

2011
Vol. 4 Nº 2



UNIVERSIDAD
EAFIT[®]
Abierta al mundo

ISSN: 2027-2340

Revista de Negocios Internacionales

DEPARTAMENTO DE NEGOCIOS INTERNACIONALES

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Revista de Negocios Internacionales. Vol. 4 Nº 2 - Julio - Diciembre 2011 - Pp.111 - 117

Bogotá 2012-2015: Mayor elections and risk society

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RECIBIDO: 24/10/2011

ACEPTADO: 15/11/2011

Abstract

On Sunday 30th of October 2011, all citizens over the age of eighteen with valid and registered identifications, from the city of Bogotá, Colombia, were able to exercise their civic right to elect a City Mayor. An environment of frustration and anger from the capital's citizens surrounds the 2011 elections, stemming from the suspension of former Mayor Samuel Moreno Rojas, who was prematurely removed from his official post, after a massive scandal of public tendering corruption was uncovered by the press in June 2010 (Caracol Radio, 2011).

After having lost multimillionaire sums of public capital to corruption; after experiencing the effects of raising petty crime and property offences; after being bombarded by the media's reports on never-ending lists of risks the citizens of Bogotá allegedly run; after having endured for years the disappointments of being capital to a country eroded by war and poverty; it is interesting to ask the question, which are the greatest risks perceived by the citizens of Bogotá, and what kind of measures do they support to address them? The main aim of this text is not only to answer the questions; but also to point out, through these answers, the fact that Bogotá does not fit crime control theories that have been used to explain trends worldwide -such as risk society- creating thus the need to acknowledge and analyze the case further.

Bits and pieces of risk society

To address the issue of risk society, it is important to do a brief history of the main theoretical contributions that have shaped the concept, as it is now understood. Let us begin by saying, it was Foucault (1977) the one to rightfully notice that the systems of control and 'normalization' are not delimited by the walls that

separate prison inmates from the rest of the society. It was he who argued that the 'institutions of supervision or constrain, of discreet surveillance and insistent coercion' (Foucault, 1977. p.298) were subtly scattered all over the societal tissue. Whether it is the school, madhouse, prison, or hospital, these institutions are able to exercise control in a non-invasive way, due to the fact that they can easily camouflage in the everyday life of the members of society. This initial idea of embeddedness, was further developed and altered by scholars, such as Shearing and Stenning (1985) who depicted how the criminal justice system and, in general, those entities who have the task or the power to regulate human behavior, "moved away from a concern for individual reformation to the control of the opportunities that permit breaches of order to occur" (Shearing & Stenning, 1985. p.428). Taking it a step further, Freeley and Simon (1992) argue that this new form of penology is characterized by a managerial conception of crime control; a "custodial continuum" that places people who belong to different risk-groups, under different control mechanisms, designed to manage in a cost-efficient way each level of 'riskiness'.

By 1992, the concept, to this author's opinion, changes significantly when the most important text regarding risk society is published by Beck (1992) who explains the risk society as people's increasing perception of risks, developed because of scientific and technological advances. These risks cannot be clearly discerned e.g. a newly developed product/system may be in use in the society, while its actual consequences are unknown to the consumer/user. This creates an anxiety that penetrates all aspects of life; a perpetually escalating sense of risk (Hollway & Jefferson, 1997).

Leaving a bit aside Beck's technological and scientific risks, Garland (1997) touches upon what he calls the 'responsibilization strategy', which goes back to the early ideas of Foucault (1977) and O'Malley (1992), regarding individuals helping in their own administration process. He explains that, new goals of crime control such as reduction of fear of crime, reduction of crime itself, the promotion of public safety and the enhancement of a security consciousness (Garland, 1997. p.460) "are best achieved by acting through (rather than acting upon) the actors involved (...). State authorities seek to enlist other agencies and individuals to form a chain of coordinated action that reaches the criminogenic situation" (Garland, 1997. p.460), hence delegating some important control tasks to those who actually need to be protected.

This brief -and by no means comprehensive- glance at the history and development of the concept of risk society was necessary to establish the aspects of risk society that will be henceforth used. For the purposes of this text, two major postulates will be analyzed through the case study of the upcoming Mayor elections in Bogotá:

(1) technology and scientific developments have generated a series of infinite and

abstract risks, like environmental and health hazards, that penetrate all aspects of people's lives and creates strong anxiety (Beck, 1992); and (2) following Garland's ideas (1997), "social control relies more heavily upon non-invasive, routinized forms of discipline and surveillance (Rigakos, 1999. p.14).

Risk society in Bogotá

Let it be firstly noted that, when asked specifically about how safe the citizens of Bogotá feel in the city, 34% stated they felt unsafe, against 22% who felt safe (Ipsos-Napoleón Franco, 2011). But what is it that makes the citizens from Bogotá perceive so many risks in their society? If we use Beck's ideas to explain this phenomenon, it would be possible to state that advances in technology and science have led to a general fear of major environmental and health risks; or better yet, advances in science and technology have no clear statement of the risks they produce, hence uncertainty and anxiety dominate people's perceptions. However, it is possible to see that people from Bogotá are not very concerned by the risks that environmental disasters pose; in fact, in the past three years, less and less concerned is expressed when asked questions such as e.g. do you consider you and your family are being affected by –air pollution, water pollution, noise pollution, garbage in the streets, amount/lack of trees in the city (Ipsos-Napoleón Franco, 2011). Furthermore, not only does 34% of the population is not acquainted with the concept of global warming, but also, the only environmental catastrophe people from Bogotá are afraid of, is an earthquake (Ipsos-Napoleón Franco, 2011). This would mean Beck's concepts of anxiety due to technology and scientific advances is not really applicable to the population of Bogotá. Their perceived risks related to the environment are not the vague, unpredictable and difused chains of infinite risks that Beck describes, but instead a concrete form of natural catastrophe: earthquakes. Either because people are ignorant as to the impacts of technology and science, or because of the actual lack of widespread forms of experimental forms of technology and science, Beck's risk society does not depict the situation of Bogotá at this point in time. This is further demonstrated by the fact that the three most important candidates running for Mayor, base their environmental proposals in the basic idea of nature and resource preservation (Parody, 2011) (Petro, 2011) (Peñalosa, 2011); no further proposals are needed, since the public is not really concerned with it.

On the other hand, the three strongest candidates have emphatically proposed new systems of intelligence and data-gathering to combat what they term -with little regard to the actual meanings of those words- the 'Mafias' and 'Organized Criminal Bands' of Bogotá, who are terrorizing the civil society with violent crimes

and local drug dealing. The three of them claim they will increase the budgets of existing entities in charge of dealing with crime in the streets -i.e. the police- and to provide them with more and better tools to do 'intelligenece' and dismantle these "powerful and sophisticated mafias" (Parody, 2011). What is surprising to see is that, according to the studies of "Bogotá, cómo vamos", mafias and organized crime were nowhere to be seen in the society's concerns. The highest risk perceived by the people, was actually petty crime, not sophisticated mafias. According to the polls, 74% of the citizens of Bogotá were victims of an offence in the past year, and 77% of those people were victims of petty crime and property theft. Interistingly enough, the candidates and the media in general have managed to attribute almost all forms of crime in the city to these 'Organized Criminal bands'; in that way, they get support for their proposals to combat petty crime and local drug dealing, which they propose to solve by installing panic buttons in public transportation and crowded places to catch the thieves, and to militarize the exits of the city to desarticulate drug trade. This phenomenon is explained by a journalist by saying that people are fed up with petty crime; they know they can't fight it themselves because they risk their own skin if they do so, so they demand from the government absolute protection, and they support extreme measures in prevention and in retaliation to achieve it. They support measures which are like killing a fly with a military tank: it is incredibly disproportionate, and you dont even know if you are going to hit the fly (Gutiérrez Viana, 2011).

If we analyze this in the light of the second postulate, it is possible to conclude that due to the coupling of petty crime (the highest perceived risk of citizens in Bogotá) and the concept of Mafias in the city, the voters tend to support proposals with significantly intrusive measures like public force control of the borders of the city, or increase in penalties for violators, in the hope that they are in this way protected from their greates perceived risk. In this sense, Bogotá does not fit in the description of control being exercised by non-invasive and routinized means of social control. This is in fact quite the opposite of Garland's 'responsibilization strategy'; people are supporting invasive and punitive measures that will be imposed *upon* citizens, not *through* them.

Although, it is possible to say that people from Bogotá are willing to help in the exercise of control, in the form of a "chain of corrdinated actions that reaches into the criminogenic situations" (Garland, 1997. p.460) to a certain extent. This is illustrated by the enthusiastic support of panic buttons in public transportation: if you are being robbed in a bus, you press the button, the doors shut, the police comes and the thief is captured. One can say, never the less, that this is not much a sign of people willingly inheriting some responsibility

from the government's task of policing crime, but more as an example of the falseness of another of Beck's postulates. He explains that post-modern world risks eliminate social class differences because post-modern world risks affect us all without regard to class or social status. Even though it is true that the risk of getting robbed in Bogotá is high enough and sufficiently wide-spread to claim it affects all citizens without regard to social class or condition, the fact is that harm cause does affect one's concern for the risk. If a wealthy person is victim of petty crime e.g. cell phone theft, whether or not there is impunity and whether or not the authorities deal with the offense is of very little concern because the phone can be easily replaced; hence they know there is a high risk of getting their phone stolen, but they are not very much concerned about it. On the other hand, people in the lower social classes are also aware of the high risks, but they are in fact concerned with impunity and authority unresponsiveness, because they cannot as easily recover from the economic loss of having the cell phone stolen. Hence, the support for measures that act through Garland's 'responsible actors' are supported by the citizens of Bogotá, not as a willing acceptance of responsibility, but more as an attempt to neutralize the differences in harm that risk can cause across social classes.

Conclusion

It is possible to say that some of the risks perceived by the citizens of Bogotá are very real, like petty crime, mostly street theft; but some others like the attribution of all of these petty crimes and most of the other forms of crimes in the city to 'powerful and sophisticated Organized Criminal Bands and Mafias', are yet to be confirmed. In spite the utter failure of the government to provide protection from the risks that surround the citizens of Bogotá, the society is still not willing to, as Shearing and Stenning put it, "be involved in its administration". We do not see compliant citizens being careful, cautious and in charge of their own safety. The citizens of Bogotá demand from the Mayor full and guaranteed protection for them and their private property, and they are ready to support heavy military involvement and highly punitive measures, to achieve it.

It is thus clear that Bogotá does not fit theories that have been used widely to explain crime control trends, such as that of risk society. Let this text be an example of the pressing need to develop a strong stream of Latin American criminology, addressing its own processes, trends and needs, and proposing theories, analyses and solutions, developed accordingly. Let this text be an example of the pressing need to explain Latin-American reality with theories that are not colonialistically imported, but internally developed.

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