

PREFACE

That there is a need to decolonise knowledge could perhaps be described as a truth now universally acknowledged. Contemporary thinkers challenge the division between a global north producing scientific knowledge and theory, and a global south supplying ‘unprocessed data’ (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012b: 1). Calls to theorise from the south have emerged alongside a recognition that cities now house most of the world’s population, and that it is the global south which is now leading the world’s urbanisation. Not surprisingly, then, urbanists have responded enthusiastically to the demand for ‘new geographies’ of urban theory (Roy, 2009: 819; Robinson, 2014).

What this means for scholarship on cities of the global south is a commitment to seeing them, not as defined by deficiency but as the “new normal” of the urban world’ (Oldfield and Parnell, 2014: 1). In addition, researchers are keen to ask what lessons southern cities might hold for the global north, particularly in relation to economic deregulation and experimentation or environmental concerns (Brand, 2006; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2012). In this context, there has been an upsurge of interest in informality – both in the economy and especially in housing and the built environment – which shows no sign of abating. Informality, it is suggested, is ‘a new paradigm for understanding urban culture’ (AlSayyad, 2004: 9).

The result is a fruitful (if sometimes fraught) encounter between the ‘critiques of neoliberalism’ currently dominating urban studies, and already attuned to thinking about how neoliberal policies enter different geographical arenas, and a concern for characteristically “Southern” urban issues, such as urban informality’ (Parnell and Robinson, 2012: 594-595). That coincidence is reflected in the focus of *Informality Revisited* on neoliberal ‘solutions’ or

alternatives to informality, particularly those (re)asserting the supremacy of private property rights in land and housing.

There is, however, a considerable irony in how a drive to theorise from the global south, a drive emphasising the significance of location and resistance to the idea of convergence, has dealt with Latin America. The literature generally emphasises cities in South Asia and Africa, and in particular the cities of former British colonies (Varley, 2013). The tendency to exclude Latin America and focus on *northern* European imperialism has also been noted (for over 25 years) with regard to broader postcolonial scholarship (Coronil, 1992; Mignolo, 1993; Moraña et al., 2008; Thurner, 1996). The particular irony here is that efforts to analyse urban informality began in Latin America. It would not have occurred to those of us starting our research on informal housing in Latin America in British universities in the 1980s to have ignored the well-established work of the region's urban theorists. In addition, the shared neo-Marxist perspective meant there was no sense of division between southern and northern contributions: the influence of French urban sociologists such as Christian Topalov was widely acknowledged and welcomed in Latin America. Two decades later, the strength of the Latin American heritage was acknowledged in one of the works marking a resurgence of interest from architects and planners in urban informality, yet the editors explicitly proposed to 'decouple' informality from Latin American scholarship (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004: vii).

It may be argued that concerns about a new intellectual imperialism miss the point: to talk about the global south is to talk about relations not regions, circulations not locations (Robinson, 2014; Roy, 2014). The reference to Africa in the Comaroffs' sub-title – 'How Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa' – is partly about personal locations and partly 'ironic' (2012a, 2012b). That said, adopting a view from anywhere and everywhere does not fully guard against the dangers of universalism; it is no less utopian than the transcendental

view from nowhere (Young, 1990). Its blind-spots, moreover, are not random. They still provoke the concern that, in urban studies, ‘the conditions of Latin America often elude inclusion among descriptions and propositions applied to much of Asia and Africa’ (Mabin, 2014: 23-24). Language of publication offers at least part of the explanation for this pattern in Anglo-American urban scholarship (ibid.; Varley, 2013).

Insofar as attention is paid to Latin American contributions to theorising from the south, they are too often pigeonholed in terms of dependency theory, as though the region’s urbanists have had little to say for the past half century. That this is far from the case is demonstrated, to cite just one example, by the two-volume compilation on *Teorías sobre la ciudad en América Latina* bringing together scholars from a range of countries to provide an overview of relevant literatures (Ramírez Vázquez and Pradilla Cobos, eds., 2013). Given the language issue, however, such publications merit translation to increase the likelihood of their speaking to a wider audience. It is in this spirit that the Society for Latin American Studies and Wiley have undertaken the translation of *Informality Revisited*, originally published as *Irregular: suelo y mercado en América Latina* by El Colegio de México.

Editor Clara Salazar provides an overview of the chapters in context, but it is worth pinpointing a few of the ways in which this book contributes to key debates about urban informality. Julio Calderón challenges the neoliberal views of influential economist Hernando de Soto (2000) about the uses of property formalisation to provide residents with access to credit as a strategy to promote small businesses and combat poverty, on an institutional and ultimately a global scale. Calderón uses data from de Soto’s own country, Peru, to show that those with formal title are no more likely than others to seek or obtain formal credit, and that formal title does not necessarily lead to formal property transactions when people come to sell. Edith Jiménez, Heriberto Cruz and Claudia Ubaldo add their voices to the growing recognition of ‘the new informality’ (Varley, 2010: 92): what happens

in the next generation, after those who received title from a government formalisation agency die. Reluctance to identify an heir or heirs in order to avoid conflict between siblings, a desire for family continuity, legal misinformation and the wish to avoid tax on property transfers all lead to people dying intestate, resulting in legalised properties returning to a state of legal ambiguity in just a few years. In other words, formalisation does not lead to the definitive resolution of tenure often assumed by its advocates.

Dissatisfaction with neoliberal solutions to the problems of urban informality has led critics to recommend alternatives based on non-state actors, especially communal landowners such as indigenous groups. Clara Salazar shows, however, that legal changes in Mexico allowing agrarian communities to oversee the formalisation of human settlements on their land have led to residents being denied the benefits to which they should be entitled. She questions whether it is fitting to allow one group of citizens to control the property rights of others and suggests that doing so is likely to lead to new social conflicts.

Some Latin American countries, particularly Chile, Brazil and Mexico, have experimented with neoliberal alternatives to informality involving large, architecturally homogeneous, developments of small houses, with urban services, around and well beyond the urban periphery. This demand-led model of formal housing, with subsidies and mortgages for lower paid workers, has been widely criticised on the grounds of location and quality (e.g. Rolnik, 2019). But to what extent can it provide an alternative to informality? Considering the scope of eligibility for housing loans is one way of approaching this question, but Priscilla Connolly makes innovative use of digital cartography to show that urban growth around Mexico City is concentrated in particular places at any one time, and that new formal and informal housing developments go hand-in-hand in those places. The two processes are linked.

The conclusion is clear: researchers in urban studies have a great deal still to investigate, both empirically and theoretically, about the formal and the informal and the relationship between them. The task is pressing. Expansion of formal housing developments for a lower-income population enables politicians to claim that they have ‘solved’ their country’s housing problem: so why should they tolerate any further growth of informal settlements? The original emergence of interest in urban informality in Latin America was inspired in part by opposition to demolition. The bulldozers are still waiting.

Ann Varley

UCL (University College London)

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