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BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

The "Latin American City"? The Rise and Fall of a Figment of the Social Imagination

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This essay reviews the following works:

Urban Latin America: Inequalities and Neoliberal Reforms. Edited by Tom Angotti. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2017. Pp. 306. $37.00 paperback. ISBN: 9781442274488.

Urbanización y revolución en América Latina: Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires y Ciudad de México (1950-1980). By Óscar Calvo Isaza. Mexico City: El Colegio de México and Universidad Nacional de Colombia, 2023. Pp. 398. $13.00 paperback. ISBN: 9786075644189.

Monstrous Politics: Geography, Rights, and the Urban Revolution in Mexico City. By Ben A. Gerlofs. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2023. Pp. xiv + 262. $39.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780826504777.

La ciudad latinoamericana: Una figura de la imaginación social del siglo XX. By Adrián Gorelik. Mexico City: Siglo XXI, 2022. Pp. 424. $55.82 hardcover, $7.99 ebook. ISBN: 9789878011370.

Representing the Barrios: Culture, Politics, and Urban Poverty in Twentieth-Century Caracas. By Rebecca Jarman. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023. Pp. xvii + 352. $60.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822947653.

Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump. By Kathleen M. Millar. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp ix + 248. $24.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822370505.

Historia de las villas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires. By Valeria Snitcofsky. Buenos Aires: Tejido Urbano, 2021. Pp. 326. Open-access ebook. ISBN: 9789873779541.

Is there a Latin American city? Such is the question driving historian Adrián Gorelik's dazzling and sometimes rambling *La ciudad latinoamericana: Una figura de la imaginación social del siglo XX*. The Latin American city, he argues, is a policy object, a historiographical category, and a figment of the social imagination of scholars and policymakers, who have projected onto it both their fears and their optimism. The idea of the Latin American city took form as a response to the "urban explosion" produced by midcentury rural–urban migrations between 1940 and 1970, during a cycle of reform spanning the ideologies of modernization, development, and planning. It was a policy object theorized and debated

among architects, planners, anthropologists, and other experts in both Latin America and the United States (for the *ciudad latinoamericana* was also a creature of the American century). The transnational intellectual networks animating the idea of the Latin American city have been studied by a growing historiography focusing on individual cities, but I do not think there is another book of comparable breadth.[1]

In this review essay, I take Gorelik's question as a prompt to read recent works on cities in Latin America. Written by historians and cultural studies scholars, the first group historicizes *informal* neighborhoods in the Cold War period, both as spaces construed as problems by policymakers, social scientists, and cultural creators and as places deeply intertwined with the political histories of the region. While the second group of books does not share as clear a thematic unity, it casts light on what can be called the Latin American neoliberal city. Indeed, neoliberalism has probably become the catchall for conceptualizing Latin American cities and their present challenges. Whether the category remains helpful for inspiring research, policies, and a broader political project remains an open question.

In the first part of *La ciudad latinoamericana*, Gorelik centers on rural–urban migration and informal settlements as *problemáticas* that prompted a comparative research agenda, theoretical debates, and housing policies such as aided self-help. At the time, the settlement of rural migrants in the city was understood through the lens of anthropologist Robert Redfield's folk–modern continuum, an interwar synthesis of a sociological tradition that went back to Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Louis Wirth. When applied to cities like Lima, Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico City, the folk–modern continuum produced a diagnosis of a city divided into a traditional and a modern sector—a basic opposition that infused older class and racial categories with new life. The stakes in these debates were momentous: nothing less than the role of the city as an agent of social transformation, nothing less than its capacity to *integrate* rural migrants into the nation-state.

If the first chapters focus on ethnography as a research method, the second part of the book adopts a top-down view to map the itineraries of planning in Latin America. Gorelik uses the metaphors of a river delta and a garden of forking paths to register the multiple planning traditions put in place in the region: regionalist and developmentalist, urbanistic and architectural, and modernist and traditionalist, as epitomized by Le Corbusier and Lewis Mumford. Gorelik studies Puerto Rico (a laboratory for centralized "integral" planning), Ciudad Guayana (envisioned as a *polo de crecimiento*), and Brasília, which he counterintuitively reads as the triumph of architecture over planning. Rather than devising a master plan informed by a battery of surveys, as planners have been wont to do since Patrick Geddes ("Survey before plan" was his distillation of the planning ethos), Lúcio Costa conceived Brasília as a rhetorical gesture, a poetic provocation that could win adepts left and right of the political spectrum.

By the 1970s, the reformist optimism propelling the idea of the Latin American city was on the wane, as modernization and development were replaced by dependency theory as political and intellectual horizons. Planners lost faith in their capacity to transform society. Their postwar optimism was further punctured by the military coups of the 1970s. By the 1980s, the Latin American city had lost much of its allure, as signaled by the posthumous publishing of Ángel Rama's *The Lettered City* (1984). Rama rendered planning and the city as negative forces, reactionary agents in the "production and reproduction of

[1] Lidia Valladares, *A invenção da favela: Do mito de origem a favela.com* (Editora FGV, 2005); Helen Gyger, *Improvised Cities: Architecture, Urbanization & Innovation in Peru* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019); Priscilla Conolly, "La ciudad y el hábitat popular: Paradigma latinoamericano," in *Teorías sobre la ciudad en América Latina*, ed. Blanca Rebeca Ramírez Velázquez and Emilio Pradilla Cobos (Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2013), 505–562; Brodwyn Fischer, "A Century in Present Tense: Crisis, Politics, and Intellectual History of Brazil's Informal Cities," in *Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Latin America*, ed. B. Fischer, Javier Auyero, and Bryan McCann (Duke University Press, 2014), 9–67.

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power" (Gorelik, 25). For thinkers like Rama, José Luis Romero, and Richard Morse—the trio whose work closes *La ciudad latinoamericana* in a long conclusion—the study of history and culture represented an escape from the straitjacket of modernization and development, which they associated with urban centers. These iconoclastic writers bear testament to the rich intellectual networks that gave rise to the idea of a Latin American city, but their work also hints at its exhaustion. The scholarly explosion of the past three decades—coupled with the siloing of the humanities, the social sciences, and public policy studies—renders the illusion of a grand synthesis chimerical.[2]

Informality in the Cold War city

Gorelik offers a road map for recent books on informal settlements in the twentieth century. While the term *informal* was coined in the 1970s by economists working on sub-Saharan Africa, several authors deploy it anachronistically to describe neighborhoods stigmatized by their illegal status, precarious physical condition, and the perceived inadequacies of residents. I do not point out this anachronism as a critique. Urban informality has a long history, dating to the nineteenth century, and perhaps all the way to the colonial period.[3] Since the late nineteenth century, public officials have (mis)understood neighborhoods outside the law through the blending of legal, architectural, and social categories. The authors under review historicize the anxieties and revolutionary expectations that political actors, scholars, and intellectuals have placed on informal settlements. Read together, they evidence that informal neighborhoods have always been imbricated with laws and state institutions. They also illustrate the centrality of culture and the social sciences in enshrining informal neighborhoods as a cornerstone of the *ciudad latinoamericana*.

In *Urbanización y revolución en América Latina: Santiago de Chile, Buenos Aires y Ciudad de México (1950–1980)*, the historian Óscar Calvo Isaza interrogates "the political meaning of the urban masses" in the working-class neighborhoods of these three cities (18). Poor, rural migrants had been stigmatized as vectors for crime and disease since the nineteenth century, but the same populations became a palpable political threat after 1950. Thus, the Latin American barrio became a "geopolitical space" encoded in a Cold War plot. Whereas Gorelik interpreted the Latin American city as an artifact of reformist optimism, Calvo Isaza portrays it as haunted by the specter of revolution.

Both authors chart similar debates—social change, migration, poverty, housing—but Calvo Isaza connects them with local political histories. His is a history of the social sciences not as "autonomous expert fields" but as "social technologies" put in practice to manage social change (19). This is easier said than done, but Calvo Isaza blends erudite analysis of intellectual debates with rich reconstructions of the histories of three cities—no small feat. (The chapters on Santiago and Buenos Aires mostly draw from published sources, while the chapter on Mexico City is based on largely unmined primary sources.)

Urbanización y revolución en América Latina features many of the same scholars and policymakers as *La ciudad latinoamericana*, but it pays special attention to the Catholic Church. As a transnational institution, the church played an important role in the creation of the Latin American city. Its decision to conduct missionary work in working-class

[2] It is hard to imagine a contemporary equivalent to the review essays published by Richard Morse in these pages more than half a century ago. See "Recent Research on Latin American Urbanization: A Selective Survey with Commentary," *Latin American Research Review* 1, no. 1 (1965): 35–74, and "Trends and Issues in Latin American Urban Research, 1965–1970," *Latin American Research Review* 6, no. 2 (1971): 19–75.

[3] Numerous authors understand (including Rebecca Jarman, in *Representing the Barrios*) urban informality as dating to the colonial division between the Spanish and the Indian republics. See Felipe Hernández and Peter Kellett, "Introduction: Reimagining the Informal in Latin America," in *Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. Felipe Hernández, Peter Kellett, and Lea K. Allen (Berghahn Books, 2010), 1–19.

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neighborhoods, Calvo Isaza emphasizes, was prompted by the inroads (real or imagined) made by Protestant missionaries and communists. Although the church conceived its mission as true and unique, its understanding of the urban poor resembled that of sociologists who posited a disarticulation between the modern and the traditional sector—soon reinterpreted as the "marginal" sector. Catholic priests and laymen flocked from Europe and North America, eager to deploy "techno-pastoral strategies in the neo-pagan world of Latin American cities" (141). Funds from charitable foundations and universities flowed in the same direction, financing research and missionary work. Many priests veered away from the church hierarchy and adopted radical political positions. In one case, Ivan Illich, who had served as a parish priest in Washington Heights in New York City, became the director of the Centro Intercultural de Documentación based in Cuernavaca, Mexico, financed by the Vatican and the archbishoprics of New York and Boston, among other organizations. Illich would eventually fall out with the Vatican and end up a staunch critic of the US involvement in Latin America, not an unusual trajectory.

Meanwhile, in Santiago, the Belgian priest and sociologist Roger Vekemans led the Centro para el Desarrollo Económico y Social de América Latina. Vekemans spearheaded a hemispheric project on marginality that became mired in scandal over its US financing and embroiled in fierce debates around the concept of marginality. The theory of marginality—a pillar of the idea of the Latin American city during the 1960s and 1970s—had broad appeal. It was embraced both by Catholic sociologists like Vekemans and by dependency theorists close to Marxism like the Brazilian Fernando Henrique Cardoso. For all the political disagreements dividing them, both thinkers shared the belief that the urban poor were marginal and ready to be saved. Accordingly, social workers, communist leaders, and Catholic and Protestant missionaries jockeyed to organize *pobladores* (settlers) in Santiago. Ironically, the 1948 proscription of the Communist Party drove communists away from workers and closer to *pobladores*, as evidenced by the occupation (*toma*) of the settlement of La Victoria, "a landmark event in the urban history of Latin America" (208). The presence of communists in these settlements compelled priests to abandon their orthodoxies "and provide technical solutions to people's most urgent needs" (234). Land occupations organized by communists were supported by Catholic priests, who eventually partnered with state organizations to sponsor new settlements and provide them with urban services and promote programs of self-construction. Occupations were not spontaneous occurrences. Neither were they informal in the sense of being illegal or inchoate.[4] They were carefully orchestrated "techno-political" affairs in which, for all their differences, communists, catholic priests, and government officials participated.[5]

Mexico City was less open to this kind of political competition. The hegemonic ruling party (the Partido Revolucionario Institucional, or PRI), an agrarian bureaucracy, and local brokers affiliated with state and party institutions spun a dense web of patronage relationships that politicized struggles over land. Calvo Isaza argues that unlike in Santiago and Buenos Aires, the emergence of the "urban masses [in Mexico City] was not a real or imaginary threat to the social order" (311). It was, since the 1940s, a factor in the stability of the single-party regime. By the 1970s, however, an efflorescence of Maoist, student, and Catholic groups was active in Mexican colonias. These groups organized land occupations in Monterrey, Torreón, and Cuernavaca, among other cities, where they led experiments in radical democracy independent from the old *priísta* channels. But the urban revolution never came, and by the late 1970s, the government had co-opted most settlers and murdered some of their more radical leaders. Other leaders later joined academia, where

[4] Millar knowledgeably analyzes both meanings of the word in *Reclaiming the Discarded*.

[5] My reading of land occupations is influenced by Emanuel Giannotti and Boris Cofré, "La invención de la 'toma,' o cómo se transformaron las ocupaciones de terrenos en Santiago de Chile entre 1945 y 1957," *Historia* 54, no. 1 (2021): 107–150.

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they reflected on their experience through dependency theory and Marxism. Others entered politics during Mexico's democratic transition in the 1980s and 1990s.[6]

In Buenos Aires, the problem of the "marginal" masses was interpreted by elite sectors through the lens of the Peronist experience, prompting the authoritarian eradication policies studied by the historian Valeria Snitcofsky in *Historia de las villas en la ciudad de Buenos Aires: De los orígenes hasta nuestros días*. Precarious informal settlements were common in Buenos Aires beginning in the late nineteenth century, but the now-common monikers *villa* and *villa miseria* were not used until the 1930s. The terms spread like wildfire after the ousting of Perón in 1955, amalgamating middle-class fears inspired by Peronism with sociological understandings about rural–urban migrants and the disorganization they suffered upon their arrival to Buenos Aires. In 1956, the newly created Comisión Nacional de la Vivienda conducted a survey of *villas* and formulated the Plan de Emergencia for the reeducation of residents of villas and the compulsory destruction of their dwellings. Like Calvo Isaza, Snitcofsky identifies a temporal lag between the appearance of informal settlements—stigmatized by governments and middle-class residents since the late nineteenth century—and their transformation into a political crisis circa 1950.

The 1956 Plan de Emergencia was not immediately enacted, but its existence would influence city politics for decades. Snitcofsky describes a pendular movement between two policies on villas: *radication*, or the upgrading and integrating of villas into the city, and *eradication*, or plans to raze and replace them with new housing projects. Where authoritarian governments more forcefully pursued eradication, democratic ones tended to be more receptive to negotiations with residents. Crucially, both policies fed off each other: In response to eradication projects, *villa* residents organized, asserting their right to remain in their neighborhoods and upgrade them with government support. When this happened in the aftermath of the 1956 Plan de Emergencia, it prompted renewed attempts to raze neighborhoods where residents had protested. Neighborhood organizations coalesced in the Federación de Villas y Barrios de Emergencia de la Capital Federal, which engaged in negotiations with the democratic government of Arturo Ilia after 1963. This dialogue was foreclosed by the military coup of 1966 and subsequent calls for the "total eradication" of villas (120). The eradication plans of the 1960s and 1970s prompted the emergence of resistance organizations across the political spectrum. A few were led by progressive priests like Carlos Múgica, who was murdered in 1974. Others were led by a reinvigorated Peronist movement, the emboldened Movimiento Villero Peronista.

Eradication policies reached unprecedented intensity following the military coup of 1976. Inspired by decade-old analyses of "social disintegration" by Gino Germani, the military government razed several central villas and relocated thousands of poor families to the Argentine interior and Bolivia and Paraguay. Unlike the eradication policies of the 1960s, those from the late 1970s were not accompanied by the construction of new housing projects. The authoritarian nature of these policies markedly differs from the position adopted by the Mexican government during the same decade, when the growth of informal settlements became a public crisis. During his 1969 presidential campaign, future president Luis Echeverría reassured *colonos* and explained that "had the Mexican Revolution created a dictatorship, [the government] would control the growth of cities. Instead, the revolutionary regime attempted to solve the urban problem" (in Calvo Isaza, 323). While a growing historiography has demonstrated the repressive nature of the Mexican regime, the Mexican experience appears benign in comparison with the Argentinean one because it sought to *radicate* (integrate) rather than eradicate informal settlements.

The tension between integration and eradication is also a throughline in *Representing the Barrios: Culture, Politics, and Urban Poverty in Twentieth-Century Caracas*, by Rebecca Jarman. A

[6] Clara Brugada, elected in 2024 as *jefa de gobierno*, cut her teeth in *colono* politics during the 1980s, before joining the left-wing Partido de la Revolución Democrática in the 1990s.

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cultural studies scholar, Jarman analyzes the production, dissemination, and consumption (often fetishizing) of the barrios of Caracas in literature, film, poetry, and music. Like the other authors under review, she reads these representations as projections of elite anxiety. Her history, however, is much longer. Fears of an urban plebeian revolution were visible in 1899, the year Miguel Eduardo Pardo's *Todo un pueblo* was published, "the first novel to turn its gaze towards informal settlements" in the Venezuelan capital (4). Pardo distinguished the *pueblo* from the *plebe*, an opposition "foundational in the Venezuelan political imagination" (6). His novel thus prefigures the ambivalent feelings toward barrios expressed by elites for over a century, up until Hugo Chávez's rise to power. Rómulo Gallegos, *the* national writer of Venezuela, whose democratic presidency was overthrown by a military coup in 1948, is another case in point. Before publishing the *novelas de la tierra* that cemented his fame, Gallegos published short stories in which he dissected the migrant settlements of Caracas with the sensibility of an ethnographic positivist. But Gallegos would fail to complete his urban novel (*La casa de las Cedeño*), a fact that Jarman reads as symptomatic of his "uneasy attitude towards the urban poor" and as prefiguring his later unsuccessful efforts, after becoming president, to "incorporate the urban population" (48) into his political project.

The dialectic between visibility and invisibility, a key theme in Latin American cultural studies, is central to *Representing the Barrios*. The racialized, poor, and anarchic spaces outside of Rama's *ciudad letrada* were rendered invisible in literary and visual representations of the urban. Likewise, barrios have always been imbricated with Venezuelan society, even though artistic representations of them were scant during the first decades of the twentieth century. Jarman offers insightful analyses of narrative and discourse—of both canonical and more obscure works—to "explore the complexities of these composite living spaces [informal barrios]" (10). But the novels and films she analyzes often represent the barrios of Caracas obliquely and as symbolic spaces. Jarman dedicates a chapter to the novel *Ifigenia* (1924) by Teresa de la Parra, an intriguing and relatively unknown author. Jarman historicizes Parra with nuance, describing her social networks, political inclination, and the class, racial, and gender structures in which her labor was embedded. But Parra and her work mostly speak about Caracas indirectly, often through what remains unsaid. While *Representing the Barrios* purports to "map the informal city," the map is elusive and tentative (11).

The last part of the book charts the final decades of the twentieth century, from the economic crisis of the 1980s and the Caracazo riots of February 1989 to Chávez's Bolivarian Revolution a decade later. A ferment of grassroots activism swept Caracas in the 1970s and 1980s. Artists and writers strove to represent the barrios, empower their residents, and collapse—spatially, politically—the divided city. The poetry collective Tráfico, for instance, promised to "incorporate street life into poetic discourse, territorialize the barrios, and incite political awakenings among its readership" (166). The feminist poet María Auxiliadora Álvarez denounced the dilapidation of health services in the aftermath of the economic crisis in *Cuerpo*, a volume set in the maternity ward of an underfunded hospital. In 1996, José Roberto Duque published *Salsa y control*, a polyphonous novel that was part of an efflorescence of scholarly and artistic works that interpreted and debated the meaning of the Caracazo. Duque wrote it while living in the 23 de Enero neighborhood, an epicenter of the riots and the government repression that followed. Duque borrows the rhythms and lyrics of salsa to "channel the impulses, drives, and pulsations of life in the barrio" (184). Reprinted by the government publishing house in 2014, the book reads as an ode to the pueblo. And yet *Salsa y control* is full of paradoxes and ironies. In Jarman's telling, the cultural industry commodified the book, fetishizing the violence and marginality that have always characterized literary renderings of the barrios. Despite their best intentions to represent the barrios through literature, the Tráfico collective, Álvarez, and Duque continued to reproduce the structures of power laid visible in *Todo un pueblo*. Jarman offers

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a narrative of the informal city punctuated by historical turning points, chronicling swings between democratic, authoritarian, and populist politics. But hers is a history of culture suspended in the colonial matrix of a divided city, a history of the inability of elites to integrate barrios into a nation-making project.

Neoliberalism and its discontents

The Latin American city was premised on the willingness of intellectuals and policymakers to articulate it as a research and policy object. Is the enthusiasm still there? We could, of course, pose the same question of the category "Latin America" tout court.[7] Is Latin America still a "theoretically productive" reality after the Cold War, after dependency, and after the fading of the transnational organizations that animated it (Gorelik)? The jury is still out, but the category of the Latin American city has lost salience, at least beyond the confines of US academia. But in so far as the category continues to exist, its contours are largely defined by the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s and the opposition that they spawned.

Urban Latin America, edited by Tom Angotti, offers a possible answer. The chapters, most of which were previously published in *Latin American Perspectives*, have been organized into five parts: "Poverty, Informality, and Peripheral Cities," "Urban Policies, Neoliberal Reforms, and Best Practices," and "Urban Struggles, Citizenship, and Public Space." Two shorter parts comprise twin chapters: one on Mexico City and São Paulo as paradigms of megalopolis, and the other on Havana and Montevideo as exceptions to the neoliberal rule. The volume has been edited with an undergraduate reader in mind. Some chapters offer broad arguments based on ethnographic data (Diane Davis's chapter on Mexico City); others summarize ideas made elsewhere (Alan Gilbert's reflections on poverty, inequality, and informality); and still others read as general introductions for undergrads (Jill Hamberg's chapter on Cuba). In his introduction, Angotti characterizes Latin America's unequal urbanization as an outcome of dependent capitalist development. In one of many overstatements plaguing the piece, Angotti writes that urbanization "was stimulated by rural infrastructure projects financed by international capital and wars of counterinsurgency backed by the United States" (2). Alan Gilbert offers a less dramatic take. Latin American cities display high rates of poverty and inequality, he notes, "and yet, given how rapidly they grew, it is amazing that the situation is not far worse" (27). Extreme poverty rates have, in fact, decreased and are dwarfed by those of African cities. Segregation is bad, but not as extreme as in the United States. I have no big qualms, except perhaps the desire to provide an overview of the entire region. The difficulty of grasping urban Latin America in a few pages is compounded by the cacophony of data and the capriciousness of census periods, which can lead to diverse conclusions regarding trends of violence, poverty, or inequality. Overall, the volume confirms the proposition of a Latin American city, which it renders a creature of neoliberalism. Daniel Renfrew, for instance, writes that "the extending squatter settlements that ring or dot Latin American cities have become perhaps the most emblematic of the new forms of spatial inequality and social suffering wrought by the neoliberal order" (236). Informality, marginality, inequality—neoliberalism is the culprit for ills previously attributed to export-led growth, modernization, and developmentalism.

The collection is uneven but overall readable, fitting for classrooms in the US. With the benefit of hindsight, it offers a snapshot of the region after the neoliberal program, toward the tail end of the Pink Tide, and before the arrival of rightwing governments in the late

[7] The historian Pablo Palomino's book on the invention of Latin America music views music as a transnational cultural project, not wholly dissimilar to the project of the city. Pablo Palomino, *The Invention of Latin American Music: A Transnational History* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

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2010s. (Research for most chapters was conducted in the late 2000s and early 2010s.) After the austerity policies of the 1980s and 1990s, national governments enjoyed healthier public finances, creating an opening for city governments to experiment with governance innovations that traveled across the hemisphere and the world: confined bus lanes, participatory budgeting, public consultations, and the like.

The tension between progressive city governments pursuing original policies and the context of neoliberal hegemony is explored by several authors. Erminia Maricato describes Brazilian cities as victims of an "urban tragedy," plagued by inadequate transportation, housing, and sanitation policies and suffering from staggering rates of homicide (48). As Maricato explains, progressive planners gained influence in the 1980s and 1990s, leading to the enactment of the Statute of the City in 2001. But most policy innovations put forward by the progressive planners enjoyed scant success because they were implemented amid neoliberal regulations that the first government of Lula da Silva (2003–2011) was incapable of rolling back. "For many years," she concludes, "we have drafted public policy proposals for cities without acknowledging the constraints imposed by peripheral capitalism in Latin America and the rest of the world" (58). A similar pessimism pervades chapters on Medellín and Bogotá. The Medellín model of good governance, Tobias Franz argues, sought to make markets more efficient without challenging local power structures. Franz concludes that the hailed Medellín Miracle enjoyed superficial accomplishments but failed to address inequality and unemployment. Stacey Hunt's analysis of the Transmilenio of Bogotá—the city's public transit system—is similarly downbeat. Following its early success and remarkable trajectory as a model adopted worldwide, the Transmilenio suffers from an ongoing process of deterioration that began in the 2010s. Hunt interprets this as a case study of "technocratic governance" through which the state depoliticized and demobilized civil society (162). Other chapters examine policies with less skepticism. Benjamin Goldfrank compares participatory budgeting in cities in Brazil, the Andes, and Central America. While participatory budgeting has enjoyed mixed success, in Porto Alegre and other Brazilian cities, it led to a reduction in poverty, an increase in sanitation and water services, and an expansion of the social groups with influence over policymaking. Both Porto Alegre and Bogotá became policy "models"—of participatory budgeting and transportation—exported to cities around the world. The networks of experts, nongovernmental organizations, academics, politicians, and policymakers engaged in the dissemination and transplantation of these policies bear a resemblance to those studied by Gorelik and Calvo Isaza. But it is not clear if these networks are still premised on the existence of a Latin American city.

The anthropologist Kathleen M. Millar revisits well-trodden concepts like informality and marginality with an original approach in *Reclaiming the Discarded: Life and Labor on Rio's Garbage Dump*. Her ethnography is set twenty miles north of downtown Rio de Janeiro in Jardim Gramacho, a neighborhood that housed the largest dump in Latin America until its closing in 2012. Millar engages in dialogue with the copious literature on favelas in Rio de Janeiro, although, as she points out, Jardim Gramacho is not a favela, instead challenging traditional dichotomies between favela and barrio. An urban form specific to Rio de Janeiro, favelas hold an outsize role in the global imagination, romanticized and stigmatized since the turn of the twentieth century. As Millar notes, research on favelas continues to focus on what they lack: "order, services, security ... and [especially] work" (22). Rather than using "scarcity as a persistent paradigm for understanding lives lived in precarious conditions," Millar strives to understand the lives of *catadores* [scavengers] as meaningful (8).

Early on, Millar observes that scavengers almost always return to work in the dump, often after long seasons away. Millar rejects the notion that this continual return simply follows necessity. In fact, many workers abandon better-paid formal jobs to return to the dump. The comings and goings of workers reveal what she calls a "relational autonomy,"

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"showing how a relative degree of control over work and time enables catadores to sustain relationships, fulfill social obligations, and pursue life projects in an uncertain everyday" (71). The informal nature of work as a scavenger —the unstructured schedule, the lack of benefits—is not merely a strategy for survival. It also has positive attributes. Inspired by E. P. Thompson, Millar strives to understand the *experience* of labor and how it "shapes inner life processes and modes of inhabiting the world" (12). She writes perceptively about the skills possessed by catadores, the labor they perform, and the social relationships embedded in this labor, relationships of friendship, cooperation, and credit.

Millar avoids the pitfalls of poverty porn or romanticizing her subjects' lives, even though her book features deeply distressing events. She also provides a wonderful sense of place and especially time, the unique rhythms that punctuate the labor of *catadores*. At the same time, she deftly portrays Rio de Janeiro, its history, and the larger political and economic processes influencing the lives of garbage workers. Through short vignettes, she provides the reader with life stories of the parents and grandparents of *catadores*, histories of seasonal agricultural labor in the Northeast, rural–urban migrations to Rio de Janeiro, and labor in the informal sector of the carioca economy. Up until the 1990s, the men and women who would end up in the dump worked as street vendors in downtown Rio de Janeiro. The displacement that followed was part of a beautification effort to attract tourism and turn Rio into a global city. The urban renewal policies of the 1990s were partially inspired by New York's broken windows theory, replicated in cities across the hemisphere.

In the last part of *Reclaiming the Discarded*, Millar reflects on the limits of political organizing in the dump. In 2005, catadores created a cooperative with the goal of improving labor conditions and increasing their bargaining power vis-à-vis scrap yards and other actors such as nongovernmental organizations. The creation of the Association of Catadores was no small feat; it joined national and transnational social movements like the Brazilian National Movement of Catadores and the World Social Forum. It built a local recycling center that allows the organization to sell its materials directly to large recycling companies, bypassing local intermediaries. But the organization's successes have been accompanied by an increasing bureaucratization and regulation of labor. For example, the cooperative organized a weekly payment system that prevented workers from making money as needed, thus eroding their much-valued autonomy. The rules of the cooperative also undermined the informal and transient unions that scavengers had organized in response to sporadic challenges. For these reasons, membership in the cooperative began to wane. Scholars are eager to find uplifting stories of collective organizing and resistance. But Millar's account of the slow death of the Association of Catadores is a sobering reminder that scholarly writings about collective action, revolution, and political awakenings often reveal more about the hopes of the book authors than those of its subjects.

The last book under review, *Monstrous Politics: Geography, Rights, and the Urban Revolution in Mexico City*, by the geographer Ben Gerlofs, exemplifies this pitfall. "Through the twisting and winding century," Gerlofs writes, "a revolutionary structure of feeling has developed among the citizens of [Mexico City]" (3). As established by a growing historiography, Mexico City had a thriving working-class and *colono* (settler) movement that made claims to the city in the postrevolutionary period. According to Gerlofs, the "Revolution is an idea that continues to animate politics across the country," as exemplified by Mexico City's political reform over the past thirty years (145). This is a bold (yet vague) statement. Whether or not readers agree with it, Gerlofs provides an original and sometimes fascinating analysis of a crucial and still-misunderstood period in the history of Mexico City.

After offering a swift historical geography of the city since the turn of the twentieth century, Gerlofs centers his analysis on the years between the 1980s and the present, a

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period marked by the implementation of neoliberal reforms and democratization, culminating in the 2000 election, when the PRI lost the national government to the conservative Partido Acción Nacional and Mexico City was won by the leftist Partido de la Revolución Democrática. Gerlofs describes the PRI and Mexico City as "the two great monsters of twentieth-century Mexico" (19). Although the monster metaphor might be excessive, the relationship between party and city is critical. For most of the twentieth century, Mexico City's regent was appointed by the president, nationalizing local politics. If Mexico City was the PRI's Frankenstein, Gerlofs asks, what happened once the city became autonomous and governed by a democratically elected *jefe de gobierno*? And what is the relationship between the neoliberal agenda pursued by the federal government since 1982 and the left-wing administrations that have governed Mexico's capital since 1997?

Unlike many of the authors of *Urban Latin America*, Gerlofs is cautiously optimistic about the possibilities of grassroots democratic politics amid a neoliberal hegemony. This optimism is on display in the three political ethnographies that constitute the core of *Monstrous Politics*: the push by activists, social movements, and academics to introduce the "right to the city" into the political arena, leading to the 2011 promulgation of the Charter of the Right to the City (Carta de la Ciudad de México por el Derecho a la Ciudad), the successful grassroots resistance to the redevelopment of Avenida Chapultepec in the gentrifying Juárez neighborhood (2016), and the approval of the Constitution of Mexico City in 2017. Gerlofs reads the episodes as paradigms of urban politics theorized by authors like Henri Lefebvre and Jacques Rancière. For example, Gerlofs understands the Avenida Chapultepec redevelopment project—inspired by New York's High Line—and its subsequent reversal as exemplifying both "Mexico City's trend toward what has been called the 'postpolitical' condition and the moment the advance of this condition was halted, even reversed" (96). Residents of Colonia Juárez threatened by the project made use of the Law of Civic Participation to vote against it in a public consultation. Surprisingly, the opposition won, a victory that Gerlofs interprets as indicative of a "a productive avenue for grassroots movements" (13).

Monstrous Politics sometimes suffers from a disconnect between its theoretical and its ethnographic sections. Gerlofs's interpretation of writers like Lefebvre is erudite but doesn't always add to our understanding of the issues at play. At the same time, there is much original research and analysis into processes that are still unfolding. The book is strongest when it combines rich ethnographic data, political analysis, and theoretical insight. The last chapter, "The Redemptive Urban Revolution," examines Mexico City's Constitution of 2017, the culmination of decades of organizing by activists and scholars around ideas such as the "right to the city." Gerlofs also offers an alternative (but not contradictory) and enlightening analysis of the Constitution, centered on the alliances and conflicts between then President Enrique Peña Nieto (PRI), Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), and the forces clustered around MORENA (Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional), the party formed in 2014 that reached the presidency in 2018, led by Andres Manuel López Obrador.

Mexico City's Constitution is rhetorically bloated, abuzz with vague but lofty ideals uttered by activists since the 1980s (an "inclusive city," a "habitable city," and so on). Article 2 states, "The right to the city is a collective right that guarantees full exercise of human rights, the social function of the city, its democratic management, and ensures territorial justice, social inclusion, and the equitable distribution of public goods with the participation of the citizenry" (cited in Gerlofs, 142). But there is little evidence that these principles have translated into laws and policies to counter the commodification and financialization of the city since the 1990s, mostly under left-wing governments. Gerlofs sees the political reforms of the 2010s as opening terrain for citizen participation and a proxy for revolution. Time will tell, but I read his analyses of the drafting of the Constitution and the mobilization against the Chapultepec project as examples of messy

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democratic politics, not of the urban revolution the author envisions. Be that as it may, *Monstrous Politics* offers a snapshot of the interplay between national and city politics during a most interesting moment: the aftermath of the "transition to democracy" and the beginnings of a political regime that has promised to bury neoliberalism in Mexico.

But is an urban revolution still possible? Gerlof's willingness to even consider the question makes him seem like a thinker from an earlier era. The idea of revolution—urban or not—has all but vanished, as has the midcentury idea of the Latin American city. Whether a post-neoliberal version of it is now taking form remains to be seen. But it seems unlikely that future historians will be able to offer a grand map of the intellectual networks animating the idea of the Latin American city of the past thirty years. The sheer number of scholarly publications, along with the short circuits between the humanities, the social sciences, and policy studies, renders this possibility implausible. The difficulty of envisioning a Latin American city as a theoretically productive reality stems not only from intellectual humility. The idea of the Latin American city was animated by scholarly hubris and the political voluntarism of the 1950s and 1960s. That sense of crisis and opportunity has passed, replaced by resignation and skepticism.

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