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Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability: The Case of Mexico City

William Eisenstein

From 1983 through 1985, a group of several hundred destitute families living in a squatter settlement on the outskirts of Mexico City attempted to organize their self-built community into something that they called a *colonia ecologica productiva*, or productive ecological settlement. The goal of the *colonia* was to enable the community to derive its livelihood from the land on which they had settled through sustainable agriculture techniques, reforestation projects, and the use of inexpensive, small-scale, solar-powered technologies. This short-lived initiative was a response to the Mexican government's efforts to evict them from the land, a national park known as the Ajusco, and eradicate their settlements. Located on the urban edge of one of the fastest-growing cities in the world, the Ajusco zone has been and remains under intense settlement pressure, not only from the thousands of rural migrants arriving in the city each year, but also from real estate speculators and developers catering to the country's elite.

The fate of this land and the *colonia ecologica productiva* (or CEP) movement are the subjects of Keith Pezzoli's book *Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability: The Case of Mexico City* from MIT Press. The topic could scarcely be of greater importance, since the situation faced by the settlers of the Ajusco is all too common across much of the developing world. Macroeconomic policies designed to modernize agriculture (generally for export) and open up local industries to foreign competition have rendered millions of people, in Mexico and elsewhere, economically superfluous. Often they are left with no alternative but to migrate to rapidly-growing megalopolises like Mexico City in search of work. These same processes of modernization and urbanization, combined with population increase, have had well-documented impacts on the global environment, especially with respect to the frightening declines in biodiversity, arable land and mature forests. In this context, the challenge to create human settlements that provide a healthful and dignified livelihood while protecting (and enhancing?) ecological integrity will be one of the central issues of the twenty-first century. Pezzoli's effort to record and analyze a movement among the poorest of the poor to design for themselves such a settlement, in

the face of institutional resistance, is therefore a most welcome addition to the literature.

The particular facts of the CEP movement in Ajusco raise a number of intriguing questions for city planners, and these theoretical issues are Pezzoli's central concern. The struggle over the lands of the Ajusco reserve, in his account, was a contest between two different socially constructed definitions of nature, each rooted in class politics. In the government's "politics of containment," a "museum-piece" view of nature in which human beings play no constructive role dovetailed neatly with its political disposition to limit the growth of squatter settlements and expand the purview of the formal housing market. But the residents of the *colonias* responded to an imposing bureaucratic complex of housing officials, environmental scientists, economists, and even a militarized ecological police force called *ecoguardias*, with a development program in which human beings preserve ecological integrity through the very productive activities that sustain their livelihoods. This emphasis on the social, rather than scientific, aspects of landscape ecology places Pezzoli firmly within the "political ecology" school of environmental planners, historians and critical theorists now centered around the Santa Cruz journal *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*. Though he never explicitly refers to socialism or rigorously analyzes the class structure of Mexico, he acknowledges throughout his intellectual debt to thinkers such as Enrique Leff and Martin O'Connor (both associated with CNS), as well as Manuel Castells and John Friedmann.

Given this theoretical framework, it is surprising that Pezzoli does not go to greater lengths to convince the reader of the pivotal point that the Mexican government was indeed motivated by a desire for social control as much as the protection of the Ajusco zone. One of Pezzoli's (and the CEP advocates') contentions is that the government was ignoring, or perhaps even aiding and abetting, developers' efforts to penetrate the ecological reserve at the same time as they were deploying armed men and women to destroy squatter settlements. Though scattered references are made to the role of upper class real estate speculators and corrupt government officials in compromising the boundaries of the Ajusco reserve, this evidence is presented in an almost offhand way and never woven together into a compelling portrait of an official double standard. Without a more airtight factual case in support of this argument, the reader cannot be sure that the Ajusco situation actually has as much importance for a theoretical understanding of political ecology as is claimed.

Nonetheless, the plan articulated by the *colonos* and their allies in the universities was remarkable in its own right. The technologies at the core of the program were two variations of a composting system called the SIRDO, one for transforming solid waste into organic fertilizer, and one for purifying waste water to cleanliness levels suitable for irrigation of crops and aquaculture. Through the introduction of these fairly simple, solar-powered systems, the CEP members hoped to transform one of the most difficult problems facing the community – the lack of basic sanitation and the attendant health risks – into the raw materials for small-scale, ecologically benign agricultural enterprises. These projects, which ranged from fruit growing to fish farming to reforestation, were envisioned as the engines for the economic development of the community. Crucially, they also relied on collective, not individual, control of the land. When the government decided in 1985 to defuse the escalating political confrontation in the Ajusco by allowing some of the settlements to be incorporated into the legal urbanized zone and awarding titles to plots of land on an individual basis, much of the solidarity that had been built up within the CEP movement in the prior two years dissipated. The resulting internal divisions compelled external supporters in Mexican universities and grassroots environmental groups, including those who had been funding the SIRDO projects, to abandon the movement.

The circumstances and dilemmas of urban growth in Mexico City, as presented here, raise a number of important challenges to the thinking of American planners. Urban sprawl, for example, is not as easy to condemn when land conversion at the urban edge is a necessity for survival, instead of the prerogative of the privileged. More fundamentally, one cannot read about the difficulties that the majority of the population has in finding housing through the legal market without feeling ambivalence about the role of formal planning. The mere existence of power lines and indoor plumbing often is enough to price a sizable fraction of the population out of the market, forcing them to make do on their own. And yet, according to Pezzoli, too often planners have resisted self-build initiatives, instead of treating them as a necessary starting point for urban development under these circumstances. Some perspective on the history of the self-build movement within the planning profession, especially the work of John Turner and others in Latin America, might have sharpened these questions even further.

The CEP program and the dynamics of the movement itself actually are given fairly scant treatment. Less than a quarter of the book (and the final quarter at that) is devoted to detailed description

of the settlements and the political movement made by the people who lived there. The remainder of the work is background material on the theory of political ecology, a very general ecological history of Mexico City and analysis of its current status, and a discussion of recent trends in international urban environmental planning. There is a frustrating, circular quality to the book whereby the theoretical and historical stage is set again and again, but the actors never seem to emerge from the wings. Despite the fact that Pezzoli lived in the settlements for “months at a time” (p. xvi), only a handful of individual activists are ever named, and the opinions and attitudes of these people are never presented. Most strikingly, there are no interviews with key participants or any oral accounts of this brief period when they challenged state power. The reader gains little understanding of the real nuts and bolts of building such a movement, or how people in the settlements viewed the government or their middle-class supporters, or the difficult choices that they faced when the government began to offer concessions. The movement is presented as a case study in the narrowest sense of that term – a prop for various theoretical constructs – and not as a product of the real suffering and struggle of real people. If social science has a purpose, it must be to examine such histories critically so that others may learn from the accomplishments and failures of people like the *colonos* of the Ajusco, not merely to hammer their experiences into predetermined conceptual frameworks. On that score, *Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability* cannot be judged a success.

References

- Pezzoli, Keith. 1998. *Human Settlements and Planning for Ecological Sustainability: The Case of Mexico City*. Cambridge: MIT Press