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In this interview, Martha Schteingart tells Julie-Anne Boudreau about her personal life and her professional career. Sitting in her bright, book-filled cubicle at *El Colegio de México* in the Mexican capital, Dr. Schteingart talks about how she fled from Argentina to Mexico at the beginning of the dictatorship in the 1970s. She reflects on her meeting with Manuel Castells in Santiago de Chile and then how she joined RC21 at a meeting in Mexico City in the early eighties. The interview provides an insight into her work on land rent, the government's role in housing, and her comparative work with Washington and other cities in Latin America and Africa, a very enriching perspective on urban studies in Latin America, her role in the development of urban Marxism, and international critical researcher networks.

In the context of Latin America in the seventies, why did you turn to Marxism to study cities?

At the start of the nineteen seventies, I was drawn to a Marxist vision of urban development because I felt that it offered us a much richer and more interesting perspective on how to analyze the relationship between the economic and superstructural aspects of society and the urban world. It also shed light on who the different urban stakeholders were; in other words, urban development

was not only a consequence of an economic and political system, but also of the actions of different social stakeholders.

And how were these Marxist urban ideas received in Mexico at that time, when the country was providing support for all the refugees from Latin-American dictatorships?

It was a time when Marxism was spreading throughout Mexico in the field of urban studies and other social sciences. Don't forget how terrible dictatorships took hold in several Latin-American countries during those years and leftist groups and ideas were harshly persecuted, while in Mexico we had the opportunity to develop Marxist ideas and do research along those lines, especially with the collaboration of the French school of Marxist urban studies. I believe that the opportunity of working in Mexico enabled us to achieve a certain level of leadership in Latin America at that time.

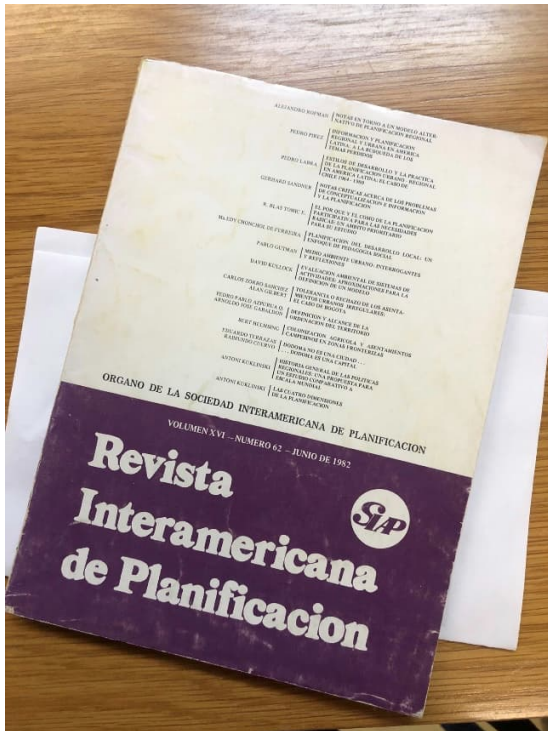
And did that leadership have anything to do with the fact that people were coming along from all over Latin America?

Of course. For instance, several Mexican colleagues here at *El Colegio de México* got involved in those kinds of studies, but we foreigners did too. There were people from Chile, Argentina, Brazil. I was the first from Argentina and Pedro Pérez, José Luis Coraggio, and Alfredo Pucciarelli came along later: a large group of Argentinians who worked in what has become the CEDUA (Center for Demographic, Urban, and Environmental Studies). We worked on urban-regional subjects. Even though some local colleagues may have found it hard to accept us, it is worth noting that here in Mexico, and at the *Colegio*, we had the possibility of setting up and discussing interesting urban projects from a Marxist perspective.

And so, if we take a step back, how did you come to Mexico?

Argentina was a country that underwent many coups d'état and some terrible times. So, we went to Chile first because my husband, who was active in left-wing politics, lost his job at the university. He was well received at the School of Law, while I was welcomed at the Faculty of Architecture mainly teaching urban planning. I was an architect originally, but then I incorporated social sciences into my architectural studies.

We returned to Argentina in 1971. At that time, it was difficult to find a place within the uncertain Argentinian political panorama, which is why I accepted the directorship of the Interamerican Planning Society's Editorial Program, including a book publishing program and the preparation of the *Revista Interamericana de Planificación* (Journal of the Interamerican Planning Society). This was very important for me because at that time, the early seventies, there was little Latin-American



literature on urban subjects. The first book we published on urban research was written by an American historian, Richard Morse, but later we did release several books by Latin American authors.

And a few years later you came to Mexico.

The political situation in Argentina became really bad and the killings began in 1974 and 1975: they killed a lot of people. And my husband's name appeared on wanted lists in the street. We managed to make some contacts in Mexico and came here in February 1975. I've been at the *Colegio de México* since we arrived here.

Did you have any children at that time, or did you come alone?

We came with our two daughters. They were very little: one was born in Chile and the younger one

in Argentina. My older daughter, Mariana, was born in Santiago de Chile, so she got Chilean nationality, then Argentinian, Mexican, and now American. She has four nationalities because she works as a medical doctor in the United States. And my daughter Luciana, who's a filmmaker, has produced very interesting documentaries and lives in Mexico with her daughter. This was a time of great mobility and changes for my family.

What was it like living in different countries and academic situations?

I went to study for a Master's degree at the *Centre de Recherches d'Urbanisme* (Center for Urban Research) in Paris. I had received a scholarship from the University of Buenos Aires but the university withdrew any possibility of support when I returned from Paris. Then, as my husband had also lost his position at the university, we went to live in Chile. I became a professor at the University of Chile, first in Valparaíso and then in Santiago. We spent about four years in Chile. I taught urban planning and also conducted some urban studies in those two cities. But my professional development took off when I returned to Buenos Aires, even though I couldn't get a position at the university because I was not a Peronist. That was the way things were.

You decided to come here, to Mexico, and you started at *El Colegio de México*.

My first big research project here at *El Colegio* was on real estate developers. We invited Topalov and he gave a course that was later published in a book called *La urbanización capitalista* (Capitalist Urbanization), which was widely distributed in Mexico and other Latin American countries. And it was I who got him published. So, this was a very important link with Marxist urban analysis for me. Likewise, Castells was very important for me at the beginning, and I was also a classmate of Jordi Borja in France

How did you make the acquaintance of Manuel Castells?

I met Manuel Castells in Chile in the early seventies, before the coup d'état. He was invited to the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO), which is where I met him. We struck up a good friendship. Later, as director of the SIAP's Editorial Program in Buenos Aires, I invited him to organize a book on urban structure and housing in Latin America, whose diverse chapters (including one of my own) tried to give an overview of this subject with a historical and structural vision of the current urban problems of the region. My relationship with Castells was very important at that time. Then he came to Mexico at the end of the 70s when I had done some research on housing policies in that country, which was later published in a book co-authored by Gustavo Garza: *La acción habitacional del Estado en México* (Governmental Housing Policies in Mexico). Castells was very interested in that work.

And which of your books elicited a widespread response?

I believe I had two books that were very well received. One was *La acción habitacional del Estado en México* (Governmental Housing Policies in Mexico) because nobody had ever published a study of that nature, in which we analyze a variety of programs and the stakeholder issue had begun to raise its head as opposed to the more functional studies previously published on housing. Then Castells, as we have mentioned, became interested in that work, which taught him a lot about Mexico. But it is also important to clarify that that first book on housing programs, written from a different perspective than previous manuscripts, made me realize how important it was to study the private real estate and construction sectors because public policy was closely articulated with their activities; besides, the public and private sectors engaged in joint initiatives. Therefore, I started to study real estate developers, based on the work of Topalov, who came to *El Colegio* to give the aforementioned course.

This is when you began researching the real estate sector.

In my research, I differentiated between building and promoting houses. Promoting implies having access to land and planning the type of housing you are going to build, but not necessarily building itself. Therefore, I found that there were construction companies and promotional companies although sometimes the two were combined. So, I did a lot of work on this, based on a survey that had never been used before, and it was thanks to Topalov's work and my contact with him that I was able to pioneer the study of this urban problem. And I was able to do these studies in Mexico and not in Argentina because I had the necessary support in this country.

Gustavo Garza and I could coordinate a common project for several years: he worked more on the economics side of urban problems, while I did more on housing and land use policies. You need funding to undertake surveys and paying assistants, and I found all that in Mexico. So, being in a country like Mexico when the possibility of a somewhat different urban research orientation reared its head was very important for me. I believe that the recognition I have received for my work stems from my beginnings as a critical researcher.





And how did the first urban studies program initiate at *El Colegio de México* ?

Back in the 1970s, the current Center for Demographic, Urban, and Environmental Studies was essentially a center for economic and demographic studies. Demography had a much longer history than urban studies. Consequently, we created the urban studies Master's program in 1976 and it was very well received. It was conceived with the idea of forming field researchers in urban studies. However, as it was a time of institutional expansion with the creation of the Ministry of Urban Development and there was a high demand for labor, many of our students went to work in the public sector. As a consequence, many of those students could not finish their theses because they went to work for the government and our aim to set up a team of researchers was not possible, notwithstanding, their academic development evidently enabled them to do a good job in the public sector.

So, Marxist studies were being developed at a time when urbanization was experiencing accelerated growth.

I don't believe the development of Marxist studies was directly linked with the explosive growth of cities, but rather what it meant in terms of capital, and above all to show which urban sectors and actors were winners or losers. More to the point, other types of study were concerned with said explosive growth of cities, putting up for discussion quantitative aspects of the urbanization process and the relationship between it and the industrial development of the country.

So, the Marxist perspective also meant studying the role of government in the development of cities.

Yes. For example, a relevant issue we tried to study was the production of the urban built environment and the logic of its production through the actions of the government and capitalist or non-capitalist agents, including the social movements and class limitations in state functions. One important issue was that of land rent and its relationship to housing prices for the majority of the population. From the Marxist point of view, the study of land rent, based on the categories used by Marx in the third volume of *Capital*, had connotations that were very different from those of neoclassical economics, very widespread in so-called "land economics." But Marxist scholars of the time were criticized for being very economic and Castells himself later made a critical examination of his own work, alleging accelerated theorization of his analyses and a lack of more careful attention to superstructural, political, social, and cultural aspects. I believe that we reached a kind of dead end concerning the difficult analysis of certain issues and in recognition of a certain schematism within Marxist approaches that had to be overcome, although evidently the balance of the research carried out at that time showed important advances in issues that had not been analyzed or known before. Then, as of the end of the 1980s and 1990s, the development of the Marxist vision was restricted or modified, giving way quite significantly to the issue of globalization.

And do you think this is international? Is it shared? Isn't it something that only happens in Mexico or Latin America? Are they globally shared revolutions of urban thought?

Yes, of course, I think there are international trends found in different countries and regions with different emphasis and peculiarities. There are also different stories in Latin America. For example, I had to take stock of urban research in several Latin American countries because I took part in a project called GURI (Global Urban Research Initiative), which was developed in the nineties and coordinated by Richard Stren from the University of Toronto. The Ford Foundation, which provided funding, wanted to know what had happened to urban research in Latin America and the Third World because their hypothesis was that it had fallen off significantly, but it was shown that this was not true at all, quite the contrary. It was also shown that there were important differences in the three groups of Latin American countries chosen for the study: Brazil and Venezuela; Argentina, Uruguay, Chile, and Peru; Mexico, Colombia, and Central America. I was in charge of coordinating this last group of countries and I was able to determine the elements they had in common and the differences that, to some extent, can be observed in the three books published in English about the Latin American, Asian, and African regions.

Was urban research interdisciplinary at that time?

It was. Richard Stren asked us to think about what the most important disciplines contributing to urban studies were. And yes, they varied; for example, when researching Asian countries, urban economists pulled more weight, especially in India; here in Latin America, sociologists were more important. Architects lagged behind because the skills that sociologists brought to the table, with input from social sciences, were much more suited to studying urban development. We architects may have been more sensitive to spatial considerations, but we didn't have the disciplinary tools to do certain types of studies: we had to study to catch up. In Africa, geography was very important. This was clear to me because I had done one of my comparative studies in Ivory Coast, trying to see how socially owned land, which in Mexico would have included *ejidos* and communal land, was considered for urban development. And how any land under consideration for urban development that was not privately owned may or may not have benefitted the less fortunate social sectors of society in an African country and Mexico. So, the predominant disciplines in urban research were, in fact, quite different across a spectrum of countries and regions and responded to local development conditions, sometimes as a result of their dependence on certain important academic centers of the world. For example, the geography of Ivory Coast, colonized by the French, exerted a major influence on urban research development.

Tell us about the comparative studies you realized at different stages throughout your career as a researcher.

The three comparative studies included in a recently published piece. A first piece dates from the early 1970s in which an Argentinian colleague and I compared Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Lima: three Latin American cities. It was an interesting work published for instance by Manuel Castells in a book entitled *Imperialismo y urbanización en América Latina* (Imperialism and Urbanization in Latin America). In this work we contradicted what Gideon Sjoberg claimed at the time: that as Latin American cities developed, they would become more similar to North American cities.

The second comparative study, the one previously mentioned, was on Mexico City and Abidjan in Ivory Coast. Initially, I believed that more government intervention would lead to a greater support of low class groups in socially owned land. But, empirical work showed that it was not so, because even though there was more government intervention in Ivory Coast than here, it guaranteed nothing because it did not necessarily work out in favor of the poor, but rather in favor of dominant societal groups.

And the third set of comparative studies was done on the United States and Mexico: the first in 1996 and the second in 2015. I was invited to the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in 1996. I attempted to compare the politics of both countries regarding poverty because at that time there was an initiative to adopt certain U.S. poverty programs here in Mexico. I analyzed how their policies were implemented in the capitals (Mexico City and Washington D.C.) of the two neighboring countries and how their effects were different. The comparison I drew between Mexico City and Washington in 2015 was also different; it took place in a different period, and the comparison



emphasized the differences between social and racial groups in the two cities. It also contemplated the issue of social and racial sector suburbanization in both capital cities.

You also tried to compare the studies you had done in previous decades with others that were more recent. What important differences were you able to find?

One of the research projects I compared with my more recent work on three Latin American cities is to be found in a book entitled *Metropolitan Governance in Latin America*. By comparing my work with the chapter on Mexico City in that book, we arrived at the conclusion that we had placed a lot of importance on dependent urbanization (dependency) as a theoretical framework in the study conducted in the 1970s. Consequently, the conclusions drawn from our work were situated in a broader socio-political context, whereas the more recent studies (also of significant interest) are more concerned with governance: an issue that emerged later. They also placed much less emphasis on broader societal issues and focused more on local processes. I set my Ivory Coast-Mexico comparison against another very recent study of two cities: one in Brazil and one in South Africa. The conclusions drawn were also significantly different because the theory of the state was central to the interpretations in my work while, in the other comparative studies, technical conclusions were predominant and limited to specific cases. Finally, the comparative study of Mexico City and Washington D.C. was set against another recent study of London and a Brazilian city; once again, we could see that the conclusions were of a very local, technical nature and set aside issues we normally use like dependency, the theory of state, and, more recently, issues concerned with racial and ethnic discrimination.





How do you explain that shift towards much more empirical, local issues?

There were two elements: first, the availability of vastly more local information than before; when I did my first studies in the seventies, there wasn't very much support: we had no institutional support for comparative studies. Later, there were more databases that gave us access to more local and more detailed issues, on the one hand; and then because Marxist theory underwent a crisis. As I have already mentioned, Marxist theory had been criticized as economic, perhaps schematic, and incapable of contemplating other problems; then major issues stopped being seen from a more comprehensive perspective.

Two things to wrap up. Could you tell me what your role in the RC21 was?

Well, we're mainly talking about the eighties, although I began to have contact with Manuel Castells in the early seventies and then with others like Prêteceille, whose work I read a lot and found very interesting and inspiring. So, this initiation to Marxism, in so-called historical-structural studies, opened up a much more interesting panorama of what urban studies were for me. More than anything else, I found bonding with an international committee made up of people from different, though mainly European, countries very stimulating. There weren't so many people from Latin America yet. I was appointed vice-president of that Committee because an ISA Congress was held here in Mexico; I had the opportunity of organizing the Committee meeting and presenting a paper in 1981 or 82. Manuel Castells, Edmond Prêteceille, and Enzo Mingione were here. I also met Marisol García in 1989. We went to Russia, when Gorbachev was still in charge, living out the final years of the Soviet Union. It was interesting because the Soviet Union was already coming in for heavy criticism. Then some young Russians came to pick us up at the airport and were trashing the Soviet Union while several French people, still communist to the core, were defending something that was already breaking up. One Frenchman, for example, spoke up for communism and the young Russians said, "You only speak well of it because you didn't suffer it." Our time in Russia at meetings with our comrades on the Committee was fascinating, and it was a significant moment of great change that marked the beginning of Russia's collapse. As vice-president of the Committee, I was also invited to attend a meeting in Budapest, Hungary, where I was able to witness the restrictions still in force in those countries to prevent people from making photocopies and disseminating new ideas. However, at the same time, I witnessed how differences arose across different groups and voices were raised in criticism of political and academic matters. It's also worth mentioning that I was there at a time of excessive police control both at border crossings and the almost daily visits we had to make to the local police precinct to show our identification documents.

Tell us about your personal experience and that of other colleagues promoting urban Marxism in terms of political commitment and political action?

Well, every case was different. For example, I couldn't be politically active because I was a foreigner; it was prohibited in Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution, and you could be expelled from the country. I had been a militant from a very young age; I was a student leader in Argentina when I studied architecture; I was arrested and imprisoned when I was eighteen. And then I belonged to a Marxist-Leninist group with my husband. Oh yes, in Argentina we were militants. I distributed the

movement's newspaper, went to slums, and spoke at public events; I was involved in a great deal of student and political militancy from a very young age. I had to give up these activities in Chile and later in Mexico because foreigners are prohibited from getting involved. In consequence, there were people like me who couldn't be politically active, but others could. For example, Topalov was a militant of the French communist party. And Jordi Borja was very militant in the urban social movements in Barcelona. For sure, you can't be a militant in anyone else's country although, of course, political militancy is very important because it puts you in contact with the poorest and neediest social groups, with social injustices, with the political alternatives that exist for those majorities, etc. The years I spent as a militant in Buenos Aires were very important for me and served as a basis for many activities that I later carried out as a critical researcher and, specifically, for my research-action work in the poor neighborhoods of Mexico City.

How important is this relationship between political militancy, public service, and social sciences?

I think it's very important. And I believe that some people have known how to take advantage of these experiences to enrich their studies in the fields of social sciences and urban research. However, I would have expected the meeting of these experiences with a return to research to have yielded better results in several Latin American countries, where there were greater opportunities to articulate technical and political practice with research work. Some have argued that being a critical researcher and a civil servant are two very different things, even with a Latin American government that claims to be progressive. For instance, I believe that Jordi Borja, at least for a time, knew how to combine his activities as a militant of social movements and as deputy mayor of Barcelona with his analysis and reflections as an urban scholar. And much of what he wrote about social movements was nourished by both his political endeavors and his work as a civil servant. This seems to have been more difficult in Latin America.

What issues are important or what issues would you suggest to young future scientists studying urban topics nowadays?

Well, there are a great many urban topics, which vary depending on the discipline and your background studies. Some people work on more regional issues, some focus on economic topics, and others are concerned with the environment. This implies different approaches to reality, different analytical techniques, and different methodological emphasis. The issues I work on are concerned with the organization of urban space and the situation of different classes or social groups in the urban environment. From this perspective, inequality is extremely important and is a line of research that deserves more support from the academic sectors of our countries. These inequalities can be measured on different levels, but it is very important to know how the differences have become exacerbated in the wake of the pandemic because certain capitalist groups have become impressively rich, while others have lost their jobs and have had to undergo an unacceptable downturn in their quality of life. Therefore, the distance between the haves and have-nots has widened and it is useful to understand how spatial organization contributes to influence the differences, which are not just financial, but a complex set of elements that play their part in widening the gap.

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