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## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Marginal Urbanisms. Informal and formal development in cities of Latin America, Felipe Hernández, Axel Becerra (eds). Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, pp. 214**

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Being informality such a complex and polymorphous question, a challenge for Hernandez and Becerra was to bring together a series of essays from different perspectives and fields. This book offers a wide range of not only Latin American urban landscapes, but also methodologies, and ways to interpret the issues related to marginality. The reader may get a bit confused with the sequence of such diversified essays: from historical analysis, based on the study of pictorial sources (e.g. Priscilla Connolly), to more sociological approaches of specific case studies (e.g. Fernando Luiz Lara, Melanie Lombard or Jaime Hernández Garcia), passing through architectural considerations and even aesthetic debates (e.g. Christien Klaufus or Axel Becerra). Although radically heterogeneous, the chapters of this volume share a common theme and purpose, brilliantly presented by Hernández's introduction: Basically to re-address urban strategies towards marginality, in more inclusive terms.

Considering the growing number of policies and programs that have tried to address developmental issues in deprived areas of Latin-American cities over the

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past twenty years, the book aims at revising such interventions to understand their failures and propose alternative approaches. For Hernández, urban development strategies have been driven by what he calls “physical determinism” (p. iv), which means that they were based only on material aspects, like infrastructure provision (roads, schools, transport etc.) According to him, this way of addressing urban issues has proven insufficient to include marginalized populations to the urban life and economy. This idea is not new, and the criticism towards liberal and neo-liberal developmentalists policies promoted by government and international agencies are numerous, especially in urban studies. Nonetheless the way this claim is articulated to the specificity and history of Latin American cities in *Marginal Urbanisms* makes this book a major contribution to the literature regarding this topic and a compulsory reading for urban practitioners.

There are two valuable arguments in this volume. First, the authors show how marginality is anchored in social processes, linked to Latin American colonial history and the way cities were planned under Spanish and Portuguese domination. The analysis of trajectories of urban strategies over time reveals the perpetuation and reproduction of segregationist patterns through “double-faced state policies” (Connolly p. 25), both allowing and excluding some areas from the “formal” city. For this reason, the large infrastructure projects are doomed to failure, since they do not address the root of the problem. The other two essays included in *Part II* enlighten how capitalist logics and private interests inherent to these programs end up consolidating the spatial and social exclusion of poor areas. The decision to place the volume under the aegis of “marginality”, rather than just “informality”, appears pretty illuminating here. Moving the cursor from the strict dichotomy of formal/informal to the wider question of “marginal urbanisms” –and implicitly, the re-

lation to the center— allows an interesting communication with the broader debates opened by the dependency theory —born in Latin America! The solid set of tools and concepts deployed by Hernández in the *Introduction* is very helpful to think Latin American urban issues in a more systemic way.

Secondly, the authors tend to illustrate the architectural resistances and innovative community solutions that have emerged in marginal areas of Latin American cities. Through the concept of “place-making”, which refers to the appropriation of space processes, Melanie Lombard stresses the agency of residents in marginalized areas, acknowledging their creativity. Jaime Hernández García, goes even further, comparing the difference between formal and informal decision-making processes that lies in the individuals who make the decisions such as professionals, in the formal cities versus the community in informal settlements. Based on this, informal practices are rehabilitated as a source of credible and innovative tools for urban planning and management. They guarantee a good alternative to neo-liberal developmentalist policies, often based on misleading statements (*Part I*), and driven by counterproductive interests (Harvey 2012, *Part II*). The original contribution of the volume is to call for a stronger participation of universities, to encourage and strengthen participatory approaches of urban planning and management in marginalized areas. The resulting experimental projects designed by students and academics —the so called “studio practices”— are presented as a good way to make a bridge between official urban programs and the inventiveness of informal practices found in the communities.

To this extent, *Marginal Urbanisms* invites the whole urban community, practitioners and investigators all mixed up, to re-engage with the issues of marginality

in the cities of Latin America, on a more comprehensive way. It would have been interesting to investigate the community of urban decision-makers itself, ethnographically. Luiz Lara gets close to such kind of analysis when he highlights the close ties of a Brazilian Minister of cities with the construction industry. However, we could go further, and formulate the hypothesis that some of the individuals involved in the urban decision-making processes carry with them mental schemes or principles which tend to reproduce segregation or domination patterns. For example, in the case of Latin America, we know that most of the decision-makers and high-skilled professionals have completed their degrees in Northern Universities, in the United States or Europe: maybe they were influenced by models that could not possibly fit in cities like Bogota or Mexico, characterized by a “rule of disorder” (Connolly p. 42).

At the same time, and for this very reason, the focus on Latin American specific issues appears as a decisive choice. It permits the authors to get into deeper debates and arguments. However, one criticism could be made related to this matter, is that the essays could precisely make stronger use of Latin American corpus of literature on the topic –the authors themselves seem to regret the hegemony of Anglo-Saxon and Northern publications (see: Hernández p. xxxv, Davis p. 23). The call for more adaptative and localized urban solutions could come to hand with the promotion of regional theories, concept and methodologies. One could think for example of some academics from the University of Sao Paulo, who promote, following Appadurai’s work (Appadurai 1996), an “experimental ethnology” and the description mode to enter urban complex issues (Telles da Silva, 2007). This kind of proposal could have been a source of inspiration for the authors of the volume. For instance, description of urban landscapes or daily-life can offer an interesting alter-

native to the quite redundant reference to commonplaces and questionable statistics on urbanization.

Overall, *Marginal Urbanisms* remains a fundamental contribution to both the urban and Latin American studies. The diversity of aspects tackled in this volume allows a wide understanding of the issues of informality, and a rich inter-disciplinary dialogue.

### References

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Telles da Silva, V 2007, “Transitando na linha de sombra, tecendo as tramas da cidade”, in Oliveira, F Rizek, C (eds). *A era da indeterminação*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, Coleção Estado de Sítio, pp. 195-220.

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