

Ulises Bonifacio Zarazúa Villaseñor

Urban Imaginaries of Fear:  
Historical Reconstructions  
of a Segregated and Fragmented Mexican City

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Ulises Bonifacio Zarazúa Villaseñor

# **Urban Imaginaries of Fear**

## **Historical Reconstructions of a Segregated and Fragmented Mexican City**

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Ulises Bonifacio Zarazúa Villaseñor. –

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## Introduction

Fear and the fear of crime have been ever present in cities and urban areas, especially in the Latin American Metropolises. Their sizes, in the rank of several millions of inhabitants, and their covering of a vast area of square kilometers turn the metropolis into a problematic monster to understand, an unknown beast that the citizens must tame to ensure survival.

If we only look at "hard data," this fear may seem reasonable. According to the Mexican NGO Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal, of the fifty most violent cities in the world (violence measured by homicide rates), forty-five of those cities are in Latin America. Of those forty-five most violent Latin American cities, fifteen are Mexican (Cárdenas, 2019). "The Costs of Crime and Violence" report, published by the Inter-American Development Bank in 2017, further supports this data. The study shows that the Latin American Region is still the most violent region with the highest homicide rates, with violence concentrated above all in the big cities (Jaitman, 2017).

Violent crime does exist, of course. However, violence and fear of violent crime, according to the common sense constructed by hegemonic narratives found in Crime and TV News, are not equally and evenly distributed across the territory of the Latin American Metropolis. On the contrary, the highly segregated urban landscapes of Rio de Janeiro, Lima or Mexico City, with a wide gap between the upper and lower classes as well as physical barriers between poor and wealthy districts, transform the Latin American metropolis into a complex and risky place to travel through with various "social spaces" distinctly delimited.

With such social barriers, local knowledge is helpful for navigating the city that has developed historically. According to this knowledge, the inhabitants learn which areas and districts of the city are "safe" and which are "dangerous," which areas deserve to be known and admired, and which districts should be avoided and considered urban nightmares. Fearless strolling or being a flâneur in Caracas or Guadalajara seems, under the light of this knowledge, unnecessary and senseless high-risk sports.

The inhabitants of the Latin American Metropolis master this knowledge and transform it into a kind of invisible armor that allows the happy owner to survive the city successfully. The problem of lacking such information acquires an outrageous dimension concerning the innocent (should we say stupid?) foreigner or the curious tourist who wants to stroll and fearlessly wander the city. In such cases, someone should quickly inform the naïve outsider about the local perils. Frequently, this happens at the hotel reception desk. During the ritual of checking in, the kind employee usually gives the visitor a map of the city, pointing out and even marking with warning circles to designate the "ugly" and "dangerous" districts that the naïve tourist must avoid if he wants to have a peaceful and memorable experience. The staff member, performing their proper due diligence with caution and sensibility, recommends that

the tourist limit his excursions to safe points of interest (places whose pictures can be downloaded peacefully at home without the risk of traveling to dangerous cities).

In this way, the city becomes an already imagined city before the newcomer. Someone else already knows the city, and this city knowledge is given to the foreigner as rock-solid evidence. This portrayal from old connoisseurs presents the city as an uneven space, a territory full of "social holes": canyons of deep insecurity and other fear barriers almost presented as natural features in the hegemonic discourse. Aside from the polluted rivers and urban gorges, social and symbolic borders mark the so-called "hot spots" and "no-go areas." Using Bourdieu's terms, this protective local knowledge is a form of class habitus practiced mainly by the middle and high classes as a city guide. These groups seem to feel more fear of the "other" than the lower-class social sectors, and therefore, their use of the city is concentrated in "protected areas" (Dammert, 2004). With this social knowledge, the upper sectors can avoid "risky places" as if they were toxic marshes.

This knowledge, constantly fed by rumors, neighbor conversations, vibrant images, shocking news delivered via TV, press, and social media, and even one's own experiences, are the sources of the urban imaginaries of fear. These imaginaries compile a wide range of discourses and images of the city. They also display various methods and advice for avoiding risky situations and the proper attitudes for crime prevention. They distinguish which districts are dangerous and which are safe, along with which groups deserve our trust and which ones our suspicion and maybe our scorn.

The urban imaginaries of fear require blind faith and ipso facto belief instead of first-hand knowledge and a doubt-based perspective. In a similar way that the Holy Inquisition demanded that Christians believe in the Holy Bible under the threat of losing their soul, the urban imaginaries of fear require the same blind faith if the local connoisseur (the hotel staff member, the metropolis-born inhabitant, or the crime news) distinguishes a particular district as a no-go area. Thus, the imaginaries require pre-scientific thought as a condition to function properly. A "just-in-case" mentality better replaces the rational and empirical method of learning by trial and error. The doubt and the necessity of something other than just rumors ought to be removed at any cost. Urban imaginaries arrive at this knowledge through a shortcut that does not necessarily require first-hand experience and exhaustive on-site research. Nonetheless, the price of not heeding the warnings encapsulated in an urban imaginary of fear is not losing one's soul and falling into the eternal flames of hell but the possibility of being stabbed by fierce gang members or shot by an anxious attacker in the middle of a dark alley.

### **Urban imaginaries of fear: spatializing the fear in the city**

The urban imaginaries of fear appeal to the oldest and most primitive fear: the fear of the demonized other. To achieve its goals, such fear must rate different urban areas and districts as "good" and "bad." The black-and-white logic that informs this fear