Emerging forms of metropolitan governance in Latin America

As Latin America’s middle classes have expanded considerably in the last few years, so have their aspirations for improved living standards, especially in metropolitan areas. Since 2007, Dr Raúl Acosta García of the University of Konstanz has been investigating the efforts of grassroots activists in Guadalajara, Mexico. During this time, he has witnessed a wave of activism through which people without any previous political experience have creatively challenged local government decisions. He has named their engagements ‘aspirational activism’ as they are not driven mainly by ideology, but by yearnings for a better quality of collective life.

Over the last few decades, Latin America has had a roller-coaster type of economic development, albeit with a somewhat upward trend. This has meant that an increased proportion of the region’s population has become middle class, although this has often resulted in high levels of economic vulnerability. With an increase in affluence levels, education levels have risen and an increase in leisure travel has been observed as well. An aspect of this process that has not often been investigated, is its implications for the political sphere, especially regarding non-governmental forms of organisation and engagement. Dr Acosta García’s research project entitled “Aspirational Activism in Urban Latin America” seeks to examine a growing demand for better metropolitan governance models in the region in a context where stark socioeconomic inequalities remain.

Increased Expectations
Latin American cities have grown at a rapid pace. Four-fifths of these city populations now live in towns or urban centres and a large proportion of these urban dwellers live in shanty towns. There has been a somewhat steady, albeit slow, improvement in the quality of infrastructure and housing. However, corruption remains one of the most difficult challenges to overcome, as it wears down the quality of government services and supervision, which in theory should ensure a greater quality of life and help avoid problems. In this context, Dr Acosta García has chosen to focus on activists who work towards improved policies for mobility and public space. The individuals who engage in these issues strive for good metropolitan governance through specific proposals, knowledgeable contributions, and creative performances in the public sphere.

Through a social anthropological focus, Dr Acosta García’s research scrutinises the cultural underpinnings of what he identifies as a cultural shift in perceptions and practices of power. Numerous Latin American countries have gone through periods of dictatorship or rule under semi-authoritarian regimes. These played a role in the Cold War by suppressing leftist movements that were considered a threat by the United States. (An example of this is how Mexico has been analysed as living a ‘soft dictatorship’ during most of the twentieth century.) This has meant that many dissatisfied populations in Latin America either rebelled in outright desperation and with violence (for example, in guerrilla fighting), or remained quiet and adopted a submissive attitude. As the Cold War came to an end and there was a global resurgence of the ideals of organised civil society, the 1990s witnessed a surge in citizenship initiatives and expectations. These coincided with an economic upsurge in the region.

CyCling as a Symbol
Dr Acosta García focuses on the activists that have chosen the bicycle as a symbol of their aspirations. With little to no infrastructure to provide safety for its users, its promotion presented clear potential. On the one hand, the bicycle was already used by thousands of poor workers and self-employed retailers. On the other, it was becoming an increasingly trendy vehicle for middle- and upper-class individuals to explore the city and countryside. This combination allowed activists to address some of the region’s structural inequalities by promoting safety for all cyclists. This has come hand-in-hand with efforts by international agencies to reduce greenhouse emissions, and with some cities’ goals of attracting innovative companies and creative individuals. Therefore, there has been a convergence of goals which in cases like Guadalajara, has seen the influence of activists shaping visible changes such as more cycleways, better public areas, and improved public transport.

Dr Acosta García has witnessed this movement in Guadalajara, one of his field sites, which has become one of the leading metropolises in Latin America. Several of his research participants now work for various local government offices as experts in the activist issues they previously participated in. Others belong to networks that span the whole of Mexico, Latin America, and beyond, through which they can learn from others and share their experience with...
For a long time, major infrastructure projects in Guadalajara were car-centric. Over the last couple of years, cycleways have become more common.