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Urban motley geographies or “geografías urbanas abigarradas”

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Veronica Gago’s book “Neoliberalism from below” is not an easy read but it’s definitely one that makes you think and encourages you to make connections between different strands of thought. In this short commentary I want to bring to the fore some of the contributions she makes in terms of urban geography which are less prominent than her main argument about Neoliberalism as a pressure from below.

The book is a combination of expansive philosophical thinking and particular reflexions based around the economies and labour relations of the production and consumption of textile products in informal and migrant spaces in Buenos Aires. In particular Gago focuses on La Salada market, the largest informal/street market in Latin America with around 8,000 stalls almost exclusively selling garments (Dewey, 2014). Situated in the southern periphery of the city of Buenos Aires, it attracts shoppers and retailers from the whole city and surrounding regions and countries who buy goods for themselves and their families or to sell in smaller scale informal markets (so called Saladitas). With this market at the core, the book focuses on the connections between three inter-related spaces: 1) The Salada Market itself, 2) the clandestine textile workshops where the majority of the products from La Salada come from and 3) the so called “villa 1-11-14”: the self-built poor neighbourhood where many of the textile workers and workshops are located. These connections stretch out to other geographies of labour migration and commodity networks from El Alto in Bolivia to China.

What is interesting about these spaces and their interconnections is that they are analysed as contrasting, contradictory, contested urban spaces. Inspired by Gago and the mainly Bolivian thinkers she draws from, we could call these spaces “motley urban geographies”, which in Spanish (again following Gago and other thinkers) could be translated as “geografías urbanas abigarradas”. Motley is not a word frequently used in English but it is traced back, in the book, to Marx and Engels referring to the men and women expropriated by the English enclosures as a “motley crowd”. Following historians Linebaugh and Rediker (cited in Gago, 2017: 65) motley means something heterogeneous and multi-ethnic which challenges classification and has a subversive character. Gago develops and relates this concept of the “motley” from three other concepts by Bolivian thinkers: “chi’xi” by Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, the “motley society” or “motley formation” by Rene Zavaleta Mercado (originally in Spanish “sociedad abigarrada”) and Alvaro Garcia Linera’s concept of “baroque modernity”. These three concepts bring together the complexity of Latin American societies where pre-colonial and colonial as well as pre-capitalist social and economic structures co-habit with modern and neoliberal ones. In particular, Rene Zavaleta’s sees Bolivia as “motley society” where capitalism has not become totalising and feudal and capitalist organisational forms are present at the same time superimposed or disjointed but not necessarily combined (Lagos Rojas, 2016). This analysis challenges the view that societies where capitalism is not hegemonic might be seen as necessarily pre-capitalists or underdeveloped but instead must be read as heterogeneous. Similarly, chi’xi, “proposes the parallel co-existence of multiple cultural differences that do not fuse but antagonize and complement each other. Each reproduces itself from the deepness of the past and relates to the others in a contentious way” (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010a: 70 cited in Gago, 2017: 61). Baroque economies, in turn, refers to a “type of articulation […] that mixes logics and rationalities that tend to be portrayed as incompatible” (p.14), i.e. legal and illegal, fake or original.

In sum, the concept of the "motley" challenges linear histories of development, expresses heterogeneity and "prevent[s] hegemony as an expansive totality without cracks" (Gago, 2017: 63).

Translating this concept of the "motley" to our understanding of complex urban geographies opens up new forms of analysis to question existing divides between the informal/formal, north/south, legal/illegal, centre/periphery, or commons/enclosure. In the following paragraphs I illustrate how Gago brings to life these "motley urban geographies".

The book, although perhaps not explicitly, is organised through the connections between three main spaces, as mentioned above: the Salada Market, the clandestine textile workshop and the villa 1-11-14, a poor self-built neighbourhood. Gago shows how in each of these spaces and in their interconnections, we find superimposed practices of competition and collaboration, communitarian and exploitative logics. Although these three places could be regarded – at last from the mainstream urban planning perspective – as informal, temporary, marginal, criminal or clandestine, she reframes them as "motley geographies" organised through capitalist, surplus seeking practices as well as communitarian through relationships of kinship and solidarity; they are peripheral as well as central spaces in the city; they are rooted in the villa as well as dispersed through migratory and export networks. But this complexity does not make them "hybrid" geographies, where these different forms of organisation are fused; "in the motley there is no fusion of differences. There is antagonism or complementarity" (Gago, 2017: 62).

For example, community leaders/delegates in villa 1-11-14 work to provide affordable and collective access to electricity negotiating with the government and the electricity companies. This is regarded by the delegates as a political victory in improving the conditions of the neighbourhood and is part of a wider struggle to achieve the "right to the city". At the same time, the clandestine textile workshops take advantage of these cheap services, connecting their electrical equipment to the electricity supply of the villa increasing consumption charges and the risk of fires due to electrical overload. So, we see in an explicit way how these communitarian and competitive logics juxtapose in the relationship between the textile workshop and the villa.

The centre/periphery dichotomy is also challenged and she shows how the centre and periphery can have different meanings and be present at the same time. The Salada Market is located in what might be regarded as the periphery of the city according to an urban planning rationality. Now however is huge and multitudinous space, a mix of fixed and dismountable structures, where thousands of traders work and shoppers arrive in a variety of means of transport from the city of Buenos Aires and from further afield. It is also a centre of trans-national economic interactions, with other centres in Argentina and neighbouring countries (Bolivia or Paraguay) and with connections with the major brands to whom the clandestine workshops supply to and other similar centres of production and consumption across the world. In fact La Salada is seen as a key node in a network of other "global centres in nonhegemonic commerce" (Massidda et al, 2010: 180 cited in Gago: 2018: 54) together with Los Altos in La Paz, Oshodi and Alaba in Lagos or the Chinese province of Guangdong. This network of "nonhegemonic commerce" does not necessarily resist or contradict the globalised capitalist system of production and consumption but at least challenges it; making us rethink the ways in which value is produced. The Salada market might lie at the urban periphery of the city of Buenos Aires, but is an urban centre of nonhegemonic global commerce. However, by recognising their "motley" and heterogeneous condition we should not underestimate that these "popular economies" as Gago calls them, are drenched in exploitative relationships from which big capital and government elites benefit (Montero, 2011)

Gago challenges the centre/periphery dichotomy in another way when she discusses the growth of the villas, the informal neighbourhoods, otherwise also called slums, in the city of Buenos Aires, where many of the textile workshops and workers are located. The villas are where most of the population growth is taking place in Buenos Aires. In a seemingly contradictory way, these neighbourhoods in disconnection to the formal city (without access proper services such as water, electricity, waste, education or health) are often right at the centre of it. The villa, like the favela or other informal urban settlements across many cities, with their precarious and unfinished architectures appear as "monstrous", argues Gago, something that should not be part of the city and yet not only endures but grows: "the periphery intrudes into, interferes with and overlaps with 'the city'" (Gago, 2017: p. 192).

Are these motley urban geographies only present in Latin American cities, or in the urban global south? Or can this concept be applied to other cities across the world? I'd argue that it can be a very useful concept to understand the complexities of urban life across the world and avoid simplifications and binary thinking in line with calls to decolonise urban studies thinking – without however keeping sight of deep structures of urban injustice.

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