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Uneven state formalization and periurban housing production in Hanoi and Mexico City: Comparative reflections from the global South

Abstract

In the early 2000s, Vietnam and Mexico turned to the private sector to respond to increasing housing demand and tame the growth of uncontrolled periurban settlements. Around Hanoi, such arrangements fostered the construction of vertical developments while large subdivisions of single-family houses spread over former lakebeds in the peripheries of Mexico City. A stronger role of the private sector in the planning and provision of housing is often seen as an outcome of crisis-driven and crisis-inducing neoliberal reforms. However, the cases of Vietnam and Mexico suggest that a fuller understanding of housing production strategies currently favored by each state needs to account for important elements of continuity in social, political and economic practices. This continuity is demonstrated through the comparative analysis of three aspects of the restructuring of housing production in Mexico City's and Hanoi's periurban areas: i) the discourses of 'order' used to legitimate heightened private sector involvement; ii) legislative reforms facilitating periurban land appropriation for redevelopment; and iii) the sociospatial outcomes of these recent changes in terms of housing affordability, liveability and quality. We conclude that both city-regions, despite important differences in their institutional and economic systems display enduring state/market/civil society relations associated with processes of "uneven state formalization." This continuity and unevenness, we argue, better explains recent transformations of periurban housing production than an emphasis on the ruptures resulting from neoliberal reforms.

Keywords

Periurban housing production, planning, neoliberalism, crisis, uneven state formalization, land development, clientelism, Hanoi, Mexico City

Introduction

In the late 1990s, Vietnam and Mexico began to deeply transform their national housing production systems in an effort to meet rising demands for urban housing and to tame informal residential developments at the periphery of existing urban centres. The two countries revised existing housing policy orientations and reformed periurban land control legislation (along with access to credit) so as to heighten the role of private and semi-private developers in the planning, commercialization, and management of large-scale land redevelopments.

The shift toward new models of periurban urban housing production resulted in different territorial outcomes. In Vietnam, policy changes began around 1992 and fostered the construction of vertical periurban developments on paddy fields called 'new urban areas' (see Figure 1). The production of these new living environments and the provision of services in them are dominated by domestic actors and, more specifically, by privatized (or semi-privatized) state-owned enterprises financed by individual buyers and speculators and by Vietnam's emerging commercial banking sector. A survey conducted by one of the authors indicates that, by 2013, the

province of Hanoi alone had approved the construction of approximately 250 redevelopment projects which, once completed, are expected to shelter about 2,8 million residents.

In Mexico, with the end of the 71-year PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) ruling and the lack of a clear urban policy to guide urban development, the PAN (Partido Accion Nacional) government adopted a new Housing Act in 2006, which positioned the housing sector as central to economic growth (Congress 2006; 2011). Homebuilding developers, in close partnership with mortgage financing agencies, were given a prominent role in developing mass-produced ‘social interest housing’ on periurban lands (García Peralta and Hofer 2006). An unprecedented construction boom followed that saw large subdivision developments of 30 to 50m² single-family houses (see Figure 2) predominantly built by large, state-subsidized companies listed on the Mexican stock exchange and financed by U.S. and European investors.¹ Between 1999 and mid-2011, the State of Mexico alone authorised the construction of 256 developments (for a total of 564,832 units) for a projected 2.5 million residents (Diaz in Sanchez 2012). Housing developments emerged on the outskirts of Mexico City where developers maximized their profits through distinctly modern tools: economies of scale through appropriation of cheaper (and often flood-prone) peripheral lands, vertical integration of production, promotion and sale activities, and homogeneity of construction.



Figure 1: Van Khe, a redevelopment under construction at the periphery of Hanoi, April 2013. Credit: Danielle Labbé



Figure 2: Real de San Martin in Valle de Chalco (on the flank of the Xico volcano), November 2009. Credit: Feike de Jong

As the official discourse went, these new periurban housing production systems were needed to address problems generated by earlier housing policies and governing practices that had supported self-building practices on the edges of Hanoi and Mexico City. In Vietnam and Mexico, national governments and planning authorities argued that a new model of periurban housing production, based on large-scale, planned redevelopment by corporate actors, would rein

¹ With the defeat of the PAN, the new PRI administration (2012to present) redirected urban growth to more central mixed-use areas as a way to contain sprawl and protect ecologically sensitive areas. Peña Nieto’s new urban development and housing policy promotes vertical housing in central areas, which combined with homebuilding companies’ growing debt load, decline in sales, and uncertainty related to their land reserves, created a major crisis in the building industry -- once held as the driver of the economy (BBVA Research Unit 2013). Vietnam also experienced a major housing debacle between 2009 and 2013. This situation has been attributed to commercial banks’ unsound real estate lending practices, overinvestment in the production higher-end housing units, and excessive speculation (Nguyen Thanh Nga 2011).

in the problematic development of informal settlements on the urban periphery while providing rapidly growing urban populations with affordable, modern and well-serviced residential environments (Connolly 2009; Tran and Yip 2008).

Yet nearly two decades into these housing reforms, none of these promises have been fully achieved. Instead, major shortcomings plague the housing recently produced at the periphery of Hanoi and Mexico City which relate to their location in relation to existing infrastructure, basic service provision, and financial accessibility for lower income households. Around both cities, new residential developments have emerged where land was cheaper but also where basic urban services and infrastructural systems were either lacking or stretched to the limit (Bao Xay Dung, 2009a; Duhau and Giglia, 2008). Moreover, developers in both cities have often failed to fulfill their contractual obligations to provide basic infrastructure and amenities (OECD 2015; Vu Thi Vinh 2011). These problems are compounded with the poor quality of housing constructions, some of which started to deteriorate only a few years after residents had moved in (Sanchez 2013; VietNam News Service 2004). Finally, mortgage credit programs restricted to ‘formal’ employees (in the case of Mexico) and speculative housing production and exchange practices (in the case of Vietnam) exclude lower income households.

In response to what Robinson (2011) calls ‘a comparative gesture,’ this paper explores the causes of what can, without exaggeration, be called “housing debacles” in Mexico City and Hanoi. We begin by discussing how scholars have mobilized neoliberalism as an explanatory factor in discussion of recent urban changes in the global South in general and in Mexico and Vietnam in particular (i.e., Gwynne 1999; Chase 2002; Waibel 2006; Douglass and Huang 2007). In contrast, there is a body of literature calling for a closer look at *political* relations in both locales. This paper tackles this proposition by exploring local relations between the state, the market, and civil society in the context of peripheral housing development. In doing so, we distance ourselves from some of the comparative work on neoliberalization, which begins from the idea that shared connections to global capitalism lead to a universal, albeit locally differentiated, importation of neoliberal practices. Instead, our comparative strategy highlights how the circulation across different settings of a specific device of governmentality, (i.e., “uneven state formalization,” defined below), affects state-backed urban development processes.² We find inspiration in the work of a growing number of scholars concerned with socio-political changes in the global South and who contend that neoliberalism is as much about “incompleteness and continuity with competing configurations of power as it is about some kind of grand rupture or the global proliferation of a particular logic of late capitalism” (Schwenkel and Leshkovich 2012: 380; see also Ong 2006; Rose 1999; Kipnis 2007).

Hanoi and Mexico City are undoubtedly very different economically, politically, culturally, and—most obviously—in terms of territorial scale and population size. Yet a comparative study of the transformations in the housing systems of a democratic country (yet with remnants of authoritarianism) like Mexico, and a socialist country (yet open to market

² In each city, we conducted a review of relevant policy documents and official discourse on urban development, a press clip review, and a survey of peripheral residential enclaves approved, under construction or built. We also rely on interviews conducted with urban developers and policy-makers in the past five years for related research projects.

relations) like Vietnam is a fruitful opportunity to rethink how we theorize urban change in the global South. By bringing two different cities into close communication and contrast, we not simply look for “similarities and differences between two mutually exclusive contexts” (Ward, 2010: 480) but instead engage the two urban regions in an “epistemic and institutional” dialogue (McFarlane 2010: 732). As argued by McFarlane (*ibid.*), such dialogue not only produces more situated accounts of urban experiences but also reveals the limitations and assumptions of particular theoretical claims, in this case claims about neoliberalization as an important factor in Vietnam and Mexico’s recent housing debacles.

The comparison of Hanoi and Mexico City is interesting for three main reasons. Firstly, like many other metropolitan areas of the global South, these two cities are under demographic and spatial pressures given their rapid and continuous urbanization. Secondly and more unique to these two city-regions, they have a history of tensions with the United States that have involved different forms, intensities, and temporalities of military interventions. This has had the effect of nurturing different anti-imperialist feelings. This is an important factor explaining their ambiguity towards neoliberal ideology. Thirdly and most importantly, histories of revolutionary land distribution feature prominently in each city’s political imaginary and governing practices. As we will see below, this land history still shapes legitimizing discourses and ideas about territorial governance, social justice and housing rights.

After a contextual discussion on neoliberal explanations of housing reforms in the global North and South, we introduce the notion of “uneven state formalization.”³ We refer here to the conditions under which the established rules of capitalist development and modernization (i.e. free market, laws, property rights), even when they are enshrined in the institutions of modern states and societies in nomenclature, are in fact violated or transgressed in everyday practice by multiple civil society, market and state actors. This notion underpins the subsequent analysis of two major steps in the restructuring of periurban housing development in Hanoi and Mexico City: i) the legitimation of change through modernist policy/planning tools and discourses of ‘order’; and ii) the implementation of these changes through processes of appropriation, commoditization and transfer of public/communal lands to private actors for redevelopment. In articulating these two dimensions of periurbanization, we argue that Mexico City and Hanoi are entangled in multiple scales and degrees of uneven state formalization characterized by porous boundaries between state, market and civil society actors. This point is expounded in the last section of the paper. There, we briefly review the socio-spatial and political consequences of changes in Hanoi and Mexico City’s housing systems. This supports an analysis of the central role played by the rules of kinship and friendship (respectively known as *quan hệ* in Vietnam and *confianza* in Mexico) in shaping the new, and supposedly ‘formalized’ periurban housing systems, backed by the state in each country.

Neoliberalization and uneven state formalization in Vietnam and Mexico

³ This notion was initially conceived jointly by D.E. Davis, F. De Alba, and J.A. Boudreau in the development of a comparative research project for the *Red continental de investigación sobre la informalidad en las metropolis* (see Davis and Boudreau, forthcoming).

Research centered on neoliberalization has provided significant insights into the profound transformations affecting housing systems and a solid foundation for concerned scholars to engage in political debates about the exacerbation of social inequalities during the urbanization process the global North and South (see for instance special issue edited by Albeers and Gibb 2014). Peck (2013), in a very useful synthesis of recent debates between ‘structural’ explanations of state transformation in terms of neoliberalization and ‘post-structural’ counter-arguments insisting instead on the specificities of local cases, suggests that the difficult reconciliation of global structural explanatory factors with local specificities in the global South is better resolved with dialectical analysis.

But the neoliberal critique, as an “omnibus explanation for the contemporary condition” (Peck 2013: 152) has limits because of the complexity and diversity of local experiences (see also Leitner et al. 2007; Parnell and Robinson 2012), and also because of theoretical fuzziness in the definition of the concept (Le Galès 2016). These limits become all the more apparent when it comes to explaining urban changes in countries like Mexico and Vietnam where the modern liberal state, given its continuous reliance on clientelistic relations, was never (fully) formalized.⁴ Furthermore, the structural analytical framework of neoliberalization is difficult to apply to these two countries because of its overemphasis on the explanatory power of global economic crises, at the expense of enduring political relations and state formations.

In neo-Marxist analysis, which largely influences the best critical work on neoliberalization, the crisis, and particularly the (global) economic crisis, is a pivotal concept. Harvey (1999), for instance, suggests that capitalism’s inherent crisis tendencies can be resolved through “spatial fixes” whereby internal economic contradictions related to over-accumulation and fallen rates of profits are temporally resolved by spatially-extending the capitalist market. Such argument was at the basis of Amin’s (1976) and others theories of uneven development whereby crisis tendencies on the world periphery are mostly exogenous, that is, they originate in the global core and only have mitigated effects in peripheral countries.

Inspired by these neo-Marxist analyses, the concept of uneven state formalization developed in this paper seeks to nuance the central role given to global economic crises in explaining political and policy changes. Instead of insisting on a spatial axis of contention between global/structural and local/post-structural analyses, we suggest to rethink the temporal divide between crisis-driven and continuity-driven explanations. State restructuring is not necessarily a linear (developmentalist) process whereby states ‘modernize’ and then ‘neoliberalize’ as a response to crises of over-accumulation. Considering in/formality as an organizing logic of governance (Roy 2005; Ong 2006), the concept of uneven state formalization emphasizes the idea that at certain points in time, in certain territorial zones, in certain policy sectors, or at certain scales, the state can be highly formalized, while in others, it may function in highly informal ways. Similarly, and as we will see in the case of Hanoi and Mexico City, once the urban periphery is formally ‘developed,’ it can still revert back to ‘informal’ settlement because of the poor quality of the houses built and the lack of basic infrastructure, or because of continued informal governing practices of negotiation and speculation impeding on modern ‘fair’

⁴ Kipnis (2007) similarly warned against uncritical uses of the term *neoliberalism* as an analytical trope in the case of China.

market rules.⁵ This non-linear process highlights persistent practices over time. This is what we mean by continuity-driven explanations.

In this view, state formalization works as a device of modern governmentality (Dean, 1999). ‘Ordering’ and ‘rationalizing’ through the imposition of instruments such as maps, censuses, a legal system of land property, and mortgage programs was unevenly accomplished in various countries of the North and South, often with the aim of better controlling societies and enabling more robust markets (cf. Scott 1998). One of the consequences of such formalization has been the drawing of an ideally impermeable boundary between the state, civil society, and the market. With the rise of neoliberalism, the balance of power between the state and the market is changing, but the basic premise of a distinction between the state and the market remains.

Marxist critical state theory emphasizes hegemonic alliances between state and capital. However, it pays limited attention to the role of state agents, favoring instead crisis-driven explanations as a key-impulsive factor behind urban policy changes.⁶ Our point is that a different conceptual lense, focusing on *processual non-linear continuity* in state/market/civil society relations, more than crisis-driven ruptures, might provide a more fruitful explanation of the contemporary political and policy process in cities of the global South.

What we see in Vietnam and Mexico is the arrival, in the 1990s, of a new set of neoliberal discursive resources (e.g., efficiency, global competition) that serve to legitimize some of the housing reforms that will be discussed below. We also see the arrival of new policy ideas and tools inspired by neoliberal policies worldwide (e.g., financing mechanisms, land deregulation). However, the process through which these discourses and tools were adopted in Mexico and Vietnam was not strictly ideologically-driven, nor was it ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ (Martin 2007; Söderström 2014). Instead, central state actors, local elites, and real-estate developers have used the new neoliberal discourses and tools as a means to legitimize and reproduce existing state/market/civil society relations. In our two case studies, this global context allowed informal governing practices (e.g., collusion, patronage, clientelism) which had long enabled each state to go on, yet within a new legitimate language of alliance with the private sector and deregulation. Neoliberalism, in other words, did not simply arrive as an ideological project to transform the state, but as a set of new resources to support long-standing governing practices.

Martin (2007) convincingly demonstrates how Mexican authoritarianism and state violence in the 1970s prepared the ground for the adoption of neoliberal economic policies to replace the import-substitution system (through the privatization of government enterprises, NAFTA, land deregulation). She calls for a *political* explanation of these policies, instead of privileging arguments that it was an ‘economic necessity’ that emerged from the 1982 debt crisis experienced in Mexico (for instance by Gwynne 1999; Chase 2002). She argues that Pinochet’s Chile had an immense symbolic influence in Latin America, more so than economic

⁵ In borrowing from Migdal (2001), we posit that contradictions regularly arise between the state’s image as a clearly-bound and unified organization and the day-to-day governing practices of its various components guided by ill-defined boundaries between state, market and civil society.

⁶ Jessop’s (1990) work on state projects and state selectivity is one notable exception. His work offers an interesting analysis of how the state functions and could be fruitfully compared to the idea of state formalization as a device of governmentality.

inevitably. Mexico City's Echeverria government (1970-76) maintained good relationship with Salvador Allende. His policy of 'shared development' rested on anti-imperialist sentiments against the United States, denouncing the Mexican private sector for its 'unpatriotism.' However, by the late 1970s, a technocratic elite trained in U.S. universities gained considerable influence within the Mexican state, discrediting state-led developmentalism. In the 1980s, consequently, economic reforms began to be privileged over political reforms.

While some scholars of Vietnam (e.g., Waibel 2006; Douglass and Huang 2007) argue that foreign investment has shaped the emergence and governance of standardised and market-oriented residential redevelopment projects on the outskirts of Vietnam's largest cities, Gainsborough (2010) insists instead on strong continuities in state forms and practices since the formal opening to market relations in the 1980s. His analysis of 'equitisation' (the process of privatizing state assets) highlights how the Vietnamese Communist Party retains control over former state-owned enterprises through governing devices such as uncertainty and ambiguity. We will come back to this point in the last section of this paper when discussing patronage and network politics. As in Mexico, Vietnam experienced the strengthening of state-led developmentalism between 1975 and 1985. The Communist Party also relied on anti-colonial discourses. But it was hard-hit by a severe currency debacle in 1985 and by the collapse of communist states across Eastern Europe at the beginning of the 1990s. The establishment of a 'market-Leninist regime' starting in 1986 did not diminish the state's control over these market institutions (London 2009).

Vietnam, however, differs from Mexico on a central point: the state is not conceived as separate from the market and civil society. While it was a similar arrangement in Mexico before its democratic transition at the end of the 1990s, it is no longer the case. With the 1994 severe economic crisis, resistance emerged overwhelmingly from outside the formal party system. The Zapatistas is the most visible expression of such civil society vitality, but urban movements are equally important. Sader (2008) interprets the vocal work of NGOs and civil society in Latin America as the rigidification of a dichotomy between the state and civil society. He deplores such separation and argues that "[t]he construction of an anti-neoliberal alternative must begin with the reorganization or recasting of the state in favour of the public sphere, universalizing citizens' rights while divorcing the state and general social relationships from the market" (ibid.: 15). Vietnam and Mexico thus developed different relations to neoliberalism based on their respective institutional systems. Vietnam is characterized by a rather weak civil society (NGOs and social movements), contrary to Mexico where it plays an important role. As a communist state, Vietnam does not draw a sharp line between state and market, whereas Mexico does divide the two spheres. Despite these differences, outcomes are the same: continuing uneven state formalization.

In what follows, we will focus more on what Vietnam and Mexico have in common: long-standing practices of close alliances between the state and the market. We build on Gainsborough's (2010) and Martin's (2007) nuanced analyses of political continuity in order to explore how uncertainty and ambiguity in state-market political relations have served to maintain power for these actors at the expense of residents and civil society actors. This is particularly clear when we examine land-use governing practices. In other words, the concept of uneven state formalization enables us to compare not only two national regimes, but also how a specific device

of governmentality, state formalization, is unevenly applied within a single regime. In order to do so, we need to shift the analytical focus to the local, looking at center/periphery tensions in housing production.

Facing housing shortage: From ‘conceded informality’ to ‘modern order’

A first element of state formalization is the idea that with formalization come order and rationality. Both Vietnam and Mexico, despite their different historical and geographical trajectories, share a history of enduring housing shortages influenced by a range of authoritarian practices. Latin America has a complex history of authoritarian regimes and Mexico is no exception. Starting in the mid-1930s, business was legally mandated to organize in national federations, to be closely allied with the PRI from 1929 to 2000, along with labor and peasant sectors. A strong corporatist system enabled the PRI to remain in power for 71 years without interruption, blurring the lines between the state, the market, and civil society. In Vietnam, the Communist party encompasses the whole of the state and its top-down instructions are carried out through mass organizations structuring civil society, peasants, labor, and industrialists at all scales. With the transition to market socialism, the Communist party retains its centralized power because market institutions remain tightly controlled by Leninist principles (London 2009). In Mexico, transition to democracy shook the PRI’s authoritarian and centralized control, but corporatist labor and business bodies have retained significant power. Moreover, opposition parties (PAN and PRD) have reproduced the PRI’s structure and practices, creating a highly dysfunctional democratic system (Davis 2010).

The communist state in Vietnam has struggled to meet urban housing demands since it came to power in the mid-1950s. By the late 1970s, a slow but steady urban population growth had combined with the political ban on private construction activities to generate a severe housing shortage in Hanoi. While the state continued to champion a universal right to housing, the acute shortage of residential space in the capital city became a major source of discontent to the point of threatening the party’s legitimacy (Pandolfi 2001). Mexico also experienced a serious housing shortage in its largest urban areas during the uninterrupted reign of the PRI. Housing deficit has been exacerbated by accelerated population growth up to the 1980s and the continuing formation of new households (Connolly 2009). The current shortage of some 9 million homes is most severely felt in the outskirts of urban areas (the State of Mexico accounts for 7% of this national deficit). It is estimated to be affecting a third of the national population (Secretaría de Hacienda y Crédito Público 2013).

Conceded informality’: Blurring boundaries between the state, civil society, and the market

Both states’ incapacity to meet growing housing demands led to widespread self-build housing practices. In Mexico City, irregular settlements (*colonias populares*) were the product of successive cycles of territorial expansion, infill and densification conditioned by real estate dynamics, restrictive development policy in the core city, and a larger unstable economic climate (Davis 1998). By 2005, irregular settlements represented 64 per cent of the total urbanization of Mexico City (Connolly 2009). In Hanoi, the rise of irregular housing production started later in the 1980s (Pandolfi 2001). By the late 1990s, informal, self-built constructions were estimated to represent between 80 and 90 per cent of all of the city’s new housing (Koh 2004).

The ‘irregular settlements’ that took form in Hanoi and Mexico City metropolitan areas can only cautiously be qualified of ‘informal’ since the self-build practices behind this urbanization process were implicitly sanctioned by both states as a solution to national housing shortages. Such practice is better understood as ‘conceded informality’ (Altrock and Schoon, 2009) in the sense that self-built housing practices were facilitated (if not encouraged) by a tacit, yet proactive deregulation by the state of housing production practices. In Mexico, irregular periurban development was enabled by the political protection of irregular land sales, expressed in the allegiance to the ruling party in exchange for political support (Connolly 2009), while clientelist relationships between local state agents and residents have played an important role in Vietnam (Koh 2004). Self-built housing, despite its deficits in urban services and tenure security, was not only crucial to securing housing but also to ensure a relative political stability in both countries. This political use of conceded informality contributed to secure state stability in the center of the capital cities; in other words, it relegated the problems to the margins in order to modernize the center.

‘Modern order’: Authoritarian regimes attempting to formalize

In recent years, both the Vietnamese and Mexican states adopted new strategies with regard to periurban housing production and land redevelopment founded on modernist planning tools and a discourse of order. In an effort to ‘formalize’ the erstwhile ‘non-modern’ periphery, such discourse deliberately delegitimizes pre-existing irregular developments and the long-tolerated practices of conceded informality leading to their production.

In Hanoi, policy-makers introduced the new urban area model of development as a mean to bring order to the supposedly chaotic urban expansion process resulting from decentralized, small-scale housing production (Tran 2015: 85; Labbé and Boudreau 2011). From the outset, municipal authorities justified the move towards large-scale, planned, and integrated periurban housing production by contrasting new urban areas with the ‘disorderly,’ ‘patchy,’ and ‘uncontrolled’ urban environments resulting from self-built housing (People’s Committee of Hanoi 1998). In conferences and through reports addressed to planning authorities, built environment professionals reinforced this view, arguing that privately initiated residential production generates haphazard urban environments and thwarts the capital city’s effort to project a modern image (e.g. Dinh Duc Thanh 2001; Nguyen Ngoc Quang 2004).

In Mexico, the discourse of order responded to a long history of irregular urbanization and incremental construction seen as chaotic, anarchic and virtually unmanageable. Regularization of informal settlements attempted to impose a rational order to the disorganized and uncontrolled urban fabric by presenting a new paradigm of urban governance based on the spatial, social and political integration of the urban poor (Varley 1998). Recent housing and urban development policy have extolled the desire for a more orderly and sustainable approach. Under the PAN administrations (2000-2012), housing law promoted ‘decent’ housing and ‘orderly’ urban development in the peripheral areas emphasizing legitimate tenure and the fight against the invasion of land and irregular growth (Congresso 2011). In 2013, the PRI government of Peña Nieto reiterated the promotion of ‘orderly,’ ‘sustainable,’ ‘smart’ and compact development in its national housing policy (Presidencia de Mexico 2013). In a reaction to the previous political regime, order came to mean “territorial organisation” i.e., “building cities with housing not housing without cities” (interview Mexico City 2015). Central to recent housing and urban

development policies has been the need to order territory and urbanization as well as the fragmentation between different actors, government levels and capacities to enable a coordinated response to urbanization challenges. The creation in 2013 of a single ministry, the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development, signaled a step towards better interinstitutional coordination and institutional order.

The pressure to consolidate irregular urbanization was even greater as both countries strived for a better competitive position in international markets and entered hemispheric free trade agreements. This shows the strength of the global neoliberal project. However, the discourse developed to legitimize these policy reforms was framed more in terms of modernity and order than in terms of “there is no alternative to neoliberalism and we have no choice but to abide” as was the case in many countries of the global North (following Thatcher’s infamous phrase) and in countries affected by structural adjustment programs. The legacy of authoritarianism and anti-imperialism in Vietnam and Mexico, even if they took different forms, did not permit state actors to show such ‘weaknesses’ in the face of global pressures. Instead, official discourses sought to reinvigorate the idea of the state’s strong modern hand over the urbanization process. In Mexico, “there is a new attempt to implement a ‘right to the city’ logic” through “a sustainable city model” that “recuperate the existing housing stock [in order to] create surplus land value through housing” (interview Mexico City 2015). In Vietnam, official statements from planning authorities, relayed by the media and by the built environment literature,⁷ insisted on the importance of repositioning the state and its regulatory powers to the center of the urban space production process. This discourse underscored the capacity of new urban area redevelopment projects to produce more orderly, functional, and accessible neighbourhoods on the city’s edge.

Hence, the new urban areas model of urban development adopted in Hanoi explicitly aims at superseding the piecemeal self-building practices of the 1990s by replacing them with large-scale, planned redevelopments of at least 50 hectares targeting populations of between 5,000 to 10,000 people (People’s Committee of Hanoi 1998). Official documents guiding the production of new urban areas call for ‘uniform, harmonious, and orderly’ constructions (Circular 15/2008/TT-BDX) with a strong preference for high-rises over small-scale, individual buildings (Decree ND/02/CP). Moreover, policies emphasize the need to produce ‘integrated’ redevelopments that provide the ‘social infrastructure’ needed by their inhabitants (schools, health care centres, markets, playgrounds, etc.).

Both the Vietnamese and Mexican states have long seen the housing sector as an essential part of their respective national modernization projects, showing that modernity cannot be equated to either capitalism or market socialism.⁸ What has changed is not the idea that housing is

⁷ Such as *Tạp chí Kiến trúc Việt Nam*, the official magazine of Association of Vietnamese Architects, or *Tạp chí Xây dựng*, a magazine published by Vietnam’s Ministry of Construction.

⁸ This is epitomized by Hanoi’s vast program of state housing production (locally known as ‘collective zones’) implemented from the mid-1950s till the late 1970s which not only sought to provide housing to state employees but also to shape the city’s built environment and society according to a modernist-socialist ideal. In Mexico, modernist architecture and social housing were seen in the 1940s-1960s as the state response to increasing housing demands. Social housing of that period (many projects built by architect Mario Pani) were multi-family, mixed-use complexes (*unidades habitacionales*) offering residential, institutional, commercial and recreational facilities. The construction of Nonoalco Tlatelolco (12,000 units to house 70,000 people) in 1964 near the city centre is a good example of the use of modernism to ‘order’ a poor neighbourhood—as further demonstrated in the militarized intervention of October 1968 on the *Plaza de las Tres Culturas*, known as the Massacre of Tlatelolco.

an important vector for the materialization of imagined urban modernity, but instead the role of the state and its relations to the private sector. With new policies encouraging private sector production, the roles of the state in Vietnam and Mexico transformed from that of direct housing provider and financier to market player and enabler. These functions could now take place in broad daylight under the banner of efficiency rather than corruption. By emphasizing the ability of a new housing production strategy to generate modern, orderly, and functional neighbourhoods equipped with basic services and amenities, states and their market partners claimed that new alliances with the market in urban housing production can relieve housing shortages and help upgrade and expand deficient infrastructure networks or expand access to formal housing (transitioning from self-built to company-built houses) in periurban zones.

In sum, the housing reforms undertaken in Mexico and Vietnam resulted as much from domestic decision-making legitimated by a discourse of ‘modern order’ and sustained by modern planning tools, than a response to international pressures for neoliberal restructuring. National housing finance reform facilitated the development of mass-produced homes in peripheral areas not only through the ideology of home ownership but also through a fiscal and regulatory bias toward home ownership. But the close relation between state, lenders, and developers also led, in a second stage, to the informalization of formal housing through home abandonment and the complete disconnect between housing and infrastructure development.

Privatizing revolutionary lands: New mechanisms for state-led (private) housing production

These histories of ‘modern’ state-led private housing production in Mexico and Vietnam rest on ideas about housing rights and access to land grounded in their respective revolutions. In order to cope with housing shortages and as a response to the perceived inadequacies of self-build strategies, Vietnam and Mexico engaged in the deregulation of their revolutionary land reforms.⁹ These regulatory changes have profoundly eroded the communal tradition that used to define the Vietnamese and the Mexican land regimes. In both contexts, central states liberalized access to periurban lands with full knowledge that these measures, rather than marking a break with their revolutionary past, provided new resources that could sustain existing state/market/civil society relations marked by clientelism and patronage.

In Vietnam, the 1988 and 1993 revisions of the Land Law imposed land ceilings and regulated the transfer of use-rights between tenants, two measures which have succeeded fairly well in limiting land concentration and landlessness among rural populations (Le Duc Thinh et al 2009). Up to the mid-2000s, policies also strictly controlled the formal conversion of land to non-agricultural uses by requiring ministerial approvals. In the 2003 revision of the Law on Land and to the adoption of new Laws on Housing (2005), Construction (2003) and Real Estate Business (2006) led to a radical shift. Through the passing of these laws, the state formally recognized commercial real estate activities as a legitimate part of the national economy and equipped developers with new tools to finance projects. This arrangement involved a significant loosening of the conditions under which possessory rights over agricultural lands can be revoked and reassigned to new users, as well as the decentralization of land-use controls and expropriation/eviction powers. These new legislations purposefully maintain peasants’ limited property rights over agricultural lands while, at the same time, loosening the conditions under

⁹ Public/communal land deregulation was accompanied by the development of new credit mechanisms. In the interest of space, we will not describe these mechanisms here.

which they can be evicted from their land for redevelopment project. These changes spurred a domestic land grabbing process. Between 2000 and 2009, about one sixth of Vietnam's total arable land area was turned to non-agricultural uses (Embassy of Denmark et al. 2011). From 2000 to 2005 alone, appropriations of agricultural lands throughout the country are estimated to have forced approximately two million households off their land (Albrecht et al. 2010).

In Mexico, communal or *ejidal* lands (designated for agricultural use in perpetuity) prevented the sale of land through market mechanisms but were often urbanized through informal expropriation, subdivisions, sales, and invasions (Jones and Ward 1998). A 1992 constitutional change sought to control the irregular trade of *ejido* lands and to facilitate the regularization of the settlements built on them. This legislative change allowed the sale of communal lands and the possibility "for ejidos to convert 'use' rights into individual rights to sell, rent or mortgage land to non-ejido members; and to set up joint venture contracts with domestic or foreign private companies" (ibid.: 78). The major change was simply a greater role of the state in controlling land development. Increasingly, governmental and private sector collaboration created new opportunities for developers, construction companies and realtors. Large developers took advantage of the opening of developable lands on the fringe of urban areas, stockpiling land far in advance of use (Ferguson 2014).

In both countries, extended possibilities for selling use-rights and converting land from agricultural to urban uses rest on the decentralization of land-use controls. In Vietnam, land conversion was implemented through formal institutional reforms. Provincial governments gained the power to approve investment projects and to expropriate and convert agricultural areas for projects of up to 200 hectares. These new powers give them the opportunity to expand their budgets by retaining taxes and fees levied on new land-users (including investors) every time land is converted or transacted (revenues which were previously transferred to the central government). Transactions and approvals also regularly involve exchange of favors facilitated by an institutional environment characterized by porous government-business frontiers, lack of transparency and weak accountability mechanisms (Embassy of Denmark et al. 2011).

In this context, and echoing the recent literature on post-socialist continuities within state practices (e.g. Gainsborough 2010; McGee 2009), most land redevelopment projects mobilize patron-clients networks and state-business networks dating from the pre-reform era. In both countries, vast swaths of territory are now redeveloped through mechanisms that allow for the interwoven interests of state and capital to combine when neither alone had sufficient power to get things done. In other words, the land and territorial management reforms implemented to 'order' the periurbanization of Hanoi and Mexico City did not put an end to 'conceded informality' in the housing sector but instead created new alliances and development practices that continue to rest on informal governing practices. But this time, rather than favoring residents who can self-build their house, the new alliances play in the interest of business.

Continuing uneven state formalization: Porous state/market boundaries

In contrast to discourses of order and modernity, which were supposed to better the quality of life in informal settlements, the 'planned' residential zones built at the periphery of Mexico and Hanoi often fail to achieve even minimum standards of livability. In order to explain this housing debacle, we have suggested that it is more fruitful to explore continuities in uneven state

formalization processes, rather than focusing on the role of a globally-induced financial crisis. With this comparison, we found that thinking in strict terms of neoliberalization does not help to understand the particular conditions in which state housing policies in Vietnam and Mexico developed because of their particular revolutionary land regimes and authoritarian governance. In both cases, new financial mechanisms, de- and re-regulation, and a greater margin of maneuver for economic actors were prominent aspects of the story. Such processes are commonly analyzed as neoliberal. However, in order to speak of *neoliberalization*, we would need to mark a break with what was there before.

Although both countries faced important changes in the early 1990s related to global neoliberalization (the North American Free Trade Agreement, the opening of Vietnam to global markets and the 1997 Asian financial crisis), a fuller understanding of current political economic processes come with a historical outlook based on continuity of practices rather than rupture. The notion of ‘uneven state formalization’ emphasizes that at various points in history, the state was differently formalized across space, sectors and relations. In Mexico and Vietnam, for example, the state continues to favor patronage and clientelistic relations providing considerable room for manoeuver for local state actors and economic actors. These local relations largely explain why new housing mechanisms were derailed in economic and social terms, probably more than singling out the effect of global economic restructuring and pressures for policy change. Vietnam and Mexico have never been liberal states with a clear distinction between the state, the market, and civil society, nor have they been fully democratic (more so in Mexico than Vietnam, however). Instead of comparing localized implementations of neoliberal ideas, we suggest that global neoliberal processes are incorporated as new elements in long-standing practices that have only superficially changed in recent years. What global forces and pressures bring, most importantly, are new legitimizing resources for long-standing state informal practices and the state/market/civil society relations within which they are embedded.

In the two cases explored in this paper we might therefore ask: How is the exchange of favours within networks that blur the state/society, state/market divisions (practices known in Vietnam as *quan hệ* and as *confianza* in Mexico) affecting state formalization in the context of periurban housing production? Are they comparable practices? And what does the comparison bring to our understanding of state formalization processes?

Widespread clientelistic relationships and other patron-client arrangements have long been central to Mexico’s political culture. Clientelistic relations are deeply anchored in irregular settlements and, as Connolly (2003: 32) writes, “far from providing a hotbed of social unrest and revolutionary struggles,” such settlements often “provided a strong foothold for the ruling clientelistic one-party corporative state” predisposing residents favorably toward the regime. Indeed, getting land or housing title regularization, building credit, water provision, or protection from crime depends on *confianza*, that is, the relations of trust developed with local *caciques* (local political and/or economic leaders connected to the state apparatus). In Vietnam, access to housing in new urban areas largely depends on social relations (*quan hệ*). Indeed, new real-estate projects are rarely financed directly by the developer. Instead, they rely on the pre-commercialization of sometimes up to 70 per cent of the project’s units. Between a quarter and a third of these units are offered to employees and other individuals connected to the company or to governmental agencies (interview, Hanoi 2013). These privileges are frequently exchanged

among family members or sold to acquaintances. In other words, the distribution of units at a very advantageous price works as a reward mechanism inherited from the collectivist era. They are also used to sustain relationships with political actors necessary to navigate the maze of red tape characteristic of the real estate sector in Vietnam.

These two examples show that in both Vietnam and Mexico, particularistic ties (including but not limited to friendship and kinship) and ‘special’ political relationships embedded in everyday life are central to the governing of state/market and state/civil society relations. These social relations are comparable in both contexts, with the difference that electoral politics in Mexico gives a specific color to the exchange of political favors, compared to Vietnam where the aim is to sustain exchanges of favours more than winning votes. In both countries, breaking the bureaucratic rule is largely tolerated (Adler Lomnitz, 1988) and the ‘degree of inappropriateness’ of these practices is therefore fairly low. As Gainsborough (2010) suggests for Vietnam, porous boundaries between the state, the market, and civil society enable the state to retain considerable power because it deliberately produces ambiguity and uncertainty as to whether rules and procedures will be respected or not. Uneven state formalization, in other words, serves as a disciplinary mechanism, a device of governmentality, resting on maintaining ambiguity.

Indeed, in seeking to accommodate the demands for rapid returns on investment of business-state coalitions in the real estate sector, public planners in Vietnam adopt piecemeal and opportunistic development planning practices and easily bend official plans and development controls. In support of this view, we can cite the frequent derogations of land use plans, disregard for developers who forsake public amenities in approved projects, and the tendency for provincial governments to allow the development of profitable high-end residential areas where plans call for affordable housing, recreational areas, or industrial zones (Bao Xay Dung 2009a; VietnamNet 2008; Vu Thi Vinh 2011; Vietnam News Service 2011).

In Mexico, private developers work closely with public mortgage financing agencies to “decide in advance the number of loans to be granted both at a national and a state level” (BBVA Research Mexico, 2012: 33). Alliances with the private sector were justified as a way to decentralize policies but also as a presumed means to reduce pervasive corruption. Yet, collaboration between the public and private sectors related to urban infrastructure are not new in Mexico because such collaboration has long been privileged in the authoritarian traditions of the state through corporatism and clientelism where partnerships often retain amenable arrangements. Although clientelism permeates different social groups, political and entrepreneurial elites have been most favoured and have played an important role in shaping national urban policy (Guarneros-Meza 2009). In sum, business-state alliances in Vietnam and Mexico are long-standing practices of conceded informality. Before neoliberalism, they were called clientelistic. Indeed, unlike the rise of private-public partnerships in countries such as the United States or England, such arrangements in Vietnam and Mexico are not supported by contracts, and if they are, there is uncertainty as to whether the contract will be respected or not.

Conclusion

In sum, in Hanoi and Mexico, important policy reforms in the past two decades were the result of comparable informal practices. The two countries’ similar history of uneven state formalization pursues its course and may explain better the housing debacle than arguments about financial

crises. Mechanisms such as clientelism, patronage, *quan hệ* and *confianza* are strikingly similar to what a neoliberal analytical grid would call privatization, deregulation, and public-private partnerships replacing democratic rights and formal sanctions by backdoor deals and contracts. Yet the conceptual difference resides in the notions of rupture and continuity. Periurban housing production in Mexico City and Hanoi is politically produced and legitimized by local sets of norms and socially-embedded practices, some of them influenced by neoliberal ideas, but most of them resulting from older political practices. More ethnographic research is needed to describe how *quan hệ* and *confianza* specifically work under present housing regimes and their differences with the previous corporatist structure (for an interesting study of these transformations in the case of Mexico, see De Alba, forthcoming).

This comparative study seeks to contribute to the ongoing effort to “think beyond neoliberalism” (Leitner et al. 2007) and to “create intellectual space for alternative ideas that may be more relevant to cities where the majority of the world’s urban population now resides” (Parnell and Robinson 2012: 593). We have focused here on the quality of state/market/civil society relations in the relatively *longue durée*, showing that long-standing domestic political relations have more influence on the reform of the housing sector and state restructuring than international pressures from neoliberal actors such as the World Bank or the global ideological neoliberal project.

Despite a justificatory discourse about the need to ‘order’ and properly ‘plan’ periurban land development, clientelistic and opportunistic governing practices characterize ‘formal’ periurban housing production in both Hanoi and Mexico City. As a governing device, state formalization is unevenly applied in regimes where authoritarianism and anti-imperialism have produced states ‘with muscles’ but a high degree of tolerance to challenges to the rule of law. The cases of Hanoi and Mexico City are particularly interesting to compare because of their revolutionary history and socialist/communal land regimes. When privatization arrived in the late 1980s and early 1990s, scholars were quick to blame the rapidly rising global neoliberal project. But as the literature on post-socialist and authoritarian states has shown, neoliberalism may not be the more fruitful explanation of these reforms. We have suggested here that the concept of uneven state formalization holds more promises. Instead of seeing the tensions between structural arguments about global crises of overaccumulation on the one side, and local particularities on the other side, the concept of uneven state formalization refocuses the debate on the political, while enabling comparative insights.

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