

Technical versus popular language: some reflections on the vocabulary of urban management in Mexico and Brazil

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From the 1940s to the 1970s, the expansion of cities outside the domain of any form of regulatory control was a phenomenon that had little impact on the urban planning and management jargon. These urban sprawls were regarded as non-cities. A skim through Brazilian architectural journals of the 1940s reveals the then current concern to eradicate 'urban ills', the *favelas* or *mocambos* (informal settlements or shantytowns). But there were no specific technical words to describe or refer to these areas. These were the years of triumphalist planning, which took its new technical vocabulary from the French model, and even more so from the international organisations (Hiernaux 1999; Rivière d'Arc and Schneier 1993). The global vision of a city that could include the peripheral areas, the non-regulated urban sector, had to resort to the key planning term of the era – the regulatory blueprint, or *plano regulador*, also known as *plano director* or *plano metropolitano* – and all municipalities of more than 10,000 inhabitants had one. The advent of such master plans opened up the space for co-operation with the development banks (e.g. the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank), which depended upon high-level negotiations with central ministries and was highly normative in its approach.

Mexico and Brazil adopted the idea of technical planning at around the same time. This reflects several influences, including those of CEPAL, for whom the urban question was then posed in the terms defined by Manuel Castells (1973); slightly later, we see the influence of the Charter of Athens, followed by that of Marxist urban sociology. Paradoxically, the vocabulary of the 1960s carried on being used by Brazil's military governments, even after profound changes in what were regarded as the determinant variables in urban planning. It also remained current in Mexico at the beginning of the 1970s, under the leftist government of Echeverría.

In fact, the heyday of *planificación* (in Mexico) or *planejamento* (in Brazil) lasted from 1960 to 1985, when the urban peripheries started to be taken over by new residential developments, often financed by low-income housing programmes (INFONAVIT in Mexico and BNH in Brazil). Massive financial support also poured in from international organisations, though more for training urban planners and managers than for building homes. Thus, two quite distinct doctrines were influential during this period – that of the international organisations versus a welfare state that looked at different sectors of the population as social categories whose shared characteristics helped their members to identify with each other as particular social groups.¹

The concept of ‘human settlement’ responds to the UN’s vision at the time. During a period of rapid rural–urban migration and in the face of concerns to settle these transient populations, the term ‘human settlement’ implied the recognition both of changes in population distribution, and of people’s right to land, even in the urban context.² The ‘urban human settlement’ was then taken on by those states which still saw their role as that of protecting their citizens. ‘Urban human settlements’ as applied to the expanding peripheries of cities, and new ways of allocating space within them, represented an extraordinarily sanitised way to refer to the way in which the urbanisation process was evolving at that time. Nonetheless, ‘urban human settlements’ rapidly found their place within *planos reguladores* and became the basis for new ways to allocate urban areas, whether perceived pejoratively (by most professionals) or in the more sanitised sense (by the population at large) (Ibarra 1997). ‘Infra’ zones of every kind began to appear, whether they were called Special Social Interest Zones (*Zonas Especiales de Interés Social*, or ZEIS) as in Mexico, or ‘sub-normal zones’ (*zonas sub-normais*), as in Recife. The people living in these areas were ignorant of such terms, but their use served to mask the stigma attached to them by local urban planners, the welfare state preferred the term *asentamientos habitacionales* (housing settlements), which would then be referred to as *lotes* and *fraccionamientos* (plots or building lots) once construction began.

The *assentamento*, in the Brazilian tradition of collective struggle for access to urban land, followed a different course from that of the Mexican *asentamiento popular* (low-income and often informal settlement). While the Mexicans we surveyed did not belong either to an *asentamiento* or to a formal *fraccionamiento*, they recognised the existence of these categories and assumed that these were more

comfortable and more privileged by the state than were their own still informal neighbourhoods (*sus propias colonias*) (Ibarra 1997). On the other hand, the 'settled' population on the outskirts of Recife believed that an *assentamento* was synonymous with *campamento* (camp) and harked back to the roadside settlements of the *Movimento Sem Terra* (Landless Movement) during their land protests.

This period also saw the appearance in Brazil of *conjuntos* (housing estates), the early precursor to the large popular housing developments of the 1970s.³ The new cityscape they brought into being soon fuelled a fierce debate between technocrats and *basistas* (pro-poor or populist activists) that characterised the late 1970s and early 1980s among Brazil's professional urban planners. Those favouring the welfare state continued to promote the construction of *conjuntos habitacionais* (available on the basis of various multiples of the minimum wage), foundations (*pe de casa*), or simply just a plan or projection (*embriao*) for the poorest. The activists, on the other hand, attempted to create a direct link with the people already living in the *ocupações*, *invasões*, and *favelas* (essentially the squatter settlements and shantytowns), with the support of certain professional organisations and NGOs, in order to help them build their own neighbourhoods. Today we are witnessing the pyrrhic victory of the latter approach.

The terms of the debate differed in Mexico because of differences in the regulatory régime. However, these regulations were persistently flouted by middlemen who gave every impression of observing legal processes for land development while in fact ignoring them completely. Known as *promotores* or *fraccionadores*, these middlemen often belonged to underground or illegal networks, and so were obliged to use the sanitised vocabulary in order to conceal what they were actually doing. Thus, the formal housing lots that they delivered to people in their *de facto* settlements appeared to have come about through a legitimate process.

Enter the language of business management and the urban environment

One might assume that in the years following Habitat I (held in Vancouver in 1976), which stressed the importance of addressing the needs of human settlements, that greater attention would have been focused on these issues. The slowdown in the growth rates of major Latin American cities such as Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, or São Paulo would suggest so, even if they still suffer the consequences of their

earlier breakneck expansion. One might further assume, then, that the pressure on urban land had also decreased, and some observers have indeed noted that access to some services in the big cities improved during the 1980s, particularly in Brazil (Ribeiro and Correa do Lago 1994). But the consolidation of peripheral settlements has not prevented a deepening of social segregation and/or of fragmentation of the cities. This is reflected today in the visible and growing poverty in the urban landscape. Around the world we see evidence of deepening social extremes.

How does the experts' language reflect this urban reality? How do urban technocrats and officials use this language? How can one create a vocabulary that facilitates dialogue between local authorities and the marginalised residents who see little point in negotiating with the state, even if the intermediaries between the two – now, more often than not, NGOs – have changed?

First, the term 'good governance' contains two opposing definitions of cities, what Jean-François Tribillon (1999) calls the '*ville-marché*' (urban land, credit, production, publicity, communications, formal employment, competing services, etc.) and the '*ville-cité*', or 'urban-city', a concept which includes poor people, who receive public subsidies so that they can indeed participate as full citizens (Lautier 1999).

The recommendations of international organisations, notably the World Bank, are popularised through a heavily loaded vocabulary that designates not spaces, but functional concepts: competitiveness, 'liveability', good governance, management, and 'bankability', the combination of which amounts to a sustainable city (World Bank 1999). It is then up to each city or town to apply these concepts to urban spaces that are already broadly marked either by their own regulatory frameworks or alternatively by having been built too quickly and without any such regulation. Thus we find ourselves face to face with many terms for which we need to establish a common meaning, but which seem comprehensible only in English: accountability, sustainability, good governance, poverty alleviation, participation, security of tenure, public-private partnership, cost recovery, replicability, third sector, and so on (N-AERUS 1999).

The term *la buena gobernabilidad* (the usual translation into Spanish of 'good governance') originated in the private business world of the USA in the 1920s. It assumes that management can bring the two sides together, while dropping the idea of welfare. This is seen in the new

global approach to the city in which special zones are established – for example, in Recife ‘The Special Zone of Rigorous Preservation’ (ZPR) – that consolidate human settlements (the pyrrhic victory to which we referred above) and render them viable (by cleaning up the environment, cutting down noise and pollution, implementing security measures, etc.), while applying as far as possible what is called ‘the true price of services’.⁴

In Mexico, cities managed by the National Action Party (PAN) have enthusiastically adopted this way of envisaging urban management, and the recommendations of good governance should from now on be applied to any new developments (Ward 1998).⁵ However, ‘edge-cities’ or other ‘flexi-spaces’ have yet to appear. Cities managed by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), by contrast, remain prisoners of the ‘statist’ vision and the doctrine of the welfare state. Certain words from the planning era remain the order of the day. In Brazil, the debate on popular participation dating back to the return to democracy after military rule, and the formulation of the 1988 Constitution, is very much alive, especially within the municipalities administered by left-wing parties. In these cities, local government emphasises resource sharing over competition (whether for space or economic benefits for the élite). An excellent example of this is the difficulty of translating into Spanish or Portuguese one of the principal instruments of new urban governance – ‘partnership’ – a concept that has yet to replace ‘participation’.

The popular response: community

Jan Bitoun (1999) shows how inhabitants develop their own vocabulary to use with different interlocutors, in order to give their demands a basis for negotiation. We can also see, when we look at the urban planning documents, that the language of urban administration is itself fluid and volatile. Terms like the ZEIS in Recife or the *fraccionamiento* in Guadalajara have only the appearance of rigour. Thus, the key negotiating term in both Brazil and Mexico is ‘community’ (*comunidade* and *comunidad*, respectively). This recalls the idea of inhabitants as participants, while also conveying the sense of a neighbourhood’s physical delimitations, within which everyone feels a degree of mutual solidarity. NGOs have clearly encouraged the use of this word. In fact, a range of sociological and local connotations of the words used to refer to one’s place of residence

are found in both countries. Rather than speaking of belonging to a squatter or irregular settlement (be it an *invasão* in Brazil or a *colônia irregular* in Mexico), inhabitants define themselves to outsiders as a community. It is a term that has for the last 20 years or so served as a magic potion for resolving all kinds of conflict. Unlike the way it is commonly used by French sociologists, 'community' does not sound at all pejorative in Mexico or Brazil.⁶ It is used everywhere and everyone knows that it is habitually used for resolving misunderstandings among the different actors involved in various types of intervention (e.g. international bodies, local authorities, the affected populations). Indeed, it is 'the' negotiating term.

However, what communities actually do is extremely contested (Vidal 1999), whether their actions are generally perceived in a positive light as in the cities of Brazil or Mexico, where they are seen as representing collective action, or in a negative one, as obstacles to policies to integrate societies and foster a sense of citizenship, which is how they are often viewed in France. In our view, no word has been so heavily used in order to designate at one and the same time a particular group and how it feels about itself at a given moment. If the community and the place to which it refers are key words in the lexicon of negotiation, will the poor urban peripheries remain non-cities?

This paper has shown, with reference to Brazil and Mexico, how different social groups use and understand certain terms in ways that reflect their different interests and perspectives. The city planners and technical experts use terms to describe informal and low-income housing developments that are not used, or even understood, by the people living in them. In addition, different actors often use the same terms, but apply different meanings or connotations to them. For instance, the people themselves invest the term 'community' with a social and political content, using this as a negotiating tool and as a way to describe their collective identity. For their part, the international agencies often harness the term to a top-down or managerial view of social realities. In each case, these terms not only interpret, but also change, reality by setting the stage for new policies and new social practices.

Notes

- 1 While a given population group will also identify itself according to other characteristics, it tends also to internalise those attributed to it. For instance, we recall that the social housing built in the 1970s when Camaçari was rapidly industrialising was allocated on the basis of household incomes, some up to the equivalent of two minimum wages (as such a low household income would have made it very difficult to get a foot in the housing market), from two to five times the minimum wage, etc.. Thus, rural immigrants would see themselves as belonging to one of these categories.
- 2 We can give more meaning to this expression by translating it as a need that is so urgent as to become a right, something we think of today as 'a human right'. Here we do not refer to the more substantial 'residences' or condominiums that became popular with the middle and upper classes, known as *conjuntos fechados*, *conjuntos horizontales*.
- 3 Elsewhere, we show that the taste of the rich middle classes can be expensive for municipalities and cause headaches for private companies who provide services and claim to practise cost-recovery pricing, based on experiences in Mérida and Guadalajara in Mexico, and Salvador de Bahia in Brazil, among others (Rivière d'Arc 1999).
- 4 We have seen the introduction of business concepts, such as 'total quality management' (accompanied by internships and training for municipal workers), in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexico-US border, in a municipality governed by the PAN.
- 5 We have seen the introduction of business concepts, such as 'total quality management' (accompanied by internships and training for municipal workers), in Ciudad Juárez on the Mexico-US border, in a municipality governed by the PAN. Since this kind of language feeds into notions of business efficiency, the local government effectively facilitates private investments by offering the most attractive conditions (Hiernaux 1999).
- 6 Might it have been the omnipresent Catholic Church and its NGO brethren who pushed the term 'community' – as evidenced, for instance, by the Christian base communities of the 1960–85 period of military government in Brazil? Or perhaps it is a translation of a term that international organisations have been bandying around for more than 20 years (in phrases such as 'community organisations', 'community groups', or what the Bank calls 'community development')? Or does it have a longer lineage, dating from a time when it designated a territory, i.e. the 'commune' of the French Revolution?

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