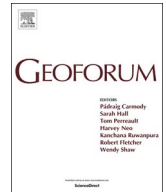




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Inequality and interconnectivity: Urban spaces of justice in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

Cities in different parts of the world are going through intensive transformations based on institutional efforts to govern urban spaces and populations in the face of global environmental change and neoliberalization of governance. This essay examines inequalities and interconnectivities in urban governance and justice, drawing on a case-study of three, socially-differentiated sectors of the city of Villahermosa, Mexico, between 2011 and 2016. My analysis contributes to a multi-dimensional approach toward justice, and the cognate fields of right to the city, and segregation and inequality, that encompasses: (1) *(re)distribution* of residents' exposure to risks and access to services; (2) *recognition* of the causes and consequences of risks and vulnerabilities; (3) fields of *representation* available for different residents; and (4) residents' capabilities to *recover* from disasters and achieve everyday well-being within the existing urban governance and service provision structures. Instead of conceptualizing segregated cities as composed of isolated worlds, I argue that it is only possible to understand how the prevailing forms of governance produce multifaceted inequalities through a relational analysis of how residents from different parts of the city interact with the authorities and with each other. The study shows how residents' tactics to accommodate, reconfigure and contest institutional endeavors to place them in hierarchical positions link to their differentiated ways of constructing urban space.

1. Introduction

'Que triste se oye la lluvia, en los techos de cartón...'

Los Cuarcuao

Cities all over the world are undergoing socio-spatial transformation as the result of institutional efforts to regulate urban spaces and populations in the face of global environmental change and neoliberalization of governance. These procedures transform urban areas and their inhabitants in segmented, yet interlinked ways (Ghertner, 2012). Drawing on a study conducted between 2011 and 2016, I examine the interplay of inequalities and interconnectivities in urban governance and justice in the city of Villahermosa, Tabasco, southeastern Mexico. Analysis demonstrates that the neoliberal forms of governance, relying increasingly on public-private partnerships and civic self-governance (Müller, 2016; Nygren, 2016; Tonkiss, 2013), produce multifaceted injustices in terms of the residents' exposure to risks and access to services within socially segregated cities. It also draws attention to how residents' tactics to accommodate, reconfigure and contest institutional endeavors to place them in hierarchical positions relate with their socially differentiated ways of producing urban space and claiming the right to city.

The study is based on an ethnographic analysis of three socio-economically different sectors of Villahermosa: (1) Tabasco 2000, a high-income residential area; (2) El Guayabal, a middle-income

neighborhood; and (3) Gaviotas Sur, a low-income, informal settlement and an ambulatory trade area. In 2007, Villahermosa suffered a catastrophic flood, during which 62% of the city was inundated and damages were calculated at US\$ 3 billion, equivalent to 30% of the state's gross domestic product (CEPAL, 2008). Since then Villahermosa has suffered annually from serious flooding.

Recently, justice approaches have become important perspectives when examining concerns and claims related to governance, inequality, social segregation, right to the city and different kinds of grievances (Attoh, 2011; Fraser, 2009; Nygren, 2014; Schlosberg, 2013; Walker, 2012; Wayessa and Nygren, 2016). Conventionally, justice has been considered merely as a framework that highlights socio-spatial distribution of benefits and burdens among human populations. In contrast, this study contributes toward a multi-dimensional approach to justice that encompasses: (1) socio-spatial *(re)distribution* of residents' exposure to risks and access to services; (2) cultural *recognition* of risks and vulnerabilities and their causes and consequences; (3) fields of political *representation* available to different residential groups; and (4) residents' capabilities to *recover* from disasters and achieve everyday well-being within the prevailing governance structures. Special attention will be paid to how residents structure their relationships with the authorities and with each other, and how they make sense of their experiences of governance and (in)justice.

To understand justice-related inequalities in socially segregated

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cities requires detailed empirical analysis. This is especially true in many Latin American, African and Asian cities, where large numbers of people live in substandard settlements with inadequate amenities, while urban elites isolate themselves in gated communities with separate water, sanitation and security services. However, instead of conceptualizing segregated cities as composed of unconnected worlds, I argue that only through a *relational* analysis of how people from different parts of the city interact with the authorities, and with each other, is it possible to understand how the prevailing forms of governance produce multifaceted injustices (Centner, 2012; Cosacov and Perelman, 2015).

Compared to the rich research on social segregation in Latin America, combined analyses of people's exposure to environmental risks and access to services are scarce. Furthermore, most of the studies that exist focus on marginal settlements, rather than on relational analyses of affluent, middle-class and poor neighborhoods. Based on the view that a relational approach to justice is difficult to develop without an examination of the interactions between different residential groups, this study aims to redress that lacuna. By building on scholarship in fields of justice, urban governance, right to the city and segregation and inequality, this study seeks to contribute to analytical understanding of multi-dimensionality of justice in segregated cities under conditions of neoliberal governance.

The following section presents a theoretical approach to justice that addresses the dimensions of redistribution, recognition, representation and recovery. The third section explains the context and the methods of the study, while the fourth examines the distribution of risks and services in a socially fragmented city. This is followed by analysis of how residents' exposure to risks and access to services are linked to recognition, leading into exploration of the representational forums available for different residential groups. The second to last section examines how residents' capabilities to recover from calamity and reconfigure the meanings of everyday life relate with loci of socio-economic status, before a concluding section on the (re)production and contestation of governance and (in)justice in socially segregated cities.

2. A multi-dimensional approach to justice

Most of the earlier research on justice has focused on the *(re)distribution* of benefits and burdens among human populations, given the fact that differentiated distribution of resources is at the core of many inequalities. Researchers have shown how risks associated with waste and hazardous industries have a spatial expression related to race, poverty and other forms of marginalization (Bullard and Wright, 2009; Mohai et al., 2009). Recently, research on (re)distribution as an element of justice has broadened to investigate amenity-related issues, such as access to water and sanitation services.

Closely linked to socio-spatial distribution of goods and bads is the dimension of justice as it operates through *recognition*, with a focus on how cultural categories, rooted in status hierarchies, underpin the prevailing distribution of benefits and burdens (Fraser, 2009; Walker, 2009). At the core of (mis)recognition lie the frames of governance that devalue some people and places in comparison to others. Such frames often explain why hazardous industries and other unwanted land uses are concentrated in particular areas and why maintenance services tend to neglect certain neighborhoods whilst protecting quality of life in others. Assumptions that people in certain areas are not interested in taking care of their living sphere affect where institutional efforts to maintain environmental safety and societal security are deployed and where they are not. Authorities and the media play significant roles in framing public opinion on how different social groups should live, thereby shaping common-sense conceptions of social differentiation (Auyero and Swistun, 2009; Hilgers, 2012; Rinne and Nygren, 2016). As Ghertner (2011: 160) notes, the authorities often use a set of attributes, such as income level and social status, for parsing the city-space into settlements of discrete residential groups considered to differ essentially

from each other in their appearance and in their need for institutional control and care.

Current theories of justice also emphasize aspects of political *re-presentation* in terms of who is engaged in urban planning, and who has a voice in policy-making and public deliberation. Misrepresentation occurs when political boundaries are drawn in ways that deny some people participation in decisions that determine their lives. However, celebrating participation for its own sake – as if local involvement automatically indicates fair representation, or civic contestation inherently leads to emancipation – is analytically simplistic, due to the fact that representational justice also requires legitimate decision-making and the capacity to make binding decisions. Furthermore, recent studies have called for attention to decision-making across diverse expert and lay spaces, as negotiations over governance and justice often traverse multiple arenas: some formal, some informal, some mainstream and some subaltern (Fraser, 2008; Müller, 2016). For an enhanced understanding of representational justice, it is crucial to analyze different actors' views of who should be entitled to claim justice, through which forms, and how such claims should be redressed.

When examining grievances related to hazards, the justice of *recovery* becomes another crucial dimension. Herein the question is not so much what kinds of capabilities individuals command, but how communities are able to recuperate collectively (Schlosberg, 2013). Recovery-related approaches to justice highlight the socially differentiated opportunities people have of taking command of their lives and attaining social fulfillment, conceptualizing well-being not only as 'living well', but as 'living well together' (Wayessa and Nygren, 2016: 4). Recently, scholars emphasizing the recovery aspects of justice have called for detailed analyses of how institutional power relationships shape people's abilities to create collectively meaningful lives (Ernstson et al., 2014).

Widening the theoretical framework of justice to facilitate examination of interlinkages between redistribution, recognition, representation and recovery offers fruitful opportunities to approach governance and justice as an arena of negotiations and contestations. As Harvey (2008: 23) remarks: 'The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city.' Approaching justice as the right to a safe living environment and access to services requires a careful analysis of inequalities and interconnectivities inherent in cities, including the institutional modes of regulating urban spaces and populations. Given the scale of vulnerabilities characteristic of contemporary cities, addressing these issues is crucial to theories of justice, and the cognate fields of governance, inequality and segregation, and the right to the city (Attoh, 2011; de Vries, 2016; Holston, 2011; Merrifield, 2014; Tonkiss, 2013).

This analysis contributes to a holistic approach to justice by examining a series of linkages important for understanding the (re)production of inequalities through interconnectivities: *first*, by demonstrating the entanglements in the notion of justice as redistribution, recognition, representation and recovery; *second*, by illustrating how residents' exposure to risks relates with their access to services and how these interconnections are produced through everyday interactions between the authorities and socially differentiated residents; and *third*, by showing how residents seek tactics to reconfigure institutional efforts to govern their right to the city and their access to services through multifaceted, albeit differentiated, power relationships. The view of cities as conglomerates of cross-class interactions provides a more dynamic way to analyze justice in segregated cities than the conventional assumptions of insular urbanism (Cosacov and Perelman, 2015). It enables an examination of how inequalities are re(produced) in everyday interactions, and how perceptions of environmental safety, societal security and life with dignity are politically charged and contested.

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