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Book Review

Scars and Resistances in Latin American Cities

by
María Mercedes Di Virgilio[AQ: 1]

Brodwyn Fischer, Bryan McCann, and Javier Auyero (eds.) *Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

Gabriela Ippolito-O'Donnell *The Right to the City: Popular Contention in Contemporary Buenos Aires*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2012.

The production logics of Latin American cities have not followed the same canons as those of American or European ones. Although in many cities we can recognize neighborhoods or areas that appear to conform to the "North Atlantic urban ideal," these areas or neighborhoods—as expressions of the so-called formal city—clearly adjoin and interact with what has come to be known as the informal city. The two volumes reviewed here contribute to the vast literature on Latin American cities and to discussions regarding poverty and the scars that informality has stamped on these cities since their foundation (for an overview, see McTarnaghan et al., 2016).

Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America, edited by Brodwyn Fischer, Bryan McCann, and Javier Auyero, is another in the long list of works on urban informality, but it attempts to move beyond the truisms and paradoxes found in this type of analysis (1):

> Portraits of the informal cities that focus only on their pathologies, or their transformative potential, can easily miss their constitutive role in extant urban cultural and power relations. . . . A second matter that must be considered is the informal cities' dual role as global phenomena and intensely local social formations. At first glance, the world's informal cities can seem disconcertingly similar, a "planet of slums" that share striking physical characteristics and are universally characterized by poverty and sub-citizenship. . . . It is easy enough to link those features to global economic, cultural, political, and environmental transformations and to end up discussing the "slum" as if it were an epiphenomenon of global history, the inevitable symptom of our interconnected pathologies. . . . The settlements' similarities are pragmatic, not determinant, and each depends on unique constellations of needs and intricate local relationships. . . . At most, one might say that the global informal city is also the rawest form of local self-expression, the space where literal and figurative facades thin away, revealing more transparently the relationships of power and culture that define each locality.

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Gabriela Ippolito-O'Donnell's *The Right to the City: Popular Contention in Contemporary Buenos Aires* focuses on a matter that is intimately linked to informality: the right to the city. In this sense, informality and urban poverty can be understood as resulting from the operation of capitalism in urban spaces and the way these spaces are converted into merchandise that serves the interests of capital accumulation. As a counterproposal, Lefebvre (1968) in the late 1960s constructed a political approach that defended residents' ownership right to the city. In order to deal with the effects of capitalism, he introduced a new political perspective that sought to rescue man as the protagonist of the urban world that he has built (Mathivet, 2009). On the one hand, the right to the city can only be exercised within a democratic context, a type of context that during the twentieth century was often closed to Latin American cities and citizens. On the other hand, as Ippolito-O'Donnell shows, the exercise of the right to the city often constitutes an engine for democratization processes. It is within this framework that she examines "the dilemmas and opportunities urban popular organization and movements face in their attempts at acting collectively to improve their living conditions and gain fair access to urban space" (4).

At first sight, the two works appear to be neither comparable nor compatible. *Cities from Scratch* is a collective undertaking that includes various theoretical and methodological approaches and reviews the past and present of the Latin American informal city. *The Right to the City* concentrates on the geography produced by struggles by the urban poor to gain access to the city. The two books, however, intersect on an important point: acknowledging the importance of territory and the capacity of inhabitants to act collectively. Ippolito-O'Donnell reveals that "geography is a constitutive part of urban poor collective action and the emergence of spatial agency, defined as the reshaping of urban space by reclaiming it, the ultimate goal of most mobilization attempts at the grassroots level" (4). Likewise, Fischer acknowledges that "poor informal cities largely survive because their inhabitants are so adept at making these places function, in ways that usually link their fates to established networks of power and profit" (2).

Thus they both recognize space as a social product (Lefebvre, 1974) and populations as agents capable of producing the city and of improving living conditions beyond the constraints imposed by the socio-urban structure.[1] This capacity is evident not only in the production of the informal city but, as Ippolito-O'Donnell shows, in struggles by inhabitants of the formal city to improve their living conditions. Both works also recognize the right to the city as something that is exercised and conquered through collective action. These texts reveal the full importance of collective action in producing the Latin American city and in the territorially based exercise of democracy. Ippolito-O'Donnell enables us to see how a neighborhood organization can constitute a valid interlocutor before government authorities, management areas, etc. *Cities from Scratch* inquires about cases and experiences in which the importance of collective action in building (and sustaining) processes in the informal city is evident. Territories and their characteristics—even those that are representative of the informal city—are not mere products of structural historical forces or of global trends and factors but the result of routine micropolitics and mundane practices performed by ground-level state agents and grassroots social actors. The power of social actors to produce urban space is shaped by interactions and by occupied space (Gazit, 2009).

Within this shared perspective, the contributors to the Fischer, McCann, and Auyero volume examine informality and its links with the formal city through different temporalities, scales, and forms of relation. Fischer's paper contributes to the intellectual and historical reconstruction of Brazilian and Latin American shantytowns during the late nineteenth century. He demonstrates that the history of favelas is the history of Latin American urbanization. The emergence of this informality is not simply associated with the successive economic crises that took place in the region during the twentieth cen-

tury but structured by those crises. As the Brazilian geographer Andrelino Campos (2011) shows, to recognize this is not, however, to deny the reality of the informal city's inhabitants. Historically, these people, particularly the residents of favelas, have been excluded from political practices and marginalized economically. The informal city has survived as a basic component of Latin American urbanization by accepting its subordinate and functional position in relation to the formal city.

Murphy's chapter focuses on the 1960s in Santiago, Chile, to review the links that existed among land takeovers, the constitution of shantytown movements, and the development of new forms of local political organization that strongly supported the right to a dwelling and to the city: "The land seizures became an important part of the era's revolutionary activism and symbolism. Squatters and housing-rights activists . . . formed a powerful social movement that fired the imagination of the Chilean Left. . . . Exploring the actions and goals of the squatters thus reveals important ways in which marginality was a central feature of both the urban fabric and sociopolitical struggle" (70). Within this framework, the chapter exposes the tensions between radical forms of political struggle and the traditional family- and property-oriented moralities that supported them. The relation between social conflicts and moralities has been widely discussed. Urban order is a moral order, and therefore the experiences acquired in collective action can be read as rituals that challenged an order but at the same time reinforced and reproduced it (O'Donnell, 1997). Perhaps it is in terms of these dilemmas and contradictions of the moral order that we should identify, at least in part, the defeats inflicted upon the historical struggles associated with the informal city in Latin America.

Historically, Latin American cities have been characterized by tensions that define the coexistence of the formal with the informal city. McCann focuses on the favela Morro dos Cabritos and Peixoto, a middle-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, to highlight the differences in the relationships between the formal and the informal city from 1970 to the present: "The favela and the barrio are symbiotic at a deep level, but the divisions that separate them are also enduring. . . . There are some indications that those divisions may become more permeable. But . . . forging true collaboration and an acknowledgment of shared interest will be far more difficult" (124). McCann's chapter is particularly relevant given that the formal and the informal city are not segregated fragments but coexist within blocks of each other and often have vague boundaries. This conflictive coexistence and its many ramifications are also seen in other regional cities. In Buenos Aires, for example, Villa 31 sits next to traditional upper-class Retiro and Rodrigo Bueno straddles upscale Puerto Madero (see M. F. Rodríguez, 2015).

Cavalcanti considers these same problems, stressing the process whereby, since the 1980s, favelas have been consolidated, recently reaching the point that some have been officially recognized as administrative units. In spite of this recognition, favelas are still registered in the city's low-income settlements system, a classification that points to the continued blurring of the boundary between formality and informality. The consolidation of the favelas is largely the result of residents' acting outside of government. They have developed and implemented improvements to their dwellings and their immediate surroundings, and in this context the purchase and sale of dwellings in Rio de Janeiro's informal neighborhoods have become much more dynamic "but also more regulated, institutionalized, and valued. Thus, favela consolidation has also brought about an increasing formalization of property. . . . Transactions are mediated by the residents' association, which recognizes property ownership in each community. While not fully formal, these markets increasingly connect to their 'pavement' counterparts (i.e., in the so-called formal city)" (211). By engaging in an ethnographic exploration of practices of purchase and sale and the movement of residents from the favela to the formal city (and vice versa), Cavalcanti describes the space that mediates between the two and shows that the gap between them is constantly being redefined.

Rodgers tries to identify the transmission belts that link macropolitical processes in Nicaragua's recent history with daily life in informal neighborhoods, focusing on "the impact that political and ideological factors have had on the evolution of what can broadly be termed processes of *local territorialization* . . . the ways in which social agents reify the physical space they occupy and bind themselves socially to it" (128). To do this, he identifies "three processes of local territorialization in the poor Managua barrio Luis Fanor Hernandez, including compadrazgo relations before, during, and after the Sandinista revolution; the implementation of an urban development project during the revolutionary decade; and the youth gang phenomenon in the post-revolutionary period" (145). These processes are particularly relevant in that they enable social groups, class groups, and even institutions to anchor their practices territorially and create spatial mediations that provide each with effective power over its own reproduction. This power is always multiscalar and multidimensional, material and symbolic; it is a power that involves the simultaneous subordination and appropriation of space. It is through this territorialities game that Rodgers traces the links between macropolitical and microterritorial processes (146):

> There are specific ways in which broader structural factors can impact local circumstances, particularly the ways in which changes at the broader level can be experienced at the local level. . . . Changes that occurred on a structural level transformed the nature of these local-level practices, including, in particular, the ways they reflected broader ideological factors. Each form of territorialization clearly displays its own specific dynamics, which is partly the consequence of the different aspects of everyday life that the different forms relate to but also stems from their own intrinsic qualities. These interrelate with a changing political imagination.

The fifth chapter was written by Emilio Duhau, who until his death in August 2013 was a prominent referent in Latin American urban studies (see, e.g., Duhau and Giglia, 2008; 2016). Thus, Fischer, McCann, and Auyero acknowledge his work and dedicate the book to his memory. Duhau focuses on "the scope and limits of the informal city's ability to gradually improve over time, a trait that I call progressiveness" (150). His chapter highlights an issue that is rarely raised: the relation between metropolitan expansion and the roles of the various forms of informal habitat in Mexico City's periphery, in particular the *colonias populares* (self-help-built settlements) and the large urban public projects destined for low-income groups. Historically, the colonias populares have been one of the main systems for providing housing in Mexican cities, but at the end of the twentieth century governments launched massive housing construction policies tied to market initiatives and building industry conglomerates. Chile was the regional forerunner in pursuing these market initiatives. Between 1980 and 2006 the Ministry for Housing and Urban Development, in collaboration with the Chilean Chamber of Construction, produced social housing for 12 percent of Chile's population. This model of social housing production, which meant a shift in the state's role from producing public housing to facilitating housing construction by way of the real estate market, was widely diffused to other Latin American countries (A. Rodríguez and Sugranyes, 2011). Mexico was no exception. The Mexican state articulated its withdrawal from the regulatory function of designing, planning, and implementing housing development programs by liberalizing the market transfer of collectively owned land. This shift, a result of the 1992 constitutional reforms and modifications to the Agrarian Law, enabled real estate promoters to appropriate part of that land at a very low cost (Salazar, 2013). This new scenario had a strong impact upon the evolution of both the metropolis and the colonias populares and informal cities: "Lands situated on the outskirts of the metropolitan conurbation (which

until the early 1990s would have been expected to become incorporated sooner or later into the informal housing market) now have a greater possibility of being incorporated into the formal housing market through their acquisition by large formal-housing developers" (163).

Through different mechanisms, both formal smallholders and owners of scattered rural plots negotiated the sale of their land with developers under conditions that were not always favorable. Smallholders could execute these transactions in the formal market, but this was not necessarily the case for rural landowners.[2] In a context in which colonias populares have been progressively consolidated through regularization and improvement programs and investment by residents and the periphery is gradually expanding, these longstanding informal neighborhoods become the potential destinations for middle-class people looking for a place to live in the city center. Thus, the colonias populares have changed, as has their relative location in the metropolis. It is therefore not farfetched to think that changes in the composition of their inhabitants may have also occurred.

Diniz and McCann provide another lens through which to approach the informal city. They present a series of beautiful images that portray and draw the reader into the everyday life and public spaces of Rio de Janeiro's favelas. It is a rendering that expresses their hypothesis regarding the relations and interactions that organize Rio's public spaces.

In contrast, Fernandes explores the capabilities and weaknesses of social movements under Chavismo for revitalizing public spaces and recovering control over them. Examining the April 2004 occupation of the Teatro Alameda in San Agustín (Caracas), she writes (187),

> The occupation of the abandoned Teatro Alameda in San Agustin . . . represented a taking back of community spaces that had been lost. . . . At the base of this action was the historical memory of the Teatro Alameda, the musical life of the parish, the vibrant years of Grupo Madera, and the dignity that the Teatro and the musical group represented for ordinary residents, as well as the multiple losses suffered by the community. The date of the takeover was symbolically linked with the coup against the leftist president Hugo Chavez two years earlier. . . . But over the course of the following year, the Teatro Alameda became the subject of bitter disputes, as rival factions in the barrio—partly the result of state and party intervention—fought to align these symbols with their own projects.

Under what conditions are these initiatives and the groups that promote them sustainable in the long run? When do these groups themselves constitute a driving force of democratization? Other research, carried out in other countries in the region (Di Virgilio, 2012; M. C. Rodriguez and Di Virgilio, 2016), provides some clues and shows how urban social movements contribute to deepening democratization. Fernandes arrives at a similar conclusion (204):

> It was precisely the absence of strong organization structures, linked to popular [informal] assemblies and other forums for accountability and deliberation, that facilitated the rise of an undemocratic current within the leadership. . . . While mobilizing the "power of place" can be an important political strategy, argues Harvey, the politics of localism is not an answer to the ever-present threat of reactionary and exclusionary dangers. The building of a new form of coalitional politics has become the most urgent task facing urban social movements in the contemporary era.

Javier Auyero's chapter on the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Flammable closes the collection. While Ippolito-O'Donnell's work highlights citizen achievements when their rights are made effective, Auyero reveals the dark side of residents' experience in informal neighborhoods: Flammable is a place of hope but, at the same time, one of resignation. Its inhabitants suffer unfulfilled government promises of relocation and urbanization. Far from being acknowledged as subjects of rights, they are subjected to a territory with a dark present and an uncertain future.

From this review we may discover an answer to the enduring question of the specificity of Latin American cities. The answer is provided by one of Latin America's most dedicated scholars of informality. Jaramillo (2008: 13) states: "The social structure of Latin American cities presents certain peculiarities—with origins in such general determinants as the forms of accumulation, the place in the global of division of labor, etc.—and the land market translates them into a spatial expression." From his perspective, informality must be attributed not to anomalies in the workings of the land market but to some structural elements that lie beyond it:

> The difference seems subtle and in some cases relatively blurred, but this difference has important implications. In terms of policy, if the goal is to eliminate singularity, in the first case it would be propitious to improve the functioning of the market, to intensify its operation. For the second approach, the physical and social features that are described as peculiar are the result of the working of the market, and if the market works more, these phenomena will be accentuated.

The books reviewed here allow us to see exactly the structural elements that are behind the configuration of the informal city in Latin America.

NOTES

1. Following Awan, Schneider, and Till (2013), a clarification is necessary: Spatial agency implies that possible actions engage in a transformative way with urban structure and living conditions but their effectiveness depends on actors' attention to the constraints and opportunities that those structures and conditions present.

2. Collectively owned lands (*ejidos)* were rarely transferred by formal market mechanisms until the neoliberal and privatization reforms.

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