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XX

The Urban Revolution(s) in Latin America: Reinventing Utopia

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Summary

This chapter explores Lefebvre's key ideas about class struggle taking place through the production of space. It does so by examining the transition from import-substitution industrialisation (ISI) to neoliberalism in Latin America using his spatial triad as a key tool of research. Moreover, it subsequently explores the contestation of neoliberalism in the region by subaltern classes, examining how this can be linked to Lefebvre's broader notions of differential space, urban revolt and autogestion.

Introduction

Since the region-wide debt crisis of the 1980s, Latin America has provided a key window with which to observe Lefebvre's (1991: 55) famous contention that 'Today, more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space.' The debt crisis marked a watershed in the continent's developmental history. The previous spatial order of the post-war years - based on nationally-scaled development - was remade in favour of a new neoliberal, global orientation. This was accompanied by a rollback in state-provisioning and a growth of poverty. However, whilst neoliberalism was a process engineered from above, it has, concomitantly, been rigorously contested from below. With access to land and vital resources made increasingly precarious, social movements in the region have frequently sought to assert their right to 'differential space'. This chapter explains the origins, practices and contradictions involved in these revolts from lived spaces, demonstrating how Lefebvre's writings can be extended to frame these movements to remake utopia but also reflecting on the need to rethink certain elements of his work in light of contemporary struggles.

It is important to note that the exercise of examining a specific locale to explore the potential of a theoretical body of work (and to highlight its possible limitations), is itself a highly Lefebvrian exercise. A leitmotiv of Lefebvre's work was the role of contradiction. He was interested in the dialectic between theory and practice so that the latter consistently informed the former, avoiding ossification into dogma (Lefebvre 1976). Expanding on Marx and Engel's (1848/2000) analysis of capitalism, Lefebvre (1976; 1991) was clear that capitalism survived through the production of space. However, an effervescent element of Lefebvre's Marxism was the accent that he placed on struggle and contestation, and the need for what he referred to as 'differential space' (defined as a collective oeuvre). This was

formed in opposition to the 'isotopy', or sameness of capitalism, that he would later refer to as 'abstract space' (Lefebvre 1970: 1991). Whilst the production of space was the element that explained capitalist survival, the new spatial forms it engendered simultaneously created the conditions for revolt. To explore how class struggle has been inscribed in space in the Latin American context it is necessary to examine the major shift in developmental practice that emerged in the 1980s, involving a shift from ISI to neoliberalism. This altered both the dominant form of spatial production and the terrain of resistance.

Lefebvre (1991) famously argued that three dialectically related elements, comprised the production of space. These are spatial practices, representations of space and representational spaces. Spatial practices refer to the spatial norms of any given social formation that ensure a degree of continuity and cohesion. Thus, property relations, the physical layout of areas including factors such as roads and infrastructure, as well as housing would be included under spatial practices, as would generalised work-patterns (see also Lefebvre 2003; Harvey 1990). This is closely associated with perceived space. In other words, it relates to our reflexive awareness of our surrounding environment. Representations of space on the other hand are tied to ideology, signs and codes. This is the realm of conceived space. Representations of space are thus related to the dominant ideology of society and this element is therefore synonymous with class rule. Lastly there are representational spaces. This is the realm of directly lived experience. Spatial practices and representations of space can combine to 'facilitate the manipulation of representational space' (Lefebvre 1991: 59). However, this component of space is associated with subjective feelings or thought and can be linked to the more clandestine side of life where resistance can begin to emerge from. It is a cultural sphere concerned with

our imagination and therefore has the ability to change and appropriate space through our everyday practices of ‘habiting’ (Lefebvre 1970/2003).

Spaces of ISI

ISI can be thought of as a Latin American variant of the ‘state mode the production’ that dominated Western capitalism after the Second World War. In other words, the space of growth was one clearly managed and controlled by the state (Lefebvre 1975/2009). This era of development mapped on to the above-mentioned triad of spatial production as follows: With regards to spatial practices, the focus on the growth of an internal market clearly represented a break from the previous model of export-led development that dominated up to the 1930s. ISI ushered in a wave of urbanisation in Latin America and subsequently new rhythms of work and daily life. In relation to ‘spaces of representation’ nationalism and the representation of ‘national space’ were utilised as an elite class strategy for capital accumulation. The bourgeoisie thus came to ‘articulate the imagined community of the nation’ (Radcliffe and Westwood 1996: 15). There was, however, a limited degree of incorporation of the demands of the popular classes such as spending on social services, subsidised consumption, increasing employment opportunities and rising real wages (Robinson 2004). In terms of the ‘representational spaces’ of ISI, the previous two elements were able to exert a powerful influence in creating a model for incorporation. In this manner, ISI as a spatial project can usefully be defined as one of ‘controlled inclusion’ (Oxhorn 1995). Contestation in this era largely took place with the state defined as the horizon of political action (Zibechi 2012). However, incorporation was far from a complete process and differential spaces remained. On the one hand, the uneven nature of state-formation had left many groups, most notably indigenous communities with de-facto

autonomy in a variety of countries (Yashar 2005). On the other hand, ISI suffered from a problem of structural unemployment owing to the use of imported technology that was labour-saving. The failure to meet expectations for social mobility would lead to tension and conflict as subaltern classes battled to maintain their precarious inclusion and urban slums proliferated (Davis 2006). As a spatial project, ISI had numerous contradictions. The redistribution of wealth was too limited to provide viable consumer markets. Inflation often resulted when governments resorted to printing money to cover their deficits. Finally, development was lopsided as rural areas were neglected in favour of urbanisation (Perrault and Matin 2005).

As a response to the economic contradictions of ISI (most notably the failure to consolidate an internal market and the continued dependence upon capital goods), Latin American states turned abroad for foreign finance. This coincided with the oil crisis of the 1970s in which large amounts of 'petro-dollars' had been deposited in western banks following the rapid raising of oil prices. These 'petrodollars' not only presented an opportunity for Latin American elites to offset the contradictions of ISI's by borrowing abroad (whilst also generating surpluses for a degree of social redistribution to offset rising labour militancy), but at the same time provided a 'spatial fix' for over-accumulated capital in Western banks, as opportunities for investment were limited there due to the onset of stagflation. Recycling these 'petrodollars' into Latin America thus became a way to productively put this capital to work and stave off domestic inflation and devalorisation (Lipietz 1984). The accumulation of debt within Latin America thus needs to be firmly situated within the very different socio-spatial relations contained within diverse geographical regions of the world. The assumption was that loans would be repaid through increased export earnings, the creation of profitable new markets and the further recycling of loans back to

the centre to purchase capital goods, helping to stimulate western economies (Lipietz 1984). Latin America in other words became a vital site for the reproduction and stabilisation of global capitalism. For Latin America, international debt was to become the very foundation of domestic economic growth.

Crisis and the export of devaluation

During the 1970s the composition of foreign capital flows to Latin America radically altered (along with the levers of power). Hitherto dominated by bilateral and multilateral lending, syndicated bank loans now emerged to provide the majority of liquidity (UNCTAD 2003: 83). By 1980, 80 percent of Latin America's debt was held by private banks, and the region held the largest accumulated debt stock in the world (Ffrench-Davis 1994). The viability of debt-led growth in Latin America was conditional, however, upon the persistence of three factors: (1) the continuing availability of foreign capital, (2) the maintenance of low interest rates, and (3) rising commodity prices to help service accrued debt. However, the election of Paul Volcker as chairman of the Federal Reserve in 1979 precipitated a new monetarist policy in the United States in response to domestic fears of inflation. This cancelled out all the above premises. First, the unilateral raising of interest rates markedly increased the value of Latin American debt. Second, the raising of interest rates caused a contraction in international liquidity, leading, third, to declining demand for primary products as recession became a feature of the central economies. Financial markets became aware that Latin America could not repay its vast loans, and thus foreign capital began to dry up. These elements helped precipitate the debt crisis in Latin America that erupted in 1982. This would be used to profoundly reshape space.

The debt crisis marked a watershed in Latin American state formation and developmentalism. It would be used to redefine the trajectory of development, with an outward-looking neoliberal economic model emerging to replace the inward-looking one of ISI. International financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank were key levers of power in this regard, reshaping spatial practices and dominant representations of space. Although external forces had never ceased to influence Latin America's state formation and development, this tendency became ever more pronounced after the debt crisis. As countries in the region could no longer service their debts and sources of private lending had ceased, they had to look to IFIs as a means of obtaining much-needed foreign exchange. These loans came with key conditionalities attached to them, including the reduction of public spending, exchange rate stability, import liberalization, privatization, deregulation, and the opening of their economies to FDI (UNCTAD 2006). This was in line with the emerging Washington Consensus, which sought to reduce (in reality, alter) the role of the state in the economic affairs of developing countries and move them toward export-oriented models of growth. In terms of spatial production this was informed by what Lefebvre (1991) refers to as 'savoir': abstract, non-place-based form of knowledge concerned only with facts and figures.

The huge debt burden meant that countries were forced to create the conditions necessary to service this debt. Practically, this entailed increasing exports while trying to reduce domestic demand. This quickly led to a disastrous recession, while the rapid opening of these countries' economies to foreign competition helped destroy local research and development (UNCTAD 2003). As a method for dealing with the debt crisis, economies were restructured to become more investor friendly. Tariffs on foreign trade, for example, dropped from 42 percent in 1985 to just 14 percent in 1995

(Robinson 2008). This decrease led to FDI replacing portfolio investment and commercial bank loans as the most source of capital (UNCTAD 2004). A significant proportion of this expansion was in mergers and acquisitions and the takeover of privatised state enterprises (UNCTAD 2000). Whereas under ISI state banks were the key providers of credit (in keeping with the national spatial strategy of development), FDI is 'to an increasing extent intended to serve global and regional markets often in the context of international production networks' (UNCTAD 2006: 10). The reality of this has been to confirm Latin America's spatial location as a subordinate region in the global political economy.

It is also important to view the debt crisis not simply as a crisis of Latin American capitalism but rather as a potential crisis of capitalism seen as a totality. Following the Mexican default in 1982, thirteen American banks were owed \$16.5 billion. Had other countries followed suit in defaulting, the financial system of world capitalism could well have collapsed, as it did in 1930, precipitating a global depression (Green 1995). As Duménil and Lévy (2004) note, by 1983 twenty-three other countries had to reschedule debt repayments, and the four most indebted nations in the world (Mexico, Brazil, Venezuela, and Argentina) owed 74 percent of the debt held by developing countries. However, rather than becoming a *crisis of capitalism* and threatening the social relations upon which the system is based, the debt crisis simply became a *crisis within capitalism*, thus acting as a necessary precondition to drive the system forward and begin a new round of accumulation. This new round of accumulation, however, involved a process of highly spatialised class struggle. Regarding this process, Harvey (2003: 151) states: 'Regional crisis and highly localised place-based devaluations emerge as a primary means by which capitalism perpetually creates its other to feed on.' This was achieved through a massive privatization of Latin American public resources and SOEs, as well as large-

scale reductions in social welfare provisions. The countryside was also opened to large scale commercialisation (Hesketh 2013). This is a classic example of what Harvey (2003) calls ‘accumulation by dispossession,’ as resources went from being state-owned and geared toward national development to exclusive private property rights devoted solely to surplus value extraction. Latin America's transition to neoliberalism thus seems to support the view expressed by Duménil and Lévy (2004) that it is a class project designed to reconstitute the wealth of the upper fractions of capital at the expense of the subaltern classes (see also Harvey 2005). Evidence for this can be highlighted by the fact that average urban incomes in all Latin American countries (except for Chile) stagnated or declined since the onset of neoliberal reforms. This decline was especially pronounced in Uruguay and Venezuela, where income declined by 30 percent and 50 percent, respectively. The dominant classes, meanwhile, increased their income faster than average (Portes and Hoffman 2003). Business also came to be increasingly privileged over labor (Grugel 1998). During the 1980s, the number of people living in poverty increased by sixty million. Concomitantly, there was a massive growth in unemployment and underemployment, with new jobs largely being created in the informal sector (Veltmeyer 1997). With this transition, the very term development also came to be redefined. Rather than being concerned with the transformation of the productive structure as it was in the past, development came to be focused on issues such as poverty reduction, the provision of minimal needs, and individual advancement, eviscerating its most salient content (Chang 2010). Duménil and Lévy (2004: 82) are therefore surely correct when they conclude: ‘That it was necessary to manage the crisis was an undeniable fact. That the neoliberal strategy was particularly harmful is another one.’

Resistance

The above factors meant that the viability of neoliberalism in Latin America as a new incorporation strategy was always inherently fragile, as there was a growing tension with the social polarization that the accumulation strategy has caused, as well as a distrust of traditional political parties and elites that engineered this (Luna and Filgueira 2009: 371). The viability of neoliberalism was therefore dependent upon generating a base of political support beyond the privileged few who have benefited from privatization, deregulation, and the move to export-oriented growth (Cameron 2009: 338). However, this sits at odds with neoliberalism's inherent nature as a class project. In fact, Latin America has been at the epicenter of resistance to neoliberalism worldwide since the twilight of the twentieth century (Goodale and Postero, 2013). This contestation necessitates thinking about how this resistance is best theorised and articulated. Beyond his work on the production of space, it is here that Lefebvre can offer an important set of intellectual resources, notably through his ideas about autogestion and urban revolt.

A key question is how an alternative political project that seeks to overcome alienation and that aims at the genuine inclusion of the subaltern classes can be formed that challenges established hegemonic practices. Here the issue of state power looms large. Castañeda (1994) acknowledges that the very things that give rise to the Left, such as poverty, discrimination, inequality, and so on, have not disappeared, and thus Left-oriented governments are likely to remain a feature of Latin America. However, he also argues that historically the Left has failed to change any of these issues in a meaningful way, especially through armed revolution. He therefore advocates an approach to political transformation that seeks to combine free-market economic principles with social redistribution as the best means for taking the continent forward. Surveying the Pink Tide movement that returned left

or left-of-centre governments to power, Castañeda (2006) sought to identify both a "right" Left and a "wrong" Left. The "good," or right, Left is defined by a market-oriented "third way" approach and is associated with countries such as Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile. The "bad," or wrong, Left, by contrast, is characterised as 'nationalist, populist, and strident' and is said to represent a threat to the region's future. This version of the Left is associated with the model of change in Venezuela and Bolivia and the whole legacy of the Cuban Revolution. The problem with such an analysis, however, is precisely the fact that it ignores the different conditions in which these movements have emerged and grown. First, classifying as a good Left those countries that accept market-oriented policies is to ignore the lessons of why neoliberalism failed as a project of incorporation (Cameron 2009; Luna and Filgueira 2009). Second, this analysis (shared but inverted by others) fails to imagine that other institutional arrangements and political practices could exist beyond the nation-state. However, as numerous interpretations have highlighted, so-called progressive governments of the region have largely been reformist rather than revolutionary and have often served to demobilise social movement activism (Hesketh and Morton 2014; Webber 2011). A tension thus exists between social movements seeking greater autonomy and the absorptive capacity of state power (Dinerstein 2015; Gutiérrez Aguilar 2008). This relationship between social movements and the state has been further strained by the model of neo-extractivism that has been pursued in large parts of Latin America. This model has functioned as a new development paradigm, focusing on natural resource extraction and primary commodity exports as the major means of growth (Burchardt and Dietz 2014; Veltmeyer 2012). In the analysis of the "two Lefts" the state becomes reified and defines the limit of political action (Luna and Filgueira 2009; Motta 2006). This analysis also ignores a hugely important feature of contemporary Latin American resistance. Rather than formulating just "two Lefts" in Latin America, we must in fact postulate a "third Left" in the form

of social movements that seek to effect change through autonomous action. As opposed to a centralisation of forces concentrated on the state, such movements focus on the dispersal of political power (Zibechi 2010). Lefebvre (1976: 125) took a clear position in this debate, arguing that the choice we face is to 'either reconstitute society as society or reconstitute the state: either action from below or acts from the top down.' Such acts from below were theorised as a process of autogestion, which he explicitly defined as an anti-statist strategy of self-management (Lefebvre (1966/2009; 1979/2009). Rather than an end condition, autogestion should be conceived as a process that at the same time serves a reflexive, auto-pedagogical function. Thus, 'Each time a social group... refuses to accept passively its conditions of existence, of life, or of survival, each time such a group forces itself not only to understand but to master its conditions of existence, autogestion is occurring.' (Lefebvre 1979/2009: 135).

This new modality of resistance is intimately connected to the way in which neoliberalism restructured space and social relations in Latin America. Everyday concerns and needs had to be attended to within the conditions of repression, poverty and state withdrawal from public provisioning (Dinerstein 2015). As a result, struggles were often moved beyond workplace issues around the means of production, and were instead linked to 'minimal access to the means of collective reproduction, such as transport, water and basic services' (Portes 1985: 31). The territorialisation of social movements' struggles in various forms has thus been a major contemporary feature of the Latin American political landscape (Zibechi 2012). These social movements have roots in spaces that have been recuperated or maintained through political action as a means for providing a secure environment. Lefebvre referred to this as the 'right to space', which transcended work and non-work based struggles, but rather concerned itself primarily with everyday life (Lefebvre 2003). For Lefebvre (1970/2003)

urban reality was always more than simply the reflection of capitalism. Rather it was the realm of possibility, of encounters and lived experiences that had the power to subvert the dominant order. In terms of alternative spatial production, this was to be governed by ‘connaissance’ (contrasting with neoliberal ‘savoir’). Opposed to a purely abstract knowledge, ‘connaissance’ is a place-based form of knowledge, informed by action against power (Lefebvre 1991).

Numerous recent examples attest to this struggle for the right to urban space in Latin America. In Buenos Aires, the piqueteros - who would later coalesce as the *Movimientos de Trabajadores Desempleado* or Unemployed Workers Movement, MTD - arose in response to the economic collapse of the Argentine economy in 2001 (which had been previously decimated by the neoliberal transition and a limited recovery that failed to provide meaningful job growth). Following the economic collapse more street demonstrations were seen in the following year that had been witnessed in the previous 15 years (Cerrutti and Grimson 2013). Issues of urban space then became vital to the unemployed movement. Confined to poor neighbourhoods, agency was exercised through the setting up of roadblocks to stop traffic and disrupt daily life. This action explicitly advanced the claim that the wealthy parts of the city could not continue whilst the poor were ignored (Cerrutti and Grimson 2013). During this time, key neighbourhood associations were set up to attend to everyday needs. These emerged in conjunction with the recuperated factory movement which managed to reclaim 200 factories, including Zanon ceramics which produced 20 percent of the country’s ceramic exports (Dinerstein 2015; Zibechi 2012).

In Bolivia cities such as Cochabamba and El Alto have been the major ‘rebel cities’, rejecting the privatisation of key resources such as water and gas (respectively) that had been mandated by neoliberal IFIs (Perrault

2006). Looking down on the major commercial city of La Paz, El Alto provides not only a stark spatial reminder of the excluded but also their power of collective organisation (Lazar 2008). The city owes its current size and identity to a wave of migration that took place when former state-owned tin mines were closed and part of the countryside privatised during the neoliberal transition in Bolivia. The Aymara and Quechua migrants have reconstituted in an urban setting the communitarian organization of the *Ayllu* to administration justice and provide for democratic deliberation (Dinerstein 2015). This was often as a necessity to provide for key elements of daily life that the state or municipal authorities were not delivering (Zibechi 2010). Such forms of organisation were integral to the insurrectionary activity that followed natural gas privatisation.

Finally, there is the example of Oaxaca City, Mexico where in the summer of 2006 no official government functioned for five months, as an array of trade unions, social movements and civil society groups attempted to declare the city ungovernable. Instead, informal neighbourhood organisations sprang up with popular 'people's councils' replacing official political parties as the local centres of power. This was a response to the perceived authoritarian neoliberalism that was claimed to have reached its apogee under governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz (Martínez Vásquez 2007). His regime sought simultaneously to extend the commodification of space in Oaxaca whilst cracking down on social protest (Hesketh 2013). These examples give credence to Lefebvre's (1947/2008) suggestion that whilst the city can lead to atomization of social life, it can also create the conditions for the reinvention of community. However, while such examples demonstrate the possibilities of urban revolt and transformation, they also highlight what Lefebvre (1976) rightly viewed as the limitations of pre-figurative action that did not have a more wide-ranging counter-project to change space permanently. In each case, autonomous political practices

have been restricted and in some cases entirely rolled back and absorbed by the state. It was for this reason that autogestion was never considered a ready-made programme by Lefebvre, but instead was viewed as ‘itself the site and the stake of struggle’ (Lefebvre 1979/2009: 134).

What potentially is lacking from Lefebvre’s writings to understand contemporary Latin America? Although, extending his idea of the ‘right to the city’ to include the right to space more broadly, Lefebvre (1976) was undoubtedly focused on the urban as the primary locale for resistance. Whilst Lefebvre did not neglect the rural in his writings, it was often framed as something that had been lost (Elden and Morton 2016). As we have seen, there are multiple examples of urban revolutions beginning in Latin America, giving credence to Lefebvre’s ideas. However, we should also note that agrarian struggles, often with demands to retain access to land and territory have been a major feature of the social movement landscape, including notable groups such as the Zapatistas in Mexico, the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil, and the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE) in Ecuador. Another new trend that can be observed in Latin America is the rise to prominence of indigenous activism and resistance. This mobilisation must be understood with reference to processes of changing state formation as the transition to neoliberalism slowed or ended policies of land redistribution. It also undercut state support for agriculture, as well as opening land to global capital. All of this threatened the communal basis of indigenous life (Hesketh 2013; Yashar 2005). These are arguably unique elements to contemporary Latin American struggles, that whilst according with Lefebvre’s broader notions of autogestion and the right to space, sit uneasily with his more resigned claims about the corrosion of agrarian life (1970/2003). As Elden and Morton (2016: 59) document, following the loss of a key manuscript *Manuel (or Traité) de sociologie rurale*, Lefebvre’s

focus shifted from the rural to the urban ‘at the expense of approaching urban and rural sociology together.’ This, however, is a vital task at the current conjuncture, especially in light of the fluid relationship between town and countryside resulting from recent migration. Despite its practical difficulties, the search for utopian space retains a vital pedagogical function in practical experimentation (Lefebvre 1976). As the very term ‘utopia’ suggest, such spaces are still not a fully-fledged reality in many cases, but rather should be thought of as ‘the non-place that has no place and seeks a place of its own’ (Lefebvre 1970/2003: 38). However, as Dinerstein (2015: 60) asserts, ‘The “not yet” occupies a significant place’ for the politics of Latin America.

Conclusions

The chapter has detailed the relevance of Lefebvre’s ideas about class struggle being waged through the production of space. It has done so by considering the transition from ISI to neoliberalism in Latin America. However, in opposition to the isotopic or abstract space that capitalism has sought to construct, numerous revolts have sprung up from everyday life that seek to create counter-projects and counter-spaces, defined as a collective oeuvre. The struggle for utopian space, is thus a clashing of spatial projects to define the very meaning of utopia. For capital, this means creating new markets and new opportunities for realising profit. For the multiple movements from below this is a broader struggle to define democratic participation and collective rights. This is not a battle that has a definitive end-point (which is all the more important given the contemporary return of rightwing forces in parts of Latin America). Rather the struggle for utopian space is likely to remain a vanishing point on the Latin American political horizon for some time to come.

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