

# What is Latin America? Between urban enigmas and postcolonial transformations



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The book “The Urban Enigma: Time, Autonomy, and Postcolonial Transformations in Latin America” (Vegliò, 2020) is a historical work which, as the title aims to highlight, explores episodes of urban transformation across the Latin American region. I wrote this book having a question that had been persistently circulating in my mind, which was (and still is) rather simple: *What is Latin America?* What is this global region of the world that is named as such and that, perhaps paradoxically, contains an openly racial/colonial adjective within it? How this region of the world has been socio-spatially produced and, crucially, understood

as such?

I soon came to realize that my question had a rather defined nature, which is to say, it was a genealogical question. At the same time, as it is already evident, there was the explicit decision to adopt a *regional perspective*; this meant on the one hand considering the formation of Latin America within a global space and, at the same time, examining the internal composition of the region by delving into its socio-spatial and historical continuities and contradictions. Following this approach, and therefore intending to avoid any sort of “methodological nationalism” (Chernilo 2008), the book analyzes three iconic episodes of architectural transformation in capital cities such as Buenos Aires (1880-1946), Mexico City (1920-1960), and Brasilia (1956-1964) and investigates how these episodes were related to projects of solidification and naturalization of the nation state.

To begin with, the genealogical question brought also its epistemological implications, which signified a critical exploration of the often conflictual and contradictory relationship between Postcolonial (and Decolonial) Studies and Latin America (which defines Chapter 1). The book delves into this discussion by adopting the relationship between cities and nation state as an analytical lens. Cities have been fundamental “social technologies” (King 1990: 9) that first organized the colonial space as imperial outpost overseas, and then became crucial centers of power that articulated and directed the nation states during the post-independence period. However, the book specifically scrutinizes the decades that preceded the process of “urban explosion” (Romero 2001 [1976]) that culminated in the 1970s, when the rapid urban growth that defined the first part of the twentieth century brought about the marginalization and exclusion of large sectors of the urban population. I call *the making* of this process “the urban enigma”.

That is, on the one hand, the ruling elites viewed urbanization as unquestionable expression of modernization, and considered the urban environment as an important machine able to modernize the national space. Yet, on the other, this created a clear tension with the traditional image of Latin America as a rural space that is defined by historical subjects such as the peasantry and indigenous population, subjects that had been essential for the ruling elites’ accumulation of wealth. The urban was thus enigmatically – both as a powerful machine and space of contradiction – at the center of Latin America’s postcolonial articulation. By

exploring episodes of architectural transformation, the book analyzes how these transformations explicitly deployed strong and often contradictory discourses about urban/rural relationships, ideas of national population, and geopolitical aspirations. In this sense, the book uses cities as powerful archives in which specific socio-political configurations could be best examined; that is, as more traditional archives, they contain elements that go much further their mere physical extension (Chapter 2 is specifically dedicated to this concept of cities as archives).

In doing this genealogical work, one of the core themes of the book is that concerning question of *time*. This involves two specific aspects. The first one is about the large timespan that embraces the investigation (1880-1964): this choice intended to highlight the period of solidification and naturalization of the nation states in Latin America. Of course, there are not well-defined dates in this sense; however, the decade of the 1880s is particularly marked by processes of consolidation of states that reached their independences mostly at the beginning of that century, and were now aiming to solidify the control over the national space and shape a strong national identity. On the other side of the timespan, the 1970s are often indicated as the arrival of neoliberalism in Latin America (specifically through the Chilean military coup in 1973), fact that would begin to transform the very composition and function of the state; therefore, the book considers the 1960s as the final threshold of this long period that started in the 1880s. The internal periodizations within this long period of time are similarly used to indicate *transitions* (in terms of both socio-political transformations and architectural tendencies) and not as linear and abrupt moments of change. The second aspects concerning time in the book is about how the countries under investigation imagined themselves throughout this period, that is to say, the question of *temporality*. The book particularly analyzes, by looking at urban transformations according to the abovementioned categories (urban/rural relationships, ideas of national population, and geopolitical aspirations), how each country imagined and deployed specific ideas of past, present, and future in order to solidify and naturalize the architecture of the nation state. The aspect of temporality is the key vector that crosses the whole book, being it normally at the very foundation of the postcolonial condition (Chakrabarty 2000); after all, regardless of the multiple shapes it has took, Barbara Adam convincingly stated that time “has been a most effective colonizing tool” (Adam 2004: 137)

To go back to the initial question about what Latin America is, or what it could be, this book argues that a new “idea” (Mignolo 2005) of Latin America is necessary in question. It is not of course a mere matter of naming the region, but it is about unveiling the overall unstableness of the modern/colonial relations the have produced the region and that are contained within its very definition (Duer and Vegliò 2019). Hence, Latin America should be understood precisely from the articulation of these complex and contradictory fields of tensions; in other words, this implies conceiving the region a net of socio-spatial relations whose determination is far from being given and, very importantly, whose socio-spatial borders are always uncertain and in constant reconfiguration.

This book, in so doing, seeks to dismantle any linear understanding of Latin America by drawing, instead, and without the pretention to offer any all-embracing and exhaustive perspective, a multifaceted historical geography that is able to unveil the controversial relations between power and knowledge that contributed to producing the global area of the world known as “Latin America”.

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