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Article:
Massidda, A.L. (2023) Slums, villas miseria and barriadas: why terms matter. Journal of Urban History, 49 (3). pp. 552-570. ISSN: 0096-1442

https://doi.org/10.1177/00961442221127308

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Article

Slums, *Villas Miseria*, and *Barriadas*: Why Terms Matter

Journal of Urban History
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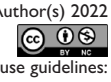
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Adriana Laura Massidda[1]

Abstract

Building upon previous debates surrounding the English-language term *slum*, this article argues that *slum* stigmatizes the spaces and subjects that it refers to not only because it evokes nineteenth-century imaginaries of pauperism and crime but also for the sweeping gesture that it implies; for its refusal to observe in depth the experience of those who inhabit the spaces at stake and the interests associated. Intended as a universal term, "slum" can refer to such disparate urban typologies as inner-city high-rise tenements, low-rise overcrowded housing, and peripheral shantytowns, which empties it of specific meaning and converts it into an abstract container on to which external agendas are projected. To further demonstrate this point, the article reads *slum* alongside the seemingly analogous yet more specific Argentine and Peruvian terms *villas miseria*, *barriadas* and *pueblos jóvenes*, fields of dispute whose meanings have been contested by different actors, including residents, from the outset.

Keywords

barriadas, Buenos Aires, Lima, *pueblos jóvenes*, slum, urban informality, *villas miseria*

> *Villas*, *villas miseria*, dark and unbelievable,
> where oblivion has blown out the last lamp.
> Villa Jardín, Villa Cartón, Villa Basura,
> of streets traced by the wanderings of hunger.
>
> (González Tuñón, 1957)[1]

> They slobbered quite a lot about us, they said all sorts of things, they treated us as all sorts of things [as according to them] *villas* were constituted "by lazy bones," [. . .] "thieves," [. . .] "diseased" [. . .] And at some point I couldn't refrain anymore and I said: "No—it's been an hour and a half that I'm listening to all the atrocities that you are saying and it can't be allowed."
>
> (Villa Jardín resident, Buenos Aires, interviewed 2019)

In 2019, over the course of a long interview, a resident in one of the largest Buenos Aires *villas miseria* (the local term for shantytowns, usually shortened *villa*) took time to carefully explain to

[1]The University of Sheffield

Corresponding Author:
Adriana Laura Massidda, Arts Tower, Western Bank, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.
Email: a.l.massidda@sheffield.ac.uk

me why and how, back in 1968, he had confronted government officials calling him and other residents "*villeros*" (*villa* residents). The context was one of top-down compulsory shantytown clearance. Officials had come to the *villa* to deliver a speech compelling them to accept the eviction program quietly. In doing so, they resorted to all the tropes that the term "*villa*" entailed in government discourse: they claimed that residents lived in them due to lack of personal drive, "low cultural level" and want of ambition; that the *villas* held the country back and were responsible for its stagnation; that they were spaces of vice; and that, therefore, the best thing to do was to demolish them and send the inhabitants back to their places of origin.[2] As reflected in my interviewee's account (quoted in the second epigraph of this article), he and many others reacted by questioning the officials' logic in its conceptual underpinnings. They had come to the city, usually from the provinces of Argentina, *precisely* due to ambition and drive: their main purpose was to work, and by doing so they contributed to the city's productivity. They did not see themselves as lacking in cultural standing, and even less as related to disease or crime. For them, it would be the return to their dramatically under-resourced provinces that would entail stagnation, not staying in the *villas*. As they spoke, residents gained self-confidence and became aware that refuting the connotations of "*villa*" implied dismantling the program's whole theoretical edifice. In the end, in this *villa*, residents successfully resisted eradication.

The anecdote that the interviewee laboriously reconstructed reminds us not only of the symbolic power implied in the terms we use to refer to urban space, but also of the ways in which this can have tangible consequences for urban residents, especially in contexts of poverty. There is consensus that urban terminology is closely entwined with wider cultural and political conceptions: for example, as Richard Harris and Charlotte Vorms highlight with regard to urban peripheries, "words [. . .] are representations that reflect social understandings of the world"; they "qualify, divide and classify reality."[3] More specifically, with regard to the living spaces of the poor, terminology has historically played a crucial role in processes whereby both the spaces and the inhabitants are stigmatized, and this has been often used to legitimize eviction agendas.

One such word, as has been widely noted, is the English-language term *slum*. Indeed, two main sets of problems with "slum" can be highlighted. The first is that, due to the cultural context in which it emerged and the way it has been used since the late nineteenth century, it is loaded with extremely negative connotations that relate the spaces and their inhabitants to crime, disease, and lack of sufficient skills to climb the social ladder.[4] Second, employed in reference to spaces of urban poverty in an extremely general way, *slum* glosses over their specificities to such a degree that it jeopardizes its own capacity to construct meaning. Furthermore, once the meaning of *slum* becomes blurred, its place is filled with figures and preconceptions: Ananya Roy's "metonymic slum" (the slum as equivalent to underdevelopment and deprivation yet, surprisingly, entrepreneurship) is one example of this, as is her suggestion that the slum stands as synecdoche for the megacity, which in turn stands as synecdoche for the Global South.[5] Alan Mayne's provocative claim that slums are "constructs of the imagination" engages with this same issue.[6] In this way, both shortcomings of *slum* reinforce one another, leading to a term that says more about the speaker's perspective than about the space itself.

Simultaneously, however, other less thoroughly discussed terms displace, curtail, and alter our conceptions of spaces of urban poverty. In this article, I read *slum* alongside two terms in Latin American Spanish, the Argentine *villa miseria* and the Peruvian *barriada*, in order to highlight the degree to which *slum* erases nuance, complexity, and difference. To be sure, these terms are by no means devoid of negative connotations. For example, depending on the context of its utterance, *villa* can entail a strong degree of stigmatization, as can be seen in the opening vignette, where residents and state officials disputed what being a *villero* meant. In Peru, *barriada* was purposefully replaced by a new expression, *barrio joven*, in the 1970s in an attempt by the government to dispel stigmatization. But *villa* and *barriada* are also very local terms, and their local genealogies have entailed different types of contestations. To be clear, the purpose of my

comparison is not to find the best way to refer to a range of spaces, to construct a new urban typology, nor to argue against (or for) the existing terminology. Neither is it my aim to contend that the South has a pedagogical role to play in the world (as so often urban theory from the Global North has done),[7] that its processes are generalizable, or that Latin American Spanish is free of the linguistic problems that burden global English speakers. Instead, by contrasting *villa* and *barriada* with the ideas connoted with *slum* I seek to expose some of what all these terms occlude, to locate the voids that lie at the center of each concept, and thus describe some of the ways in which these words make part of the world invisible.[8] The analysis will be focused on the context and conditions of emergence of "*villas miseria*" and "*barriadas*," which took place around the middle of the twentieth century.

An Initial Surprise: On Slum in the English and Spanish Languages

Probably the most widely used term in the English language to refer to spaces of urban poverty since the late nineteenth century, *slum* is simultaneously ambiguous and stigmatizing. Applicable to an inner-city tenement (as, for example, in London or New York in the nineteenth century), a group of shacks whether in the city center or on a periphery, a refugee camp,[9] or apparently almost any space of material want,[10] the term is so vague that it largely lacks any analytical capacity. This generality has been widely noted and goes hand in hand with the othering capacity that *slum* entails. Indeed, *slum* is a stigmatizing term not only because it is often accompanied by negative judgments but also because, by glossing over detail, it assumes a reader positioned outside and (in terms of social status) above the space considered.[11] Of course, throughout the course of its history and given that it is a term of such wide geographical scope, *slum* has not been used in exactly the same way by all actors: the case of the nongovernmental organization "Slum/Shack Dwellers International," where residents from across Africa and South Asia struggle for better living conditions, is one case in point. However, the connotations of the term on the whole remain negative and vague and preclude the possibility of discussing the spaces and their tensions in further depth.

According to Gareth Stedman Jones and Alan Mayne, *slum* originates in nineteenth-century London, in the context of a deeply exploitative and rapidly polarizing society just as the Industrial Revolution was in full motion throughout Britain.[12] This meant that, at least in its origins, the main representations embedded in the term *slum* were linked with Victorian conceptions of pauperism (voluntary poverty; lack of industriousness), hedonism (an alleged human tendency to decrease effort where reward increases), and vice. Meanwhile, those precariously employed were vilified by the elite, and by a rapidly-consolidating middle class, for their very situations of need. In short, this conceptual construction posited that, as long as charity existed, the poor would prefer to perform poverty rather than work. Blaming the poor for their own poverty was effective in simultaneously liberating the powerful classes from any responsibility with regards to social redistribution and hiding exploitation and instability of employment. Furthermore, othering the poor into a confined space of degradation and weakness had the additional function of constructing the middle class as virtuous. Interestingly, *slum* came to replace the word *rookery*, an equally disparaging term that, in identifying the tenements with crows' nests, animalized residents and so portrayed the poor as humans of a lesser nature.

Coming from Buenos Aires, a Spanish-speaking city in South America, I was initially puzzled and later surprised the first few times I encountered the term *slum* in English. The fact that it could refer to such different things as an inner-city tenement or a shantytown particularly disconcerted me. I am not implying here that Spanish (Argentine or otherwise) has an impeccable record of noting each subtle difference in the living spaces of the poor. Even less would I suggest that terms related to poverty are not used disparagingly across different geographies. However,

in most South American contexts, a difference has been made between spaces where residents (legally, though precariously) rent and those where they self-build in land they do not own or lease. This made sense, in my mind, not only because the spaces themselves are different, but also because they present disparate challenges. Self-organized groups of residents, for example, rarely emerge in tenements, and when they do so it is often to demand the landlords' fulfillment of their obligations rather than to collectively set up infrastructure. In addition, the tenancy of land outside established juridical frameworks has usually placed residents in a position of increased vulnerability, subjecting them to a constant threat of eviction. Historically, this has affected the types of associations that they set up and the ways in which they interact with political power.[13] Conversely, with regard to government approaches to resolve the issue, legislation forcing tenement landlords to abide to minimum standards, such as the 1885 Housing of the Working Classes Act in the UK, or the New York Tenement House Act of 1901, have been useful in cities such as New York or London but would have no impact in Latin American shantytowns.[14] For me as a Spanish-language native speaker, the conflation of these concepts under one term (*slum*) raised several questions: would English-language readers not be confused by this ambiguity? And perhaps most importantly, would their confusion matter? As I became more familiar with urban scholarship in English, I realized that many authors had similar concerns.

In 2007, Alan Gilbert published an influential critique of the United Nations' use of the term *slum* as a direct response to the launch of the program "Cities without Slums."[15] Concerned about the effects that such an initiative would have for low-income communities, Gilbert highlighted three main ways in which the term (and, with it, the approach itself) could jeopardize, rather than deliver, the program's intended goal of expanding and enhancing shelter. First, while recognizing the effectiveness of *slum* in attracting public attention, Gilbert argued that its emotional load stigmatized the poor and their living spaces. Indeed, conjuring up again images of "doom, dependency and fear," the term "emphasize[d] too heavily the disease, crime and difficulties" implied in stereotypes of slum life, and in this way could undo what "years of careful research" had achieved in dismantling myths about the urban poor.[16] Furthermore, and perhaps more worryingly, *slum* for Gilbert conflated understandings of the space itself with the people who inhabit it, reverting back to nineteenth-century conceptions underpinned by environmental determinism. In these, so-called rookeries or slums were closely associated with the alleged vice of residents, sometimes under the argument that dilapidated dwellings were conducive to immorality (the spaces producing the people), others claiming that the space was substandard because of its inhabitants, and often entwining both. In all these cases, places labeled with the term *slum* were invariably associated with crime and with overwhelmingly negative imaginaries.[17] Finally, Gilbert reminded readers that simply "getting rid" of such a multi-faceted, continuously changing, and ultimately ungraspable space as the slum had proved unfeasible, and that clearance (the image evoked by the term) had been demonstrated to actually worsen the issue.[18]

A few years later, Pushpa Arabindoo convened an event, followed by a journal issue, to deepen the debate initiated by Gilbert's widely read article. From slum tourism to the need to conceptualize spaces of urban poverty as produced by residents, the issue tackled many of the issues that Gilbert had raised, consolidating the consensus around this approach for the scholarly community.[19] Around the same few years, Ben Campkin analyzed the way in which, during the 1990s and 2000s, understandings of urban poverty that stemmed from the idea of *slum* were mobilized once again in London to legitimize a neoliberal agenda of regeneration.[20] In 2017, furthermore, Mayne expanded these analyses by reconstructing the genealogy of the term, from its emergence in Victorian London to its global spread across the United States and the former British Empire, ending with its use in public policy pioneered by India and taken up by other countries in the Global South through the non-aligned movement. Thus, Mayne walks the reader through a series of stories involving so-called slums that continue to reiterate concerns over stigmatization, sensationalism, and top-down approaches to policy.[21]

But perhaps *slum* is most stigmatizing in what it *does* than in what it *means*: in the very sweeping gesture implied by its utterance.[22] In its incapacity to describe the spaces at stake, *slum* erases them; it implies a lack of curiosity to understand their complexity or the interests and tensions at play; and it performs a refusal to engage consistently with what they are and how they are experienced by those who live in them. In other words, the polysemy of *slum* is so extreme that the term loses its ability to convey meaning. Once *slum* no longer means something specific per se, it becomes a repository of external anxieties. To be sure, this does not only happen with *slum*: just to give one example, as analyzed by Brodwyn Fischer, early twentieth-century writings about *mocambos* in Recife, Brazil "reveal[ed] little about the *mocambos* themselves: how they came to be, [or] the nature of their daily life and microeconomics."[23] Rather, in this case, what the texts revealed were the writers' agendas: the quest for a modern city which, underpinned by racist views, implied the need for erasure of the *mocambos*. A similar point was constructed by Licia do Prado Valladares in her discussion of the *invention* of the idea of *favela* in Rio de Janeiro.[24] However, *slum* makes this problem particularly pronounced. In "Slumdog Cities," for example, Roy argues that "the slum has become the most common itinerary through which the Third World city (i.e., the megacity) is recognized."[25] The megacity, in turn, "is a metonym for underdevelopment, Third Worldism, the Global South"; a "'constitutive outside' of [. . .] the norm of the 'global city'" in contemporary urban studies.[26] Here Roy uses the idea of 'metonym', a rhetorical figure whereby a thing's attribute is named *in lieu* of the thing itself. In this way, *slum* becomes an empty container for images that continue scaling up: first, metonym (or synecdoche, another figure of speech which names a part *in lieu* of the whole) of the "megacity," understood in opposition to cities of the Global North; and, by that same operation, a synecdoche for another part of the world (the Global South).

Following Roy's argument, *slum* in this epistemic operation not only ceases to be a concrete space of the city itself but also becomes a tool for the definition of the Global North understood as the center. In a way, the process is not too dissimilar to that performed by nineteenth-century elites when they related the poor to images of crime and disease in order to present themselves as righteous and truthful. The operation is also reminiscent of Enrique Dussel's argument regarding the construction of the other as part of the conquest of the continents now called the Americas. According to Dussel, the Spanish only ever conceptualized the indigenous people as a corrupted copy of themselves, an image which served to reinforce Spanish or European identity. Indeed, this image of the other was largely formulated before contact was made and constituted a moral categorization placed onto the other instead of stemming from observation.[27] Going back to the process identified by Roy, and in a comparable movement, the conceptual construct of *slum* is more effective in creating the image of the "global city" as oppositional than in conveying information about the spaces to which *slum* ostensibly refers.

Contending Viewpoints on Lima's *Barriadas*

The Peruvian usage of different terms related to shantytowns provides an excellent point of entry to explore some of the issues mentioned thus far. To start with, due to the existence of a sizeable corpus of scholarly works in English about Lima produced in the 1960s and 1970s, the limitations of the term *slum* become in this context particularly visible. More specifically, in their analyses of Lima's *barriadas*, a wide range of English-speaking authors saw themselves in the need of highlighting for their readership the ambiguity of *slum* as compared with Peruvian terms.[28] As part of this, they clarified the difference between slums-qua-*corralones* (inner-city low-rise tenements) and slums-qua-*barriadas* (shanties built over occupied land in the city's outskirts) explicitly, often avoiding the term *slum* afterward. Henry Dietz even went as far as to select one of his Lima case studies (a *corralón*, in the context of a study about *barriadas*) to demonstrate this difference to English speakers. Around the same time, moreover, Peter Lloyd

focused his famous book *Slums of Hope?* on this same distinction, the "slums of hope" being the resourceful *barriadas* that would give the poor access to a home of their own in the long run, and the "slums of despair" being the *corralones*, which deprived them of the same opportunity.[29]

Most interestingly, since the first half of the twentieth century, collective land occupations in Lima received different descriptions, including terminology created by the state, and this multiplicity shows the changing approaches to the issue. One of these terms, well in tune with contemporaneous theories of social marginality, was *barrios marginales* ("marginal neighborhoods"), closely preceded by *barrios clandestinos* ("clandestine neighborhoods").[30] By and large, however, the term most widely used up until 1968 was *barriadas*. As defined by their contemporaries, *barriadas* were collective land occupations in the urban peripheries: "social agglomeration[s] formed by a population which takes over waste land, usually owned by the state [. . .] or by private owners who do not make use of it."[31]

Barriada does not have an obvious translation in English, although it is clearly derived from "barrio" (neighborhood). The suffix "-ada" usually indicates "blow of," or "coup of" and so, puzzlingly, refers to an act of invasion ("blow of neighborhood"). *Barriada* is thus "a word that intensifies the term *barrio*"[32]; the evocation of "a character confusingly pejorative"[33]; and it can be said to convey a more general idea of movement. In his work on Lima's shantytowns, for example, which made him internationally well-known, anthropologist José Matos Mar used the term *barriadas*.[34] Contemporaneously, it was adopted by the Peruvian state through Law 13.517,[35] which first recognized the squatter phenomenon and outlined the types of aid that the government would make available to squatters.

Despite official recognition, however, *barriadas* remained largely associated with negative stereotypes. In fact, it must be remembered that the administration that recognized them, Manuel Prado's (1956–62), was politically conservative, and that it was preceded by a conservative dictatorship (Manuel Odría's, 1948-56). Law 13.517 did not refer to *barriadas* or their residents in negative terms, and neither did Matos Mar in his studies. However, these articulations were deeply embedded in a highly exclusionary social system,[36] which, more generally, meant that the use of *barriada* remained surrounded by a mix of paternalism and contempt. In 1963, for example, journalist José Mugica Málaga wrote of them

> [T]he humble inhabitants of those barriadas live in a faecal atmosphere, exposed to misery, sickness, and abandonment [. . .] Parents, children, grandparents and cousins live together in great promiscuity.[37]

Like many contemporaneous social scientists, Matos Mar developed his work within the framework of marginality theory. This meant that, along with Gino Germani in Buenos Aires and others, he read Latin American "villages in the city" as the remnants of a rural past that would disappear as soon as industrialization advanced on the continent.[38] Much has been written about the modernization, marginality, and dependency theories in Cold War Latin America, and discussing them further falls beyond the scope of this article.[39] That said, what I would like to highlight here is the way in which marginality theory makes Roy's "metonym" strikingly evident. As explained above, writers have often claimed to be describing slums when their main concerns were other, and the concept of *slum* remained the excuse to discuss them: the vice of the working classes, justifications of an exploitative system, a self-construction of the image of the elite, or alarm by the degeneration of the national race. In marginality theory texts, the works produced sought to prove a theoretical point while understanding of the cases themselves remained secondary. Thus, where urban space was conceptualized as a tension between the extremes of modernization (urban life) and tradition (rurality), Matos Mar focused on showing the ways in which Peruvian migrants were integrating themselves or not in the modern city. Migrants' voices did not feature in the analysis or the evidence, neither in this nor in other contemporaneous writings inspired by modernization theory such as Germani's.[40]

At the same time, not everyone read *barriadas* as an epitome of backwardness and abandonment. For example, drawing on his work for several Peruvian state departments, the architect John F. C. Turner articulated views about self-construction, housing self-management, grassroots participation and autonomy in *barriadas* that made him famous worldwide.[41] With him as consultant, the United Nations produced the short film *A Roof of my Own*: this film even included (albeit mediated) some residents' voices.[42] At the same time, in reference to the same *barriadas* described by Mujica Málaga, and where her interviewees also lived, Sarah Myers remarked:

> Not every observer sees conditions in these two squatter settlements as wretched, despicable, inhuman [. . .] For some residents, life is at its lowest ebb, fraught with hunger, disease, frustration, and hopelessness; but others have seen the fulfilment of their dreams of a good job, land of their own, a nice house, and a healthy and well-educated family. The two *barriadas* are many things to many people.[43]

Myers's book concludes with a thorough and invaluable appendix which includes transcriptions of the author's interviews with the *barriada* residents (all women), made in the 1960s and translated into English from the original Spanish and Quichua.

If we compare works such as Matos Mar's to Myers's *barriadas* interview transcriptions, the viewpoints are different as residents' main concerns revolve around livelihoods, language, and work. To be sure, like Matos Mar, Myers's interviewees also refer to cultural differences. Indeed, in the case of Peru, the fact that migrants were overwhelmingly indigenous and spoke Andean languages (mainly Quichua) rather than Spanish as their mother tongue made these contrasts particularly visible. However, Myers's interviewees did not consider their own culture backwards or a cause of poverty. On the contrary, they valued it to the point of one of them narrating an anecdote where she sought to contest stigmatization in a work context.[44] In other words, the whole intellectual construction that authors such as Matos Mar were embarked on implicitly assumed a superiority of modernity above tradition where residents' input would be considered of lesser value. When one de-links[45] from such points of view, however, as Myers does when she presents her interviews, other perspectives appear, reminiscent of that defended by 1960s Buenos Aires residents despite the differences between Peru and Argentina.

Having said this, and despite the celebration of *barriadas* put forward by authors such as Turner and Myers, the term largely continued to evoke negative views in public opinion, and so it was understood by the progressive dictatorship which took power in 1968, Juan Velasco Alvarado's. In fact, the most interesting turn in Peru's changing terms for shantytowns was the one performed by this administration. Seeking to offset its derogatory implications, Velasco Alvarado's government deliberately changed the earlier word *barriada* in a top-down manner into *pueblos jóvenes* or "young towns" (figs. 1 and 2). By creating this new term, Velasco Alvarado sought to highlight the emerging and rapidly improving situation of these spaces and their residents, portraying them as crucial to the nation's future.[46]

The context of this lexical change was one where the dictatorship claimed to celebrate grassroots initiatives, and allegedly encouraged self-organization. In line with this, collective invasions were not only recognized but also resettled into purposely assigned land at no cost, provided with services, and provided with technical and financial assistance. Velasco Alvarado's administration went as far with this as to create a department aimed at supporting residents' mobilization, the "Sistema Nacional de Apoyo a la Movilización Social," or SINAMOS (the name translates as "National System Supporting Social Mobilization" and the acronym entails a pun, meaning also "without masters."). There is, indeed, something paradoxical in the gesture of a government trying, top down, to promote bottom-up modes of organization. This paradox was reflected in the fact that the government did so by retaining full control of how such

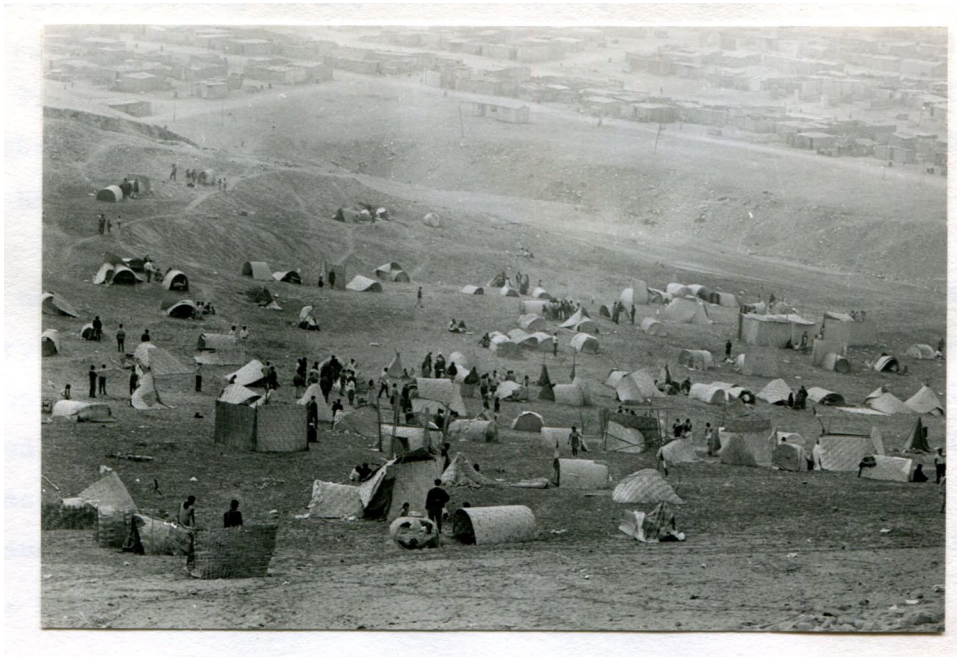

Figure 1. The Pamplona Alta invasion in Lima: A *barriada* just at the time where the term was being switched to *pueblo joven*.
Source: Nicholas G.d'A. Houghton, "The Barriadas of Lima." Architectural Association, 5Yr Thesis, 1972. John F. C. Turner Archive.
Note: The landscape is typical of Lima's mid-twentieth century *barriadas* just after the land occupation, and it strongly contrasts with the "slums" depicted in Figures 3 and 4.

initiatives and residents' groups operated. However, when read in context, this attempt stands out as one of the most sympathetic steps that a Latin American government of the time would take toward shantytown residents. It remained unique for over a decade while, as in the case of Buenos Aires, governments repeatedly tried to evict self-built settlements. Thus, taking one more step in the direction initiated by Odría, Velasco Alvarado's government provided the terms *barriadas* and *pueblos jóvenes* with nuances and connotations unique to Peruvian cultural, social, and political history.

A Second Surprise: "Helots" in Buenos Aires *Villas*

In 1977, Argentine sociologist Alicia Ziccardi defined Buenos Aires *villas* as an "arrangement of individuals and families who share a common housing precarity, a common lack of collective services, a common illegitimacy in the use of land, all within neat geographical boundaries."[47] A researcher and activist, Ziccardi was writing right at the moment when the scholarly paradigm to analyze urban poverty shifted from marginality theory to Marxist dependency critiques in Latin America, and traces of the former approach can be found in her work, which, however, is mainly concerned with residents' insertion within the economic structure. Ziccardi's definition reflected the very specific way in which *villas* were understood in Argentina, which took construction precarity and spatial proximity into account but was focused on the conditions of land tenancy. This focus was not coincidental, as having occupied land *de facto* (that is, outside the juridical system, not having leased it or bought it) placed residents in a very

Figure 2. Residents building collectively in Pamplona Alta, Lima.
Source: Nicholas G.d'A. Houghton, "The Barriadas of Lima." Architectural Association, 5Yr Thesis, 1972. John F. C. Turner Archive.

vulnerable situation with regard to the threat of eviction. Residents' commissions, associations, and protests were set up to deal with this, sometimes successfully (as the opening vignette demonstrates) but nevertheless consuming a huge amount of energy in the process. This marked a difference between *villas* and other forms of urban poverty in Argentine cities: residents of urban peripheries who had bought their plots of land, for example, found themselves in a much stronger position, gaining more leverage with municipal governments and even room to set up cultural endeavors. Thus, while they self-organized as much as *villas* residents did, the scope and the activities of their organizations were different. Furthermore, and as opposed to *barriadas*' collective invasions, *villas* emerged through the gradual accretion of individual shacks, and this quality also remained linked to the term and the idea.[48] The conception of *villa* condensed by Ziccardi continues to be the main way in which *villas* are conceptualized in Argentina. Nevertheless *villas* and more especially *villas miseria* were terms which could be traced further than these discussions.

"*Villa miseria*" in Buenos Aires emerged as a sarcastic expression motivated by compassion and anger, coined by writers who sought to highlight the inequality that the city's rapid expansion and alleged modernization produced. The first use of the word *villa* as designating a group of precarious houses dates back to 1933 (fig. 5). It referred to the settlement known as Villa Desocupación ("Unemployment Village"), set in Palermo, beside the river coast, not far from the harbor. It was also Desocupación which inspired the (then) oxymoron "misery village": up until then *villa* and *miseria* were opposite terms in Buenos Aires. With its early origins in the recreational homes of the upper classes of ancient Rome, "*villa*" had passed to Spanish designating a unit of agricultural production, and later a small town or a district. From here it was taken to name the suburban neighborhoods through which Buenos Aires was expanding rapidly at the turn of the twentieth century: Villa Industriales, Villa Santa Rita, and Villa del Parque

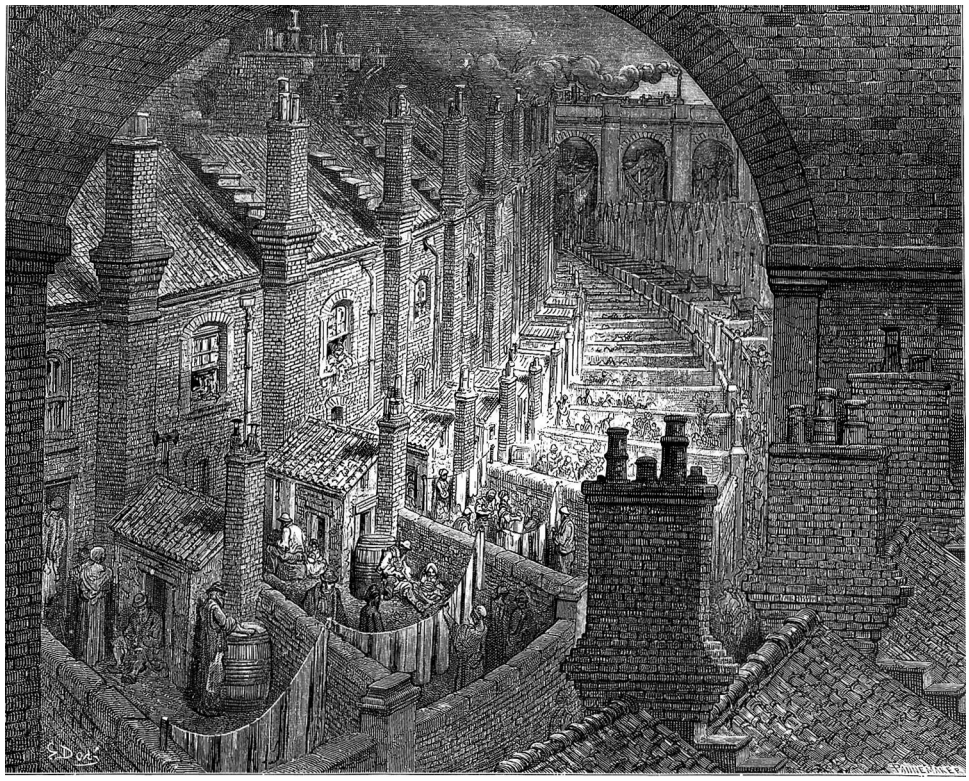

Figure 3. Gustave Doré's engraving "over London—by Rail" has become a classic image of London tenements or "slums."
Source: Wellcome Collection, under the title "London Slums."
Note: Paradoxically, however, the book where it was initially reproduced did not use the term. Originally published in William Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré, *London: A Pilgrimage* (London: Grant & Company, 1872).

were some examples of Buenos Aires areas urbanized in this way.[49] In its earliest uses for the Buenos Aires periphery, "*villa*" was actually a marketing tool, chosen in an attempt to evoke spaces regarded as desirable.[50]

Inspired by this denomination but alarmed by the misery that they saw in the groups of shacks in places such as Palermo, poets and journalists like Carlos Sibellino, Raúl González Tuñón or Bernardo Verbitsky started playing with the term *villa* accompanied by negative adjectives. Contemporaneous to New York's tongue-in-cheek "Hoovervilles," for example, Sibellino's article "La villa de la miseria en la ciudad maravillosa" ("The Village of Misery in the Marvelous City") was pioneering in denouncing the desolation facing Eastern European immigrants in Villa Desocupación during the Great Depression. Only two decades later, the phrase *villa miseria* was in common use. This happened simultaneously in the state sphere, the arts, and the social sciences. It was then when, in contrast to most low-income neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, which were usually set through legal land sub-division, the notion of *villas* became very strongly related to land occupation. The use of *villa miseria* in the literature of the 1950s continued the steps traced by Sibellino: both González Tuñón in "Villa Amargura" ("Bitterness Village," quoted in the first epigraph of this article; 1957) and Verbitsky in his acclaimed *Villa Miseria también es América* ("Villa Miseria is also America," 1957),[51] sought to inspire compassion and indignation. At the same time, yet with a different horizon of preoccupations, Germani's use of the recently

Figure 4. Another classic image of an inner-city "slum," in this case a New York tenement.
Note: Jacob Riis, "'Bandit`s Roost,'" 59 1/2 Mullbery Street." Originally published in Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890).

emerged "*villa*" was in close dialogue with Matos Mar's "*barriada*" and informed by modernization theory.

But it was the approach of the state that proved to be most problematic when consolidating the use of "*villa miseria*." In contrast to Peruvian Law 13.517, in fact, the first plan addressing *villas* in Argentina was extremely disparaging about *villas* residents. The plan in question was produced by the self-styled Revolución Libertadora ("Liberating Revolution"), a military dictatorship that ousted elected president Juan Domingo Perón. Peronism had engaged working class culture and enhanced workers' rights, becoming immensely popular. The regime that followed, however, had almost the opposite perspective.[52] In this context, as if in line with Victorian ideas of pauperism, it considered residents responsible for their deprived housing situation and blamed them for having migrated into the city to live in poverty. Thus, setting a precedent for later initiatives, and against any empirical support, the Argentine state deemed *villas* inhabitants vicious, indolent, uncivilized, deficient in the care of themselves and of others, and for these reasons responsible for their own housing environment (fig. 6).[53]

In my first few readings of this plan, I was surprised to find this approach but even more puzzled by the terminology employed. In fact, the document stated that *villas* residents had "fallen into an abyss," were "morally degraded" "troglodytes," suffered "helotism" and "the corruption of their mental faculties and their moral resources," and gathered in "aberrant nuclei of

Figure 5. Villa Desocupación, Buenos Aires, 1932: The first recorded "*villa de la miseria*."
Source: Archivo General de la Nación.
Note: The reverse of the photo reads: "Hovels build by the unemployed in Costanera Norte." Photographer unknown.

uprooted population" thus needing to be assessed with radiographies before "eradication."[54] However, this vocabulary and these concepts seemed to bear little connection to the groups of low-income workers that the rest of the historical sources depicted. What could helots, serfs in Ancient Greece,[55] have to do with the *villas*? What abyss could this document be referring to? And why use all these biological references? Indeed, in 1950s, in Buenos Aires as in Lima, the vast majority of these residents were employed and experiencing a relative degree of upward social mobility, which had been the main reason to attract them from stagnant smaller towns despite the housing crisis. Their shacks were precarious, but better than the ones where they had lived before, and the general atmosphere was of struggle but also of enthusiasm. Bearing this scenario in mind, the epithets used by the Argentine state in this plan seemed to bear little resemblance to the processes taking place at the *villas*.

The plan referred to was deeply influenced by modernization theory, the predominant lens through which contemporaneous social science understood Latin American shantytowns. Modernity theory was also prevalent in inter-American forums with which the Argentine officials who wrote this and later eradication plans were in dialogue.[56] Although these documents only occasionally engaged the term *slum* (or its direct translation in Spanish, "*tugurio*"), the idea of urban poverty as a space of stagnation to be watched from above and afar was ubiquitous. Furthermore, the "eradication" proposal was conceived from the angle of modern architecture, which also understood "slums" as spaces to clear rather than to engage with. Indeed, emerging just before the turn of the twentieth century, and consolidating its influence during the inter-war

Figure 6. *Villa* in Dock Sud as recorded by the first Argentine eradication plan.
Source: Comisión Nacional de la vivienda (1956).

period (especially through the work of the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), architectural modernism became a key vehicle to disseminate the idea of *îlots insalubres* or slums as targets for clearance at a global level.[57] These imaginaries were extremely influential in Argentina. As such, and again in contrast to the Peruvian approach, the Argentine state assumed eradication as the natural intervention that the state should take in the *villas*.

What remains to be explained is the vehicle and the reason for the use of such unfitting, and ultimately outdated, epithets as "helots" or "abyss" in Argentina in the 1950s. They were, in fact, out of place, even considering the engagement of the plan with *slum* imaginaries. "Helots" had been used in reference to the modern urban poor in the late nineteenth century by George Sims[58] and, a few years later, Charles Masterman[59] wrote of the same group having "fallen into an abyss" in relation to their living spaces. Both works had been widely known at the time, but by the mid-twentieth century these references had become rare. Key documents in modern architecture such as the Athens Charter or Josep Lluís Sert's[60] *Can Our Cities Survive*, for example, expanded pre-existing imaginaries of slums as spaces of blight, crime and despair, now using them as the justification for clearance, yet made no reference to "helotism" or "the abyss." Here, it is worth noting that ideas of pauperism and hedonism were still current in Buenos Aires in the 1930s, especially those linked to French nineteenth-century criminological studies such as the study by police chief Juan Alejandro Ré.[61] Furthermore, the dictatorship mobilizing these terms had, once more, a cultural and political agenda whereby it sought to disparage the poor in order to celebrate the middle classes. Overall, and beyond the exact routes through which these terms

were picked up in this Argentine document, their use makes it clear that the document was not really observing the *villas* but pouring onto them a set of conceptions constructed or learnt somewhere else. Paradoxically, while authors like Sims and Masterman arguably intended their writings as social critique when they produced them, in mid-twentieth century Argentina these expressions were used to put forward plans that not only disadvantaged but also stigmatized the poor. Thus, the combination of an othering approach with the argument that the Buenos Aires poor were backwards and indolent created a conceptual structure which underpinned the dictatorship's civilizing mission and justified its urge to eliminate the *villas*.

Final Thoughts

Terms like *villa*, *barriada* and *pueblos jóvenes* can be read as fields of dispute, symbolic spaces where different actors defend contending views regarding the place of the urban poor in society. Coined by left-wing Buenos Aires writers, *villa miseria* emerged as a sarcastic phrase denouncing the hypocrisy of a city where speculators used the term *villa* to make suburban land subdivisions commercially attractive while *miseria* (misery) was widespread. Shortly after, however, it was appropriated by the national state with a vocabulary reminiscent of nineteenth-century discourses of pauperism, ultimately stigmatizing urban poverty. It was this latter view that *villa* residents contested, as described in the opening vignette. It is worth highlighting that *villa* residents of the 1960s were not seeking to confront stigmatization by stating that they were not *villeros*, but disputing what being a *villero* meant. More generally, the position put forward by them was part of a wider context whereby many Argentine *villa* inhabitants defined themselves as *villeros*, understood as workers, in order to resist top-down eviction through city- and nation-wide organizations like the Federación de Villas y Barrios de Emergencia (*Villas* and Emergency Neighborhoods Federation) and the Movimiento Villero Peronista (Peronist *Villero* Movement).

Barriada, in turn, was not used disparagingly by the Peruvian government, although its connotations remained largely negative in the context of an exclusionary society. In the late 1960s, a left-wing dictatorship switched it to *pueblos jóvenes* in a top-down attempt (once again) at de-stigmatizing the settlements, engaging their residents, and encouraging grassroot organization. In this same context, authors like Turner, Myers, Dietz, and William Mangin started to use both *barriada* and *pueblo joven* as part of a celebration of the zeal and creativity of the urban poor. It is worth noting that, even though these authors were native English speakers, they not only used the term *barriadas* instead of *slum* but also purposely distanced themselves from the latter. In the longer run, their perspectives became extremely influential, both in academia and in multi-lateral organizations such as United Nations.[62] The "years of careful research" that deconstructed preconceptions about the urban poor and their living space alluded to by Gilbert, most likely refers to this background of discussions, together with the views put forward by others such as Janice Perlman, working on Brazil.[63]

Furthermore, pulled by both local and global connotations, terms like *villa* and *barriada* are caught in a dual game. On one hand, they are plugged into worldwide imaginaries that link them to the idea of *slum*. When doing so, the narratives at stake in Argentina and Peru entail an attempt to other the poor and therefore consolidate the status quo. In this sense, they correspond to a political position that could be described as right-leaning. This became particularly evident in Argentine eradication plans but was also implied in some of the views put forward by marginality theory or by writers such as Mujica Málaga. On the other hand, these terms are reclaimed and contested by local processes and local actors. Some of these actors can also be considered reactionary: such was the case of the 1950s Argentine dictatorship that reclaimed *villa miseria* as a way to re-stigmatize and disenfranchise the poor. In other cases, however, the mobilization of *villa* and *barriada* was performed by local actors that could be called left-leaning, this

understood as a political position that promotes social redistribution. This involved the writers who coined the term *villa miseria* to start with, but also *villas* residents, scholars celebrating the work done by in Peruvian *barriadas*, and those who embraced the switch toward *pueblos jóvenes*. In the Argentine case, the category of "worker" would become crucial for these imaginaries, related not only to left-wing discourse but, more specifically, with Peronism. In Peru, it was the self-builders' proactivity and ingenuity that constituted the kernel of progressive views. The tensions between stigmatization and protest, political right and left, are embedded in the very constitution of the terms: in *villa miseria* as oxymoron, and in *pueblo joven* as replacement of *barriada*.

In contrast, *slum*, even when used in the context of initiatives that claim to work toward the interests of the urban poor, seems to remain linked to a unidirectional repertoire of images. This is, I argue, not only linked to previous uses of the term, but also to the fact that it designates an abstract conception rather than a concrete space of living. By doing so, it implicitly entails a refusal to engage in detail, and it precludes a conversation that might otherwise remain open: that of what urban inequality entails, in space and time, from the eyes of its actors. With these shortcomings, *slum* becomes an empty container, an ambiguous utterance which tells us more about the agenda of those who mobilize it than about the spaces and peoples it refers to. Like pauperism in nineteenth-century London, like the indigenous in the Conquest of the Americas, or like the Global South megacity, the "other" is described not in an attempt to understand its experience but as a way to construct the "one," or the center, through opposition.

In this article, I have reviewed the problems entailed by *slum* alongside the tensions embedded in a selection of Latin American names used for the spaces of the urban poor, the more local *villa miseria*, *barriada* and *pueblo joven*. This "reading alongside" is not intended as an encompassing review of terminology (*villa miseria*, *barriada* and *pueblo joven* are only a few of the local expressions used for urban poverty in Latin America), as a linear comparison, and even less as a terminological contest. Rather, it is an invitation for further reflection on the words, and therefore the approaches that we use when writing about urban inequality. Finally, it is worth highlighting that, throughout history, the views of the poor themselves have been only partially recorded, and even more poorly preserved and treasured. This has contributed to many of the problems and tensions outlined here. As scholarly and public conversations about poverty continue to unfold, it will be important that the voices of local inhabitants take center stage.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article: This research was produced in the context of my Postdoctoral Fellowship funded by the Argentine Research Councils (Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas; CONICET).

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Author Biography

Adriana Laura Massidda is an architect and researcher specialised on the urban history of Argentine *villas miseria* (shantytowns). She is currently a Lecturer in Architectural Humanities at The University of Sheffield. Adriana completed her PhD at the University of Cambridge in 2016, and was a postdoctoral fellow at the Centre of Urban and Regional Studies (Buenos Aires, 2017-2019) and a Senior Lecturer at the Leicester School Architecture (2019-2022). A later research project looked into the environmental and infrastructural history of low-income communities in Buenos Aires, London and Leicester. Her most recent publications include "'Villas miseria' en Buenos Aires hacia mediados del siglo XX: tensiones políticas y primeras conceptualizaciones estatales," co-authored with Eva Camelli and Valeria Snitcofsky, in *EURE; and "Film* and the Toxic Politics of Waste," with Hanna Baumann and others, in *eFlux* (both 2022).