

How to help, and how not to help, the poor in the megacities of the South

Alan Gilbert

Generalising about urban governance and the urban poor across most of the globe is unhelpful. Unfortunately, I see far too many current examples of that disease. Latin America is not China and is most certainly not like most of Africa or the Indian subcontinent. A recent paper in this journal argued that every city in the South suffers from poor and corrupt management. While accepting that such a diagnosis is true of too many cities, this paper offers an antidote. It explains how Bogotá, Colombia, was transformed from a bankrupt and excessively politicised city into one that is quite well run. Unfortunately, Bogotá also demonstrates that progress follows an uncertain path and corruption reappeared in spectacular form when the electorate voted in a dishonest mayor. If Bogotá is no longer quite the model of competent management it once was, it demonstrates that decent government is possible in the South. That is a vital ingredient if the quality of life of poor people is to improve.

Key words: Global South, megacities, poverty, Bogotá

There is a regrettable tendency in many recent academic analyses of urbanisation to over-generalise. Of course, the phenomenon is hardly new; many so-called classic papers and books of the past did the same thing. Hoselitz' 'generative and parasitic cities', Lewis' 'culture of poverty', Sovani's 'over-urbanisation' and Quijano's 'marginalisation' were all misleading concepts based on over-generalisation and sometimes on remarkably little evidence (Hoselitz 1957; Lewis 1966; Sovani 1964; Quijano 1974).¹ And, of course, the authors of virtually every book based on European or US research have always assumed that it was applicable everywhere. Hence broad titles such as Castells' *The Urban Question*, Murie, Niner, and Watson's *Housing Policy and the Housing*

System, Bourne's *A Geography of Housing* and Massey and Meagan's *The Anatomy of Job Loss* all sought universal relevance even though they had no discussion of such a minor issue as urbanisation in the Second or Third World (Gilbert 1987). There are so many recent examples of this phenomenon that any list would exceed the space available.²

Much of the over-generalisation and misleading titling are caused by the desire of authors to draw attention to their book or paper by making it appear relevant to a wider public. More people are likely to read a book about Ethiopian housing if it is called 'Slums' because the title gives the impression that it makes valid generalisations about housing throughout the South. Given the proliferation of literature about urbanisation, and

the consequent embarrassingly low average citation rate that ensues, the wish to attract a large audience is totally understandable (Gilbert 2009).

However, over-generalisation is dangerous. A seductive paper putting forward a particular approach to urban development which is based on limited evidence can do great harm if applied in places where the argument simply does not apply. While the problem has been around for years, it has been accentuated recently by the incredible recent growth in academic and non-academic publishing. There is so much material that it is all too easy for readers to be unaware of alternative interpretations. This is a particular danger for researchers too young to have lived through the recycling of received wisdom that features in so much of our intellectual history and who, therefore, will not recognise an old wine in a new bottle.³

In the fields of housing and urban development it is also clear that many academics are finding it so difficult to keep up with the flood of writing that they are relying over much on journalistic accounts of the processes that they are describing (e.g. Davis 2006; Neuwirth 2006; Saunders 2010) or on the tomes of economists (e.g. Glaeser 2011) for enlightenment. If someone famous says something they must be right. Alas, that is often not the case.

In a recent issue of *City*, I believe that Ash Amin (2013) was guilty of my charge of over-generalisation. While writing, no doubt accurately, about conditions in the Indian subcontinent, he generalised his argument about urban mismanagement to include every large city in the South. His is a pessimistic account in so far as he suggested that every city was managed by the incompetent and corrupt. He also suggested that much recent analysis was unhelpful because it fell into his category of 'telescopic urbanism', a confusing term at best. While I accept that too many cities in the South are in a dire state and agree that much urban analysis is highly flawed, his generalisations need to be contested.

In order to avoid tarring myself with a similarly over-broad brush, I want to illustrate my points with examples from Latin America and specifically from Bogotá, Colombia. That region, so shamefully neglected in the English-language planning and social science literature, is highly urbanised, contains at least five megacities, has a great deal of poverty, is highly unequal and much of its urban population live in so-called 'slums'.⁴

Latin America was the first region of the post-colonial world to urbanise and to have its cities castigated as unliveable. Along the way it made most of the mistakes that afflict the majority of cities in Africa and Asia today. It allowed shanty towns to spread into mountainous terrain or onto land liable to flood, condemning the inhabitants to a range of physical dangers from landslides to flooding. The settlements developed initially without services and most governments lacked the capacity to provide the inhabitants with electricity, water or sewerage, let alone proper education and health facilities. Work for the inhabitants was problematic and led academics to devise often erroneous theories about urbanisation and employment; including marginality, 'tertiarisation', 'informalisation' and 'ruralisation' (for critiques, see Gilbert 1998; Leeds and Leeds 1970; Lomnitz 1977; Perlman 1976; Roberts 1978). Too many argued that Latin American cities were powder kegs ready to explode bringing any number of future horrors including dictatorship, revolution, starvation and bloodshed.

In hindsight, few of the Cassandras were proved right and despite the difficult situation facing most of the cities, the majority coped remarkably well. Over the last 30 years or so, the quality of urban life in the region has improved. Between the first half of the 1990s and the middle 2000s, access to piped water increased from 84 to 97% and connections to the sewerage network rose from 68 to 86% (UNECLAC 2010, 252; UN-ROLAC 2010, 125). In most of the larger cities, people can

expect to live for more than 75 years. A majority can now afford consumer durables like television sets and hi-fis, more women have been freed a little from domestic servitude, and most cities have more parks and leisure facilities than ever before.

Latin America has continued to urbanise, albeit at a much slower pace than previously because fertility rates have fallen so dramatically. It has also experienced a major improvement in the quality of both national and urban governance. Compared with the dismal days of the dictatorships so prevalent during the 1970s and 1980s, most countries are now quasi-democracies and most cities have elected mayors. The quality of administration has improved to the extent that a majority of the population have access to water and electricity and public transport gets them to work. My point is that the situation of the urban poor in Latin America today is described poorly by Amin's paper.

Let me illustrate that point with the experience of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia and a megacity with a population approaching 8 million people. Bogotá began to expand rapidly in the 1950s and suffered from all of the difficulties typical of those cities whose populations were growing at over 5% per annum—a shortage of housing and services, underemployment, crime and so on (Gilbert 1998). While its problems were never as severe as those in most cities in Africa or the Indian subcontinent today, its administration always struggled to keep up. By 1992, the city was bankrupt, service coverage was in decline, its mayor was in prison, and crime and violence were out of control. The crisis forced change, and benefiting from the autonomy offered by a new national constitution and the legitimacy provided by the election of mayors, the quality of leadership improved remarkably (Gilbert 2006). Today, the homicide rate is one-quarter of what it was in 1992, electricity, water, drainage and sewerage services reach the whole city, the budget is in balance as a result of major hikes in taxation and the

incidence of poverty fell from 46% in 1999 to 12% in 2012.

Certain elements of its transformation are being copied by other cities across the region and indeed the world. The *TransMilenio* bus rapid transport (BRT) system (Figure 1), which was opened in 2000, is the model for similar transport initiatives in cities from Chile to the USA, from China to South Africa (Gilbert 2007). Its system of bicycle lanes and its annual car-free day are initiatives that are now being considered by London's transport authorities. Moreover, its initiatives in crime and drug control are also being followed with interest in many other parts of Latin America (Gilbert, forthcoming).

However, if the administration of Bogotá has improved dramatically, it is clearly far from perfect. The mayor in charge of the city between 2008 and 2011 is under arrest and numerous councillors and former officials are either in jail or are facing charges of embezzlement and corruption. It is quite clear that a so-called 'carrousel of corruption' operated in the city after 2008, which led to commissions being paid on a number of public contracts including those concerning maintenance of the road system, building new BRT routes and operating the city's ambulance system.

The current left-wing mayor, who was one of the first to denounce his predecessor's misdeeds, came to power in a weak political position given that he obtained only 32% of the popular vote and lacks a majority in the council. He had many enemies at the national level, many reacting to his guerrilla past, and his radical urban agenda also threatens important interests in the city. His development plan promised to reduce inequality, control urban sprawl, reduce the cost of water and transport for the poor, increase taxes for the better off, reduce the prevalence of guns in the city and deal with drug addiction. He was also determined to try to reduce the profits of the private operators of *TransMilenio*, rubbish collection and some secondary schools.



Figure 1 *TransMilenio*: hardly a Third World bus system

He is now embroiled in a series of charges against his administration. At the time of writing, June 2013, he is under threat of a recall motion and his administration is being investigated by several control agencies for wrongdoing. The Attorney General launched an investigation into supposed links between Petro and the leaders of the carousel of corruption (Bromberg, 2011). Similarly, the District's Solicitor and Comptroller are attacking him. The council has rejected his request for approval of a large loan to finance his transport projects and is unlikely to approve his valorisation plan. Even his own appointee, the City Observer, is attacking him for his failure to implement some of his policies. Some believe that one or other of these legal cases, and particularly the charges relating to the cost of the problematic rubbish collection fiasco (see below), may lead to his removal from office.

However, a very real problem is that it soon became clear that his administration was proving less than capable of implementing its policies effectively. He is accused of introducing policies without having

conducted the relevant studies. The inexperience of many in his team has clearly been a problem and was reflected in his decision to ask his cabinet to resign after six months. He claimed that too many of his team lacked experience in running large enterprises and the decision reflected his concern that he had only four years to change the city. It was this impatience to bring change that was perhaps the reason why the administration has made some critical errors. The most notorious was the decision to take rubbish collection under state control because the operators were making what he considered to be excessive profits. While the argument was not wrong, its precipitate application was a disaster. When it began operations in December 2012, the new agency lacked sufficient collection vehicles and the trained staff to do the job; photos of uncollected piles of rubbish in the streets hit the front pages. Another controversial decision was to change the plans for transport improvements along the emblematic Seventh Avenue by shelving the plans for a light *TransMilenio* service and to build a tram system instead.

This decision led to the eventual resignation of the head of *TransMilenio* on the grounds that the action was illegal. His resignation was one of many in the agency; the current incumbent was the fourth director to be appointed in 10 months.

Petro's public image is also being damaged by his habit of regularly upsetting significant lobby groups. He dismayed bullfighting aficionados by banning such events in the city, he alienated taxi drivers by changing the *pico y placa* timetable and closing part of Seventh Avenue to cars, he worries elite households by threatening to raise valorisation charges and he irritates many through his constant use of tweets. His difficult personality has upset people who were once his friends and allies. With the exception of his own officials, none of my interviewees commented favourably on his record.⁵

These charges have taken their toll on the mayor's reputation and the media are constantly denouncing his administration's incompetence. One recent editorial claims that 8 million *bogotanos* are suffering 'the worst mayor of all time' (Nieto de Samper 2013). The opinion polls are less than favourable; towards the end of March 2013, his favourability rating fell to 31%, the lowest rate among the mayors of the largest cities in the country. An attempt to mount a recall referendum is under way and his opponents appear to have obtained the 289,263 signatures that they require to proceed.

While it is clear that all is not well in the current administration, Bogotá in no sense fits Amin's description of a poor megacity. There is no sign that the current administration is anything but honest and it is following a clear, albeit ambitious, urban development strategy. Bogotá by the standards of the South is still a well-run city and like many other large cities in Latin America does not fit Amin's (2013, p. 488) description of 'fiscally hampered or corrupt and inefficient public authorities'. Mexico City, São Paulo and Santiago do not lack resources and recent administrations have

demonstrated that they are able to run their cities competently. Nor do 'slum dwellers, owing to their legal status, remain a population without rights, left outside the society of sovereign and civic obligations, now usurped by the haves alone' (p. 486). After all, Bogotá, along with the Federal District of Mexico, Quito, Lima, several municipalities of Caracas and Santiago, and numerous cities in Brazil, is governed by a party of the left. In addition, several countries in Latin America have national governments representing the middle to the far left: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Cuba, Ecuador, Uruguay and, less certainly, Mexico and Nicaragua. Of course, Latin America still has some right-wing governments, in Chile and much of Central America, but it simply does not fit Amin's generalisations about governance, representation and power.

Nor do most urban policies fit the descriptions that Amin makes in his paper. For example, most Latin American governments have learned that it is foolish to demolish self-help settlements, a not uncommon practice during the bad old days of the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, but currently quite rare.⁶ Today, most such settlements are being upgraded and their settlers are being offered title deeds (Figures 2 and 3). Governments in Brazil, Colombia, Chile and Mexico are building extraordinarily large numbers of social housing units, albeit with insufficient control over either quality or location. Public transport systems more or less work and are generally improving. The lesson I draw from this is that little is served by over-generalising about the problems facing the urban poor. If the problems relate to say cities in the Congo and India, say so, don't lump China and Latin America in there too—conditions there are very different!

I would also point out that many Latin American and Latin Americanist scholars long ago eschewed telescopic thinking in favour of holistic accounts of urban life. The crucial links between informal and formal sector employment were being



Figure 2 Britalia, Bogotá: once a shanty town now a bustling informal suburban street



Figure 3 Informal initiative and sanitation on its way to the 'slums'

explained in the 1970s (Bromley and Gerry 1979), 'dependent' urbanisation became a preoccupation among most sociologists in the region from the 1960s on (Cardoso and Faletto 1979), and the clientelistic links between shanty towns and local politicians had been fully documented by the end of the 1970s (Collier 1976; Cornelius 1975). Of course, there was far too much poor quality academic work but the links between the rich and the poor, the city and the countryside, the city and the nation, and the national economy and the wider world were at the forefront of much serious scholarship.

What can we usefully generalise about megacities across the globe in the hope of improving the lives of the poor? Well, most are hugely unequal and in too many cases the distribution of income and wealth is getting worse. Housing policy and particularly official veneration for home ownership is creating sprawling and divided cities. Most urban areas suffer from deficient services, although not at all like the appalling situation in much of Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Some governments are less than competent and many are excessively politicised. While public contracting is more transparent than in the past, there is still too much corruption and under-the-counter dealing. Neo-liberal forms of globalisation are damaging too many lives and transnational corporations are too often escaping their responsibilities in terms of contributing to local taxes, preserving the environment and improving working conditions.

Nevertheless, I believe that the experience of urbanisation in Latin America is useful in informing other cities in the South about how they might improve living conditions for the poor. Latin America's experience provides useful examples of both positive and negative approaches. First, democracy has been shown to work more or less effectively and some local mayors have achieved wonders. Second, its experience with decentralisation shows that municipal authorities have to be of a certain size and possess a

minimum economic weight to function properly.⁷ Third, BRT systems can provide cheaper solutions than metros although congestion is inevitable if free rein is given to the growth of private car ownership. Fourth, it is possible to improve and extend public service networks and get the poor to contribute to at least part of the cost. Fifth, rapid population growth almost guarantees that urban poverty will worsen as people move in increasing numbers to the cities.⁸ However, since living conditions in the countryside are generally far worse, rising urban poverty, for all its horrors, is still a price worth paying.

To conclude, generalising about urban governance and the urban poor across most of the globe is unhelpful. Latin America is not China and is most certainly not like most of Africa or the Indian subcontinent. If we are to improve the quality of life of the urban poor, and let me endorse Amin's *cri de coeur* that it is criminal not to attempt to do so, then grand academic statements are often counter-productive. Unfortunately, I see far too many current examples of that disease. Fancy rhetoric and literary ballistics are being used by many academic stars to separate them from the rest and too often leaving facts and statistics by the wayside. Quality scholarship will not rescue the poor but over-generalised academic statements may encourage the adoption of policies that will damage lives.

Notes

- 1 Lewis had plenty of evidence based on his studies in the USA, Puerto Rico and Mexico but still over-generalised from a very limited 'sample' of inner-city tenements.
- 2 It would also be unfair on the selected authors to provide a short list.
- 3 And of course we all tend to read the most recent literature and forget the older material.
- 4 Amin (2013) argues that: 'If "slum" serves to incite a politics of justice for an alarmingly large mass of humanity living in appalling urban conditions deprived of basic rights and services, then there is little reason to drop it, despite all its limitations.'

(p. 491) As I have argued elsewhere, I hate the term because of its limitations and its pejorative associations (Gilbert 2007). Latin America contains a great deal of 'self-help' settlement with as much as 60% of its housing stock having been constructed 'informally'. Much of it today provides perfectly decent shelter and very little of it is in any sense a slum. Nor can we sensibly agree that the vast majority of 'slum dwellers' today are subject to Godwin's (1854, 45) no doubt well-intended statement that: 'Dirty, dilapidated, and unwholesome dwellings destroy orderly and decent habits, degrade the character, and conduce to immorality.'

- 5 I conducted 14 in-depth interviews in the city in March/April 2013.
- 6 A lesson that most certainly has not been learned in China or India. However, there are examples of commercial displacement in Latin America, for example, in the affluent south of Rio de Janeiro.
- 7 As such, decentralisation can be a disaster for small municipalities; the great majority of Colombia's 1102 and Brazil's 5570 municipalities hardly function.
- 8 The number of poor people in Latin America's towns and cities grew from 41 million in 1970 to 132 million in 2009.

References

- Amin, A. 2013. "Telescopic Urbanism and the Poor." *City* 17 (4): 476–492.
- Bromberg, P. 2011. "La suspensión del alcalde de Bogotá: una acción popular ... pero equivocada." *Razón Pública*, 8 May.
- Bromley, R., and C. Gerry, eds. 1979. *Casual Work and Poverty in Third World Cities*. Chichester: John Wiley.
- Cardoso, F. H., and E. Faletto. 1979. *Dependency and Development in Latin America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Collier, D. 1976. *Squatters and Oligarchs*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cornelius, W. 1975. *Politics and the Migrant Poor in Mexico*. Stanford, CA: University of Stanford Press.
- Davis, M. 2006. *Planet of Slums*. London: Verso.
- Gilbert, A. G. 1987. "From Little Englanders into Big Englanders: Thoughts on the Relevance of Relevant Research." *Environment and Planning A* 19: 143–151.
- Gilbert, A. G. 1998. *The Latin American City*. Revised and expanded edition. London: Latin America Bureau; New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Gilbert, A. G. 2006. "Good Urban Governance: Evidence from a Model City?" *Bulletin for Latin American Research* 25: 392–419.
- Gilbert, A. G. 2007. "The Return of the Slum: Does Language Matter?" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 31: 697–713.
- Gilbert, A. G. 2009. "Towards Sustainable Academic Research: Should Social Scientists Write Less?" *Twenty-First Century Society* 4: 257–268.
- Gilbert, A. G. Forthcoming. "Homicide in Bogotá: Confounding Received Wisdom." In *Violence and Resilience in Urban Latin America*, edited by K. Koonings and D. Kruijt. London: Zed Books.
- Glaeser, E. L. 2011. *Triumph of the City*. London: Macmillan.
- Godwin, G. (1854) 1985. *London Shadows: A Glance at the Homes of the Thousands*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.
- Hoselitz, B. F. 1957. "Generative and Parasitic Cities." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 3: 278–294.
- Leeds, A., and E. Leeds. 1970. "Brazil and the Myth of Urban Rurality: Urban Experience, Work and Values in the "Squatments" of Rio de Janeiro." In *City and Country in the Third World*, edited by A. Field, 226–276. Cambridge, MA: Schenkman.
- Lewis, O. 1966. "The Culture of Poverty." *Scientific American* 215: 19–25.
- Lomnitz, L. 1977. *Networks and Marginality: Life in a Mexican Shantytown*. New York: Academic Press.
- Neuwirth, R. 2006. *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World*. New York: Routledge.
- Nieto de Samper, L. 2013. "Editorial: Por qué subió Petro." *El Tiempo*, January 25.
- Perlman, J. 1976. *The Myth of Marginality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Quijano, A. 1974. "The Marginal Pole of the Economy and the Marginalized Labor Force." *Economy and Society* 3: 393–428.
- Roberts, B. 1978. *Cities of Peasants*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Saunders, D. 2010. *Arrival City: The Final Migration and Our Next World*. London: Windmill Books.
- Sovani, N. V. 1964. "The Analysis of "Over-urbanization"." *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 12: 113–122.
- UN-ECLAC. 2010. *Social Panorama for Latin America and the Caribbean*. Santiago: United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.
- UN-ROLAC. 2010. *Estado de las ciudades de América Latina y el Caribe*. Rio de Janeiro: United Nations Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean.

Alan Gilbert is Professor Emeritus, University College London. Email: a.gilbert@ucl.ac.uk