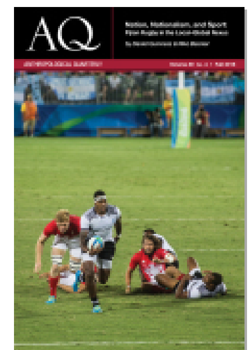
Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogotá by Austin Zeiderman (review)



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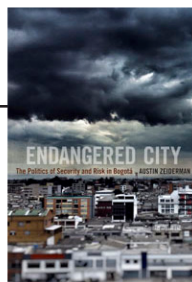
NEW RELEASE BOOK REVIEW



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Austin Zeiderman, *Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogotá*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. 312 pp.

Colombia is at a historic juncture, or so it seems. In less than a week, peace negotiations between the government and the FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia), the country's largest guerrilla group, went from the celebratory signing of a peace accord in Havana on September 26, 2016, to the rejection of the agreement in a closely voted referendum on October 2nd. In a country that has endured a 52-year conflict, with more than 200,000 deaths and 7 million displaced persons, the transit to a post-conflict era continues to be deeply troubled and the perennial "pre-postconflict" (Theidon 2015) moment raises critical concerns. Immediate concerns include the demobilization and reintegration of armed groups. These are daunting challenges, given not only the number of combatants and weapons in circulation, but also the availability of opportunities for rearmament in an expanding landscape of criminal violence fueled by drug trafficking, resource extraction, and deregulated regional economies.

More broadly, one might ask what it means to say the country is moving into a post-conflict era when the structural conditions that have sustained the armed conflict continue to be firmly entrenched in Colombian society. Among these is the status of security as an enduring rationality of government and a pervasive cultural framework that reinforces modes of exclusion and inequality. Is security, as a political technology and social idiom, being reconstituted? Does post-conflict status hold promise as a move toward a post-security era? What kinds of political spaces and modes of social engagement will post-conflict security frameworks enable? Any meaningful approach to these questions must begin by disentangling the

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dense strands of meaning and the multiplicity of uses that have made security one of the most pervasive yet opaque notions in Colombian society.

In *Endangered City: The Politics of Security and Risk in Bogotá*, Austin Zeiderman does precisely this with an ethnographically engaging and theoretically ambitious study of the governance of urban risk in Colombia's capital city. In a context in which fears of insecurity "saturate" (6) the public realm and violence has "the status of master-signifier" (29), Zeiderman's foray into the politics of risk expands our field of vision in important ways. His book complicates "causal and linear" (30) analyses of violence and security, exploring instead the open-ended and multi-directional processes through which insecurities are experienced by urban dwellers and acted upon by officials and experts. While resonating with recent scholarship on Latin America's "violence at the urban margins" (Auyero, Bourgois, and Scheper-Hughes 2015), Zeiderman's focus on environmental risk offers an "oblique" (29) perspective that unsettles dominant understandings of violence—from the criminal to the structural—and sheds light on the shifting politics of security both as a technology of governance and as a space of citizenship.

In looking at Bogotá's wide-ranging transformations during the past decades—from a city besieged by criminal violence to an international model of progressive urbanism—Zeiderman argues that disaster risk management has emerged as a critical framework of urban governance, shifting the definition of threat "from disorder, criminality, and insurgency to floods, landslides, and earthquakes" (16). To explore these shifts, Zeiderman tracks the mapping and monitoring of risk zones as well as the politics surrounding resettlement schemes. The bulk of his research was carried out between 2008 and 2010, in the midst of a leftist turn in urban politics in Bogotá, which saw the expansion of risk management in peripheral settlements.

Zeiderman's ethnography unfolds primarily in Ciudad Bolivar, a collection of self-built settlements clinging to the mountainous terrain of Bogotá's southwest periphery. The most expansive and impoverished of the city's 20 localities, Ciudad Bolívar has a population of over 700, 000 inhabitants and has been a main destination for rural migrants and internally displaced persons since the mid-20th century. Zeiderman shows how the area and its inhabitants—for years associated with criminal violence and illegality—have been reconstituted as targets of risk management. Unsettling widely held assumptions about the "how the poor came to inhabit landscapes of

risk," he perceptively asks: "How did zones of high risk come to inhabit the territories of the poor?" (66).

The book presents high risk zones "not as static and self-evident spatial units but as techno-political objects" that are continually "made and remade on a daily basis" (28). *Endangered City* usefully turns our attention to "endangerment" as an unstable process through which state actors, urban dwellers, and city spaces are brought together in distinct socio-political configurations. This is not the story of the emergence of a modern "risk society" (Beck 1992) in Colombia, but, rather, an exploration of the historical trajectories and social milieus in which risk coexists with multiple and often contradictory modalities of governmental power and political engagement (3).

Particularly interesting, from this perspective, is the political indeterminacy of risk management. Early in the book, Zeiderman notes that risk control and resettlement in Bogotá's peripheries do not conform to established narratives of urban transformation (17). Environmental management and relocation are not simply capitalist ploys to free up land for real estate development. Evacuated zones often remain empty or are reoccupied by new settlers. According to Zeiderman, a political economic critique "does not fully explain why, how, and to what end the state has committed itself in Bogotá to protecting the lives of the urban poor from environmental hazards" (20).

An alternative focus on neoliberal rationalities of governance, although seemingly closer to the book's approach, ultimately proves unsatisfactory to the author as well. While important scholarship has called attention to the variegated and context-dependent character of neoliberalism (Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2010), most accounts tend to assume a path from welfare politics to marketization and individual self-regulation. But in Latin America, as Zeiderman notes, "neoliberal techniques of governance…intermingle with political projects that…are set on challenging neoliberalism's hegemony" (21). Of particular concern here are the ways in which the logics of neoliberalism are deployed and reassembled to pursue ideals of citizenship and rights that are at odds with orthodox neoliberal tenets (Ferguson 2010, Roy and Ong 2011).

In *Endangered City*, Zeiderman explores these ambiguities carefully. He delves in great depth into the contradictions and challenges entailed by on-the-ground practices: from bureaucrats who conceive risk resettlement as "progressive and pro-poor" (25) to inhabitants who embrace their

own displacement as a path to housing rights. Although risk management is an ostensibly technical and "postpolitical" (25) framework, it appears in Zeiderman's ethnography as an open-ended and irregular field of governance and political action. In looking at how citizenship, urban space, and governmental intervention are negotiated and enacted in the terrain of environmental risk, *Endangered City* offers a compelling account of contemporary urban politics in Colombia. Furthermore, it provides a new horizon to examine urban progressivism and to reimagine global urbanism beyond the confines of paradigmatic critiques of neoliberal urbanization.

A first question the book raises has to do with the trajectories through which the anticipation of risks became a critical governmental concern. Urban danger in Bogotá has a long history that can be traced back to colonial conceptions of order and contagion (Alzate Echeverri 2007). For Zeiderman, however, excessive attention to colonial legacies can "[flatten the] temporality of the present and the recent past" (29). In an attempt to capture this proximate temporal texture, Chapter 1 turns to two catastrophes that shook the foundations of Colombian society in 1985 and that, according to Zeiderman, led to "the emergence of risk as a technique for governing cities" (38). The first was a volcanic eruption that destroyed the town of Armero on November 13, 1985, killing over 20,000 people and becoming the deadliest disaster in recorded Colombian history. The second—which occurred a week beforehand, on November 6—was the M-19 guerrilla siege of the Palace of Justice in downtown Bogotá, which resulted in nearly 100 deaths and 11 forced disappearances. Zeiderman argues that in the following years these events were "actualized" (38) as a "failure of foresight" (49) on the part of the state. Both catastrophes would ultimately "authorize the governmental imperative to protect life against a range of potential threats and make prophecy and prognosis foundational to political authority and responsibility" (53).

While Zeiderman's analysis of news coverage and official reports demonstrates that discourses of preventability initially linked these events, his discussion hints at broader issues that are central to examinations of state authority in Colombia. Of particular relevance are notions of state failure and absence, and how they have shaped the imagination of the state in Colombia (Serje 2013). In the siege of the Palace of Justice, for instance, ideas of preventability were closely linked to critiques of deliberate state omissions—most notably the removal of security from the building days before the assault—and of an overly militarized response after

it occurred. Equally relevant is the place of accountability and memory within Colombia's murky history of state, criminal, and insurgent violence. The Holocaust of the Justice Palace, in particular, emerged over time as a forceful instance of state impunity, criminal collusion, and injustice. This suggests a messier process of "actualization" in which siege of the Palace became a pivotal point of convergence for competing diagnostics of the state, from lack of prevention and prognosis to human rights violations and institutional forgetfulness. In this sense, the chapter ultimately calls attention to the deeply unstable relationship between risk and violence, "political catastrophe" and "natural disaster" (59).

In Chapter 2, Zeiderman develops a fine-grained historical and ethnographic analysis of the emergence of risk as a technology of governance in Colombia. He shows in great detail the multi-stranded and non-linear "governmentalization of risk" (67), from early 20th century emergency responses to contemporary risk management. In Bogotá, Zeiderman explains, risk management became firmly established within the city's policy repertoire in the 1990s. During this period "the imperative to govern the city as a space of risk extended beyond the domain of environmental hazards" (73) and included, for instance, the treatment of urban violence through the epidemiological control of risk factors (such as alcohol consumption and illegal gun possession). This expanded approach to urban risk was part of a new brand of technocratic governance (1995–2003) of which centrist mayors Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa were the emblematic figures. While governmental interventions in public space and crime control were criticized in the subsequent decade of leftist administrations (2004–2015), environmental risk management remained unquestioned as an adequate and politically palatable strategy to address urban poverty in Bogotá's peripheries.

Zeiderman skillfully demonstrates, however, that risk is far from a static and self-evident category that lends itself to allegedly "technical, apolitical" (88) interventions. By following risk technicians in the field, he shows that "high risk zones" are variable formations that "are constituted by encounters between these technicians and the spaces and populations subject to their authority and expertise" (76). The stakes of these encounters are high, as boundaries of risk areas are drawn and redrawn, and residents may or may not be entitled to resettlement depending on where they fall along these shifting lines. Experts and residents engage "in the sometimes collaborative, sometimes contentious process of codifying the world in terms

of risk" (81). This co-production of knowledge is ultimately shaped either by inhabitants' longstanding mistrust of the government or their aspirations to be relocated from their precarious settlements (82). Crucial in this regard, is the "entanglement of diverse dangers" in risk zones, "where crime and violence are as common as sliding hillsides and cracking foundation" (82). Zeiderman shows with compelling ethnographic detail how in the midst of paramilitary threats, extortion, and everyday violence, risk management emerges not only as a technical alibi for narrow governmental intervention, but also as a crucial and deeply resonant resource for residents attempting to survive and, ultimately, "escape from a mix of dangers" (88).

Following this account of the profound "hybridity" of risk expertise, Chapter 3 examines Bogotá's overlapping and discontinuous "genealogies of endangerment" (93). Contrary to grand claims about the emergence of modern techniques of governance founded on risk, self-regulation, or biopolitics, Zeiderman argues that "there is no overarching logic of power that replaces what came before" (102). Focusing more closely on the institution in charge of resettlement efforts (*Caja de Vivienda Popular*), Zeiderman sheds light on a range of modes of engagement and political projects that coexist within the city's risk and resettlement programs.

The chapter shows how city officials take on pedagogical roles in their everyday encounters, enacting a hierarchical relationship in which residents are seen as lacking education about risk and prevention (103). At the same time, municipal authorities emphasize notions of shared responsibility or *co-responsabilidad* (104), which evoke neoliberal ideals of self-reliance and self-governance. Importantly, Zeiderman notes, in their everyday work resettlement officials also purposefully employed a "legal and political grammar" (105), framing their interventions as a way of "governing the city in the interest of the people" (105). Although the language of citizen rights and inclusion has been integral to urban policies in Bogotá since the 1990s, Zeiderman calls attention to a change in political sensibilities since 2004 and to the re-articulation of such concepts within recent leftist administrations.

One of the book's central arguments, in this regard, is that risk management has become the dominant governmental framework to address urban poverty and to intervene in the city's most marginalized peripheries. According to Zeiderman, it has offered government officials, and particularly those with leftist inclinations, an indirect means to engage with a variety of social problems and to avoid being either "labeled pejoratively

asistencialismo (a neologism akin to 'welfarism')" (108) or targeted as proponents of radical ideology (106). While Zeiderman's explanation seems plausible, it is important to consider other factors that may have also contributed to the favoring of risk management as "a seemingly neutral political rationality" (110). Most significant here is what one could call a politics of prioritization and which has less to do with ideology than with bureaucratic logics. In the midst of an expanding housing crisis, environmental risk and resettlement "narrowed the state's responsibility" (111) in the relation to Colombia's constitutional 'right to decent housing,' giving bureaucrats a legitimate framework for the distribution of scarce resources.

Furthermore, risk management also provided officials with technical resources to condition the allegedly universal right to housing by "establishing degrees of entitlement based on levels of vulnerability" (113). The words of a resettlement manager were most revealing in this regard: "In a poor country like ours with a weak state, when the constitution says 'right to housing' this requires lots of fine print" (113). Beyond simply constituting a "politically safe" (111) way to confront poverty, such techniques suggest a paradoxical form of technocratic populism that would moderate unfulfillable political promises, while retaining a medium to build a "political constituency among the urban poor" (105). Crucial in this regard is the enduring presence of "kinship and familial" (108) and "patron–client" (123) relationships between state officials and local inhabitants. Such models of political engagement were at the core of peripheral urbanization during the 20th century, and their reconfiguration through risk management suggests a recurring mutation of urban clientelism under the façades of technical and progressive policies (Gutiérrez Sanín 1998).

If risk management became the government's preferred avenue to deal with urban poverty, the politics of life and vulnerability has also become a key resource to make claims on the state and attain some form of sociopolitical recognition. In Chapter 4, Zeiderman carries out a penetrating ethnographic analysis of the ways in which impoverished urban dwellers mobilize notions of endangerment and risk to access the benefits of urban citizenship. He demonstrates how "the politics of rights is subordinated to a politics of life" (134) and "urban citizenship is predicated on and subordinated to the political rationality of security" (136). In the midst of multiple dangers and a sharply stratified terrain of vulnerability and victimhood (142), urban dwellers employ a variety of tactics "to be recognized as lives at risk" (138) and become legitimate subjects of governmental protection.

The chapter presents a textured account of the spatial itineraries that individuals and collectives follow in their search for citizenship. Internally displaced persons often move from rural towns into evacuated risk zones on the urban periphery. Many seek to be resettled or at least to "hold back the threat of eviction" (141) by merging their status as victims of the armed conflict with their new environmental vulnerabilities. Others emphasize the acute risks of being caught between "landslides and death threats" in order to "ensure the distribution of entitled benefits" (143), persuading bureaucrats to expedite their resettlement. And, finally, demonstrations of vulnerability have taken center stage in recent years, with the occupation of parks and plazas by internally displaced persons, or *desplazados*, seeking state assistance and social recognition.

Zedeirman vividly recounts a series of public demonstrations that made headlines in 2008 and 2009. Hundreds of *desplazados* occupied a park on two occasions in an affluent neighborhood in north Bogotá, while a year later a group of over 500 set up a "veritable refugee camp" (150) in one of the city's largest public spaces, Third Millennium Park, in the city center. By looking closely at the terms of the public debates that surrounded these spectacles of vulnerability, Zeiderman identifies the pitfalls and tensions that are inherent to such projects of recognition. He calls attention to a politics of suspicion that led to "allegations of a manipulative force behind the protest and reports of demonstrators being held against their will" (151). The vulnerable masses were portrayed as passive victims of manipulative opportunists, typically referred to as *vivos* (literally, "alive") in Colombia (148). Previously a resource for claims of vulnerability, the politics of life was thus delegitimized by the figure of el vivo.

This tendency to oppose individual agency to social exploitation is fairly common in Bogotá and also informs pervasive views of street vendors as being simply pawns of manipulative "public space mafias." Similarly, the Third Millennium Park occupation was framed by authorities and the media as being subject to the manipulation of unscrupulous opportunists, until the first cases of swine flu appeared in Bogotá, radically redefining the event. It was only with the explosion of a "health crisis" and when the *desplazados* became "vulnerable in a biomedical sense" (156) that an agreement for state assistance and voluntary withdrawal was reached. Zeiderman successfully excavates an opaque field of vulnerabilities and victimologies to shed light on forms of recognition and political praxis that are inextricably linked to the experience of endangerment.

From the analysis of urban space "as terrain, target, and technique" (150) of risk management and political recognition, the book moves into an exploration of temporality "as a domain of social control and as a terrain of political possibility" (164). Drawing inspiration from the work of AbdouMaliq Simone, Zeiderman examines an anticipatory urban politics centered "on what has not yet happened and may never actually occur" (164). While previous chapters detailed the techno-political work that goes into managing risk zones and inhabitants' tactical navigations of landscapes of endangerment, Chapter 5 examines the politics of resettlement and its critical connection to the realm of anticipations and potentialities. Far from the seeming monopoly of official city planning over the future, Zeiderman weaves together stories that reveal "the coexistence of multiple temporalities and figurations of urban futurity" (164).

Inhabitants are brought into a specific logic of temporality from the moment they are declared residents of high risk zones and are required to anticipate and submit to the prognosis of disaster. As beneficiaries of resettlement schemes, they are also compelled to imagine their relocation in unbuilt developments in which promises of social mobility and new forms of endangerment are uncertain (170). According to Zeiderman, at stake here is an ambivalent rationality of government, which he terms the "subjunctive state" and which is guided by expectation and speculation (171). Critically, he demonstrates that both governors and the governed have come to share this logic, reinforcing an urban politics essentially linked to future threats and insecurities.

The chapter concludes with an illuminating analysis of the deployment of anticipatory politics by the urban poor as a means to critique state policy and demand greater accountability. In 2011, heavy rains flooded Bogotá's southwestern edge, leaving several low-income housing complexes under water. Residents had mobilized months earlier, calling on the state to act on what they considered to be the signs of the "imminent of risk of the river overflowing" (188). When the flood finally occurred, "prospective denunciations" (180) that had anticipated the danger became the ground for critiques of authorities' failure to respond to the threat and to regulate land use and development. Significantly, the mobilizations engaged the state through the anticipation of potential dangers and vulnerabilities. But by adopting hegemonic conceptions of authority and endangerment, Zeiderman argues, the urban poor were caught in a bind: that is, "while

positioning themselves as critical of the state, they ultimately reinforce[d] the security logics dominant in Colombia" (190).

This brings us back, full circle, to the status of security as a pervasive and entrenched rationality of government and horizon for political engagement. *Endangered City* offers crucial insights into the contingent and localized assemblage and deployment of security frameworks both as technologies of governance and as platforms for citizen claims. By exploring environmental risk, the book persuasively shows how security logics mutate and are hybridized, continually opening new fields for intervention and mobilization, but also reinscribing securitized conceptions of authority and citizenship. Although Zeiderman is careful to warn against "epochal shifts" (164) between governmental paradigms, he is at times too successful in arguing for the emergence of risk as a central technology of urban governance. This detracts attention from other key articulations that continue to shape urban governance in Bogotá and beyond. The role of legality is particularly relevant in this regard. The legalization of ownership through the provision of property titles (legalización de barrios), for instance, has been a massive undertaking in the city's poorest neighborhoods during the past decades and has proven inextricably bound to questions of security and risk (Eslava 2015). Closer attention to the relationship between law and security—which is foundational in Colombia's history of insecurities—would deepen Zeiderman's nuanced analysis of urban governance and politics in Bogotá.

But then again, one of the central aims of *Endangered City* is precisely to show how the increasing dominance of risk can draw attention and resources away "from concerns such as poverty, rights, equality, education, housing, health care, or justice" (205). It is here, too, that Zeiderman makes an important contribution to contemporary calls for "new geographies of urban theory" (Roy 2009). He cautions against critiques of global urbanism that simply invert the historical progression of modernity by repositioning urbanism in the global South as an ominous endpoint to which all cities are converging (200). Instead, risk techniques, such as those gaining prominence in Bogotá, should bring into question the expanding imagination of cities across the globe "as spaces of menacing uncertainty, imminent threat, and potential crisis" (205). In this regard, the book is a significant accomplishment in its denaturalization of endangerment as an emergent paradigm for governing and inhabiting cities (206). In his most ethnographically incisive passages, Zeiderman shows how technologies

of risk management are "vying for dominance" (203), how they are not yet fully stabilized but, rather, malleable techniques continually reconfigured and rearticulated in conjunction with alternative modes of urban engagement. And it is here that *Endangered City* strikes a more hopeful chord by pointing toward the possibilities of unmooring contemporary urban imaginaries from the logics of security: of reinventing "future futures beyond the endangered city" (207). ■

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