Latin American Urban Cultural Studies:

Unique Texts, Ordinary Cities

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Abstract

Urban communication research in Latin America is not just responding to, or rejecting, Western perspectives but producing material that can be valuable for understanding arguments about ordinary cities within the context of globalisation. We interrogate current frameworks in urban cultural studies and communication theory to highlight how research in Latin America provide new possibilities for exchange and dialogues into an area of study that is often missing or limited in Western urban cultural analysis. We argue that this research moves away from theories that deemed Latin American cities as underdeveloped or unequally inserted in to the network of global cities by providing ways of narrating, imagining and understanding the city in their own terms. This research however does not go unchallenged; we also argue that Latin American capital cities are often privileged at the cost of forgetting, ignoring or just describing as traditional other Latin American cities in the region.

Key words: urban communication, urban cultural studies, Latin American urban cultural studies, Latin American communication research

The relationship between communication and the city, though well established in Latin America since the early 1990s, is all too often looked upon with suspicion. As communication scholars we are often asked to justify in what ways the city is part of communication studies. This article sets out to provide a framework for how we came

to understand and research the city as part of communication studies. Urban communication has a long-standing tradition in Latin America. Research in this area is not just responding to, or rejecting, Western perspectives, as is evident in some of the work we will present here, but producing material that can be valuable for understanding arguments about ordinary cities within the context of globalization. In this article we aim to interrogate current frameworks in urban theory and communication studies to highlight how research in Latin America can provide new possibilities for exchange and dialogues in an area of study that is often missing or limited in Western urban cultural analysis.

Latin American metropolitan cities were the backdrop against which colonial powers imposed the idea of the nation-state. It is also in cities that the idea of Latin American *patria* (homeland, motherland) emerged and where the colonial experience of domination was evident. The link between city, culture and politics, formative in the Latin American experience, has been present in the varied intellectual projects that accompanied the struggles for independence in the region and on the slow road to the organization of Latin American nation-states. These connections are also present in the constant dialogues with literature about cities from other continents.

It is impossible to give an account of two centuries of history of Latin American thought about cities in these pages, so our goal is more modest. It is limited to part of that experience, trimmed in time, space and type of approach. We choose to focus on the last quarter of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first century, with particular attention paid to work that started – and to this day continues uninterrupted – when most Latin American countries were re-establishing some model of democratic politics. Geographically, we have limited our discussion to Spanish-speaking countries and have restricted our approach to urban cultural studies. Our aim is to assess the way Latin American urban cultural studies has contributed to general academic discussions about cities, and in particular within communication studies.

We will first provide a context for understanding the academic framework within which the work is discussed. We will then consider authors identified as 'classics' before briefly assessing the work of authors who have provided new ways of thinking about cities (particularly via the notions of imaginary maps and spaces of experience). We argue that Latin American urban cultural studies have privileged capital cities and excluded regional cities and towns. Such a focus has tended to reproduce the arguments and claims made by scholars in Europe and North America. Finally, we reflect on this material under three headings: the problem of the periodization; the idea of localization; and the issue of 'blended culture'.

The Context for Latin American Urban Cultural Studies

Urban theorists have excluded many cities and their inhabitants from explanations and descriptions of what it means to live in these cities, ignoring vernacular terms used to describe and imagine urban areas and their transformations. In a similar way communication scholars have neglected cities as sites of production and consumption, and ignored the dynamic practices of their inhabitants (Graham, 1996; 1997). It is from within this space between these two disciplinary approaches that we locate the arguments emerging from a tradition of urban communication studies in Latin America.

In the United States and Europe Latin American urban studies has been framed as development studies, while research about European and American cities falls under the umbrella of urban studies. Third World cities:

> seemed incommensurable with the cities of advanced industrial capitalism. Thus, as more pragmatic approaches to cities in poor contexts emerged through the latter half of the last century under the sign of development, urban sociological theory retreated into its original concern with western urban experiences. (Robinson, 2004, 570)

In this context, the Latin American city has been measured against the backdrop of dependency, underdevelopment and globalization theories (Davis, 2005).

The literature emerging from Latin America that we discuss here coincides with a renewed interest in Western urban theory as a means of understanding the problems of advanced industrialized cities within the context of globalization. Understanding the revival of the dilapidated urban centres of the industrialized world and their place in the global economy is central to contemporary Western urban theory (Harvey, 2000; Robinson, 2004). This shift puts cities in the United States and Europe at the centre of the debate (Davis, 2005). The global city becomes the 'yardstick' to which the Latin American city should aspire (Davis, 2005).

As with the discourse of modernity, theories of the global city become yet another way of measuring temporal progression, of legitimizing a particular type of development for the rest of the world (Massey, 2000). Such a representation implies that Latin American cities experience layers of intense development without undergoing the same logic of progression as the 'advanced' capitalist cities of the world. The following quote from David Harvey (2000, 16), when trying to explain the problems of post-industrial cities, is indicative:

> But all of these problems of the advanced capitalist world pale into insignificance compared to the extraordinary dilemmas of developing countries, with the wildly uncontrolled pace of urbanization in São Paulo, Mexico City, Cairo, Lagos, Mumbai, Calcutta, Seoul, and now Shanghai and Beijing. On the surface there seems to be something different going on here, even more than just that qualitative shift that comes with the quantitative rapidity and mass of urban growth that has Mexico City or São Paulo experiencing in just one generation what London went through in ten and Chicago in three.

Or, take for example the following quote:

> If there is one dominant impression I have of the urban processes that are re-shaping cities particularly in developing countries (Seoul or São Paulo, for example), it is simply that of an urban process in which the content transcends the form – social processes literally bursting at the seams of urban form – on a scale never before encountered. How to create the poetry of our urban future in such a situation is the fundamental question. (Harvey, 2000, 28)

Quotes such as these can lend support to notions of the supremacy of the West against the rest of the world.[1] The problems of the advanced capitalist world are not deemed to be as bad when compared to cities in developing countries. This partly explains why research on Latin American cities has been confined to development studies.

Despite these observations, Harvey acknowledges that globalization:

> denies any relative autonomy for urban development, undermines the capacity within individual cities to define new possibilities of urban living, and makes it impossible to envision the modification, transgression or disruption of the trajectory of capitalist globalization/urbanization in general. (2000, 43)

As Jennifer Robinson (2006) argues, global or world city approaches establish hierarchies of cites, in which poorer cities are compelled to imitate the global city and, as such, limit the possibilities for imagining urban futures.

> Often such [poor] cities are caught … between finding a way to fit into globalization, emulating the apparent successes of a small range of cities and … embarking on developmentalist initiatives to redress poverty, maintain infrastructure and ensure basic service delivery. (Robinson, 2006, 111)

It is precisely because of this hierarchical positioning of cities and the limitations that this perspective imposes over imagining different futures that Robinson has advocated an approach that considers cities as ordinary: 'Understanding cities as ordinary … opens up new opportunities for creatively imagining the distinctive futures of all cities' (2006, 2).

The literature emerging from Latin America that we have chosen to discuss here is not coincidental – it emerges at a time when democracy was being re-established in the region (after long periods of dictatorships or authoritarian regimes). It came at a time when Latin American scholars were moving away from arguments about dependency and underdevelopment while trying to rediscover their voices and ways of imagining distinctive urban futures. Such voices can be found in essays (Sarlo, 1988), socio-

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[1] This argument is repeatedly stated in work that questions the discourse of modernity (Massey, 2000; Pratt, 1992)

economic analysis (Coraggio, 1999), urban ethnographies (Carman, 2006; Lacarrieu, 1988) and semiotic (García Canclini, 1999; Silva, 1992), ecological (Cuenya and Herzer, 2004), political (Gorelik, 1998; Sábato, 1988; Svampa, 2001) and cultural (Silvestri, 2003) approaches to cities.

The studies presented here as unique texts are precisely so because they move away from theories of dependency and globalization that deemed Latin American cities as underdeveloped or unequally inserted into the network of global cities. They are also unique because they are capable of narrating, imagining and understanding the city in their own terms; precisely because they uncover 'the poetry of our urban future' (Harvey, 2000, 28).

Mapping the Classics

The following texts are persistently quoted amongst communication scholars in Latin America: *Latino America: las ciudades y sus ideas* [*Latin America: Its Cities and Ideas*] (2001 [1976]) by José Luis Romero; *La ciudad letrada* [*The Lettered City*] (1984) by Angel Rama; *De los medios a las mediaciones* [*Communication, Culture and Hegemony*] (1998 [1987]) by Jesús Martín-Barbero; *Culturas hibridas* [*Hybrid Cultures*] (1990) and *Consumidores y ciudadanos* [*Consumers and Citizens*] (1995) both by Néstor García Canclini; and *Una modernidad periférica* [*A Peripheral Modernity*] by Beatriz Sarlo (1988).[2] These texts were soon considered classics in the field of communication studies in Latin America, particularly for those researching the city and contemporary urban issues. These texts circulate widely across the region and the fact that most have been translated into other languages is evidence of their significance outside of Latin America. These studies were part of the renewed interest in the understanding of urban practices provoked by the restoration of democratic processes in the last two

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[2] Most of these books have been translated into English (see references for details). Beatriz Sarlo's text has not been translated, but numerous other works of hers have been, including: 'The modern city: Buenos Aires, the peripheral metropolis' (2000). *For convenience, English titles of these books are used in the rest of the article.*

decades of the twentieth century. We identify two authors whose publications gained immediate distribution and are recurrently quoted among Latin American communication scholars. These are Armando Silva with *Imaginarios urbanos* [Urban Imaginaries] (1992); and Rossana Reguillo with *En la calle otra vez: las bandas – identidad urbana y usos de la comunicación* [In the Street Again: Gangs, Urban Identity and Uses of Communication] (1991), and her subsequent *Construcción simbólica de la ciudad* [Symbolic Construction of the C]ity (1996), which is less well-known than the first. These authors – apart from José Luis Romero – continue to produce texts about the city. From 2000 onwards there has been a huge growth of studies and it is impossible to document and summarize here the number of texts about the city and the urban that have been produced in the region.

*Latin America: Its Cities and Idea*s (Romero, 2001 [1976], whose first edition dates back to 1976, provides a starting point for our selection of studies about cities. The originality and significance of José Luis Romero's book can be detected by the way in which it is quoted by the authors discussed here. For example, Jesús Martín-Barbero's lengthy discussion of Romero's argument in chapter 3 (titled 'Modernity and mass mediation in Latin America') of his *Communication, Culture and Hegemony* (1998 [1987]) is evidence of why Romero's book became a classic textbook on Latin American cities.

Romero's text proposes a history of Latin America that takes as its focus the ways of *living-together* (*vivir-juntos*) in cities, a narrative that is intersected by various national stories. In the foreword to the latest edition, Luis Alberto Romero points out that the key to interpreting the book rests on the ability to think about Latin America as a whole, as 'a unit … derived from the colonial experience, and the diversity of responses' that this process brought about (Romero, 2001 [1976], xv). In this sense, this book is a history of Latin America, one that is written from the viewpoint of its cities.

Romero synthesizes forms of Latin American urbanity from the conquest until the middle of the twentieth century. He proposes a chronological typology that systematically organizes these cities into six periods. These types are: 'foundation cities' (sixteenth century); 'noble cities of the Indies' (seventeenth century); 'Creole cities' (last decades of the eighteenth century to the early nineteenth century); 'patrician cities' (from independence until 1880); 'bourgeois cities' (1880–1930) and 'cities of the masses' (1930–64).

José Luis Romero surveys scholarly research on Latin American cities, encompassing texts of literature, history, sociology and essays (*ensayismo*). Though dealing with most Latin American nations, he privileges cities in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, Peru and Colombia. The book's concern with 'acculturation' is consistent with his systematic dichotomy in labelling cities. He identifies 'cities on the move' and also stagnant cities, he refers to oligarchs and ignorant foreigners too. Clashes between 'culture' and 'no culture' became a type of domination involving a process of 'acculturation' where one culture overrides the other.

Subsequent writers have attempted to move beyond these dichotomies. For example, the concepts of 'hybrid cultures' (García Canclini) and 'blended culture' (*cultura de mezcla*) (Sarlo) are offered to confront these assumptions and accentuate the mixed character of the urban experience. Ángel Rama's approach to 'transculturation' was important in this shift towards an emphasis on mixing and hybridity.

None of these texts ignored or rejected colonial domination as a key unifying feature for understanding the Latin American city proposed by Romero. It is not only the reference to the colonial experience that unifies these texts and aligned them with Romero, since they also privileged the national capitals in their theorization of Latin American cities. Here we have to exclude the work of Beatriz Sarlo, who, drawing on the British cultural studies tradition, consistently focuses on Buenos Aires, as does García Canclini's anthropological study of Mexico City. Nevertheless, in explanations seeking to understand the Latin American urban experience, the 'blended culture' or 'hybrid culture' experience took over from the colonial consciousness proposal.

These texts adopted a different approach from that undertaken by Romero; they disarticulated every city or each set of cities under study by focusing on a particular period and they embark on the task of outlining the very features that make each of these processes distinctive in each of the cities they focused (the 'cities of the masses' in the case of Martín-Barbero; the first decades of the twentieth century in Sarlo, the contemporary city in García-Canclini). It is no longer a social history that addresses economic, sociological and cultural processes as a whole, but one that focuses on specific themes under particular historical periods. Among them, the cities of the masses of the twentieth century appear to be the most visited.

These classic studies emphasized the centrality of the cultural industries for urban life since about the 1920s. The concept of mass-mediation (*massmediación*) proposed by Martín-Barbero – which relied heavily on the interpretation of cities of the masses that appeared in José Luis Romero's book – represented a break from a tradition of Latin American communication studies that drew on a North American functionalist approach, while critically renewing ties with a semiological approach to ideology (i.e. Dorfman and Mattelart, 1975). Martín-Barbero's work was important because it openly criticized elitist approaches to communication studies that did not acknowledge media discourses as a valid form of knowledge. He also linked processes of urbanization to media discourses.

> the histories of communication media continue – with very few exceptions – to be dedicated to studying the 'economic structure' or the 'ideological content' of the media, without considering even minimally the study of the mediations under which the media acquired its institutional materiality and cultural thickness; or those that appear to correlate historical transformations to the influence of the media; and others where these are reduced to mere passive instruments in the hands of a class with almost as much autonomy as a Kantian subject. (Martín-Barbero, 1998 [1987], 223)

Martín-Barbero's idea of mediation and his proposal to think in terms of matrices of social communications emphasize the importance of the city. These mediations materialize in the city, a city that in becoming 'mass' incorporates the thickness of the cultural industry experience to previous influences.

This feature is also present in Sarlo (1988), with her proposal of blended culture (*cultura de mezcla*) to refer to the urban experience in Buenos Aires between the 1920s and 1930s, characterized by River Plate artistic vanguards, and ideas of the city and its inhabitants as projected by the mass media. In this case, she confronts the idea of the modern city and relates that modernity to the periphery. Similarly her later work – *Scenes of Postmodern Life*, (2002, first published in Spanish in 1995) and *Instantáneas* (1996) critically engages with discussions about the post-modern city. In all these books Sarlo's concern is to reconstruct urban experiences from cultural texts. The idea of mix in Sarlo is not only a theme but also a methodological approach: 'Deliberately, I wrote a "book of mixes" about a culture (urban Buenos Aires) also of mixes' (Sarlo, 1988: 9).

We would now like discuss the work that took on board the arguments presented here, but this time incorporating rich ethnography and semiotics to the study of the city within communication studies.

Imaginaries and Experiences (Imaginary Maps/Territories of Experience)

Armando Silva Tellez published a book on urban imaginaries in Latin America in 1992 addressing the idea that knowledge about the city could be gained through images as the main sources of knowledge about the city (as a research strategy). What is new about Silva's approach is the overlap between a systematic survey approach to the construction of urban imaginaries derived from the perspective of the inhabitants themselves, and his analysis of different images and visual spaces in cities. Such an overlap between his own analysis of the visual-urban (stained glass, graffiti, emblematic sites) and the systematization and interpretations of the citizens of the cities studied (Bogotá and São Paulo) adopts a broad semiological approach and brings together innovative methodological alternatives. This is the case, for example, in the contrast between *maps* and *croquis* (sketches). These concepts allow him think about the contrast between the institutional representations of space and those derived from the territorial practices that occur in these places. Contrasted with the

texts discussed above as 'classics', this work represents a shift from *ideology* to *the imaginary*. This shift was also taking place in social theory and cultural analysis inside and outside of Latin America and it was symbolic of its time (part of the postmodern shift)

The territorial practices that are outlined in the work of Silva as a backdrop to urban imaginaries are the central focus in Rossana Reguillo's research. Both share similar theoretical concerns about the need to combine experience and representations to account for ways of being urban in Latin America. In *The Symbolic Construction of the City* (1996), Reguillo renews the debate about Latin American cities by focusing on a non-capital city: Guadalajara. Significant also is the attention she plays to urban actors and the establishment of new social relations through an environmental disaster that reveals the uneven patterns of that city. These same theoretical, methodological and thematic concerns are again present in her research about the conflicting territories occupied by youth (*In the Street Again: Gangs, Urban Identity and Communication Uses*, 1991).

The research done by Silva (1992) and Reguillo (1991; 1996) not only represents a valuable contribution to the area of communication and the city, it is also *explicitly situated within the field of communication studies*. If in the work cited earlier as classics the city is the focus of the analysis, this is not done with communication studies in mind or within the field. If Romero's book was written outside of the field of communication, the one by Jesús Martín-Barbero is produced thinking about the field of communication studies but it is broader in scope. The city occupies a section in a book that is mainly concerned with mediation and cultural matrices. Sarlo's work is incorporated into the curriculum but mainly to make sense of the link between urban cultural forms and practices and modernity. The texts by Reguillo and Silva, however, were produced within the already institutionalized field of communication studies. The point we are trying to make here is that communication and the city has been a solid and institutionalized area of study in Latin America since the early 1990s.

The approaches to the city for each of these authors will be different; for Reguillo the link is made with anthropology, and for Silva with semiotics and aesthetics. Both, in turn, will seek answers in psychology; in the first instance, to question the formation of subjectivities as forms of communication and collective action, and in the second to make a link with the imaginary (as in Lacan). The *historical dimension* is relevant to both authors as it was with the work we mapped as 'classics', but in this instance the temporal dimension is the contentious present of Latin American cities. Also significant is their territorial dimension: for Reguillo the neighbourhood occupies centre stage, for Silva it will be the comparison between two distinct Latin American cities: Bogota and São Paulo. Reguillo draws attention to the neighbourhood as an important dimension for understanding the city. The Mexican author presents the district as a first level of analysis and the city as a second level of analysis. In this sense she finds in the neighbourhood a metonymic representation of the city of Guadalajara. This territorial scaling of the analysis adds a dimension to that of the 'classics': in her work we have the neighbourhood, city, state and the Latin American space. Later, in her research about youth, gangs and drug trafficking she adds a fifth dimension to her analysis: that of the global transnationalization of illegal economic activity. In the case of Armando Silva, the comparison between Bogota and São Paulo is first done through a semiotic analysis of different texts (stories, news, public images, graffiti, stained glass, display windows, among others) to uncover the urban imaginaries of these cities. The Colombian author also proposes an in-depth survey interview to assess qualitative aspects about its citizens and to understand how people talked about and used these cities. After publishing this book he received sponsorship from the Andres Bello Agreement to extend this project into what became a large-scale project on Latin American urban cultures across 14 countries (the research was carried out by local municipalities or public universities). Here the territorial dimension extends across the continent and the richness of this approach lies in the synergies produced from the combination of urban imaginary experiences in their relationship to other urban contexts. Their work stands out as pioneering in the field precisely because both authors offer a cultural analysis of urban settings within the field of communication studies.

Eccentric Maps: Other Cities in Latin America[3]

The studies we have referred to[4] tend to bypass non-capital cities in the region, ignoring the ports that allowed links with other countries, and thus a nation's inclusion in the world market economy. These non-capital cities merit recognition and should be salvaged from their marginalization under the label of *traditionalism*, a term used to subsume those other cities in the interior of the country. Cities are usually attached to innovation and modernity, so to circumscribe the interior of the country in general, and their cities in particular, to the broad and imprecise field of the traditional prevents scholars from having to understand its actors, spaces and relationships.

Thus, 'to get to the interior' involves a rather prolonged journey in space and time. This estrangement – and condemnation to the past – appear across the spectrum of scholarly production (i.e. the idea of 'traditional interior' in Argentine sociology, present in the work of Gino Germani, 1969), artistic production (i.e. the process of displacement of the hero in *The Lost Steps* by Alejo Carpentier, 2001 (1953)) or the description of a dusty city, stopped in time, present in the novel *The Lost Place* by Norma Huidobro, 2007) and media companies (most of whose headquarters are located in capital cities)

The idea of exclusion and estrangement is present in the work discussed above in various ways. José Luis Romero attributes this version of 'traditional societies' to non-capital cities through his category of 'stagnant cities' that appear in the chapter on 'Bourgeois cities: 1880–1930' (2001 [1976], 250). Here the cities of the interior – with the exception of a few, generally ports – are opposed to the capitals in his dichotomy

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[3] The topics discussed in this section are fully addressed in García Vargas (2010).
[4] With the exception of R. Reguillo.

of 'transformation/impasse'. For Romero, the city that was left out of modernization 'retained its provincial character'. He describes it in the following way:

> They did not change when others did, and because of this they became *stagnant cities.* Many of them, however, managed to keep pace with   their area of influence, but also kept their traditional lifestyle without accelerating its pace. The streets and squares retained their peace, architecture its traditional modality, the forms of coexistence, its norms and customary rules. Certainly *the horizon was not expanded*, where in other cities the possibility of adventure, of easy wealth and social promotion seemed to grow. By contrast the cities that escape modernization could seem more stagnant than they were. (Ibid., 258, emphasis added)

> Typical of the *stagnant or asleep cities* was not so much the intact permanence of their urban layout and their architecture but the endurance of their *societies.* Indeed, the old lineages and popular groups remained intact from those formed in the colonial or patrician times. Little or nothing had changed, and certainly *nothing stimulated the transformation* of the structure of the dominant classes, or the formation of the new middle classes or diversification of popular classes. (Ibid, 259, emphasis added)

> Just the opposite occurred in cities which, directly or indirectly, were included in the system of the new economy. Old societies were beginning to transform …

> In rural areas and small and medium-sized cities the old patrician class was deeply rooted and constituted a vigorous and homogeneous aristocracy. It was that 'gentleman's democracy' that was spoken of in Arequipa, Tunja, Trujillo, Salta, or Popayán. There were no groups that suggested diversifying trends nor *humble or middle groups that will reject the consent to authority.* That is why it was there where they better withstood the test of the new era. In capitals and in ports, in the cities which were transformed, these circumstances began to undermine the structure and the strength of the nobility, even though it was well formed and had unequivocal power … (Ibid., 259)

Martín Barbero is silent about non-capital cities, and they are excluded from Silva's *urban imaginaries* and Sarlo's *peripheral modernity*.

The research and theoretical argument evaluated here contains a significant flaw in its failure to acknowledge the differences between metropolitan and non-metropolitan urban experiences (present in Raymond Williams' *The Country and the City*, 1973) and this has repercussions for theorizing urban Latin America. Although some non-capital cities are very briefly mentioned, they are approached from the point of view of theoretical and methodological models that emerged from research on capital cities.

Such an approach is similar to the unequal dialogues between the theory of the so-called core and peripheral countries. The dichotomy is compounded as a type of double dependency on both the capital and colonial centre by duplicating the *colonized* argument when referring to non-capital cities in Latin America.

Three Family Traits

Regarded as a whole, the studies of cities discussed in this article converge in three ways: a *historical periodization* that highlights a shared history given its articulation/disarticulation with political and economical frameworks (specifically, with the development of capitalism); a *triple localization* that highlights the multiple ways of being urban in Latin America; and the idea of 'blended culture' or 'mixed culture'.

We conclude by arguing that urban cultural studies provides – and in doing so, reinforces – a particular interpretation on the history of Latin America. The *periodization* present in Romero's work reinforces the idea of a common history and privileges the colonial experience, the insertion of nation-states in global capitalism, and the impact of globalization processes for social and economic practices in the region. In this period the relationship between urbanization and development is central to understand the development of national states. Here, scholars have stressed how demographic concentration in urban areas was linked to industrialization. The studies that we have discussed here as classics are themselves part of a period: the increasing quantity and quality of work published since the 1980s has coincided with the establishment of various forms of political democracy in the region. This research demonstrates a concern for understanding the political contexts under which urban practices were occurring, particularly after long periods of political authoritarianism when urban practices were largely curtailed (Rosenthal, 2000).

A second theme that emerges is *localization.* Urban studies, given their focus, tend to be localized. Localization appears here as threefold: a sense of belonging to Latin America; membership of a specific national context; and the urban environment itself. This way of thinking about localization involves taking into consideration the multiple experiences present in the different ways of being urban in Latin America, while engaging with wider theoretical discussions about place within the remit of urban studies. It also opens up the possibility of producing comparative studies. We are not suggesting the type of comparison that was prevalent in the work we have reviewed here – which aligned Latin American cities as a unity and which reproduced the same theoretical models for all – but one that acknowledges the particular ways of being urban in Latin America and where convergence points might come to the surface. The research so far produced has provided us with a solid foundation to recover the tradition of comparative studies – but only by renewing it. The starting point for this renewed approach should be able to highlight similarities, differences and contradictions that shape the variety of Latin American cities, and only then can we begin to uncover the specific ways of being urban in Latin America.

This localization can also be detected in the way in which some cities are excluded from what falls under the umbrella of Latin American urban studies. It seems as if a few metropolitan cities are part of what constitutes Latin American urban studies, even though a lot of research is being produced about non-capital cities (Alejandra García Vargas' edited collection on San Salvador de Jujuy [2010] is just one example). In this sense, this tendency reproduces the critique of Western urban theory that relegates the study of Latin American cities to development studies. If the Latin American city was considered 'eccentric' in Western urban theory, and thus framed under anthropological or development studies, non-capital cities duplicated this eccentricity. When escaping this double condemnation, research about these other cities (small or medium, previous industrial centres, tourist or sporting destinations) produces a localized and multi-layered knowledge about ways of being urban in Latin America. So a comparative urban approach should consider all these experiences. These doubly eccentric cities can be seen as unique texts, but the richness provided by

its spaces and its inhabitants could be enhanced when these experiences are compared and inserted into wider academic discussions about ways of being urban in Latin America.[5] The history of Latin America through its cities should not only comprise metropolitan or port cities, but should be one produced out of the dialogues between all its cities (beach, mountain, puna or pampa).

Our discussion of periodization and localization converges with our third point: that of cities as points of encounter and the idea of 'blended culture', according to which cities are in continuous processes of transformation through transculturation (Rama), culture of mix (Sarlo), hybrid cultures (García Canclini), matrices and mediations (Martín-Barbero). Such a focus on change and mixture (a characteristic of numerous cities), a celebration of cultural encounters and diversity, can lead to an avoidance and evasion of the unequal relations of power that are an integral part of such dynamics.

The work we have presented here attest to the significance of moving away from the idea of global cities as nodes of production, information networks or economic flows, to the city as a spatial instance and a site of material and symbolic expression; our senses and experiences are equally important for understanding the city as territorial, political and social organization that is embedded in relations of power. Such an approach has provided Latin American scholars with a different way of imagining cities, and allowed for the development of narratives on the different ways of being urban in Latin America. Narratives that consider the voices and subjects that are actually living, making and experiencing ordinary cities on a daily basis.

Communication and the City

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[5] Portes et al. (2005) provide examples of this approach. However most research about other cities, though very rich in detail, tends to be presented at conferences and does not have wide circulation in the region, resulting in rich descriptions without the possibility of in-depth comparisons.

The research produced in Latin America under the umbrella of urban communication studies is rich and varied partly because it does not depend on closed disciplinary boundaries, theoretical models or methodological approaches. Throughout this article we have demonstrated how thinking about the city within a communication studies perspective has offered researchers an avenue to avoid closure, reflecting the way that cities are not closed systems but are formed out of multiple layers that include various histories, processes and relationships.

We would like to stress here that Urban Communication, though fully established in Latin America, is a relatively new area of study in places like the United States (Burd et al., 2007; Gibson, 2007) and Britain (Brunsdon, 2007; Graham, 1996; 1997; 2004). In the United States the emphasis seems to be on (though not limited to) communication systems in urban environments, while in Britain the emphasis is on the impact of new communications technologies in the production of urban spaces, and on transformations of spatial experiences and interactions. Still it is often the case that we are asked to justify in what ways is the city part of communication studies. The article addressed this concern while also mapping (though geographically limited to Latin America) for the first time an area of study that is emerging as ever more significant. In trying to explain, reflect on and justify our work as communication studies (García Vargas, 2010; Roman-Velazquez, 1999; 2008) we have produced a thematic guide of research on communication and the city.

Communication, then, appears as a process that places an emphasis on practices through which meaning is produced; this includes interpersonal communication and it certainly goes beyond the media. Communication and the city share similar concerns to those of media studies. The city appears as a product that is designed, planned and promoted in particular ways. Multiple players have a stake in its production (planners, architects, different government departments – housing, transportation, green spaces …) and so different discourses and visions about cities develop in what is a constant process of negotiation. It also appears as a text – here particular urban settings are the objects to be analysed – graffiti, art and advertising for example. Cities also appear in texts – film, fiction, novels, music and research on

representations of cities is less disputed in communication and media studies. Finally, we identify the city as lived experience; here the city is about its physical form, its buildings, squares and parks, as much as the practices that make and define these places.

Thus, joining with Robinson's (2006) proposal about ordinary cities, we would like to argue for the need to move away from hierarchical knowledge about cities, and this includes the classification of cities (as global, world, developing, underdeveloped) as much as hierarchical disciplinary divisions over whether research on cities falls within the remit of communication studies. Thus our call for understanding and comprehending ways of being urban in ordinary cities is a response to both a geographical and disciplinary hierarchy of knowledge about cities.

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