Privatization of Security and the Production of Space in Mexico City: Challenges for Urban Planning

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ABSTRACT

By observing the process of privatization of public security in Mexican cities, the authors focus on the social production of the urban space. It was defined by Lefebvre (1991) as the set of practices carried out by the State and civil society throughout history that gradually form and transform cities. The authors argue that the intervention of private agents in the production of security services not only weakens the State’s monopoly on the use of force and exacerbates segregation, but it also diminishes the State’s capacity to intervene in questions of urban (e-planning).

Keywords: Mexico City, New Technologies, Privatization of Public Security, Production of Space, Urban E-Planning

INTRODUCTION

This article forms part of a research project on the challenges of the privatization of public security in Mexican cities in settings made more complex by the generalization and banalization of violence and a growing confusion among national, public and private security. In what terms can we continue to speak of public security? Who are the actors involved in this process of securitization? What resources –human and technological– do they employ, and what do they understand by public security? What are the consequences of their actions in territorial terms (segregation, fragmentation)?

The central hypotheses are, first, that the way in which security is produced –through discourse, actions and representations– reveals a growing opacity between the public interest and multiple private interests; and, second, that the private production of security complicates the processes of spatial segregation and fragmentation in cities by transforming security into a commodity available to only a few. As

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Nelson Arteaga (2005) expounds clearly, access to security becomes a luxury, just like access to health care, education, and other basic services that should be guaranteed by the State.

In the context of this debate, this article focuses on the processes of the social production of the urban space, defined by Henri Lefebvre (1991) as the set of practices carried out by the State and civil society throughout history that gradually form and transform cities in a permanent fashion; thus leaving aside the topic of urban planning as a regulatory action imposed by the State on that space. The importance of this distinction in the topic that interests us lies in the fact that the social production of the urban space brings into play a series of symbolic, functional and material dimensions in which the society, urban architects, and political decision-makers have different levels of incidence according to the space and the geographical scale involved, and to the correlation among the forces that establish a given historical moment.

Based on this premise, the hypothesis that orients our research holds that the intervention of private agents in the production of security services not only weakens the State’s monopoly on the use of force and exacerbates segregation, but also diminishes the State’s capacity to intervene in questions of planning to the extent that agents such as these close off streets, privatize previously public spaces, and produce sealed-off residential areas that become almost autonomous. Obviously, this occurs in a differential manner in a metropolis that depends on residents’ socioeconomic status and the relations they establish with different municipalities, as the evolution of the case studies analyzed herein will illustrate.

The first section presents statistics on actions by the State and civil society in response to the increase in delinquency and the exacerbation of feelings of insecurity that lead us to understand the privatization of public security as a process in which the civil population takes the production of services and devices for safeguarding their persons and properties into its own hands.

The second part is based on ethnographic studies. There, we analyze the processes of securitization in three neighborhoods in the Metropolitan Area of Mexico City marked by very distinct socioeconomic and spatial characteristics: The first is an affluent suburb in the northwest periphery of the capital that is home to some 4,000 families and that –thanks to a complex modern system of security devices– has forged a very successful model of cooperation between public and private police corporations to combat crime but, it is important to note, one that has done little to assuage feelings of fear. The second site is a condominium for the upper-middle class located in the Historical Center of the metropolis, a space replete with historical contradictions crowned today by a process of gentrification. We demonstrate that consolidating this process requires significant investments in matters of public security to mobilize groups of police –public and private– and entails new security technologies (CCTV cameras, magnetic ID cards and panic buttons; see Zamorano 2012). Finally, we examine the case of a lower-middle class neighborhood in the northeast area of the city that relies on much more modest means to guarantee its security; measures that have triggered social and spatial fragmentation that exacerbate its vulnerability.

This article shows that the growing involvement of private police and the adoption of new security technologies may be formal or informal and include means both legal and extra-legal, all implemented through complex processes involving elements of fear, stigmatization, alliances, the exclusion of certain groups, and ruptures with authorities. Based as they are on this conflictive background, the case studies show how the State’s capacity to intervene in the process of city planning has diminished. At this juncture it is important to stop and consider a problem that, though not elucidated in this article, offers points of contrast for future analyses: that is, if conventional urban planning is limited by private actions in the area of security, what does this entail for the possibilities of consolidating urban e-planning?
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