
Security, Uncertainty, and Urban Futures: A Conversation with Austin Zeiderman

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How has the opposition between “civilized” urbanity and “barbaric” rurality conditioned future imaginaries in Latin America? What are the historical links between urbanization and attempts to establish social and spatial order during colonization, after independence, and in other political conjunctures? In the following conversation, anthropologist Austin Zeiderman reviews historical perspectives on Latin American cities with a focus on the future. With an interest in the genealogy of urban imaginaries, he sheds light on contemporary preoccupations with future uncertainty and the specific role that security plays therein. Ever since the conquistadors set foot on the continent, he argues, the future has exerted affective power via hopes, threats, and visions of both utopian and dystopian possibilities.

Zeiderman’s reflections take inspiration from Fernando Coronil’s final essay, *The Future in Question: History and Utopia in Latin America (1989-2010)*, which conceives of the future “as an open horizon of expectation, as potentiality, offering a hopeful sense of possibility characteristic of liminal phases or revolutions” and “as a receding historical horizon, a future in doubt, inducing a sense of despondency typical of periods of decline or historical depression” (Coronil 2011: 235). Although Coronil offered this reading of “the present-day future imaginary” to understand a particular

historical conjuncture in Latin America — the leftward turn-away from military dictatorships and against neoliberalism — his essay remains analytically productive for understanding Latin America’s urban futures, as Zeiderman argues here.

For the Latin American Futures edition of CROLAR, I had a written exchange with Austin Zeiderman, Associate Professor at the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Our conversation explored the changing configurations of political ideology, urban space, and future imaginaries with a focus on the interplay between hope and anxiety, utopia and dystopia, security and threat. We began with one observation: despite the exhaustion of modernist paradigms, cities continue to be imagined, planned and governed as places in which attempts to secure the betterment of collective living condition narratives of national progress and sustainable development. Meanwhile, cities are also and increasingly understood as threatened by impending climate crisis, deepening economic and social inequalities, unprecedented health emergencies, and violent outbursts of political unrest. It is in this seemingly contradictory context that the analytics of security proves productive for thinking about the future as a space of both unfulfilled promises and imminent danger.

Frank Müller: Attempts to improve safety in cities and mitigate the effects of heterogeneous threats have buttressed the securitization of various forms of urban life, territories, and politics. In your work, and particularly in your 2016 book, *Endangered City*, you develop uncertainty as a critical analytical lens to read urban security governance in Latin America. Could you elaborate on what brought about this contemporary tendency? What are the historical conditions that supported the emergence of security?

Austin Zeiderman: Social theorists have frequently argued that teleological, evolutionary, and developmental thinking began to lose credibility in the late-twentieth century, and that utopian visions have since been in short supply. The weakening of grand modernist narratives of progress has made way for radically different futures filled with uncertain prospects and undesirable outcomes. The rise of non-progressive temporalities, sometimes downright dystopian, has had a profound effect on cities. Amidst a global trend toward forecasting urban futures as futures of potential crisis, security has emerged as a dominant rationality for governing urban life. Although I find this argument persuasive, I think it is misleading in two dimensions: first, it lacks historical depth; and second, it lacks geographical specificity.

In contrast, I find it productive to highlight the long history in Latin America of recurrent anxieties that cities might, ultimately, be destined to fail. I'm not a historian, but in my reading of the history

of Spanish America, I'm often drawn to the different ways security and insecurity have been imagined in an urban context and to how threats have been perceived and faced by cities. From the initial urban settlements of the Spanish empire up to the present, I see a common thread in recurring concerns about the fragility of the city as a social, moral, and political ideal. We might even say that there has been a dystopian strand running through the long history of future imaginaries in the region, even those inspired by utopian visions. This line of thinking takes inspiration from Fernando Coronil's observation about contemporary Latin America: that the future has become, paradoxically, both an unfolding horizon of expectation, possibility, and hope and a receding horizon of uncertainty, despondency, and doubt. It also follows Coronil's argument that critical engagements with contemporary future imaginaries must be grounded in history.

Although I have not really answered your question about what is responsible for the ascendance of urban security governance, I am making a methodological point about the need to think about the cultural, political, and economic changes of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries alongside a deeper genealogical perspective that stretches back to the colonial period.

F.M.: With reference to Coronil, you argue that the future is both hope and threat. How has that tension informed the emergence of urban security?

A.Z.: I agree that amidst a global trend toward forecasting urban futures as futures of potential crisis, security has emerged in recent decades as a dominant rationality for governing cities and urban life. However, let's go back to the first cities built by the Spanish in the Americas. As Ángel Rama (1996: 1) argues, the so-called New World "afforded a propitious place for the dream of the 'orderly city' to become a reality". Santo Domingo was one of the earliest settlements, founded on the island of Hispaniola in the late fifteenth century. The city was destroyed by a hurricane only a few years later, and its governor swiftly relocated it to what he thought would be a safer location. Construction began on the new site in 1502 and it became the first experiment with geometric urban design in the Americas. While Santo Domingo's layout is thought to have subsequently influenced successive city-building projects in the Americas, I think its history of destruction and relocation also nurtured future concerns about the fragility of cities established throughout the empire.

Between 1530 and 1560, hundreds of new settlements were founded, and I imagine this period of city-making to have been governed affectively by both expectation and anxiety, hope and threat. This takes on a material, spatial form if we look at the remarkably similar designs deployed. Through buildings and layout, these designs imposed a framework for the establishment and reproduction of a socio-political order. In contrast to the absence of such planning in the Portuguese settlements in Brazil, cities in the Spanish colonies were laid out according to a

traza (plan) consisting of linear streets at right angles, which together formed a geometrically regular grid pattern. At the center was a spacious, rectangular plaza, which contained public buildings, and from which radiated outwards the *calles reales* of the colonial elite. The linkage between the ideological foundation of empire and its spatial forms was further reflected in architecture, which physically manifested the presence of order within urban space. However, the extensive expectations placed on city-building meant that threats to the socio-spatial order were threats to the urban ideal as a whole, and by extension to imperial rule.

While similar arrangements were repeated in the majority of cities founded in the sixteenth century, it was not until 1573 that they were codified by the Spanish crown in the form of the *Ordenanzas de descubrimiento, nueva población y pacificación de las Indias*. Although this royal decree was more symbolic than practical, it may have retroactively reassured the Spanish colonial elite that their settlements were based on principles derived from a formal, rational, and scientific body of knowledge. Here I'm thinking about what Patricia Seed (1995) calls *Ceremonies of Possession*, through which Spain attempted to assert its sovereignty in the face of competition and other sources of instability. Expectations for what city-making could achieve seem to have been inseparable from anxieties about that which threatened such promises.

F.M.: Can you specify this further? How were the ideological premises of imperial order implemented in and through the urban space?

A.Z.: José Luis Romero (2011: 48) remarks that the origin of most Latin American cities was as a fort. These cities were imagined and built with the objective of protecting themselves against the potentially menacing wilderness outside. The perceived connection between imperial rule and socio-spatial order also influenced what was prohibited from the planned center. Everyone outside the traza was considered neither civilized nor Christian, beyond the boundaries of the rational and sacred, and innately prone to vice and immorality. The boundary between urban and rural, inside and outside, civilized and barbaric formed the basis of another core tenet of colonial governance—the racialist policy of two republics, one for Spaniards (*pueblo de españoles*) and one for Indians (*pueblo de indios*).

Historians have shown that Spanish conquistadors brought to the Americas a set of ideas that equated civilization with urban existence. What, then, to do about the indigenous population that survived the genocidal violence of conquest? Seen by the colonizers as living according to the laws of nature, rather than of God or king, the Indians had to be brought into civilization, converted to Christianity, and taught Spanish ways of life in separate settlements known as *congregaciones* or *reducciones*. However, urban life required daily contact between different groups. Even where the two republics model

was most thoroughly instituted, people frequently moved back and forth between Spanish settlements inside the colonial traza and Indian barrios on the outside. After all, *reducciones* were not only a way to convert Indians into civilized Christians but also to facilitate the extraction of labor for the construction of public works, churches, and government buildings. As a result, the utopian hope that European civilization could be extended to the Americas was accompanied by its dystopian counterpart: the fear that racial purity, political stability, and social order could not be maintained. The city was where these hopes and fears intermingled most intensely.

F.M.: So the idea of security seems to have been strongly set up by attempts to civilize the “other” in the colonizers’ view through norms, disciplines, and architectural commitments. How would you describe the moment when cities became identified as protective places amidst a hostile world?

A.Z.: Throughout the colonial archive, there are examples of Spanish colonizers expressing anxiety about the capacity of authorities to govern future threats to cities. There is also heated debate over which potential dangers warranted the most attention. After all, the list of possibilities was long and diverse: floods, pirate attacks, earthquakes, Indian uprisings, volcanoes, epidemics, famine, hurricanes, and slave revolts, among others. What these threats had in common, however, was that they were imagined to originate outside the boundaries of the urban settlement. Whether attributed to God’s

will, to the power of nature, or to human agency, they were collectively understood to be caused by forces external to the city. But even when there was consensus about the primary source of threat, there was still disagreement as to how best to secure the city's stability and permanence.

For example, Charles Walker (2008) shows that the 1746 earthquake that hit the viceregal capital of Lima was followed by debates about how best to undo physical damage and restore social and political order. Although the question of whether to relocate the city surfaced immediately, a rebuilding plan was eventually devised to minimize future earthquake damage. While this plan involved a struggle between the Spanish crown and the local elite, such struggles were overshadowed by the fact that the city's foundations had been shaken, and the entire edifice of colonial rule seemed on the verge of collapse. Since the city had long been privileged as the symbolic and material foundation of the colonial order, and since the spread of European civilization throughout the Americas depended on it, this utopian vision was perpetually haunted by the dystopian fear that the future of the urban ideal, and therefore also of the imperial project it supported, was fundamentally in question.

F.M. How did this dialectic between utopian visions and dystopian fears further develop with independence?

A.Z.: The influential Argentine politician and intellectual Domingo Sarmiento

(2004) is the classic point of reference. In the 1840s, Sarmiento expressed concerns about the balance of power between the country and the city, not only for his own patria, but for all of South America. Sarmiento argued that all civilization had been centered in cities, where people naturally lived in a manner that was orderly and urbane. He feared that rural society and culture — embodied by the figure of the barbaric, uncivilized, and uneducated gaucho — was threatening the progress of the nation. While prior to independence, the two rival, incompatible societies (civilized and barbarous) coexisted, one in cities and the other in the provinces, the early nineteenth-century revolutions set them on a collision course. Sarmiento feared that the countryside would triumph over the city and ultimately erode civilization, law, and liberty. The presence of rural people and customs in urban space disturbed the racialized association between the city, civilization, and the white European elite.

Similar anxieties about the post-independence urban condition were expressed by other public figures. In his 1867 essay, *Miseria en Bogotá*, lawyer and politician Miguel Samper (1996) depicted the Colombian capital as a backward, anarchic city plagued by material and moral decay — a sick organism that needed to be cured. Though Samper also made reference to “barbarism” and “civilization,” his anxiety differed from Sarmiento's (2004: 46) fear that “[t]his insecurity in life, which is customary and permanent in the countryside” would eventually invade the city. Indeed, we might say that, in

the writings of someone like Samper, we see reflections of a wider shift in urban governance. In contrast to prior concerns with threats external to the city - such as Indian revolts, natural disasters, or rural demagogues - Samper targeted those originating within the "organism" of the city itself.

This way of conceptualizing the city gave birth to a host of specialized discourses and techniques, from higienismo to eugenics, that sought to govern its internal socio-natural dynamics. The establishment of professional police forces earlier in the nineteenth century was followed by other forms of governmental intervention, such as the criminalization of begging and the establishment of poor houses, which also aimed to regulate urban society and prevent social unrest. But problems internal to the city - its own government, environment, economy, and population, for example - took on renewed importance in the unstable political climate of the newly independent republics. Those in power across the region sought to exert control over an increasingly heterogeneous and illegible urbanity. Unlike the period before independence, when threats to the city were threats to the colonial order, at this moment the future of the independent nation was at stake.

F.M.: How did the temporal progress project of modernization play out in cities' internal spatial orders and how were they tied to respective governmental interventions?

A.Z.: The spatial shift I just mentioned took on a temporal dimension when the divide between inside and outside, on which earlier governmental imperatives were based, was joined by the sequence of past, present, and future. And whereas threats to the urban ideal eventually migrated across that spatial divide, they came to encompass aspects of the city that had to be overcome by the march of progress. Whatever jeopardized the city's linear progression had to be reformed or removed through urban renewal efforts, such as those described by Jeffrey Needell (1995) in late-nineteenth-century Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires. When voices emerged blaming modernization projects for erasing memories of the past, they were drowned out by those who equated such opposition with stubborn racial and cultural inferiority.

After all, urban reform efforts were designed to show the world that Latin American cities had achieved European standards of progress and modernity. Doing so meant removing "degenerate" traces of the past - such as crowding, laziness, corruption, and Indians — and replacing them with symbols of the future. As such, these efforts aimed to bring about a new kind of person with appropriately modern conduct, appearance, and aspirations. The goal of creating a civilized society through modernization projects spread across a number of related domains such as health, transportation, architecture, immigration, infrastructure, education, and policing. Yet even in Buenos Aires, which became the symbol of urban modernity in South America, the pursuit

of urban renewal did not resolve concerns about the dark underside of the city, which was thought to breed immorality and vice. Donna Guy (1991) shows that prostitution was seen as dangerous, not only to public health and moral sensibilities, but also for its association with political instability and revolt. Stimulated by the anxiety that prostitution threatened the city's drive for modernity, government intervention aimed to protect Buenos Aires from threats to the glorious future imagined by porteño elites.

F.M.: The modernization paradigm remained highly impactful further into the twentieth century. How did modernization and the governmental attempts to secure economic development associated with it meet less popular social and economic transformations?

A.Z.: The unexpected speed and unprecedented scale of urbanization in the second half of the twentieth century posed fundamental challenges to modernist utopian visions. In the 1950s, many Latin American countries had industrialized and internationalized their economies. With investment and infrastructure concentrated in central locales, capital cities experienced rapid growth and development. Around the same time, millions of rural campesinos began migrating to cities looking for economic opportunity and, in many cases, fleeing violence. They constructed favelas, villas miseria, pueblos juvenes, and other variations of self-built housing wherever they encountered vacant

land, at first close to centrally-located employment opportunities and eventually on the urban periphery. As housing stocks were inadequate to the scale and pace of migration, squatter settlements and self-built housing spread. But economic opportunities were still widely available as the welfare-oriented policies of the 1960s generated employment through centrally directed development programs.

By the 1980s, however, a number of Latin American "urban miracles" began to collapse. States became highly dependent on external financing to forestall economic crisis, which forced national and municipal governments to withdraw subsidies and reduce expenditures on public services and infrastructure. Urban growth had already outpaced the capacity of governments to extend benefits and amenities to new settlements, and this compounded the problem. Employment opportunities shrunk as industrial production slowed, forcing millions to enter the informal economy as low-wage workers now unable to participate in society's main productive apparatus. In the span of just a few decades, Néstor García Canclini (2001) observes, modernist hopes of creating orderly, rational, and civilized cities began to seem unrealistic.

As a result, the aesthetic ideals and economic goals associated with urban modernity lost credibility, and new political formations began to take hold. Manuel Castells (1983) shows that, during periods of economic crisis, a particular relationship between the state and the poor developed, which fueled the urbanization

pattern of squatter settlements. Social movements began to mobilize around issues of collective consumption, and they addressed these concerns directly to local governments. Women became centrally involved in grassroots political mobilization, which blurred the conventional distinction between the domestic and public spheres, challenging the definition of politics itself. The visibility of the poor - in both a physical and political sense - increased to such a degree that, for the first time since conquest, the city was no longer a bastion of elite control. The fall of military dictatorships led to democratization processes that enabled new political claims to be articulated from the urban periphery - what James Holston (2008) calls "spaces of insurgent citizenship."

The problem of how to maintain security and stability in the face of such swift and widespread social transformation was met with a range of governmental efforts to control and accommodate peripheral spaces, lest cities would soon be overwhelmed by them. In countries like Peru and Bolivia, where rural migrants were mostly indigenous and cities had long been considered the "natural" home of whites of European descent, the anxiety surrounding the settlements springing up in Lima and La Paz was deeply racialized. By the turn of the century, academics and policymakers seemed to agree that Latin American cities were out of control and that modernist utopian aspirations were increasingly obsolete. What followed were more limited approaches to urban planning and governance, which

privileged isolated interventions and technical issues above city-wide planning. The relationship between migrant barrios and municipalities also changed, as governments shifted from a policy of exclusion and neglect to one of inclusion and regulation. Squatter settlements came to be seen as both potentially dangerous and politically necessary, and policies of repression alternated with efforts to mobilize the poor in support of ruling regimes. Eradicating favelas and informal settlements, as was common in Rio de Janeiro and Bogotá in the 1970s, gave way to "slum upgrading" programs designed to incorporate these settlements into the official city. Threats stemming from the unfulfilled promises of urban modernity had to be managed for social order and political stability to be maintained.

F.M.: How is this complex nexus between uncertainty and political stability effective today in architectonic patterns and polarized avoidances?

A.Z.: In recent decades, urban transformations throughout Latin America have compounded the uncertainty hanging over the future. Structural adjustment programs tied to financial aid from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank pushed many countries into economic crisis at the same time that their governments were forced to reduce investments in public services, social programs, and urban infrastructure. Shifts away from manufacturing and industrial production increased economic dependence on

service sectors and on North American and European imports and capital. Neoliberal reforms were implemented to increase competitiveness in the global economy and to attract foreign direct investment by reducing trade barriers and creating tax incentives. Eventually, privatization, trade liberalization, and market-based institutional reform came to be seen as necessary or inevitable.

The social effects of these structural changes were felt severely throughout the region's highly unequal cities, especially for those thrust even more deeply into poverty. Despite some gains in social inclusion and political recognition, economic restructuring and the dismantling of social benefits led to what Javier Auyero (2000: 99) calls the "new sociology of urban exclusion," whereby millions of people were relegated to zones of unemployment, violence, and vulnerability, which were then codified as threats to urban security. Rising security concerns eventually contributed to widespread patterns of social discrimination and spatial segregation as fortified enclaves came to represent a new paradigm of distinction - what Teresa Caldeira (2000: 292) calls a generalized "aesthetic of security."

In cities throughout the region, security began to infuse urban politics, governance, and everyday life. This was complicated by the fact that neoliberal reforms celebrated the figure of the flexible, active, and self-reliant citizen who provides for his or her own safety, justice, and livelihood. Governments throughout Latin America began to promote "citizen security" as a way

to reduce crime and violence and establish the rule of law, which empowered anticrime gangs and encouraged vigilante citizens to collaborate with the state security apparatus. In Colombia, President Álvaro Uribe's *seguridad democrática* advanced the ideal of a society in which citizenship implied the personal responsibility to police one's self and surroundings. As people were shouldered with this responsibility in the context of widespread violence and marginality, "a general feeling of fear and insecurity" became "all-encompassing and inescapable, part of the habitus of daily life" in many urban areas, as Daniel Goldstein (2005: 397) puts it.

As violence and insecurity infused urban life, new political ideologies and future imaginaries emerged. In *Endangered City* (2016), I show how the progressive, developmental narratives that accompanied twentieth-century modernization projects were displaced by projections of imminent crisis, threat, and danger. I chart the rise of risk management as a technique of urban governance whose vision of the future is fundamentally uncertain. This accompanied the recognition that modernization campaigns failed to produce their intended result and that the promises of progress remain unfulfilled. And this had material consequences, as investments that may have once gone into infrastructure, education, and healthcare were redirected to programs designed to promote resilience or preparedness amongst a population of responsabilized citizens. Cities came to be seen as "at risk," which, in turn, defined the problem to

be addressed by their governments and the behavior expected of their citizens. With modernity's slide into the unfulfilled promises of the past, visions of an uncertain future came to influence how Latin American cities were planned, built, governed and lived.

F.M.: To conclude, how can Coronil's work inspire the work of historians, sociologists, geographers, and anthropologists in continuous thinking about urban futures?

A.Z.: First, I take from Coronil (2011) the importance of focusing on the interplay between utopian hopes and dystopian anxieties, which I have found productive for thinking about urban future imaginaries. I also take from Coronil the assumption that critical engagements with contemporary future imaginaries must be grounded in history, for this enables us to consider alternative ways of envisioning the city yet to come. After all, current configurations of urban thought and practice frequently build upon, work against, or negotiate with the cultural and political frames through which cities and their futures have been imagined in the past. One implication is that we should pay as much attention to the present as we do to the historical contingencies that have produced its conditions of possibility. Here the method of genealogy can be useful, for it allows us to destabilize what seems certain or inevitable. However, as Coronil reminds us, a lack of certainty about the present (and, indeed, about the future) is not simply the insight of critical scholars, but also an enduring feature of the Latin

American urban experience. Examining the multiple ways that problems of security have been framed at different moments allows us to engage with uncertainty, both conceptually and politically, and to see how it enables and constrains the urban imagination. These days, dystopian visions of the future seem all the more entrenched thanks to the resurgence of right-wing populism, the COVID-19 pandemic, exponential increases in violence, mass migrations and refugee crises, state and police terror, economic fallout, climate-related disasters, and other acute and chronic emergencies. However, as we consider this bleak prognosis, I think it's helpful to return to the last line of Coronil's (2011: 264) essay, which reassures us that "as long as people find themselves without a safe and dignified home in the world, utopian dreams will continue to proliferate, energizing struggles to build a world made of many worlds, where people can dream their futures without fear of waking up".

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