

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Kate Maclean, *Social Urbanism and the Politics of Violence: The Medellín Miracle*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. ISBN: 978-1-137-39735-5 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-349-48492-8 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-137-39736-2 (ebook)

With the Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro rapidly approaching, police went on strike and [greeted tourists at the airport with signs](#) that explained they will not be protected by them during their visit. In spite of years of attempts to “pacify” the most dangerous neighbourhoods, the spectre of violence looms large in Rio. Kate Maclean’s timely book contains lessons for many cities struggling to address urban violence. Its focus is the “miracle” of Medellín’s transformation; once synonymous with drug cartels and all-pervasive violence, the Colombian city has become a trendy destination now known for investment opportunities and leisure activities. Maclean’s critical evaluation of the multifaceted strategy behind Medellín’s transformation—known as “social urbanism”—is historically, politically, and socially contextualized. Geographers will appreciate Maclean’s careful attention to space. In the introduction she traces the roots of violence in Medellín to the city’s extreme socio-spatial inequality, and notes that from its emergence in the 1990s social urbanism explicitly sought to address the spatial exclusion of the poor who live on hillsides around the city centre. This raises the question, however, whether city-based elites willingly engaged and earnestly solicited the political participation of the poor, or if social urbanism was more of a public relations campaign designed to rebrand Medellín.

The book begins with a chapter that sets out the theory for the remainder. Its focus is the relationship between violence and power, and Maclean reviews scholarship that locates the cause of violence between criminal pathology and structural inequality. This scholarship establishes a positive relationship between violence and [i] inequality and [ii] city size. She notes that establishing causality is elusive, however, and advances a position that violence is inherently political and “intricately entwined with questions of power” (p.17). Thus, violence

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

is wielded by those with power, and the discourses and identities through which it is legitimized are locally contextualized. It follows, then, that reducing violence must address the political structures and processes that have given some groups power over others. Maclean notes that the politics of power acquisition will be highly place-specific, and this leads her to provide an in-depth analysis of the events that led to the proliferation of violence in Medellín in the following chapter.

The region's rich industrial history is recounted, and this explains why Medellín has long had a gravitational pull on those in search of livelihood opportunities. Rural-to-urban migration accelerated as people sought to escape Colombia's decades-long civil war. It wasn't long before the patterns of violence in rural areas were recreated in Medellín. Indeed, violence was exacerbated by extreme inequality, deindustrialization in the 1980s, and the explosive growth of narco-trafficking. Violent groups thrived in these conditions, and in addition to narco-traffickers, there were paramilitary organizations, street gangs, militias (some of whom worked for elites and others associated with left-wing guerrillas), and the state apparatus. Given this bewildering array of actors, each asserting claims to territory, it is no wonder that Medellín became synonymous with urban violence. In the context of the power struggles among these groups Maclean examines the genesis of social urbanism in the third chapter. She notes up-front that Medellín's transformation was a long-term process, that it involved the objective transformation of the built environment, and that there was a redistribution of power through initiatives designed to address the "historical social debt" owed to the most marginalized neighbourhoods (p.55). Furthermore, it is a bricolage of elements from around the world including "acupuncture" urbanism from Barcelona, models of participatory governance from Brazil, and even some of Richard Florida's ideas. The city was integrated and mobility increased with public transport improvements, and there was an effort to incorporate the poor in planning decisions. A series of iconic structures were built, and they house libraries, creches, and community centres. There has been investment in the

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

production of public space, and efforts to enhance livelihood opportunities for informal sector workers.

Chapter 3 concludes with the acknowledgement that in each “of the policies that define social urbanism, a balance was struck between a continuation of elite interests and more progressive elements” (p.76). The remaining two chapters focus on the political balancing act and the new politics to which it has given rise. From the outset Maclean makes clear that social urbanism was the result of a political alliance among a range of groups that had hitherto been unable to cooperate. By the 1990s violence had become so destabilizing that Medellín’s economic and political elites were forced to invite groups from historically marginalized neighbourhoods to the bargaining table. Cooperation was facilitated by the emergence and production of new political spaces, and Maclean notes that although many of these spaces encouraged broad-based participation they also served to reinforce elite control of the city. Thus, Maclean interprets competing pressures at work, as social urbanism is based on ideas of inclusion and participation, while at the same time embodying “a desire by elites to take back their city” (p.84). Recall the first chapter focused on the ways in which those with power are able to justify their use of violence. Thus, a complex picture emerges in the fourth chapter in which elites make a bid to be the sole legitimate perpetrators of violence, but in return they must distribute the benefits of social urbanism throughout the city. None of this, of course, challenges their elite status.

Throughout the final two chapters one gets the impression that Maclean is of two minds. She notes that in some ways Medellín’s transformation is strikingly similar to textbook revanchist urbanism as elites were able to establish themselves as the legitimate leaders of the city and re-establish a favourable investment climate from which they benefited tremendously. However, she also notes that new spaces were fostered in which hitherto marginalized groups could participate in politics, and this ultimately reworked the conditions that engendered violence. In the final chapter she examines some of these spaces, and shows

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

how they evolved from less formal forums to a social movement and ultimately an institutionalized political party. A range of voices became audible for the first time, and in 1999 they cohered into an umbrella party and put forth a candidate for mayor. The chapter ends with a balanced assessment of social urbanism, in the sense that it resulted in a transformation of politics and violence was reduced as a result. However, its limits are also identified, the most notable of which is the absence of redistributive policies or any real challenge to elite interests.

A logical question follows in the conclusion, when Maclean asks whether social urbanism was the blueprint required at a particular time in Medellín's history to facilitate capital accumulation. She notes that the "needs of capital will, on occasion, coincide with the needs of excluded populations" (p.123). If I have any criticism of this book it is that this question is left open-ended. In the final instance it remains unclear whether social urbanism is revanchist or progressive. The answer is surely more complex than this either/or dichotomy, but the question is worth asking given the near-universal praise heaped on Medellín by policy-makers. It is important to ask the residents of Medellín's most marginalized neighbourhoods if the transformation was worth it. In their opinion is the reduction of violence and enhanced mobility provided by the Metrocable, say, not to mention libraries and public space, worth the strengthening of a hierarchical power structure? These voices are conspicuously absent in this volume, and we are left with the expert opinions of authorities and representatives from civil society. Given the centrality of reducing inequality to Medellín's transformation it would have been helpful to hear from those living in places that have been dramatically transformed. This would allow us to determine whether social urbanism, or certain aspects of it, should indeed serve as models that can be applied elsewhere. This brings us back to ongoing events in Rio de Janeiro, where the preferred strategy of "pacification" is now showing cracks as police are on strike and violence seems as prevalent as ever. I would enjoy reading a follow-up volume from Maclean that traced the

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

packaging and mobility of social urbanism from Medellín and its impact on other cities in the region and beyond.

Seth Schindler

Department of Geography

University of Sheffield

S.Schindler@Sheffield.ac.uk

July 2016