

Urban Dispositions of Violences. A Brief Panorama at Socio-Spatial Logics of Violence at Latin American City

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Abstract

Nowadays, when all the forms of violence have become something normal and they are part of our everyday life, mainly for the so-called developing countries, it is essential to inquire about everyday beliefs and practices, which enable coercive links or their invisibility. Dispositions are intellectual mechanisms that define trends of action for individuals in a given context and situation; they are based mainly on beliefs and the characteristics of the socio-spatial context. This analysis discusses the question: what are dispositions that legitimize and promote the segregated city? Our thinking is based on a review of several studies, and empirical research on the peripheral and central public spaces in large cities, especially some recent research on violence in the outskirts of Mexico City. In other words, we intend to examine it from the point of view of the groups that suffer most from the violence. But mainly it is about proposing an examination of our preferences and desires to inhabit cities in search of the mechanisms that protect us from discomfort, but which, at the same time, tend to harbour the seeds of human violence.

Keywords

Daily Life, Legitimation of Segregation, Dispositions, Public Spaces, Violence

1. Urban Dispositions

The patterns of economic segregation of urban spaces, at least in Latin America, seem to predominate over initiatives having perspectives of social equity or environmental balance.

As CEPAL has pointed out, the income inequality between households and people, although it has been reduced since the early 2000s, continues as a high

economic and spatial segregation. “The simple average of the Gini indices of 18 countries in Latin America dropped from 0.543 in 2002 to 0.466 in 2017. However, the pace of reduction slowed down over the last few years: between 2002 and 2008 the average annual decrease of the index was 1.3%; between 2008 and 2014, 0.8%, and between 2014 and 2017, 0.3%.” [1].

Nevertheless, colloquial claims and scientific research from most of the cities of our continent site the major urban problems as traffic, pollution, crime, and destruction of natural areas, among others. All of them, although they can be understood as collateral effects and consequences of the rapid urbanization process that began in the middle of the last century, are part of a complex system of human interaction. The effects of the new forms of urbanization can also be characterized as reactionary, for example, the walled enclaves that seem to be a response to the increased violence, but that contribute to this trend of economic segregation.

The questions driving much research on current urban problems attempt to identify the factors that give cohesion and consistency to a pattern of utilization of space that has proven to be violent in its effect upon people and their natural environment. In this context, the question of interest here is: what are the attitudes and practices that legitimize and promote the extension of the economically segregated city?

This analysis seeks to clarify that question and give an approach to finding a possible answer. Our thinking is based on a review of several studies, and empirical research on the peripheral and central public spaces in large cities, especially some recent research on violence in the outskirts of Mexico City. In other words, we intend to examine it from the point of view of the groups that suffer most from the violence. Some of the urban paradigms that have become a way of thinking and building cities were reviewed. But mainly it is about proposing an examination of our preferences and desires to inhabit cities in search of the mechanisms that protect us from discomfort, but which, at the same time, tend to harbour the seeds of human violence.

Returning to the original question: what are the attitudes and practices that legitimize and promote the extension of the economically segregated city? I mean, what attitudes and preferences of the bourgeoisie living in the city favour such symbolic violence, particularly segregation?

It is essential to make sure that by segregation we mean the stigmatized division of urban spaces according to socioeconomic characteristics, which has implications for the unequal access of the population to public services and spaces. Segregation is visible in the physical and symbolic differentiation of the city; manifested in the degradation of spaces and lack of urban infrastructure (or differentiated services of local urban authorities) and discrimination against people living in these areas. Those factors increase the economic violence against already socially excluded groups, and often imparts an increase in violence throughout an entire city.

In the neoliberal economic model, segregation operates through difference in

access to urban land, where the land is considered a commodity and is governed under the rules of the market, such that the price and access to land is a factor of market speculation. There is a large segment of poor people who have no access to the formal land market and who look for other ways to cover their need for protection and to have a space in which to live. The fact that access to land ownership is obtained through invasion or occupation, and sometimes illegal land sales, does not mean that the supply-demand mechanisms are any different. In fact they largely operate in the same way according to the criterion of the greatest profit. Needless to say, access to land and housing is based on the ability of consumers to obtain financing. The quality of life in the city is determined by the location of the residence and the location of the workplace, with respect to their access to convenient urban services.

In his book *The Distinction*, the renowned French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu explains that “this economy wants a social world that judges men according to their capabilities of consumption, their standing, their lifestyle, as well as for their productive capacity.” [2].

Now, if a hegemonic minority group establishes a basis of good standing, the question still remains of how it is that this process that affects the majority, is socially sustained. The answer is partially revealed throughout history in various ways, generally linked to discrimination. From the Arab suburbs in the medieval city, the *Quilombos* in the colonial cities of South America, to sprawling, impoverished slums and favelas, a recognizable image of urban discrimination has emerged. This is one of the forms of symbolic violence, understood to be strategies, consciously or not, which are validated by victims and victimizers, through which people or groups of people are diminished and made invisible.

As discrimination is a form of symbolic violence and, in turn, a cause and effect of segregation, segregation is therefore a form of symbolic violence and, as we mentioned previously, what concerns us is its proliferation. When Bourdieu investigated the logic of the propagation of symbolic violence, found that prejudices and socio-cultural mechanisms, support the exercise of power of some over others. The prejudices are attitudes, inclinations to perceive, feel, behave and think, internalized by individuals from their objective conditions of existence. They function as unconscious principles of thought, perception and behaviour. Dogmas, impunity, corruption, sexism, and indifference, are characteristics impregnated at all levels of our society, which support and endorse forms of domination. In other words, the core of the injustice lies in the form of everyday life and not in the terrible crimes that appear each day in the sensational news. Bourdieu goes on to state that symbolic violence becomes incorporated into the human psyche by way of social practices and beliefs, and he believes that, somehow, social violence is part of the city modality, to which we could give the name: urban dispositions. This is to be distinguished from generalized characteristics such as socio-spatial conditions or from everyday social practices of the bourgeoisie linked to preferences for living in the city. This urban dispositions

favours and increases the delegitimization and invisibility of groups that are often already marginalized.

The urban space is the result of various social practices. It is both a result of them and an influence upon them, making highly probable the assumption that the already built environment is a crucial factor in the reproduction of a model of living in the city. Thus, understanding the characteristics of the segregational nature or characteristics of space also contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms of reproduction of a hegemonic urban model. Wigley discussed the confinement of people as an abuse, in which spaces become “instruments of violence,” adding that “our theories on urban space, are often the most efficient mechanisms of confinement, order and social control strategies of certain social, political or aesthetic totalitarianisms. The author also said that” (...) social subjects are not only influenced by the constraints of architecture but they are made possible by them.” [3].

The inseparable roles of social customs and social tastes automatically places everyone within a world of significant practices that reflect a person’s class and standing. People can establish symbolic relationships, bypassing verbalized and conscious awareness. In regard to the discursive semisolid we know that the way that people in a society live, know each other and talk to each other, partly determines the behaviour and attitudes of social groups, but it is not easy to explain the difference between commonly held beliefs and the course of daily events [4]. To try to grasp “the everyday” life, historians like Carlo Ginzburg had to look beyond the meaning of images suggested in verbal social discourse.

The exercise of pointing out urban attitudes necessarily involves recognizing that it has to read “against the grain” [5] of the social mechanisms typical of people living in the city, to understand the environment in which we operate. It is a task that will always be incomplete and extremely limited, since we cannot recognize the origins of the attitudes that have influenced our own attitudes. However, it is a necessary challenge in the quest to understand and overcome that predominance through a critical analysis. Those who can only see the alienation cannot perceive that dynamic.

This lecture points to four characteristics that we have named speed, saturation, privacy and homogenization. We refer to speed as the increasingly frequent dissociation of urban mobility with forms of socialization; we refer to saturation as the evasive reaction to the daily overload of explicit information in the public space; we refer to privacy as an overvalued sense of security and personal worth over that of the community; and ultimately, we refer to homogenization as the tendency to decreased sociocultural diversity in public spaces accentuated by processes of segregation and gentrification.

These attitudes that we will analyse does not mean to imply that all of the bourgeois sector is homogeneous nor that the entire middle class is pretentious or reacts similarly to the socio-spatial conditions of the city, but to recognize those exceptions does not lead to denying the existence of such social attitude.

2. Speed

*People rushed in large masses in the streets,
violently pushing or marching in endless columns.
Cars were jammed on the streets,
roaring buses among them, always crowded.
On the facades of the buildings gleamed
illuminated signs that filled the crowd
with their multi-coloured, blinking light.
Momo, who had never seen that before,
walked behind the turtle with his eyes wide open,
as if in a dream.*

(Momo. Ende, Michael, 1973)

Nobody likes traffic, yet it is part of today's urban life. As mentioned in previous paragraphs the quality of urban life is determined by the location of the residence relative to workplaces and public services. The physical and symbolic distance between the points of origin and destination for each individual in the city is crucial in their use of time. It is not in vain that, at present, urban authorities in the major cities of the continent are immersed in transit planning, which includes the transport system and roads, connectivity plans, plans for sustainable transportation, etc. Common sense leads us to believe that the resolution of the time-distance equation is speed. Not only are we, city dwellers, concerned and desperate to get to our destination faster, planners and developers of the urban system are also busy creating ways to allow faster to ever-faster transit vehicles. But, in the same way that, in the last century, the right to leisure time became a commodity, speed has become an indication of social standing. Currently we are presented with an unworkable dissociated discussion between an efficient transportation system and the velocity of urban mobility, so it is instructive to take a look back in time to one of the urban paradigms that promoted speed as an end in itself.

In Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurist Architecture (1914) [6], the author concludes, "Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have already created eternal and omnipresent speed" The leader of the futurist group explained this space-time relationship as follows:

We must invent and rebuild the Futuristic city like an immense tumultuous, agile, mobile shipyard, dynamic in all its parts, and the futuristic home like a gigantic machine... The house of concrete, glass and iron, with no paintings or sculptures, enriched only by the congenital beauty of its lines and projections, extremely "ugly" in its mechanical simplicity, as high and wide as necessary and not according to what municipal laws prescribe. The futuristic house must arise on the edge of a tumultuous abyss. The street, which will no longer spread like a carpet level with entrances, it will sink into the earth at various levels and will receive metropolitan traffic and will be linked to others by metal walkways and fast escalators. We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a

new beauty: the beauty of speed. A car with its hood adorned with thick tubes like serpents with explosive breath... a roaring car that seems to run on grape-shot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.

The Italian Futurist movement was branded as fascist-Stalinist; it was highly criticized and then declined after the Second World War. The apparent ideological remoulding of Futurism does not eliminate the possibility of thinking about the joy of Marinetti if he were to ever live again in one of our present-day cities. Speed was an expression of the war; and the war was the opportunity for purification and rebirth of a “better” society. Velocity, for the futurist ideologist, was the hope to eliminate the impurity from society, just as we do today. The move at high speed around the city is a way of denying the impure. To represent and design the city as a sum of points of origin and destination, to the bourgeoisie speed is set as a facilitator of invisibility, to deny what one does not want to see. This way a new urban disposition was established, made possible by a socio-spatial condition.

3. Saturation

Nobody likes degraded cities. In different articles, Jordi Borja, leading researcher of urbanism and former mayor of Barcelona, has argued that the beauty of urban space should be considered a civil right. The degradation of the urban image not only affects those who live within the city spaces forgotten by the “hand of God”, as they say, but by all those that include such forgetfulness in their everyday horizon. The problem has been exacerbated by the solutions of many governments. Some of the questions that arise about the subject are: What is the standard for urban beauty? How is it done or achieved? What effect does the hegemonic physiognomy of the city have on the lives of the people who live in it every day?

Some of these responses we have learned in Las Vegas from Robert Venturi’s hand. Las Vegas is one of the main tourist destinations on the planet, and the town itself is indicative of the apparent ability of man to master nature. The city rises from the desert sands and recreates the old Venice, now renewed without contaminated water; it dresses it with fancy, dancing fountains, and the streets are so intensely lit that they have been able to be seen from the moon.

We have learned that the neon signs and the show attract us the way that fish are attracted to fishermen by lamps. The saturation level of the urban image creates the pleasure of abundance and clears (and strips) the visitor’s mind of his worries. Whoever visits Las Vegas focuses on what he sees as “beautiful” and allows him or her to forget the degradation. Saturation allows us to get away from the problems that we do not want to see. The great city is established as a means of communication that pervades the people that somehow need to be taken away from saturated degradation. Tomas Maldonado [7] explains that Las Vegas is the pseudo communicative culmination of “more than half a century of masked, manipulative violence, which purpose is to lead to the formation of an apparently free and lively urban environment in which human beings are completely

deprived of innovative will.”

Las Vegas has also taught us that it is not difficult to achieve this; Venturi [8] calls it the art of the decorated shed. Just a shed with a luminous façade is enough for us to become part of the trend that has built this city. The contrast between the exteriors bright casino facades, against the dark interiors, is appealing. It recalls the relationship between on stage and off stage, between the open and brightly lighted, and the dark and forbidden. We should ask ourselves whether these urban dispositions motivate us to distance ourselves from the private and the hidden, to the extent to generate morbidity. If so, for example, we could ask ourselves: Who is responsible for the increasing domestic violence? Is it the responsibility of the State or is it the responsibility of the family?

To illustrate this idea, it helps to consider the interventions that have been made to the highway in Rio de Janeiro that goes from the airport to downtown, consisting of a large number of informational and decorative screens that cover the route to obstruct the view of the favela as in the north of the city from passing motorists. Saturation and greasepaint are integral to the urban dispositions, since it frees us from all that we do not want to see.

4. The Carry-On Privacy

*I leave the house, get in the car, dark glasses, music,
the garage door rises, noise, smoke, dust, lights, signs,
a street child washes the windshield, more cars, more dark glasses, another
garage door. I have arrived. Today I am filled with the double sensation of hav-
ing arrived and of being lost.*

(E. Duering)

No one likes to be bothered when walking the city. The city belongs to everyone and each of us. Much of the current technological development has focused on producing goods for individual comfort. We refer to products which, interestingly, are designed to relieve the stress caused by the saturation of life in the big city. There are means and goods affordable to a certain sector of the population that give us isolation within public spaces.

Consumption of these cultural goods that are considered legitimate, among which is the acquisition of jurisdiction over property and particular practices, is defined according to the logic of supply, or the specific forms taken as a consequence of the competition among producers, much more than by the logic of personal demand and tastes [2].

The car has become one of the best assets that demonstrate the standing and pretences of their owners. It also has become an extension of the house, so that the transit through the city can mean the passage from one private space to another. Cars with tinted windows, stereo, air conditioning, small refrigerators, cup holders, television, speakerphone, are only some elements of collective consumption linked to this mode of transport that favour individual privacy when moving around the city.

The assets that favour isolation do not make a walk around the city a way of recognizing one another as human beings. The exaggerated isolation in public spaces is a powerful way to make others invisible.

5. Security

Nobody likes to live in an unsafe city. The escalating violence has led to an increase in private security arrangements. The issue of security is present in most national and international political agendas, curiously separate from public safety and from the problems that are often at the source of the sense of the insecurity: the malfunctioning of the economy, ecological disasters, lack of efficiency in health services, poor urban development, etc. Also in political speeches fears are reinforced among the citizens and it is common to refer to some “other” party, as presumably totally responsible for the uncertainty, (in our country it is organized crime) to thereupon promise, in search of more votes, that the government will end the insecurity. Also the issue of safety and security is a fundamental factor that determines and increases the value of property. It’s part of marketing and advertising in most countries. There, on the initiative of the Argentine Chamber of Electronic Security and Indexport Messe Frankfurt, they promote their products to ensure a “safe city” during the Buenos Aires Seguriexpo 2009 exhibition. In this way, the perception of insecurity in the streets has resulted in a strong new urban paradigm, which some have called “safe city”.

The construction of walled subdivisions throughout the whole country, in the context of the increasing privatization of public services, allows the assumption that exemplifies a trend in the social image, for construction and acceptance of the hegemonic model as the “ideal city”. This model ensures a quality of life associated with privatization and a repudiation of the public services in the existing city. Otherwise, the contradiction of the preference for closed compounds would not explain the increasing insecurity on the outside of them and are not an obstacle to organized crime. In fact, they favour the concealment of crimes within their walls.

Vitruvius (first century BC), the Roman author of the first treatise on architecture, was concerned about the distance between the towers of a wall and he explained and described how they had to be determined by taking into account the maximum range of an arrow, so that the archers could defend a tower that was being attacked. This is in fact the way that closed circuit cameras are planned today. Technical safety and crime prevention techniques have prevailed over principles that seek to remedy the causes of violence.

The city has been studied by planners as spaces of opportunity for crime, and they have developed convincing theories such as the Broken Windows by James Q. Wilson, a professor at Harvard University, who presented the idea that if a building has a broken window and the broken window is not repaired quickly, the neighbours will stone the other windows. It is a logic that led Rudolph Giuliani in New York, to create the Zero Tolerance policy. It was based on a series

of simple crime prevention measures, in which he took special interest in preventing and prosecuting certain serious misdemeanours and a wide range of minor offenses. Then there was talk of suspicious behaviour that warranted police intervention, which recalls the philosophy of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909), the founder of anthropological criminology. This scientist said that it was possible to identify links between the nature of a crime and the physical appearance of the criminal, which is why he measured the size of the skull of criminals in order to find patterns that would indicate which children were likely to become criminals and thus achieve efficient forms of crime prevention.

The heightened security motivates the construction of paranoia and imaginary projections on nearby enemies; it contributes to the fragmentation of the social fabric and generates preventive reactions that often form part of and sustain the escalation of violence.

6. Order and Homogeneity

Nobody likes urban chaos. The disorder of the present city and illegibility generated by the Las Vegas decorated shed as analysed by Venturi, is one of the factors of anxiety. It seems necessary to return to the order and clarity of expression in the use of buildings (a church that looks like a church and not a casino) and to an order that favours the proper orientation of the people in the city. In this case, the solutions appear to have exacerbated the original problem.

Modern urbanism has left an imprint on the image of city dwellers of what should be proper order. However there is a trend towards homogenization of uses and users as synonymous with order, instead of exploring the complexity of relationships and the promotion of sociocultural diversity in public spaces. The notion of order, in many cases, approaches that of authoritarianism.

Le Corbusier [9], the so-called father of modern urbanism wrote in his essay *The Great City* (1922), about the origin of urban issues. He related to the increasing speed of events, which has exceeded our receptive capacity; more specifically he said that “the pace has accelerated to the point of putting men...in a state of increasing instability, insecurity, fatigue and hallucination. Our physical and emotionally violated organization, crushed by this flood, groans and would explode if order were not imposed within this explosion through decisive, quick and clairvoyant action. In response, in the Athens Charter, written in the third decade of the last century, the father of urbanism proposed an orderly city, divided into areas for work, rest, leisure and mobility. It was an order that would allow self-selection of men thus evolving in the Darwinian sense and he explained that “The selection is made in the brutal movement of a constant push. The big city vibrates and stirs, crushing the weak, making the strong. That is where, thanks to gentle hinterlands, the transcendent street is intensely alive. “ Finally, Le Corbusier put into words his thinking and perhaps the feelings of many: “I think, therefore, coolly, that you have to get to the idea of demolishing the center of large cities and rebuilding it, and that we must remove the lousy belt of the suburbs, move these further away and in its place gradually establish

an area of free protection which will give in its day a perfect freedom of movement and will allow to build, at low cost, a capital whose value will double and even centuplicate, if the inner city is the intensely working capital upon which the unbridled private speculation of the stock market plays (the case of New York is typical). The protection zone in the files of the municipality constitutes a formidable financial reserve.”

The provision of the urban order is allied to the interests of the real estate market thus eliminating the “lousy people”.

7. Conclusions

What we understand from the structure of social relations is that they are also modes of creating the cultivated habitus, the beginning of differences that not only rely on early acquired skills but also on the ways to implement them.

The way of life in the city is a symbolic expression whose meaning and value depends upon both the individuals who perceive it and those who cause it; such that the use of symbolic goods is one of the privileged contrasts that proves “class”, and at the same time, is the instrument par excellence of the strategies of distinction. According to the sociologist, when the mode of the practices, tastes or opinions is ignored, what are essential escapes. In many cases it is the way, when the real social truths of the attitudes become manifest, which the true beginning of the understanding and comprehension of practices occurs [2].

Although attitudes are always perpetuated in the habitus, the terms of acquisition are not evoked unless there is disagreement between the conditions of purchase and use, *i.e.*, when the practices engendered by the habitus appear to be inadequate because they conform to a previous state of objective conditions.

There are other mechanisms that make invisibility and delegitimization possible that are intertwined with what we call the urban dispositions, but do not correspond to practices that can be studied from a specifically territorial approach. We want to emphasize what Dejours [10], a French social psychologist, identified as the trivialization of social injustice. According to research on working conditions and quality of life, that Christophe Dejours analyses in neoliberal society, it is persistent job insecurity that leads to the appearance of fear from the threat of expulsion from work. This fear functions as a deterrent against possible outrage at the fact, operating in such a way that it promotes the dissociation of the perception of suffering from the injustice that causes it, which is paralyzing. That is how this author describes the indifference to and the tolerance of unhappiness and suffering.

Finally, perhaps if we are able to understand the complex coexistence of discourses and mechanisms of the social order that sustain daily injustice, then it will be possible to achieve a profound transformation, not only spatial, from which new dispositions arise and where inequity has no place.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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