

## **The Transnationalization of the Urban “Question” in Post War Latin America**

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During the 1950s, the increasing urban problems associated with rising poverty, insufficient urban infrastructure, the alarming housing shortages, and the ignominious presence of squatter settlements in Latin American cities became an object of substantial concern to a number of different actors at the local, national, and transnational level. In response to the rapid population growth and unprecedented rural-to-urban migration that swelled in the region, social theorists, public policymakers, urban planners, politicians, and philanthropic organizations throughout the Americas asked how the postwar Latin American city might house a burgeoning population.

In particular, the "problem" of postwar urban housing among specialists in academic institutions, interamerican diplomatic circles, and multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Economic Commission on Latin America (ECLA, founded

1948) came to be understood as a challenge of building the physical capacity for urban housing to the standards of Western capitalist democracy; rationalizing the state apparatus as an agent of the material modernization, democratization, and social integration of the urban dweller; and, applying the social sciences to the technocratic administration of urban development and planned housing. Discourses on modernization and development of Latin American societies nourished new notions of economic growth, democracy, and social transformation. Urban renewal and housing construction were, I argue, part of a transnational concern about the problem of poverty in the modern, post-WWII American city.

During my recent research visit to the Rockefeller Archive Center, I focused on three sets of records: a) the Social Science Research Council's (SSRC) Committee on Urbanization (1958-1965); b) the grant files of sociologist Gino Germani (founder of the modern School of Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires, Argentina) in the archives of the Rockefeller Foundation (RF); and (c) the archives of the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC), the business founded by Nelson A. Rockefeller to promote private investment in developing countries.

The minutes and reports of the SSRC's Committee on Urbanization proved crucial to my initial hypothesis that during the chronological scope of my work, transnational networks of research, scholarship, and philanthropic assistance were constituted to the study of urbanization beyond US borders, overcoming traditional self-centrism. In 1958, Paul Webbink, Vice-President of the SSRC, contacted Philip Hauser, by then the Director of the Population Research and Training Center at the University of Chicago, to create a multidisciplinary committee on urbanization that would prioritize comparative problems across nations and across cultures. According to the minutes of the first meeting on October, 24, 1958, the research agenda for the

following years focused on “(a) a critical review of assumptions and generalizations regarding urbanization and especially their applicability to other cultures and areas; (b) formulation of a program of research relating to the historical development of urbanization; and (c) examination of the situation in various parts of the world in which urbanization is proceeding rapidly with a view towards suggesting needed research regarding these situations.”

Prominent scholars who took up the agenda, among other, included Philip Hauser, Leo Schnore (a key figure in the field of human ecology perspective in sociology), Oscar Lewis (the anthropologist who coined the concept of the “culture of poverty”), Eric Lampard (an early advocate of urban history as a social process), Gideon Sjoberg (sociologist), Norton Ginsburg (a geographer who specialized in economic development in East and Southeast Asia), and Wallace Sayre (political scientist). From 1958 to 1964, this interdisciplinary group gathered together three or four times a year to debate ongoing individual investigations with the idea of presenting them to the scholarly community in a final conference.

Many of the particular works would become very influential in the following years. In March 1960, the group debated the Oscar Lewis paper, “Further observations on the Folk-Urban Continuum and Urbanization with Special Reference to Mexico City.” There, Lewis explored the pivotal notions of structural-functionalist anthropologist Robert Redfield about the folk-urban continuum in his study of the behavior of poor rural families migrating to Mexico City. The American anthropologist was working at that time on his famous book *Los Hijos de Sánchez*, where he pointed out that Mexican families from rural origins kept their ‘traditional’ values and habits in their new ‘modern’/urban environments, affecting their economic assimilation, social and political participation, and psychological adaptation in the

larger society. In Lewis' work the dichotomy between traditional and modern and between rural and urban clearly became a key notion that was debated during the following meetings of the Committee.

The Lewis example also shows the extent to which Latin America, the USA's "figurative backyard," came to be the primary object of analysis for many American scholars who saw the developing countries of the region as a testing ground for their ideas about 'modernity' in the late 1950s and early 1960. In addition, the conversation about the notions of traditional/rural vs. modern/urban demonstrates how most of the figures on the committee shared the analytical framework of the Theory of Modernization, the scientific paradigm that became the hegemonic ideology in US foreign policy during the administrations of presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. To know and to understand the social changes occurring in Latin America after the Cuban Revolution in 1959 was part of a broader Cold-War imperialist view related to the notion of American 'manifest destiny' in the hemisphere. The technocratic belief in knowing and transforming society through the application of 'neutral' science influenced foreign assistance to Latin America. Promoting economic and social development was a way to advance both the stable democracies in the region and concurrently undermine the fertile soil for anti-American feelings and the appeal of Communism. Since urban space was seen as the locus of modernity, the place where change might happen, state-intervention into the urban fabric became a central way to contribute to the modernization of people's everyday lives.

Philip Hauser, the chair of the SSRC's Committee on Urbanization, was a key figure in the transnationalization of the urban problem. He was in charge of two seminal meetings organized by UNESCO, "Social Implications of Industrialization

and Urbanization in Africa South of the Sahara” (1956), and the UN/Bureau of Social Affairs for urbanization in Asia and the Far East (1957). The UNESCO, the UN/Bureau of Social Affairs, and the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA/CEPAL) in cooperation with the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the Organization of American States (OAS), organized a seminar on urbanization problems in Latin America in Santiago, Chile, between July 6 - 18, 1959. There, key figures of urban scholarship of the Americas such as Gino Germani, Juarez Rubens Brandão Lopes, José Matos Mar, Andrew Pearse, as well as members of multilateral and governmental agencies, and representatives of the civil sphere—varying from religious institutions, cooperatives, unions, and political parties—debated pre-circulated papers based on ongoing field research about such issues as the demographic aspects of urbanization, the social and economic structure, the relationship between migration and urbanization, and between economic development, industrialization, and the growth of urban population. Not casually, this program was very much in tune with the initial agenda of the SSRC’s Committee.

This is not to say that the Committee pushed a particular agenda in that meeting in Chile; Hauser just informed the members of the committee about the encounter in 1959 and distributed the published results in the book *Urbanization in Latin America* (1961). Still, this is good evidence of the way in which ideas and notions about the meaning of modernization and the problems of urbanization were built transnationally in the encounter of American scholars and their Latin American counterparts. The SSRC’s Committee on Urbanization ceased functioning after the organization of a conference on “The Study of Urbanization”, at the University of Chicago on July 7-10, 1965 (the sociologist Gino Germani was among the selected

group of guests). The proceedings were published as *The Study of Urbanization* (New York: Wiley, 1965), edited by Hauser and Schnore.

The second body of records I explored during my stay at the Rockefeller Archive Center was the archives of the Rockefeller Foundation, in particular the grant files relating to Gino Germani, who was one of the most respected sociologists in Latin America. Regarded as the initiator of modern sociology in Argentina, where he founded the School of Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires in 1955 after the ouster of President Juan D. Perón (1946-1955), Germani circulated widely in the Americas as a visiting professor, consultant, and panelist in innumerable conferences and symposiums.

Early in 1957, Germani launched his first sociological research, through the Department of Sociology and the Extramural Department of the University of Buenos Aires, using the methodology of modern sociology -- including empirical data collection and analysis -- in a study of the population of a shantytown in the industrial area of Buenos Aires, locally known as 'villa miseria,' where the newly arrived population was compared to that which had been established in the area for a generation or so and which had a considerable housing level. The sociologist presented the preliminary findings of that work at the above-mentioned meeting in 1959 in Santiago, Chile, organized by UNESCO and directed by Philip Hauser.

The fact that Germani was an anti-authoritarian -- an Italian immigrant from the Fascist regime -- and a non-Communist, a modernizer of social sciences, politically and theoretically against populist regimes (specifically president Juan D. Perón (1946-55) in Argentina) made him an extremely attractive figure in the plans of the Rockefeller Foundation to modernize research centers in the region. Between 1958 and 1961, Germani and José Luis Romero (a key figure in the emergence and

consolidation of Argentine social history) received \$35,000 over five years to partially cover the cost of a research and training seminar in social and intellectual history. As stated in an internal RF memo, the goal was “to stimulate basic studies of contemporary intellectual and social trends in Latin America. The proposed seminar provides the first opportunity in South America for support by the Foundation of a long-range research and training program in contemporary intellectual history where a major university [University of Buenos Aires] has made a substantial commitment in time and money.” The research plan was successful in allowing the training of prestigious scholars in the social history of 19<sup>th</sup> century Argentine history.

By 1961, Germani had left the University of Buenos Aires and moved to the newly created Instituto Torcuato Di Tella (ITDT), the academic and vanguard artistic and research center founded by the owners of the Di Tella Company, at the time an important Argentine industrial firm. The ITDT appeared on the Argentine scene in the early 1960s as an institution committed to the modernization of arts and social science in a historical context of rapid social and cultural change in Argentina. In the area of the social sciences, the Institute was trying to stimulate research and the development of modern social sciences within three research centers on economics, comparative sociology, and public administration.

Germani and others were looking for funds for the creation of the International Center for Comparative Social Research that was to promote the study of sociological research with an emphasis on the analysis of the growth and structure of the population of Latin America. The RF found the consolidation of the Center of importance as the “central interest of the project will be the problem of economic development in Latin America, and (the) aim is to present the results in such a way as to maximize their usefulness for officials charged with developing and executing

national policies in the countries concerned.” In other words, the promotion of the modernization of social research and scholarship in Latin America demonstrates the interest among policymakers, technocrats, political elites, and the private sector of producing the ‘right’ knowledge about the explosive social changes occurring in the region. That understanding, in turn, might guide social and economic public policies in order to bring development to the Latin American nations –a notion especially promoted during the years of the program for foreign aid and regional cooperation known as the Alliance for Progress announced by United States President John F. Kennedy in March 1961. Not in vain, prestigious figures such as Raúl Prebisch, director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America, strongly favored the support and strengthening of these institutional developments, as is shown in his recommendation of Germani’s initiative.

In this context where a new, largely transnational discursive-technical imagery about the most problematic aspects of rapid urbanization, and especially about the looming presence of poor people in the urban landscape, circulated among the capital cities of the Americas, policymakers, technicians, and urban scholars in the Americas came to share many optimistic expectations about the role that housing might play in the modernization of the so-called underdeveloped world. The rational construction and management of the urban dwelling emerged as one of the grounds of the struggle to foster modern, democratic, and equitable development in Latin America. As part of a range of ideas about the modernization of people’s everyday life, homeownership and “decent” housing came to be a remedy for urban ills, capable of promoting middle-class habits, mass consumption, and moderate political behavior, especially among the poor. Housing was to be a desired outcome of modernization and an

antidote to the specters of underdevelopment and social unrest in a Cold War scenario that framed US-Latin American relations after the Cuban Revolution.

The microfilmed documents of the International Basic Economy Corporation's Housing Corporation are excellent sources to shed light on the role of foreign assistance and private capital in the modernization of poor people's built environment in Latin America. The IBEC was the for profit company that Nelson A. Rockefeller founded to demonstrate that private enterprise could play a role in the promotion of basic economic areas of developing countries. In the area of housing, IBEC invested in the mass-production of low-cost housing in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Chile, Perú, and Iran and contributed to the awareness of the importance of channeling private funds from the US to capitalize the mortgage and credit market. The company also developed its own method of construction: the mass production of concrete pre-cast models for use in houses in order to reduce costs and time.

After a small experience with 200 units in Norfolk, Virginia in 1948, IBEC triggered its presence in Latin America with the construction of approximately 1,500 lower middle and middle-class houses in the Las Lomas Development project in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1956. Santiago, Chile also became the target of a plan for the construction of 760 houses in El Dorado (1961-64), while 1,000 units were built in Lima, Peru after 1964. Even when the company succeeded in the construction of these housing complexes, it is more interesting to see the many difficulties and the failures that IBEC faced along the way. The frustration with the economic situation of the countries where IBEC was working, including high inflation, political instability, governmental interference, and anti-American feelings, fills the correspondence between local representatives and IBEC headquarters.

The problem of the disbursement of large sums of money and the financing of credit and construction of housing were issues taken personally by IBEC president Rodman C. Rockefeller, Nelson A. Rockefeller's eldest son. By the mid-1950s, IBEC's officials had come to the conclusion that help in the financing of housing was equally, if not more, important than construction itself. In 1959 the Eisenhower administration launched the Social Progress Trust Fund to channel economic and technical assistance to Latin America and contributed to the foundation of the Inter-American Development Bank. Yet it was John F. Kennedy's reorganization of the Foreign Assistance Act in 1961 that created the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the launching of the Alliance for Progress that fostered American private investment in Latin America. During the 1960s, the Alliance proved ineffective in providing social development and the promotion of democracy in the continent. Latin American unease with the US pushing its interests in the region through economic aid along with American skepticism about infusing public funds abroad, forced the Johnson administration to put more emphasis on the financial guarantees to channel American private capital into the region. Against this backdrop, the IBEC Housing Company began to target newly established savings and loan associations and other financial institutions in Latin American countries to capitalize them. There were frequent conversations between representatives of the company and important people such as Stanley Baruch, the Chief of the Inter-American Development Bank Housing Division, or even with George Meany, Director of the AFL-CIO, and Serafino Romualdi, in charge of the AFL-CIO's American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the agency in charge of promoting pro-US unionism and which had participated in facilitating credit to the construction of housing for union members. In this regard, the correspondence of

Nelson A. Rockefeller with AFL-CIO/AIFLD officials are also valuable evidence of the intricacies of this network of diverse public and private agents' concern with different aspects of the construction of low-income housing in Latin America.

Taking advantage of the contacts cultivated by Nelson A. Rockefeller during his many years involved in Latin American affairs, IBEC's high-level officials and local representatives also had close connections to government personnel in the Latin American countries and pushed them for the establishment of large programs of monetary fiscal reform and guarantee of foreign investment in the mortgage market. For instance, Raymond Foley, who was an administrator of the Federal Housing Administration, had very close connections with the Argentine Minister of Economy, Alvaro Alsogaray, who in 1958 gave him first-hand information about Argentine plans for housing construction. Even with this kind of access to governmental plans, IBEC did not succeed as much as it wanted in either financing or building massive housing units in Latin America. The unstable currency situation, inflation, and devaluations, were not the right backdrop for the profits of private domestic savings and foreign capital.

The IBEC Housing Corporation was not only focused on the financing and construction of low cost housing programs in the urban space but also in the development of new techniques and methods of construction for rural areas in poor countries. IBEC/Colombia signed an agreement with the Inter-American Housing and Planning Center (Centro Interamericano de la Vivienda; the housing research center of the Organization of American States) in 1958 to manufacture and commercialize a simple but useful brick-making machine. The 'CINVA-RAM method' created bricks by simply squeezing mud and adding cement or other agricultural products. The simplicity of the mechanism based solely on manpower

fitted the emphasis of organizations such as the United Nations or the OAS in promoting 'self-help' projects in developing countries. Even when the profits were not spectacular, the CINVA-RAM machine was sold widely not only in Latin America but also in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

In conclusion, the documents in the consulted collections (SSRC, RF, and IBEC) proved to be valuable sources to the study of the transnational concern about the urban question and the housing 'problem' in the post-war and Cold War period. Their value resides not only in the factual information that allows for the reconstruction of different networks of scholarship, philanthropy, and institutional policy making, but also in the possibility of recreating a whole historical imagery that sought to promote the development and advancement of so-called underdeveloped nations through the modernization of a built urban environment. Taken in this way, these sources are key pieces of evidence for a cultural history of US-Latin American relations and for the discussion of the subtle ways in which imperial encounters occurred in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.