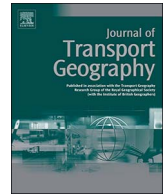




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Expert-citizens: Producing and contesting sustainable mobility policy in Mexican cities

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ABSTRACT

Urban transport policymakers in Latin America are increasingly utilizing the “sustainable mobility” paradigm. This paradigm involves not only considering more seriously the environmental consequences of transport, but also including a wider variety of actors in transport policymaking processes. In this article we use qualitative evidence from Mexico City and Guadalajara to show the tensions that exist within the apparent consensus around sustainable mobility policy in Latin American cities. In doing so, we analyze a particular kind of non-state actor who has become a critical figure in both the production and contestation of sustainable mobility policy in Mexico. These actors, whom we call *expert-citizens* in this article, are characterized by their mobilization of legitimacy as both experts and citizens to influence urban transport policy agendas. This legitimacy is mobilized through three key practices: 1) their focus on small-scale interventions; 2) their capacity to engage the state and civil society through the use of a toned-down language; and 3) a strategic use of media and public opinion tools. We argue that the work these expert-citizens undertake—and the strategies, practices and spaces they use—are telling of a new type of urban political actor that goes beyond the traditional divide between state planners and civil society groups that has characterized studies of urban transport politics. Finally, by focusing on the relational ways in which these actors confront and collaborate with transport activists, planners and experts, both globally and in their home cities, we show new ways in which “sustainable mobility” policy is produced, circulated and contested in Latin American cities.

1. Introduction

In recent years, “sustainable mobility” has emerged as a new paradigm in the transport policy world (Banister, 2008). If the traditional approach to transport has privileged investments in high capacity systems to minimize travel time and the cost of moving goods and people from point A to point B, the emerging sustainable mobility paradigm explicitly emphasizes reducing the environmental impacts of transport and increasing density and accessibility to improve the living conditions of all inhabitants of the city (Low, 2012; Banister, 2008). With sustainable mobility there is also a renewed emphasis on mass and non-motorized modes of transport (transit, cycling and walking), on the qualitative dimensions of transport, such as the quality of trip, and on questions of social equity and citizen representation in transport policy decisions (Lucas et al., 2013; Vasconcellos, 2014).

But the rise of the sustainable mobility paradigm also brings a transformation in the political economy of transport policymaking. It is not only in academic circles that transport policy is being redefined, on the ground, an increasingly wide range of actors are promoting

sustainable mobility, from radical bicycle activists (Gamble, 2017), to social movements, such as Movimento Passe Livre in Brazil (Singer, 2013), to the experts and bureaucrats who populate Latin American local and national transport agencies (Ardila, 2007; Flores, 2013). The adoption of the sustainable mobility is also taking place in a moment in which a constellation of international actors, including international development institutions, climate change scientists, public health experts, and global philanthropic organizations, have become central to processes of urban planning and transport policy making (Montero, 2017a).

In this reconfiguration of urban transport policy, some actors, whom we call “expert-citizens,” have been particularly successful in becoming part of urban transport policy discussions. Expert-citizens are situated in the middle ground between activists and social movements—which use disruptive and contentious tactics to achieve their purposes—and transport experts, who follow technocratic rationalities. Examples of expert-citizens actors are global non-profits, such as the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), or the World Resources Institute-Embarq, both of which have offices in Mexico City, but also

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local NGOs such as the Colectivo Ecologista Jalisco (CEJ) in Guadalajara, which have forged important international connections after receiving several Hewlett Foundation¹ grants. While the actors involved in sustainable mobility vary widely, their agendas coincide in the need to transform the traditional transport planning paradigm in response to the current environmental and economic crises and in that this transformation implies a new politics of redistribution of benefits and responsibilities. In practice, this means that urban policy is becoming a space in which traditional dynamics of confrontation and collaboration are being transformed, and thus, there is a need to better understand how are state and non-state actors engaging in the production and contestation of transport policy.

In this article we show these emergent dynamics of urban transport policymaking by analyzing the work of two organizations of expert-citizens that we identify as representative of this typology and who have been very effective in influencing transport policy agendas in Mexico's two largest cities. One is ITDP Mexico, the Mexican office of the New-York based global think tank *Institute for Transportation and Development Policy* (ITDP) and the other is *Colectivo Ecologista Jalisco* (CEJ), an environmental NGO from Guadalajara. The work that these actors do is politically complex: sometimes they collaborate with government officials, and in other occasions, they become their most forceful opponent. They alternately identify themselves as civil society groups that represent citizens, and other times they rely on their connections with global philanthropy and international development banks to present themselves as transport experts.

The paper makes two arguments. First, it shows how the increasing focus in urban transport of international development actors is changing the dynamics of transport policy processes in cities and how, in this context, expert-citizens have emerged as important transport policy actors. And second, it shows how these expert-citizens mobilize legitimacy and influence urban transport policy agendas through: 1) focusing on small-scale interventions; 2) engaging the state and civil society through a toned-down language that speaks to different concerns; and 3) strategically using media and public opinion tools.

The paper is structured as follows. We first situate our framework of analysis in a larger trajectory of studies of social mobilization around urban infrastructure, claims for the recognition of different forms of expertise, and the adoption of participatory and collaborative models in urban planning. Following this, we describe the two actors whose practices we subsequently examine and show how they have risen to prominence in the context of the politics of sustainable urban mobility in Mexico. We then draw from qualitative evidence collected in two different Mexican cities between 2012 and 2015 –including participant observation of planning meetings, forums and other public events, archival work and semi-structured interviews with different transport policy actors– to show how these actors navigate the tensions that exist within and beyond an apparent consensus around “sustainable mobility.” The paper ends with a short reflection of how these actors and their practices can help us understand the new ways in which transport policy is produced.

2. Contesting urban transport policy: social mobilization, participatory planning and beyond

Scholarship on the politics of urban transport often focuses either on processes in which state actors and citizens—often organized as urban social movements or civil society groups—stand in opposition and in conflict (Orcutt, 1997; Henderson, 2013; Burgos and Pulido, 1998; Velázquez García, 2008), or on evaluating transport planning processes in terms of their design and effectiveness at including citizens (Legacy

et al., 2012; Silva, 2012; Sagaris, 2010). In this section we sketch how the role of social mobilization, expertise and participation has changed in recent decades. An important dynamic that we want to address is the increased reliance on collaboration and citizen participation, a feature that requires us to re-think contestation as a dynamic beyond direct opposition of state and non-state interests. In responding to this, we draw from debates on relational politics and urban assemblages (Cochrane, 2010; Leitner et al., 2007) as a framework that allows us to better understand the productive processes of policymaking through the state and non-state actors to co-produce and contest transport policy.

Social mobilization and contestation around demands for the redistribution of benefits of urban infrastructure and services have shaped urbanization and the landscape of urban politics for a long time. Early work on this topic showed that social mobilization in cities takes place in response to the contradictions of capitalist accumulation, where social movements usually had redistribution as their main objective. As Manuel Castells (Castells, 1984) shows, urban dwellers mobilize in struggles for collective consumption of the infrastructures and services necessary for social reproduction. Latin American cities, which experienced rapid rates of urbanization between during the 1960s and well into the 1990s, were especially important sites for this kind of social mobilization. Across the region, urban social movements spawned as recent arrivals to cities confronted the state demanding land, tenure and urban services (Castells, 1984; Holston, 2009a; Perló and Scheingart, 1984). These movements were not only successful at re-defining the role of citizens in the production of urban space, but also created the condition for new forms of identities, and ultimately, disrupted and re-shaped urban citizenship regimes (Holston, 2009b).

In more recent decades, new forms of urban mobilization and contestation appeared in response to cultural, political and economic changes. New social movements proliferated around issues of difference, environmental issues and human rights, and in the Latin American context, around political rights and different elements of democracy (Alvarez et al., 1998). While these movements were not focused on the redistribution of urban amenities, they challenged the bureaucratic-rational model of development and governance that produced many of the inequalities exposed by movements of earlier decades. In light of the increased privatization of urban public spaces and public services as well as growing inequality, segregation and exclusion in Latin American cities (Maricato, 2017), new social movements and civil society groups in the region have tried to reshape and reinvent old claims to find new ways to reclaim the city. Perhaps the most salient strategy has been the widespread embracement of the “right to the city,” the Lefebvrian notion that fueled urban mobilization in the 1960s (Purcell, 2002). In recent decades, the right to the city has become an umbrella term for a variety of struggles that includes the need to counteract the increasing displacement and dispossession of the urban poor, or demands for more sustainable and inclusive urban infrastructure. In several cases, specific references to the right to the city have been incorporated into local legislation, such as in Brazil in 2001 and Mexico City in 2016.

In this context, critiques of the bureaucratic state have also led to the recognition of multiple forms of knowledge as valid forms of expertise (Friedmann, 1987) to which urban planning, in turn, has also responded. Since the 1990s, many planners have embraced communicative planning (Healey, 2003) as an alternative way of producing knowledge about social problems and developing solutions to move beyond technocratic and expert driven forms of government. This communicative and collaborative turn in urban planning was led by authors such as John Dryzek, Bent Flyberg, John Forester and Patsy Healey, who develop similar views on the way processes of planning should take place (Dryzek, 1994; Flyberg, 1996; Forester, 1999; Healey, 2003). Two key notions, based on the work of Jürgen Habermas, were at the core of the communicative turn in urban planning: 1) communicative rationality as a deliberative process to produce knowledge

¹ The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation is a philanthropy institution based in the Bay Area that has been an important actor in the promotion of sustainable mobility and the strengthening of civil society groups across the globe (<http://www.hewlett.org>).

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