

Expert-citizens: producing and contesting the “sustainable urban mobility” paradigm in Mexico

Oscar Sosa, University of California, Berkeley (USA)
oscar.sosa.lopez@gmail.com

Sergio Montero, Universidad de Los Andes (Colombia)
s.montero@uniandes.edu.co

Abstract submitted to RC21 2016, Session 17
“Transgressional mobilities: Strategies, resistance, possibilities”
organized by Guénola Capron and Priscilla Connolly

ABSTRACT

In the last two decades, transportation and urban development experts, international development institutions and environmental NGOs have generated a global consensus around the need to promote sustainable mobility strategies in cities. However, in the absence of a common definition of what comprises sustainable mobility, a particular set of transportation policy models and “best practices” have often become the vehicles through which the sustainable mobility paradigm has spread in cities around the world. In this article we use qualitative evidence from two Mexican cities –Mexico City and Guadalajara- to show the kinds of tensions that exist within and beyond the apparent consensus around “sustainable urban mobility” in Latin America. In doing so, we show a new landscape of non-state actors that are becoming key in the circulation and contestation of sustainable transport policy knowledge in Latin American cities as well as the local and transnational spaces where this contestation takes place. These actors are characterized by their claims as experts and citizens, their use of international policy models to strategically collaborate or oppose government officials, and a sophisticated use of media and public opinion strategies to influence urban policy agendas. We argue that the nature of the work these expert-citizens undertake -and the strategies, practices and spaces used to move their agendas- are telling of a new typology of urban political actor that complicates existing categories such as activists, experts and citizens. Finally, by focusing on the ways in which these actors confront –and sometimes collaborate- with transportation officials and planners in their cities, we show how contestation plays out within elite urban planning circles in contemporary Latin America. We end with a reflection on how the experience of these actors can help shape new forms of mobilization and contestation in Latin American cities.