



Global Changes, National Development & Urban Poverty. Political
Engagement Among the Poor in Mexico City
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Summary of Ph.D. Dissertation

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Introduction

As the global community approaches the tipping point in which urban poverty is to become the primary characteristic of global poverty by 2030, understanding the drivers, the contexts, and the conditions for urban poverty around the world is increasingly urgent. Likewise, as the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals have been designed with an eye toward the needs of promoting inclusive and sustainable development in cities, there must be continued exploration into the challenges in reaching such goals. This dissertation contributes to such needed understandings by carrying out an historical, multi-scalar analysis of the politics of urban poverty within the context of urban and global restructuring. In Mexico City, where vast wealth has been generated in some sectors, poverty has been nonetheless chronic and increasing. In an effort to explore the fundamental drivers behind poverty, the point of departure for this research is that the global institutional context of political and economic neoliberalism penetrates the context in which urban poverty is produced and resisted at the local level. It proposes that urban poverty is not the result of isolated urban phenomena, but is a reflection of the power relations that define neoliberal capital accumulation in general, reflecting a political relationship which needs a political analysis in order to contribute to new approaches for alleviating poverty.

Gap in Knowledge

This research brings together theoretical approaches from the fields of International Relations (IR) and International Development Studies (IDS). It develops a multi-disciplinary theoretical framework drawing from IR and IDS to study multi-scalar politics and the poor. This research speaks to a growing concern that the theoretical boundaries of both disciplines limit the ability to generate new knowledge about some of the world's most pressing problems, including poverty. Despite this concern, there has been little practical engagement between the two fields to explore how, and in what ways, they can be brought together. Hence, this research contributes to this gap first, by bringing Neo-Gramscian critical international relations theory into the field of International Development studies, demonstrating that it provides an essential framework to develop new ways in which poverty can be analyzed. Situating poverty within Neo-Gramscian conceptualizations of state/society complexes and social forces, this dissertation historically analyzes poverty as the outcome of multi-scalar unequal political and social relations.

Constituting the poor as a social force in itself by recognizing their attempts to impact political decision-making at both the local and national level, this research makes the unlikely claim that the poor are relevant to International Relations theories. To the extent that this can be shown, this research forces the lens of International Relations to widen.

Second, it expands the field of International Development Studies by contributing to a gap in knowledge about the relationship between international relations and politics, or the political agency of the poor. By subjecting poverty to the multi-scalar political and social relations that contribute to it through the Neo-Gramscian framework, it is also necessary to constitute the poor as political subjects, with political agency and political objectives. This research thus moves beyond approaches in International Development Studies that address the politics of the poor through concepts such as social capital and empowerment, limited both in scale and in capturing the political nature of poverty. It conceptualizes the political agency of the poor in terms of the ideas, discourses and actions that are taken as they engage and struggle in both formal and informal political processes, and – crucially – as they are defined and shaped in response to economic and political shifts linked to urban, national and international processes. At the same time, this research contributes to International Development Studies in another way. By extending the reach of critical international relations theory and situating poverty within a multi-scalar political and social analysis, this research may add to the relational analysis of poverty and development that is currently being explored in new paradigms of inclusive development. It argues that the relational aspect of inclusive development can be greatly strengthened by building upon Neo-Gramscian theory.

Third, this research fills a gap in global city literature regarding the ways in which political agency and participation of the urban poor are transformed in the context of top-down urban economic development policies, inspired by global city ambitions and neo-liberal capitalist theory. Global city literature has sparked interest in the way transnational relations between cities emerge and in the corresponding patterns which can be observed at the city level including squeezing out the middle class, insecurity of low-wage work forces, growing polarity between the wealthy and poor, and increasing low-income migration. While significant attention is thus given to the changing economic opportunity structures and the material conditions of poverty in the context of deepening neoliberalism¹ in global cities, not enough is known about how those who are marginalized by global city ambitions articulate new political demands and act upon them. In this regard, this research rectifies the claim that global city literature has the tendency to render the poor and marginalized as lacking agency.

Research Question

The research question for this dissertation is: How has neoliberalism re-shaped the context and opportunities for political agency and participation among the urban poor in globalizing cities? In order to operationalize this question, the global city framework has been applied as a useful approach for observing the ways in which global and transnational linkages are established, both with the support of, but also beyond the reach of the state. Through this model, space is given to understanding how neoliberal policies and ideologies pervade urban development goals and create negative outcomes for the urban poor. Taken in this way, the global city becomes a container for neoliberalism, and neoliberalism becomes a primary driver of urban poverty. Likewise, though the global city framework does not provide a set of assumptions for analysing the political outcomes for the poor, it does not preclude the accompanying analysis of how neoliberalism changes the political opportunities, agency and participation of impoverished groups.

The overarching research question has been answered through the following multi-level steps. First, to establish the international context, neoliberalism as a set of ideas and an ideology, as a global organizing principle, and as a set of policy instruments is described. This is followed by an account of how a nation-state, Mexico, has engaged with and resisted global processes, and according to the interests of which groups. Third, at the next level – a midway between the national and the urban – Mexico City as a globalizing city is explored to see how it engages in global and transnational interactions and how urban policies are geared towards shaping such global engagement. Fourth, the level of urban politics is examined. At this level, a wider range of goals among the urban elected leadership are taken account of in terms of the conflicts that take place between global city ambitions, the need to support social welfare and poverty reduction programmes, and the desire to promote or maintain the democratic process. Through analysis at this level, it becomes apparent how the room for political engagement between the urban government and the poor has been re-constituted over a period of time with the deepening of neoliberal principles. Finally, at the level of the civil society, the research question is answered by analyzing how urban poor groups have interpreted changing urban, national and international processes, reoriented their attempts at political engagement, claimed political agency, and participated in the political process.

This research aims to first solve the conceptual problem of how poverty is analysed and understood. It provides a clear framework, sufficient argumentation, and empirical evidence to illustrate that when local conditions of poverty are linked level-by-level to its global context, then it becomes impossible to deny that global forces – filtered through the national, urban and local levels and defined by neoliberal capitalism ties the poor into global dynamics and allows ‘local’

poverty to be construed as 'global' poverty. When viewed in this way, urban poverty – particularly in the context of global cities and despite the range of local factors that also come into play – gains new meaning and relevance when assessing the benefits of the neoliberal model of cooperation and growth. Solving this conceptual problem ties directly into solving a practical problem. Insofar as it can be shown that the principles and policies of neoliberalism create obstacles to reducing certain forms of poverty, in this case urban poverty, then it makes clear that new ideas and policies for global cooperation need to be explored and implemented.

Data and methods of collection

The multidisciplinary approach developed for this research focuses on an historical moment in Mexican history – the years leading up to and immediately following the period of democratic transitions, first at the urban and then at the national level of government. During this time from approximately 1995-2005, major changes in political ideas, formal and informal political processes, the nature of political representation, and the constitution of both formal and informal political actors came about, providing the opportunity to explore how these different aspects were driven by, or responding to, multi-scalar pressures and transitions. Interpreting, as this research does, the Mexican democratic transition as being driven by decisions made at the national level to become more economically competitive on a global scale, it is possible to explore the interests and actions of a range of social forces in urban contexts in bringing about or resisting change, as well as from the global to the local levels.

As a qualitative, historical and multi-scalar study, this research has made use of a variety of primary and secondary data collection methods and sources. Key to the research findings were the results obtained through fieldwork in Mexico City. These likewise required firm grounding in the broader institutional, historical, national, political and economic context to better understand the implications of urban and local level outcomes and make links between the levels. In broad strokes, secondary sources such as historical accounts and analyses, current analyses from books and articles, biographical information, and institutional documents were used to carry out the historical research on national development, as well as to establish the global institutional context at the time of research. Literature reviews were used to give a descriptive analysis for globalizing cities, both in terms of the driving force behind ambitions for global city status, but also the particular implications of those ambitions at the regional, urban and local levels.

To study the politics of urban poverty, this research selected two main units of analysis. First, were civil society organizations among or representing the poor. Such organizations inherently have a political perspective and engage in various forms of politics. Given this natural inclusion in the political process, and the ease of access to speak with them, they contributed very much to

the findings of this research. Data collection included interviews with organizational leaders and members, focus groups, newspaper articles covering their activities, participant observation at both regularly scheduled meetings and public protests, secondary literature which has analyzed the historical emergence of social movements and civil society activity in the city, and academic writing on the role of social movements, community based organizations and civil society organizations. Second, research on the city government and government representatives was carried out using a combination of government documentation (including official statistics, explanations of development plans, and minutes, and minutes from meetings), participant observation in public hearings on issues pertaining to urban poverty, interviews with government representatives, extensive newspaper coverage to provide alternative views on government policies, secondary sources providing biographical information about key leaders, and secondary sources charting the historical development of the urban government as well as current sources analyzing urban government and urban policies.

Findings

The Neo-Gramscian framework (Cox 1981) has allowed for an interpretation of the Mexican democratic transition that rests on the conflicts and compromises of different social forces interacting between the national and global levels. Through the sometimes contradictory discourses promoting economic liberalization and democratic transitions, a backdrop was created for political struggles among the elected leadership in Mexico City, who were either driven by, or fighting against, the deepening of neoliberal principles into Mexican society. Moreover, both elected and non-elected leaders responded to, and also helped shape, dialogue at the national and international level, largely because of the leverage they could enjoy due to the political and economic prominence of Mexico City in respect to the nation-state, and its status as a global city. By exploring the changing relations between the state, business, and labour – all driven by transformations instigated within the realm of global politics, it became clear that the era of rapid neoliberal transformation beginning in the 1980s must be understood as something much more than the imposition of structural adjustment policies by Western institutions, but as the outcome of political struggles, conflicts, compromises and cronyism among the Mexican leadership with each other and Western representatives.

Recognizing the politics of neoliberal transformation has made it possible to understand the role that different actors have played in political struggles. While some representatives among both the elected and non-elected leadership could play a role in, and influence, national and international discussions, they were also responding to another group of city level representatives that not only feared the imposition of neoliberalism as an economic model, but the power that it

would and did transfer to already wealthy economic and political elite, thereby shifting the weight of economic growth away from the urban population. This fear and resentment funnelled upward to both Mexican and Western elites, but also helped shape the discourse and political promises that were made to represent, support, and gain the support of poor and low-income residents in the city. Such discourse and promises facilitated an earlier and more drastic democratic transition within Mexico City, which in turn empowered low-wage residents, and grassroots and community-based organizations to make new claims to the city. Through a fortuitous balance of leftist leadership and emboldened low-wage groups putting pressure on the city, changes took place regarding the political opportunities and agency of the poor that would, in turn, re-shape their own discourse and political activity.

Such changes have been categorized in this dissertation as either city-wide changes affecting the urban poor in the urban political landscape initiated by government representatives, or informal changes in political agency among the poor. City-wide changes for political agency came about through policy interventions and new forms of representation by the city-level elected leadership. Such changes included new relationships between elected leadership and grassroots activists and a newly cast rhetoric characterizing national and international actors as the enemy to the wellbeing of the urban poor. Informal changes in the political agency of the poor included the range of ways that the poor embraced their new role as 'citizens' rather than 'clients' of the state; promoted a discourse on democratization and participation in a democratic system; and discovered grievances, linked to neoliberal economic reforms, that could be addressed collectively and through new forms of coalition building across the urban space to resist the disciplining effect of neoliberalism. These new forms of political agency and new practices of political participation appeared to have an iterative effect on at least the political rhetoric (if not policies) of both urban and national leadership.

In conclusion, the Neo-Gramscian model has allowed for two key observations. First, through the concept of social forces, it highlights the political nature of neoliberal transformations. This in turn endows political relevance to all which are drawn into the neoliberal fold, insofar as they accept, facilitate or resist such transformation. This, from the perspective of IR theory, means that the poor themselves become a subject and force in international politics which should be taken into account in future IR theorizing. In addition to this, the social implications of this theoretical approach have highlighted how neoliberal policies undermine relations of trust between actors at different scales of governance, as well as undermine stable working conditions, social safety nets, and thus leave the poor to their own devices. Nonetheless, it has found that in this vacuum of national solidarity, the political agency and aspirations for political participation of the poor have

been enhanced. As such, it concludes that, contrary to widespread expectations, neoliberal principles may promote rather than undermine civil society political agency, and thus, create conditions for positive change. This is seen in how the implementation of neoliberal reforms in the global city context closes off political access of the working poor on a vertical level as most resources, political and economic, are channelled to facilitating the growth of high finance sectors that can compete in the global market. Concomitantly, the conditions of poverty for those in the lower tiers becomes more deeply entrenched and living more precarious. Social policies and poverty reduction strategies put in place at the city level have likewise become more targeted in the context of neoliberal development, which has had the effect of fragmenting the population at the urban and neighborhood level. However, and perhaps paradoxically, the horizontal space for accumulating political strength in the global city framework has increased and continues to do so. The withdrawal of the state under conditions of neoliberalism means that citizens have to some extent been left to find their own solutions. In this context, they have built coalitions, discovered new avenues for acquiring attention, and discovered their own forms of 'community citizenship'. Whether such coalitions have allowed them to overcome conditions of poverty remains a separate question.

Recommendations

In expanding the notion of urban poverty in a social and political way, future research could further explore if this gives us new understandings about the multi-layered causes and solutions to poverty. Moreover, in exploring the multi-scalar political and social context of poverty, this research allows 'local' poverty to be interpreted as 'global' poverty insofar as it is linked to global processes that filter through the national and urban context. As such, future research could apply this theoretical model in a comparative research project to link up different geographies of (urban) poverty across least developed, developing and developed countries and explore the ways in which they share or do not share links to global transformations. This research promotes the idea that there is such a thing as 'global poverty', not necessarily because of its physical manifestation in nearly every country of the world (though to different degrees), but because of how it can be observed in the modern context of neoliberal global restructuring. Furthermore, future research could apply and expand the concept of political agency among the poor to more thoroughly establish and demonstrate the role of 'the poor' in international politics. Once put on the radar of more traditional and critical IR theories, the equations leading to our understanding, interpretations, and even predictions about global politics change, and so would the outcomes of our research, our understandings of international political realities, and possibly even the nature of our international interactions.