



A metropolitan area undergoes a real transformation

The Center for Metropolitan Studies
discovers the many faces of São Paulo

Carlos Haag

After much thought, US millionaire Nelson Rockefeller concluded: “the chief problem of low-income persons is poverty.” The comment is obvious enough that it is laughable, but this “pearl” of knowledge is a fallacy. “Income is a very important metric for analyzing poverty and inequality, and it is no surprise that international comparisons focus on it. Nonetheless, our effort at the Center for Metropolitan Studies (CEM) has focused on examining the many facets of poverty and inequality, because an individual’s status as poor is the result of a combination of different factors above and beyond income,” explained the Director of the CEM, political scientist Marta Arretche, in an interview in 2010. “These factors are: an individual’s access to the formal job market, to public services, and to social and association bonds. An individual’s lack of protection is a result of this multitude of factors.”

Founded in 2000 and situated in the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning (Cebap), the CEM is one of the 11 Research, Innovation and Dissemination Centers (RIDCs) that FAPESP supports. The CEM carries out activities in research, the transfer of knowledge (to government-

tal entities in particular), and the dissemination of information to specialists and to the general public. Some of the objectives of the center are: to analyze current changes in metropolitan areas and to assess their effects using new conceptual and methodological approaches; to serve as a reference center for the documentation and consolidation of information about the São Paulo Metropolitan Area and other cities; and to support and update a Geographical Information System (SIG) that is mapping the metropolitan area, to include the use of satellites.

“The central assumption and focus of our analytical work today is to confirm that the social reproduction of poverty is the result of a combination of economic processes and sociopolitical mechanisms,” Arretche stated. Based on this observation, on its agenda the CEM prioritized research on socialization, social networks, patterns of residential segregation, and the effectiveness and extension of public policies on the state of this situation. Moreover, the research revealed that in national specialized literature, excessive emphasis was placed on economic aspects in analyzing the dynamics of the metropolitan area. “Our research showed an apparent paradox, in

The grandeur of the cable-stayed bridge in the South Zone of São Paulo; the Real Parque *favela* is an eyesore.



The segregation of the urban fabric is visible from the Real Parque *favela* in São Paulo.

that a negative economic/employment scenario can coexist with improvements in social indicators, even in *favelas*,” Arretche noted.

Then other variables emerged, such as social networks and urban space, that made it easier to understand the mechanisms that bring together macro-processes and structures and micro-actions, linked to individual and family behavior, whose impact can lessen or intensify inequalities. Even religion and recreational activities fell within the scope of the research. “Our studies are based on the theoretical assumption that labor, social services and sociability are decisive mechanisms to successfully mitigate poverty situations. Two individuals may have the same nominal income, but if one of them has access to housing and government-subsidized health care, and the other does not, one is poorer and more isolated than the other. In all cases, it is necessary to analyze more than just income” according to Arretche. “Poverty can in fact be mitigated, but it is possible that inequality, by contrast, is being reproduced,” the researcher noted.

This mapping and the discoveries from the research generated a broader picture of the social and spatial dynamics of metropolitan areas; not only did they shed new light on the academic debate, but they also contributed to the idealization and formalization of public policies. According to the Director of the CEM, the institution abandoned the goal of proposing a general solution for the problem of metropolitan areas because the task was impossible; instead, it selected specific themes to which it was able to contribute. Thus, one of the most important CEM studies is the *Social Vulnerability Map*, which used data from the 2000 census and geoprocessing techniques to map poverty in the municipality of São Paulo. The cartographic map was released in 2004 and produced a mosaic of the status of each of the 13,000 sectors of the city that the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) had established, and was able to capture specific situations of vulnerability in groups of 300 to 400 families aggregated in each census sector.

In each new study, the CEM demystifies the old notions that have steered public policies in the wrong direction for so long. “There is a series of processes that stopped occurring in São Paulo long ago and yet the same impression and assessment of the city continues. They date back to the 1970s and no longer make much sense,” said CEM sociologist and researcher Eduardo Marques, who launched a research project in book form entitled *São Paulo: novos percursos e atores* (Editora 34, 2011). According to Marques, one of the myths has to do with migration, which has been declining considerably over the last de-

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cedes. “Today, few issues related to São Paulo are heavily impacted by the issue of immigration,” he noted. Contrary to what was being said, the city has stopped growing and migrants are no longer moving in, and more people are leaving than coming in, especially in the less-skilled labor force, whose fortunes have diminished.

Thus, the new São Paulo parameter presented by the CEM is of a city that is not growing much, but continues to expand to outlying areas that are becoming more diverse. The good news is that the government is much more present in every area of the city, including the outlying areas. Yet there are major differences in the quality of its policies, and this causes social inequalities to occur in a way that is different, more multifaceted, and not as easy to grasp. According to the researcher, “differences in access to public policies have decreased, although replaced by differences in the quality of public services, and the urban fabric has become more diverse.” The cycle is complex in that the city has closed its doors to a certain type of worker who is forced to live in nearby municipalities or regions, having been expelled from the metropolitan area.

One noteworthy example of this new complexity emerges, for example, in the research by Nadya Guimarães. “Now a high school diploma or university degree is required for any job. A street sweeper who works for the city, for example, must submit a secondary school diploma, so great is the distortion. This is a negative effect of this elitization of the city,” according to Guimarães. “The remaining question is: What reward is there for going to school if you will end up becoming a telemarketer and earn so little? São Paulo just confirms the deeply entrenched idea in our culture that education leads to nothing.” And yet, in this segregated metropolitan area a new force emerges: sociability networks. “Poverty has a territorial dimension in that poor people may be segregated in terms of space, but they can be united in space, thereby fighting precisely this segregation effect” Marques observed. Research has shown that relations with neighbors, family, friends, coworkers, etc., are very important, above and beyond education and

other factors, such as whether the individual is employed or not, the quality of the job, and the individual’s income.

“People who have friends have a much better chance of having a job and hence, increasing their income, and then decreasing inequality through personal relations. This shows that these networks of relations are more effective than public policies” according to Arretche. For the Director of the CEM, fighting poverty cannot replace traditional social policies, but since networks have penetrated the communities considerably, incorporating them into governmental policies may help them take on a more specific and customized form. Metropolitan areas are not just “the mouth with a thousand teeth” described by Mário de Andrade in *Hallucinated City*. “What is life like for an unemployed individual in a metropolitan area these days? Despite the difficulties, the children continue to attend school and the individual still uses health services. And, most importantly, they need no favors or special treatment from any politicians,” Arretche observed.

According to Arretche, metropolitan areas are not the worst places in Brazil. “In this context, Brazil seems to be following a characteristic path, since democracy in Brazil has successfully decreased inequality in terms of income as well as in terms of access to public services,” stated CEM political scientist Argelina Cheibub Figueiredo. Inequality also requires political and not just economic consideration. In the early 1990s, most social scientists believed that the government of Brazil would be incapable of meeting the demands of the social debt inherited from the military regime—a serious threat to democracy. “On the redemocratization agenda, the governments that followed the dictatorship placed increasing priority on settling the social debt the dictatorship left behind. There is no doubt that the concentration of income and the limited access by the poorest in society had their origins in the makeup of the political forces and public policies that the opportunistic governments prioritized,” Figueiredo said. Mário de Andrade’s view: “These men of São Paulo, equal and unequal, look like monkeys to me —weak, short and skinny” now seems preposterous. ■

PROJECT

Center for Metropolitan Studies (CEM)
1998/14342-9
(2009-2012)

TYPE OF PROJECT
Research Centers Program – RIDC

COORDINATOR
Marta Teresa da Silva Arretche (Cebrap)

INVESTMENT
R\$9,727,502.00

SCIENTIFIC ARTICLES

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