



MEXICO CITY'S SOCIO-CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

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Mexico City's socio-cultural development correlates to its economic development, although not linearly. For my reading on the relationship between society and culture, I set out from a rather common assertion that multiple cities exist within the megalopolis. This holds true for the Mexican capital and many other world capitals that contain – in their enormous territories – residential neighbourhoods and university quarters; administrative, commercial and industrial zones; new and old districts. Rather than looking at these heterogeneous uses of urban space in detail, my intention here is to analyse the structural processes which have created differences and inequalities between different parts of the city, considering how these processes interact with the representations and imaginaries of city residents.

THE HISTORICAL AND TERRITORIAL CITY

A large number of buildings in Mexico City persist from pre-Columbian and colonial times. Founded in 1324 on a small island in a lake, the metropolis has accumulated throughout seven centuries built forms that are constitutive of its identity today: archaeological sites, colonial buildings turned museums, antiques and crafts shops, banks and public offices. The National Museum of Anthropology and the Templo Mayor Museum, the two most visited in the city, educate us on how the 200,000 original inhabitants were leading their lives at the time the Spaniards arrived, occupying 13 km² that then constituted the city. The colonial period, begun in 1521, has left its imprints on buildings and on the square grid of the Historic Centre. This centuries old legacy has been compounded with other forms of construction and of organising the urban landscape brought in by migrants from other parts of the country. National museums and monuments in the capital have synthesised a reading of the nation. In contemporary urban sights however, monuments mingle with publicity, the solemn aesthetics of heritage coexist with ephemeral commercial and political messages. The urban scene is often made up of chaotic landscapes disputed by the great national heroes from the past and the propaganda of today, rituals that glorify archaic traditions juxtaposed with the eloquence of modern and postmodern architecture.

THE INDUSTRIAL CITY

The modern urban experience begins to consolidate in 1940 with an industrialisation process that concentrates in the capital, massive in-migrations from the rest of the country and the rapid expansion of the urbanised area. Population climbs from 1.64 million in 1940 to 18 million in the year 2000. As a consequence of this accelerated population growth, the Federal District's borders blur and the city begins to fuse with peripheral municipalities. Central districts show negative growth from the mid 20th century onwards at the same time that most of the population increases localise in outer rings and in the 29 municipalities from the states of Mexico and Morelos that are part of the conurbation. What were the consequences in terms of social interactions and cultural development? I touch upon the following three transformations: the experience of 'incommensurability', the unevenness in the spatial distribution of cultural facilities, and the development of cultural industries favouring distanced communications. Through the term 'incommensurability', I refer to the difficulties experienced by residents in the megacity in constructing an idea of the whole that would include the heterogeneous set of zones, neighbourhoods, types of journeys and experiences that are enabled by this urban formation. Mexico City's urban footprint occupied 12,000 hectares in 1940 – the Metropolitan Zone has expanded to reach 170,000 hectares. Its population equates to that of half of the 32 states in Mexico and hovers slightly below the entire population of Central America, and includes as many diverse ethnic groups, lifestyles, and productive and consumption activities as are found in the five countries that constitute the subcontinent. This could be another way of referring to the megacity: city-continent. Its multicultural variety includes over 30 indigenous languages and some others from Europe. But this diversity cannot be understood simply as enriching – it also propitiates distorted stereotypes leading to the discrimination of the other, those who are different. In a survey on urban perceptions we found that the mainstream does not empathise with structural explanations provided by the social sciences and rather tends to identify tangible culprits: an excessive number of migrants, political

demonstrations, street vendors and police corruption can be blamed for urban violence, pollution or traffic jams. Most social movements also fall in localisms and are incapable of proposing an alternative metropolitan agenda to shift the direction of public policies. Precipitated population growth and disorderly urban expansion have resulted in a disjointed megalopolis, a city without communication.

THE COMMUNICATIONAL CITY

From the mid 20th century onwards, the creation of new cultural facilities was not apace with urban expansion and the localised cultural supply (cinemas, concert halls, bookstores) remained concentrated in a triangle extending from the Historic Centre to Chapultepec in the east and Ciudad Universitaria in the south. Throughout these decades the use of delocalised media such as radio, television and mobile phones expanded rapidly. The most up-to-date surveys on cultural consumption in Mexico City show that 97% of households have television and radio sets, 74% own a VCR, and mobile phones outnumber land lines. Whereas the spectacles that require a physical presence (cinemas, theatres) are highly concentrated, the messages of electronic media are distributed more evenly across urban space in its entirety. The city then tends to be used as a workplace or as journey to the workplace. Participation in cultural and recreational activities in public places is reduced – most people prefer to retrench to their private homes and consume culture through electronic terminals. Radio and television provide an imaginary reinvention of social and cultural bondages to compensate for the disconnection between residents and the megacity caused by territorial dispersion. What types of cultural consumptions have emerged in the industrial megacity? A somewhat deterritorialised consumption in which non-local relations predominate and electronic media supersede neighbourhood ties inscribed in a well-defined territory. Deficiencies in the educational system, both in the city and nationwide, also mean that the incidence of early school drop-out increases the impact of mass media and makes spectators less able to process complex information and entertainment with the gaze of 'critical citizens'. How do the residents of Mexico City use their free time after work or studying and on weekends? The six most commonly mentioned activities take place at home: watch television, rest, read the newspaper, listen to music, spend time with family and take physical exercise. Except the latter, which sometimes entails jogging around the house or going to the gym, and family life, including strolls and outings, it would seem that people in the capital prefer to avoid

contact with public life in the city when given a choice. During weekdays, no more than 6% of the population engage in activities that require contact with the city – visiting friends, shopping, cinema- and theatre-going, attending parties and dancehalls, and eating out. On weekends, this figure climbs to 30%. Distantiated information and entertainment prevail over local engagement. Cultural representation and urban imaginaries are constructed, most of all, through the agendas promoted by radio and television.

THE CITY THAT IMPROVISES ITS GLOBALISATION

The Mexican capital is endowed with a vast cultural supply that places it in an internationally competitive position. For instance, there are more museums in Mexico City (92) than in New York (88), Buenos Aires (55), Madrid (47) or São Paulo (32). The city also counts with communications systems, entertainment and versatile services providing international electronic connections. Conditions of efficiency and security in the city are highly deficient, however. Entrepreneurs and people in government have expressed their concerns about the heightened insecurity and the slow pace of traffic (it now takes two hours a day per resident to make a trip that should take 30 minutes) which reduces productivity. It is estimated that 20 million person hours are lost daily due to the congestion generated by the more than 3 million vehicles circulating in the metropolitan area. The rapid growth of Mexico City in the past 50 years, as in São Paulo, Caracas and Lima, is due to the millions of Mexicans from all over the country who moved to the capital expecting that industrialisation would bring benefits for all. With the external liberalisation of the Mexican economy, the URBAN AGE BULLETIN 4 3 city enters a phase of deindustrialisation and the most dynamic growth sectors are expected to relate to transnational services. The Federal District and its metropolitan periphery have become one of the world's 20 urban megacentres with the highest linkage to global networks of management, innovation and commercialisation. A clear instantiation of this shift is found in the almost 800 hectares of Santa Fe that are dedicated to: the buildings of Hewlett Packard, Mercedes Benz, Chubb Insurance, Televisa and other corporations; commercial malls; and up-market housing complexes. The shift is also confirmed by: the revitalisation and architectural interventions in the Paseo de la Reforma, Polanco, Insurgentes and Periférico Sur; the mushrooming of 29 commercial mega-malls; the presence of new transnational hotels; the modernisation of telecommunications and satellite connections; and the diffusion of information services,

cable and digital television. The shrinking ability of the globalised city to benefit the vast marginal zones of exclusion has disappointed a large part of the population and turned Mexico City's metropolitan zone into the main region expelling Mexican migrants to the United States. Dualist frameworks of intervention for urban regeneration and urban expansion plans have benefited only limited enclaves such as the Historic Centre, Reforma-Polanco and Santa Fe, segregating the rest of the population and creating a fracture between the globalising 'utopia' and the historical city relegated to a deficient modernity. Global service nodes attempt to isolate themselves from traditional sectors, from informal or marginal economic activities, from deficient urban services, from the frustrations of the unemployed and from the fears of insecurity. The duality between the global city and the insecure local city of the fringes, may become the main obstacle both for Mexico City to be imagined as an attractive location by those that bind global networks and for the city to reach a more balanced and sustainable internal development. Some of the strategic tasks for cultural policy in this megalopolis include: articulating the historical heritage and local traditions with modern developments to improve the competitiveness of the megacity in the global economy; redistributing cultural resources in urban space so as to facilitate intercultural communication through media policies that consider the diverse socio-cultural needs of the population and are not limited to the expansion of media clientèles; and including the urban majorities in a coherent modernisation project. In the meantime, insecurity affects all sectors of society. Air pollution concerns the entire city. Informal policies make their marks amidst the gestures of modernity. These and other signs indicate that urban duality fails. What predominates today is a conflictive intersection between the different cities of Mexico City.

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