Latin American Urbanization and Planning
Inequality and Unsustainability in North and South

by

Thomas Angotti

That the quality of life in Latin American cities is in most ways dramatically inferior to the quality of urban life in North America is hardly disputable. For example, about two-thirds of the 20 million people living in Mexico City live in substandard housing, without adequate water supply, sewerage, garbage disposal, clinics, hospitals, parks, and schools. The Latin American metropolis is characterized by mass poverty and environmental pollution on a scale generally unparalleled in the North. Inequalities between the large metropolitan regions, small cities, and rural towns of Latin American nations are gaping. Inequalities within metropolitan areas are no less dramatic.

These urban and regional inequalities are not strictly “urban” problems but are a reflection of economic inequalities between North and South and within the South, and an unequal international division of labor. As Armstrong and McGee (1985: 17) note, “The role of cities in both capital accumulation and the generation of dependence, structural inequality and poverty is part of the larger history of the unequal relations existing within and between societies.”

In this article, I will attempt to show that efforts by governments and the international aid establishment to address urban problems have had little success because they do not address underlying economic inequalities. Many of these planning strategies are based on the assumption that the problem lies with cities themselves and, even more so, with the size of cities.

Latin America is among the most urbanized of world regions, with many of the largest metropolitan regions in the world. Thus, a good deal of importance has been placed on curbing urbanization, decentralizing the population, and limiting government initiatives to improve living conditions.

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in big cities. Attempts to regulate the urbanization process and plan Latin American cities have been largely based on this antiurban philosophy and on techniques imported from Europe and North America that do not take into account the particular needs and conditions of Latin America. Attempts to rectify urban inequalities and decentralize resources have generally had little success because they either assume or foster continued dependence on Northern capital. They tend to reproduce the economic and social inequalities that underlie “urban” problems.

I will also attempt to show that national economic policies in Latin America have fostered an unsustainable regime of capitalist growth that has had an indelible and negative impact on the urbanization process. Economic growth tends to revolve around expansion of auto and petroleum monopolies and to reproduce the unsustainable North American model of sprawling auto-based urbanization in a minimally regulated real estate market. In other words, economic growth is based on a regime of capitalist accumulation that fosters conspicuous consumption and an ecologically damaging form of urbanization.

**METROPOLITAN LATIN AMERICA**

The metropolis and not the countryside now defines the Latin American landscape. I use the term “metropolis” here to refer to the qualitatively larger urban regions that emerged in the 20th century, regions with over 1 million population, distinct central cities and suburbs, and a highly developed internal division of labor and land uses. These metropolitan regions are qualitatively larger and more complex than 19th-century industrial cities and smaller cities and agrarian towns.

If we consider cities of over 1 million metropolises, then by 1990 about a third of Latin America’s population lived in 41 metropolitan areas, a greater proportion than in Europe and the former Soviet Union and twice that in Asia. Only North America and Oceania had higher levels of urbanization (see Table 1). Although the rate of growth of large cities in Latin America may have begun to level off or even decline, and there are indications of higher growth rates in many smaller and medium-sized cities (see Portes, 1989), the overall urban growth rate is still high enough that by the end of the century Latin America will retain its position as one of the most urbanized regions in the world.

Not only is Latin America among the most urbanized regions of the world but it has the largest metropolitan areas, with an average of 3.6 million inhabitants compared with Asia’s average of 3.1 million, North America’s 2.7
### TABLE 1
Urban Population by Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1990 Population in Millions</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Metropolitan</th>
<th>City</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>City</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Metropolitan</td>
<td>City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Africa</td>
<td>72.3</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>645.3</td>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>7.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>472.9</td>
<td>235.7</td>
<td>3,057.6</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>147.7</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>451.1</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>14.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>144.7</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>275.3</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>25.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>120.6</td>
<td>118.2</td>
<td>498.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>54.8</td>
<td>83.5</td>
<td>291.8</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oceania</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>26.5</td>
<td>44.5</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>1,024.8</td>
<td>629.4</td>
<td>5,246.2</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### UNEQUAL URBANIZATION

It is no coincidence that Latin America is the most highly urbanized of "Third World" regions. This is a reflection of its history and its close relation to North America, today the most highly urbanized region in the world. Among the former colonial regions, Latin America was the first to gain independence and embark on a process of dependent capitalist development. In general, urbanization is stimulated by the growth of capital; labor follows capital, and Latin America has achieved a level of capital growth that most of Africa and Asia have not experienced.

The colonial era established conditions that were conducive to urban expansion in the postindependence era. Almost all of Latin America's metropolitan regions developed around colonial seats of power. They were modeled on European cities and served as gateways for export-based depen-
### TABLE 2

**Metropolitan Population in Latin America**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metropolis</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexico City</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>20,250,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>São Paulo</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>18,770,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buenos Aires</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>11,710,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rio de Janeiro</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>11,370,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lima</td>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>6,780,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogotá</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>5,270,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santiago</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>4,550,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caracas</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>4,180,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belo Horizonte</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3,890,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curitiba</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3,772,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medellín</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>3,601,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guadalajara</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>3,200,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Porto Alegre</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3,180,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recife</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3,040,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monterrey</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>3,010,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salvador</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2,650,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortaleza</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2,422,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cali</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>2,402,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brasília</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2,400,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo Domingo</td>
<td>Dominican Republic</td>
<td>2,170,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Habana</td>
<td>Cuba</td>
<td>2,040,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Juan</td>
<td>Puerto Rico</td>
<td>1,816,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goiânia</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,788,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barranquilla</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>1,775,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guayaquil</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>1,638,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cobo</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,577,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>Guatemala</td>
<td>1,460,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belém</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,357,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asunción</td>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>1,350,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nova Iguacu</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,325,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maracaibo</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>1,295,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Córdoba</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>1,285,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Puebla</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1,260,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montevideo</td>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>1,248,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quito</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>1,220,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Paz</td>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>1,210,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santos</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>1,139,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valencia</td>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>1,135,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosario</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>1,122,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>León</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1,077,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciudad Juárez</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1,006,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

dent economies. After independence, urbanization went along with dependent capitalist development, which continued to centralize both international and national capital and public and private capital in a small number of cities.

Although the rate and extent of urban growth are generally a function of capital growth, the particular forms—both physical and social—that cities assume vary according to the regime of capital accumulation. Urbanization in Latin America is a consequence of a particular form of dependent capitalism. In most countries cities mushroomed in size as capital became increasingly concentrated in urban centers whose economic activities were oriented toward the export of commodities to the North and in which local elites established secure enclaves for their urban lifestyles and consumption patterns, which emulated the conspicuous consumption prevalent in the North. As agriculture was mechanized and monopolized and subsistence farming declined, the surplus labor force in the countryside was drawn to metropolitan areas. It takes only minimal capital investment in cities to spur a flood of migration from depressed rural areas. Also, capitalist growth requires a surplus labor force above and beyond that which is needed at any given moment for production. And as poor as life may be in large cities, the standard of living in the metropolis is still better than in rural areas.

The export-oriented industries that drive capitalist growth in Latin America tend to be more highly integrated with global capitalism than with the national economies. Many are enclave industries that have a minimal multiplier effect on local economies. Most of the surplus produced is exported, and little remains to build adequate housing, roads, utilities, and other services for the urban population. This suppresses the overall cost of labor reproduction and the value of labor, particularly Latin American labor, stimulating the reproduction of dependent capitalism.

The Latin American metropolis is in large measure a reserve labor pool for international capital to use in its global assembly line. Immigration policies in North America ensure that most of the labor reserves remain in Latin American cities, where reproduction costs are lower. International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank policies that discourage investment in urban infrastructure and services help limit improvements in the urban standard of living. Indeed, urban consumption levels declined in the past decade as a result of austerity measures undertaken to meet debt obligations; these led to the recent IMF rebellions in Buenos Aires, Lima, Santo Domingo, Caracas, and elsewhere (see Walton, 1987). Recent World Bank attempts to restore some urban expenditures are aimed more at moderating social tensions than at altering the structure of inequality.
Proof of the close relationship between capital accumulation and urbanization is that the wealthiest countries in Latin America are also among the most urbanized. In Venezuela 45 percent, in Argentina 43 percent, in Brazil 39 percent, and in Mexico 34 percent of the population lives in cities of over 1 million. Colombia and Chile, which have recently undergone rapid economic growth, have 41 percent and 35 percent, respectively, of their populations in metropolitan areas. In recent decades, a structural economic and urban gulf has opened in Latin America between the highly developed and urbanized nations and the less developed and urbanized nations. Poorer countries such as Ecuador, Bolivia, and Guatemala, for example, have proportionally smaller urban populations—26 percent, 15 percent, and 15 percent respectively—and others, such as El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guyana, do not even have a single metropolis of more than 1 million.

Whereas the North American metropolis is one of suburban affluence with a minority, mostly in central cities, living in chronic poverty, mass poverty is a reality in most Latin American cities. What is often described as a vast “informal” sector in Latin American cities is really a working-class majority that survives at a level of subsistence far below North American standards while a disproportionate amount of the economic surplus it produces is exported. Its economic activities may be unregulated by government, but it is not at all “marginal” (see Bromley and Gerry, 1979; Portes, 1985; Perlman, 1976; Portes, Castells, and Benton, 1989; Schteingart, 1990).

Contrary to diffusion theory (for a classical statement of this view, see Hoselitz, 1969), urban Latin America is not necessarily becoming like urban North America in anything other than the level of urbanization. There are key differences in the process and structure of urbanization between North and South (see Violich, 1987). Aside from the obvious differences in the urban standard of living, the North American metropolis has flourished by importing capital and labor from less developed nations to build a diversified consumer economy, while the Latin American metropolis has grown unevenly by exporting its labor and resources to the North (see Acosta and Briceño León, 1987, for a critique of diffusion theory and its principal source, the Chicago school of urban sociology).

**THE NEW INTERNATIONAL DIVISION OF LABOR**

Are recent changes in the international division of labor going to stop Latin American urbanization or alter the fundamental pattern of inequality?

Since the 1970s, capitalist production has begun to take on more pronounced aspects of a global assembly line. Many have associated this with a
“new international division of labor” (Palloix, 1977; Frobel, Henrichs, and Kreye, 1980; Henderson and Castells, 1987; King, 1990). This phenomenon has been accompanied by deindustrialization in North America and the flight of the most labor-intensive and noxious operations to the South. It also entails the export of labor-intensive assembly operations within the new high-tech electronics and communications industries. As a result of this process, the relatively dynamic metropolitan areas in the North serve less as centers of production than as global centers for international finance capital. The metropolis in the South, on the other hand, has seen a growth of sweatshops and enclave industries once confined to isolated zones such as, for example, Mexico’s border region maquiladoras. The North American Free Trade Agreement seeks to institutionalize the new international division of labor.

Despite the growing globalization of production and consumption, however, it has yet to be demonstrated that the new international division of labor is producing any major shifts in urbanization patterns. Although new enclaves of capital accumulation have emerged in Latin America, they still do not account for more than a small proportion of capital investment on a global scale. Most are within existing metropolitan areas. Capital and industry from Europe, Japan, and North America are still going primarily to the most developed nations. Investments in Latin America, though significant and increasing as a proportion of the total, have not altered the postwar economic order in which capital, manufacturing, and consumption of the surplus are concentrated in the developed capitalist countries. Thus, for example, while manufacturing, particularly the assembly stage, in the leading industries of autos and electronics has now spread to countries like Brazil, the vast majority of value added in these industries still originates and terminates in the United States, Europe, and Japan.

Despite these differences (indeed, because of them), the Latin American metropolis is an integral part of the global urban network dominated by the North. The barriadas, favelas, and ranchos are ready reserves for international capital. The huge labor surplus in the Latin American metropolis is as necessary to capital as the small proportion of the population actually employed in commodity production for exchange on the international market. Again, the low level of subsistence in Latin America suppresses wages and the expenditures that capital must make for the metropolitan infrastructure (see Smith and Feagin, 1987).

Another key aspect of urban inequality in Latin America is displacement. As in the U.S. regime of urbanization, the private real estate market bids up the cost of land in central locations and forces the eviction of low-income workers in favor of office buildings, stores, and new housing for the professional and technocratic strata. Entire neighborhoods are often displaced to
permit developers to capture land-value increases, protect elite property rights, facilitate monumental public works, and maintain political control over the poor. Shantytown dwellers who happen to be located on land that gains in real estate value are the targets of eviction. The uprooting of spontaneous communities dampens demands for greater government expenditures for urban infrastructure in these poor neighborhoods, which in turn would raise the cost of labor from these areas. Struggles over displacement parallel and intensify class and income divisions because local elites and the bureaucratic and technical strata are heavily invested in real estate, while productive investments are strongly linked with transnational capital (see Castells, 1983).

UNSUSTAINABLE URBANIZATION

For transnational capital, the spontaneous growth of the Latin American metropolis, without the public investments and regulatory mechanisms customary in the Northern metropolis, is normal and acceptable. Water and sewer systems, traffic controls, street surfacing, electricity, parks and recreation, schools, and health facilities are financed not by the global factory’s surplus, which is exported, but instead by the meager accumulations of local capital, which are inadequate for the building and maintenance of a modern infrastructure. Economies crippled by foreign debt can scarcely afford the institutional infrastructure—urban planning and other regulatory mechanisms—to enforce environmental standards. Consequently, the microenvironment in the Latin American metropolis is dangerous and polluted.

The North American metropolis is typically auto-oriented and spread over a large territory, a result of the imperial faith in a seemingly unlimited ability to plunder land and resources. There are sharp economic and social divisions between central city and suburbs. The real estate market is loosely regulated, reinforcing the tendencies toward concentration in the central business district, displacement of low-rent activities, and sprawling expansion at the periphery (see Logan and Molotch, 1987). Development and planning of the Latin American metropolis have followed much the same market-oriented approach. However, Latin American cities and national governments lack the resources available to Northern cities for regulating urban growth and mitigating the worst consequences of market-driven development. Local and national governments in Latin America and North America tend to follow the colonialist tradition whereby land is considered to be a source of quick profit; the purpose of public planning is to encourage the most profitable use of land.
This differs from the approach of the pre-Columbian cultures, for which land was an element of nature and humans were its custodians.

The environmental consequences of the lack of planning and regulation are evident in the case of Mexico City, the largest metropolitan area in Latin America and second-largest in the world. Mexico City has perhaps the worst air quality in the world. Carbon monoxide levels far exceed the averages in North American cities. Most emissions come from motor vehicles, whose use is subsidized by low oil prices as a way of advancing the populist “American dream” of car ownership and, in some cases, protecting a national oil industry. Although the rate of vehicle ownership is lower than in the North, cars are older and have inadequate emission systems, and fuel is cruder and more polluting. Mexico emulates the model of sprawling, auto-based metropolitan growth that prevails across its northern border but lacks the resources to control its disastrous ecological consequences.

Mexico, Venezuela, Brazil, and the other highly urbanized Latin American countries are locked into a regime of accumulation that forces them to rely on environmentally damaging petroleum energy. The most urbanized countries are among the largest producers of either oil or motor vehicles (Muñoz, 1980; United Nations, 1991: 81). Governments in these nations rely on oil and auto industries for a large portion of their revenues. For example, the major part of the budgets of Mexico and Mexico City come from oil exports.

The neoliberal craze for deregulation could further worsen the situation. In Santiago, air pollution got worse during the years of the Pinochet dictatorship, in large measure because deregulation of the bus system encouraged the importation of used buses with the result that now there is a huge squad of some 11,000 diesel buses spewing black fumes into the air. Traffic on unpaved and poorly maintained streets kicks up dust and particulate matter, further contributing to respiratory illnesses (Nash, 1992).

In São Paulo, as in most other large cities, most sewage is discharged without treatment into rivers and streams, only a small fraction of solid wastes is treated, and air quality is extremely poor (Faría, 1989). Brazil’s main petrochemical center, Cubatão, is located less than 80 kilometers from central São Paulo. Every day about 1,000 tons of pollutants, including benzene, carbon monoxide, ammonia, and other toxics, are spewed into the air. According to Finquelievich (1990), in the nearby favelas infant mortality is as high as 35 percent and 80 percent of Cubatão children suffer from respiratory problems.

The issue of environmental protection is qualitatively distinct in North American and Latin American cities. This is one of the points often over-
looked in “sustainable development” proposals that aim at environmentally sound development and consumption strategies in the Third World. To be sure, elimination of pollution in both North and South is an urgent and humane objective. The Northern metropolis, however, is the main contributor to world pollution. North America uses over four times as much energy per capita as Latin America and is the single greatest source of the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels on a world scale.

Insofar as measures to achieve greater energy efficiency in the Northern metropolis cut down on the extraction of raw materials from the South, they can prevent the depletion of natural resources. However, from the point of view of Latin American nations, unless inequalities between the two worlds are also eliminated, pollution control in the North will improve resource efficiency and the quality of life there without necessarily improving the quality of life in the South. In fact, more resource-efficient production and consumption in North America can cause great economic damage by lowering world market prices of the few goods some countries have to sell. And there is also a trend toward discarding in Latin America the most noxious waste materials from the North, which cannot be economically recycled or disposed of in the countries of origin.

In sum, sustainable urban development is bound up with the question of economic equality and the unequal international division of labor.

**URBAN PLANNING STRATEGIES**

Ever since the Laws of the Indies, urban planning strategies have been imported from the North and reinforced the regime of private property. In the postcolonial period they have been based on antiurban and progrowth philosophies, and they have been ecologically destructive.

There is a widespread perception that the large cities of Latin America are unmanageable and unplanned. In fact, however, there has been considerable planning—not just official planning by government agencies but planning by the private sector. Planning is not the exclusive preserve of technocrats who happen to be called planners but the application of human consciousness to the building and preservation of human settlements.

Looking first at regional planning, which addresses national and subnational urban systems, and then at urban planning within metropolitan areas, I will attempt to show that these are imported strategies that serve the interests of national and transnational capital.
REGIONAL PLANNING

Antiurban theory has dominated urban planning in the North since the industrial revolution. It is based on the idea that large, densely developed cities are the source of urban problems. Lipton (1988), for example, explicitly sees urbanization as a cause of underdevelopment. Solutions lie in rural development or in bringing the countryside to the city in the form of low-density suburban living.

The antiurban bias rationalizes attempts to displace the urban poor, limit spending on urban infrastructure, and even stop urbanization. Negrón (1991) notes that the myth that improving the quality of urban life will empty the countryside and bloat the metropolis and the myth of urban “marginality” underlie Venezuelan planning. The data cited above showing the level of Latin American urbanization speak for themselves. However, attempts to limit urbanization or urbanize the countryside have been historic failures, and despite limited public investment in “marginal” urban communities, metropolitan areas have flourished.

More serious attempts at regional planning in Latin America were initiated by developmentalist governments committed to the strategy of import substitution. Perhaps the most ambitious effort was undertaken by the government of Juscelino Kubitschek de Oliveira in Brazil, which established a powerful regional development agency for the Northeast and launched the plan for the new capital city of Brasília. A succession of national development plans up to the present has directed significant capital investment outside the two main metropolises of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (Guidugli and Barreto, 1986).

Though sometimes motivated by nationalist intentions such as these, regional planning initiatives in Latin America have more often followed strategies imported from the North. They rarely have strong links with national economic policy. As the following discussion shows, without aggressive national planning, regional planning can be little more than a utopian dream of bureaucratic and technocratic elites (see Hopenhayn, 1991). I will consider four problematic regional planning approaches: spatial deconcentration, balanced regional development, strong local government, and growth poles.

Spatial deconcentration. Planning schemes that narrowly focus on the need to decentralize the urban structure are problematic. Spatially dispersing a highly centralized urban and economic structure has long been seen as a means of promoting national development, eliminating inequalities, stimulating an internal market, eliminating differences between city and countryside, reducing rural dependency, and eliminating urban primacy. Historically
it has been promoted as a rationale for declining central government financing in rural areas (see Spalding, 1992: 40-43). Most recently, deconcentration has become a favorite tactic in neoliberal privatization schemes.

The colonial administrations in Latin America tended to be highly centralized. The colonial powers often destroyed popular, democratic, and communal structures so as to enhance the role of their appointed regimes. After independence, most countries adopted the old colonial structures of local government. Centralism was often justified by the lack of resources and the need to strengthen weak national governments. As Roberto Segre (1978) has shown, centralism contributes to the maintenance of ruling-class power as long as national and metropolitan power is in the hands of property classes.

As desirable as decentralization may be, decentralization schemes are often narrow and misdirected when viewed as an essentially urban, or spatial, problem. The problem of overcentralization is too often measured by divergence from some ideal geographic notion of even distribution of the population between city and countryside, large and small cities, metropolis and rural areas. However, dispersal of the population does not necessarily affect economic inequalities. Opening up government offices around the country does not necessarily mean the decentralization of political power or resources.

The key to decentralization is economic and political power, not spatial distribution of resources. Even so, central economic planning within the context of independent national development policies provides the best opportunity for a more equitable, decentralized regional planning practice. A greater degree of control over the nation’s human and natural resources is a precondition for directing and influencing their location and use. In other words, although it may seem to be a paradox, central planning can provide the best conditions for regional planning. José Carlos Mariátegui (1928), criticizing Peru’s decentralization strategies, asserted that the basis for regional empowerment was an alliance of the working class and the peasantry. With a national surplus appropriated for internal use and not for export, such a scenario could indeed strengthen historically forgotten regions. As nations become more urbanized and the size of the peasantry dwindles, this possibility is even more desirable. In many European countries, for example, a political commitment by national governments to preserve productive activities in rural areas has often outweighed the narrow logic of the market. Many nations in which the urban working class has historically wielded greater political power also have more developed and politically powerful rural regions and rural producers.
**Balanced regional development.** A recurrent strategy for correcting regional imbalances favored by the international aid establishment is to promote market activities and infrastructure development, especially road construction, in regions with relatively disadvantaged small and medium-sized settlements (see Rondinelli, 1983). The idea is that capital investments from the center create greater relative economic advantage by helping towns participate in the regional market, thus spurring the growth of small and medium-sized settlements and correcting regional inequalities. Rondinelli and Ruddle (1978) call for the establishment of “urban functions in rural development” so that all settlements above given threshold sizes have urban services that should correspond to settlements of these sizes. Presumably, this strategy would limit pressures for migration from these settlements to the metropolis.

Although such programs can improve the quality of life in less urbanized areas, insofar as they reinforce the local marketplace they reproduce all of the inequalities of that marketplace. The market’s tendency is to centralize resources as it develops and to expand and link up with the international market. The roads drain rural areas of population and resources and pull them toward the export-oriented metropolis, and undemocratic centralized power is unaffected by a decentralized government bureaucracy. Indeed, creating urban functions in this economic environment only reinforces the power of urban elites.

This is yet another example of an approach rooted in an abstract ideal theory of geography that equates a particular kind of spatial uniformity with economic equality. It confuses functional and geographical categories. Economic development does not arise from geographical form or “normal” dimensions. A regular size relationship among settlements does not necessarily mean that the economic relations are based on equality.

**Local government.** Planning strategies that rely mainly on strengthening local government are among the most problematic. U.S.-supported aid programs are fond of projecting the U.S. experience of local federated government as a model for Latin America. They finance programs to enhance the revenue-generating capacity of local governments and train local administrators. Noting the lack of resources in Latin American nations, they treat local governments as if they were profit-making enterprises whose success must be measured by revenues and fiscal rationale.

But what economic interests do local governments serve? The interests of local elites and property owners, or the interests of workers and tenants? Do the local governments rationalize a central bureaucracy and overcentralized power structure, or do they truly decentralize power? Does strengthening
local government mean cutting back national support for local programs as it did in Ronald Reagan's "new federalism"? Local government has traditionally been a means for legitimizing elite political power. David Collier's study of Lima's barriadas (1978) is one among many that demonstrate how popular participation at the local level can be used to co-opt potential opposition and reinforce central authority (see also Eckstein, 1982; Herzer and Pirez, 1991).

In Latin America, in contrast to North America, the total economic surplus is usually insufficient to provide adequate resources for municipal planning and regulation. Furthermore, if local governments are part of an unequal development structure, they only reproduce that pattern. Because their powers are geographically limited, they are unable to affect the overall structure of inequality even if they can more equally distribute the minimal surplus available to them within their own boundaries.

**Growth poles.** The notion of planning urbanization by establishing industrial growth poles in less developed rural areas has been around since the 1960s, but the idea has rarely been implemented. One of the first and most notable examples of growth poles in Latin America is Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela (Rodwin, 1969). Ciudad Guayana was built, beginning in the 1960s, around a major steel complex in Venezuela's interior. Physically, the city exhibits many features of rationalistic European planning—orderly streets and boulevards, monumental public buildings, and neat suburbs. However, it also has acquired the symptoms of spontaneous growth, mass poverty, and inequality that characterize cities throughout Venezuela (see Friedmann, 1966; Friedmann and Weaver, 1979).

Ciudad Guayana has become more of a traditional company town or enclave than a planned city. The state-financed industries produced a small economic multiplier effect and more unemployment than employment. Air and water pollution are serious problems in the city, and in the region the Guri hydroelectric project created ecological destruction (see García and Kunkel, 1991). Ciudad Guayana was made possible by a relatively short-lived economic boom in the steel industry, and its replication in other new cities is now precluded by the nation's debt crisis. The obsolescence of the industrial technology makes its future questionable.

Growth-pole experiments never took hold elsewhere in Latin America. In Mexico, plans to create a growth pole around the new city of Lázaro Cárdenas had little success. Not surprisingly, the international aid establishment has always been wary of growth poles because they presume an unacceptable level of central economic planning and investment in urban infrastructure and are linked with nationalization of basic industries and import-substitution strategies.
At the theoretical level, growth-pole strategies never adequately dealt with the problem of urban economies of scale. Existing larger settlements probably offer more efficient use of economic resources than completely new cities (see Gilbert and Gugler, 1984: 177-178). Large metropolitan areas have a greater diversity of capital and labor. The metropolis offers many scale economies in the production sphere and in social and physical infrastructures that are not available in smaller cities.

PLANNING WITHIN THE METROPOLIS

As noted previously, some city planners in Latin America have tried to use planning to assert and consolidate emerging national identities and to establish urban centers as focal points for national development. More frequently, however, city planning has emulated European and North American planning.

The first urban planning regulations, contained in the Laws of the Indies, were products of the Spanish crown. They established rules for the organization of urban space around the central plaza, which became the center of political and economic power. Located on the plaza were the representatives of the crown, the church, and the civic authorities. Urbanization by other colonists around the plaza was regulated, but, significantly, areas occupied by the indigenous masses were unaffected.

After the end of colonial rule, the most influential trend in city planning was European. For example, Mexico City’s center was fashioned according to principles of Baroque monumentality. The Paseo de la Reforma was inspired by Georges-Eugène Haussmann’s monumental Champs Elysées in Paris. The influence of French planning may also be seen in Buenos Aires, Caracas, and other large cities that introduced monumental boulevards, grand civic architecture, and other Baroque features as part of a strategy to capture control of the city centers from the working class—much as Haussmann had done after the Revolution of 1848.

In the 20th century, Latin American planners have followed the modernist downtown models of Europe and North America and the laissez-faire approach to real estate development found in North America. The downtown skylines of the major metropolitan areas in Latin America offer stark images of the influence of the Manhattan model, where central real estate values have combined with official urban renewal plans to produce monumental business districts. For example, downtown Caracas is now a collection of giant civic projects such as the Torres de Silencio that dwarf the colonial-era plazas and narrow streets. These megaprojects are connected by a network of highways such as the Autopista del Este that mimic the U.S. interstate highway system.
Planned residential areas are few—elite enclaves such as the Country Club neighborhood and public housing ghettos such as 23 de Enero, created during the Pérez Jiménez dictatorship.

The sprawling low-density suburbs in many Latin American cities, though much more spontaneous and crowded than North American suburbs, are the result of the laissez-faire pattern of development in the urban periphery. Planning is done spontaneously by individuals, associations of property owners, and squatters. It follows an antiurban pattern of dispersed development. In North America, suburban planning follows the parochial interests of exclusionary local governments, supported by regressive fiscal policies and state and federal subsidies. In Latin America, suburban development is just as parochial and chaotic, but the problems are more dramatic because of the absence of adequate resources for basic infrastructure.

Most city planning in Latin America has relied on regulation, not comprehensive planning. Although comprehensive master plans have been completed for most large cities, they have generally been formalistic—emphasizing physical form—and unimplemented. More often than not, they outline approaches to urban planning that require a political will, institutional consensus, and level of social surplus that do not exist.

In theory and practice, most city planning in Latin America has not been sustained by economic development, cultural history, or the natural environment. Perhaps the most damaging consequence of emulating the North American regime of urbanization has been reliance on the private automobile as the main means of transportation. Auto circulation has been favored over more ecologically sustainable transportation modes such as trolleys and subways (see Wright, 1992). Following the lead of North America, many Latin American cities tore up their trolley lines to make room for autos, trucks, and buses. The few cities that now have subways still have horrendous traffic congestion because auto use is still dominant. Intercity freight moves mostly by truck, since the few railroads were built only for individual foreign corporations to extract raw materials from specific locations. Also unsustainable are the urban redevelopment strategies that favor new construction over preservation, subdivision regulations that permit energy-inefficient low-density sprawl, and water and other infrastructure systems that serve low-density areas.

City planning has had no significant impact on the domination of urban development by the real estate market. This is a political choice favored by urban elites, and it is exacerbated by weaknesses in the enforcement of local regulations. Many cities have strict rent, subdivision, and zoning regulations that theoretically govern urban development. However, in the absence of the resources and institutions to implement these regulations, they are ignored or
easily violated. Thus, an urban system designed to work with Northern wealth falls apart in Southern poverty. As in the colonial era, the masses remain outside the orbit of planning. At the same time, indigenous forms of planning of human settlements are ignored or overridden by the real estate market.

**Self-help.** A strategy frequently promoted by the international aid establishment as a preferred substitute for government-sponsored planning is local self-help. Self-help is basically an acknowledgment that the state will take little or no responsibility for planning and development of working-class neighborhoods (see Burgess, 1992, for a concise critique). The basic strategy of self-help is to finance local groups and organizations that arise spontaneously to deal with miserable urban conditions. Assistance may involve financial aid, construction materials, or technical advice.

The World Bank’s Sites and Services program (World Bank, 1974) arose from the self-help strategy, and self-help became a major thrust of the international aid establishment in the 1970s. The best-known model for self-help came out of Peru and the work of John F. C. Turner in Lima’s *barriadas* (Turner and Fichter, 1972). Turner traced the spontaneous process of upgrading of housing in squatter settlements and compared this with the relative inaction of government. It is perhaps no accident that Turner’s theses arose in one of Latin America’s poorest countries, where government legitimacy among the poor has traditionally been weak.

Self-help housing programs promoted by the international aid establishment usually involve some form of credit and “cost recovery.” This means that housing consumers must have stable incomes in order to qualify for credit, excluding people in the lowest income categories. It means that housing consumers must pay back the banks and international donors for material assistance. This indebtedness in the end winds up promoting private property and a real estate market in which only a weak one existed previously. Mortgage credit, bank involvement, and infrastructure add up to a private real estate market able to house the upper strata but unable to solve the housing needs of the impoverished majority.

This does not mean that self-help cannot be a positive element in development. Self-help actually describes the way in which most metropolises in Latin America have been built—spontaneously and without government assistance (see Hardoy, 1982). Sometimes spontaneous planning can be well organized and sophisticated. For example, in Chile under the Unidad Popular government and in Mexico since the 1970s, local associations for improving the urban environment played key roles nationally as well as locally and have been important forces in pressuring for government financing of urban development (see Castells, 1983: 190-209; Fox, 1989). However, these
groups rely on self-help out of necessity, not because they believe it is a preferred national strategy. Indeed, a constant among the strongest and most influential self-help groups is the demand for a stronger government role and a more equitable economic and political system.

The Cuban microbrigade system is an example of how central planning can work together with local initiative. Since 1970, most government-financed construction of housing and local community facilities has been done by microbrigades with volunteer labor organized and backed by local enterprises and government. Microbrigades could not have accomplished as much as they have without government support (Mathey, 1988).

Capital-city development. Creating a new capital city has long been a popular idea, promising the establishment of a distinct national urban form free of the colonial past. In theory, a new capital can be a national symbol of independence in contrast with the export-oriented colonial seat of power. It can avoid the pitfalls of spontaneous urban development and aid decentralization of historically centrist government functions.

Some countries, such as Chile and Bolivia, have split administrative functions among urban centers. In others, such as Peru and Argentina, there have been recent proposals to move the capital functions to the interior. The Argentine proposal to move the capital to Viedma in 1987 died for lack of political support and funding. The dream of moving Peru’s capital to Cuzco, the Mantaro Valley, or somewhere else closer to the indigenous population in the sierra has remained a dream since the rebellion of Túpac Amaru.

The most significant planned capital city in Latin America is Brasília. Brasília was planned as a gateway to the development of the interior and a symbol of Brazilian national power. Far from the metropolitan areas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, Brasília was to establish a new pole for urbanization and relieve pressures on the bloated coastal metropolises. Unlike Ciudad Guayana, Brasilia was planned primarily as an administrative center, though there were hopes that a more balanced local economy would emerge.

Brasilia’s monumental civic center symbolizes the Brazilian bourgeoisie on the rise. Its expansive physical layout, rational superblocks, and modern infrastructure contrast with the tangled chaos and spontaneous sprawl of the older cities. However, beyond the planned center, where three-fourths of the population of metropolitan Brasilia lives, lies a world of favelas and uncontrolled development unanticipated by the planners. Brasilia has in fact become a center for the accumulation of capital and labor in Brazil’s interior, even though the coast still dominates the entire country (see Vale, 1992; Shoumatoff, 1987; Holston, 1989; Epstein, 1973).
Brasilia’s self-conscious design is an example of a universal trend in city planning—physical determinism. Physical forms are presumed to symbolize and promote national pride, civic pride, and economic development. However, when there are no jobs and the buses don’t work, one wonders who benefits from the “planned” city center. And without the amenities of the old central plaza, it is often far less gratifying.

CONCLUSION

Despite its many failures, urban planning can help improve the quality of life in Latin America—if it is part of a progressive, sustainable strategy for economic development. Elements of an emerging progressive approach could be empowerment of the growing network of local community organizations, national, regional, and local planning based on principles of equality, and a “rediscovery” of America’s historic, sustainable regimes of urban and rural living.

The large popular community-based movements in almost every Latin American country present new hope for grass-roots urban democracy and empowerment. These movements arose spontaneously in response to the lack of government planning in the urban periphery. Women tend to play a leading role and have become politically empowered in community movements. In many countries the movements have evolved into large organizations that negotiate with the state for improved urban services and plan and administer their own urban infrastructure. In many cases they have become significant political forces. In Brazil, for example, urban movements make up a major part of the popular base for the Workers’ party, the largest left party in Latin America.

Grass-roots urban movements have joined with other forces in the left to win control of local governments in Brazil, Mexico, Venezuela, and Peru, to name only a few countries. This has brought to the fore the contradictory relationship between centralist national governments that reflect the general interests of capital and the historically weak local state. Local government has become one of the main battlegrounds for the political engagement of labor and capital and sectors within each.

To address existing inequalities, urban and regional planning strategies need to be consistent with national strategies that address economic inequalities. They should allocate resources in a balanced way to improve the daily living conditions of both urban and rural populations. Cuba, for example, is the only country in Latin America in which the capital city declined in size relative to secondary cities. This was not the result of any policy to stop urban
growth but the consequence of a national policy since 1959 aimed at correcting urban-rural inequalities, shifting productive investments to secondary cities and the countryside, and decentralizing health, education, and other services. As a result, migration to Havana declined (see Susman, 1987). An unforeseen consequence, however, was the deterioration of Havana’s housing and urban infrastructure, now exacerbated by Cuba’s severe economic crisis.

If Latin America’s large metropolitan regions do not have to accumulate poverty, they also do not have to be congested and polluted. Sustainable urban transportation modes such as subways, trolleys, and bicycles can help clear the urban air. Some cities, most notably Curitiba and Belo Horizonte in Brazil, have begun to reclaim city streets for nonpolluting transportation modes and pedestrians (see Wright, 1992). However, these are exceptions. Unless economic dependence on oil and auto and the underlying regime of capital accumulation are altered, it is difficult to conceive of an early solution to Latin America’s urban environmental problems.

NOTES

1. The term “metropolis” is not used here as in the classical “metropolis-periphery” theories of political economy. A metropolis here is an urban phenomenon.

2. De Mattos (1989) identifies four approaches that have been emulated: (1) comprehensive basin planning along the lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority (especially influential in Mexico), (2) growth poles and regional economic development as propagated in Europe (influential in Brazil), (3) integrated rural development strategies along the lines of the Israeli experience (often applied in less developed Andean and Central American nations), and (4) the neoliberal approach propounded by the IMF and the World Bank (especially influential in the Southern Cone countries).

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