

# SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT IN LATIN AMERICAN CITIES

**Gareth Jones** sketches the defining features of contemporary social life for Latin America's urban poor.

Georg Simmel would be both fascinated and alarmed. The streets of Tepito are full of worshippers, upwards of 2,000 people moving excitedly in anticipation of seeing and possibly touching La Grande, a lifesize statue of the Santa Muerte or saint of death. Looking to all intents like the Grim Reaper, La Santa represents a 'crisis religion', with devotees identified as the victims of the neo-liberal economy: she is popular among drug addicts and dealers, former prisoners and gang members. Mingling in the crowds of Tepito are heavily tattooed men, in every appearance hardcore gang members, except that they are bringing their babies to La Grande, delicately placing a cigarette at the baby's lips to cast smoke over the shrine.

But La Santa's supporters go beyond these stereotypes. A friend's uncle, a millionaire businessman, has replaced the conventional Virgin of Guadalupe altar in his house with one to La Santa. At the Sonora market in La Merced, the stallholders selling the statues – red for love, gold for wealth, black for protection, and the powders for the devotions – claim a broad clientele. In these times of economic uncertainty, of a state no longer willing to be associated with terms such as 'welfare', with families split by the 20 million Mexicans living in the US, everyone needs some form of social attachment.

Elsewhere, the scenes are a little different but essentially the same. In a Brazilian favela located on a rubbish dump a *mae-de-santo* (Mother of Saints) receives visitors to divine their life-paths through the interpretation of cowrie shells. The old woman has a steady stream of clients, keen to understand their futures but also grateful that believing in something provides the necessary motivations to be 'healthy'. In a favela racked with drug addiction, alcoholism, tuberculosis, dengue or 'nerves', this concern with health extends beyond the spiritual.

In São Paulo, religion is also central to a reanimation of social life. Neo-Pentecostalism is the fastest growing religion in Brazil, with 24 million faithful (four times as many as in the US). The March for Jesus organised by the Renascer em Cristo church recently brought together over one million people for a daylong festival of faith. Many of those in attendance are drawn by the messages of hard work, family, moral integrity – disseminated by the Record Network of television and radio channels run by the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God. These messages speak well to people whose 'faith' in other religions has been shaken by links to political corruption, abuse and indifference.

Religion offers salvation in many forms. Among Latin America's numerous gangs, the 80,000 members of the Mara in San Salvador, Guatemala City and Tegucigalpa, or the *parche* in Bogotá and *malandros* in Caracas, conversion to Protestantism is the only way to leave your *jombos*, and avoid the 'exit beatings' dished out to people requesting to become a *calmado* (quiet one). Even then the decision is not taken lightly. In many cities gangs are the principal form of social engagement among young people. In Villa El Salvador, Lima, 70 per cent of inhabitants are under 25 years old but fewer than 15 per cent have access to some form of higher or technical education. The gang is the focal point of social relations. Gang members congregate on vacant plots or corners, swapping stories, drinking, dealing drugs, discussing the latest styles of music or dress that might identify them as *skatos*, crew or punk. Their relations with community leaders, the police and rival gangs define the feeling of the *barrio*. Their use of tagging and graffiti may define the *barrio's* territorial boundaries, and more likely by drawing from scripts through US and Japanese spray styles of cartoons and popular imagery the *barrio* gains an aesthetic.

Deemed 'anti social' by those who fear leaving home or departing from fixed routes that make conviviality difficult, to its members the gang is hyper social. But rumour and gossip do travel. In dense squatter settlements with houses constructed from rudimentary materials there are few secrets. Local bosses or gangs know of the domestic violence, the adultery, drug taking or alcoholism, they learn of the debtors and neighbours with disputes over noise, thefts or property lines. Although complicit in these problems, the boss or gang is also the route to conflict resolution. In Rocinha, the archetypical favela holding onto a Rio de Janeiro hillside, the local drug gangs mediate disputes, sometimes working with NGOs. A programme known as 'Balcao do Direitos' that organises favelados to apply for their registration papers involved the Rio Law School and the agreement of the major gangs. A drug gang's decision is final and non-compliance is not recommended. Though not always fair, people have less reason to believe that a gang's verdict will be any less just than a judge's, and their decision will be arrived at more quickly and cheaply. In Rio it costs less to have someone killed than to arrange an illegal hook up to the electricity supply. Summary justice can be ruthless, but gangs also impose norms to prevent favelados resorting to individual violence.

Public confidence in bosses and gangs is often higher than in the police or politicians, while the corruption of bosses is condoned. As the saying goes, 'ele rouba mas faz' (he steals but he gets things done). Bosses and gang leaders offer reciprocity, the organisation of work programmes for drainage and water supply, or the construction of a kindergarten requires collective action, known variously as *faena*, *minga* or *rondas*. In Buenos Aires the *manzaneras* and *punteros* create dense local networks that often rely on fictive kinships between *compadrazgo* (godparents) to bond people to their community and the party. Patron-clientelism is a dirty word among political scientists and international agency 'experts', but on the streets it looks a lot like personalised mediation and problem-solving.

Social and economic deprivation begets certain forms of social engagement. In Lima, the crisis of the 1980s motivated community groups to organise soup kitchens. By 1986 there were over 800, and by the late 1990s almost 10,000 providing half a million meals each day, as well as serving as meeting points to share childcare, medication and exchange clothes. With the support of the Catholic Church the committees drew the attention of the municipality which used the kitchens to distribute free milk to children. One million children now receive milk through a committee structure involving almost 100,000 people. Recent threats to cut the *Vaso de Leche* budget have brought widespread protests, especially from women.

The 2001 crisis in Argentina prompted the formation of *clubes de trueque* (barter clubs) and *empresas recuperadas* (worker-occupied enterprises), and of new union groups. The Union of Seamstress Workers was formed to protest at labour abuses in Buenos Aires' nearly 400 clandestine textile shops, and to remove the 100,000 undocumented immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay. Perhaps the best known mutual solidarity and direct action has been the *Piqueteros*: organised groups of unemployed people, some with support from trade unions that blocked roads (*piquets*) demanding a fee for passage and the state to buy their acquiescence through granting access to the social safety fund or approve their local development projects. In 2003 there were over 5,000 *piquets* with maybe 360,000 members in Greater Buenos Aires.

Elsewhere, in São Paulo for example, the Movimento Sem Techo has used land occupations to extend poor peoples' access to land and housing. In 2003 the MTST mobilised 4,000 families to occupy land owned by Volkswagen. In Lima, around the fringes of Villa El Salvador, itself formed by a series of land invasions dating from the late-1960s and 1970s, and now a settlement with



Although Villa El Salvador, located in the South of the Metropolitan Region of Lima, is heralded internationally for establishing itself as a sophisticated self-managed urban community since the early 1970s, almost 20 per cent of the residents still do not have sewage services.



Dante Busquets

In Rocinha, a favela in Rio de Janeiro with a population estimated between 100,000 and 1,000,000, there is an active tradition of providing for one's own urbanity according to informal and organic interventions.

over 400,000 inhabitants, 'cooperative groups' are using agrarian law to gain plots on the desert and sand dunes. At present there's just a series of reed matt houses, but the community knows that the agrarian law affords them some protection from eviction.

Over time, the new area of Villa El Salvador will become a consolidated vibrant settlement. Established areas are full of billboards and vans with loudspeakers announcing consumer items and credit terms. There are small yards selling wood and concrete block, and stores selling kerosene, sewing workshops and plenty of mechanics. The settlement is host to 12,000 small- and medium-sized enterprises. Impromptu cinemas show the latest films with rigged up screens and shaky DVD quality. Despite all this enterprise, amidst unemployment – 30 per cent of the population is permanently unemployed and 54 per cent have incomes insufficient to cover basic needs – and the police absent or bribed, crime is high. The residents of sub-districts of Villa El Salvador such as Pachacámac have organised *rondas vecinales* (vigilante groups) using paid security guards or neighbour rota. In Lima over 700 reported cases of 'vigilante justice' in 2004 were in squatter settlements.

Families may also save in small groups, known as *cadenas de ahorro*, for funerals, costs of educating children or house construction. Until the 1990s most savings clubs relied on circulating funds within the community. But with growing numbers of international migrants the clubs now receive and circulate remittances. In Bogotá around 5 per cent of households receive income from abroad. In Quito and

Guayaquil the figures are probably higher as estimates put one million Ecuadorians living in Spain, the United Kingdom and the US sending US\$ 1.4 billion back home. Settlements show signs of Western Union and Moneygram, and notices for Delgado Travel prominently displayed.

A few savings clubs have joined with micro-finance organisations, some affiliated with larger banks or with NGOs. In Lima the largest is MiBanco, which specialises in small loans to micro-entrepreneurs; it acquired about 125,000 clients per annum in recent years. In Buenos Aires, Progresar gives small loans to members with limited formal savings histories, undercutting the major banks' and moneylenders' interest rates. The loans are usually devoted to the establishment of small shops or kiosks where inventory is limited, profits low but risks are minimal.

Contemporary social life is often associated with Samba, Tango or Huey Huey. But on the urban landscape the football stadium looms large. Driving through Baranquilla's industrial and squatter areas, en route to the airport, the view is punctuated by an enormous concrete stadium. Walking through Leblon in Rio de Janeiro in the aftermath of Flamengo beating Corinthians or near La Bombonera following a Boca Juniors victory over River Plate gives some sense of the buzz. The better off spill into bars wearing their authentic shirts, while others wearing replicas wave flags in the street. Car park attendants and vendors paint their faces to display team loyalty, or to drum up a little extra business from the crowd. The rituals and chanting of songs give football a religious feel, just as well, as the Estádio São Januário in Rio has a church inside.

Emotion can get out of hand. The *tribus* and *barra brava* (supporter clubs) draw the attention of riot police and mounted patrols. Fights erupt inside and outside stadiums, often leaving the injured nursing knife wounds and sometimes a few dead. But organisation is here too. The *barra* are linked to the clubs, some clubs are owned by their supporters. Clubs anchor urban identities and connect neighbourhoods with social histories. Identifying with one team or another can mark people as local or an outsider, might indicate their political affiliation or class position – the Racing Club stadium in the working class area of Avalleneda in Buenos Aires is called the Estadio Presidente Peron – and even their gender.

Social engagements are fomented through public policies and urban design. Schemes for participatory budgets and governance may now involve upwards of 2,500 city and district authorities in Latin America. In Bogotá the municipality instituted the Concejos de Planeacion Local, and the feedback circuit of 'Bogotá, Como Vamos'. In Lima the city's urban development plan for Villa El Salvador was put out for citizen consultation followed by an exercise to discuss anti-poverty measures. Despite an announced budget of only US\$ 2 per capita, nearly one quarter of inhabitants turned out. These programmes have gained many supporters for the effects on transparency, efficiency and welfare. Even in cities such as Buenos Aires which only briefly instituted a Presupuesto Participativo between 2002 and 2005, these programmes generate spheres in which people voice opinions in public and attempt to persuade doubters. Discussions resonate long after the meetings, in conversations with neighbours, in the queues for the Via Expresa in Lima or the TransMilenio in Bogotá.

Participation can also scale up to link city hall with the political networks and social agents that run daily life in the *barrios*. In Medellín, the non-partisan Compromiso Ciudadano movement built on the mobilisation that elected Mayor Sergio Fajardo to open dialogue with armed groups and push forward a process of disarmament. In Rio de Janeiro, Residents' Associations – independent of every political party in the 1960s – had by 2005 become dominated by drug dealers or death squads. Some favelas are no-go areas to the state in formal guise – when Minister of Cities Marcio Fortes visited Complexo de Alemão his train was shot at. But NGOs such as Sou de Paz and Viva Rio, with Catholic and evangelical churches, have worked with young people and gangs to reduce violence, and trade in guns. Their example and pressure promoted Brazil's National Disarmament Statute in 2003.

Finally, back to Mexico City. Here, as in other cities, social movements performed vital roles in the transition to democracy, combining ideologies with a social awareness that was seemingly ignored by politicians. Rallies and demonstrations brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets but also fomented smaller engagements in the *colonias*, tenements and public housing estates. Social engagement informed political engagement. Today the 'politics of protest' has given way to the 'politics of proposal', to links with government and reinvention as NGOs. However, save in the aftermath of elections, demonstrations now rarely muster more than a few thousand participants, the largest most recent march drew perhaps 80,000 people angry at a spate of kidnapping's. We must not romanticise social engagement as natural to Latin America or a cure-all for its ills. As Superbarrio, an icon of popular resistance in the 1980s and now a restaurant owner put it: 'In the 1970s I served the Revolution, in the 1980s I served the people, but now I serve tables.'

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