

Intervention Symposium—“Urban Theory from the Global South”

**A Look at the Global South’s Urban History
through the Lens of Its Informal Neighborhoods**

Rafael Soares Gonçalves

Departamento de Serviço Social

Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

rafaelsoncalves@yahoo.com.br

The urban phenomenon has come to be a necessary element for thinking about our societies, and consequently, it has become a central element of historical analysis. Whether it reflects the city as a site or as a process, urban history is a significant field through which can analyze specific aspects of our societies. The dialogue between Urban History and other disciplinary fields, such as Geography, Sociology, Demography, or Urban Planning, has always been significant. Urban theories from such disciplines, usually emerging from the Global North, have influenced the ways we think about our cities. Specific processes of urbanization in Western countries have been broadly generalized into analytical guides for understanding urban growth worldwide.

When defining the concept of “coloniality of power” (*colonialidade do poder*), Aníbal Quijano (2005) describes the elaboration of Eurocentrism as a hegemonic epistemology of modernity, based on an evolution from a state of nature that culminates in modern Europe. In this vision, the differences between the European (Western) and non-European civilizations and cultures are the outcome of differences in nature and not in the history of power. This same process of coloniality of power is also evident in urban studies. Cities, such as Paris, Chicago, or London, established rigid standards for understanding different urban processes around the world. Thus, the history of non-Western cities is measured against this model. Nevertheless, the

imposition of these Western models has often proved overly simplistic. Valuing specific forms of knowledge production and the urban space itself found in the cities of the South also allows us to appreciate the points of convergence between North and South: urban models, people, and theories mutually enrich each other as they circulate around the globe.

Cities of the Global South vary greatly. Some are ancient, some, like Rio de Janeiro, emerged within the last couple of hundred years as the result of colonialism, and others are only a few decades old. Many are extremely poor and unequal cities, while others have areas highly integrated to international capital. Therefore, using the term cities of the Global South is clearly a cultural construction, which, in our view, still lacks critical analysis. More important than trying to establish the contours of what such a definition might entail, the common element shared by these cities lies in the difficulty of developing a type of scientific output that is more attentive to the particularities and heterogeneities of these places. Even though discourses of Western modernization have permeated most of these countries, traditional and cultural practices existing in them have not vanished within the new urban model that was designed with the expansion of cities in the South. The interesting point here is to understand how such practices are often perpetuated even in largely globalized cities of the Global South, and how this produces new syntheses that escape the urban imagination coming from the North.

The most recent urban history emerging from the South conveys a valuable contribution in questioning dominant models, in order to understand, within international flows, the particularities of the processes of each reality. Historical analysis on cities of the South, therefore, breaks with perceptions of processes built from different and distant realities. Traditional practices of collective resource management, cultural expressions, and types of housing or forms of political organization in the countries of the South were not stages of a pre-designed and professed development. Instead, they were forms that were often innovative and did not shy away from dialoguing with models from the North.

This reality is demonstrated, for example, in the analysis on neighborhoods considered to be informal, which in many cities of the Global South are not exceptions to the production of the urban, but are home to a large portion of the population. The expression informal is used

critically in this work because of the challenges in standardizing different terms to designate such spaces: mocambos, bidonvilles, shantytowns, villas misérias, favelas...

Urban planning is one of the many expressions of forms of state intervention in society. If urban planning, through its theories, plans, and norms, defines what should be the model of a city and its society, it ends up, in contrast, also defining what should not be acceptable to such a project. Thus, the notion and concept of informal neighborhoods, with all their different regional designations, is necessarily built in dialogue with theoretical analysis on the urban and normative elaborations on the city. The great novelty here would be urban planning with its efforts to plan, regulate, and, above all, classify urban space permeated by models and theories from the North. The growth of informal neighborhoods, such as the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, cannot be explained as the emergence of new modes of urban production but as efforts to categorize already existing modes of production as irregular. Thus, although favelas have been considered illegal since their origin, their development can be compared to the formation of many popular neighborhoods on the outskirts of other cities around the world. What distinguishes them from these other neighborhoods is that they were excluded from the urban imagination of the cities that were being formed.

There is an extensive critical literature in urban studies on informality, which opposes the association of these spaces with marginality/illegality. Here, rather than being absent, the state is one of the main actors in the development and consolidation of informal areas. The traditional understanding depicted these spaces by their alleged “dysfunctions” and “misfits” instead of analyzing them by their appropriate urban aspects, such as the insertion of their residents in the labor market, the cultural manifestations that exist there, and the popular mobilizations for access to collective services. The urban imagination of Western modernity did not integrate such spaces into its models and historical studies were particularly slow to apprehend this reality. In the case of Rio’s favelas, history was probably the last discipline to focus on such places, and historical studies only really started to increase from the 2000s onwards. Two dimensions to this issue help us to understand this reality.

First, there is an epistemological aspect. Informal spaces appeared as temporary parts of the city and were expected to be demolished in the face of urban modernization. This provisional

character evidently raised questions about the historical analysis of such areas. How to build the history of something that should not exist and was always destined to disappear? How to think about the past of something that was never to have a future? Now, despite of being considered illegal, Rio's favelas have spread throughout the city's landscape. As Ananya Roy (2011) analyzed, it is important to change the apocalyptic and dystopic discourses about these spaces and understand that they are places of housing, coexistence, culture, and political practices, in addition to spaces where technical and even legal knowledge emerge. Such spaces are still stigmatized and relatively neglected in the annals of urban theory. Historical analysis on the daily experiences of these spaces is still incipient. To consider, for example, favelas as areas of "spontaneous urbanization" is to overlook the multiple forms of political arrangements, including—and above all—the state itself in the formation, expansion, and consolidation of these areas.

A second aspect, which unfolds from the first, is methodological. The understanding of these spaces as provisional also affected the production of academic sources. Whether or not to file documents about these neighborhoods is to recognize their place in history and in the city itself. Those who conduct studies in this area know how difficult it is to find sources about these places. Being considered illegal spaces, favelas were rarely included in official administrative documents. This does not mean they did not leave traces in literature, newspapers, police files, and even indirectly, in administrative documents, and obviously and most importantly, in the memories of favela inhabitants and their descendants. The difficulty in accessing documented sources often forces researchers to be creative, and challenges them to seek new methodologies. Many works on informal urban spaces rely on ethnography or oral history in an effort to reconstitute their memory through a rich dialogue between documented sources from public and personal collections.

We would like to end this brief reflection with three elements, which, more than conclusions, could be used as new clues for future studies.

First, we understand, at least in the case of Brazil, that current changes in the profile of university students bring important modifications to the production of knowledge, including research on cities. Brazilian universities have been historically white, elitist spaces that

reproduced the country's enormous racial and social inequalities. In this sense, they are also intersected by the coloniality of power in representations of the city and the urban. Affirmative action policies in recent years have brought more Afro-Brazilian students and teachers into universities, many of them from favelas and working-class neighborhoods. This greater diversity has brought fresh air to research on such spaces, especially in historical studies. This progress has also reverberated through political agendas. The point is not to limit studies on informal neighborhoods only to their residents. However, it is undeniable that these researchers have brought new inquiries that significantly enriched the debate on the subject. In this way, democratizing universities is, in our view, a promising element for consolidating innovative analyses on cities in the Global South.

In the case of Rio de Janeiro, for example, many popular organizations have even turned to the debate on the history and memory of the places where they operate, looking through the past for elements to rethink new utopias and societal projects. The most significant experiences are the various social museums that have spread in the city's favelas. The idea of these organizations is to reinforce the potential of these spaces, questioning the prejudices that insist on associating these areas with marginality, and that always classify them based on alleged gaps they have that prevent them from adequately acquiring the status of being part of city (Clapp and Gonçalves 2022).

Rather paradoxically, the discourse that historically distinguished favelas from the rest of the city is maintained by these organizations, no longer as a stigma, but rather as a distinct place: favelas should no longer be spaces of need but should be places where local experience can also produce knowledge and social innovation. Therefore, the idea is to provide new meaning to the reality of being on the margins, and to challenge the negative representations of these spaces. The significance is in understanding how this dynamic of spatial distinction is articulated with the struggle of favela residents to guarantee the same rights and services that exist in other areas of the city.

A second aspect worth raising is the contribution of historical analysis to other disciplines that work in the field of urban research. A fine understanding of broader historical processes of the production of space avoids the risk of generalizations and simplifications. Historical analysis

can, at the same time, question imposed urban models and avoid possible idealizations, even contributing to the theoretical analysis of disciplines with a strong interventionist character in the urban field, such as Urban Planning, Law, or Social Work.

Finally, valuing theories and experiences of urbanism in the Global South breaks with the imposition of Western paradigms for understanding urban processes. Comparative and transnational reflections enrich this effort even more, understanding the city as a cultural construction of thought, specific knowledge, and object of public policies and disputes between different actors at different scales. It is therefore necessary to value the circulation of knowledge not as impositions, but as points of contact that precisely imply the hybridization of ideas, selective appropriations, influences, adaptations, and rejections (Gonçalves and Benmergui 2022). Thus, the urban, and more precisely historical, analysis of the cities of the South can also bring valuable contributions to understanding specific realities of the cities of the North.

References

- Clapp A and Gonçalves R S (eds) (2022) *Organizações sociais populares: Educação e memória nas periferias*. Rio de Janeiro: Letra Capital
- Gonçalves R S and Benmergui L (2022) Maria Josephina Rabello Albano: Uma assistente social transnacional. *O Social em Questão* 54:111-136
- Quijano A (2005) Colonialidade do poder, eurocentrismo e América Latina. In E Lander (ed) *A colonialidade do saber: Eurocentrismo e ciências sociais—Perspectivas latino-americanas* (pp107-130). Buenos Aires: CLACSO
- Roy A (2011) Slumdog cities: Rethinking subaltern urbanism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35(2):223-238