

Fraya Frehse\*

## ➤ Introduction

“Cities in Latin America”, “Latin American cities”, or “the Latin American city”? How should we conceptualize the large, mid-sized or small cities in this region of the globe at the beginning of the 21st century? This century is evolving against the backdrop of crucial historical and social transformations occurring in the four corners of the globe in the wake of economic globalization. This process goes hand-in-hand with the (re)production of hitherto unsuspected socio-cultural and political differences that flourish and spread regardless of wider national or regional boundaries.

Addressing this type of question is inevitable nowadays for those who are interested in the urban research that has been produced about Latin America, either in the region itself or abroad, over the last two decades. In referring to “cities *in* Latin America” we invariably emphasize a set of characteristics that are common to the defined spaces we call “cities” and that can be empirically apprehended both in the region and elsewhere. In the case of “Latin American cities”, what comes to the fore analytically and conceptually are features that are proper to Latin America and that are present in its cities. Implicit, in turn, in any reference to the “Latin American city”, is the supposition that there is one set of characteristics that are common and peculiar to the diversity of metropolises that empirically exist in this region, to the point of favouring the synthetic association that we are dealing with just one city.

In fact, it is of no surprise that today, more so than a few decades ago, the link between “city” and “Latin America” is conceptualised in a variety of manners, and that this is reflected in a multiplicity of labels: “cities in Latin America”, “Latin American cities”, or “the Latin American city”. The current panorama of urban studies in/on the region is very different from that of some decades ago, when there was a certain consensus about the “Latin American city” in the urban research about the region that was being produced by sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, historians and urban planners who were located there or abroad. Indeed, urban investigation of Latin America was consolidated between the 1950s and the 1970s by focusing in theoretical and political terms on the specificities, in particular, of the so-called Latin American city, a category that designated “major metropolises and [...] their pressing problems: poverty and marginality, fragmentation and violence, their historical centres becoming slum-like tenement

---

\* Fraya Frehse is Professor of Sociology at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and Associate Researcher at USP's Núcleo de Antropologia Urbana. Researcher in the Brazil-Portugal-Network of Urban Studies. Recent publications: *O Tempo das Ruas na São Paulo de Fins do Império* (2005), Roger Bastide. *Impressões do Brasil* (co-author 2011), *Ô da Rua! O Transeunte e o Advento da Modernidade em São Paulo* (2011).

buildings, the uncontrolled urbanization of the countryside, regional imbalances” (Gorelik 2005: 114). From the 1980s the theoretical and empirical emphasis on any comparative generalizations about this unique conceptual totality fell into discredit in the wake of historical, sociological, anthropological and urban planning research on specific cities in Latin America (Gorelik 2005: 115).

But this empirical demonstration of the “impossibility, or at least, the sterility of making comparisons and generalizations” (Gorelik 2005: 115) is not the only element that has contributed to the discredit of the “Latin American city”. While for a long time we have known that Latin America itself is a historical-social construction of an ideological nature, since the 1980s urban research in and on the region has been strongly inspired by the notion of the eminently representational – and relative – character of any truth about any and every city. And the city as such is also recognized as a precise socio-spatial construction. This is a theoretical perspective that largely stems from the (post-modern) crisis of trust in the emancipating virtues of modernity as a philosophical project that synthesizes the ideals of rationality and of social life that developed out of the French Revolution. Given this context, it is impossible not to shake the theoretical conviction that there is a set of characteristics relating to metropolises in Latin America that are both common and specific to all of them. How many of these shared features have to be attributed, on the one hand, to the fact that we are dealing with “cities” in general which may – but do not necessarily need to - be located in Latin America? In this case, it makes sense to use the term “cities in Latin America”. Or to what extent are these characteristics not, on the other hand, common in the first instance to Latin America in general? In this case, the presence of common traits in the region’s cities is a possible but not necessarily inevitable historical unfolding of the urbanization process in Latin America: hence, an issue of “Latin American cities”.

Taking into account this empirical and theoretical state of play with regard to the urban studies on Latin America that have been produced both in and outside the region over the last few decades, the purpose of this dossier is certainly not to offer a defined response as to which conceptualization best applies to cities in the region nowadays. It does aim, however, to precisely question the thematic and conceptual limitations and potential in the wider research that has been produced over the last twenty years about the cities that empirically exist in Latin America: cities *of* Latin America.

Yet it should be stressed that this dossier is a *sui generis* bibliographic evaluation, one that is unusual within the ambit of currently existing reviews about urban studies relating to Latin America. First of all, this is because it deals more or less critically with urban investigations of the region that have been produced recently, so between 1990 and 2010.

In fact, a large part of the most recent extant evaluations of Latin American urban studies usually concentrate on approaches whose most recent versions stem from the 1980s and were developed by social scientists, historians, geographers and urban planners, not to mention writers. I am referring, on the one hand, to interpretations of the history of “ideas” about cities in Latin America from the colonial period to the 1960s (Romero 1986), and also the interval between the 1950s and 1980s (Gorelik 2005); and, on the other hand, to critical reviews of urban research of the 1980s (Henry/Sachs-Jeanet 1993, Stren 1995, Valladares 1997, Valladares/Prates n.d., Schteingart 2000), especially the so-called urban sociology (Valladares 1988). In turn, more recent evaluations

take some of these studies as reference sources in critical assessments of the urban studies about Latin America produced in the 1990s (Reynoso 2003, Ricárdez 2006).

Without ignoring these analytical tendencies, this dossier concentrates on the empirical and theoretical investigations of the cities of Latin America that emerged in the 1990s and, in particular, in the decade that began in 2000. Thus, to the fore come the thematic, methodological and conceptual evaluations of urban research produced about the region under the impact of the more recent socio-spatial developments of economic globalization and political (re-) democratization: “urban studies in/on Latin America”.

But there is also a second aspect that ensures a character that is peculiar to the bibliographic review the reader will encounter over the next few pages. It is that it constitutes, in fact, an ‘evaluation of bibliographic evaluations’, since it bundles together, in the dossier format, bibliographic reflections prepared in four different academic and disciplinary scenarios in Latin America and abroad, and from very different investigative and theoretical-methodological angles. It differs from other reviews of recent urban studies regarding Latin America (Reynoso 2003, Ricárdez 2006) in that our emphasis is less on exposing the argumentative structure of a specific specialist with regard to urban research in/on the region at the beginning of the 21st century than, through seeking support in the narrative possibilities implicit in the “dossier” genre, on gathering together simultaneously different types of expertise in this same field of investigation.

To the forefront of the debate about present-day “urban studies in/on Latin America” there comes, thus, a hitherto unsuspected ‘meeting of minds’ between the academic scenarios of Mexico, Brazil, Germany and Portugal. Martha Scheingart appears, with her background as an urban planner and sociologist, Fraya Frehse, in her turn, as a sociologist and anthropologist concerned with historical themes, while Anne Huffs Schmid echoes the influences of *Kulturwissenschaften* and political science, and sociologist Carlos Fortuna makes the case for a “discipline-transgressive” perspective for urban studies. When scholars with profiles so heavily marked by the wager on a dialogue between disciplines congregate to discuss the dilemmas and potential of an urban research tradition that is essentially interdisciplinary (cf. among others, Scheingart 2000, Gorelik 2005), it is no surprise that the ‘evaluation of evaluations’ resulting from this meeting is characterized by its distinguishing the difficulties and possibilities that specific disciplinary fields, in particular sociology and anthropology, alongside so-called interdisciplinarity, represent for present-day urban studies in/on Latin America.

But other encounters also spring from this (inter)disciplinary convergence, on this occasion between different investigative perspectives. Scheingart’s critical evaluation of the methodological and political treatment of an “interdisciplinary” nature which more or less traditional themes of sociologically-oriented urban studies received in Latin America in general and Mexico in particular between 1997 and 2010, co-exists in this dossier along with the Lefebvrian dialectic approach that Frehse brings to the methodological dilemmas – and thus to a “utopia” - that underpin(s) the sociological conceptualizations of urban space in Brazil that were produced between 1998 and 2008. If both approaches converge in the discussion on dilemmas that are internal to the urban studies of the region, Huffs Schmid and Fortuna, on the other hand, are concerned (each one in their own way) from the perspective of Mexican urban anthropology and post-colonial urban studies, respectively, to emphasize, above all, the conceptual contributions that the urban research produced in Latin America offers to academic debates of an international

reach on issues like “urban complexity in the 21st century” and the “current city world”, respectively.

How much this difference in perspective is due to the fact that we are dealing with authors who, in their own academic biographies and careers, have a deeply existential contact with specific urban contexts in Latina America, is less important here than the defined perspective indicated by this diversity of views in/on urban studies of the region. The last aspect I would like to emphasize here is the possibility of furthering the North-South debate on the thematic and conceptual contributions of Latin American urban studies to present-day international urban research.

In order to evaluate this potentiality, I can only direct you to the contribution that each of the four scholars brought together here has made to the ‘evaluation of evaluations’ contained in this dossier.

## Bibliography

- Bassols Ricárdez, Mario (2006): “La sociología urbana ¿en busca de su identidad?”. In: De la Garza Toledo, Enrique (ed.): *Tratado latinoamericano de Sociología*. México: Anthropos, pp. 229-246.
- Gorelik, Adrián (2005): “A produção da ‘cidade latino-americana’”. Transl. Fernanda Peixoto. In: *Tempo Social*, 17, 1, pp. 111-133.
- Henry, Etienne/Sachs-Jeantet, Céline (1993): “Envahir, conseiller et gouverner... la ville d’Amérique latine”. In: *Social Science Information*, 32, pp. 303-361.
- Reynoso, Arsenio González (2003): “Los estados de la cuestión sobre la investigación urbana en América Latina (1990-2000)”. In: *Anuario Americanista Europeo*, 1, 133-146.
- Romero, José Luis (1986): *Latinoamérica: Las ciudades y las ideas*. México: Siglo Veintiuno Editores.
- Schteingart, Martha (2000): “La investigación urbana en América Latina”. In: *Papeles de Población*, 23, pp. 9-27.
- Stren, Richard (ed.) (1995): *Urban Research in the Developing World [Vol. 3: Latin America]*. Toronto: Centre for Urban & Community Studies.
- Valladares, Licia (1988): “Urban Sociology in Brazil. A Research Report”. In: *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 12, pp. 285-302.
- (1997): “La recherche urbaine au Brésil: parcours et tendances”. In: *Actes des Journées Franco-Brésiliennes du PIR Villes*. Paris: CNRS, pp. 37-63.
- Valladares, Licia/Coelho, Magda P. (n. d.): “Urban Research in Latin America: Towards a Research Agenda. In: <<http://www.unesco.org/most/valleng.htm>> (6.03.2009).
- Valladares, Licia do P./Freire-Medeiros, Bianca (2002): “Olhares sociológicos sobre o Brasil urbano: uma visão a partir do UrbanData-Brasil”. In: Oliveira, Lúcia Lippi (ed.): *Cidade: História e desafios*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora FGV, pp. 60-83.