


BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

## The Urban and Beyond in Latin America

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This essay reviews the following works:

**Concrete Dreams: Practice, Value, and Built Environments in Post-crisis Buenos Aires.** By Nicholas D'Avella. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019. Pp. 312. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478005117.

**Black Market Capital: Urban Politics and the Shadow Economy in Mexico City.** By Andrew Konove. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018. Pp ix + 304. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780520293687.

**Mapping the Megalopolis: Order and Disorder in Mexico City.** Edited by Glen David Kuecker and Alejandro Puga. Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2017. Pp vii + 304. \$110.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781498559782.

**Defiant Geographies: Race and Urban Space in 1920s Rio de Janeiro.** By Lorraine Leu. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2020. Pp. 238. \$42.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9780822946007.

**The Street Is Ours: Community, the Car, and the Nature of Public Space in Rio de Janeiro.** By Shawn William Miller. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp viii + 349. \$120.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781108426978.

**New World Cities: Challenges of Urbanization and Globalization in the Americas.** Edited by John Tutino and Martin V. Melosi. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Pp. xii + 344. \$34.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781469648750.

**The Invention of the Favela.** By Licia do Prado Valladares. Translated by Robert N. Anderson. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019. Pp. xxxii + 286 pages. \$32.50 paperback. ISBN: 9781469649986.

**A City on a Lake: Urban Political Ecology and the Growth of Mexico City.** By Matthew Vitz. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018. Pp ix + 352. \$27.95 paperback. ISBN: 9780822370406.

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The “urban history of Latin America,” wrote Diego Armus and John Lear two decades ago, “has been unfolding in the form of a fan, more often than not adding themes on top of

others.”<sup>1</sup> In their reading of contemporary urban histories, the city had served as a stage for myriad processes unfolding within it. Since then, scholars of the humanities and social sciences have continuously magnified the field of urban studies and in so doing moved beyond questions of what constitutes the urban. These books represent a concerted emphasis to situate cities not only in national histories but also in multiscalar histories.

The eight books reviewed bring to the fore questions of spatial scale: from the informal markets in Mexico City, to the streets and hillside communities of downtown Rio de Janeiro, to the mutual imbrication of city and nation, and all the way to global networks that surpass the nation. Urbanization, a central theme since the inception of urban studies, is recast in several works. Moving away from urbanization’s links to the previously explored themes of migration and industrialization, Lorraine Leu’s *Defiant Geographies* examines urbanization as a racialized process, intimately interwoven with national claims to modernity. While race does not wholly disappear, John Tutino’s and Martin V. Melosi’s edited collection *New World Cities* moves beyond the nation to link urbanization to globalization. The global lens is also central to the interdisciplinary collection *Mapping the Megalopolis*, edited by Glen David Kuecker and Alejandro Puga. Matthew Vitz’s *A City on a Lake* and Shawn William Miller’s *The Street Is Ours* contribute to the burgeoning field of urban political ecology by emphasizing the intersecting influences of human and nonhuman actors in the process of urbanization and enclosure of the commons. Andrew Konove and Nicholas D’Avella each intervenes primarily in literature on urban popular politics by examining the informal economy and value. Licia do Prado Valladares’s *The Invention of the Favela* concentrates on the formation of the favela as a category. It neatly bridges the scholarship of the early 2000s with its emphasis on the travails of modernization and formality/informality, and that of today’s emphasis on capitalist dispossession and globalization.

### The invention of categories

Licia do Prado Valladares’s book was originally published in Portuguese in 2005 and in English in 2019 and is already well known; nonetheless, she makes crucial contributions that uniquely frame current shifts in the field. In an intellectual history of sociological scholarship on the favela, Valladares identifies three periods in the formation of the favela as a category: the invention of the favela at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century; the mid-twentieth-century surveys and statistical analyses; and the late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century social scientific research designed to inform public policy targeting poverty.

Valladares argues that over this span, social scientific work produced three enduring dogmas about favelas: the favela as a peculiar, unique space (140); the favela as the “locus of poverty, the land of the poor” par excellence (141); and the favela as a homogeneous space, devoid of internal heterogeneity. Considering these favela representations, Valladares ends her monograph with a radical proposition: dump favelas as “the field systematically used for the most diverse questions concerning poverty. This is the only way we will cease to confuse the favela with poverty” (155). Indeed, recent scholarship on Brazil and Latin America has done just that.

Scholars have shown that informality in Latin America precedes the modern period, has grown in tandem with formal urban processes, and does not solely encompass

<sup>1</sup> Diego Armus and John Lear, “The Trajectory of Latin American Urban History,” *Journal of Urban History* 24, no. 3 (March 1998): 297.

poor sectors.<sup>2</sup> As will also become clear in the rest of this essay, the field has moved away from a sole focus on poverty and marginalized populations. In tracing the historical production of the favela as a category, however, *The Invention of the Favela* is a useful reminder to denaturalize other categories that over time have become all-encompassing and seemingly immutable.

### Urban ecologies

The very morphology of urban ecologies requires denaturalizing. Once a lacustrine environment, the Mexico City basin has undergone vast transformations such that the capital now faces perennial water crises. The Desagüe, a massive hydraulic project to drain the city's lakes, began in the colonial period as urban elites sought to protect Mexico City from flooding.<sup>3</sup> In *A City on a Lake*, Matthew Vitz recognizes these earlier transformative projects but argues that they pale in comparison to those of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when “Mexico City became the national hub of capitalist urbanization and state-directed environmental planning” (4). During this period, he shows, two revolutions contributed to prioritizing the needs of the capital city over its hinterlands; a sanitary revolution that began at the end of the nineteenth century and sought to modernize the city through drainage, sewerage, and forest conservation, and the Mexican Revolution of 1910.

Vitz argues that “nonhuman nature, rather than being torn asunder, was inextricably joined to the build environment in the process of urbanization” (6). Vitz builds on scholarship on urban political ecology, which views cities as hybrid spaces. He also draws on US environmental historians who have shown that the urban and rural traverse each other in the making of metropolitan environments. Attuned to spatial scale, Vitz demonstrates that for modern Mexico City, too, urbanization tightly linked the capital to its hinterlands. As the city grew, so did the need for efficient waste removal, potable water, and housing. Urban planners and engineers built infrastructure to service the needs of urban consumers, often at the expense of hinterland economies and populations. The environmental and social transformations of Mexico City's metropolitan environment were not predetermined. Vitz carefully points out that multiple players—state agents, urban planners, engineers, Indigenous communities, and poor urban dwellers—negotiated, contested, and fundamentally reshaped the sanitary and Mexican revolution.

Vitz makes important contributions to histories of the Mexican Revolution and state formation. The agrarian reform project and Constitution of 1917, he argues, “urbanized Mexican capitalism” (176). This important insight suggests that we can no longer think of agrarian and urban history as separate. Contestations over the metropolitan environment brought diverse popular groups into a dynamic interplay with state agents, remaking both popular culture and state power in the process. This becomes abundantly clear in Vitz's examination of forests and working-class settlements during Lázaro Cárdenas's administration (1934–1940).

<sup>2</sup> On the mutual interdependence of formality and informality, see Brodwyn Fischer, Bryan McCann, and Javier Auyero, eds., *Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Bryan McCann, *Hard Times in the Marvelous City: From Dictatorship to Democracy in the Favelas of Rio de Janeiro* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013). On the informal city as more than just a modern feature, see Brodwyn Fischer, “Beyond Insurgency and Dystopia: The Role of Informality in Brazil's Twentieth-Century Urban Formation,” in *Public Goods versus Economic Interests: Global Perspectives on the History of Squatting*, ed. Freia Anders and Alexander Sedlmaier (New York: Routledge, 2016), 122–149.

<sup>3</sup> Vera S. Candiani, *Dreaming of Dry Land: Environmental Transformation in Colonial Mexico City* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014).

Forest conservation gained utmost attention in the 1920s, as environmentalists took up the issue of Mexico City's dust storms. These conservationists focused solely on deforestation to explain flooding and soil erosion. In doing so, they simplified a more complex ecological and environmental phenomenon. The Mexican Forestry Society and the Forestry Law gave officials the power to regulate forestry uses on private, public, and communal land. As Vitz makes clear, these efforts brought campesino and hinterland communities into the fold of the state. Tepidly supportive of agrarian reform, the Forestry Society blamed "primitive campesinos with an ingrained culture of destruction" for deforestation and sought to limit land distribution to only unforested lands (120). Ejido forest cooperatives, created to regulate communities' use of woodlands, had contradictory effects. Tight control by forestry officials, for example, fostered illegal campesino practices. Cárdenas's programs, Vitz shows, worsened these existing tensions. The creation of the new Forestry Department and the national park system imposed additional challenges on cooperatives. Cárdenas fully embraced the conservationist current and made forests and parks exempt from ejido grants. It was not just forest preservationists that sought to limit campesino woodland uses; workers in textiles and paper mills equally condemned them, afraid that deforestation would impact the water resources that powered the plants, and by extension, their livelihoods. These shared assumptions, Vitz argues, "forged a new sociospatial hierarchy around the use of resources," increasingly prioritizing urban needs (133).

Vitz posits that Cárdenas's rule was less progressive and consistent than previously thought. Urban housing, much like forest conservation, brings into sharp view the contradictions of Cardenismo. Despite the 1930s attempts to ensure broad access to public services by revising building and sanitation codes, these measures were difficult to enforce and expensive. Owners who upgraded their buildings also increased rent, forcing tenants into affordable but unhygienic alternatives. As Vitz astutely argues, "as long as the state failed to universalize sanitary services through massive infrastructure development, the market determined who could access them" (168). To avoid land expropriation, wealthy landowners close to Mexico City divvied up and sold their lands (176). They invested in land rents and urban real estate, a process that Vitz argues served as a "spatial fix" for capital (à la David Harvey).

A conservative reaction to Cardenismo emerged in the 1940s, foreclosing alternatives made possible by the Mexican Revolution. An elite, technocratic alliance of state officials, engineers, and urban developers facilitated capitalist development at the expense of campesino communities and workers, who bore the brunt of urbanization and industrialization initiatives to service the needs of urban consumers (195). While he does not ignore the many gains of the Mexican Revolution, Vitz points to the remarkable continuity with Porfirian development; both reinforced an elite, urban vision of environmental planning led by a centralized state. Though absent in the book, the desire to protect the capital's wealth above the needs of the basin's communities extends to the colonial period, as Vera Candiani suggested in her environmental history of the Desagüe. Readers interested in the long-term transformations of the basin of Mexico must read these two books together.

Vitz is to be commended for his ability to integrate the ecological, social, and political dimensions of cities and their hinterlands into an engaging narrative. He brings together a multiplicity of social actors and contingent factors to explain Mexico City's contemporary environmental challenges. At times, this slew of actors, especially in chapter 1, make the narrative somewhat convoluted for nonspecialists, but this minor quail does not reduce the importance of his work.

Shawn William Miller's *The Street Is Ours* complements Vitz's environmental history approach. It is the street as a natural resource that concerns Miller, not lakes or forests. The street, Miller argues, "has been unique as a commons because rather than contributing specific extractable resources, its primary offering has been physical space," which is

renewable (10). By viewing the street as a “natural resource, a common public good,” Miller emphasizes the street’s diverse uses, beyond conflict (8). It was the introduction of the automobile, he shows, that over time facilitated the creation of an exclusionary public space dominated by the elite. Miller, like Vitz, draws on critical geographers such as Henri Lefebvre to trace the production of urban space and underscore its hybridity. Transformations of Rio de Janeiro’s historic center—such as the broadening of avenues and flattening of hills—likewise altered the meanings and practices associated with the street.

In his classic book about US suburbanization, Kenneth Jackson argued that “no other invention has altered urban form more than the internal combustion engine,” converting the open space of streets to arteries for the automobile.<sup>4</sup> Until now, we knew very little about the impact of the automobile on Latin American cities, and especially on the street. In emphasizing the spatial dimensions of both the car and the street, Miller intervenes in debates about the relationship between space and time and about the urban commons.

Miller draws on critical geographers to argue that with the advent of modernity and capitalist ascendancy, “space becomes subservient to time” to such an extent that it is “converted from its reality as a three-dimensional volume to a two-dimensional line” (15). Miller makes this explicit by pointing to the car’s mobility, which transformed the street’s multiple functions to the single use of thoroughfare. In his analysis of paintings and illustrations of Rio, Miller argues that the nineteenth-century street was less about movement and more for “human bodies to be, a medium for existence” (16). The street was a place for chatter, play, gossip, illicit activities, news, and music. Though attempts to police street behavior were there, Miller argues that access to the street went unregulated. Unlike other historians who focus on streets as mainly sites of conflict, Miller maintains that they could also be “communities of place,” with radical democratic potential and whose disappearance he laments (47).

The nineteenth-century street did not zone ecological, cultural, or social functions; they all occurred simultaneously. Residents perceived the nineteenth-century street as “nature’s residue,” as unimproved and unproduced space (31). To explain this perception, Miller examines early urban planning maps in which cities were structured by the arrangement of lots and blocks, not streets. It is only in the mid-twentieth century that maps became street maps and not representative of “urban blocks built on raw landscape” (35). The perception of the street as nature indicates to Miller its early status as a commons.

Not only did pedestrians make up over 80 percent of car accident fatalities by the mid-1930s, but walkers lost the more abstract battle for public space. The car transformed streets into roads whose singular function was to facilitate movement. Miller argues that despite attempts to resist the automobile’s conquest of space, pedestrians’ access was increasingly regulated and restricted. The National Code of 1941 “codified the street bed as automotive space,” further ceding public space to the vehicle (210). The destruction of Castelo Hill, once the city’s foundational civic center, was initially intended to create space for hygienic and wider streets but instead became the “nation’s largest parking garage” (270–271). Large investments in parking structures and roads for vehicles left city coffers too depleted for other urban services.

*The Street Is Ours* is a fascinating study of how the introduction of the automobile helped enclose a diverse, multiuse commons. This process, Miller shows, was contested throughout, and in the 1970s and 1980s desires for street access led to the relabeling of many streets as solely pedestrian ones. While the car constrained street use by the lower classes, it was the creation of gated communities that led to the final elite victory of

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 188.

privatizing and dominating what had once been public space. The lens of political ecology allows both Miller and Vitz to think about the evolving and complex uses of the urban environment and to advance conservationist practices not as a retreat to a nostalgic past but as pivot to a sustainable future.

### Urbanization: Racialized and globalized

Lorraine Leu, like Miller, situates her study in Rio de Janeiro's downtown. Her temporal focus, however, is more limited than Miller's in its attention to historical contingencies of key events. Leu delves deeply into the 1922 centennial of Brazilian independence, the same year as the first world fair in Latin America, held in Rio. Brazilian desires for modernization and urbanization, she shows, led to the destruction of Castelo Hill, a once lively, multi-racial community in downtown Rio. Leu's analysis of these urban restructuring efforts centers the co-constitution of racialization and the production of space (5). In examining Brazil's first mega-event, Leu intervenes in scholarship on urbanization and makes race, not class, central to her analysis.

For Leu, urban reforms that began with Mayor Francisco Pereira Passos in 1903 and continued in the 1920s with Mayor Carlos Sampaio targeted areas where Afro-descendants lived and worked; she reads these efforts as "implementing *topocide*: the deliberate annihilation of place" (37). Because they lived and worked in the same places as Rio's Black population, poor, European immigrants of Italian and Portuguese descent, Leu argues, were discursively "blackened" (56). Drawing on prior scholarship, she maintains that while poor whites would eventually transcend stereotypes applied to them, Afro-descendants would not.

State and elite attempts to displace the city's Black population, Leu argues, were met with resistance. Leu reads these "defiant geographies," the term she embraces for her title, in cultural artifacts such as lithographs, photographs, novels, cartoons, and press articles. While this is an impressive array of sources, I found myself needing a discussion of the challenges of using highly mediated sources through which to read defiance. Doing so would have provided a nuanced perspective on Afro-descendants' state-countering logics that go beyond the binary of spatial domination and resistance.

Leu is the only author reviewed here who recasts urbanization as an explicitly racialized process. This aspect alone would be enough to make her work a vital contribution to the field. Leu wants to demonstrate a longer history of "ruination" of spaces occupied primarily by Afro-descendants and to portray ruination as a state tool in reconfiguring space across racial lines. For her, the flattening of Castelo Hill and destruction of spaces of life, work, and sociability of racialized populations laid the groundwork for present-day exclusion. She points to the destruction of Vila Autódromo in preparation for the 2016 Rio Olympics and argues that early twentieth-century urban restructuring efforts brought about twenty-first-century segregation, "with over 70 percent of the country's urban black population living in self-constructed housing" (15). Leu's attempt to historicize present-day segregation is important. Historians might wonder, however, if the displacement of Afro-descendants in both the 1920s and in 2016 resulted from the same historical processes.

In Leu's *Defiant Geographies*, urbanization initiatives were central to both nation building and to erecting spatial divisions across racial lines. In their edited collection *New World Cities*, John Tutino and Martin Melosi advance a different perspective, that "globalization shapes metropolitan lives more than national policies, and that urban politics often shape city lives as much or more than national processes" (2). The volume examines both globalization's challenges and popular politics in six American cities: Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Montreal, Los Angeles, and Houston. Many of the individual chapters,

however, fall short of the stated aim to explicitly connect urbanization to globalization, and globalization appears more like a backdrop against which urban processes unfold.

There is an unexplored tension in Tutino's three essays. For example, in the introduction, Tutino draws inspiration from both Saskia Sassen's *The Global City* and Mike Davis's *Planet of Slums*.<sup>5</sup> Tutino claims that reading "cities of power and prosperity as nodes integrating global production" (Sassen) alongside "cities of desperation" (Davis) is a way to link North American and Latin American cities (9). However, a dichotomy emerges here between cities of "prosperity" in the North and cities of "desperation" in the South. Apart from the Houston chapter, it is unclear how each of the cities examined function as "nodes" in the larger global economy. The spatial element of transnational networks linking global cities is likewise absent here.

Curiously, too, Tutino brings back marginality as a category to describe urban poverty in postindustrial societies. Latin American scholars, including Teresa Caldeira, have pointed to how such formulations hark back to the basic tenets of the marginality theory of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>6</sup> For Caldeira, notions of marginality and advanced marginality do not adequately capture the complexity of working-class experiences. Although Caldeira was responding to an earlier sociological work, her critique is also applicable here, given the shared interest in the post-Fordist landscape and the retreat of the welfare state. If the concern of the volume is to examine the resurgence of different forms of marginality alongside globalization, that point deserves explicit attention and is worth pursuing further, perhaps a line of inquiry for future scholars.

Bryan McCann convincingly argues that throughout the twentieth century in Rio, formality and informality grew in tandem. Informality did not emerge with globalization but resurged in a different way in the 1980s as the favela stopped being a "compromise solution" for residents and the state and instead became an "investment strategy for expanding criminal-commercial networks" (135). Mark Healey argues that "modern Buenos Aires was made on the periphery" as population and industrial growth in the new suburbs fostered political mobilizations for access to citizenship (150). The Argentine military dictatorship overturned this trend and reestablished the dominance of the center over the periphery by targeting the Peronist industrial zone, decentralizing authority, and failing to provide formal access to land. As in Tutino's chapter, globalization serves as a backdrop for both McCann and Healey.

While formality/informality, marginality, and center/periphery function as analytical frames in the analysis of the three South American cities, these disappear in the examination of Montreal, Los Angeles, and Houston. Michèle Dagenais examines ethnic enclaves of French- and English-speaking residents as central to Montreal's development. George J. Sanchez focuses on patterns of racial segregation in Los Angeles. The chapter by Joseph A. Pratt and Melosi on Houston is different from the rest, and not only because Houston followed a different trajectory from the other cities examined: it became more prosperous over time. The authors connect Houston's rise as an energy capital of the United States to oil centers such as Mexico and Venezuela; they explain how geography and chance fortuitously converged, and point to the environmental and health risks tied to the city's successful oil and natural gas production.

Melosi's epilogue represents a herculean effort to connect these chapters, and some of his insights should have been incorporated in the introduction. The suggestion that urbanization must be thought of in connection to globalization will open new avenues of research, but that this volume represents that path is less clear.

<sup>5</sup> Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, rev. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013); Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

<sup>6</sup> See Teresa P. R. Caldeira, "Marginality, Again?!" *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33, no. 3 (2009): 851.

Glen David Kuecker and Alejandro Puga's *Mapping the Megalopolis* is a cohesive interdisciplinary volume, united by the authors' shared framework of the mutual constitution of order and disorder in Mexico City, and by the shared intellectual influence of Ángel Rama's *The Lettered City* and David Harvey's *Rebel Cities*.<sup>7</sup> Most of the contributions are historically situated in the turn from state-led development and import-substitution industrialization to neoliberal globalization and its concomitant privatization of urban space and everyday life. Space limitations make it impossible to cover each of the ten chapters, but I will highlight specific contributions that make the global impact concretely manifest.

Kuecker's chapter, "Carlos Slim's Urban Imaginary: Plaza Carso and the Privatization of Public Space," examines the transformation of a former industrial area into the largest mixed-use building complex in Latin America, known as Plaza Carso. In doing so, he situates the restructuring of the neighborhood, with its shopping malls and gated private residences, within the context of neoliberal globalization and its formation of a "new political and economic group in Latin America that has unprecedented power in society due to their ability to subordinate the state to their agendas" (27). As Kuecker reveals, the multi-billionaire Carlos Slim sought to construct an urban imaginary rooted in the privatization of public space as part of a long history of elite attempts at ordering the city.

A similar concern with how global capital reworks space and urban subjects at the local and national levels informs the chapter by Shannan Mattiace and Jennifer L. Johnson, "Securing the City in Santa Fe: Privatization and Preservation." The authors compare the old and new Santa Fe neighborhoods to show the "difference between the national ideal of order in the lettered city, and the post-national, global idea of order" (104). The gunpowder factory and the largest open-air garbage dump in Mexico made the old Santa Fe neighborhood an important site of labor. The gunpowder factory closed in 1989, and the garbage dump was also filled in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, in the 1990s, new Santa Fe became "Mexico City's showroom for globalization" (104). New Santa Fe, the authors show, is cordoned off by gates and private security guards, lacks sidewalks and other public spaces, and houses the corporate headquarters of global and financial capital, while employing workers in the low-pay service economy. Despite these differences, the authors show that both new and old Santa Fe have been negatively impacted by neoliberalism, as fear of crime in both has led to withdrawal within private spaces.

The desire to link urbanization to national and global processes will more prominently connect Latin America to ongoing discussions about urban history and globalization. New scholarship would do well to heed this call.

### Urban popular politics and capital

Both *Black Market Capital* and *Concrete Dreams* pivot toward an examination of cities as loci of formal and informal economic activity. Andrew Konove traces the history of the Baratillo, a black market of secondhand, stolen, contraband, and pirated goods, across three centuries of Mexican history. In doing so, he reveals the centrality of the informal economy as a social and political institution from the mid-seventeenth century through the twentieth century. Konove thus contributes to a growing body of scholarship that examines informality and formality as intertwined processes.<sup>8</sup> The long-term view grants the author the opportunity to make four interrelated arguments: extralegal commerce was central to Mexico City's overall economy; the Mexican state was far from a monolithic entity; cross-class interchanges shaped the contours of urban public space more than contestations between the elite and the poor; and market vendors creatively exploited

<sup>7</sup> Ángel Rama, *The Lettered City*, translated and edited by John Charles Chasteen (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); David Harvey, *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Fischer, McCann, and Auyero, *Cities from Scratch*.



tensions between royal and local authorities and successfully negotiated with elite and middling sectors. Konove's aim is to revise simplistic understandings of urban popular culture as an elite-dominated sphere. While he considers perceptions of the Baratillo's spatial presence and reforms to transform the markets of the city's central plazas, the urban here is only implicitly relevant.

Konove convincingly evidences a fractured colonial and national Mexican state, one intimately connected to illegal commerce. For example, in the aftermath of a 1692 riot, the Crown sought to eliminate the Baratillo and restructure the Plaza Mayor, but these efforts ultimately failed, Konove argues, in part because the *ayuntamiento* (municipal authority) relied on rent from the Baratillo for its budget and was loath to eliminate its source of income. Konove reveals that the "baratilleros were not up against a unified colonial state but a highly fractious one," and elites rarely shared the same vision of urban restructuring (34). Likewise, Konove demonstrates that eighteenth-century Bourbon reformers only managed to relocate the Baratillo but could not altogether eliminate it. Tensions between Creole elites and *peninsulares* created a gap where the Baratillo survived.

Konove shows that divisions over the fate of the market did not neatly cut across class lines. Against simplistic notions of resistance, he argues that the Baratillo "was a place where elite, popular, and middling actors engaged in republican politics," largely without violence (119). This was clear when in 1870 Mexican elites, including the publisher of Mexico's leading liberal newspaper, rallied in favor of the Baratillo vendors as they faced relocation (117).

It was during the Porfiriato, Konove shows, that the Baratillo was displaced from its central location to Tepito in the northern part of the city, where it remains to this day. Díaz's reforms of political institutions stripped the Ayuntamiento of its powers and severed the vendors' relationship with the local authorities. Despite its survival for hundreds of years, the Baratillo "operated in a legal limbo," and its tenuous existence depended on personal and commercial networks and informal rules (177). Konove relied on an impressive array of sources across three centuries, including vendor petitions, government correspondence, and uneven press coverage. We know little, however, about the racial and ethnic identities of the market's vendors and customers, a fruitful avenue for future research.

For the anthropologist Nicholas D'Avella, the built environment is central to the everyday politics of Argentines in the aftermath of the 2001 economic crisis. By looking at buildings as economic objects, D'Avella traces the different ways in which people engage with and value the built environment, beyond the economic. He argues that "approaching value as part of an ecology of practices is a way of keeping minor, intimate, quotidian politics of value present in what could otherwise slide into major-key histories of capitalism, colonialism, and national political struggles" (22). The author eschews what he calls "major-key analytics" that provide sweeping generalizations and broad frameworks through which to understand large-scale capitalist transformations. For D'Avella, such general theoretical frameworks abstract from the particular and tend to overlook practices that do not constitute "radical breaks" (19). Rooted in ethnography, the narrative moves through several sites of struggle over value: real estate, market analysts, neighborhood associations, and school of architecture.

D'Avella argues that *pequeños ahorristas* (small savers) drove the postcrisis real estate boom in Buenos Aires by purchasing real estate, or bricks, because they were seen as a solid, physical investment unlike the seemingly immaterial world of finance. Argentines understood the 2001 crisis by relating it to longer histories of currency fluctuations and economic booms and busts since the 1970s, a form of "economic storytelling" that informed their investment decisions. Distrust in financial institutions led to investment in bricks, but also in converting pesos to dollars, euros, or gold, and even hiding money under mattresses. While investments in brick gave middle-class Argentines a sense

of security, high-rise developments increasingly encroached on public space, and neighborhood associations emerged to limit their influence. D'Avella dedicates two chapters to tracing members of these associations, such as *Salvemos al Barrio*, in their attempts to revise the urban-planning code and navigate the technocratic language of state bureaucracy.

D'Avella brings to life the everyday experiences of residents of single-floor homes as high-rise buildings blocked the sun, casting shadows over urban gardens. While these intimate ethnographic portraits of residents' interactions with nature are beautifully rendered, in looking at buildings solely through the lens of "minor keys," the author misses an opportunity to place real estate in broader conversations. Embracing the real economic dimensions of "value"—a category so prevalent in the book—would have allowed the author to engage real estate's function as a "spatial fix" for capital, as private property, and as a legal institution. Value, then, appears as an empty signifier to stand in for an infinite number of ways in which people engage the built environment. Wishing to look beyond the economic aspects of value while making the category central to the argument reifies value, for it becomes a meaningful category when it is thought of as internally differentiated between use value and exchange value.<sup>9</sup>

As these two books make clear, both the formal and informal economies of cities generate value. It is both real estate's seeming durability and informal markets' impermanent condition that make them central to capital and to popular politics.

## Conclusion

The books reviewed here span the disciplines of anthropology, history, sociology, and literary and cultural studies. Despite disciplinary differences, especially in use of sources, there are shared conceptual influences and common concerns that hint at the makings of a new trend in urban studies. Critical geographers such as Henri Lefebvre, Lewis Mumford, Neil Smith, and David Harvey continue to inspire thinking about the production of cities and nature. The most fruitful tendencies cluster around the unifying possibilities of spatial history. This is especially the case when it comes to spatial scale and the examination of units both within and beyond the nation. For instance, Matthew Vitz and Shawn Miller trace environmental and social transformations in Mexico City and Rio de Janeiro, respectively, by moving beyond the binary of city versus nature. Miller's focus on the street as a unit of analysis enriches bigger claims about the urban commons, class, and community. This complements Vitz's scalar approach and the emphasis on the mutual entanglements between Mexico City and its hinterlands, between forests and water, and between national hydraulic projects and international funding and expertise.

Indeed, urbanization as both a historical process and thematic focus lends itself nicely to scalar thinking. Lorraine Leu's argument that urbanization is a racialized process is rooted in her analysis of Brazil's first mega-event and the nation's long-desired claims to modernity. Nation-states do matter, but the collections edited by Tutino and Melosi and by Kuecker and Puga convincingly show that globalization's impact on urbanization has significantly restructured the role of the nation.

The built environment—whether it be a black market (Konove) or real estate (D'Avella)—is central to thinking about the formal and informal economy. These are not economic histories centered on productivity and domestic growth, but social and anthropological accounts of contestations over buildings and the fraught dynamics of popular politics. They do, however, beg the question: When is popular culture not contested?

<sup>9</sup> I thank Joshua Savala for reading and discussing Karl Marx's *Grundrisse* with me, on which these interventions are based.

Three cities—Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro—are overly represented. To fully grasp the urban in Latin America requires the inclusion of midsize and smaller cities across the region, beyond these metropolises. The books reviewed (with minor exceptions) are heavily skewed toward the twentieth century. This bias makes sense since at mid-century, Latin American cities experienced unprecedented demographic growth, rural-to-urban migrations, and fast-paced urbanization. The colonial and precolonial periods, however, also have a rich trajectory of urban studies. Future work on the urban and space would do well to engage with scholars not just across disciplinary boundaries but also across historical periods. Doing so would position Latin American urban studies to make innovative theoretical contributions to spatial history, state formation, and globalization. As the books reviewed show, the field is ripe with possibility.

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