

THE FIFTH SYMPOSIUM ON
URBANIZATION IN AMERICA:
A Report on the Proceedings*

Bainbridge Cowell, Jr.
Emory University

Two symposia of interest to urbanists took place as part of the XLI International Congress of Americanists in Mexico City, 2–7 September 1974. One, chaired by Claude Bataillon, focused on “Regions and Regionalism in Latin America”; the other, coordinated by Jorge E. Hardoy of the Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (Buenos Aires) and Richard P. Schaedel of the University of Texas (Austin), dealt with “Urbanization in America from Its Beginnings to the Present Day.” This report summarizes the papers presented at the Hardoy-Schaedel symposium, the fifth biannual meeting of an interdisciplinary group of scholars who first assembled at Mar Del Plata, Argentina, in 1966.

Those attending the symposium in 1974 included historians, anthropologists, art historians, economists, and planners—in all, twenty-six participants from eight countries (the United States, Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Brazil, and Spain). Their research covered a broad geographical range, with Mexico, Argentina, and Peru receiving the greatest attention. Chronologically, seven of the papers dealt with the pre-Columbian and colonial periods (up to 1750); five focused on the years 1750–1950; and the remaining ten concentrated on recent urbanization.

Two pre-Columbian papers approached the difficult question of what may or may not be called an urban center in ancient America, on the basis of archeological evidence. Duccio Bonavía and Richard P. Schaedel, using “nucleation” as one of several criteria for defining urbanism in the Andean region, noted that only when improved technology provided an adequate food supply, could settlements acquire any degree of permanence. Previously, urbanization had appeared only at occasional flashpoints on the landscape, centers that flourished briefly and then vanished, perhaps because of population pressure on meager resources. Following this stage of “quasi-sedentism,” stable villages arose on an agrarian base as early as three to four millenia before the Spanish conquest, especially in the southern and central Andes. The authors pointed to important subregional dif-

*The papers summarized above will appear in a volume to be published in the near future. The author would like to thank Richard P. Schaedel for assistance and criticisms in the preparation of this report.

ferences—such as the primary role of ceremonial centers on the central and north coasts compared with villages in the highlands, and leads and lags in the timing of urban development in different zones of coast and sierra. Agriculture, with or without irrigation, emerged as a key variable for explaining the genesis of urban centers throughout the region.¹

In contrast with the broad panorama of time and territory covered by Bonavía and Schaedel, Eduardo Cigliano and Rudolfo Raffino analyzed a single site—Tastil, in Northwest Argentina, circa A.D. 1420, just prior to its incorporation into the Inca empire. Located in a peripheral zone, far from the dense population clusters of the central Andes, Tastil nevertheless exhibited a number of traits diagnostic of urban settlement: A nucleated, resident population of some 2,600 persons, including full-time nonagricultural specialists—“a consumer-artisan-administrator group”; “functional and morphological differentiation” within the center, as evidenced by buildings and layout; and technically advanced agriculture involving terraces and irrigation, to provide a subsistence base for the urban core. Demographic expansion and economic growth proceeded concurrently, both relying on agricultural productivity.²

The Spanish conquest shook the foundations of Amerindian societies and restructured them—not only around cornerstones such as Cuzco or Tenochtitlán, but also in outlying districts. To describe this process in detail, Woodrow Borah and Sherburne F. Cook presented a case study of the transition from Aztec to Spanish domination in a small Mexican city-state of the Mixteca Alta region. One trauma followed another in the aftermath of conquest: Rapid population decline; imposition of new tribute obligations in place of old ones; organization of a new local government on the Spanish municipal model, with the controlling posts of *corregidor* and priest held by Spaniards; “simplification” of Indian society into two strata of nobles and undifferentiated commoners; and the conversion to Iberian-Catholic religious forms. Most of these changes took place within thirty years after the conquest; by the 1550s, the church and its associated festivals accounted for the greater part of the town council’s budget, paid for out of revenues from public enterprises producing silk and livestock. A decade later, the restructuring was completed by the removal of the entire town from its original hilltop location to a new valley site, complete with grid plan, plaza, and church. Further population losses and the gradual eclipse of the local Indian nobility during the colonial period undermined the functions of the urban center, reducing it to a settlement of only marginal importance in modern times.³

Culture shock and demographic losses notwithstanding, the Spanish policy of concentrating the Indians into cities and towns proved to be an effective instrument of conquest and indoctrination. Francisco de Solano, in his paper, delineated three periods in this “urbanizing process”: A Caribbean phase (pre-1519), in which towns were founded on or near the coasts, principally as beachheads and defense points; an early mainland phase (1520–50), when urbanizing policy shifted toward the assimilation of large Indian populations, the exploitation of mines, and the establishment of trade routes over extensive land masses; and a later mainland period (post-1550), when the form of Spanish towns was codified in law, Indians were resettled en masse in planned mission towns, and urban networks were

completed by the founding of secondary towns and the economic organization of hinterlands. By founding separate *pueblos de indios*, colonial administrators defused Indian resistance, giving the native nobility some control over local governments and treasuries, and allowing commoners to participate in town councils. Although municipal boundaries did violence to tribal and linguistic differences, and labor drafts frequently forced Indians to leave home for service in distant places, the local political structure and the communal land system enhanced the solidarity of Indian communities under Spanish rule.⁴

The theme of mutual acculturation in colonial urban societies—how disparate social groups adjusted to each other—was discussed in four other papers. Sidney D. Markman used a set of polar coordinates—the legal distinction between *pueblos de españoles* and *pueblos de indios*, and the demographic-economic contrast between centripetal and centrifugal settlement patterns—to construct a typology of towns in colonial Central America. Growth of the economy and population in an urban center, he found, correlated with increasing racial interaction and centripetal development. “Mestization”—the gradual blurring of racial distinctions from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century—was accompanied by the emergence of characteristic architectural forms and urban layout, especially in Mexico and Guatemala.⁵

Ramón Gutiérrez, in analyzing the society, economy, and physical structure of the Jesuit mission towns in eighteenth-century Paraguay, emphasized cultural adaptation as a formative influence in mission society. Whereas the Jesuits imposed Western religious, political, and educational norms—through the local church, *cabildo*, and *colegio*—they also permitted the Indians to carry on the Guaraní tradition of living in multiple-family dwellings, and encouraged the cultivation of music, dances, and popular festivals. The Jesuits’ economic planning aimed at self-sufficiency for each mission in food and handicraft products, with some limited interchange of specialized goods between missions and production of an agricultural surplus for overseas export. At the local level, however, market relationships were minimized. Under the “mixed-economy” regime, farmland and pasture were allotted to families and to public endeavors alike, social welfare services being provided out of mission revenues. The physical structure—plaza, church, workshops, residences—represented “a pragmatic design,” developed in response to environmental conditions, not in deliberate imitation of outside models, such as the laws of the Indies, the Jesuit missions in Peru, or the Franciscan missions in Paraguay.⁶

Finally, Juan Verschueren presented the hypothesis that the conflicting purposes of the Spanish crown and the colonists resulted in two urban plans superimposed on each other—a lofty, vertical dimension, embodied in churches and government buildings; and a low-lying, horizontal plan, containing the houses of the settlers.⁷

The transition from colonial to national periods is best represented in this collection by the work of Alejandra Moreno Toscano, who used plans of Mexico City, dated 1753, 1811, 1844, and 1882, to describe the evolution of the “urban structure.” In contrast to the conventional view, she found that the city’s colonial ecology did not survive intact until the late nineteenth century. The big change,

according to the evidence, took place in the period 1811–44, despite the lack of significant demographic or industrial growth in those years. The explanation lies in certain political-administrative measures following independence—inclusion of ecclesiastical property under civil jurisdiction, taxation of urban real estate, legal prohibitions against the performance of unremunerated personal services, and new zoning restrictions on lower-class activities like street vending. A case study of the *Alcaicería*, an old artisan district, shows exactly how this process might occur: By demolishing buildings to extend a street, authorities opened up the neighborhood to city traffic, thus drawing an influx of merchants who displaced the artisans. One result of such measures was the emergence of a ring pattern of population density, the highest densities being found just beyond the city center rather than within it. Previous researchers have assumed this pattern to have been a legacy of the colonial period.⁸

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century brought much greater alterations in the ecology of Latin American cities. Horacio Torres summarized the process for Buenos Aires, basing his research on the national censuses from 1869 to 1970. The first intercensal period, 1869–95, witnessed intensive growth in the downtown area of Buenos Aires, as *conventillos* (tenements) multiplied to meet the demand for housing generated by the first waves of European immigrants. Between 1895 and 1914, concentration gave way to suburbanization as the extension of streetcar lines and real estate speculation opened the possibility of home-ownership to increasing numbers of white-collar and skilled manual workers. Social mobility for immigrants, already an important phenomenon by 1914, became much more common in the ensuing decades, which Torres identified as a second phase of suburban development. After 1930, collective taxis supplanted streetcars as the link between suburban residences and downtown jobs; beginning in the 1950s, government policies further facilitated the acquisition of private homes by members of the working classes. Increasingly, internal migration fed recruits into the city's blue-collar ranks, enabling second- and third-generation European immigrants to move into middle-class positions in large numbers. The urban elite, however, continued to reside close to the center of town. In this respect, as in the widespread use of collective transport after 1930, Buenos Aires deviated from Anglo-American models of urban growth.⁹

A more general interpretation of spatial development in Latin America was provided by Maruja Acosta, on the premise that economic organization determined the pattern of urban networks and urban-rural relationships. Her three economic types—the “pre-imperialist primary-export model,” the “imperialist primary-export model,” and the “import-substitution model”—correspond roughly to the periods pre-1870, 1870–1930, and post-1930. Settlement at isolated points—viceregal capitals, port cities, mining towns—characterized the first stage, in which cities were mainly oriented toward an overseas metropolis. In the second stage, while cities continued to resemble enclaves, they established links with the interior, such as railroads. Dominance of foreign capital, specialization in agricultural exports, increasing cityward migration, and the growth of primate cities typified this phase, of which Argentina and Cuba were leading examples. Finally, the import-substitution period since 1930 witnessed the onset of “urban-industrial

densification." The bourgeoisie of each country, based in the cities and allied with foreign investors, managed to integrate the national territory, by developing communication, air, and road networks and exploiting natural resources. New towns have sprung up in previously undeveloped or sparsely inhabited regions. Despite shifts in the occupational distribution toward larger numbers of technocrats and urban workers, Latin American economies are still subject to control by small, city-based elites; and strong foreign influence persists in distorting the trajectory of development, as in the case of Venezuela's dependence on the oil industry.¹⁰

Two authors dealt with specific aspects of network geography in the nineteenth century. Bainbridge Cowell, Jr., using evidence from parish registers, described changes in the origins and volume of migration to the city of Recife, from the late colonial period until World War I. Migrants accounted for one-third to three-fifths of the urban population, with substantial increases in migration correlating closely with slumps in rural sugar production. Short-term fluctuations as well as long-range economic decline displaced large landowners, sharecroppers, and squatters from sugar plantations in the hinterland, driving them toward the city. The fin de siècle reorganization of the sugar industry, accompanied by the appearance of large-scale "factories in the field," put many old plantations out of business and greatly augmented the stream of short-range migration to Recife. This case study fits nicely into Acosta's "imperialist primary-export model," pointing up a causal relationship between export-oriented monocrop agriculture and rapid urbanization.¹¹ Economic determinism received further support from Arthur P. Schmidt, Jr., who showed how foreign investment in Mexico's railroads during the *porfiriato* produced a rail net centered in Mexico City, with links to smaller cities, ports, and the United States, thereby consolidating primacy and foreign influence. Today's rank-size distribution of urban centers, with the national capital as the dominant city, resulted in part from the pattern of railroad building in the late nineteenth century. Secondary cities—Puebla, Vera Cruz, Orizaba, Jalapa—while benefitting from railroad traffic, nevertheless found themselves permanently subordinated in the urban hierarchy, in a system of economic dependency.

Among the papers on Latin American cities since the Second World War, the main concerns were the economics of urbanization and the acculturation of migrants. Planner-economist Wilmar Faria, in exploring patterns of recent growth in 219 Brazilian municipalities, found that his thirty variables load significantly on eight factors—such as industrial growth, public-sector and service employment, migration, and total population increase. High scores on the most important factor, socioeconomic status of the municipality (as measured by industrial-development indicators), occur only in the dominant South-Southeast region—with the exception of Recife, a growth pole in the impoverished Northeast. Cities of the agricultural frontier, in Mato Grosso and Paraná states, rank highest in population growth, surpassing the bigger centers of the coast. Economically marginal populations loom large on the urban scene, domestic service and "underemployment" being the principal options open to them.¹²

Alejandro Rofman, in his paper on the industrialization of Greater Rosario,

reinforced the impression of regional imbalances and inadequate labor force absorption. After discussing the import-substitution phase of industrialization (from the 1930s to the 1950s), in which Argentine development broke away from foreign control, he dealt with the very different pattern of the past twenty years. With the shift in emphasis from consumer goods to heavy industry, the urban economy once again has become dependent on foreign investments and technology. Multiplier effects are minimal within the metropolitan area, since intermediate goods produced by the new factories provide inputs for industries located outside the region. Entrepreneurial and governmental decisions, especially with regard to wages and capital/labor ratios, restrict consumption and lead to overgrowth of the tertiary sector.¹³

Continuing the critique of Latin American development policies, Markos Mamalakis and Jorge E. Hardoy both addressed themselves to the concepts of "urban reform" and "rural reform." Mamalakis stressed the need for a multi-sectoral approach to rural problems, one that encompasses investment and social redistribution throughout the rural economy, not just in agriculture. Applying the same idea to urban reform, he showed that relative income and relative employment in each of various economic sectors—mining, construction, industry, utilities, commerce, finance, government, services—are closely related to the level of urbanization; hence all deserve attention from policymakers.¹⁴ Hardoy examined the numerous schemes of "agrarian reform" launched in this century, concluding that only one—the revolutionary Cuban program—has succeeded in transforming the rural areas, by frankly recognizing the interdependence of land policy and political power. Mexico, Bolivia, pre-Allende Chile, and Peru have had ambitious "reformist programs," all of which have got sidetracked. Other countries, such as Colombia and Venezuela, have tried "apparently reformist" policies, designed to forestall any meaningful change in land distribution. Cuba, on the other hand, has permanently altered the status quo—by combining radical changes in the rural economy with an "urban reform" involving decentralization and controlled growth, in order to achieve a symbiotic balance between city and countryside. Significantly, Cuba remains the only Latin American nation to have undertaken a basic restructuring of the urban system.¹⁵

Migration, the main engine of city population growth, received detailed attention in five anthropological papers. For Venezuela, Matilda Suárez presented evidence of increasingly complex migration patterns. Migrants now seek out smaller towns as well as major cities; movement by stages, from rural area to town to city, may occur over two or more generations. Reverse migration helps new urbanites to maintain contact with their birthplaces. Arthur D. Murphy and Alex Stepick, who interviewed respondents in Mexico's Oaxaca Valley, reported that lower-class groups in disparate settings—peasant villagers, recent migrants to Oaxaca City, and urban migrants of longer standing—all tend to hold similar values and pursue similar goals. Leisure activities, economic status, "security," and "respect" figure as important concerns, with urban dwellers adding educational and health care services to the list. The authors concluded that rural values persist among migrants who have adapted their behavior to an urban environment, and that the personal goals of migrants often transcend purely economic considerations.¹⁶

J. Douglas Uzzell discussed institutional mechanisms for acculturation to urban life, in his study of lower-class migrants living in Lima. Like Murphy and Stepick, he de-emphasized the rural-urban contrast, showing that recent migrants, called *cholos*, develop their own institutions in the city—savings cooperatives, *pueblos jóvenes*—rather than trying to cope with banks, housing agencies, or schools controlled by the urban power structure. Such alternate institutions comprise a “disengagement sphere,” permitting gradual adaptation to the city and providing the migrants with more effective means to tackle the problems they face.¹⁷

Housing and family arrangements also reflect migrants’ ingenuity in bridging the transition from rural to urban life. In Mexico City shantytowns, according to Larissa Lomnitz, as many as five related nuclear families group their shacks together on a single plot of land, forming an extended-family or multiple-family household. Not only does the arrangement allow interfamily cooperation in child care and livestock raising, it also facilitates mutual aid among kinsmen in cases of illness, unemployment, or personal distress. Since the system has evolved through trial and error, according to the migrants’ perceptions of their own needs, planners would do well to study it in looking for solutions to the housing shortage in Latin American cities.¹⁸

A very different style of dwelling, described by Margo L. Smith for Lima, is available to resident domestic servants employed by upper- and middle-class urban families. Instead of being integrated into a kin-group or peer-group situation, the young migrant hired as a maid moves in at the bottom of a well-defined social hierarchy. Her small, poorly furnished room serves as a constant reminder of her low status vis-à-vis the other members of the household. A servant’s material living standard, nevertheless, commonly exceeds that of other young adults in the same social class.¹⁹

Whether or not the flood of migrants is “ruralizing” the city remains an open question. Although increased geographical mobility has blurred the boundary between city and countryside, Latin America’s urban culture retains distinctive characteristics. As in Sarmiento’s time, the city serves as an outpost of civilization—and of empire. Nora S. Kinzer, after analyzing samples of popular literature and cartoons, found that Buenos Aires does indeed exhibit peculiar cultural traits compared with the rest of Argentina, such as the special dialect of Spanish and the conspicuous presence of European immigrant groups. A node of tensions converging from the Argentine interior and from overseas, Buenos Aires is depicted symbolically as lying between two oceans—the Pampa on one side and the Atlantic on the other. Urbanites and their institutions display quasi-pathological tendencies—social insecurity, political turmoil, even “food fetishism.” Normative though her judgment is, Kinzer attempted to define “urbanism as a way of life,” *rioplatense* style.²⁰

Overall, however, the papers presented at the symposium viewed the Latin American city within the context of larger economic, social, and political systems. The very existence of urban centers in pre-Columbian America depended on a precarious agricultural surplus; the colonial city served as a nexus for control of empire, extraction of resources from the hinterland, and mutual adaptation of races and cultures; in the modern period, the city has become a nerve center for

native elites and foreign capitalists, who direct the functions of regional and national economies. Thanks to the massive circulation of migrants, cities today have transcended the role of specialized organs, becoming microcosms of the total society. Economic dependence, persistence of traditional values, and coalescence of new behavior patterns no longer pose uniquely urban problems, but stir the aspirations and anxieties of entire cultures. The great question of modern political economy—stagnation, reform, or revolution?—confronts all Latin Americans, whether plantocrats or bureaucrats, sharecroppers or clerks, dirt farmers or street peddlers or beggars.

NOTES

1. Duccio Bonavía and Richard P. Schaedel, "Patterns of Incipient Urbanization in the Andes and Their Continuity."
2. Eduardo Mario Cigliano and Rudolfo Raffino, "'Tastil': Un modelo de ecología urbana del noroeste argentino."
3. Woodrow Borah and Sherburne F. Cook, "A Case History of the Transition from Pre-colonial to the Colonial Period in Mexico: Santiago Tejupan."
4. Francisco de Solano, "Urbanización de la población indígena: Proceso, objetivos, problemas, resultados."
5. Sidney D. Markman, "Ethnic Variables as Reflected in the Urbanization of Colonial Central America: Mestization as a Determinant of Urban and Architectural Character."
6. Ramón Gutiérrez, "Estructura sociopolítica, sistema productivo y resultante espacial en las misiones jesuíticas del Paraguay durante el siglo XVIII."
7. Francisco Solano, "Análisis de los sistemas asociativos en la ciudad colonial"; Juan Verschuere Rodríguez, "Una interpretación de la disputa entre el diseño real y la acción urbanizadora del capitulante."
8. Alejandra Moreno Toscano and Jorge González Angulo, "Cambios en la estructura interna de la ciudad de México, 1753–1882."
9. Horacio Torres, "Evolución de los procesos de estructuración espacial urbana: El caso de Buenos Aires."
10. Maruja Acosta, Isbelia Segnini, and Germán Yanes, "Problemática del subdesarrollo: Modalidades de ocupación del espacio en Latinoamérica."
11. Bainbridge Cowell, Jr., "Origins of Migrants to a Nineteenth-Century City: The Case of Recife."
12. Wilmar Faria, "Sistema urbano en el Brasil, siglo XX."
13. Alejandro Rofman, "Localizaciones industriales y concentración de capitales en un área metropolitana de la Argentina."
14. Markos Mamalakis, "Urbanization and Sectoral Transformation in Latin America, 1950–1970: Background and Implications for Urban Reform."
15. Jorge E. Hardoy, "La reforma agraria y la reforma urbana como medios de una transformación territorial."
16. Arthur D. Murphy and Alex Stepick, "Economic and Social Integration among Urban Peasants."
17. J. Douglas Uzzell, "From Play Lexicons to Disengagement Spheres in Peru's Urbanization."
18. Larissa Lomnitz, "Dinámica del desarrollo de la unidad doméstica en una barriada de la ciudad de México."
19. Margo L. Smith, "Architecture, Social Status, and Domestic Service in Contemporary Peru."
20. Nora S. Kinzer, "Buenos Aires: Ambience and Evanescence—A Sociology of Literature."