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Neoliberalism From Below: Popular Pragmatics & Baroque Economies, by Verónica Gago

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Abstract

A book review of Veronica Gago's book, *Neoliberalism from Below*.

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Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics & Baroque Economies, by Verónica Gago, translated by Liz Mason-Deese, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017, 277 pp., \$94.95 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-8223-6883-0, \$25.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8223-6912-7

The translation of Veronica Gago's book, *Neoliberalism from Below*, into English brings a much-needed perspective from the Global South to theoretical debates concerning neoliberalism. Using La Salada – Latin America's largest illicit market – as a point of entry, Gago brings to bear upon

these debates the labor and entrepreneurial practices of migrant communities in this border section of Buenos Aires. The major strength of the book is its attention to the complex interrelations between the market, the local textile workshops in which the goods sold in the market are produced, the migrant neighborhoods and community spaces wherein the labor force of the market and workshops live, and the communal religious festival that serves as a focal point for the informal economy produced by and through these spaces.

At the heart of Gago's argument is a consideration of how migrant communities created an 'informal and subterranean' popular economy in La Salada built on heterogeneous labor and entrepreneurial practices (p. 17). While informal (even illegal), these practices are intimately imbricated with transnational distribution and value chains, owing to the fact that the textile workshops that produce the goods sold in the market also produce goods for major brands. Such imbrication was hastened in the wake of the crisis of neoliberal hegemony in South America in the early twenty-first century, when governments in the region began integrating informal economies into their formal national economies as a strategy of development. Considering La Salada as representative of a particular mode of production of (and within) urban spaces in the Global South, Gago posits that this popular economy is characterized by a combination of precarity, resistance, and expansion in response to (and, later, as a function of) neoliberalism in the wake of crisis.

Such transformation of the urban space operates spatially and temporally. The spatial transformation occurred as an outcome of the collapse of traditional masculinized practices of employment, family support, and the welfare state in the wake of crisis. In response to such crisis, 'feminized figures (the unemployed, women, youth, and migrants)' began to produce informal economies through their occupation of 'the street both as an everyday public space and as a domestic space' (p. 7). In addition to the spatial dimension of this strategic workers' economy, *Neoliberalism from Below* considers the temporal character of the urban transformation produced by such an economy. Owing to the precarious and illegal nature of the market, the informal economy of this transformed urban space functions in a partial, temporary, and discontinuous manner. This occupation represents a street-level flexibility in labor and entrepreneurship, which in turn serves as a form of political mediation whereby proletarian microeconomic practices operate within – in some ways reinforcing, in others resisting – the transnational postmodern network of capitalist production.

The significance of migration to the spatiotemporal context with which Gago is concerned cannot be overstated. Indeed, the author's focus on migrant populations is one of the great strengths of this book. La Salada was built initially by vendors from Bolivia, whose informal economy continues to provide migrants from around the region with resources for settlement, investment, and production. In addition to these material and social resources, La Salada functions to produce 'a popular productive rationality' that accommodates a variety of labor and entrepreneurial practices (p. 8). Taken together, these spatial, temporal, and migratory factors mark this rationality as a *border* epistemology – a 'mode of knowledge that emerges from the displacement of territories, occupations, and languages' (p. 30). This is important for re-theorizing the neoliberal order (both economically and politically) because such an epistemology allows for 'mapping popular economies [as] a way of mapping neoliberalism as a battlefield' of competing forces rather than as simply a hegemonic order (p. 176).

This is what I take to be the core of Gago's analysis: to expose the fractious, amorphous character of neoliberalism in order to more accurately account for the complexity of its immanent functioning, and, consequently, identify potential points of political intervention. The dominant narrative posits neoliberalism as a top-down 'antistate and pro-market' agenda developed by economists, put into practice by corporations, governments, and international financial institutions, and embodied in policies of deregulation, financialization, and the gutting of the welfare state (p. 235). Recent work in neoliberal studies maintains this top-down perspective even while disrupting the false binary between the state and the market. Crouch (2011) argues for a deepened analytical engagement with the role of the corporation in the neoliberal era instead of yet another reinvention of the state-market relation. This is echoed by several authors. Birch (2015) argues that economic activity occurs

primarily in organizations instead of within markets, which frames neoliberalism as a form of corporate monopoly rather than market capitalism. Hardin (2014, p. 215) goes even further in suggesting that what distinguishes neoliberalism from other eras is the restructuring of 'society as an economic system of corporations.' The traditional narrative of neoliberalism as being a project of deregulation in favor of market competition is also upended by Panitch and Konings (2009, p. 68), who argue that modes of regulation have expanded and consolidated rather than the commonly accepted 'retreat of public institutions from social and economic life.' Taken together, recent work indicates the fundamental systemic interrelation between economic and political power under neoliberalism, not their separation.

While this top-down perspective certainly characterizes much of the neoliberal era, Gago argues that neoliberalism is also (re)constructed from below 'as a rationality that negotiates profits in this context [La Salada] of dispossession, in a contractual dynamic that mixes forms of servitude and conflict' (p. 5). This allows us to recognize that political legitimacy is not necessary for the persistence of neoliberalism. Instead, its perpetuation depends on 'the proliferation of forms of life that reorganize notions of freedom, calculation, and obedience, projecting a new collective affinity and rationality' – conditions 'materialized beyond the will of a government' that themselves form the conditions for a 'network of practices and skills' that characterize neoliberalism as a rationality, and not simply a set of policies (p. 6). What this book shows us – through an analysis of the heretofore unexamined role of informal economies in Latin America – is that neoliberalism remains ambiguous, fractious, and incomplete, despite government attempts to articulate these informal economies to the national economy as part of the project of development. In this way, Gago's work fits with another recent trajectory in neoliberal studies – one that considers neoliberalism in regard to conjunctural crisis (Hall 2011), everyday appeals to popular rationality (Hall and O'Shea 2013), and the centrality of individual entrepreneurship to neoliberal understandings of human freedom (Harvey 2005).

While this contribution to the discussion of neoliberalism was sorely needed, the empirical evidence for the author's claims often becomes lost in a tangle of concepts and theories. It is difficult to grasp the claimed connections between Spinozist philosophy, baroque economies, neodevelopmentalism, populism, statism, rentier economy, and governmentality – even though each of these elements on its own is given adequate explanation. Of course, this could be a result of the necessary limits of the translation process (though not necessarily a failure of the particular translation itself). While not detracting from the author's accomplishment, it does present certain challenges to our comprehension of what is conceptually and theoretically at stake here.

I am also left to wonder about the political potential of these popular economies if they ultimately become incorporated into the formal economy as part of the strategy of development. To be fair, Gago does indeed point the way to such potential in a consideration of 'the common – that territory that appears plagued with ambivalence and, at the same time, is permanently expanding' (p. 235). Politically speaking,

The flexible declinations of the community become a point for rearticulating knowledges and technologies, as well as an attribute of valorization in very diverse economies. Its power to construct poststate urban infrastructure is fully apparent and is what makes popular life possible in the metropolis. (pp. 235–236)

Gago's consideration of the common 'as a space that bypasses the binary between the public and the private [...] a dynamic territory of struggles and conflicts' could be pivotal for understanding the resistant potential of the popular economy (p. 236). The political potential of the people and practices of La Salada might become clearer with a sustained conceptualization of 'the common' in conjunction with 'populist statism,' instead of a re-theorization of 'neoliberalism.'

This ultimately leads me to question if the term 'neoliberalism' – with all of its conceptual and theoretical baggage – has outlived its usefulness as an analytical mechanism for understanding the processes, policies, and practices of contemporary capitalism. So amorphous, so all-encompassing, so ahistorical at this point – what is the distinct character of the term if we see it everywhere, in every mode of public, private, and common life, even those we claim to resist or operate in

opposition to it? If understanding neoliberalism in the current conjuncture requires us to deploy all of the other concepts mentioned above, is this still neoliberalism? The utility of the concept might regain some traction by being relegated once again to its initial historical context – theoretically, as the logic of governmentality ‘that arises as the [political] projection of the rules and requirements of market competition’ and (p. 176), empirically, as a set of structural reforms and policies (e.g. privatization, deregulation, financialization, the dismantling of the welfare state) that were implemented from above during the last decades of the twentieth century. That being said, *Neoliberalism from Below* masterfully achieves the task it set out to do – namely to characterize neoliberalism

by its polymorphic ability to recuperate many libertarian principles, while that polymorphism is also challenged and defied by (commercial, affective, productive) economies, forms of doing and calculating, that use neoliberalism tactically, putting it into crisis in an intermittent but recurring way. (p. 235)

For those readers invested in the theoretical debates about neoliberalism, this book is a necessary addition to the literature – one that demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of what is at stake in our discussions of heterogeneous economic practices, while simultaneously unsettling our preconceived notions of neoliberalism through a nuanced analysis of the lived economy of a specific spatiotemporal context.

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