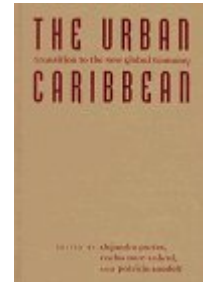


**Alejandro Portes, Carlos Dore-Cabral, Patricia Landolt.** *The Urban Caribbean: Transition to the New Global Economy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. iii + 260 pp. \$48.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8018-5517-7.



**Reviewed by** Mercedes Giuffre

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This volume[1] is the result of a multinational project that studied urbanization in five countries of the Caribbean Basin: Costa Rica, Haiti, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, and Jamaica. One of the main points highlighted in this book is that in the urbanization process in Latin America, population growth preceded economic development, a common feature of Third World cities. Though sharing some common aspects, there are deep political, economic and social differences among the five countries. Furthermore, the aim of this book is not a merely descriptive one; it also offers a theoretical framework for urbanization in the region (p. 4).

The methodology used here differs from the two usual methods applied to Latin America: "Intensive case study" and "Large numbers (Large-N)." In this work, the authors have successfully utilized the "Small numbers method (small-N)," analyzing the same topic in a limited number of settings, systematically contrasting the data. The Caribbean Basin proved to be an ideal geographical setting for this method, and this is one of the main innovations of this volume.

The major aims of this research were two-fold: 1) To "examine general propositions about Third World urbanization " (p. 5); and 2) To analyze the unique characteristics of each country's development, comparing it to that of the others. These aims were largely achieved by developing a theoretical framework for mapping the complex patterns of urbanization in the Caribbean Basin through two different methods: a macrosocial analysis of common features and a microsocial study of urban popular and informal sectors. Statistics presented in numerous charts and tables clearly illustrate step by step the evolution of the research.

Special care has been given to the conceptual equivalence of questionnaire items in each specific country with all the sociological and cultural implications, something that is unfortunately not always done in research projects of this sort. Language is one of the best ways in which to understand national identities, so a multinational project like this naturally acted through native speaker teams in each different country. Questions were translated into four languages: English, French, Haitian Creole and Spanish. The ques-

tions took into account country-specific situations, and some questions were even modified according to the country idiosyncrasies, including certain "sensitivity issues," such as party preferences in Jamaica.

During the 1970's, a seemingly endless number of rural peasants moved to urban areas, leading to new juxtapositions of social classes. Traditionally, in many Latin American countries, the same city served as the nation's capital and industrial center, and was home to the residences of well-off classes. However, the influx of peasants from the countryside provoked an exodus to suburban areas of wealthy classes, who in turn demanded that local governments extend services to their growing neighborhoods. At the same time, poor and scarce housing conditions within the city also compelled poor inhabitants to establish themselves in irregular settings in the periphery. Finally, this rural exodus and lack of employment, combined with the lack of governmental unemployment policies, led to cities with a high unemployment rates. As a result, many unemployed workers were absorbed into the informal sector, without any type of welfare protection.

From 1980 onwards, Latin American countries evolved from ISI (import substitution industry) to EOI (export oriented industry), thus accelerating a rapid and widespread urbanization process. A strong informal economy appeared, with increasing participation of women in the labor force. Later research conducted by the same team (Portes, 1989), presented new evidence confirming the changing conditions. All these affirmations are well documented in this book through a wide and ample use of specific bibliography and related documents (Inter-American Development Bank and CEPAL reports, Latin American researchers, etc.).

Three propositions constitute the core of this research: 1) "The greater the shift from ISI to EOI, the greater the probability of secondary growth and a decline in urban primacy" (p. 19); 2) "In-

creases in poverty and income disparities produced by economic adjustment programs led to a reduction of spatial polarization in Latin American cities as an outcome of survival strategies of both middle class and low-income sectors" (p. 20); and 3) "informal employment functions only imperfectly as countercyclical mechanism" (p. 21).

Portes, Dore Cabral and Landolt, proceed to examine and assert the validity of these hypotheses in each of the five countries studied, using abundant primary and secondary data provided by national institutions, such as census data, and also by international institutions such as the ILO Regional Employment Programme for Latin America (PREALC), CEPAL, Inter-American Development Bank, the United Nations, etc.

The authors clearly state the differences among the countries studies, from the political and social stability of Costa Rica, to Haiti's political turmoil and difficult economic situation. The situation of Costa Rica was quite different from the rest of Central America, because the country did not pass through a long and resource exhausting civil war, as most of the other countries of the region did, allowing Costa Ricans to develop a strong democratic system. Furthermore, since the late 80's different export-oriented and environmental programs were under way. Also tourism promotion plans were followed. It is interesting to mention that among the countries studied in this volume, Costa Rica is the only one that actually is developing urban planning programs, such as the Urban Habitat Program, which "In response to the housing needs, mainly during the recession of the 80's, FUPROVI created in 1988 the 'Popular-Urban Habitat Program.' Its main activities are, among others, technical support and assistance, training and advising in legal, administrative, constructive, financial and social areas. It incorporates other activities related to horticulture, reforestation, waste management, water treatment, and alternative systems of housing and urbanization. Families of the communities participate in plan-

ning, implementation, and general administration of the program." [2] The Bamboo Housing National Project, is another current project in Costa Rica with participation of the regional government, international agencies, and NGOs/CBOs.

*The Urban Caribbean* concludes with a final chapter, by Alejandro Portes and Jose Itzigsohn, examining "The Politics and Economics of Urban Poverty," where they "present a comparative analysis of popular behaviour" (p. 227). Two central issues are developed here: 1) "politics in the form of participation in established parties and community grassroots organizations;" and 2) "economics in the form of popular entrepreneurship" (p. 227). These issues are applied using qualitative comparisons of entrepreneurship case studies in each country, and quantitative survey results in the five cities. This chapter is profusely illustrated with tables and figures, examining with detail variables like, sex, marital status, education, migration, employment, self employment, income, political party membership, community membership, in each country and comparing these data as well. The appearance of what in Latin America was called "the new social actors" was an unexpected way of survival within authoritarian regimes and military dictatorships. These grass-root organizations carefully avoided contact with traditional political parties, devoting themselves to activities such as "child health and education, mothers' need for care, access to basic food staples, shelter and protection from crime." (Cardoso, 1983, p.228). The meaning of these new movements was considered by Portes and Johns (1989), Eckstein (1989) and Cardoso (1982), as the result of occupying spaces of opportunity within the political system.

Next, Portes and Itzigsohn analyze the different political situation in each country. Costa Rica, as mentioned earlier, has developed a strong and stable political system. Guatemala, has gone through an alliance between the armed forces and the economic elite, and is still politically un-

stable. The Dominican Republic, is an incipient democracy with a strong presidentialist regime. Haiti, after all the political turmoil, still has very fragile democratic institutions. Jamaica's political system, following British colonial rule, is marred by violence and political intolerance, where social urban settlements tend to group according to political party allegiances. These results were obtained from a sample of 2,300 cases in the five cities.

Finally, the authors show that informal economic activities vary according to the country, and are classified into three kinds: 1) direct subsistence activities; 2) activities subordinated to others in the formal sector; and 3) autonomous small enterprises. Comparisons between jewelry craftsmen in Santo Domingo, shoemakers in San Jose, and metal workshops in Port-au-Prince, indicate that generalizations are misleading within this very complex system of informal economy. National governments and international aid have focused their efforts on promoting microenterprises and strengthening social networks as a way to combat poverty and unemployment.

As a final conclusion, Portes and Itzigsohn state that popular participation in community organizations is now rather low, with a wider participation of the better off and better educated classes. From the urban economic point of view, integration of the North American market and the Caribbean presents new opportunities, but also brings with it low wages, cheap labor and creates a very competitive informal sector which, in turn, widens the distance between extreme poverty and new emerging classes from the informal economic sector. Democratic consolidation and the strengthening of democratic institutions, conclude the authors, will provide the necessary space to make the voices of the destitute heard, and also to strengthen grassroots participation in the decision making process.

Clear footnotes at the end of each chapter, ample bibliography and documents from many

sources, and useful tables and figures make this book a very good opportunity to deepen the knowledge of the different characteristics of each of the five countries studied here.

#### Notes

[1]. The contributors to this volume are Patricia Anderson, Carlos Dore-Cabral, Derek Gordon (deceased), Jose Itzigsohn, Patricia Landolt, Wilfredo Lozano, Mario Lungo, Sabine Manigat, Juan Pablo Perez-Sainz, Alejandro Portes, Don Robotham.

[2]. The Together Foundation and UNCHS

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