

Constructing Inequality in Mexico City



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March 31, 2015

“We are the only real aristocracy in the world: the aristocracy of money.”
- George Bernard Shaw

Introduction

52.3% of the 122.3 million Mexican population lives below the poverty line (Indexmundi, 2014). That number hits even harder as you're strolling down the Santa Fe, Mexico City's major business district. Every extravagant building screams for attention as it tries to show off. You will see the “dishwasher” building. You will see the “pants” building. (Yes, their appearance resembles their titles). You will see a building with a surreal waterfall wall near the Angel of Independence landmark. And of course, you will see endless, tall skyscrapers. Just like in any modern city, those buildings look like they can house about anything—a mall, a bank, a business, or apartments perhaps. But, what they don't house is poverty. The standard of living surely does not seem accommodating for a poor man. So, where are those 52.3%?

I was in Mexico City for only three days with Hiram College's Garfield Scholar Institute for Public Leadership. I mostly enjoyed the “globalized” part of the city, which resembled the Santa Fe district, since we were meeting political and economical figures. Yet, as we were driving into the outskirts of the city, I saw a glimpse of poverty. Hundreds of shabby houses are slumped together, with barely any space between them. They are not even painted “because their inhabitants cannot afford the paint,” according to our tour guide. These are the majority, hidden away from “modernity.” What a contrast...

This short paper explores this contrast, or in other words, the social inequality as reflected in the country's spatial construction. In the subsequent section, I will briefly explain the significance of analyzing spatial structures as a reflection of society. I will then analyze the spatial inequality as it emerged after the Spaniard invasion—within the limited scope of this paper—to argue that inherited racism is prevalently linked to the current social division. I will finally con-

clude with implications of the analysis, particularly on the current relations between Mexico and the United States.

Spatial Structures as a Reflection of Society

Curiously, we, as humans, have the tendency to categorize our reality. We have divided ourselves into complex and sometimes overlapping categories, such as nationalities and classes. Architecture is our reality's setting—a setting we constructed to deal with nature. Therefore, architecture has been thoroughly examined in academia as a reflection of societies. According to the philosopher, Walter Benjamin, “Buildings have been man's companions since primeval times. Many forms of art have developed and perished...But the human need for shelter is lasting,” making architecture an invincible form of art (1936). Consequently, architecture can be seen as a form of communication. The way it is constructed, spread, and utilized, reflects the true nature of the society that constructed them, along with the power rationale that they imprinted on the inhabitants. Therefore, spatial structures, or the arrangement and construction of setting, can serve as a narrative expression about the society that constructed them, its inhabitants, and those inhabitants' placement in society. With that being said, it is only fit to examine Mexico's social inequality issues by analyzing its spatial structures.

Social Inequality as Reflected in the Spatial Structure

Mexico's social inequality can be traced back to five centuries ago, after the Spanish Conquest. I realized this when we visited the Metropolitan Cathedral—the largest cathedral in the Americas. It is quite astonishing. The embellished detail in its Baroque architecture, both exteriorly and interiorly, flaunts the church's power. Yet, its history symbolizes the brutal triumph of the Spaniards over the Aztecs. The Cathedral was built in the 16th century atop the Aztec's sacred precinct near the Templo Mayor, which was demolished and buried. The intention was to

destroy any hints of the Aztec's remaining power. And so, typical of a Baroque piece, this intricate cathedral was designed by Claudio de Arciniega as a clear statement of the Spanish expansion, which brought along the Catholic Church's triumph. It serves as an example to portray the Spaniard's transformation of their reality's setting, or spatial structure, to imprint their new power rationales.

Along with their rationale came the transformation of the power relationships between the natives and the start of social discrimination on the inhabitants. The Spanish rule imposed a detailed and complicated Caste system (Tai, 2011). The closer one was to European origin, the higher one was in the system; this meant that natives were inferior not only socially, but also legally. The Spaniards were creating a "New Spain" by demeaning the natives and transforming the spatial structure of Mexico City (Henaro, 2013). In that modified spatial world, the natives were cast off from the city, away into the periphery. After independence in 1821, the ethnic divisions were translated into economic injustice.

The resonance of this imprinted injustice still lingers in Mexico. "Mexico suffers from unconscious racism issues that people don't talk about," says Dr. Carlos Heredia, a Mexican economist and a former member of the Mexican congress, whom we had the pleasure of meeting (2015). And indeed, despite my trip's short length, it was easy to observe what he was talking about. The few "citizens of power" are Caucasian-looking, who inhabit the wealthier parts of the city. On the other hand, the lower wage jobs, such as housekeeping and construction, belong to indigenous-looking citizens, who inhabit the poor slums I described in the introduction.

It is no coincidence that slums like these are hidden away from modernity. Architecture is a sign of power. And we live in a globalizing world, one that not only favors an open market and democracy, but has also marked modern architecture as a staple for the "successful cities" that

embody an open economy. Mexico's current power rationale is associating itself with this globalized trend. Hence, we see increased creative modern architecture in the capital's center, such as the "dishwasher" and the "pants." Mexico is also currently building a second grand airport in Mexico City—despite having a beautiful one situated in the center already—in order to further integrate itself with the globalizing world. Therefore, through its architecture, Mexico is displaying its globalized (in other words Western) ideology.

And yet, a true democracy is one that aims for social unity, one that distributes space equally among the inhabitants. Instead, Mexico is creating what Henaro refers to as "social hygiene practices" (2013). In other words, they are making the poor invisible. The poor are cut off from modernity in order to allow Mexico to appear like an advanced, globalized economy. The main highways, streets, and avenues have become trenches to exclude the poor. So, they are left on the peripheral—like the natives before them—with difficult access to the city. When they're being excluded from the city, they're also being considered insignificant for society. Therefore, "the poor remain insignificant not only to space, but also to decision-making processes regarding the country's future" (Henaro, 2013).

Implications

As reflected in the spatial structure, Mexico is currently in the grips of oligarchs who set up an economical system that makes social mobility extremely difficult. Dr. Carlos Heredia would agree with me. "Since NAFTA, Mexico has seen only 0.9% per capita growth...even Venezuela had more per capita growth," he says. But others in power are merely trying to show the world that a further globalized, open market—which is not helping the poor in its current form—is the answer. For instance, Louis De Calle, whom we also met with in Mexico, argues that Mexico's middle class is prominently growing. He wrote the book *Mexico: A Middle Class*

Society. Poor No More, Developed Not Yet, which measures social status with access to technology. However, this measure is extremely flawed, for almost anyone today can own a cell phone; but, that cell phone doesn't make them middle class.

What is the solution then? It is quite difficult to say. However, Mexico's current international affairs are not solving the issue. Mexico's relationship with the United States has been growing closer under their new PRI administration. Previously, Mexico had better relations with other nations, but now it has shifted to shape its international affairs based on that of the United States—which is not necessarily in social equality's favor.

1% of the 318.9 million United States population owns 40% of the wealth; 80% of the population owns only 7% (Wealth Inequality in America, 2012). These numbers are tremendously more unjust than the United States population thinks they actually are. So, the United States suffers from social inequality itself. However, that inequality is merely better masked than that of Mexico. With that being said, Mexico's issue will not be solved by continuing to use the United States as a role model. With the current situation in both countries, the majority will still remain poor...

"You have a choice between the natural stability of gold and the honesty and intelligence of the members of government. And with all due respect for those gentlemen, I advise you, as long as the capitalist system lasts, vote for gold."
- George Bernard Shaw

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