

The Future of Latin American and Caribbean Cities: Urban Bias and Political Fragments in Place

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter I provide some reflections on the fragmentation of Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) urban landscapes and some speculations about the future of urban bias and inequalities in the decades to come. Latin American and Caribbean societies will no longer be divided according to the classic urban/rural, industrial/agricultural, worker/peasant, capital city/periphery set of cross-cutting cleavages, but through their fragmentation within and between cities, and a hierarchy of place within urban spaces. Despite the colonial legacy a “triumph” of middle-sized mestizo cities inherited from the colonial era, non-urban areas that are predominantly indigenous will remain increasingly critical to the planetary future. Non-urban areas will be critical due to the interaction of their original peoples with the remaining “wild” spaces in the hemisphere. Rainforests, deserts, and mountains – that up till now had remained relatively untouched by human activity–, will need to be preserved as global public goods, reservoirs of biodiversity, carbon sequestration, climate, and hydrologic regulation. The safekeepers of those natural resources will most likely have to be indigenous and Afro-descendant communities that live in the fringes that surround those wild areas. Indigenous communities will hence remain the custodians, safekeepers and buffers that may prevent cities from overtaking these precious remaining natural environments (214 words).

1. Introduction

In this chapter I provide some reflections on the fragmentation of Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) urban landscapes and some speculations about the future of urban bias and inequalities in the decades to come. Latin American and Caribbean societies will remain primarily urban, in the sense that most of the population will continue to live in cities, for the foreseeable future (Sassen 2018). But the configuration of centers and peripheries within cities and across regions will reshape widening inequalities, that will not just be racial, ethnic or among individuals and households, but that will express themselves in the configuration of the urban territorial landscape beyond the capitals and a ranked hierarchy of cities (Post 2018).

The first point this chapter seeks to make is that the most prevalent social cleavage that will divide Latin American and Caribbean societies will no longer be about the classic urban/rural, industrial/agricultural, worker/peasant, capital city/periphery set of cross-cutting divisions (Rokkan 1999), but about fragmentation within and between cities, and a hierarchy of place within urban spaces. A second order point I will make is that is that, despite a “triumph” of middle-sized mestizo cities inherited from the colonial era, non-urban areas that are predominantly indigenous will remain increasingly critical to the planetary future. The relevance of non-urban places will perhaps supersede current concerns regarding rural poverty reduction, land distribution, or enhancing the livelihoods of peasant communities. Non-urban areas will be critical for decades to come due to the interaction of their original peoples with the remaining “wild” spaces in the hemisphere.

These “wild” areas of Latin America (Sanderson et al. 2002), rainforests, deserts and mountains – that up till now had remained relatively untouched by human activity–, will need to be preserved as global public goods, reservoirs of biodiversity, carbon sequestration, climate and hydrologic regulation. The safekeepers of those natural resources will most likely have to be indigenous and Afro-descendant communities that live in the fringes that surround those wild areas. Ever since the colonial era, indigenous communities have been excluded from much of Latin America’s urban development. Despite rural migration to cities and the cultural loss of languages and identities in such migratory transitions, indigenous villages and towns remain a key feature of the Latin American territorial landscape. They will not disappear or be absorbed into urban conglomerates. Instead, they will remain as the custodians, safekeepers and buffers that may prevent cities from overtaking the remaining precious natural environments.

The chapter is organized as follows. The next section provides an overview of the colonial legacy of Spanish settlements which set in motion a configuration of ranked urban spaces that still characterizes Latin America today. The cities emerging from that process were predominantly mestizo (and mulatto), although they often contained also large indigenous populations. In the Caribbean and the coast of Brazil the urbanization process was marked by coercive structures of slavery and plantation economies. Peripheral areas outside of those cities remained primarily indigenous (and sometimes black). The section after that describes the “triumph” of the colonial European city in Latin America. Reconstructing the urban landscape reveals that this configuration did not include indigenous communities (or black inhabitants) as part of the imagined geography of the colonial world. Such exclusion still characterizes human settlements today. The third section of the chapter takes a view from high above, very specifically from satellite images of the earth at night, revealing how the path taken centuries ago is highly persistent in the urban development of the region today. The fourth section considers how this urban landscape can be visualized together with those areas where human activity left

little trace, the last remaining “wild” regions of the hemisphere. In the final section I argue that the most important challenge for rural communities in Latin America is about finding ways to work together with the rest of their nation state inhabitants dwelling in cities to preserve those wild areas.

2. The colonial legacy

The colonial period configured several aspects of Latin American and Caribbean jurisdictions that can hardly be ignored, when interpreting the current partition of political fragments in space. A template for municipal governance was offered by the Spanish institutions, but the *Pueblos de Indios* took form as the main structure that adjudicated conflicts and exercised political authority in the peripheral areas of the Americas. Even though the rural reality was a prevalent feature of the way in which most Latin Americans lived, devoting their livelihoods to agricultural production, institutions were designed with an urban mindset in their organizing principle. *Pueblos* had governance structures through their cabildos, judges to adjudicate justice, and control over land in their hinterlands. Despite their ubiquity, the Spanish colonial rulers did not focus on these *Pueblos*, but on core areas of new cities, or more precisely, in the *Ciudades y Villas de Españoles*, founded by the colonists. These cities were the spaces that concerned colonial rulers, because to a large extent these were the locations where European white elites could extract rents and value from coerced labor by indigenous peoples and African slaves (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Bates and Bates 2001; North, Wallis, and Weingast 2009). The cosmographer of King Phillip II, Juan López de Velasco, in his *Geografía y Descripción Universal de las Indias* (López de Velasco 1574), counted in the 16th century probably some fifty territorial jurisdictions in the Americas, which he organized around Spanish cities. He mentions that in the Spanish cities an undetermined number of indigenous peoples lived (surprisingly, he does not provide a final tally of actual numbers of urban inhabitants, summing up detailed tables and descriptions in his treatise for indigenous population he provided elsewhere). Arguably the King’s cosmographer had enough materials available to understand the geography and demography of the Americas, better than any other scholar at the time of afterwards. López de Velasco summarizes the demography and settlement of the whole Spanish possessions in these terms:

Two hundred Spanish pueblos, cities and villas, with some of the mines established as pueblos, with some 32 thousand families [and] some eight or nine thousand settlements, nations or fragments (parcialidades) of indians, that cannot be counted well because most of them are still pending to be reduced to pueblos. [...] for those [Indians] that live in peace this may amount to around a million and a half tributary Indian families, without counting the many that live in hiding so as to not pay taxes, and the many that are not pacified. [In addition,] forty thousand black slaves, and a great number everywhere of mestizos and mulattos (1574, p.1).

Figure 1 provides a georeferenced location of 185 of the Spanish towns mentioned by the Cosmographer. It is possible to code them because they are explicitly labeled and displayed in sketch maps that López de Velasco also produced while he was preparing the *Geografía y Descripción Universal de las Indias*. These sketch maps are kept at the John Carter Brown Map Collection (López de Velasco 1575). The sketch maps were probably meant to be used in

conjunction with a brief summary text, called the *Demarcación y División de las Indias*, that is kept at the National Library of Spain (BNE), together with a second copy of the sketch maps (López de Velasco 1570). A noteworthy aspect of these sketch maps is that they are not particularly detailed in providing information about indigenous human settlements, even though the Spanish Crown had detailed demographic and tributary data on vast areas of its possessions, often in cartographic form, organized and systematized by some of the best geographers of the era. The omission of indigenous settlements was probably a purposeful choice, given the imperative by the Crown to maintain some degree of secrecy about the exact features of its possessions, in the perennial competition with the other European powers.

[Figure 1 around here]

In figure 1 the sketch maps are georeferenced and stitched together, sometimes with overlapping sections, into a Geographic Information System (GIS), which positions the images and cities into their accurate geographic locations. Lopez de Velasco did not provide longitude or latitudes in his sketch maps, again probably as a way to ensure that information provided in them would be minimal (although he does provide enough detail regarding coastlines and other geographic features to make georeferencing feasible). His maps color jurisdictions indicating with various degrees of precision the location of the main Spanish cities. The maps that have been georectified in the figure include the Audiencias of Española, Charcas, Nueva Galicia, Nueva España, Guatemala, Panama, Lima, Nuevo Reino (Nueva Granada) and Quito, and the Province of Chile.¹

This list of territorial divisions constitutes, in some ways, the political geography of Latin America and the Caribbean at the beginning of the colonial period. The jurisdictions contained in the summary *Demarcación*, and the more detailed *Geografía*, are the following: Hispaniola, Cuba, Jamaica, San Juan de Puerto Rico, islas Caníbales, Venezuela, Florida, México, Pánuco, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Yucatán, Tabasco, Guadalajara, Zacatecas, Chiametla, Culiacán, Sinaloa, Cibola and Quivira, Guatemala, Soconusco, Chiapa, Verapaz, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panamá, Veragua, Santa Fé de Bogota, Santa Marta, Valle de Upare, Cartagena, El Dorado (Nueva Extremadura), Pirú, San Francisco del Quito, Popayan, Quixos, Pacamoros, Los Reyes de Lima, Villa de la Plata (Charcas), Tucumán, Santiago de Chile, Cuyo, La Imperial, Estrecho de Magallanes, Río de la Plata and Brasil. Lopez de Velasco adds, at the end of both his *Demarcacion* and the *Geografia* manuscripts, the *Indias de Poniente*, with a description of the towns in Philippines, and some basic facts about China, Japan, New Guinea and the Salomon islands. An index at the end of the *Demarcacion* provides something akin to a gazetteer of the Cosmographer's conception of the landscape of the Americas, listing almost one thousand place names, specified in 471 unique locations, including all the cities highlighted in the previous maps.

The remarkable thing to note about this reconstruction of the territorial space is that modern nation states of the Americas, despite almost five centuries, remain clearly recognizable, either as their own units, or as compounds of units composed of States or Departments in the case of the Mexican Federation and Colombia.

¹ The Lopez de Velasco collection also includes three maps at a larger scale showing the possessions North and South of the equator in the Americas, and those in Asia, and a final map of the world that shows navigation routes. Those maps are not included in Figure 1.

The cataclysm of the combined effect of the epidemics and the colonial disregard for human life led to the precipitous decline in population of the 16th Century. Demographic trends only stabilized as the Crown embarked in arguably one of the most ambitious efforts at human resettlement and legibility in human history (Scott 1999), with the creation of *reducciones* and *congregaciones* into the *Pueblos de Indios*. The Spanish Crown established that indigenous communities were to live in “police”, which meant in a political unit as well as an ordered and obedient subjection, under the authority of the King and the legitimate claim to authority supported by the Church.

In Brazil, the Guyanas and the non-Spanish speaking Caribbean the process was quite different in that the sugar plantations and other estates created subdivisions that were more built on the basis of settlement through slave labor, around units of production, with a division of the productive territorial spaces turned into private estates. The prior political configurations of indigenous communities are hardly visible or possible to reconstruct in those landscapes. But the main issue remains that the most comprehensive effort at making the human settlements of the Americas visible, at the beginning of the colonial period, primarily counted cities where Spanish peoples inhabited (as well as blacks, mestizos, mulattos and probably a majority of surviving indians). Some of the cities listed in the maps and the treatises have disappeared today or are only minor urban concentrations. But to a large extent these are exactly the same cities that configure the urban spaces of Latin America today.

3. The triumph of the “European” cities

The urban landscape of Latin America and the Caribbean is the legacy from that initial colonial period. In a highly simplified and schematic vision the “triumph” (Glaeser 2011) of the “European” city can be summarized in the following way. In the mainland, Spanish and Portuguese imperial rulers sought to congregate surviving indigenous populations into towns that were originally not conceived as cities, but as semi-urban pueblos, Indian Republics with some degree of self-rule. Those spaces are now recognizable throughout Latin America as municipal jurisdictions dotting the territorial landscape of Mexico, Central America, the Andes and the interior of countries in the Southern cone. Those municipalities usually have a main town, designed according to then prevailing visions of urbanism, with a regular rectangular grid of streets, a central square, a church and a city hall, and a hierarchy of houses that are larger closer to the city center and smaller as we move to the outskirts. The towns are of various sizes, and often have deep connections to both the rural hinterland, which provides for the economic opportunities of the town dwellers, and a network of larger cities, usually provincial capitals, which are characterized by much larger urban concentrations.

The provincial capitals in Spanish America were, in contrast, urban spaces that were meant to be local European Republics, cities where colonial administrators and white settlers could engage in business opportunities, also with some degree of self-governance, similar to the cities in the Iberian peninsula. For the most part, these municipal institutional forms of urban governance were not available to towns where the indigenous majority lived. Creole and Peninsular whites never lived alone in those cities. They were surrounded by indigenous and African workers, who provided all sorts of services to them. With time these European cities in the Americas became increasingly mixed, becoming perhaps primarily mestizo spaces, although they probably never ceased to have very large indigenous settlers. But indigenous dwellers in the European cities became less visible, as the original peoples made linguistic investments to learn Spanish (and

Portuguese), often abandoning their indigenous mother tongues. The only exception to this process may have been in the Guaraní speaking areas of Paraguay.

The capital cities of the Audiencias, Mexico, Guadalajara, Lima, Quito and Bogotá were from the very beginning designed with a view towards centralization and concentration of power, economic activity and fiscal resources. Even though the last decades witnessed a resurgence of provincial politics outside of the capital (Eaton 2020), the fact is that national decision making remained highly centralized in those capital cities, that often comprise a very large part of the total population in the country, around a quarter or a third in some cases, depending on the way large metropolitan areas are counted. Given their preponderance, those very large metropolitan areas (Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Santiago, Lima, etc.) have often been the main focus of urban studies in Latin America.

The 19th century may have shifted the inherited colonial landscape in important ways that are difficult to summarize in this brief reflection. Brazil became a space where the Portuguese Crown survived, and as Empire in the Americas eventually led to an independent nation, the rivalry between Minas Gerais, Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo configured much of the politics of the country. The vast Pampas became newfound frontiers, as the transportation revolution made it feasible to transport beef and wheat across oceans, with an enormous concentration of wealth in the port city of Buenos Aires (and to a lesser extent, Montevideo). And the former areas of the Spanish imperial core, built on mining in Peru or Mexico, continued to be locations of greater economic activity as haciendas were formed to feed workers in the mines. Lima and Mexico City had a clear preponderance over the rest of the cities. Such dominance by the capital city of the new nation was less evident in Colombia or Bolivia. But it is important to note that the provincial capitals and other second ranked European cities never disappeared.

In the Caribbean (and areas in the Northeastern coast of Brazil) the pattern of villages and towns was configured by plantation economies and slave labor. Although urban configurations in the Caribbean became capitals of newly independent island nations, none of these cities grew to become like some of the megalopolis of the mainland. The islands nations remained scattered with settlements, dotting the former plantations, that now are connected to the tourist industry in the coasts and the cities, often in networks that expand throughout the whole territory.

Despite different processes in each newly independent nation, after the 19th century the municipal charter of the “European” cities in the Americas created the main subdivision of the Latin American territory, even though the specific make-up in each country after independence was partitioned according to all sorts of previous divisions, including the *Intendencias*, *Gobernaciones*, *Alcaldías Mayores* or *Corregimientos*. In Federal countries, Argentina, Mexico, Venezuela and Brazil, the provincial divisions live on most clearly as spaces of political authority as states in federations (Departamentos in Colombia have a similar status). Provinces, states and departments increasingly became dependent, during the course of the 20th century, on developmental goods and services, including schools, health clinics, public infrastructure projects for water and sewerage and electric power, on the largesse of the Center. This configuration, initiated at least two centuries before independence, survives in the way Latin American nations organize their territorial landscape, and has become reinvigorated with the current trends towards decentralization and assertion of regional power vis-à-vis the center.

4. A view from space, looking towards the future

Stripping away subnational political jurisdictions, satellite images of the Western Hemisphere from space give a clear depiction of what urban configurations of Latin America and the Caribbean look like today. Vast territorial spaces are saturated by light, even among the poorer countries, with a full saturation of light sources in all the capital cities of each nation. These urban centers of economic activity are surrounded by large peripheries, sometimes gradually less lit as the level of development declines, and sometimes surrounded by pitch dark areas that are sometimes rural spaces of more sparsely inhabited villages, but most other times represent the last remaining “wild” areas in the hemisphere. These are primarily rainforests, mountain ridges and deserts.

Figure 2 provides such a view from space, through the night lights captured by the Operational Linescan System of the US Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP-OLS) (Baugh, K., Elvidge, C. D., Ghosh, T., & Ziskin, D. 2010; Elvidge, C. D., Baugh, K. E., Kihn, E. A., Kroehl, H. W., & Davis, E. R. 1997), which provides the visible emissions from cities and towns throughout Latin America. These are cloud-free composites, measured at a high resolution of 30 arc second grids (equivalent to around 926 meters at the equator), that provide a rather reliable indicator of nocturnal activity in Latin America. The specific light measures displayed reflect persistent human activity, including gas flares (notice large oil operations off the coast in the Gulf of Mexico and in the Venezuela coast), but do not include ephemeral events such as forest fires and other forms of background “noise”. These images are measured in 2013 and have been shown to be highly correlated with economic activity and development (Mellander et al. 2015). It is clear from the images that Latin American coastlines are fundamental locations of human settlements in the region, but there is also a distinctive set of urbanizations that can be observed in many highland areas, a relatively distinct feature of Latin America. This is particularly noticeable in the mountain ranges of Colombia and Mexico, as well as across the Andes. There are, nonetheless, vast areas with little illumination.

[Figure 2 around here]

A dense saturation of lights is observed in capital cities, as well as corridors that link those cities with their hinterlands. Buenos Aires, Mexico City and Santiago can be clearly observed as vast metropolitan areas that radiate far out from their specific jurisdiction. But there is also a dense network of the other urban centers outside the capitals. Dark areas correspond to mountains, deserts, and rainforests. It is important to note that in some poorer countries, there are vast areas with human settlements, but little illumination. Such areas in less developed countries like Bolivia or Paraguay or Central America may become more lighted in future satellite images as electrification is increased in smaller cities. The additional panels to the right suggest, as can be seen clearly by the light saturation of their perimeters, that most islands in the Caribbean, with the exception of Haiti, in one side of Hispaniola, and Cuba, are fully urbanized according to this metric.

The density of urbanization in Mexico radiates from Mexico City and the Central highlands, but there are also pearls of activity running along the Pacific coast and in specific locations along the US-Mexico border. And in the case of Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Montevideo, one can observe coastal agglomerations that extend for kilometers inland. This urban landscape is not likely to change in the foreseeable future from its basic patterns, except that the lighting will probably become even more saturated in the places that are already urban (Henderson, Storeygard, and Weil 2011). The linkages of Latin American urban areas with

networks of international trade and flows of goods and services at a global level will probably reinforce the growth of cities that are in the coastlines or in the border with the United States. And cities that are in the interior of each country are likely to become more connected with other interior cities as road infrastructure continues to be expanded in the region. But the Latin American urban landscape will remain in place for many decades. Rural areas are not likely to be converted into urban spaces, because the migration of rural inhabitants to urban locations has already been occurring over the course of the past decades, nor should we expect a reversion out of cities into rural spaces.

5. The last of the wild

What is the likely future of the non-urban space? The crucial question is not so much related to the possibility of new cities emerging, but rather to the question of what will happen with the remaining “wild” areas in the continent, those where there is little human footprint. Those wild areas are depicted in Figure 3, which retains the earth at night image, but superimposes NASA's Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center calculation of the areas that in 2005 could still be considered to the the Last of the Wild (CIESIN 2005).

[Figure 3 round here]

Although the areas are shaded in grey profiles and a light grey interior, it is important to note that many of those areas are not rainfall forests like the Amazon, but deserts and rugged mountains. There are virtually no wild areas left in the Caribbean or in the Areas of Ancient Mesoamerica in the Mexican Highlands and Central America or along the coastlines of the large expanses of the Pampas. There are deserts in Northern Mexico and the Southern Cone. But the largest part of the wild areas remaining in Latin America is made up of rainforests, most of them in the Amazon basin. These are the lungs of the planet.

The challenge for rural peripheries of Latin America will be of a very different nature to the problems characterizing most of the 20th century. Social, political, and economic dilemmas for rural dwellers in the LAC region had involved adaptations of human groups to dislocations produced by a radical transformation of the countryside since the colonial period, that accelerated in the 20th century. Vast areas transited from traditional plantations, producing commodities such as coffee or sugar, into mechanization into high value-added crops and a process of capitalization into agribusinesses that were less labor intensive. On the political front, the process of democratization in the 20th century and the waves of protests and mobilizations by dispossessed peasants demanding land reform, gave way to massive rural-urban migrations that created new social and political dynamics in the urban peripheries.

Land tenure problems created by ancestral processes of dispossession were not necessarily solved through redistribution of assets of the poor, but through a shift in the value of agrarian assets and resources, as opportunities became far more attractive in cities. Most countries in Latin America are no longer characterized by the simple rural-urban divide, but rather by the existence of cosmopolitan urban spaces of rising middle classes and professional elites, connected to global networks, living side to side with marginalized communities of workers with precarious jobs characterized by low skill and low wages, often in the informal economy, living in those same cities. Those workers may have dwelled in those cities already for several generations or may be new arrivals from the countryside.

This is not altogether a new phenomenon. The landscapes of the urban hubs of regional, national and international trade and economic activity in Latin America have, at least since the 20th century, offered huge contrasts with the *favelas*, *villas miseria* or *ciudades perdidas* coexisting next to opulence and wealth (Portes and Walton 1976). Even in the islands of the Caribbean this patterns are present in the urban enclaves of tourist services that support vast poor populations employed in restaurants and hotels catering to the global elites (Portes, Dore-Cabral, and Landolt 1997). The poor in those islands or neighborhoods no longer depend on their livelihoods on income from cash crops or world commodities such as sugar or palm oil or subsistence agriculture.

Hence this fragmented nature of Latin American and Caribbean cities is being reproduced in fragmented spaces within the countryside. As agriculture becomes mechanized and more capital intensive, fewer workers are required to maintain the production of foodstuffs or even higher value-added goods including flowers, winter vegetables or fruits grown in controlled environments of hothouses. Rural laborers, both men and women, are finding the most attractive jobs in cities, even though they may remain living in the countryside or the sprawling periphery of the large urban conglomerations.

6. Final reflections

What is the future of Latin American and Caribbean urbanization and the remaining wild territorial spaces in the region? Although these final reflections are speculative, there is enough data regarding the evolution of urban spaces in the region to venture some predictions. The data involves understanding that the evolution of a hierarchically ranked network of cities is the product of a cumulative process of agglomerations and concentrations that was triggered by foundations made by European settlers during the colonial period. The rulers who governed those cities, initially conquistadores that gave way to imperial bureaucrats, and after independence, caudillos and local strongmen, sought to control vast territories, denying in the process the reality of thousands of pre-existing Indigenous settlements, many of them as large as the new cities, that dotted the territorial landscape in every Latin American emerging nation. The centralization of power into capital cities, and away from imperial metropolis, accompanied the creation of nation states. Independence and sovereignty vis-à-vis foreign powers and neighboring rivals was often accompanied by efforts from regional elites to counterweight the power of large and growing capital cities. Those large cities have received much scholarly attention.

The metropolitan areas were characterized by urban cores where white and creole European descendants enjoyed public services and a great concentration of wealth, surrounded by vast peripheries that were often populated by indigenous and Afro-descendant households, whose members provided much of the services those city dwellers demanded. A similar pattern, but with perhaps less stark contrasts, was repeated in provincial capitals and second ranked cities outside of the seat of national governments. These other cities have received less scholarly scrutiny than what they deserve.

In the rural peripheries, smaller cities, towns, and villages organized agricultural activities, and were often understood as residual spaces of pre-modern or backward legacies from the past. As cities grew in the 19th and 20th centuries, with massive migrations from rural areas into urban spaces, a frequent expectation among scholars and politicians alike was to believe the process would be inexorable, as the hinterlands would empty and countries would become predominantly

urban. That was incorrect, in the sense that rural settlements are persistent. This is not simply the consequence of a resistance to modernization or the “forces of progress”, but rather an assertion of indigenous peoples and other communities to continue living in their ancestral lands and to keep livelihoods within closely knit, smaller political units.

From my perspective the most critical issue for the future will be predominantly a political question: will the connection of medium size cities, provincial capitals -rather than the largest metropolitan areas-, with their hinterlands of smaller cities, towns and villages, primarily inhabited by indigenous and Afro-descendant, become a virtuous one, in which human opportunities for rural dwellers are enhanced without having to migrate to the largest urban settings, and life in middle size cities is rewarding and fulfilling for most inhabitants, and in this whole process our natural endowments are protected? Capital cities will hopefully stop growing disproportionately and concentrating most of the national resources, while more livable provincial capitals and other middle size cities will become the prime form of urban livelihood. Those middle size cities may be a threat to their hinterlands if they end up extracting resources from their surrounding towns and villages, the way capital cities did in the 20th century. As rural areas become encroached upon, indigenous and Afrodescendant dwellers may be pushed towards colonizing the remaining wild areas in their fringes.

The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 exposed the many inequalities that characterize the livelihoods and life chances that are available to peoples and communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. The sheer fortune, or misfortune, of having been born or dwelling in a particular place, within the territorial landscape, determines the chance of contagion, vaccination, and health care access, and therefore of life and death. For a long time, we have known that opportunities of access to some basic public services and necessities for a poor citizen are often better in urban spaces, and many risks that in rural areas would produce profound disruptions of people’s livelihoods, or even premature death, are somehow mitigated in cities. This urban bias was sometimes even enhanced by governments that would transfer greater subsidies to dwellers in cities, taxing rural dwellers more heavily. The pandemic, however, revealed that cities are also highly vulnerable to risks and shocks, particularly when coordinated responses require a large degree of trust both among members of the community and towards leaders and health authorities. The various responses by smaller communities, particularly when national governments failed to take effective and swift action, revealed how much variation there really is in the governance of cities, towns and villages, both between and within countries. The capacity to mobilize resources and organize everyday social interactions in ways that could save lives in the face of the pandemic ended up being higher in rural areas and smaller cities than in the largest cities with more resources and wealth.

The city bias in future will be, however, less about the comparison of cities to rural inhabitants and more about how the various urban fragmented spaces interact within national settings, despite widening differences in income, opportunity and access to services. In this context, a crucial challenge for cities will be to redress patterns of inequality both within their own territorial spaces and among each other. If countries become overly decentralized, one can imagine a situation in which cities become sorted into two types, one equilibrium composed of cities that provide virtuous circles of accountability and government performance, and the wealth generated by agglomerations and economies of scale can finance the provision of high-quality services. But those cities may be only for those who can afford to live in them. There might be other distinct urban equilibria, in which cities are characterized by crime and deficient public safety, poor quality public services such as health clinics and schools, and precarious livelihoods.

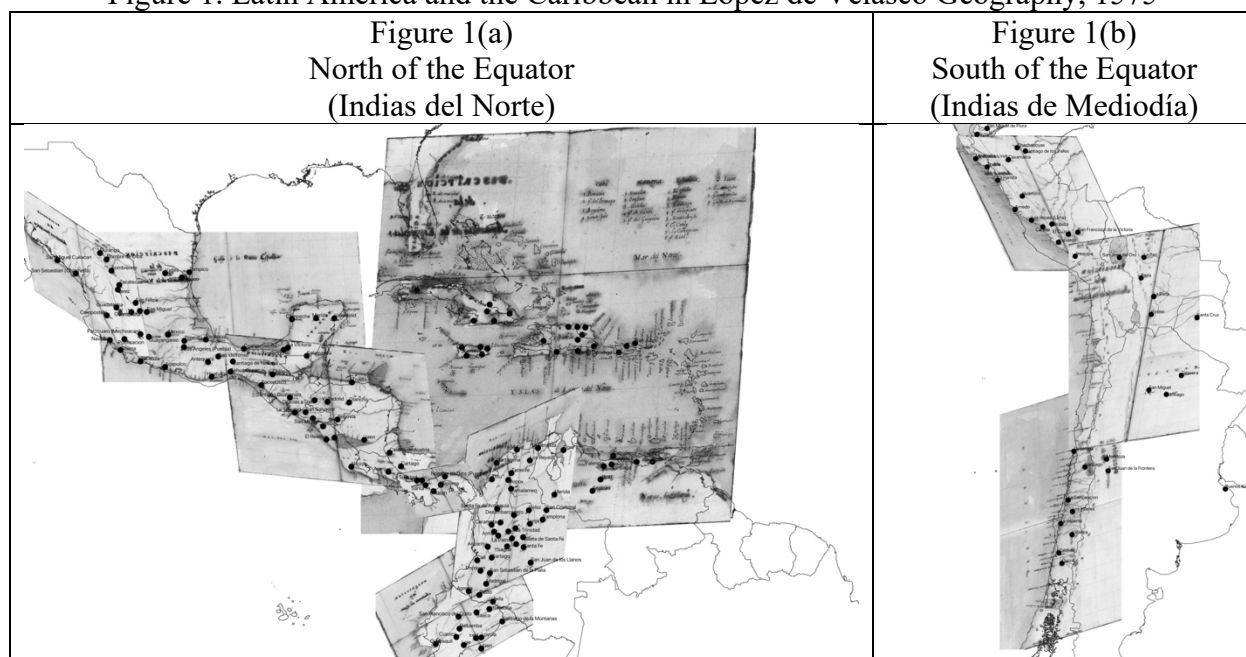
The question is fundamentally political because the way in which national governments will interact with those middle and small-sized cities, and the empowerment their citizens may have to make their own local choices, will greatly determine what the future may hold. Cities will need to be spaces of accountability for both local officials and national policies, where subaltern voices can be heard, even when they may not constitute electoral majorities. And as national governments recognize that the best stewards and guardians of our remaining wild natural endowments are the indigenous communities that inhabit their fringes, we may empower them too, to preserve those resources for the future, even as the majority of us live in cities, enjoying their planetary benefits.

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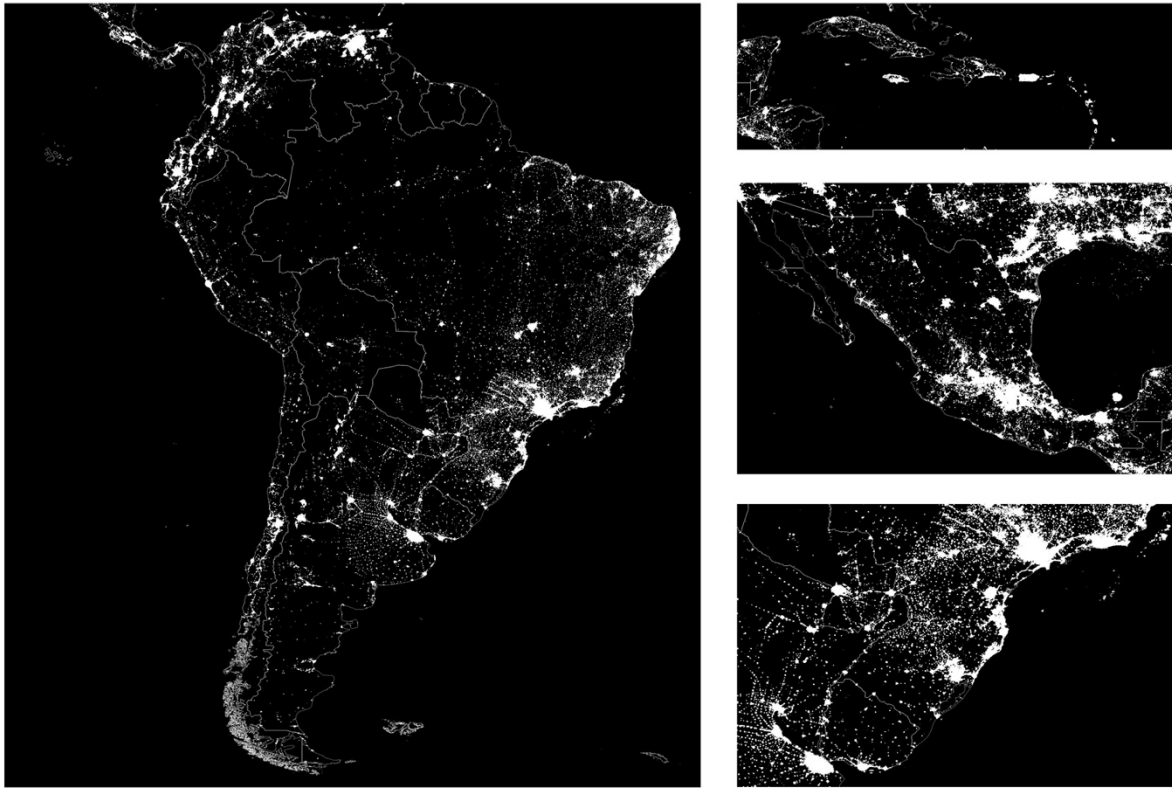
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Figure 1. Latin America and the Caribbean in Lopez de Velasco Geography, 1575



Source: Visualization constructed on the basis of ten maps kept at the John Carter Brown Map Collection, Juan Lopez de Velasco, *Demarcacion y Diuision de las Yndias* (manuscript maps, files 17000-1 to 17). **Notes:** Maps were georeferenced using a Polynomial order 1 transformation and geocoding of cities and towns using the locations indicated in each georeferenced map. Given the unknown projection used on those sketch maps and the inaccurate measurement of longitude, those locations are not exactly the correct geographic ones. The accompanying text is kept at the Biblioteca Nacional de Espana (Mss/2825), listing each of the towns with some brief description.

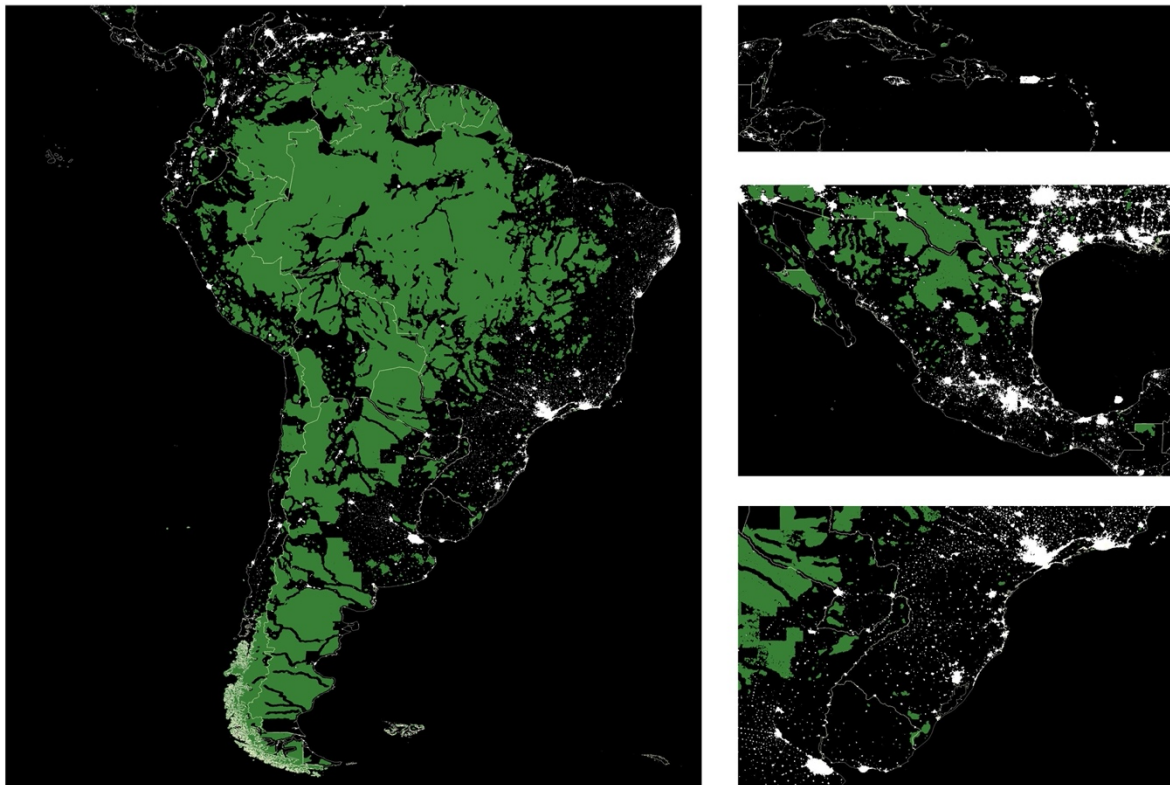
Figure 2
Latin America and Caribbean Urbanization (Night Lights)



Source: DMSP-OLS Nighttime Lights Time Series F182013.v4c Visible Stable Lights Cloud Free Coverage NOAA.

Notes: The largest metropolitan agglomerations are clearly visible in areas with saturated light intensity, that radiate into their hinterlands. There are, however, many additional cities that appear throughout the territorial landscape, particularly close to the coastlines and in highland mesa regions. The Caribbean exhibits light saturation that often covers the whole territory of the island nations.

Figure 3
Latin America and Caribbean Urbanization and Remaining Wild Areas



Source: DMSP-OLS Nighttime Lights Time Series F101992.v4b Visible Stable Lights Cloud Free Coverage. NOAA. Last of the Wild (Geographic), v2 (1995–2004) NASA Socioeconomic Data and Applications Center (SEDAC)

Notes: Wild areas are delimited by river systems, roads and settled valleys that make them non-contiguous. Illuminated cities are shown as contrast. The largest wild regions are visible in the Amazon rainforest, Patagonia and the deserts of Northern Mexico.