

Areas of ill-repute. Immigrants, the city and security

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“Security” is one of the central axes of the debate on social image and immigrants as well as on policies with regard to immigration. There are numerous ideas on this, but the view which is perhaps the most widely-held and deepest-rooted – and at the same time false - is that which associates immigrants with crime. There is also another viewpoint which associates immigration with security, relating to the use (and abuse) of the concept of “mafias” – which is generally understood to imply that these are foreign mafias – as a means of explaining the cause of certain social problems such as drug abuse, prostitution or networks for the clandestine transport of people. It goes without saying that this simplification obscures the fact that principal cause of these phenomena is the demand for drugs or sex industry workers in the country concerned and, at the same time, the existence of a hidden, black economy or of policies which tend to shift aliens into a clandestine, illegal environment.

However, there are also other hidden relationships of the binomial immigration-security, such as, for example, the fact that immigrants are individuals who suffer high levels of insecurity as victims of crime, abuse, discrimination and the systematic violation of their basic rights. On the other hand, the policy of closed borders which criminalizes the right of movement leads to the dissemination of images of an almost bellicose hue showing law enforcement agents holding back the “invading hordes”, which, at the same time are “hordes” which swell and obfuscate the figures of suspects arrested for serious criminal activities as these are lumped together in the same bag as those detained for mere administrative infractions of immigration law.

All this has contributed to the creation of a framework of “criminalization” with respect to immigration. Immigrants are a threat to our security, but useful for maintaining our occupational structure. This image assists in the subjugation of the lowest level of the labour market and thereby facilitates the maintenance of high and profitable levels of exploitation and abuse.¹³

This brief exploration intends to sketch out one of the complexities of the relationship security-immigrant, which has to do with the construction of collective images of urban areas where there are large immigrant populations which are stigmatized as high-conflict areas. Our mental picture of society converts these into dangerous, run-down areas whose condition is a consequence of their large foreign populations.

The empirical data available suggests that the idea that there is more criminal activity among immigrants is false. However, there are hardly any data or studies which explore the belief that areas with large immigrant populations are those which have more criminal activity and insecurity.

What is certainly true is that areas may have differing levels of conflict, of criminal activity and of violence, and that these realities contribute to a greater insecurity. Yet it is also true that residents of some urban areas may have a perception of greater insecurity even though, in reality, the danger to which they are exposed is the same or less than in other wards of the city.

Why is there a greater *conflictivity* in some areas? Or – to put it another way- why is there a greater *feeling* of insecurity in some areas than in others? Identifying the contributing factors and relating the variables which explain these two phenomena is a tremendously complex process. However, in Spain, the deep-seated identification of immigration with insecurity permits simplistic, linear explanations, and a knee-jerk assumption that areas with a high concentration of immigrants are *ipso facto* dangerous areas.

¹³ For a discussion of other aspects of this, see: Wagman, D. “La criminalización de la inmigración: Políticas de seguridad policial, penal y carcelaria” in *Trabajo social y educación social con inmigrantes en países receptores y de origen*. Ediciones Aljibe. Málaga, 2004; and “Integración y inmigración” in *Inmigración y Seguridad*. Ed. Instituto Universitario de Investigación Sobre Seguridad Interior. June 2004. Madrid

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One thing is certain: once an urban area has acquired a reputation as being unsafe there is a tendency for this to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The feeling of insecurity can create dynamics which contribute to urban degradation. In the first place, this is because the residents abandon public spaces: the streets and squares become deserted and shops close. What Jane Jacobs calls the “*watching eyes*” disappear, that is, the constant presence of people in street disappears and therefore the numerous “watching eyes” which keep the area safe¹⁴. Moreover, the fear and mistrust generated by a feeling of insecurity results in residents seeing each other as threatening, causing them to avoid intervening in conflicts or, when they do so, doing so in such an aggressive manner that, instead of negotiating a peaceful solution, they only exacerbate the problem. As a consequence a cumulative process ensues thereby increasing mistrust, conflict, lack of solidarity and pessimism and adding to the perception on the part of residents that they are living in an unsafe and hostile area¹⁵.

Modern Spain has not been a country of great ethnic heterogeneity, the only significant exception being the gypsies. However, although they have traditionally been stereotyped as “dangerous” (and still are), there was never a very significant social perception of areas being unsafe or threatening due to their presence. Yet this has changed as a result of new public housing policies which in recent years have led to the construction of a number of urban districts with high percentages of gipsy residents, such as, for example, the La Mina district in Barcelona, the 3000 Viviendas in Seville, or shantytowns such as La Rosilla or La Celsa en Madrid, which has stigmatised these areas.¹⁶

In recent years we have seen a rapid and massive growth of neighbourhoods with significant number of immigrants which has led the emergence of perceptions of these spaces as dangerous, conflictive and unsafe. Among the most emblematic of these are areas such as Lavapiés in Madrid, Raval in Barcelona or San Francisco in Bilbao.

Nevertheless, the idea that the greater the number of immigrants, the greater the conflictivity, violence and insecurity, at least in terms of causal explanations, is entirely without foundation.

One line of research on the relationship between conflict/crime, ethnic minorities and urban spaces is that opened by Clifford Shaw and Henry McKay of the Chicago school in their monograph: “*Juvenile Delinquency and Urban Areas*”¹⁷. In contrast to the conventional mainstream of sociological and criminological thought, which attributes the causes of crime and conflictivity to individual (or collective) characteristics of socially maladapted persons, the Chicago school argues that, in the complex interrelationship between urban spaces, crime, conflictivity and insecurity, social and structural factors are determinant. This pioneering research has identified certain structural factors such as, for example, low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity and the high mobility of residents. They also found that the coincidence of these factors in particular urban areas had significant effects on local social organisation, on the attitude of residents towards their surroundings and on neighbourhood life. At the same time this might contribute to local variations in crime, conflictivity and insecurity. Urban areas which end up becoming what are currently referred to as *ghettos* are a good example of these factors. A further aspect which hinders processes of construction and commitment to local communities is the existence of social groups who are victims of severe inequalities and discrimination in terms of gaining access to the opportunities and resources of the society they live in.

The idea that poverty is one of the causes of criminal activity has never been demonstrated¹⁸. However, Shaw and McKay (as well as other authors) found a correlation between poor people living in the urban areas in which low income groups represented a majority of residents. On the other hand, poor urban areas with high indices of mobility of residence may be a factor in urban degradation. In this context a spiral is created, a black hole in which only those who lack the resources to move to better areas with better opportunities remain. Consequently those individuals with a greater social capacity, or social capital, leave and the urban area becomes even more impoverished. At the same time, the fact that there is more mobility within a particular urban area weakens the bonds which exist between residents. This in turn is related to a third factor: that of ethnic heterogeneity, which equally,

¹⁴ Jacobs, J. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Ed. Vintage books, NY, 1961

¹⁵ Another important factor in self-fulfilling prophecies is that urban areas which are stigmatized as unsafe may be subject to a greater degree of police activity, which, in many cases is markedly aggressive in character, which in turn adds to criminal activity, irrespective of the real level of criminal activity. This then ends up justifying the original hypothesis that the area was unsafe in the first place.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that there were certain tendencies towards the stigmatization of areas as “unsafe” with respect to urban areas which were constructed from the 1950’s onwards to accommodate the massive influx of internal Spanish immigration from the rural areas to the cities.

¹⁷ Shaw, C. y McKay, H. *Juvenil Delinquency and Urban Areas*. Chicago, Univ.of Chicago Press. 1942

¹⁸ Ver Hagan, J. Y Peterson, R. (Editors). *Crime and Inequality*. Stanford Univ. Press. 1995 y Reiman, J. *The Richer Get Richer and the Poor Get Prison*. Massachusetts. Allyn and Bacon. 1997

can be an obstacle to the building of social and communal ties. This is not necessarily the result of deep-rooted “cultural” differences, but rather of the existence of stereotypes and prejudices which increase hostility, mutual distrust and conflict among residents.

In Spain mobility of residents has been relatively stable due to the high level of home ownership and other cultural, social and historical causes. This is one of the reasons why at present there are no major *ghettos*, or run-down urban areas in Spanish cities such as can be found in other countries. In Spain there have always been urban areas which were regarded as “poor”, but which have a stable population, with residents owning their own homes, where there are significant social ties (formal and informal, and with a certain diversity of economic status. However, this model is undergoing important changes and one of the results of this are urban areas with a significant number of immigrants who have recently arrived in the country, with limited economic resources, who live in rented flats and with a high residential mobility, and who are subjected to significant processes of inequality and discrimination.

On the other hand, this heterogeneity, which does not arise from “cultural” or “ethical” differences, but is instead a social construction based on and rooted in stereotypes, makes the construction and maintenance of communal and social bonds even more difficult. Communication and contact between the local population and immigrants (and at the same time between the various groups of immigrants) is impeded. The subjective perception of the heterogeneity can be such that it becomes another self-fulfilling prophecy, where the differences reach such levels as to hinder and erode local social organization. Yet this is not inevitable. It is possible to foster initiatives to reduce the perception of “difference” and to promote the building of bonds and common objectives which strengthen the feeling of belonging to a neighbourhood or community and to bolster a feeling of unity and security.

Urban areas in which residents enjoy multiple bonds of friendship and informal networks of acquaintances, and where there are also organizations, associations or social movements have a greater correlation with urban areas which are less conflictive and more secure. The converse is also true: urban areas with persons or families with fewer ties to their surroundings show a correlation with more conflictive urban areas.

The simplistic idea that an urban area with a large number of immigrants is therefore more unsafe is false, but urban areas with immigrant populations are at risk of becoming unsafe areas. This depends on the social policies and practices which are formulated. Stimulating housing policies which favour greater stability and less abuse is important. So too are policies which promoting family regrouping, a factor which can promote participation and strengthen the social structure of the neighbourhood. Another important element are measures which favour the organization of the various groups of immigrants. A priority¹⁹ is opening channels of participation in the initiatives and decisions regarding the use of neighbourhood resources. It is also necessary to combat discrimination and structural inequalities, and processes of stigmatisation of entire urban areas.

We also need to promote housing policies (both private and public) which yield urban areas composed different economic strata in order to avoid extensive urban zones inhabited by families with very low economic resources, or situations of segregation.

We need to know more about the structural dynamics which affect social organization in urban areas. In particular, we need to identify the factors which prevent the consolidation of immigrant “ghettos”, with limited economic resources, and which are stigmatized and culturally and socially isolated from the rest of society and victims of clear situations of inequality. The question of immigration and urban areas with large concentrations of immigrants in terms of possible problems of security has nothing to do with the characteristics and nature of the immigrants concerned, but with the practices and policies implemented by governmental and social institutions. Urban security is achieved by acting on structural factors. In other words: policies - not residents - are what generate ghettos and insecurity.

¹⁹ Another very important theme is that these measures were much more difficult to implement and did not solve the problem of the large numbers of undocumented immigrant residents.