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Securing Bogotá

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Bogotá's lauded transition from chaotic city of crime and violence to cosmopolitan hub of commerce and creativity belies the manner in which 'security' has been differentially mobilized over the past fifteen years, to stigmatise and displace the city's most vulnerable residents.

Since the late 1990s, a succession of charismatic mayors have adopted innovative strategies for securing Colombia's cities. International observers now refer frequently to the "Bogotá model" and the "Medellín miracle" [11] while celebrating the transformation of both cities from chaotic infernos of violence, fear, and criminality into cosmopolitan hubs of commerce, conviviality, and creativity. Common to discussions of this transformation is the assumption that security is a self-evident good that all city dwellers inherently desire—understandable considering the bomb blasts, political assassinations, and drug wars of the eighties and nineties. This has meant relatively little critical analysis of the strategies municipal governments have used to protect the lives of urban citizens. How are threats to urban life defined and identified? What are the targets of security interventions? Which forms of political authority and technical expertise are favored? Whose safety is prioritized and whose neglected?

Enrique Peñalosa was elected mayor of Bogotá in 1998, and immediately established a lofty set of goals for his two-year term. High among them was the recovery of public space [12], a necessary component of his plan to create a more inclusive, accessible, and secure city. At the time, his vision seemed somewhat farfetched; Peñalosa would have had to stroll only a few blocks from his new office in Plaza de Bolívar, the historic center and political heart of the capital, to be reminded of the work he and his administration had cut out for them. The infamous barrio of El Cartucho was a stone's throw from City Hall (Figure 1). Few dared to set foot within an area that over fifty years had become "a sinister urban myth of the capital." [13]

The Bogotazo riots of April 1948, sparked by the assassination of populist presidential candidate Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, left the downtown in shambles[i]. When residents started to flee the center in the 1950s, its stately buildings and polite streets began to experience a half-century of precipitous decline. The mass exodus of gente decente to the north and west stimulated the conversion of spacious, respectable homes into working-class tenements; others were simply abandoned and left to fall into disrepair. By the 1980s, El Cartucho was the most unsafe part of downtown, which was the epicenter of insecurity in one of the most violent and dangerous cities in the world (Figure 2)[ii]. So close to the city center and the seats of both national and municipal government, this neighborhood epitomized the dereliction of Bogotá's public space.

Figure 1: Aerial photograph of central Bogotá. Source: Google Earth.

For Peñalosa's vision to become reality, this would have to change. As long as El Cartucho persisted, he later recalled, "it was impossible to envision the center of Bogotá as dynamic, lively, and attractive to locals and visitors alike."[iii] El Cartucho was equally anathema to Antanas Mockus, Peñalosa's successor, and his drive to instill a "culture of citizenship" (una cultura ciudadana) among those seen to be lacking civility and civic responsibility. Peñalosa began by creating the Urban Renewal Program, which would continue under the guidance of the Mockus administration. The program would eventually acquire and demolish 615 properties and relocate thousands of their former occupants, destroying the heart of the barrio. To symbolize Bogotá's commitment to a different future, El Cartucho would be replaced by the twenty-hectare Parque Tercer Milenio, or Third Millennium Park.

Figure 2: From a series of photographs taken in El Cartucho by a French photojournalist. Source: Le Monde, photograph by Stanislas Guigui.

As the clearance of El Cartucho was getting underway, an unexpected event escalated the priority of securing the city center. During President Álvaro Uribe's inauguration ceremony on August 8, 2002, mortar shells exploded a few hundred feet from where the newly elected leader was being sworn in. Uribe had won on a pledge to crack down on leftist guerrillas and his mano dura stance had been countered by the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) in the weeks leading up to the elections with an escalation of bombings in both rural and urban areas (New York Times 2002 [14]). The shells that detonated on inauguration day matched those used previously by the FARC, supporting the theory that this group was responsible. Although one of the missiles hit the façade of the presidential palace, at least two others went astray and landed in the midst of the still occupied El Cartucho (The Guardian, 2002 [15]). Once the damage was fully assessed, twenty-one people were found dead. Although the strike's origin remained unverified, the government's response to the bloodshed in El Cartucho resembled what might have occurred if the bombs had been launched from there. Immediately after the explosions, tanks and troops dispatched to patrol the city quickly sealed off its perimeter, attempting to regulate who and what flowed in and out. El Cartucho, in this case, was more victim than perpetrator of violence; nevertheless, it continued to be identified as a security threat. If there was any doubt before the bombings that the neighborhood would be erased from the map, this event sealed its fate.

The goal of transforming downtown Bogotá by demolishing El Cartucho and replacing it with Third Millennium Park joined a much broader set of concerns. What began as an urban problem had now been promoted to the level of counterterrorism and national security. The inauguration day bombing fueled latent fears that guerrillas, known for perpetrating violence in the countryside, were coming to terrorize Colombia's cities. Tapping into prevailing "war on terror" rhetoric, Uribe saw the explosions as an early justification of his intent to govern with a firm hand and to increase military operations targeting rebel groups. He believed that FARC militias were forming in peripheral urban settlements throughout the country and that they were "time bombs [16]" waiting to go off. While the city center required heightened protection, it was these impoverished, densely populated, and loosely governed neighborhoods—and the possibility that they could become fertile ground for guerrilla recruitment—that presented the most fearsome threat.

This shift was encouraged by the progress of the Urban Renewal Program in El Cartucho. In December 2003, the media celebrated the fall of the last house, drawing a close to what Semana [17] called "forty years of embarrassment." The

creation of Third Millennium Park (Figure 3) brought twenty hectares of public space and recreational facilities to the city center, symbolizing the inauguration of a new era—what urban planners, politicians, and the media now celebrate as its "rebirth"[iv]. But while crime and homicide rates fell, fear abated, and the physical space of the city was transformed, the problem of urban insecurity did not disappear. There were still hundreds of thousands, if not millions, living in the city's shadowy peripheries.

Figure 3: Third Millennium Park. Source: www.bogota.gov.co.

In response, new policies emerged that would redefine security and reconfigure the rationalities and techniques of government through which it could be pursued.

As the demolition of El Cartucho was coming to a close, the municipal government of Bogotá initiated a disaster risk management program aimed at protecting the lives of vulnerable populations from environmental hazards, such as floods, landslides, and earthquakes [v]. The Caja de la Vivienda Popular (Fund for Social Housing, or the Caja) was put in charge of the program, which began with an inventory of "zones of high risk" among the two lowest socioeconomic strata. Studies found the highest concentration of vulnerability in Ciudad Bolívar—the largest and poorest of Bogotá's twenty localities. Though it would subsequently be illegal to settle in these areas, qualified existing residents would be granted housing subsidies conditional on their willingness to abandon their homes and relocate.

The sprawling, self-built settlements of the urban periphery—once seen as potential breeding grounds for urban insurgency, as threats to social order and political stability, as risks to the city—turned out to have the greatest concentration of families living at risk. Once evacuated, these areas would be patrolled by vigías ambientales, or "environmental guards," in order to prevent their reoccupation. Logics of ecology and security conjoined to stop the spread of neighborhoods long assumed to be fostering illegal and subversive activity.

We have, then, two approaches to securing Bogotá, each with different ways of defining problems and acting upon them. On the one hand, the demolition of El Cartucho responded to the threat of crime, violence, and armed insurgency, and force was used to remove one of the most infamous sites of disorder from the capital city. The Urban Renewal Program created Third Millennium Park and other public spaces as a means by which to promote public safety and political stability in a city once synonymous with insecurity. The disaster risk management program, on the other hand, was more technical than political, more voluntary than coercive, more focused on environmental threats than human ones. Both initiatives required the relocation of poor and working-class bogotanos.

The Caja's primary objective was to protect the lives of vulnerable populations living in specific zones rather than defending the city or society at large. These zones were located on the urban periphery rather than in close proximity to downtown Bogotá and the municipal government, instead of evicting residents and demolishing buildings, encouraged households to relocate themselves. The strength of the military and the police was unnecessary, as the Caja turned to the technical expertise of engineers, architects, and social workers. And while security logics motivated both slum clearance in the city center and disaster risk management on the urban periphery, the definition of threat had shifted to floods, landslides, and earthquakes.

Third Millennium Park remained quiet until March 2009, when close to 500 desplazados, or internally displaced persons, descended on it[vi]. Desplazados are victims of the armed conflict in Colombia who have been forced to leave their homes, and many of them arrive in Bogotá seeking anonymity and protection. While finding a foothold in the capital has always been a struggle for poor migrants, many hillside settlements of the urban periphery—once their most viable option—were now "zones of high risk" and off limits. With nowhere else to go, these desplazados constructed makeshift shelters out of scavenged materials, and, overnight, the park was turned into a veritable refugee camp. By early May, their ranks had risen to 1,200 and their spokespeople were negotiating with the national and municipal governments over their rights to protection, housing, food, and employment. The national government was reticent to acquiesce to what it called an unlawful occupation of public space (El Tiempo, 2009 [18]). Mayor Samuel Moreno, however, promised [19] them employment and offered temporary shelter while funds for additional support were sought. 300 of the demonstrators agreed to these terms, and City Hall was confident the others would follow (El Tiempo, 2009 [18]).

Then a crisis of global significance hit Bogotá and changed the fate of those still struggling to make their demands heard. On July 13, the National Institute of Health announced the appearance of gripa porcina, otherwise known as swine flu or the H1N1 virus. Bogotá's Secretary of Health expressed concern about the concentration of desplazados in the park, which, he feared, could become a "niche for the H1N1 epidemic." Although not a single case of swine flu had been detected among the displaced population, Zambrano said [20] they "are highly vulnerable, both emotionally and physically, and their conditions of health and nutrition are not good. We are all aware that many efforts have been made, but these cases demand more forceful responses." Two days later, 300 uniformed policemen installed a cordon sanitaire around the encampment and, at its only entrance, set up a security checkpoint (Figures 4 and 5). A medical team began to administer daily exams and, at 2am, conducted a census to register each protestor and identify the most vulnerable among them (Caracol Radio, 2009 [21]). With the containment strategy in place, Mayor Moreno informed the media that the health department had found approximately one hundred thirty desplazados with acute respiratory symptoms. He declared [22] a health emergency and appealed to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) for mediation. The UN agency quickly brokered an agreement that provided temporary shelter, long-term housing solutions, employment assistance, food support, transportation subsidies, and security assurances. Four months after the occupation began, the desplazados called an end to their protest.

Figure 4: Cordon sanitaire surrounding the encampment in Third Millennium Park, Bogotá. Source: photograph by author, 2009.

Figure 5: Security checkpoint in Third Millennium Park, Bogotá. Source: photograph by author, 2009.

In the days that followed, government officials reflected back on the crisis. Secretary of Government Clara López clarified that the agreement reached with the desplazados was not the result of their prolonged occupation of the park, which was illegal, but, rather, the necessary response to "the extremely high risk (altísimo riesgo) of … an H1N1 pandemic." (El Tiempo, 2009 [23])

In insisting that the situation was a health crisis, and that it was "in that context that we signed the agreement," López revealed something else. With the arrival of the H1N1 virus, the logic of security through which the city was governed had once again been transformed. This time, the threat shifted to a potential flu epidemic. Health professionals became the voice of expertise rather than the police and the military, as in the slum clearance effort, or engineers, architects, and social workers, as with disaster risk management. The space of intervention was identical to that of the Urban Renewal Program, yet what had been a hotbed of drugs, crime, and violence was now a public park. The target population was neither the criminal underclass and the armed insurgents mingling among them nor the vulnerable inhabitants of the self-built settlements of the urban periphery. The desplazados were both the threat and the threatened—at risk of contracting the H1N1 virus and risks to the health of the city. As before, securing the city required relocating the urban poor. But in the crisis surrounding the occupation of Third Millennium Park, this imperative was framed by logics of biosecurity.

It is remarkable, as many have observed, that a city once known as one of the most dangerous and insecure places on the planet could now be celebrated as a model of urban governance and violent crime reduction. Acknowledging that Bogotá is now safer than it was a decade ago must not deter us from scrutinizing the ways in which security has been pursued. After all, if our cities have any chance of becoming not just safe but also democratic spaces, we must examine and debate how political institutions go about protecting them from threat and danger. In the context of heightened global anxiety about natural disaster, financial crisis, disease outbreak, and other potential crises, such a task has never been more urgent. Denouncing security as an infringement on our rights and freedoms is a woefully inadequate response. There are certainly better and worse ways of making cities safe, and existing orthodoxies should not inhibit us from imagining creative alternatives. After all, a fundamental question remains: What is a genuinely democratic form of security?

[i] María Clara Llano, "Plaza de Bolívar: La manzana de la discordia," in Pobladores Urbanos, ed. Julián Arturo (Bogotá: Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, Cocultura, Tercer Mundo Editores, 1994).

[ii] On the quadrupling of homicides in Bogotá over a 10-year period, which increased from 1237 in 1983 to 4470 in 1992, see Michael G. Donovan, "Informal Cities and the Contestation of Public Space: The Case of Bogotá's Street Vendors, 1988-2003," Urban Studies 45, no. 1

(2008): 34. The downtown locality of Santa Fé contributed a disproportionate share of violent incidents to these statistics with a homicide rate "comparable with countries undergoing high-intensity civil war" (497 deaths per 100,000 people). See also Ángela Rivas Gamboa, Gorgeous Monster: The Arts of Governing and Managing Violence in Contemporary Bogotá (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2007), 33-34, María Victoria Llorente and Angela Rivas, "La caída del crimen en Bogotá: Una década de políticas de seguridad ciudadana," in Seguridad ciudadana: Experiencia y desafíos, ed. Lucía Dammert (Valparaíso: Municipalidad de Valparaíso, 2004), Silva Téllez, Bogotá imaginada, 86-87, Niño Murcia, Territorios del miedo en Santafé de Bogotá: Imaginarios de los ciudadanos.

[iii] Martha Segura, ed. Conversaciones con Bogotá, 1945-2005 (Bogotá: Sello Editorial Lonja de Propiedad Raíz de Bogotá, 2005), 174.

[iv] Jeffrey Villaveces, Ximena Londoño, and Luis Carlos Colón, eds., Bogotá León de Oro 1990-2006: El renacer de una ciudad (Bogotá: Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá, Instituto Distrital de Cultura, 2006).

[v] For analysis of the emergence of risk as a technique of urban planning and government in Colombia, see Austin Zeiderman, "On Shaky Ground: The Making of Risk in Bogotá," Environment and Planning A 44, no. 7 (2012), Austin Zeiderman and Laura Astrid Ramírez, "'Apocalipsis anunciado': Un viraje en la política de riesgo en Colombia a partir de 1985," Revista de Ingeniería 31 (2010).

[vi] For a detailed analysis of this case, see Austin Zeiderman, "Living Dangerously: Biopolitics and Urban Citizenship in Bogotá, Colombia," American Ethnologist 40, no. 1 (2013).

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