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Urban Nature in Latin America: Diverse Cities and Shared Narratives¹

Latin America is an urban society. Despite differences in opinion about how national censuses distinguish between “urban” and “rural,” the consensus is that approximately 80 percent of Latin America’s population now live in cities. It is in the cities, therefore, that four out of five Latin Americans must negotiate their access to food, water, air, land, parks, and coexist with urban populations of mosquitoes, rats, pigeons, dogs, and cats, among many others animals. The everyday experience of nature for these Latin Americans are Havana’s urban beaches; rainwater gushing from buildings and into drains in Bogotá; overflowing rivers in Buenos Aires; children’s tree-swings in Lima’s town squares; the smoke-filled air of central Mexico; the erosion of overcrowded hilltop settlements in Rio de Janeiro; or the smell of animals, people, and machines in the colonial streets that have borne witness to the passing of generations up until the twenty-first century. The construction of urban nature, combining trees and buildings, rivers and streets, is as much a part of Latin America’s environmental history as the Andes, the forests, the deserts, and the mines are.

There is no one single historical narrative that can encompass the manifold origins and individual national trajectories of Latin American cities. There are, however, narratives which are common to urban experience on the South American continent. The small villages of the interior areas or the large coastal cities, the capital cities or the border towns: they are all interconnected by these narratives in a network of relationships shaped by political decisions, economic pressures, and environmental demands. This network occasionally goes beyond national or regional boundaries and forces us to understand cities not only in respect of their own urban boundaries, but also in respect of the position they occupy in this network. In this way a narrative can be established that includes both villages that grew up to serve the coffee harvest in the Colombian highlands, and the city-ports of Maracaibo, Barranquilla, and Buenaventura through which much of this coffee was exported. Cities, therefore, extend their networks and entwine not only the history of different countries, but also ecologically distinct regions such as the Andes and the Caribbean.

This shared narrative can be more easily understood if we think of the urban network as an integrated system, in which each city-entity has its own unique dynamic, which nevertheless affects the dynamics of other related city-entities. The various characteristics of these

1 English translation by Rocky Hirst.

city-entities—in terms of size, population, political importance, and location—not only include elements which describe each city, but also those that describe the system as a whole. From capital cities to remote hamlets, the urban experience is explained less by the opposition between the countryside and the city, than by the image of a continuum—an uneven and disordered continuum, certainly, but one that highlights the integration of cities into rural economies, extractivist communities, and into the Latin American landscape in general.

Latin American cities were at the heart of the colonial experience. The arrival of Europeans in the fifteenth century and their project of colonization required the ties with Old World to have strong urban foundations. Alfred Crosby, in likening the great voyages to “reknitting together the seams of Pangaea,” pays little heed to the fact that the stitches that hold these seams together are the cities (Crosby 1993). Ships laden with plants, animals, and germs (intentionally or otherwise) arrived in the colonies via the cities, whilst coveted colonial products such as precious metals, sugar, tobacco, *drogas do sertão* (exotic plants with medicinal properties), and tropical birds exited through the same cities’ ports. Although colonial cities in Latin America were not necessarily the “Neo-Europes” imagined by Crosby, they did connect Latin America to the dynamics of the mercantilist system that changed the Latin American environments so radically.

The location of Latin America cities from the sixteenth century onwards likewise follows mercantile logic, being based on three significant variables. The first is whether communication with the capital city was safe and reliable. A good harbour provided protection from enemy attacks (European or otherwise) and rivers facilitated access to the wealth of the interior. Bays, capes, and estuaries were all highly prized as bases for an initial urban settlement. A second variable is the existence of valuable natural resources in the vicinity. Proximity to gold and silver mines, as well as the availability of timber, favored the creation of urban centres such as Potosí in Bolivia, which, in the seventeenth century, became one of the largest and richest cities in the world, with about two hundred thousand inhabitants. Finally, colonizers placed cities where they could count on the availability and management of labor. Colonial cities established their hierarchies of power and domination over areas which had already been transformed and domesticated, and thus they secured control of the human element required to turn nature into wealth. Mexico City rose on the site of the captured city of Tenochtitlan. To these three determining factors we can add those towns and villages that emerged from the domestic economy in Latin America, i.e., cities that developed on the edge of trade routes, small settlements that were stopping points for cargo haulers, or bases for exploring the

interior areas. This is the framework on which the foundations for Latin America's urban network were established.

However, the elements that guided the creation of the colonial cities gave scant impulse to their expansion. Until the mid-nineteenth century, few Latin American cities had expanded beyond their colonial boundaries—Havana, Cuba, at the height of the sugar production industry in 1830, is one of the few exceptions. Other than Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico, most Latin American countries had one or two main cities which dominated the relationships between that region and the international markets. In fact, the first half of the nineteenth century saw what Richard Morse called “urban decline,” in which cities lost some of their attractiveness, and grew little amid the wars and conflicts of the independence period (Morse 1975). This decline, however, was dramatically reversed in the second half of the nineteenth century. With increased integration of Latin American countries into the global industrial economy, cities grew exponentially. On the one hand, the modernisation of rural farmland and the increasing land concentration necessary to meet these new demands caused great waves of domestic migration from the countryside to cities. On the other hand, cities offered new opportunities for social mobility to newcomers—and not only for Latin Americans. Latin America, especially Brazil and Argentina, became a sought-after destination for immigrants from Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. Up until 1900, only Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro had more than half a million inhabitants; during the twentieth century the parameters for the Latin American urban landscape widened dramatically—today, these two megacities have 13.6 and 12 million inhabitants respectively. However, urban growth did not occur only in capitals and major cities. In the same time period, the railroads expanded the reach of cities into areas that had hitherto hardly been explored areas. As a result, the urban network witnessed the emergence of hundreds of towns in these new frontiers.

The history of Latin America's urban system has, in my view, four main interdependent themes, which need to be analyzed both diachronically and synchronically. The first element relates to the metabolism of cities and how it transforms itself over time. By means of their transportation routes and from their place in the productive system, cities absorb resources and energy: they consume, transform, and transfer these, and secrete by-products as a result of such processes. The megacity of São Paulo, Brazil, for example, has grown as the Atlantic Forest has shrunk—transformed into energy for its industries. The way this energy has been produced, however, has not remained the same. Until the mid-twentieth century, firewood and charcoal were the main sources of energy for São Paulo (Brannstrom 2005). The city's industrial growth increased its

energy requirements at a rapid rate, and from the 1950s hydroelectric dams in the region multiplied, turning large forest areas into reservoirs. Similarly, the cities of Buenos Aires and Cordoba in Argentina also owe much of their development to the exploration of the Pampas plains. These cities process the wheat, meat, and more recently soya beans which are produced on a large scale in the countryside. The importance of the city as a space for transformation and consumption cannot be underestimated, both in environmental and cultural terms. It stems not only from the amount of food consumed in the city, but also from the appropriation of traditional products which are then reproduced on a large scale in the cities. Urbanites reinvented the *fogo de chãõ*, the traditional gaucho barbecue, in city steakhouses, with varying degrees of refinement; *tortillas* and *arepas* (tradition flatbreads), commercialized and wrapped in plastic, fill the shelves of supermarkets in Mexico City and Bogotá. In this way, the city's voracity in the twentieth century shapes both urban and non-urban landscapes.

A second element concerns the consequences of the new urban model, which required the morphological adaptation of older cities. Cities that were functional in the sixteenth century, with a few hundred or even a few thousand inhabitants, have very different requirements in the twentieth century—requirements for transportation and housing, for expansion into new land, for the distribution of food, etc. As the population increased, concepts and expectations of hygiene and human mobility also changed. The transformation of the colonial city into the modern city, and later into the industrial city, has had significant environmental impacts. In Colombia, the city of Tumaco is built almost entirely on mangrove swamps; in Rio de Janeiro, hills were flattened and rivers channelled; in the Caribbean, the enthusiastic use of DDT allowed the use of areas that had hitherto been off-limits due to the presence of epidemics. These transformations, which took place at breakneck speed, also revealed the environmental vulnerability of the urban model in Latin America's history. The growth of cities has led to the intense use and settlement of floodplains—and rain that used to fall on meadows and forests is now the cause of disasters which put the urban population at risk (Sedrez & Maia 2011). In 1911, for example, heavy rainfall in the Rio de la Plata basin caused dramatic flooding of riverside towns such as in Avellaneda in the province of Buenos Aires. The settlement of these new urban areas, as well as the modernisation of former capital cities, usually happens unevenly so that the poorest sectors of society are concentrated in areas of high environmental risk—and thus social vulnerability is linked to environmental vulnerability.

A third element is indeed urban inequality and how it affects access to natural resources, such as water, soil, and air, in different sectors of the city. The *urbes* is not homogeneous,



Figure 1:
 Firefighters and neighbours rescuing flood victims in Avellaneda, Argentina, 1911.
 Source: Avellaneda, Municipal Government.
 Source:
<http://www.avellanedawebsite.com.ar/archivo/diapo>.

and different groups seek to ensure the availability (both quantity and quality) of these resources for themselves. The development of shanty towns (*barrios*, *favelas*, and *villas*) is an important and crucial part of the environmental history of the city, and also of its political history. Cities that consume and process resources also generate large amounts of waste: domestic sewage, garbage, and atmospheric contaminants. The question is therefore not just of access to water, but access to *clean* drinking water. Likewise, it is not only about having access to housing, but access to housing in areas with waste management and clean air. Cholera and yellow fever epidemics, often perceived as resulting from the risks of a deprived urban environment—such as lack of ventilation, polluted air, or poor sanitation—provided an example of injustice that provoked much popular activism and provided a template for future campaigns for urban equality. Discussions on inequality and access to resources in urban areas must also include debates on health, contamination, pollution, and waste disposal. How can these issues be negotiated? How can they be introduced onto the political agenda? How can they be applied (if at all) in cities as diverse as Santiago and Havana? It is important to understand here the role of the state and public policies in shaping the urban environment in capital city spaces, since the practices developed in these areas usually reverberate on the rest of the urban network. This element, rather broad by definition, ranges from the emergence of green areas as a result of late nineteenth-century urban reforms to the development of environmental agencies that monitor pollution, erosion, and air and water quality in cities.



Figure 2:
New Year's
Eve in Copaca-
bana, 2012.
Source: Lise
Sedrez

Finally, a fourth element refers to urban expansion and how new spaces are disputed by the population. The emphasis here is on the ways in which urban populations have begun to claim what has subsequently been defined as “environmental rights.” In this historical process, the annexing of new territories for the industrial cities, the arrival of immigrants, and, principally, the dispute over water played a significant role. However, it is important to understand how urban nature in Latin American cities has been divided between public and private use especially since the mid-twentieth century. On the one hand, there has been an increase in “green gated communities,” i.e., enclosed areas of housing for the urban elite that suggest a bucolic experience, with woods and clean air—basically a romanticised rural experience within the city. Whether it be in Mexico City or in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, this privatization of urbanized nature is only possible by excluding those communities which traditionally occupied these areas and which now find themselves surrounded by the city’s expansion (Duarte 2012). On the other hand, there is a growing demand by the urban public for green spaces for the purpose of social interaction. The *plazas*, an old Latin American tradition, are celebrated for their old trees and for the green space they offer. Parks which have been

landscaped to be reminiscent of the countryside or remnants of ancient forests, establish a new aesthetic of urban nature, initially in larger cities, but quickly reproduced in smaller cities. They become leisure spaces (for games and family life), meeting areas (for demonstrations or protests), or simply proud celebrations of urban nature. The start of the New Year on Copacabana's famous beach, with fireworks and offerings to the Afro-Brazilian deity Yemanjá, the lady of the waters, has become one of the highlights on Rio de Janeiro's tourist calendar. In 2012, over two million people gathered to meander between sea, sand, and asphalt.

The Latin American city is the result of a combination of various historical processes: the voracious city as a part of a larger system; the adapting city, vulnerable at the same time; the unequal city, burdened by conflict; and the self-aware city that negotiates and celebrates its green spaces. Environmental history allows us to see these multiple cities from new angles, highlighting the complexity of urban nature in Latin America.

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