase in unemployment and the informal sector, the drop in real salaries and changes in state policies.⁷

On the subject of popular settlements I would like to mention some conclusions from a wide-ranging study we undertook in the 1990s that included the relationship between habitat and health (Scheingart 1997). The study revealed, among other things, a somewhat alarming situation as regards the health status of the poor. Figures on the prevalence of certain diseases in these areas showed that they more than doubled those of the National Health Survey for Mexico City as a whole. This enabled us to show the health problems in poor settlements, raising doubts about the statements of certain researchers and government officials regarding the advantages of this kind of urbanization. Ten years later, we analyzed the current social problems of the population that had settled in the same irregular neighborhoods over 30 years earlier. On the basis of workshops with communities, mainly with women's groups, we have begun to prove that these neighborhoods have progressed with regard to quality of housing, urbanization and certain services. This has partly been encouraged by the regularization of land ownership and certain positive local government policies. Nevertheless, the situation has notoriously deteriorated in terms of employment, safety and education because of the overall economic and social processes mentioned earlier, which have little to do with local management. In the first study in the 1990s, we saw how there was a predominance of industrial and salaried employees, with a considerable number of workers belonging to the formal sector of the economy. The latest study, however, suggests that there has been a significant increase in men's underemployment and the precarization of work, with a greater proportion of women in the labor force.⁸ These comparative conclusions join those of other studies in arguing that a downward homologation of men and women's work appears to be taking place, whereas, in the past, gender studies revealed sharp differences in the quality of jobs and income between the two sexes (Damián 2003). Since

⁷ Until the late 1970s, the prevailing view in Latin America was that the state should guarantee the population's social rights, social policy should play a complementary role to economic policy, and universal social policies should be developed. This vision was only applied in a partial, stratified fashion, with differences in the various countries in the region. However, as a result of the reforms in the 1980s and the prevalence of neo-liberal ideas, frequent criticisms have emerged of programs targeting the poor, which have proved highly insufficient, and in some cases implied significant regressions for large groups of the Latin American population.

⁸ The study undertaken in the 1990s (Ortega 1997) showed that these settlements largely constituted the living framework of workers belonging to the formal sector of the economy, whose low salaries and difficulties in gaining access to the state's insufficient housing programs led them to participate in the processes of irregular urbanization. As for the women, they were mainly employed as domestic servants and street vendors.

women lack childcare support from either the government or the community, this situation has led to an increase in family disintegration, the creation of youth gangs and drug addiction, and a lack of safety in poor neighborhoods, none of which were observed in studies undertaken a decade earlier.

Regularization and Upgrading of Settlements

The results of certain case studies suggest that the regularization of land ownership has not necessarily helped the poor obtain loans for home improvement, and that this is usually achieved through enormous sacrifice and the use of self-construction processes. Studies in Mexico confirm the research conducted in other Latin American countries such as Peru and Colombia (Gilbert 2002; Calderón 2003). This has belied Hernando de Soto's declarations (2001) that the regularization of land ownership or possessing the legal title to a piece of property enables the poor to use their assets and gain access to formal banking. In other words, land ownership would open up the possibility of using registered property to transform dead capital, through credit, into the basis for business development and improving the living conditions of the poor. His ideas encourage a sort of popular capitalism among the poor, which is very attractive within the neo-liberal context that has dominated social policies over the last two decades (Calderón 2003).⁹

Indeed, some Mexican studies (Duhau/Schteingart 1997) showed that low-income neighborhoods gradually gained access to the regularization of land ownership. This only appeared as a factor directly linked to their improvement when it depended primarily on the security of land ownership. When land and home ownership was not threatened, possessing a title deed was unimportant. In the case of Peru, mass land regularization programs were implemented under the enormous influence of de Soto, a native of that country. However, Calderón overwhelmingly proved that access to mortgage loans continued to be very low, despite the vast number of title deeds granted.

New Directions and Strategies in Urban Research

The change of attitude regarding state intervention in general and urban issues in particular was obvious in a comparison of the guidelines and definitions approved at the Habitat I meeting in 1976 with those that emerged from Habitat II twenty years later. During the first forum, there was a major discussion on the need for state intervention and planning whereas during the second, the warhorse was "enabling strategies" and the implementation of a series of principles related to "empowerment and equity". Although these concepts or principles are undeniably important, they are insufficient for dealing with the needs of the poorest in a world in which access to basic resources is more and more inequitable and international relations are increasingly asymmetrical. Habitat I was

⁹ Hernando de Soto has achieved international notoriety due to the series of fallacies described in his books *The Other Path* and *The Mystery of Capital*, in which, among many other things, he states that "informality is the inability of law to adjust to the way people actually live, and that practical solutions are to be found in the sphere of law rather than economics or culture."

held under the banner of the Charter of Rights and Duties of Nations. Conversely, Habitat II took place at a time when these more general principles and discussions were overlooked in favor of the defense of individual, local and private initiatives and the so-called “new ethics”, reflecting the age-old idea that private is better than public, despite the fact that experience has often proved the contrary. These principles tend to encourage the redefinition of families’ roles and responsibilities, grass-roots organizations, commercial firms, etc., in order to achieve a smaller, more efficient government. Many of the principles disseminated as a result of Habitat II had already been tested years earlier without positive results. In several cases, enabling strategies simply placed the burden of solving their problems on the poor, and made matters even worse by raising expectations about “new strategies” that were neither new nor really positive for large sectors of the Latin American population.

Taking up the reflections that emerged from the crucial Habitat II forum would be helpful in reviewing the discussions and positions in force in local and international official media and in considering the reactions of certain specialists in the field of housing and urban studies (Cohen et al. 1996).

More recent analyses of housing policies and the improvement of irregular settlements, as borne out, for example, by ECLAC documents (Arriagada 2000), acknowledge the fact that programs for dealing with precarious settlements must complement housing subsidy systems. The former may lead to the creation of more irregular neighborhoods rather than encouraging the development of other housing policies. These are confusing arguments since it is not that policies for upgrading irregular settlements prevent the development of new housing programs for the poorest. Instead, this is due to the fact that the general policy of Latin American governments has tended to follow the trend of providing subsidies only exceptionally and ensuring that investments can be recovered. On the other hand (and this has been proved on several occasions), improving habitat without modifying access to employment and education or improving income makes it impossible for the poor to escape poverty.

Various researchers concluded that in the case of Mexico, although unequal income distribution has not changed, housing policy as regards the various social strata has implied significant retrogression for the neediest sectors of the population. The question is: how good is state housing action if it fails to benefit those who are unable to obtain it through the market in a country where the majority of the population is poor? (Coulomb/Scheingart 2006).

A New Spatial Order for Latin American Cities? Social Division of Space and Globalization

The social division of urban space is not merely a reflection of the social structure. Both are mediated by a series of factors including the production of the built environment, the logic of the real estate sector, state housing policies for different social groups,¹⁰ the development of irregular urbanization zones for the poor, and urban plan-

¹⁰ For example, it has been acknowledged that in the case of social housing, the tendency to locate it by primarily taking land prices into account means that the municipalities where the new housing develop-

ning and major projects promoted by different levels of government. Nevertheless, it is extremely important to bear in mind the fact that spatial organization also reflects social structures and processes at various stages in history (Castells 1975). Studies on the social division of space have been undertaken on the basis of an analytical orientation and framework which has scarcely used general or case studies, and they show how access to land and the various forms of housing production have influenced the more global configuration of cities at different times.

On the basis of accurate data from rigorous research carried out in the recent history of cities, it is difficult to determine whether socio-spatial differences have increased or decreased in Latin American cities and what this means, particularly for the largest, most disadvantaged social groups. This is the result of several factors, such as lack of information and appropriate analytical techniques, but mainly the absence of a means of explaining the changes that have occurred and their connotations for different social strata. The scale of segregation and the living conditions in segregated homogeneous zones have been mentioned, particularly for the most disadvantaged groups in society, as the most negative factors of this phenomenon (Sabatini 2003). However, although I agree with this statement, I think that there is an enormous gap in these types of analyses (even in those carried out by sociologists): they ignore the study and problematization of the changes that have occurred in the various social groups in cities (whom we refer to when we speak of middle and upper-middle sectors and whom we mean when we speak indiscriminately of the poor). This gap leads one to make statements or to use terms that often lack social content, which hampers the task of proposing new policies for coping with the often negative changes in cities.¹¹

Some empirical studies for describing the social division of space on the basis of census data and the use of a statistical analysis technique such as factor analysis (Rubalcava/Schteingart 2000a, 2000b) have shown: 1. where the various urban social strata defined on the basis of the applied analytical technique are located on the maps of cities; 2. the behavior of selected variables and the enormous differences in values; 3. socio-urban conditions, within a comparative perspective, of the largest metropolises in Mexico 4. the greater social homogeneity present in the lowest strata of the scale and 5. the appropriateness of certain variables which, due to changes that have occurred in the social reality of cities, no longer discriminate between the different zones (by which I mean, for example, the indices of running water and income included in Censuses). In this respect, the research carried out has revealed the possibilities and shortcomings of the Population and Housing Censuses for this type of research, and the positive and negative aspects of works that have used the different units of analysis provided by this source of information. It has made us aware of the need to undertake a different type of

ments are located are extremely peripheral. They have very little infrastructure and few facilities, which has increased segregation, leading in turn to greater problems for urban development and social integration (Arriagada 2000). Sometimes, as a result of urban social movements, housing programs have been designed to allow low-income groups to remain downtown (as in Mexico City after the earthquake of 1985).

¹¹ By this I mean the use of terms such as fragmentation, social mix, greater proximity between social groups, isolation, etc. which have not been properly explained and are sometimes hollow terms rather than that do not provide a precise description of the processes included in the socio-spatial division of cities.

study to find out more about social differences, about what happens in the poor, segregated zones in particular, and the factors that have influenced the changes between different cut-off points in time. The latter are largely concerned with the production of the built environment, although also, as some articles have indicated (Sabatini 2003) and others have shown (Duhau 2003), the relevance of intra-urban residential mobility (an issue that has barely been researched to date in Latin America) helps explain segregation within a more realistic, complex and dynamic perspective.

Nevertheless, Latin America has seen a significant increase in studies on the social division of space, the decline of public spaces, the emergence of new housing developments and shopping centers as well as facilities and edge cities. On scant evidence and by making a mechanical transposition of observations drawn from cities in the north, however, certain authors have begun to speak of a new city model or urban order, and to link these to globalization processes. I feel that these conclusions are sometimes over hasty and that it is necessary to examine certain urban features more carefully, as sometimes they have existed for decades. Other features, although new, have not always been shown to be a more or less direct consequence of the various processes involved in the economic and political globalization of today's world. I think it is precisely a lack of linkage and continuity in the issues researched that is responsible for the interpretations currently in vogue.

The relationship between globalization and the internal organization of cities that is currently at the center of certain discussions, has guided interesting studies in Latin America including case studies on Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Santiago de Chile and Mexico City (Aguilar 2004). Despite the differences regarding the scope and type of changes observed in the metropolises mentioned and the descriptions or explanations that are not always sufficiently grounded in empirical studies, it is interesting to note that they discuss a series of fairly recent processes and constitute an essential starting point for discovering the changes that cities in the region are currently undergoing. Numerous partial transformations are occurring, including sharper spatial divisions, the emergence of specific new urban formations and gated communities. However, it is difficult to speak of a new urban order corresponding to globalization, due partly to a certain slowness in the rate of physical change and to the fact that a city is the outcome of history, where the new and the old intertwine in a complex fashion (Marcuse/Van Kempen 2000).

Environment, Violence and Lack of Safety in Cities

Recent urban studies have incorporated the environmental dimension, since this is crucial to understanding some of the new processes taking place in cities. A major topic in urban-environmental studies (which are obviously becoming increasingly important in Latin America) is urban sprawl and its impact on natural resources and the environment. This issue may play a key role in the study of metropolitan peripheries, although that obviously depends on the location and hinterland of the urban center. In Mexico City, given the ecological diversity of the Valley of Mexico and the environmental policies implemented to protect it, this problem is of particular interest, mainly because urban sprawl began to cover zones containing a high proportion of areas designated as

nature reserves (Scheingart/Salazar 2005).¹² They are, however, threatened by urban growth, particularly through the formation or expansion of irregular settlements, and despite some of the controls established, local policies are too limited to prevent this occupation. New norms, plans and programs have been established in recent years, but if they fail to deal with the problem of poverty and social housing for low-income groups, then they can do little to protect the environment and promote a new type of sustainable urban development. It is also interesting, from a sociological point of view, to examine the conflicts between different governmental institutions and local social groups, to discover the complex urban ecological management scenario. These studies, as I pointed out at the beginning of this paper, have tried to integrate different kinds of knowledge, drawing on urban sociology, legal and policy studies, as well as biology and ecology. This integration has usually been very difficult despite the researchers' efforts to work together with people from other fields.

When we consider violence and safety in cities, we must include a wide range of situations, problems and reflections. It is only recently that more studies on the topic have emerged, particularly in Colombia, Brazil and Mexico. Although a proportion of the violence in cities is due to the impoverishment of certain groups, attempts have been made (Arriagada/Godoy 1999) to show that most violence is caused by inequality rather than poverty. Some examples from poorer countries and the example of Brazil confirm that there is no direct relationship between these two situations, since in general poor regions do not have the highest rates of homicide or violence.¹³ Another hypothesis of this issue is that the increase in violence among young people belonging to poor families is linked to the failure to satisfy the expectations created among second- and third-generation of migrants.¹⁴

But the existence of genuine crime machines that revolve around drug trafficking, smuggling, clandestine gambling, etc., supported by international mafias, constitutes a major, growing cause of urban violence. Mexico has replaced Colombia as the country with the fiercest fighting between drug cartels, with some of the highest indices of violence in the world. In some cities, particularly in the north of the country, drug mafias completely dominate the lives of individuals and local businesses; many of the latter are moving elsewhere, such as to the other side of the US border. This type of crime has been accompanied by sustained, rising violence and institutions appear to be on the verge of collapse. Neither the police nor the armed forces are able to control it. Although this problem has rarely been treated with an urban sociology approach, Mexico has begun to produce research in which the issue of drug trafficking overlaps with the political and social aspects of urban development (Alvarado forthcoming).

¹² The creation of ecological conservation areas (Conservation Land and Nature Reserves) constitutes one of the most important policies included in the Federal District's General Ecological Planning Program for maintaining the water cycles of the Mexico basin and biological diversity.

¹³ Poor Latin American countries such as Haiti, Bolivia and Peru do not have the highest homicide rates while the greatest violence in Brazil occurs in wealthy cosmopolitan cities such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Briceño-León 2001). The issue of inequality in cities has to do with highly unequal income distribution, the increase in contrasts, and poor areas with a growing degree of social disintegration.

¹⁴ The increased expectations of the second or third generation of people born in cities who no longer belong to the migrants of the 1940s, 1950s or 1960s, occurred at the same time that economic growth and opportunities for social improvement stopped. As a consequence there was a big gap between their aspirations and reality (Briceño-León 2001).

On the other hand, local programs in Mexico aimed at controlling violence have proved totally insufficient, as shown by research undertaken in several popular neighborhoods in that country. Although some interesting programs (which have lacked continuity) created neighborhood police, in general, the presence of police is even more damaging to young people as a result of their arbitrary practices, repression, blackmail and corruption (Alvarado 2004).

The middle and upper classes have responded to insecurity and violence with gated communities and exclusive malls, by closing streets and using private police. This response has exacerbated what some researchers call the fragmentation of the city, which is most evident in cases such as Río de Janeiro in Brazil.¹⁵

The issue of security where land ownership is concerned is linked to the environmental aspect of cities, and the environment is also a factor in the lack of security in irregular neighborhoods, as these are often located in areas that are unsuitable for settlement, which tend to be low-lying, prone to flooding, or on hill slopes where landslides may occur. Situations such as these have claimed many lives in recent years, particularly when the public sector has failed to provide assistance for settlers or intervened too late, ineffectively and solely for political gain. The climate changes affecting Latin American countries and cities make the areas inhabited by the poor even more risky. This state of affairs is difficult to combat using the limited policies on habitat and without radically attacking the problems of large population groups which are generally in an increasingly disadvantaged and difficult situation in the region.

Final Remarks

Recent publications

For this paper, I have reviewed issues from the past ten years of two major social science journals in Mexico which feature articles on urban issues approached from a social perspective. Through this review, I have been able to prove that the number of articles discussing urban issues is relatively low (6% of the total number of articles included in UNAM's *Revista Mexicana de Sociología* and 23% of the total published in El Colegio de México's *Revista de Estudios Demográficos y Urbanos*, between 1997 and 2010). This review has also shown that the issues currently most in vogue are: governance, citizenship and civic participation, the issue of criminal activities and security in cities, the problem of public spaces, vulnerability, society and the environment, the privatization of public services, segregation and residential mobility, social exclusion, neighborhood social organizations, electoral preferences and urban space and the peripheries of the poor. If these issues are compared with the recommendations for a research agenda developed in the early 1990s out of an evaluation of urban research that was carried out

¹⁵ A study on Río de Janeiro (López de Souza 2004) mentions the fragmentation of the socio-political and spatial fabric as a consequence of the existence of *favelas* which are enclaves for drug trafficking and promote self-segregation into closed communities by the upper classes, in a city where the quality of life has been severely damaged by violence and lack of safety.

within the context of GURI, it seems that considerable progress has been made in urban social research in Mexico. Researchers have focused more on the theoretical development of the issues dealt with, both as regards a conceptual review of traditional topics and proposals for analytical categories for new issues. The recommendations for a research agenda mentioned above, which include poverty and inequality, new actors in cities, new ways of managing cities, the issue of citizenship and participation, social policies, the state's new role and the privatization of certain services, now have an increased presence. Moreover, it should be noted that certain issues that had previously been dealt with from a more administrative or physical perspective, have now received far more attention from urban sociology (such as environmental urban management and security issues). This is undoubtedly the result of the creation of new institutions, graduate programs in urban and regional studies, and the formation of international networks that include researchers from different countries and disciplines.

Urban research: disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Relations with NGOs and governments

By way of a conclusion, I would like to say that, despite the progress achieved, it is essential to create greater links between the various disciplines that converge in the field of urban research, and to stress the need for more interdisciplinary studies. It is true that certain topics are more linked to certain disciplinary approaches and some of them, almost from the very beginning, discovered the need to include the convergence of different disciplines or to integrate their diverse approaches into an interdisciplinary kind of study. Where the pros and cons of disciplinary or interdisciplinary approaches are concerned, I do think that not every topic needs the convergence of various disciplines but, for many topics, even if they started out as part of urban sociology, the addition of other disciplines could be useful for a better and broader understanding of certain urban processes. An interdisciplinary approach is not easy, as most urban researchers are generally trained in particular disciplinary fields, but for many topics or research fields this kind of approach is absolutely necessary and depends on the creation of teams of researchers who then work together for long periods, exchanging points of views, knowledge and ways of dealing with the subjects that are at the center of their scientific concerns.

It is also necessary to establish a more functional connection between the academic sector, poor communities and NGOs, and to overcome the apparent contradiction between academic and popular knowledge, the latter typically being regarded as unscientific. Within a critical view of the social sciences, studies should be oriented towards a search for knowledge that will provide guidelines for transforming society. Moreover, human knowledge is derived from interaction with the world. In general terms, epistemology derives from action and induces new action (Palazón 1993).

It is also important to mention the relationship between the academic sector and government action. There are different interests, objectives and work dynamics in these two sectors that often make it difficult for them to cooperate, although this also depends on the government's political orientation, its level of action (federal, national or local), government officials' training and undoubtedly the administration's genuine interest in stud-

ies that will orient action.¹⁶ Researchers may have different degrees of involvement in public action (as generators of knowledge and ideas, by intervening in the decision-making process, or as consultants or advisers), and although their work may not have been undertaken to orient action, it may exert a significant influence by generating valid, accurate knowledge of particular situations.

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¹⁶ In many cases, researchers have had to undertake studies that could only be explained by government's interest in lending credibility to certain actions by presenting them as having been guaranteed by prestigious academic institutions, whereas in fact there was very little coincidence between these studies and policies.

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