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Digitalizing Urban Latin America

A New Layer for Persistent Inequalities?

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Digitalizing Urban Latin America – a New Layer for Persistent Inequalities?

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Digitalization refers to a multifaceted process which has experienced a vertiginous expansion on a global scale in the last few decades. This issue of CROLAR aims to explore one these facets: digitalization of urban space in Latin America. Thus, the contributions submitted discuss how the advances in digital technology are connected to social inequalities in urban Latin America, and which social, political, cultural and economic opportunities and obstacles they offer for a more equal, just and participative urbanization.

It is commonly said – perhaps quite mechanically – that Latin America is the most urbanized and the most unequal continent in the world. Without losing sight of the occasionally dramatic dimensions of inequality in the continent, but also attempting to avert the risk of falling into self-evident generalization, it is worth noting that the expression "urban Latin America" refers, in this issue, to a heterogeneous spatial, social and cultural geography. Because, on the one hand, instead of presuming a "Latin American city" with well-defined boundaries and regionally shared characteristics, in the last few decades urban Latin American studies have shown an heterogeneity and multiplicity of expressions of urbanism in the continent that hampers their reduction to a single city model. On the other hand, it is necessary to reflect on the heterogeneity of social, cultural and spatial realities grouped under urban census and administrative categories in each country of the region – which usually include from great megalopolises (that were often conceived from the model of the "Latin American city"), to medium-sized cities and small towns and villages with a few thousand inhabitants. Similarly to the cautions urged with regard to the idea of an "urban era" on a global scale, "the urban" in Latin America is much more plural than it could be assumed at first sight.

Digitalization is thus inscribed in a complex and inequitable reality that it requires to comprehend the specificity of situations and urban contexts of which it detaches itself and which it modifies. Hence, we begin to investigate theories and methods that allow us to understand the ways in which digital and urban are connected, as well as the spatial, social, political and cultural effects produced by digital technologies in an inequitable urban scenario, avoiding

hopeful technophilic promises as much as pessimistic technophobic prognoses.

In turn, it's worth questioning how digitalization – and its promises to improve quality of life, boost economic growth, and promote human development – could contribute to overcome persistent inequalities in the Global North and South, providing opportunities of reversal for some, consumerism as a lifestyle for many, but also disconnection and digital exclusion for the ever marginalized.

Bearing these questions in mind, the contributions contained in this issue review works that essay possible approaches and different responses for the digitalization process in Latin America, from works such as "I-Polis. Ciudades en la era de Internet", by Susana Finquelievich, in which a history, review and future prospection of the relations between urbanism and new technologies are laid out for Latin America, to books such as "Virtualização do corpo e sexualidades online: encontros gay, gênero e performatividade" by Kaciano Barbosa Gadelha, which investigates the role of digitalization in the transformation of sociability, corporeality and sexuality.

Between both these poles, a series of contributions concerned particularly with the uses of technology in surveillance, security and control of the urban space and their effects on urban life and relationships are found. In this respect, in section Interventions, the work "Hacking Team malware para la vigilancia en América. Latina" by Gisela Pérez de Acha questions

the political applications of information from the Internet, emphasizing the need to update and strengthen legal boundaries on the use of information by the state.

In section "Review Articles", Claudio Altenhain reviews four works grouped in the field of surveillance studies in Brazil: "Máquinas de ver, modos de ser: vigilância, tecnologia e subjetividade" by Fernanda Bruno, "Vigilância e visibilidade: espaço, tecnologia e identificação" edited by Fernanda Bruno, Marta Kanashiro and Rodrigo Firmino, "Todos os olhos: videovigilâncias, voyeurismos e (re) produção imagética" by Bruno Cardoso, and "Securização urbana: psicoesfera do medo à tecnoesfera da segurança" by Lucas Melgaço. From the author's perspective, this set of works discusses digitalization of and from Latin America. Here, a series of specific processes – authoritarian regimes in recent history, systematic police violence, persistent social inequalities, ubiquitous fear of violation and high levels of urbanization – enables a locally- and culturally-oriented approach on the intersections between digitalization (more specifically, surveillance) and the urban space. Altenhain identifies the future challenge of producing from the South a theoretical vocabulary that allows not only specification of the dynamics in the region, but also essentially "provincializing" Euro-North American studies on surveillance.

In particular, with the work of Marcela Suárez "Mediaciones tecnofeministas en contra de la violência a las mujeres en

México", we have included a second review article in this volume. Suárez presents a critical review of the book "Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet", by Manuel Castells. Her criticism is based on the feminist activism experience of the collective *Rexiste*, in Mexico, which has used new technologies and digital mediation strategies to intervene in urban and digital spaces in order to make the growing violence against women in Mexico visible. The author seems sceptical before the nearly deterministic hope with which Castells and others have applauded the possibilities brought about by technological innovations in communication to launch social struggles against power. In this direction, it points to a lack of analytical tools in Castells' work to analyze non-human agencies and evidence the power relations within a feminist narrative of collective action. It shows that, far from constituting autonomous and neutral objects, it is necessary to recognize the agency that digital technologies – in this case, the drone – have in forming new spaces of intervention in cities. In this sense, Castells' work could benefit from extending its analytical focus to the different types of technology and mediating actors that play an important role in urban spaces.

With concerns in line with the works abovementioned, this issue encloses two interviews. One of them is given by Nailton de Agostinho Maia about the Smart City and inclusion in Rio de Janeiro, a city ranked as fifth in the global scale of "Smart Cities" and that presents, on the other hand, a powerful and profound spatial and social fracture. The other interview was carried out with Lucas Melgaço, Assistant Professor at the Department of Criminology of Vrije Universiteit Brussel, on policing, surveillance and new technologies. In both cases, some maladjustments and contrasts are found – at least in Rio's case – between a set of policies and interventions around "smart urbanism" and the day-to-day experience of large sectors of the city's inhabitants marked by inequality and marginality.

On the other hand, in section "Current Debates", and stepping away from the focus theme of this number, we are glad to present the discussion of three other books: "Global Knowledge Production in the Social Science. Made in Circulation" by Wiebke Keim, Ercüment Çelik, Christian Ersche and Veronika Wöhrer, "Development Discourse and Global History: From Colonialism to the Sustainable Development Goals" by Aram Ziai and "Violence, Coercion, and State-Making in Twentieth-Century Mexico: The Other Half of the Centaur", edited by Wil Pansters.