

The geopolitics of crime prevention and city planning in an international context

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This paper analyzes patterns of crime, public policies for crime prevention and urban planning efforts aimed to create safe spaces as urban commodities than can be distributed through the real estate market. We use a critical geopolitical approach to discuss the invention of urban myths of safe vs dangerous spaces.

These geopolitical creations, may be linked to shifting domestic and international power relations, political discourses and the search for a new international strategy for crime control. These discourses, policies and practices have been applied in Mexico over the past two decades to create four emerging social utopias of security as the drivers of the organization of urban space and as the structuring discourses behind planning and crime prevention policies. They emerge from the combination of urban planning solutions with two ideal type orientations: “protecting private life” and “protecting public life”; and the crime protection policies with two ideal type orientations: “serving power” vs “serving people”.

These utopias are the reference framework for designing interventions with police forces, deciding over acceptable forms of urban living, and as creators of explanatory models of patterns of crime observed in Mexican cities and regions.

Analytical model

The use of these utopias shape urban spaces and social practices aiming to preserve power structures.

A) The fortified urban space. This model may trace its origins to military strategies, which regard space as a divisible entity where kings, lords and powerful people may be protected through the creation of physical barriers that prevent people from getting access to protected places. Its contemporary manifestation is the creation of restricted areas, walled residential, work or entertainment environments, digital and ICT monitoring, or the presence of armed forces in public or quasi-public spaces. Fortification has even migrated to the virtual world though the use of encryption technologies, where the state has a commanding role in using different ways of protecting selected areas from actions aimed at challenging established forms of power and control.

B) The institutionalized private order. Used as a form of protecting powerful people, including state operations. The notion of a protected private life is used to induce practices and segregation in private or quasi-public urban environments. It may take many forms of institutionalized exclusion. Access to privatized urban spaces has been restricted, individual behavior is constantly monitored. The aim of this form of control is to guarantee protection for a selected group. Individuals assume the role of participants in socio-spatial practices leading to exclusion, or even self-exclusion. Developers and governments use different marketing strategies to convince customers that they need some form of private protection as they move in the urban space. Free movement is discouraged through a constant campaign including crime reports and alerts, and the use of urban and architectural designs aimed to distinguish between safe and unsafe places.

C) Body armoring and privacy control. This utopia is organized around the promotion of a culture of fear. Its aim is to create private solutions to protect personal security and guarantee privacy. Protecting the body is considered to be, the ultimate manifestation of protection and is also a manifestation of power. The aim to fulfill the promise of personal security leads to the use of a mix of spatial, organizational and technological solutions, which may include bodyguards, armored vehicles, household and work environment on line monitoring, alarms systems and the intensive use of ITC.

D) Citizen protection. It refers to solutions aimed to guarantee crime protection to every citizen in all forms of social interaction. These are solutions offered by the state as a public good based on a clear distinction of public and private realms. This is an expected solution provided by democratic regimes, therefore involves the use of public forces while protecting human rights. Under this utopia, policy designs include different forms of public participation.

Analysis

Based on this analytical model we propose that Mexico is witnessing a geopolitical transformation, which is leading to the coexistence of formal and informal forms of production and protection of urban space. The regime is opting for centralized forms of control, privatization and segregation, and the creation of new geographies of urban and regional protection. The combination of police practices, technological solutions, and discourse constructions, is having clear effects on a diverse array of issues. Cities and urban spaces are managed as segregated crime scenarios. International flows of immigration are treated with a “war on crime” approach. Tourist flows and investment flows are seen as deserving protection. And the whole process is leading to particular forms of location patterns, metropolitan structures and deeper differentiation between public and private spaces.

The use of this critical geopolitical model of public security, leads us to conclude that Mexico’s transition to democracy is still plagued with problems of sociospatial segregation and differentiated protection levels, based on unequal distribution of power and wealth.

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