In 1979, the US underwent a second oil crisis and a financial shock. In October of that year, Paul Volcker, Chairman of the US Federal Reserve System, unveiled a new monetary policy aimed at making the American dollar the most sought-after currency in the world, and began forcing interest rates upwards to combat inflation. Mexico defaulted in 1982 as the “Volcker Shock” was applied, and the US secured rigid repayment and exorbitant fees. Capital flooded out of the country, while the Mexican peso lost 78 percent of its value and kept on devaluing. As a solution to enable repayment, the Reagan administration found a way to assemble the powers of the US treasury and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to roll the debt over in return for neoliberal reforms. President José López Portillo’s government cracked under the pressure and submitted the country to draconian austerity measures crafted by the IMF, which encompassed an extensive privatization and deregulation program, as well as a series of reforms liberalizing the Mexican trade regime. Also that year, the final one of López Portillo’s presidency, the banks were nationalized as a nationalist measure and as means to solve the problems of speculation and capital flight, as well as a way to impose controls on foreign exchange. In his last presidential address, the President announced the decision, famously bursting into tears and sobbing: “It is now or never. We have been sacked. It is not the end of Mexico. We shall not be sacked again!”

This episode marks the beginning of a severe restructuring of the Mexican economy, inspired by the ideology and operating framework known as neoliberalism, which generally implies a shift away from state-led industrialization and welfare state policies, and a move toward a market-led political economy. The banks were re-privatized between 1991 and 1992 under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari, followed by the ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993, which represented the continuation of Mexico’s comprehensive trade liberalization and economic reform programs that began in the early 1980s. Eliminating trade barriers between the US, Canada, and Mexico was publicized as the best way to bring economic development to the southern country. According to Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, politicians and technocrats promised that the trade agreement would finally allow the Third World to become like the First World: “Rich, cultured, and happy”; “We Can Be Like Them” was the mantra leading...
from underdevelopment to modernization. The treaty covered aspects of investment, labour and competition in the regions,” opening them up to foreign investment and the exploitation of natural, mineral, and cultural riches while at the same time, “integrating their economy with Central and North America.” The agreements were designed to advance Mexico’s neoliberal economic, social, and political reform program and are currently transforming entire regions, forms of life, and ways of making a living. They follow an integration-fragmentation model based on dismantling small-scale productive activities at the national level in favour of massive transnational agricultural operations. While they include token production projects and assistance for the affected communities, they have devastated entire communities. This year, Enrique Peña Nieto put forth the Pact for Mexico, a national agreement signed by all three major parties with an ambitious structural and institutional reform agenda furthering neoliberal political rationality: it includes changes to labour laws, taxation, the public education system, the telecommunications industry, and the energy sector—all in favour of giving foreign corporations greater freedom to hire and fire workers, pay extremely low wages in seeking to make the Mexican economy “more competitive,” and controversially inviting foreign capital for investment in the oil, energy, and resource industries. As production costs and wages have risen in China, efforts are being made to position Mexico as the new China, or “Aztec Tiger,” drawing manufacturing away from Asia, facilitated by the Pact for Mexico’s rewriting of the countries 1970 labour laws. Thus, Peña Nieto’s Pact, in concert with production innovations such as cloud computing, and open-source innovation is geared toward attracting global investment in cars, aerospace, household goods, and even manufacturing drones for civilian use. From this point of view, the country’s growth implies the return of the maquiladoras, as well as the continuation of attendant social policies: large-scale incarceration, mass surveillance, and the permanent presence of the military in some regions of the country under the guise of the “war against crime.” These measures ultimately serve as a means of social control, ensuring the smooth traffic of (legal and illegal) goods within the country and toward the North, as well as the means to implement megaprojects in rural areas (wind farms, industrialized agriculture, mines, hydroelectric plants, etc.), which not only have a negative impact on the ways in which people live and make a living, but also destroy the environment.

Moreover, neoliberal reorganizational alignments in the past 30 years have meant the mass migration of individuals to the outskirts of cities and to the border, expelling people from their forms of life and ways of making a living, putting them in places where they are not wanted and therefore are most vulnerable. The state manages and excludes portions of the population by selectively ignoring them, without investing or providing, governing using a form of “granted sovereignty,” discussed below in more detail. It is not only that the Mexican State has failed its citizens and that corrupt politicians are to blame. For example, poet Javier Sicilia’s “Movement for Peace, Justice and Dignity” is problematically premised on the idea that the government must be held accountable for violence and responsible for containing crime, and is thus centered on an ethical critique of power as a form of politics. But this also echoes the apolitical, conservative, hegemonic opinion: We have passed from the certainty of a regimen that built the country based on a framework of interests sustained by corruption, to the incertitude of not knowing where we are headed. […] The meagreness of the political class that has led the country down unknown roads has impeded the definitive establishment of the rule of law, and: The Mexican political class has tended to fail in definitive moments: when opportunities have clearly been available in order to transform the country and to lead it down the road of self-definition.
Because of Mexico’s history of colonization and repression, dispossession and racism are embedded in the country’s DNA, and since its inception, Mexico has been ruled by a political culture that disregards laws; neoliberal reforms were thus imposed on the country at very little political cost, facing meek (or effectively repressed) resistance. In this regard, governing as a State program geared toward aiding the development of entrepreneurial ventures (there and even PhDs of dubious academic quality), the proposed to tax soft drinks and junk food as a regimes (such as the national campaign to addition, this features the promotion of health with self-help and permanent education. In dispossessing with ideas of progress and normalization violence.

Neoliberalism also creates particular ways of seeing the world, reconfigures notions of common sense to justify destruction and dispossession with ideas of progress and development, the economic precarity with self-help and permanent education. In addition, this features the promotion of health regimes (such as the national campaign to combat diabetes and obesity: Peña Nieto proposed to tax soft drinks and junk food as a regulative measure, a reform that took effect in December 2013), the acquisition of skills (private education institutions endlessly offer expensive diplomas, certificados, courses, MAs, and even PhDs of dubious academic quality), the development of entrepreneurial ventures (there is a State program geared toward aiding the growth of small and medium entrepreneurial ventures, the PYMES), and other techniques of self-engineering and capital accumulation.21 Furthermore, since the ratification of NAFTA, Mexican farmers and proletarians have been converted into maquiladora workers or managerial workers tied to production lines through modern techniques to exclude or re-engineer citizens, services, and goods.

One of the main consequences of the implementation of neoliberalism in Mexico has been the transformation of the production process, which is why everyone can have personal freedom and equality—but only formal freedom and a graded equality, with many having no access at all to jobs, education, healthcare, housing, and other profit-generating enterprises, services, and goods.

The Mexican Neo-Liberal Conversion ... Emerging Economy?

The government's strategy has been to militarize the North,utterly incapable of sustaining itself as a member of the international community [of failed states] due to civil strife, government breakdown and economic privation. […] [Failed] states descend into violence and anarchy, imperiling their own citizens and threatening their neighbours through refugee flows, political instability, and random warfare.27 The perception of Mexico as a “failed state” materializes in areas of the country in which the government has suspended sovereignty, illustrating what Alhwa Ong has called “graded sovereignty.” According to Ong, neoliberal governments treat populations differentially, creating a diversity of zones with regimes of exception. That is, there are some areas in which the State is very strong and protective, while in others it is nearly absent. This mechanism has the purpose of enabling areas to be either flexible with regards to markets—at the risk of rendering them structurally irrelevant—or an obstacle for the free flow of (legal and illegal) merchandise, money, and people. For example, the six Mexican states bordering Mexico that have been placed in anarchy, in a war amongst the cartels seeking to control the passage routes for illegal goods. Moreover, gangs charge extortion and protection fees to citizens, and force illegal immigrants deported from the US to work for them. In addition to controlling smuggling routes, regional kingpins continue to hold sway over local business and governments. The maquiladora industry, however, has neither been affected by violence nor threatened by the gangs; in 2011, 10,000 jobs were created at 19 factories in Ciudad Juárez. Forty more opened in subsequent months. Despite the violence, foreign investment is pouring in, especially to the automobile industry.25 The government’s strategy has been to militarize the North,
disregard the real social problems, and treat the
disputes created by the titans and the army as a
collateral damage that is ignored—or capitalization
—on the media. Another example is the
case of the states of Guerrero and Michoacán,
where policías comunidades [community
police squadrons] have been created to defend
themselves against organized criminal organizations worldwide,
like the Zetas. Interestingly enough, these are states
with a heavy military presence and where the
government is developing megaprojects. Of
course, there has been organized resistance
against these projects, most notably, the
movement known as Nueva Salaverna. There is also the case of the Comité
de Reordenamiento Territorial [Territorial
Reorganizing Committee]33 in Cuetzalan, in
the northern mountains of Puebla, which in
2011, impeded the construction of a Walmart
that sought to capture the 500 million pesos
that flow yearly into the region to sustain
its autonomous economy. Areas in which the
rule of law and State institutions are nearly
absent, or act against the resistance to
development, are marked by megaprojects, contrast with first-
world luxury enclaves protected by state-of-
the-art private security technologies, and that
have access to high-end (private) services,
jobs, entertainment, healthcare, and education.
In a recent New York Times editorial,
Thomas Friedman frivolously and superficially
wrote that Mexico is likely to become a
dominant economic power in the twenty-first
century, reporting that corruption, crime,
the weak rule of law, and drug-related violence are
seen as a condition to be lived with and fought,
but not something that defines neither the
country nor its economy. 33 As I mentioned
above, NAFTA promised to fulfill “a desire for
development,” and 20 years ago, megalopolises in the South were the “great cities of the North
viewed through a warped mirror.” That is,
before NAFTA was signed, modernization in
Mexico was perceived as a distorted version of
developed countries: dirty, full of smoke, noise,
and toxic fumes, a place where walking around
the streets was perceived as risky.32 Nowadays,
fortified buildings and gated communities
still prevail, and some of the more affluent
areas such as Polanco, Anzures, Cuauhtémoc,
Condesa and Roma in Mexico City—with
their enhanced surveillance, gentrification,
and social cleansing—have even become
pedestrian-friendly. In these neighbourhoods,
the City’s collective transportation system now
includes bike lanes, as in some European and
North American cities. Santa Fe, an urban hub
for corporate headquarters, office buildings,
and luxury residential housing, conveys the
impression of living in a North American
city, or somewhere in Southeast Asia—if one
overlooks the intermittent areas of extreme
poverty. And San Pedro Garza García, the
richest district of Latin America, in Monterrey,
Nuevo León, resembles a wealthy Texan suburb,
although it is surrounded by buffering hills and
accessed via a tunnel, thus isolated from the
violence created by the gangs and the army as
an obstacle to political and economic progress—is perceived to be
the presence of the middle class. In September
2012, as his term was about to come to an end,
President Felipe Calderón stated that Mexico
had become a middle-class nation: “Mexican
families have bettered their access to housing,
cars, goods like computers and electronics,
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services—basic products that characterize
the middle class worldwide.”34 Calderón’s
statement was echoed by an online World Bank
publication, which reported that from 2003 to
2009, the middle class [defined here as people
who are neither poor or vulnerable, but not
rich, and who have been schooled up to 12
years of age] grew by 50 percent. This means
that supposedly, 17 percent of the Mexican
population joined the middle class during the last
decade.35 But the new members of the middle
class evoked by Calderón and the World Bank
are people who were incorporated into the
economy primarily as consumers—and debtors.
This is highlighted by Calderón’s definition of the
middle class: to be middle class means
to have access to housing, all kinds of goods,
(private) education, and healthcare. Following
Aditya Nigam, development implies a “global
hypermobility” as a plentiful utopia of
shopping malls, casinos, and super-highways,
where consumption and debt are the rule.36
Thus, in neoliberal societies, there is an
elaborate network of systems, processes,
apparatuses, and relations37 that work
to produce individuals as middle-class consumers
Nieto’s recent efforts to change the image
of Mexico from “Drug War Zone” to “Free
Trade Poster Child”38 but should rather be
attributed to the differentiated reality of the
country. The refrain “the world has never been
cleaner” is not exclusive to a one-sided view
of Mexico. As Žižek notes, such a view of
the world has invaded the (right-wing) mass media
and financial publications worldwide, and is
an example of the unevenness of neoliberal
development and progress.39 “Progress,” in turn,
appears as the incomplete realization of
a social project. In the case of Mexico, a token
of progress—as well as the obstacle to political
and economic progress—is perceived to be
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is therefore, the national, inborn aversion to conflict and competition. For Castañeda, the problem is that the middle class believes in protectionism and subsidies, while demonizing privatization. Therefore, while the middle class has benefited from economic liberalization, they are averse to the open market, private initiative and foreign investment; in Castañeda’s view, this is the result of citizens having cultivated an irrational and anachronistic character.40

In this context, official intellectuals and academics have argued that, because of Mexicans’ “love” of stagnation, a Deng Xiaoping figure is needed to direct the country toward development, carrying out necessary reforms in order to assure growth. Thus, after 30 years of neoliberal reforms, Mexican technocrats, official intellectuals, and the corporate class envision and promote a Mexican version of “Capitalism with Asian Values”—defined by Žižek as a dynamic and efficient capitalism functioning within an authoritarian state—41—for the supposed sake of the country’s prosperity.42 Official intellectuals’ assessment and critique of “Mexican backwardness” (posited as the incapacity to undertake the changes required to grow economically due to the rejection of institutional reforms that would assure those changes) at the turn of the twenty-first century echo not only the prescriptive recommendations of the IMF and World Bank—as a surreptitious infiltration of market-driven truths into the domains of culture and the media43—but also the late-eighteenth century Bourbon Reforms of Mexico City. In late Colonial Mexico, revisions were imposed on the municipal framework in the name of improving health and welfare for all city residents. Back then, however, the problems faced by the population were somewhat different: disease, waste and garbage, limited access to water, poorly paved and flooded streets, and dirty markets. The renovations program carried out by city officials, according to Sharon Bailey Blasco, reflected the anxieties of the emerging elite surrounding the fact that rich and poor coexisted intimately and that there was no separation between the public and private spheres. In this context, the reforms were geared toward reshaping plebeian culture, as the elite blamed the ills of the city on the “unruly and polluting activities of the lower classes,” such as public drunkenness and nudity, defecating on the streets, and a lack of personal hygiene. Therefore, the city’s reorganization project was inseparable from a re-education of the urban poor, changing their “traditional” or backward behaviour, into “modern” behaviour, both productive and nonthreatening.44

Specifically, Castañeda’s description of the backwardness of the Mexican middle class—potentially remediable, as he points out—resonates with the Colonial elite’s perception of the poor and the discursive aspects of the reforms they imposed on them (attended by physical punishment if they were non-compliant). Nowadays, notions of democracy, development, betterment, security, efficiency, sustainability, design, autonomy, creativity, green urbanism, and self-sufficiency are the excuses used to model new ways of life, and imply a similar behavioural “correction”45; the results, as I mentioned above, include (self-) exploitation, slavery, and death. These concepts, moreover, revolve around, first, the surreptitious privatization of government services and functions; and second, the systemic and ongoing nation-wide process of displacement and dispossession. The reason why Castañeda chose to posit the middle class as a token for Mexican identity is twofold: it implies that the middle class comprises the majority of the country (which is clearly not the case, despite his, Calderón’s, and the World Bank’s assessments), and it makes sense in this age of social control, by way of what Gabriel Tarde and Maurizio Lazzarato call “the public(s).” For them, as public opinion is increasingly fabricated by the corporate media and addressed to the middle class, the receptors bear the potential to influence other minds; the fundamental...
problem here is the creation of consensual subjectivities, acting upon one another. For example, I have often heard the following description of people from Oaxaca: “They like their old ways, they do not like progress, they are not interested in modernity, they are backward.” In this sense, “improvement” and “development” are measures serving to both lubricate the system and the perfect means to condition citizens as subjects aspiring to become middle-class (and indebted) consumers. As Lazzarato furthermore argues, debt is a form of social control of both individuals and nations. In a society in which privilege is inherited, moreover, the gaps between the poor, the “middle class” and the rich are wider than ever, to the point that the rich live in a social and material universe entirely distinct from the rest, rendering redundant notions of equality and democratic access. Indeed, many have defined neoliberalism as a form of class warfare, and the ongoing assault on organized labour in Mexico—including the dismantling of the National Electricity Company’s Union in 2010, the Mining Union Section 65 in Cananea in 2013, and the current President’s efforts to destroy the Public School Teacher’s Union—is the result of the systemic drive to segregate the working class from the rest of society, and the economy.

Neoliberal Mexico (City): Zones of Graded Sovereignty

Despite the fact that with the introduction of neoliberal policies, Mexican industry began shifting its centre of gravity away from the historic centre of the country, the Federal District (or DF) is still the political, media, cultural, and educational core of the country. The past 30 years of neoliberal reforms have influenced its politics, society, and culture industry, giving the city new sites that accurately represent such reforms, for instance, by optimizing the conditions most suitable for the easy flow of goods and money. At the same time, the reforms have translated neoliberal logic into spatial and sensible terms. This expresses itself in the organization of everyday life, by way of exclusion and exception disguised as policies of optimization, development and betterment. For example, leftist mayors (Manuel López Obrador and Marcelo Ebrard) have implemented apparently progressive city policies such as gay marriage and populist urban attractions, like the massive free ice-skating rinks in the Zócalo and three of the city’s districts, artificial beaches during Spring Break in poor districts of the city, bike lanes, and affordable bike rentals as a supplement to public transportation in affluent areas. But these policies have merely served to whitewash or hide the fact that urban space has become an object of massive surveillance, restriction, displacement, and social cleansing; as one example a private superhighway was built on forcibly expropriated land to the detriment of a much-needed expansion of the public transportation system. Other examples include the developer-driven megaprojects that are changing the fabric of Mexico City with upscale mixed-use areas, housing complexes, and entertainment areas. Many of these new urban projects are being built by subcontracted or private companies, justified by the presupposition—pushed forward by corporations, private interests, and official intellectuals—that the government is too overwhelmed to be able to manage and supply Mexico City, and that the aid of civil society and private investment is the exception, rather than the rule.

According to Jamie Peck and Adam Tickell, in the past two decades, cities have become incubators for the major political and ideological strategies that have helped maintain neoliberal dominance. As Mexico City has become globalized, some of its areas have been transformed into strategic economic spaces concentrating material and immaterial flows necessary to global processes of production, creation, and exchange—for example, as providers of services needed by corporations, such as insurance or accounting. In this regard, the transnationalization of corporations has meant the homogenization of the city through the creation of office districts (Santa Fe, the Reforma Financial Corridor, Cuicuilco), residential spaces (Nuevo Polanco, Interlomas, Casas Geo), as well as spaces for entertainment and consumption (from Talpan, Satélite, and Cuauhtemoc to Ecatepec, Las Águilas, Tacubaya, Chalco, and Mixcoac). The historical downtown has been rebuilt and partially gentrified, and the Condesa, Colonia Roma, San Miguel Chapultepec, and San Rafael boroughs, which may be considered the city’s creative zones, have undergone processes of intense gentrification. These transformations simply mirror similar processes—as well as modern and minimalist architectural styles—that have materialized in other parts of the world over the past two decades.

Washington consensus policies of graded government intervention and trade expansion have not only transformed how Mexico City looks and functions, but also the ways in which people live and work. As in other global cities, urban planning and design have become important spatial practices: while they materialize and furnish spaces for neoliberalism to thrive in, they create ready-to-consume modes and forms of life inseparable from signs circulating in the sensible regime that have materialized in the hypermodern global utopia of consumption. The homogenization of the environment brought about by corporatization coexists with spatial differentiation, as urban space is more and more polarized, introducing new spatial legibilities and regimes of exception: slums and illegal settlements, or “misery belts,” in Ciudad Neza, Chalco, Santa Fe, Ecatepec, Jaltenco; hyper-securitized luxury enclaves for the rich in Interlomas, Lomas de Chapultepec, Valle Escondido, Bosques de las Lomas; for the upper-middle and middle-classes, Coyoacán, Tepepan, San Jerónimo; and for the working class what I call “subcontracted mass social housing,” conceived as city dormitories and named after the companies that build them: Casas Geo, Urbi, Ara, Sare, Homex, etc. Mexico City’s public version of this kind of housing is called Ciudad Bicentenario (Bicentennial Cities).

Paradoxically, in its spatial differentiation the city has barely changed since the nineteenth century. According to Michael Johns, by 1890, Mexico City had acquired the principal geographic feature that defines it to this day: a division into rich west and poor east. Fragmenting even further the landscape of civil society, those governed as citizens coexist... and Differentiated, Homogenous Lives
apolitical, insurgent actors, for example, the
allowing for the emergence of new types of
fragmented the landscape of civil society, while
and the exclusion of the majority, has further
proliferation of physical barriers, surveillance,
possibilities for access. This, alongside the
non-citizens with a different set of rights and
with the underclass, who are governed as
NAFTA, the Mesoamerican Integration and
have different roles to play in the Mexican
country, where new development areas
in urban and rural regions in the rest of the
that characterizes Mexico City is mirrored
precarious. The socio-spatial differentiation
are being actively dispossessed and rendered
work, but also to the ways in which people
about by neoliberal policies, which have not
endemic to the kind of development brought
Unevenness, as we have seen, is highly
distribution, there are several emerging,
binal conurbations, such as San Diego-
El Paso-Ciudad Juárez, and Matamoros-
Brownsville along the Rio Grande-Bravo. Some
3,700 maquiladoras have mushroomed on
the Mexican side under the regime of Export
Processing Zones, characterized by federal law
exemptions regarding taxes, quotas, and labour
in order to make the goods produced there
globally competitive.55 As mentioned above,
anchovy and lawlessness often reign in these
areas—but without affecting maquiladora
production. Moreover, the violence is not
simply a result of war among narco-cartels, but
is intrinsically tied to the fact that in the past
decade Mexico lost competitiveness to Asia, and
thousands of workers lost their jobs, forcing
them into the circuits of narco-capitalism.
This was the true cause of the explosion of
violence.56 In Juárez a combination of volatility
and precarity prevails, and the cartels and the
maquiladoras both follow the same free-
market business logic. As Charles Bowden has
pointed out, Juárez is the “laboratory of the
future”: not a breakdown of the social order, but
the new order in which massive unemployment
and violence co-exist within the fragile
maquiladora economy.57
In contrast, Special Controlled Development
Zones (ZEDEC in Spanish) have been created
for the rich: corporate, residential luxury zones
exemplified by Santa Fe and Atizapán, west
and north of Mexico City, respectively, but also by
Interlomas (north of Santa Fe), Puerta de Hierro
in Zapopan, Jalisco and Lomas de Cuernavaca,
and the entire district of San Pedro Garza García
in Monterrey. The ZEDECs are zones of high
real-estate development that embody an upper-class
utopia where the poor are rendered invisible.
A kind of exurbs, they are modeled after the
small cluster of cities that constitute Orange
County in California, and their design seeks to
convey a sense of the highest efficiency, safety,
and the idea that “it’s good business to live here.” For instance, Zona Esmeralda in Atizapán
is considered to be the “safest zone in Mexico
City,” and together with Lomas del Valle and
Lomas del Viga, they constitute a cluster of upper-middle and upper-class housing
developments (16 gated communities in total),
which include shopping, entertainment, and
collegiate complexes, along with an ecological
reserve, two golf courses, and an airport. This
and other privileged zones of Mexico City
constitute concentric zones traversed by a
hierarchical division of labour and degrees of
access to services: Atizapán, the former village
where arable lands were expropriated to build
this housing cluster, has now expanded into a
small city that lacks everything a city usually
has. More like a misery belt, it largely houses
the cheap domestic labour employed in the
gated communities to the west. A newspaper
ad for Lomas in Puebla expresses, and/or
constructs, people’s desire to live in such
isolated, homogenous, urban conglomerates:
To live in Lomas means that you, your
children and your parents will recover your
freedom; it means that you will be able to
go out to the streets without a worry,
that you will know that your children are
playing in the park, safely riding their bikes
on the bicycle path; it means coming home
and listening to their stories about their
adventures in Lomas. It means that you
will be able to relax on a Sunday morning,
listening to the sound of water falling,
the laughter of people, knowing that you are
surrounded by nature, that a coffee is
within walking distance, or that you can go
shopping without leaving Lomas. It means
that you will be able to go jogging or walking
at any time of the day you desire, so you
can take a break; it means that you will know
that you live in a unique place in Puebla.
For intellectual José Steinsleger, these developments are “Bantustans for the rich,” comparable to recent projects in Guatemala and Honduras, which he posits as cities “without God, State or law,” administered by magnates, and ruled by the principle of “security.” In Guatemala, there is Paseo de Cayalá, which represents the new, gated urbanism; like the North American suburbs that many of these projects tend to emulate, Paseo de Cayalá is characterized by New Urbanism’s nostalgia for village life with its pedestrian-friendly streets. While it offers a cosmopolitan lifestyle, the National Guatemalan Police need a warrant to enter the city, and all the community’s problems are dealt with by an “Owner’s Association,” who make decisions inside a building inspired by the Lincoln Monument in Washington and the Parthenon. Like Paseo de Cayalá, Mexico City’s Santa Fe district is also premised on modifications of the law. It emerged as part of a larger project under Salinas de Gortari, who established ZEDECs as a legal tool to regulate land use and allow for partnerships between the city’s government and private investors and real-estate developers. In this regard, urban planning has legitimized the imposition of controls and decisions to the exclusive benefit of the residential and corporate enclave—to the detriment of most citizens’ needs. These new developments have greatly exacerbated mechanisms of recent exclusion, as populations live under the illusion of existing in a homogenous society.

A more recent development of the ZEDECs is Miguel Mancera’s (current mayor of Mexico City) project of “Economic Development Zones,” or ZODEs. This project of “strategic urbanism,” implies the creation of thematic neighbourhoods, and involves a partnership between the government, civil society, corporations, and academia. Based on this project, areas of the city will be “redesigned,” repurposed, and rehabilitated according to five specific economic “vocations” and themes, anchored in specific buildings: Future Technology City, Creative or Cultural City, Agribusiness City, Government or Administrative City, and Health Care City. World-renowned architects Herzog & de Meuron have been hired to design the project, and will be creating spaces where people will be able to live, hang out, study, work, and have access to culture and entertainment in specific areas—without having to go to other parts of the city.

Furthering the tendency to segregate and homogenize the population through urban planning, the working-class equivalent of the ZEDECs is what I referred to above as “subcontracted mass social housing.” Under Salinas de Gortari, throughout Mexico a portion of the working-class population began to be transferred to small boxes isolated from big city neighbourhoods. The prize for easy access to a mortgage was a long commute. Built quickly on cheap land with inappropriate materials, these projects are the result of a basic drive for profit, as contractors and sub-contractors built cities that began immediately to fall apart, that were far away and lacked basic infrastructure and services. They are essentially unlivable and have become a national social problem; indeed, in the past few years, five million such homes have been abandoned by their owners. If luxury enclaves promote cosmopolitan hyper-consumer lifestyles, neoliberal mass housing, aside from being a machine for the extraction of money from the poor, clearly reveals an underlying mechanism of domination: the “liberation” of the population is in fact the loss of public spaces and access to services, less than the minimum space for living, exhaustion from commuting, alienation, and illness.

As I mentioned above, the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (PPP-MIDP) is an experiment in “co-participation” between the public and private sectors, comparable to the “Prawer Plan,” according to which Israel is seeking to relocate 40,000 Bedouins from the Negev into townships with few municipal facilities. Similarly, the Mexican State intends to concentrate members of isolated communities scattered throughout rural areas, and toward strategic centres—all within a “competitive” framework. Along with the Plan Mérida (a US-led counter-narco-insurgency plan modeled on the Plan Colombia), the treaty takes into account regional security, and implies territorial reordering in order to “liberate” strategic zones so that transnational corporations can develop their megaprojects, thus displacing farmers, peasants, resisting communities, and drug dealers. It also involves changes in land use, financed by governments and private and transnational entities such as the World Bank. What the PPP-MIDP envisions for the population is their transfer to “Rural Cities,” suburban-like villages where dispossessed farmers and peasants are (with partial success) being relocated, starting in the States of Chiapas and Puebla. The Rural Cities program is also an experiment in “co-participation” between the public and the private sectors, comparable to the “Prawer Plan,” according to which Israel is seeking to relocate 40,000 Bedouins from the Negev into townships with few municipal facilities. Similarly, the Mexican State intends to concentrate members of isolated communities scattered throughout rural areas, promoting their relocation under the discourse of “access to services” and “quality of life.” However, the motivation behind the Rural Cities Program is not social but evidently economic, and the proposed network of rural integration centres has the ultimate purpose of achieving more efficient territorial organization by expropriating land from farmers. Once living in Rural Cities, farmers will cease to grow crops for their own consumption, and be forced to work for the mining, agribusiness, or biofuel industries.

The “productive conversion” of the program implies that entire communities will be obliged to change their forms of life and ways of making a living, lose control over their mode of production, and shift from a position of autonomy to one of dependency on corporations and the State; the suspicious participation of Elektra, Banco Azteca, and BrainPOP education in the program makes it evident that the plan for the inhabitants of rural areas is to incorporate them to the upcoming national “middle class” of indebted consumers. The Rural Cities Program has a counterinsurgency objective as well, echoing Guatemalan “Model Towns” from the 1980s.
which relocated communities displaced by the civil war to so-called “development poles.”

Rural Cities are merely another chapter in the ongoing history of the dispossession of indigenous communities; while in the past they were expelled from valleys and fertile lands and pushed to arid mountains, now they are being forced to relocate because their lands are rich in mineral resources. The first Rural Cities were built in Chiapas, and two more have been planned for the Sierra Norte in Puebla, but many of them have not been built at all, or, like the “Casas Geó,” they have been abandoned or are falling apart.

Projects such as Export Processing Zones, Rural Cities, and “Casas Geó” (as well as housing developments geared to more affluent populations) are social laboratories that normalize the violence embedded in these terms by determining citizens’ terms of subjectivity, survival, and liveability; subjectification, after Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, here implies a sensible subjectification and a distribution of vulnerability. The application of neoliberal policies in Mexico, therefore, implies that citizens are not only being dispossessed of their traditional modes of life, but are also being subjected to injurious State and corporate dependency and other modes of sensible subjugation. Moreover, these zoning projects are evidence of the government’s policy of selectively reinforcing institutions at the national level which enables civilians, as well as civil, social, and political organizations, to partake in any governmental activities, unless they may encourage political arrangements in the region.

32 Scapegoat

33 The Mexican Neo-Liberal Conversion ...

27 Gerald B. Horman, Steven R. Alvarez, “Saving Failed States: Britain’s original plan in 1950’s-1990’s for Latin America’s new tranquility reigns, at least in this part of the city. See David Daniel, “The Zetas exploit this vulnerability between 2010 and 2013 for new tranquility reigns, at least in this part of the city. See David Daniel, “The Zetas exploit this vulnerability between 2010 and 2013 for the Mexican Neo-Liberal Conversion …”

18 Alejandro Rosas and Ricardo Cauya

Gaffy, El México que nos duele: Cronicas de un país sin rumbo (Mexico: Planeta, 2013).

19 ibid., 75.

20 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 98.

21 ibid.


23 See Mary Virginia Tiana, Capitalismo Gordo (Mexico: Mextaal, 2010).


29 See Mary Virginia Tiana, Capitalismo Gordo (Mexico: Mextaal, 2010).

30 The Committee is a legal form drafted by activist Erwin Slim Torres and approved at the municipal level which enables civilians, as well as civil, social, and political organizations, to partake in any governmental activities, unless they may encourage political arrangements in the region.


32 Ong, Neoliberalism as Exception, 98.

33 The Mexican Neo-Liberal Conversion ...

34 Irmgard Emmelhainz


In 2000, Mexican presidential candidate Vicente Fox Quesada proposed an unprecedented plan to build two million low-income homes throughout the country during his six year term. On the eve of his election, Fox proclaimed, “My presidency will be remembered as the era of public housing.” To enact this initiative, the federal government formed INFONAVIT, the Central Bank of Mexico, and the National Housing Bank (Bancomundial), to build low-income housing. There were also public banks to support this program. By 2010, various social programs, numbering six to eight per year, had helped to build 25% of the homes promised. There are few commercial structures—such as banks and grocery stores. Yet demand for these low-income homes continues to increase as developers continue to provide them with extreme efficiency. During Fox’s six-year presidency, 2,350,000 homes were built, at a rate of 2,500 homes per day, and this trend is set to continue.

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