

Extended Urbanization in the Brazilian Amazonia

Panel Contribution to the PERN Cyberseminar on Urban Spatial Expansion by Roberto L. Monte-Mór, Professor, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Brazil, Email: montemor@cedeplar.ufmg.br

The Brazilian Amazonia [1] is being socio-economically, spatially, and ecologically restructured as bulldozers, chainsaws, and axes combine to destroy the tropical rainforest and replace it with agricultural and grass lands, mining camps, and towns and hamlets of various sorts. In the southern part where upper lands predominate, highways and roads connect urban centers, rural areas, and mining sites cutting across the forest, fields and savannas attracting several economic activities and millions of migrants that come from all over the country in search of profits or a better life.

Amazonia is still largely perceived as a rural region, if not a pristine jungle. The regional economies that have produced it—mining, agriculture, and cattle ranching, not to speak of forest extraction—are commonly identified as rural activities. Although state city-capitals and middle-size commercial towns grew intensively in population in the past decades, they are still questioned in their urbanity in the face of their unstable mobile migrant populations and precarious urban (infra) structures. Small towns marked by muddy roads and palm-tree huts popping along farming and mining areas amidst the exuberant tropical forest do not easily suggest a steady urbanization process.

Amazonian urban growth has thus many times been understood as a temporary feature due to the inefficiency of institutions in distributing rural land. Towns are often seen as doomed to shrink or disappear as rural occupation intensifies leaving only central places to support country life. Therefore, most attempts to occupy Amazonia were—and still are—thought of on the basis of its alleged rural, if not peasant, regional vocation.

I argue, instead, that the urban phenomenon is not only present in Amazonian cities and towns but also in various other socio-spatial forms such as mining areas, settlement and/or colonization projects, timber industries, cattle-ranching and farm enterprises, in addition to urban concentrations of commerce and services spread throughout the region [2]. The urban phenomenon has reached Brazil's farthest and wildest frontier, gone into forested areas and produced a variety of social processes and spatial forms. The new socio-spatial relations thus produced combine apparently oppositional spaces—the jungle and the urban tissue—and are currently being (re)construed in everyday socio-spatial practices under the hegemonic logic that emanates from Brazil's urban-industrial forces centered in its metropolitan areas.

The intense process of urbanization in the past decades produced a myriad of urban forms beyond cities and towns that have required new definitions beyond the traditional categories of city/country and urban/rural. The expansion of metropolitan areas upon their hinterlands, new municipal associations involving middle-size cities and towns, and the extension of urban infrastructure and social services onto rural areas, both extensively

and in concentrated nuclei, produced micro-regional organizations and hybrid city-country socio-spatial relations that do not fit the traditional classifications.

New residential developments, resort and (eco)tourism areas, services/commercial centers in the countryside, agro-industrial complexes, isolated power and industrial plants (particularly of intermediate goods such as mineral extraction, steel, cellulose, cement, among others) have produced new socio-spatial configurations that cannot be easily defined as urban or rural. Sub-categories are being created within the broad urban-rural dichotomy in an attempt to deal with the variety of new urban-rural forms, such as: isolated urban areas, areas of urban expansion, agglomerations from urban extension, rural nuclei, and rural settlements, among others [3].

The complexity that characterizes current urbanization in Amazonia (and in Brazil as a whole) thus requires new approaches and ways of inquiring and understanding the diverse socio-spatial forms and processes that are being created throughout the territory beyond the city-country dichotomy. Urban-industrial capitalism, once concentrated only in metropolitan regions and in a few other urban areas has, in the past decades, been extended onto the countryside along roads and highways, electric power lines, communication infrastructure and services, urban, social, financial services and legal requirements, the State apparatus at its various levels (including the new municipalities), labor legislation, organization, control and social benefits, carrying beyond cities and towns those and other socio-spatial aspects of contemporary urban-industrial life.

The *urban tissue* that extended from metropolises and large cities onto their rural hinterlands reached regional space in a variety of urban-rural forms, more or less dense, more or less equipped with infrastructure and services, and more or less economically, politically, and culturally linked to the national core(s). The result has been the extension of socio-spatial relations that were proper and limited to cities and urban centers to rural and regional space. This extension of the urban-industrial process allows us to speak of an urbanization that has been—or is being, in the case of developing regions—virtually extended upon social space as a whole. Therefore, the concept of *extended urbanization* [4] expresses a particular social spatiality brought about by late capitalism and extended onto isolated areas reaching unprecedented levels of time/space/societal (re)articulation.

Extended urbanization refers thus to the extension of contemporary socio-spatial relations—urban-industrial forms and processes—formerly restricted to cities and towns onto regional, national, and global scales. It encompasses the socio-spatial fabric that stems from the dialectical unity of dense urban centralities consolidated what as command centers and the urban tissue that extends the variety urban-industrial forms and processes onto the countryside and social space. Extended urbanization carries within it *urban praxis* as a characteristic of its urban character, bringing thus politics along with it and producing the politicization of social space as a whole. The resulting socio-spatial fabric is therefore not only material or territorial, but it brings within it the extension or urban praxis in a symbolic way, extending the meaning and the scope of urban life to spaces and territories never before touched by the sense of pertinence and integration to the command centers.

Through extended urbanization multiple urban centralities, from cities and towns to commercial and service centers, industrial plants, large ranches, local communities, rubber estates, and even(tually) indigenous areas combine to connect and (re)articulate local, regional, national and global forces and thus produce a variety of locales and populations more or less linked to urban-industrial capitalism. Extended urbanization carries within it the socio-spatial processes and forms that are proper to industrial capitalism, manifested both in its early expression—the industrial city—and its contemporary globalized urban-industrial manifestations.

The implications of such an understanding of *extended urbanization* and *production of social space* for environmental and health conditions are manifold if we consider that *politics* and *citizenship* are extended onto social space as whole along with the urban tissue. The proliferation of socio-political organization groups in Amazonia (and in Brazil), from native populations to migrant workers of all sorts, brings about new possibilities of social control over everyday spaces of reproduction and local environmental and health conditions.

End Notes

[1] The Amazon River Basin—Amazonia—extends from the Atlantic Coast to the Andean Mountains comprising areas in nine countries: Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela. Brazilian Amazonia encompasses the Amazon's low lands and slopes of the Central Plateau and Guyana Shield. Amazonia Legal, a planning region encompassing nine states in Brazil, has circa five million square kilometers, over half of the national territory.

[2] I draw the concept of *urban phenomenon* from Henri Lefebvre's neo-Marxist interpretation of contemporary urbanization, referring to the specific spatiality of capitalist societies; *urbanization*, *urbanity*, *urban tissue*, *urban nucleus-i*, *urban center*, *urban process*, *urban-industrial*, and finally, *urban*, all are used within the same theoretical Lefebvrian perspective.

[3] The legal definition of *urban* in Brazil included, until 1988, only the area (and population) contained within a perimeter around municipal headquarter—*ciudades*—and municipal district headquarters—*vilas*.

[4] *Extended urbanization* is inspired on Henri Lefèbvre's *urban tissue and urban revolution*.