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## “What is a city but its people”\*: commentary on “Migration and peripheral urbanization: the case of the metropolitan zone of the valley of Mexico” by Raúl Delgado Wise, Francisco Caballero Anguiano and Selene Gaspar Olvera

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### ABSTRACT

This commentary centres on themes of conquest, globalization, and inequality and argues that the article *Migration and Peripheral Urbanization: The Case of the Metropolitan Zone of the Valley of Mexico* can be understood as suggesting prescriptions for forward-looking socio-economic and migration policy. The article’s authors focus on the effects of neoliberalism on the Metropolitan Zone, explaining how globalization has dismantled domestic markets in the global South and triggered both internal and cross-border migration. In the phenomenon the authors dub “peripheral urbanization”, poor people now live in the periphery of the city, having been priced out of the city centre. Assuming a shared commitment to reversing the effects of conquest and equalizing wealth, the authors’ analysis supports the removal of morality and membership theory from discourse regarding border crossings and immigration. In addition, the authors can be understood as demonstrating that neoliberal, trickle-down economics have been a failure.

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It is a special privilege to step outside of my normal role as a US immigration lawyer and legal scholar to shift my gaze to the phenomena of urbanization and migration in the global South. My commentary centres on the themes of conquest, globalization, and inequality and offers some brief remarks on how the authors’ analysis of the effects of neoliberalism on the Metropolitan Zone of the Valley of Mexico suggests prescriptions for forward-looking socio-economic and migration policy.

A city is inextricably bound up with her people. Urban areas can be sites of liberation and progress – places people escape to find themselves and their

\*William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*

futures. At the same time, they can be places of exploitation and deep inequality. Cities are not only places people flock to; they are places people flee from. As the authors explain, the Mexicas founded Tenochtitlan, located in what is today the historical centre of today's Mexico City, in 1325 (Wise et al. 2023) The indigenous civilization was "one of the largest [] in the ancient world", and "serving as the heart of the multiethnic Aztec empire that ruled over a large part of Mesoamerica" (Wise et al. 2023). The conquest and its aftermath killed off the much of the indigenous population. The legacy of this violence remains to this day, in embedded and institutionalized racism and colorism.

Neoliberalism, the focus of the authors' article, can be understood as a continuation of this conquest. Neoliberal policies globalizing markets have dismantled the domestic markets and economies of the global South and "rearticulated" them in the international market, destroying local markets and creating low wage, unattractive jobs in factories and other industries controlled by large multinational corporations and global capital (Wise et al. 2023) The modern world economy requires not only low wage assembly line workers but also highly skilled tech and financial workers, who may have a pathway to emigrate out of the Global South. As the authors write, a "new stage in the international division of labor" has developed in which the North focuses on "knowledge-intensive activities" and the South on "labor-intensive" ones (Wise et al. 2023). The urban South is restructured, including spatially, around the needs of large multinational companies and financial centres (Wise et al. 2023).

The greater Mexico City area is thus a product of what the authors call "[c]ontemporary capitalism and imperialism" in which "the country's productive apparatus was thoroughly dismantled and disarticulated to be subsequently rearticulated, in a subordinate and dependent fashion, to the sphere of US accumulation" (Wise et al. 2023). Globalization allows rich, dominant countries to get richer and build economic power by taking advantage of low wage markets in poorer countries. The urban South is subservient, in a sense "rural" vis-à-vis the global North.

We can understand the story of the Global South as one in which the world becomes increasingly connected, first by sea, then by railroad and cars, and now by the virtual world. Globalization requires the movement of human capital in and out of cities and across borders. Today's connectivity no longer depends as much on the physical land or advancements in modes of transportation. Technology is our new pathway. Yet even as the elite can stay where they are and still be connected (as the pandemic has shown us), physical migration remains the most logical option for most people to improve their, often desperate, circumstances. As physical movement for elites becomes less important for success, we see only increases in the migration of people from the south to the north. Some low-income

Mexicans (who make up what the authors describe as a “surplus population” created by neoliberalism) do not cross the border to the United States but nonetheless serve US interests by working for multinational corporations in *maquiladoras* (Wise et al. 2023).

The story of the Global South is also a story about extreme, and broadening, inequality. A relationship exists between migration, urban policies and practices, and the growing wealth gap. There is a simple connection between some forms of migration and inequality, as large incoming groups of impoverished people grow the size of a city’s lower class. But I read the authors as making a more nuanced point. There have always been haves, and have nots, in Mexico City. But a defining feature of contemporary urban society in Mexico, and the Global South more generally, is that the rich are increasingly ultra-rich and the middle class is disappearing. The authors describe neoliberalism as spurring “unequal development” in which the poor majority suffer “ghettoization, gentrification, deficient and insufficient transportation, environmental pollution, labour precariousness, expansion of poverty and social marginalization, as well as the proliferation of violence and organized crime” (Wise et al. 2023). The helpful visual of the hourglass depicts the direction the Global South is heading: a substantial and growing ultra-wealthy upper class, a small and disappearing middle class, and large and increasing lower class.

A causal relationship exists between migratory flows in and out of a city and the socio-economics, look, and culture of the urban space of Mexico City. Urbanization and migration are co-constitutive. A city might become a magnet for migration if there are jobs available or if the tax and monetary policies of a place makes it favourable for a certain industry. Mexico City used to be a top destination of internal migration because of the availability of industrial jobs. As the authors note, during a period of “incipient industrialization”, the population of the city “practically quadrupled, going from 500 thousand inhabitants in 1900 to 1.8 million in 1940” (Wise et al. 2023). Then, during the peak period of industrialization from 1940 to 1981, the city jumped to 8.8 million (Wise et al. 2023). Today, the population of the greater metropolitan area is over 22 million (Wise et al. 2023). The “region generates 32.5% of GDP, hosts more than 60% of national banking activity and more than 75% of financial savings” (Wise et al. 2023). It is home to “the regional and central offices of the main multinational and national corporations operating in the country” (Wise et al. 2023). However, people no longer move to Mexico City to work in factories. Deindustrialization has left service sector jobs as the highest percentage of available work both in the heart of the metropolis and in the surrounding areas. The authors state that “the net metropolitan migratory balances has been generally negative since 1985” and argue that Mexico City has “ceased to be the main destination[] of internal migration ... replaced by new poles of attraction – notably,

Tijuana ... Cancún", where *maquiladoras* and the tourist industry thrive (Wise et al. 2023).

At the same time, causation runs the other way. Flows of people into, or out of, an urban space have socio-economic, cultural, and spatial effects. In the phenomenon the authors dub "peripheral urbanization", lower income people now live in the periphery of Mexico City – "expelled from the heart of the metropolitan area" (Wise et al. 2023). They have been "dispossessed and displaced from the heart of the metropolitan area to be relocated in increasingly distant and marginalized places" (Wise et al. 2023). In their place, "financial/real estate/speculative capital" constructs "horizontal (new areas) and vertical expansion (construction of residential and office buildings)" (Wise et al. 2023). Gentrification abounds in the areas formerly inhabited by poor people, resulting in "walled areas with elitist access" (Wise et al. 2023). Destabilized labour markets created "forced migration dynamics", which "giv[e] way to severe modalities of unequal exchange" (Wise et al. 2023). Causation thus runs both ways between migration and urbanization. The authors aptly characterize as "dialectical" the relationship between the movement of people and peripheral urbanization (Wise et al. 2023).

The authors contribute to the critical project of understanding how neoliberalism has triggered migratory flows that have shaped the urban environment of Mexico City and its surroundings, particularly peripheralization. However, readers may be left wanting more granular detail about the centuries of migration and urbanization in Tenochtitlan/Mexico City and how particular migratory flows into and out of the area have influenced the space. As the authors point out, the modern urbanization dynamics of the greater Mexico City area are tied to the removal of trade restrictions and the movement of capital, including human capital, in an increasingly connected world and a world in which the global North remains dominant. But readers might want to know more about the comings and goings of specific groups throughout Tenochtitlan/Mexico City's history and how different areas of the urban space reflect the co-constitutive forces of migration and urbanization. Where have people arriving in Tenochtitlan/Mexico City come from (beyond colonial Spanish migration) and where have they emigrated to? What are the characteristics of the people on the move (for example, Central Americans)? How has the look and feel of different urban spaces in the city changed over time (for example, the infrastructure and universities built by the Spanish Republican refugees from the Spanish Civil War)?

The authors focus primarily, if not exclusively, on the macro level phenomenon of neoliberalism rather than on more local forces of change. In Mexico, the dynamic of neoliberalism has played out with local, small-scale industries disappearing after failing to compete in the global market. In their place, US multinational corporations offer low-wage jobs in *maquiladoras*. As discussed

above, in this global “division of labor”, the North provides the capital, and the South provides the labour, either in in-country factories owned by multinational corporations or directly through migration north (Wise et al. 2023). But both migratory flows and socio-economic change in cities are the result of multiple causes. The authors acknowledge the complexity of the phenomena of migration and urbanization, calling it “complex and multivariate”, yet they focus exclusively on the role of neoliberalism in the peripheralization phenomenon they describe (Wise et al. 2023). By not discussing other causes, the authors imply that neoliberal policies are the sole cause of emigration from Mexico City and urban peripheralization. However, as reflected in the discussion during the symposium proceedings, the causes of peripheral urbanization and migration are multiple. Other dynamics may be in play, including intentional gentrification of the city’s historical centre, building codes, US immigration policy, economic recessions, and partisan politics. But the lack of a perfect causal analysis should not be an enemy of a good one. Teasing out the co-constitutive relationship between the movement of people and the socio-economic life of Mexico City through the lens of neoliberalism deepens our demographic, spatial, and cultural understanding of the city of today.

I now turn briefly to the question of what normative lessons we can take from the analysis of the ways in which Mexico City, and the migrant flows in and out of the city, has been shaped by exploitation, globalization, and increasing wealth inequality. In particular, I consider how the authors’ analysis of Mexico City should inform political and moral choices, assuming a shared commitment to reversing the effects of conquest and to decreasing wealth inequality.

The authors’ analysis of the effects of neoliberalism in Mexico City supports the removal of morality from the discourse regarding border crossings. The story of Mexico City, like the story of many cities, is one about adaptive migration. When industrialization was on the rise in the city, people sought jobs there. As neoliberalism shifted the demand for labour to factory jobs in Tijuana and the service industry centred in Cancun, people left. The criminalization of human movement takes a natural feature of our existence and overlays an unhelpful and unwarranted morality. This is not to say that borders must be open, only that crossing a border is at most a civil regulatory infraction – an action of the sort that we all have taken when we have driven faster than the speed limit or parked somewhere knowing it was a tow away zone. The authors’ paper, like many analyses of the social and political forces that drive migration, supports a normative stance against criminalization of border crossings.

Second, their analysis implicitly recommends caution during discussions of membership and belonging. The migration and urbanization effects of neoliberalism suggest we must guard against conversations about cultural or

the fabric or glue of a society slipping into invidious talk of class, race, and ethnicity. Anti-Blackness and colorism shapes both immigration and urban policies – in terms of how dark-skinned people on the move are viewed and how we understand and treat people once they are city dwellers in our midst. In Mexico City, as in all cities, the inhabitants with political, economic, and social power have asked and continue to ask how newcomers fit within our vision of who we are and progress for the city. The authors' analysis of how neoliberalism has shaped migration to and from Mexico City suggests that we must be cautious of such conversations, given the larger, structural forces at play.

Lastly, it comes as no surprise that the authors imply that neoliberal, trickle-down economics have been a failure. The rising tide of global wealth has left many still touching bottom. The logic of liberal theory assumes a level playing field, which, as the historical analysis of Mexico City illustrates, is a dangerous fiction. Neoliberalism requires, and regenerates, an underclass, a proletariat. Globalism may have put overall wealth at an all-time high but only helps those already at the top. The result is an economic and physical reality typified by extremes – shanty towns next to walled communities and gleaming skyscrapers. In the neoliberal world order, these extremes cannot exist without the other and movement upward, into the middle, is all but impossible.

Harder is the authors' suggested normative stance on what should take the place of neoliberalism. Redistributive policies and practices recognize, and seek to undo, the legacy of conquest and exploitation. Social service programs, while important at the margins, lack broadscale impact needed to reverse neoliberalism's effects. The rich detail in the telling of the story of Mexico City underscores the urgency of the neoliberalism question but does not supply an easy answer.

In sum, moving groups of people have altered the economics, culture, and physical space of Mexico City, and neoliberalism has shaped migration and urbanization, particularly peripheralization of Mexico's poor people. The "dialectic" between migration and urbanization is undeniable (Wise et al. 2023). In the thick details of the paper, the themes of conquest, globalization, and inequality appear. Though primarily descriptive, the analysis contains an implicit normative critique of anti-Blackness, colorism, and, most obviously, neoliberalism. Left for another day is a discussion of true reparations for conquest and a move beyond neoliberalism to construct a tale about Mexico City, and of all cities, that is about progress for all, or at least many, and not just a few.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Wise, Raúl Delgado, Francisco Caballero Anguiano, and Selene Gaspar Olvera. 2023. "Migration and Peripheral Urbanization: The Case of the Metropolitan Zone of the Valley of Mexico." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/01419870.2023.2174807.