
BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Learning from Latin America's Informal Sector

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The essay reviews the following works:

Slum Health: From the Cell to the Street. Edited by Jason Corburn and Lee Riley. Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. Pp. xvii, 315. \$34.95, paperback. ISBN: 9780520281073.

Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America. Edited by Brodwyn Fischer, Bryan McCann, and Javier Auyero. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. 293. \$24.95, paperback. ISBN: 9780822355335.

Owners of the Sidewalk: Security and Survival in the Informal City. By Daniel M. Goldstein. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv, 334. \$26.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822360452.

Housing and Belonging in Latin America. Edited by Christien Klaufus and Arij Ouweneel. CEDLA Latin American Studies, 105. New York: Berghahn, 2015. Pp. xiii, 330. \$120 hardcover. ISBN: 9781782387404.

For a Proper Home: Housing Rights in the Margins of Urban Chile, 1960–2010. By Edward Murphy. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015. Pp. ix, 343. \$32.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822963110.

The Urban Informal Sector and How It Speaks to Us (and to the US) Today

Depending on how one defines it, the concept and theories of the informal sector have been around for almost half a century, whether as a “tertiary refuge sector,” the “bazaar economy,” or as the “informal economy” defined by Keith Hart in the late 1960s study of the labor market in Accra, Ghana, that morphed into a major International Labor Office (ILO) study in 1972. Each of these early constructions began as a duality of polar opposites: traditional/modern, rural/urban, bazaar/corporate, and formal/informal. The informal sector was viewed as a product of modernization in which the “traditional sector” of employment and economic activity was essentially a temporary, but functional, response to rapid urbanization and to the constrained expansion of manufacturing jobs and other modern jobs. Initially conceived within an arena of employment and underemployment, in the 1970s the concept also quickly gained traction to describe so-called spontaneous settlements associated with rapid urbanization: squatter settlements and illegal subdivisions on land captured illegally, without title, self-built with little or no infrastructure. Indeed large swaths of many large cities and metro areas of Latin America were established informally and by the 1980s often made up between 20 and 50 percent of the built-up area. Far from being “marginal” to Latin American society, economy, and city development, the informal sector, writ large, was in fact the mainstream,¹ forming an integral part of capitalism with a capacity to expand, albeit on terms that served the dominant formal sector.²

¹ Janice Perlman, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

² See Rod Burgess, Caroline O. N. Moser, and others in Ray Bromley, ed., *The Urban Informal Sector: Critical Perspectives on Employment and Housing* (New York: Pergamon, 1979). (Also published in *World Development* 6, nos. 9–10 [1978].)

The concept of the informal sector thus became conventional wisdom for Latin America from the 1980s and 1990s, as scholars sought to understand its dynamic and rationale,³ and as policy makers sought to figure out the most more appropriate (and sometimes sensitive) responses to low-income self-employment such as street sellers and itinerants (*ambulantes*), and to backyard and in-home production of goods and inputs that were often early de facto supply chains to the formal sector. Similarly in the housing and informal settlement arenas, policy makers, while continuing to espouse formal housing projects for some of the most powerful worker unions and state employees, also switched to more pragmatic approaches to informal settlements by providing basic services and increasingly legal land property titles via programs of “regularization” and settlement upgrading. Indeed, in employment and especially in the housing arena, such intervention was often tied to political clientelism, statecraft, and social control, which several authors in *Cities from Scratch*, and elsewhere, argue continues to this day.

Significantly, those of us who live in the US and the industrialized North are beginning to become more aware of informality's existence in our own backyards: sweatshops, registered and off-the-books self-employment, day laboring, parts of the “gig economy,” self-built and self-managed housing, unregulated off-code informal backyard subdivisions, “garage” and front yard sales of second-hand goods, pedicabs, community gardens, and so on.⁴ While not the mainstream as in Latin America, urban informal practices and the nature of informality and its rationale under conditions of neoliberalism and post-neoliberalism in the contemporary US may be better understood by learning from Latin America and the global South.⁵ Which brings me to the question: To what extent do the texts reviewed here tell us anything new about informality in Latin America today? And do they offer further insights about informality in industrialized contexts such as the US?

Urban Marginality and Informal Settlements: Progressive or Regressive?

On the latter point—possible lessons for urban informality in the US—*Cities from Scratch* offers little. Instead, it is overly locked into discussion of the 1970s literature of marginality, informal housing conditions, critiques of the culture of poverty, and so forth, and often ignores much of the more positive interpretations of informality literature mentioned above.⁶ Brodwyn Fischer is the lead editor, and her chapter provides an overview of the intellectual history of Brazilian and Latin American shantytowns from the late nineteenth century to the 1970s. In a similar vein, but for 1960s housing and squatter movements in Santiago, Chile, Edward Murphy's chapter on Chile revives some of the marginality debates focusing on the *tomas* and *pobladores'* movements of the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR, Revolutionary Left Movement). Murphy covers the period of Popular Unity until the Pinochet coup that overthrew Allende in 1973, and substantially extends his analysis in his own volume, reviewed below. Bryan McCann and Dennis Rogers offer interesting analyses of shantytown experiences in Brazil and Managua, respectively, and explore the ways in which these residents are embedded in social movements and campaigns for democratization and citizenship. Chapters by Sujatha Fernandes (on Caracas) and Mariana Cavalcanti offer ethnographic portrayals of the boundaries between informal/formal housing and neighborhoods. However, in focusing on *favelas* and *villas*, which are physically irregular shantytowns around the inner city, they largely ignore discussion of the much wider universe of the more peripherally located self-built irregular settlements such as *loteamientos* (Brazil) and *barrios populares* (Argentina), thereby emphasizing the highly marginal and stymied regressive development of shantytown neighborhoods. Nevertheless, the individual chapters are interesting and provide useful insights, even if the intellectual thrust is embedded in early 1970s thinking and is less generalizable to the wider informal city of today.

³ See for example Alejandro Portes, Manuel Castells, and Lauren Benton, eds., *The Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989). See also Alejandro Portes and William Haller, “The Informal Economy,” in the *Handbook of Economic Sociology*, edited by Neil J. Smelser and Richard Swedberg, 403–425 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴ Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, eds., *The Informal American City: Beyond Taco Trucks and Day Labor* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014). See also Noah Durst and Jake Wegmann, “Informal Housing in the United States,” *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research* 41, no. 2 (2017): 282–297.

⁵ See for example Peter M. Ward, *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico: Urbanization by Stealth* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999); Ananya Roy, “Urban Informality: Toward an Epistemology of Planning,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 71, no. 2 (2009): 147–158; and Richard Harris, “Modes of Informal Development: A Global Phenomenon,” *Journal of Planning Literature* 33, no. 3 (2018): 267–286. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0885412217737340>.

⁶ Parts of the text here draw on my earlier review of *Cities from Scratch*, published in the *Bulletin of Latin American Research (BLAR)* 34, no. 3 (2015): 422–423.

Cities from Scratch is deservedly and very appropriately dedicated to Emilio Duhau, a Mexican sociologist and critical urban theorist who passed away in August 2013, and who also contributed to the volume. His chapter “The Informal City: An Enduring Slum or a Progressive Habitat” is, to my reading, the strongest and most pertinent in the volume, particularly insofar as it speaks to Latin American housing informality. Unlike the other chapters, which focus on the informal settlements that show less potential and promise for consolidation and improvement, Duhau's chapter is much more in tune with the mainstream evidence in Latin America and engages with the debates about the extent to which informal settlement and self-building over time can be considered “progressive,” and different from the inner-city shantytowns in which abject poverty and poor housing conditions endure.

The book's focus on the more enduring slums means that Duhau's study “strikes a more optimistic note,” as Brodwyn Fisher notes in the editor's introduction (5). Yet his is an evidenced-based chapter that is much more in line with contemporary thinking and analysis for Latin America generally than the remaining chapters, all of which tend to emphasize the more negative side of informal settlement life and contestation, usually from a historiographic and/or ethnographic methodological perspective. The irony is that Duhau's interpretation is described as optimistic even though his scholarship and voice has consistently been among the most critical in Mexico. As he himself notes, “assessing the size and localization, and explaining the causes of this *nonprogressive informal city* [his emphasis], is a task that requires much undone fieldwork” (163). He calls for researchers to explain *nonimprovement* outside of the mainstream where there is less social mobility and neighborhood upgrading over time.

Javier Auyero's final chapter offers an abbreviated version of his book *Flammable* (on extreme cases of environmental poverty and injustice in an informal settlement in Buenos Aires). It describes the social costs and oppression of the poor, who are treated as supplicants by the city authorities through state-induced waiting and queuing for basic services.⁷ This short overview will be a helpful entrée for those interested in a more detailed reading of Auyero's work. However, I am not sure that the other essays in the collection will, to the same extent, encourage readers to go back to the authors' original works. While *Cities from Scratch* readers will appreciate some of the debates surrounding informal settlements in the early literature, it is rather unfortunate that the volume makes Duhau's chapter look like the outlier. In fact, his take adheres to the more mainstream perspective of the ways in which informality and self-building arise from ground zero—that is, from scratch.

Edward Murphy's volume *For a Proper Home* builds on his aforementioned analysis of housing rights and housing policies in *Cities from Scratch* and extends the analysis to include the major eradication programs that followed the coup, and the social housing programs of both the dictatorship and the period after the return to democracy in 1989 to 2010, when his study ends. While there are several major and well-documented studies of Chilean housing production covering this period (1960–early 2000s), Murphy's volume is perhaps the most detailed and definitive, dissecting the linkages between popular mobilization, governmental ideology, and development “project,” and the types of housing programs that result from the tensions between permitted (or tolerated) informal housing production and subsidized formal (social) housing projects, for which Chile has become something of a model in Latin America.

A historian by profession, Murphy weaves the detailed historical analysis drawn from archival materials and Ministry of Housing documentation with his own fieldwork and ethnographic research, much of which allows him to retrospectively build insights from contemporary key-informant *pobladores* about their mobilizations and housing trajectories from the Allende period (1970–73) through the dictatorship to the present. He identifies three different types of low-income housing: the (often) radical land invasions and self-built housing of the *campamentos* (illegal status); the legally developed and more upgraded *poblaciones*, some of which began as squatter settlements, while others were state-subsidized and state-promoted informal settlements; and the formal-sector *villas* (which are solidly built apartment blocks or row houses with full infrastructure and not to be confused with the shantytowns mentioned earlier for Buenos Aires). The development dynamics of these housing types are closely linked to the political economy and polity. *Campamentos* were the principal means of access to land and informal self-building during the late 1960s under the Frei administration and through the Allende period, when they formed part of the socialist project of Popular Unity and the more radically left of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). From 1967 to 1973, nearly 400,000 low-income Chileans mobilized and seized land on the (then) outskirts of Santiago.

⁷ Javier Auyero, *Flammable: Environmental Suffering in an Argentine Shantytown* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Auyero's 2012 volume *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

After the coup the Pinochet dictatorship targeted the *campamentos* for eradication and removal to *poblaciones* and *villas* as part of a repressive state-of-emergency “sanitization” campaign, which also freed up valuable inner-urban land sites for redevelopment. This accelerated the segregation and exclusion of lower-income sectors to the periphery and to certain *comunas* (municipalities) in the south, making Santiago one of the most socioeconomically segregated cities in Latin America. And while some *campamentos* resisted evictions during the Pinochet regime and after, the primary housing options became state-assisted *poblaciones* and, increasingly, subsidized social-interest housing.

Despite the book's title, Murphy wisely dodges the minefield of offering a definition of what constitutes a “proper home,” except to suggest that it is home ownership preferably with legal titles, and to suggest that *pobladores* associate different meanings to residence in each of these types of housing, and to different types of property relations. He is especially interested in the ways in which property holding is valued or stigmatized, with such social constructions coming largely from the state and from the middle class. He offers a theoretical link between property and “propriety” (defined as dignity and forms of behavior) and shows how propriety is substantially different, and is increasingly tied to expected patterns of behavior and to concepts of citizenship rights and duties.

Given that Chile has a wide and deep tradition of state-subsidized social-interest housing and that several Latin American countries have followed that path through large-scale state-sponsored or subsidized mass social-interest housing estates (e.g., Mexico and Brazil), it would be especially interesting to extend the analysis and the idea of propriety to different types of social-interest housing projects in Latin America and elsewhere. If it has any traction, then it will be interesting for future research to explore how propriety, citizenship, and political participation intersect and vary spatially across the city, as well as between different types of social housing projects, not least since Chile is already undertaking policies to tear down some of the most stigmatized and problematic housing projects (Bajos de Mena housing development in the southern part of Santiago, for example).

Christien Klaufus and Arij Ouwennell's edited volume *Housing and Belonging in Latin America* extends several of these ideas about the meanings of housing and home. Bryan R. Roberts's chapter offers an overview of the consolidation of the Latin America city since the 1950s with a focus on population mobility; spatial changes, especially those wrought by market forces since the 1990s; and a labor market structure that underpins poverty and has led to a decline of neighborhood social cohesion. This provides a baseline for most other chapters, which seek to examine the meanings attached to houses/homes, neighborhoods, and cities, and how those meanings and values change: over time, by generation, by socioeconomic mobility achieved by individuals, and by social class. (The focus is on the working and lower-middle classes.) Most authors argue that they see considerable creativity in emerging meanings and sense of belonging, even though each solution and response often generates new limitations and new forms of informality.

Erika Denisse Grajeda's chapter is an excellent example. Taking the case of dwelling inheritance transfers in consolidated informal settlements Mexico, she shows how after thirty or forty years of self-building their homes and creating a substantial asset, many pioneer householders are dying intestate (without a will). Over the twenty to thirty years of living in their properties they have moved from having no title papers at all to having full titles, and now as they pass away those titles are “clouded” (flawed) by competing claims due to intestacy. Since most would-be beneficiaries do not wish, or cannot afford, to liquidate the value and move elsewhere, the property slides back into legal limbo with the result that informal understandings about ownership, rights of access, use rights, and inheritance status once again prevail. Thus there is a reversion to and reproduction of informality.

Meanings and informal participation also change over time. Michaela Hordijk's chapter on Lima suggests that residents in consolidated informal settlements no longer aspire or engage in collective action as they once did. They feel less attracted to the neighborhood per se, and instead identify more closely with the city—points also made by José Samper and Tamera Marko in their chapter on Medellín. In part, of course, this reflects the different needs of their pioneer squatter parents, many of whom were migrants to the city and who, when they first occupied land in the 1970s and 1980s, were obliged to defend the fledgling community and lobby for services and legal recognition, all of which demanded solidarity and collective action. Changing meanings and aspirations also reflect the increased heterogeneity of neighborhood populations, which now include renters, kinsmen/sharers, and others (*arrimados*), as well as adult second and even third generations of sons and daughters who grew up in the barrio and in the city. Moreover, as Murphy highlights in his volume, the nature of the state is different: it is smaller, less authoritarian, more decentralized, more technically able, and above all, more tied into a neoliberal development and financial logic that creates alternative housing options. In short, the socioeconomic trajectories, expectations,

and values that shape the meanings of house and home for the second generation are likely to be very different than those of their parents. To date, differences in these formal and informal transgenerational expectations and housing trajectories have been little studied and are an important area of future research.

Several chapters of the volume focus on middle-class housing values and explore the relative importance of neighborhood location and reputation and lifestyles, including a drift toward greater individualization versus collective or group identities (features also mentioned by Roberts and Ann Varley in their respective chapters). Two chapters on Argentina and Buenos Aires in the 1990s and 2000s show how the growth of some two hundred high-rise (gated) apartment buildings have created sharper boundaries between neighborhoods and a more fragmented sense of belonging (Jan Dohnke and Corinna Hölzl). Fernando Ostuni and Jean-Louis Van Gelder describe the huge federal government expenditures to create mass social-interest housing estates in the early 2000s as part of the attempt to revitalize the economy after its collapse in 2001. Yet they also note the paradox that informal settlement actually increased in the period after 2004, largely as a result of a failure to control or cap land prices in the formal housing market, ensuring that less of the target population could afford them. Formality and the unintended (or unanticipated) consequences of planning interventions may beget further, or different forms, of informality.

Cristina Inclán-Valadez describes one of Mexico's largest social-interest housing developers, Casas GEO, specifically one of developments in the semirural hinterlands of the city of Cuernavaca in the state of Morelos. Targeting better-off working- and lower-middle-class families, the relative proximity to Mexico City (a drive of one and a half to two hours) meant that Casas GEO homes were bought as either first or "second" (weekend) residences. Casas GEO promoted and marketed its developments as "coproduction" of housing in which residents were partners in being able to shape the design of the house (within limits) according to their own notions of style, security, and comfort. In practice, the actual coproduction of the home was limited, but once residents occupied their homes many households made significant self-help adaptations to the dwellings by adding rooms, making adornments to the exterior of the dwelling, and so on, all of which reflected their newfound tastes and projection of identity.

Similarly Peter Kellett, working in Northern Colombia, describes how as well as self-building from scratch, once homes became close to be finished (usually after ten to fifteen years), owners quite self-consciously reshape the facades of their homes, less out of a desire to conform to elite architecture and design and more as a reflection of their own ideas of reality and symbolic meanings. He argues that this emphasizes the need "for detailed ethnographic work in teasing out the subtlety and complexity implicit in dwelling practices, social values and meanings" (238).

In a similar vein, Ann Varley has a reflexive chapter on home and belonging and takes issue with some recent literature in the UK and elsewhere that belittles those who see the home as a space of safety, privacy, renewal, and individuation, arguing instead that treating the home as a private utopia that excludes the Other (threats from the outside) serves to inculcate and reinforce selfishness. Varley has a problem with this viewpoint; in an affecting description of her father's suffering from late-life dementia, she shows how being at home was central to his maintaining any sense of his bearings since his memory was intimately tied to his surroundings—namely home. Switching to her fieldwork sites and work in informal settlements in Guadalajara, she also shows how the core values of house and home as spaces of safety, renewal, and individuation were echoed in focal discussion groups and were appreciated by men and women alike.

Slums and Informal Settlements as Harbingers of Poor Health and Environmental Poverty

Continuing the focus on informal settlements, *Slum Health: From the Cell to the Street* is something of an outlier. It examines slum populations' exposure to health risks and diseases and explores how such risks and negative outcomes might be mitigated or alleviated through upgrading (physical improvement) policies, and through the coproduction of health interventions by residents, medical workers, NGOs, and health agencies. Given the book's focus on health and epidemiology, the material in this volume will be largely unfamiliar to most *LARR* readers and to social science researchers who work on informal settlements, and whose disciplinary areas are outside the health sector. The anchor points for the studies in the book are also likely to be largely unfamiliar, comprising as they do detailed scientific and medical research, *Lancet* publications, and World Health and United Nations publications. There is little reference to the mainstream literature on housing informality that forms the basis of the books under review here. In some ways this makes it refreshing and new, and the volume offers an extremely helpful opening to a realm of medical science literature relating to informal settlements.

Most of the chapters in parts 2–4 focus on Kenya, India, and Brazil and recognize the importance of taking a relational view of place and health using a wide spectrum of quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques, including narratives, systemic observation, and spatial mapping. For most readers part 1, “Slum Health: Framing Research, Practice and Policy,” is likely to be most helpful and accessible and offers an excellent overview and guide. The two editors, Jason Corburn and Lee Riley, provide the initial framing, and both are individually engaged in many of the specific country/city/informal settlement studies, along with some thirty-seven other authors (most of whom are public health and medical scholars and researchers).

Part 1 introduces the coproduction approach, namely integrating the laboratory and the street (biological and community base expertise and inputs), and argues that it is important to fully understand how contemporary health issues are differentially embedded in slums and informal settlements. The goal is to seek understandings that will improve “slum health” in the broader context: well-being; access to life-affirming services; and reduction of risk, disability, danger, and disease. In chapter 1, by way of an example, Corburn and Riley describe some of the results from the case of Salvador, Brazil (reported later in chapters 6–8), and focus specifically on research in the favela Pau de Lima. They show how residents (especially children) were particularly prone to exposure to a bacterium (Group A streptococcus, GAS), which causes coughing driven by the host's immune response and which, in turn, can cause collateral damage to the heart valves associated with rheumatic heart disease, ultimately requiring costly treatments and surgery. The point is to show that favelas and informal settlements showed high exposure and presented disease at higher levels than middle-income and better-served neighborhoods. They also found that the GAS strains were actually more virulent in the slum areas.

Chapter 4 by Alon Unger and Riley outlines how to move from understanding to action. Their table 2.1 provides a useful summary of how the characteristics of informal settlements (poor quality structures, overcrowding, poor sanitation, inadequate access to safe water, insecure tenure, unintentional injuries, environmental hazards, poor access to health care services, and so on), all shape negative outcomes. Corburn (chapter 3) introduces the notion of *ecosocial epidemiology*, emphasizing that there are multiple pathways to address patterns of health and disease at different scales and contexts (places). One of these is “toxic stress,” and Corburn argues that social, economic, political, and environmental depredations may act as stressors that can wear down the immune and neurological systems, leading to a range of diseases and even death. Chapter 5, by Corburn and Alice Sverdlik, provides an excellent overview of how governmental “upgrading programs” of informal settlements can improve health equity, and reinforces the merit and relative importance of this volume as a link between the social and medical sciences especially as they relate to informal housing and health.

Informal Employment: Markets and Street Vendors

Daniel M. Goldstein's *Owners of the Sidewalk: Security and Survival in the Informal City* takes us from informal settlements to informality in the marketplace. It is built around several years of fieldwork, from 2005 to 2012, and tells the story of a covered market called La Cancha located in the center of the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia. The market is fairly typical of many in Latin America: a central location comprising a patchwork of sections of owner/leaseholder-fixed retailing stalls embedded within a web of informal relations between sellers, leaders, local authorities, and private actors (wholesalers, security guards, and so on). Also embedded within and outside the actual market space are itinerant street sellers, or *ambulantes* as they are more widely known. There is ongoing tension between the *sindicatos* (union organizations) of the *ambulantes* (who ply their trades along sidewalks or in front of a formal *puesto*), and those who have a fixed stall for which they pay a rent. Across the whole marketplace there is constant insecurity generated by competition, conflicts between fixed and itinerant sellers, changing informal “rules” of operation, and policing to extort bribes. Little of this will be new to those familiar with markets and street sellers in Latin America, or indeed across the “Majority World” (Goldstein eschews the terms Third World and global South). Yet it is an excellent study and a wonderful read. Why?

The answer is in the writing and the way in which Goldstein tells the story through thirty-seven short chapters, each rarely more than five or six pages long, and does so in a way that is nonlinear, nonchronological, and nonsequential (probably not a model for a PhD dissertation!). However, Goldstein does offer helpful and necessary background on Cochabamba's history (colonial and modern), on the political economy of the Bolivian experiment, on the informal state, and on the informal economy, but these chapters are interspersed across the volume that comprises short vignettes of stories and events. Each vignette touches on a different aspect of the web of informality in the marketplace and on the surrounding streets, such

as market spaces and market time; conflicts of interests; the stall as an extension of the home space for *puesto* holders; wholesaling and how it is done; relations of sellers to the authorities and to the private security “police”; the contradictions between security and chaos; women’s work and the role of gender in organization and leadership; resisting privatization.

Most of these snapshots are integrated from the perspective of one of the four principal protagonists: Don Rafo (a union leader of the fixed stallholders); Don Silvio, a leader of the *ambulantes*’ union; the author (Goldstein), a cultural anthropologist; and Nacho, his local research assistant who plays many roles: bodyguard, quasi-spiritual guide, mentor, factotum, and reality check or sounding board. At different points in the book the backgrounds and characters of these principals are described. Don Silvio, for example, appears in the prologue but the chapter about him comes much later (chapter 26), whereas Don Rafo and Nacho are described early on. The characters and their agency are described within the context and drama of popular mobilizations, encounters with the press and with local authorities, and by interactions with each other and with the author.

Goldstein inserts himself into the narrative, often with humor and self-deprecation. As well as personalizing many of the stories he occasionally steps back to provide a (slightly) more academic commentary about engaging in ethnographic research: “Decolonizing Ethnographic Research” (chapter 10); “Fieldwork in a Flash” (chapter 20), which describes quick in-and-out interviews with key informants (sellers) as they continuing working; fieldwork entry and exits; and a wonderful early chapter “Writing, Reality, Truth” in which he describes his intention to write an accessible ethnography, free of jargon, that does its best to reflect the reality and the truth of market life. As Lynn Stephen notes in the cover blurb, the book is “superbly researched and beautifully executed,” and Diane Davis astutely comments that it is written with a “novelist’s sense of drama.” By offering short but thick descriptions and accounts, Goldstein not only covers most of the important detail of a Latin American informal-sector market but does so in a way that allows one to feel the essence of its dynamism, creativity, and truth.

Understanding Informality in US Cities

While informality is the norm in the global South (what Harris calls “overt informality”)⁸ it also exists in contemporary advanced industrial and postindustrial societies in a variety of guises. Harris differentiates between “diffuse informality,” which is largely individualistic, weakly coordinated, and small scale, and “embedded informality,” which is more endemic and engages groups and associations that take advantages of jurisdictional variations of codes and regulations, or that undertake activities that ignore local codes and construction permissions, for example. The problem is that research in the US rarely drills down to see it or seeks to understand its logic.

With the exception, perhaps, of the exploration of *Slum Health: From the Cell to the Street*, the works reviewed here offer few significant new insights about the informal sector in Latin America. But they do highlight several important themes that can inform our thinking about informality in US cities today. One theme is about informality and marginality itself, the reproduction of culture-of-poverty type arguments from the 1970s Latin American literature, and the idea of being trapped in poverty with few options or opportunities of escape. There is no doubt that abject poverty continues to exist in Latin American cities, but maybe the theme to carry over to the US is to seek explanations for that marginalization and lack of progress—Duhau’s point underscored earlier in this review. There are clearly sections of the underclass in America who struggle to survive let alone emerge from poverty, as Matthew Desmond so graphically portrays,⁹ but here, too, the lesson from Latin America is to look at other, often more widespread examples of informality. A second theme is the converse: namely to recognize and understand the creativity of the informal sector and see it as neither dysfunctional nor temporary (although it is less omnipresent in the US). Informality that one observes in Latin America—the work-arounds that allow for access to home ownership and employment, for example—are often viewed positively and pragmatically by policy makers, even though informal practices invariably incur considerable social costs for households and workers alike. Third, Latin American informality helps to inform us of the possibility of negative consequences such as greater exposure to environmental and other risks (such as health and disease); the excessive delays in receiving basic or essential goods borne of clientelism and foot dragging; and the links between poor housing and morbidity, among others. Fourth is the notion that informality is dynamic and reproduces itself in response to changing economic conditions. It may also morph as a result of some public policy interventions even

⁸ Harris, “Modes of Informal Development.”

⁹ Matthew Desmond, *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (New York: Crown, 2016).

when these are well intentioned and supportive, and lead to a new iteration of work-arounds and subversion of codes and laws.¹⁰ A fifth theme is to understand the transgenerational dimension of informality: how it may become embedded within the behavior patterns, self-identity, and aspirations of second- and third-generation low-income households and individuals, thereby reproducing and reshaping informal practices.

There is real value in reprising informal-sector analyses and thinking. Being familiar with the informality writ large in Latin America helps us to expose its underbelly in the US. This was a primary goal of my own 1999 volume *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico*.¹¹ Informed by many years of research about informal housing practices and policies in Mexico, that volume demonstrated that Texas *colonias* were very similar in practice and rationale to their Mexican informal settlement counterparts, and called on Texas legislators to respond with more sensitive policy responses along the lines of those adopted earlier in Mexico. Indeed, as Richard Harris and others observe, there are multiple examples and modes of informality in US cities today: day labor sites and casual laboring; self-building in colonias and informal subdivisions in Texas and across many parts of the US; informal financing of the same; backyard second- and third-family housing units built outside of code in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Austin, and many other cities; home extensions; informal off-street parking arrangements; garage and front-of-lot sales of second-hand goods; the booming industry of food trucks; the ubiquitous street sellers of New York and Los Angeles, and so on.¹²

Many of these activities have existed in the US for decades, albeit often largely invisible and “underground” (e.g., the sweatshops described by Saskia Sassen),¹³ and are therefore rarely adequately documented. The legion of studies from Latin America, and those discussed in this review, offer insights and a framework for how scholars and policy makers might think about informal processes in our own backyards and better understand the logic (and needs) that drive them. Some informality is structural and rent-seeking (day laboring, for example), while other forms are work-arounds. In Texas and elsewhere *colonias* and informal subdivisions are a response to poverty, lack of access to formal financing, and the failure of public and private sectors to provide affordable formal housing alternatives. By locating in low-code or relatively weak political jurisdictions such as counties that have relatively little planning authority and fiscal capacity, developers offer low-income self-builders a foothold in the land market and a route to home ownership.

One major difference between Latin America and the United States is the extent to which informality is tolerated and regulated. Goldstein shows how, in the case of Cochabamba, the state's capacity and calculus to construct what it considers to be illegal, and to use its discretion in facilitating other illegal practices (in the state's self-interest), forms part of a process of *disregulation* (a term he adopts to differentiate from the more widely used term “deregulation,” which, he says, implies that there was regulation in the first place). Selective enforcements of rules and laws and the existence of “organized disorder” are, he says, a result of the state's presence rather than its absence (7). While rules and laws exist, they are used in ways that are discriminatory and controlling.

In contrast to much of the global South, the texture of law and regulatory environment in the US is much more dense, and the norm is that it be adhered to (unless, in Dickens's Mr. Bumble's terms, the law is “a ass—a idiot,” in which case it will be wildly flouted). But in the US public legal and normative practices vary: by jurisdiction (city versus the less empowered county), and by (in)capacity to exercise regulatory controls, and thereby the turning of a “blind eye” (for example the backyard secondary units in Los Angeles).¹⁴ Sometimes, too, informality will be ignored when well-meaning public officials know that intervention will probably only make the problem worse and/or lead to unanticipated consequences. When seeking to shed light on informality in the US it is important to clarify the rationale that underpins these activities and work-arounds, how these are embedded in the wider formal market, and how they engage with, or avoid, the reach of the local state. Only then can sensitive planning responses be devised and implemented to engage with informality without causing undue hardship to the population concerned, or resulting in their stigmatization and (sometimes) their criminalization.

¹⁰ Peter M. Ward, “The Reproduction of Informality in Low-Income Self-Help Housing Communities,” in *The Informal City in the USA*, ed. Vinit Mukhija and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, 59–77 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014); Matthew Desmond, “Eviction and the Reproduction of Urban Poverty,” *American Journal of Sociology* 118, no. 1 (2012): 88–133.

¹¹ Ward, *Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico*. Since 2000, working with my colleagues and graduate students at University of Texas at Austin, we have extended this housing and public policy research. For further information see www.lahn.utexas.org (Texas Housing Database button).

¹² See Harris, “Modes of Informal Development,” and several of the works cited in previous notes.

¹³ Saskia Sassen, “New York City's Informal Economy,” Institute for Social Science Research Working Papers 4, no. 9 (1988).

¹⁴ Jake Wegmann, “Research Notes: The Hidden Cityscapes of Informal Housing in Suburban Los Angeles and the Paradox of Horizontal Density,” *Buildings and Landscapes* 22, no. 2 (2015): 89–110.

There are many opportunities for such sensitive policy making in which informal activities can be gradually woven into the formal fabric of the city: by regulating on the basis of minimum (but safe) rather than maximum (high) standards; or by “progressive compliance” (grace periods to come to code); by policies to incentivize registration and transparency, and so on. After all, the lightly regulated ride-sharing companies that we see in the US today have clear origins and parallels in jitney cabs and *peseros* in Latin America as do many of today's self-building and household-sharing strategies, Airbnb arrangements, pedicabs, day labor markets, and the multiple individual self-employed income-earning strategies of the “gig” economy. In short, we have much to learn from Latin America about informality in our own city backyards.

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