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## The Atlas of Sin in Latin America Nightlife and Its Urban Geography

In the early 1920s Mexico City, at the beginning of the revolutionary “pacification,” nighttime entertainment venues appeared spontaneously and moved around from one neighborhood to another. The best examples of this are tent theaters with their plays and music, although the same happened with cabarets. A decade and a half later, President Lázaro Cárdenas’s policies in the capital (1934–1940) legitimized these venues, which began to operate with a very specific management structure, supervised by authorities in charge of shows and entertainment. Ricardo Pérez Montfort notes that by 1937 and 1938, when radio had become a daily means of communication, station owners preferred to broadcast from certain cabarets.<sup>1</sup> Even so,

entertainment continued to be dominated by venues like the Politeama, Arbeu, Lírico, and Follies Bergère Theaters, and the Grillon and Waikiki cabarets.

In the 1940s and 1950s, Mexico City nightlife, associated with theaters, ballrooms, and nightclubs, had inherited the “suggestive” (indecent, obscene, licentious, sinful) show that had been in vogue two decades before. The productions in these venues, “entertainment for men only,” and their fellows in tent theaters, whose spectacles were considered “racy,” plus shows in first- and third-class nightclubs, would set the parameters for interpreting, measuring, and setting social values in Mexico City. Points of view about these social values were elaborated upon in the press and on film, to cite only two examples of communications media.

Cultural magazines and newspapers offered space to different authors for whom nightlife became a pretext

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and excuse for a diatribe about what was moral and what was immoral. In fact, journalists played a decisive role in the construction of the image of the immorality of nighttime shows, morality, and its imaginary. The press constructed an ideal of social values, many related to the perception of the female body. These print media also published journalistic opinions by intellectuals and the political class that closely followed a censoring Catholic morality. While the city's physiognomy corresponded to that expected from a large modern capital, the mechanisms for social control, identified with censorship and greatly influenced by the Catholic Church, categorically increased.

The reconstruction of post-revolutionary productions, vaudeville, and other shows, among many other elements, demonstrate how conceptions of the female body were forged that spurred the "guardians of public morals" not only to express their complaints and doom and gloom, but to carry out campaigns of "moral prophylaxis." These campaigns can be followed in the media, revealing a society in a constant state of confusion about what values like honorability, decency, integrity, virtue, and dignity should be, as well as about women's and men's behavior. Local media in those years abound with these kinds of issues.

I said that the existence of venues for nighttime entertainment delineated a specific urban geography. By 1940, both downtown Mexico City and the adjacent Guerrero Neighborhood reigned supreme as the territories of nightlife. In the following decade, with capital investment in these areas, mainly by media-owning businessmen, other centers for middle- and upper-middle-class patrons began to shine. Some examples were La Fuente, at 890 Insurgentes Avenue, opened in 1950, and El Patio, at 109 Atenas Street, opened five years before, ushering in a vigorous campaign of moral hygiene headed by the Mexico City government.

In the 1940s, nightlife was centered in the same area that two decades before had been demarcated by ballrooms and nightclubs: the downtown area and its bordering neighborhoods, the Doctores, Obrera, Nonoalco, Buenavista, Morelos, and Guerrero. The Guerrero Neighborhood, for example, was bordered on the south by Hidalgo Avenue, on the north by Nonoalco (today Ricardo Flores Magón), to the east by what is today the Lázaro Cárdenas Central Boulevard and Reforma Avenue, and to the west, by the West Guerrero Boulevard 1.

The thread running through journalists' chronicles of these activities and their participants was the association between the night and sin. This created continuity and fostered the image of the city as the capital of vice.

In mid-1950, the government used street widening as a pretext to decree the disappearance of most of the cabarets and ballrooms used by poorer patrons. This process took time and involved three mayors: Javier Rojo Gómez (1940-1946), Fernando Casas Alemán (1946-1952), and Ernesto Peralta Uruchurtu,<sup>2</sup> in office from 1952 to 1966. The Tívoli was the last of these venues, closed in 1963 after its final performance on November 10. The impact and effectiveness of this clean-up policy was such that, by the end of the 1950s, most of the old cabarets and ballrooms had disappeared and existed only as memories.

To recap: in the 1940s and 1950s, the social atmosphere in Mexico City was one that had been generated by World War II and the post-war period, with the economic and cultural benefits momentarily experienced by some Latin American nations. According to Emma Yanes, what was then the capital's Federal District was the center of the country's economic and political life, the reflection of a new industrialization-based national project.<sup>3</sup> A list of issues corroborate this: an increased birth rate; the growth of tourism; making money off the value of land; the concentration of government and company offices in the capital; feverish construction; the appearance of the first large hotels; the rivers being enclosed in pipes; the installation of deep drainage; the emergence of mass media (radio and television); and the building of new neighborhoods (the Petrolera, Azcapotzalco, Nueva Industrial, Periodista, Prohogar), schools, and stadiums; and the inauguration of University City in 1954, as well as housing projects for public employees. All this sharpened the increasing contrast between different sectors of society. Along with urbanization, poverty was sent to the periphery of the city, arranged to project the image of a great progressive metropolis.

During the first half of the twentieth century, a perimeter was established within which nightlife activities were carried out. That area, which stretches from the Roma Neighborhood to Nonoalco and from the Guerrero Neighborhood to the Circunvalación Outer Ring, was portrayed

in many ways by writers, journalists, photo-journalists, film directors and cameramen, and chroniclers. Daily life in that area linked to ballrooms, nightclubs, cabarets, and hotels designed for daytime and nighttime trysts was recorded by a kind of photo-journalism soaked in sensationalism and by the film genres that represented the urban night. I have called this area the geographical and sociocultural “Map of Sin.” The thread running through journalists’ chronicles of these activities and their participants was the association between the night and sin. This created continuity and fostered the image in the mass media of the city as the capital of vice.

In later decades, from 1960 to 1980, journalistic genres with a racier tinge created x-rays of the nighttime city. They told of processes that changed the geography, extending nighttime activities and offerings, but also of the social stigmas and prejudices aimed at those who participated in these venues.

Similar processes were underway in other Latin American cities, particularly Buenos Aires and Havana. They coincided time-wise with the Mexican capital and with regard to the identifiable urban perimeter as well as in the development, expansion, and representation in the media of subjects and scenarios of nightlife. Buenos Aires back streets and Havana’s nightlife appropriated the proposals of other latitudes, assimilating them into their own contexts and specific perspectives. These spaces were the site for constructing the nighttime based on domestic and foreign models. Other cities, like Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, underwent *sui generis* development following well-known cultural modes, distributed by industries like the cinema or illustrated magazines, combined with Afro-descendent modes in areas like old neighborhoods.

A group of colleagues living in Mexico City, Buenos Aires, Havana, and Cartagena de Indias and I undertook to develop an initial list of nighttime activities in these four cities, from where cultural proposals were projected to the rest of the continent. The construction of an “Atlas of Sin in Latin America” is a project that proposes, in the first place, to identify the spaces linked with those activities, such as cabarets, ballrooms, and nightclubs, applying the model of the “Red Map of Sin” in Mexico City.<sup>4</sup>

First of all, the aim is to identify nightlife venues on old maps of each of the cities, pointing to them by postal or zip code. To that identification, we add “social x-rays” both of the venues and scenarios where the activities oc-

curred and of the subjects involved. In all cases, for the years between 1920 to 1960, journalistic sources, illustrated magazines, weeklies, and some film footage exist that have left traces of Latin American clean-up policies and their scope in each of the social locales. With this, we aim to center on urban behavior and a log of nightlife in these societies, the changes they underwent for four decades, at least in the aforementioned cases, as well as the similarities and differences with regard to the record of processes and specific contexts involving nighttime leisure, the subjects who participated in and benefitted from these activities, the characteristics of the scenarios, the urban moralizing campaigns, and the media as purveyors and promoters of social values.

From prejudice to prejudice, the media has left traces of the conflicts, predicaments, setbacks, quandaries, and labyrinths sparked by the clash between Morals—with a capital “M”—and the proposals for nighttime entertainment in Latin America. Just as an aesthetic was formulated for decency and morality, so, too, was another formulated for their opposites, circumscribing indecency and immorality to the territory of nightlife and its entertainment. These complex processes, inserted in urban social forms of behavior, are what, at the end of the day, we are interested in diagnosing. ■■■

## Further Reading

Chica, Ricardo, *Cuando las negras de Chambacú se querían parecer a María Félix. Cine, cultura popular y educación en Cartagena de Indias, 1936-1957* (Cartagena de Indias, Colombia: Universidad de Cartagena de Indias, 2015).  
Valenzuela, Luis, *Trilogía de los bajos fondos* (Mexico City: FCE, 2004).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ricardo Pérez Montfort, “La ciudad de México durante el sexenio de Lázaro Cárdenas,” in *Juntos pero no revueltos. La ciudad de México durante el sexenio del General Cárdenas y otros ensayos* (Mexico City: Ediciones ¡Uníos!, 2000), p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Better known as Ernesto P. Uruchurtu, the “Iron Mayor.” [Editor’s Note.]

<sup>3</sup> Emma Yanes, “Los cuarenta: seductora ciudad,” *Historias* no. 27 (October 1991-March 1992), pp. 171-177.

<sup>4</sup> Gabriela Pulido Llano, *El mapa “rojo” del pecado. Miedo y vida nocturna en la Ciudad de México, 1940-1950* (Mexico City: INAH, 2017).