

PUBLIC SPHERES, CRÓNICAS, AND  
HETEROGENEOUS LANDSCAPES  
New Works in Latin American Urban History

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**The Latin American Urban *Crónica*: Between Literature and Mass Culture.** By Esperança Bielsa. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006. Pp. 239. \$25.95 paper.

**La ciudad y los otros, Quito 1860–1940: Higienismo, ornato y policía.** By Eduardo Kingman Garcés. Quito: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, Sede Ecuador-Universidad Rovira e Virgili, 2006. Pp. 431. \$20 paper.

**Space and Place in the Mexican Landscape: The Evolution of a Colonial City.** By Fernando Núñez, Carlos Arvizu, and Ramón Abonce. Edited by Malcolm Quantrill. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007. Pp. 200. \$40 cloth.

**Historia ambiental de Bogotá, siglo XX: Elementos históricos para la transformación del medio ambiente urbano.** By Jair Preciado Beltrán, Robert Orlando Leal Pulido, and Cecilia Almanza Castañeda. Bogotá: Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas, 2005. Pp. 346. \$30.00 paper.

**Actores, espacios y debates en la historia de la esfera pública en la ciudad de México.** Edited by Cristina Sacristán and Pablo Piccato. Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas; Instituto Mora, 2005. Pp. 284. \$36.22 paper.

At the core of the narrative of Latin American colonialism lies the figure and form of the city. Beginning with the founding of Santo Domingo, in what is now the Dominican Republic, in 1502, urban settlements revealed and made present the civilizing mission of the Iberian conquerors while serving as fortresses against the dangers of a wilderness perceived as barbaric. These cities were nevertheless influenced by the landscape in which they resided, an environment that Europeans would struggle to map, zone, and dominate across two continents and several centuries.

Latin American cities inspired extensive inequities, which have greatly expanded within the discord of today's megacities. Whereas traditional

visions hailed urban centers as the locus of civilizing power networks, the modern sociological theory elaborated in the 1970s and 1980s by scholars such as Manuel Castells instead framed the city as an instrument of domination.<sup>1</sup> The analyses of elite urban culture and power simultaneously initiated by José Luis Romero, Richard Morse, and Ángel Rama constructed an image of the city as both beacon and leviathan, whose very stratification helped breed poetry and a progressive political public sphere.<sup>2</sup> Such studies of the mechanisms of cross-class power largely faded during the following two decades, until, at the turn of this century, urban historians took them up anew, moving beyond portrayals of deluded elites seeking to inculcate European modernity into American soil, trampling over civil liberties in the process. This has led to new treatments of criminality, subaltern responses to urban reform, and the articulation and creation of urban collective identities.<sup>3</sup>

The works under review in this essay lie at the proverbial crossroads between broader scholarly trends and exemplify both the continued importance of interrogating elite forms of exclusion and the potential of alternative methodologies, including the mechanics of formulating public spheres, the importance of landscape, the nature of urban-rural dichotomies, and the means of collective association within fragmented urban settings. To a greater or lesser extent, each study also seeks to locate cultural heterogeneity at the center of urban character, that is, to rehabilitate the idea of the city as a locus of possibility rather than as a dystopia rife with mismanagement, besieged since the colonial era with pervasive and incurable problems.

*The Latin American Urban Crónica*, by Esperança Bielsa, exemplifies the latter tendency perhaps more than any other work under consideration.

1. Manuel Castells, *City, Class and Power*, trans. Elizabeth Lebas (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); Manuel Castells, *The Urban Question: A Marxist Approach*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

2. José Luis Romero, *Latinoamérica: Las ciudades y las ideas* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 1976); Richard M. Morse, *New World Soundings: Culture and Ideology in the Americas* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Richard M. Morse and Jorge Hardoy, eds., *Rethinking the Latin American City* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Ángel Rama, *La ciudad letrada* (Montevideo: Comisión Uruguaya pro Fundación Internacional Ángel Rama, 1984).

3. On criminality, see Pablo Piccato, *City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900–1931* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). For urban planning and sanitation, see Teresa Meade, *Civilizing "Rio": Reform and Resistance in a Brazilian City, 1889–1930* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997) and Adrián Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque: Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887–1936* (Buenos Aires: Universidad Nacional de Quilmes, 1998). Some of the most interesting work on collective identities has been in colonial historiography. See particularly Richard Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493–1793* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000) and Tamar Herzog, *Defining Nations: Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

Bielsa, a research fellow in comparative cultural studies at the University of Warwick, has written a deeply researched and provocative book focused on the urban *crónica*, a genre that resides in the liminal space between journalism and literature. In her estimation, the *crónica* occupies “the contact zone between high and low culture” (xiv), which gives it an interstitial character that speaks to a cross-class audience and has the potential to articulate resistance to dominant cultural norms. *Crónicas* are first- or third-person narratives, often semifictionalized, situated within the public sphere in settings that include a city’s grand central plaza or its underbelly. Regardless of location, Bielsa argues that the form presents a “report from unofficial culture” (50) by a narrator whose “voice is constantly being eroded by the voices of [the] characters” (39). Borrowing the concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia from Mikhail Bakhtin, Bielsa acknowledges the *crónica*’s roots in earlier genres, particularly picaresque novels, nineteenth-century *costumbrista* sketches, and the *modernista* chronicles and travelogues eloquently discussed by Julio Ramos as an originary point of Latin American consumer culture.<sup>4</sup> However, Bielsa convincingly offers the second half of the twentieth century as the point of genesis for a new form of *crónica* that responds to the growing presence of a literate mass public, the corresponding expansion of print journalism, and an ever-widening circulation of ideas.<sup>5</sup> Although *crónicas* themselves often use sophisticated literary techniques and structures, they find strength in their ability to remain accessible to a broad readership because of their grounding in the city’s familiar spaces. In so doing, they represent the city, dialogically, back to itself.

Bielsa focuses primarily on two metropolises, Mexico City and Guayaquil, Ecuador, in which the *crónica* took on specific cultural meanings. In the Mexican case, she documents an upsurge in these tales during and after the student movement that culminated in the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968. According to Bielsa, the *crónica*’s ability to provide an oblique snapshot of the peripheral made it a particular favorite in the repressive political climate subsequent to this event, in turn widening the possibilities of democratic discourse itself as the writings of figures such as Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska, and Emiliano Pérez Cruz increased in popularity and appeal. In Guayaquil, however, the *crónica* remains less common, “a peripheral genre in a peripheral city,” whose importance lies in its ability to parlay a “poetics of everyday existence” rather than

4. Julio Ramos, *Desencuentros de la modernidad en América Latina: Literatura y política en el siglo XIX* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989).

5. Bielsa acknowledges that some earlier *crónicas* meet her criteria; for an analysis of one such example, see Ernesto Capello, “City, Chronicle, Chronotope: Re-Constructing and Writing Old Quito,” *Journal of Latin American Urban Studies* 6 (Fall 2004): 37–56.

dramatically shift public discourse (xiii). In both cases, however, these fragmented writings help make the city comprehensible to its inhabitants while crafting a local sensibility.

The interrelated chapters of Bielsa's book provide insights into the nature of the *crónica* and its unique ability to portray modern urban life. Bielsa begins by contextualizing the genre within debates on mass culture in Europe and Latin America before turning to an analysis of its hybrid position in relation to high and low culture. She then turns to the *crónica* in the presses of both Mexico City and Guayaquil, offering examples from the past decade by Monsiváis, Fabrizio Mejía Madrid, Roberto Zamarripa, Jorge Martillo, Iván Ulchur Collazos, and Betty Abad Mora, which serve to illuminate the general contentions elaborated previously. These readings are enhanced by interviews with authors themselves and by attention to the depiction of marginality in Pérez Cruz's renditions of the Mexico City shantytown of Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl and in Martillo's *crónicas* of Guayaquil. The book concludes with a glossary of forms of reception and readership that came to light during a series of workshops on the *crónica* in which Bielsa participated. Two appendixes translate a selection of articles directly addressed in the text, along with profiles of individual *crónica* readers.

The overall impact of *The Latin American Urban Crónica* should be considerable given its ambitious attempt to trace the complex relationships of the *crónica* across the various stages of its production and consumption. Bielsa provides a welcome service in detailing its historical genesis and contemporary existence while also exploring its multifaceted attributes, political potential, and ability to engender a shared collective identity in two of the region's megacities. There could be more attention to nonwritten forms of the genre (which Bielsa acknowledges and briefly touches upon in a fascinating passage on radio tales), particularly in film and music. The latter would be especially interesting given recent explorations of collective musical identities by Eric Zolov in regard to Mexican rock and by O. Hugo Benavides in regard to the Guayaquileño *pasillo*'s role in community formation among émigré communities in New York.<sup>6</sup>

While Bielsa's study features a particular realm of inclusiveness within the contemporary city, Eduardo Kingman Garcés's *La ciudad y los otros, Quito 1860–1940* telescopes upon forms of exclusion that developed in the Ecuadorean capital as it transformed from an aristocratic order (*ciudad señorial*) to early modernity (*primera modernidad*). This expansive volume is the culmination of almost two decades of research by one of Ecuador's eminent historical anthropologists and professor at the Facultad Latino-

6. Eric Zolov, *Refried Elvis: The Rise of the Mexican Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); O. Hugo Benavides, *The Politics of Sentiment: Imagining and Remembering Guayaquil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

americana de Ciencias Sociales. Those familiar with Kingman's previous work, which also focused on this particular moment in Quito's history, will recognize several of the arguments and perspectives developed in this book. As a specialist in the field, I was also particularly gratified to see a number of novel lines of inquiry that reflect Kingman's recent forays into the practices of sanitation and hygiene in the Ecuadorean capital.

The study incorporates a wealth of material, both qualitative and quantitative, concerning sociopolitical order and customs. Of particular note are the exhaustive analyses, culled from guidebooks and police studies, of the spatial distribution of artisan and small industrial concerns. These establish some of Kingman's larger arguments about the segregation of space and society and are illustrated in a highly useful series of color-coded maps that give testament to changes in the city's forms of production and socialization. These will be of interest to both specialist and amateur readers.

The range of material presented is at times overwhelming, yet does not detract from the primary goal of providing a genealogy of an urban elite habitus based in sanitation and *ornato* (adornment or beautification) aimed at eliminating *los otros*, that is, the rural (uncivilized) presence within the city.<sup>7</sup> Kingman argues that this fundamentally racialized project rested on a mythology of Quito as the city of a white-mestizo elite, in which largely indigenous subalterns were unwelcome. This binary notion of urbanity, progress, and civilization, inherited from the positivist mind-set of the long nineteenth century, bore little resemblance to the city's everyday forms of socialization.

The book is organized into sections on nineteenth-century Quito, the shifting sociospatial order, the development of new forms of policing space by a professionalized sanitation corps, and the importance of ornato in altering the urban fabric. The early chapters present a richly detailed treatment of social relations and patterns of daily life, while establishing the onset of attempts to reorder the city and centralize surveillance during the late nineteenth century. Kingman follows the traditional historiography of the city by locating a substantial break at the liberal revolution of 1895, particularly as the ensuing secularization of society and the creation of a railway system linking Quito with Guayaquil in 1908 produced a modern, national economic infrastructure and propelled the vast expansion of both cities. The most rewarding sections of the book, however, are the last two chapters, which feature extensive discussion of the development of the police and modern hygienic planning and provide an overview of the city elite's obsession with ornato. State efforts to restrict mobility are documented through traditional sources such as gov-

7. On habitus, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

ernment records and journalism, yet the text is also peppered with the results of oral interviews with subaltern leaders of the masons' union and an indigenous *comuna*, Santa Clara de San Millán. Kingman also draws on sociological studies of poverty by bygone hygienists such as Manuel Jijón Bello (nineteenth century) and Pablo Arturo Suárez (1930s) to demonstrate how "power" demarcated sanitized urban spaces. These attempts were bolstered by the fetishizing of adornment and "rational" planning brokered by foreign architects and planners, such as the Italian Giacomo Radiconcini, who developed the architectural curriculum at the School of Fine Arts, and the Uruguayan Guillermo Jones Odriozola, who designed the city's first master plan in 1942.

For Kingman, however, the superficiality of ornate and sanitary designs pales in comparison to the degree to which the white-mestizo elite internalized the habitus separating urban and rural. In a particularly telling passage, he evokes the specter of the old Quebrada Jerusalén, a dank and polluted ravine that was refilled in the early years of the twentieth century to make way for the monumental Avenida 24 de Mayo. This ravine once marked the boundary between the white-mestizo city and the indigenous townships to the south. Despite its eradication and the extensive transformation of Quito over the past century, the southern half of this city of 1.4 million continues to be unfamiliar and unvisited by the elite. For Kingman, this is an artificial separation between the worlds of city and countryside, and between the white-mestizo and indigenous populations.

The task that Kingman takes on is formidable, and it is a testament to his perspicacity that *La ciudad y los otros* largely succeeds in unfolding a tale of the elite's transformation of itself and its city. Nevertheless, as in any work of this scope, there are silences and theoretical issues whose consideration would have helped strengthen the overall conclusions. One of the most problematic is Kingman's lack of attention to detractors of the elite consensus, an egregious omission given the highly politicized conservative and liberal camps in early-twentieth-century Ecuador. In a similar vein, regional tensions, particularly between Quito and Guayaquil, are largely ignored, as are Quito's relationships with secondary cities. Although Kingman is largely successful in challenging the urban-rural binary by documenting the presence of subalterns within the city, his analysis sets up an alternate class-based separation that implies little dynamic interaction.

The relationship of the city to the surrounding landscape is also the focus of *Space and Place in the Mexican Landscape* and *Historia ambiental de Bogotá, siglo XX*. Both suggest novel ways to reconsider the urban-rural dichotomy in the historical narrative of Latin America, although neither presents much original research.

*Space and Place in the Mexican Landscape* presents a trio of essays intended to elaborate a "metaphysical archaeology" of the Mexican built

landscape (ix). The bulk of the book consists of a theoretical essay by Fernando Núñez, professor at the Querétaro campus of the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, who models an “essential structure of Mexican space,” incorporating Mesoamerican and Iberian notions of physical and metaphysical space. The model consists of six “cosmic directions” that comprise the metaphysical world, the underworld, and four basic structures of apprehending and organizing earthly space (10–11). These include religiosity, centralism, baroque enclosure, and attachment to the land. Using this framework, Núñez seeks to elucidate the quintessential spaces of Mexican society, pausing to consider plazas, streets, and churches, places or institutions that shift among the four cosmic directions depending on the historical situation. The task set for the coauthors, Carlos Arvizu and Ramón Abonce, also professors at the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey, is to trace the imprint of these same structures from Querétaro’s origins as a colonial fort city amid indigenous settlements through its decline during the era of Bourbon reforms and, later, its reinvention as a “colonial city” in which vestiges of the past are still present but no longer part of everyday existence. This is a daunting task to be sure. Although these essays attempt to follow Núñez’s methodological insights, they are largely superficial treatments of an urban biography in which dislocation from the land and tradition is paramount. Although there is merit in advocating a policy prescription to adopt urban renewal with an eye toward the maintenance of enduring cultural frameworks, one wishes that these attempts to consider the transformations of space and place had been more rigorous.

A similar desire to influence policy can be seen in the more successful *Historia ambiental de Bogotá, siglo XX*, which attempts to rewrite the history of Bogotá’s development by offering a panorama of moments in which policy decisions affected the environmental path of Colombia’s capital and its surrounding region. In this, the study shifts the emphasis away from political and social conflicts to prioritize different actors, including waterways such as the San Francisco and San Cristóbal rivers, the surrounding forests, and the rural environs that increasingly transformed into shantytowns as immigrants overwhelmed the city’s stock of housing.

If there is a general theme to this narrative, it is of a city whose municipal planning authorities never adequately foresaw its rapid rate of growth. The tale begins with the dislocation caused by the War of a Thousand Days (1899–1902), which first inspired extensive attention to the city’s lack of housing and basic services (including adequate water supplies and sewerage) and to environmental hazards such as typhoid fever (which was reigned in by water chlorination beginning in 1920). Ongoing attempts to control population growth and to encourage the reforestation of surrounding regions arose in the 1930s and 1940s, inspired by the garden city movement. To illustrate these developments, the authors draw on figures

such as Jorge Eliecer Gaitán—better known as the liberal radical whose 1948 assassination inspired the Bogotazo and helped radicalize Gabriel García Márquez and Fidel Castro—who, as mayor of Bogotá, oversaw the first attempts at regional reforestation. These efforts continued in the 1940s and 1950s even during La Violencia, only to fall victim to the extreme pace of development in subsequent decades. The authors focus particularly upon the inadequacy of Le Corbusier's 1951 master plan, which foresaw a population of two million in Bogotá by the century's end, when in fact its inhabitants would number almost four times as many. The emphasis placed on the inadequacy of previous planning efforts undermines the book's conclusion in support of Mayor Enrique Peñalosa Londoño's *Plan de ordenamiento territorial de Bogotá* (2000), which the authors characterize as being able to project the city's future with "verdadera planificación" (339), a statement that rings hollow given the authors' castigation of prior attempts to regulate Bogotá's environmental ethos in the face of extreme political and social pressures.

The strength of this book lies in its reformulation of the history of Bogotá and Colombia in the twentieth century according to resource scarcity and overpopulation. However, this intent is undercut by inattention to the political rationale of several of the experiments undertaken. This results in a series of missed opportunities to link environmental and political history, for example by tying Gaitán's reforestation policies to the proagrarian mandate of then president Alfonso López Pumarejo (1934–1938), whose *revolución en marcha* saw the first attempts at national agrarian reform and backed squatters' rights in rural areas. This is to say that the histories of urban environments and urban-cum-national politics ought not be divorced but instead combined in a simultaneous trajectory.

In contrast, *Actores, espacios y debates en la historia de la esfera pública en la ciudad de México*, edited by Cristina Sacristán of the Instituto Mora and Pablo Piccato of Columbia University, directly tackles the question of the urban public sphere during the long nineteenth century. Based on a 2002 conference, this work seeks to examine political history through the analysis of urban institutions and political culture by engaging Jürgen Habermas's theoretical construction of the public sphere and its applicability to the emergence of civil society in the Mexican capital. In so doing, it attempts to reframe the history of Mexico within the narrative of global capitalism and vice versa.

Habermas argues that the emergence of the public sphere coincides with the rise of the burgher in the political realm, a notion that is often construed to refer to the simultaneous rise of modern capitalism. The lack of an autonomous bourgeoisie in Latin America has therefore been used to exclude regional history from that of emergent capitalism, helping to justify the perception of the area's backwardness with regard to Europe and the United States. As Piccato points out in the introduction, however,



an independent middle class was as rare in eighteenth-century Europe as it was in Mexico, which has led to renewed attention to Habermas's identification of the public sphere with the burgher, a term that could be translated from the German to mean both bourgeois and citizen. If one takes the latter meaning, as do the essays in the volume, examining the tenets of civil society within a Latin American context can prove extremely fruitful for expanding our knowledge of the formulation of modern state power, particularly given the region's unique status as one of the earliest postcolonial societies. In the study of the emergence of the public realm in Mexico City, the authors hope to begin a dialogue on the nature of political persuasion, the elaboration of public consent, and the engagement of high and low social sectors; in short, to illuminate the participatory nature of nineteenth-century politics.

The essays in this collection make a balanced and welcome addition to the literature on urban political culture. With sources ranging from juridical accounts and periodical literature to popular poetry and public debates, the essays offer a wealth of perspectives that underscore the value of diverse avenues of exploration. Although their themes are quite varied—ranging from indigenous neighborhoods in the eighteenth century to journalistic lampooning of the medical profession during the Porfiriato and the organization of streetcar lines—they bolster the idea of heterogeneous engagement with political dialogue and policy formation. Of particular note are Luis Fernando Granados's chapter on the continued viability of Nahuatl political structures and norms in the barrios of Mexico City at the turn of the eighteenth century, Sacristán's examination of public wrestling over control of internal affairs at the La Castañeda psychiatric ward, and Diane Davis's consideration of post-1910 urbanization of the center of Mexico City.

Beyond the merits of the individual studies, however, the value of this collection lies in its attempts to reformulate debate on the nature of the Latin American city as a complex system, in which a multiplicity of discursive and political trends have coexisted, though not always harmoniously. Similar currents also underlie the perspectives of the other publications discussed in this essay. As such, one could argue that the study of the modern Latin American city appears to be headed away from a scholarship of conflict and binaries and toward one that highlights moments of negotiation and process.