

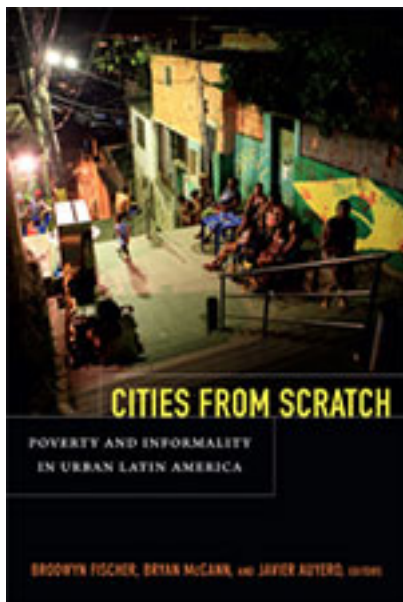
***Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America* edited by Brodwyn Fischer, Bryan McCann, and Javier Auyero**

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“José Arcadio Buendía, que era el hombre más emprendedor que se vería jamás en la aldea, había dispuesto de tal modo la posición de las casas, que desde todas podía llegarse al río y abastecerse de agua con igual esfuerzo, y trazó las calles con tan buen sentido que ninguna casa recibía más sol que otra a la hora del calor. En pocos años, Macondo fue una aldea más ordenada y laboriosa que cualquiera de las conocidas hasta entonces por sus 300 habitantes. Era en verdad una aldea feliz, donde nadie era mayor de treinta años y donde nadie había muerto.”

Gabriel García Márquez, *Cien Años de Soledad*



As with many social phenomena, the existence and persistence of informal urban settlements has been a subject of much scholarly work. However, according to the contributors of *Cities from Scratch: Poverty and Informality in Urban Latin America*, most of this work has focused on these informal cities as parts of an urban whole, framing them as the causal results of larger economic-social-political processes. As a consequence, the actual functioning, dynamics, and particularities of these spaces have been generally

obscured by the focus on structural processes, such as economic crises, political regime changes, or global urban trends. As Brodwyn Fischer argues in the introduction, this compilation of essays aims to play with the global-local paradox in which these informal cities are immersed. This playfulness allows for the recognition both of structural factors in the constitution and persistence of informal cities, and the importance of local dynamics in their formation, organization, and permanence. In an increasingly urban world, ask Fischer and the authors of this volume, “what does it mean when an enduring feature of urban life is persistently defined as a symptom of contemporary crisis?” (11). How does one approach the inevitable tension that arises from the fact that “the favela (or other informal urban settlements) and the *bairro* (formal urban settlements) are symbiotic at a deep level, but the divisions that separate them are also enduring” (124)?

The collection of essays challenges existing literature around the informal city in several ways. First of all, it denounces the tendency towards *presentism*—the failure to acknowledge the relevance of past events in present issues, and the effect that the latter will have on future arrangements—in recent urban poverty scholarship. Several of the essays of this volume, including Fischer’s detailed historical study of favelas in Rio and Mocambos in Recife and Bryan McCann’s historical assessment of the intertwining histories of a favela and a middle-class neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro, are a reaction to this tendency. In these essays, edge cities, or informal urban settlements, are acknowledged as part of a larger historical process and as part of a bigger structure, rather than as spaces that emerged out of an ahistorical void. The essays place the informal cities within a broader context. Following this idea, the book also focuses on the temporality of these sites by resisting the tendency to understand informal cities as backward spaces that modernity has not reached. Instead, informal cities are portrayed as a fundamental element of the urban fabric, not necessarily related to the degree of modernity or progress that a particular city has accomplished. In short, the volume contests linear progressive narratives by understanding these settlements as part of the city as a whole, not as primitive fragments on a path towards what is sometimes portrayed as inevitable formality and institutionalization. As an explicit challenge to this linear modernization narrative, in his chapter on property-rights conflicts in the slums in Mexico City, Emilio Duhau argues that, in the long term, informal urban spaces in Mexico City Metropolitan Zone, as well as others within Mexico, generally function as progressive habitats rather than as backward, fixed spaces. In other words, Duhau believes that the informality and precariousness that characterizes these spaces is something that, mainly through the organization and mobilization of inhabitants, will be overcome eventually, and will not remain part of the urban dynamic.

Beyond the temporal placement of the informal city, the authors also undertake the task of repositioning it spatially. Authors place emphasis both on the local conditions, contexts, and dynamics of informal cities, as well as on their role as part of a global urban phenomenon. While the book’s focus on Latin America serves as a response to a lack of scholarship in that region’s particular conditions, it does not limit the possibilities for generalizing these case

studies to other situations. In chapter four, for instance, Luis Fanor Hernandez illustrates how three large-scale processes in Nicaragua—the Sandinista revolution, the urban development plan and the construction of public housing complexes, and the later youth gang phenomenon—directly and indirectly altered the local social dynamics and spatial organization of the wider urban fabric. Mariana Cavalcanti also highlights the inevitable coexistence and interdependence of the formal and informal city in Chapter 8, where she claims that "the favela-pavement boundary¹ in question is neither spatial nor physical but an essentially symbolic construction." This boundary is "socially productive, experienced and constructed by different subjects" (212).

Cities from Scratch also aims and succeeds at contributing to ongoing debates around constructions of the subjectivity of informal-city dwellers and the diverging consequences of defining informal city inhabitants as dispensable "others," in contrast to considering them an integral part of the urban population. An example is illustrated in Murphy's study of housing issues in Chile. During the 1960s and 1970s in Santiago, he argues, rights to ownership were inextricably linked to the "quality" of people. In other words only "good people" could own a property; to put it another way, if a person owned a house or a piece of land, he or she was automatically considered to be a good citizen. In her chapter, Sujatha Fernandes demonstrates how populations respond to such structures of violence. She writes about the occupation of the Teatro Alameda in Caracas, Venezuela, as an example of residents organizing to foster "community presence in the streets and public spaces of the barrio" (186). This collective presence emerges as resistance to emptiness and vacancy due to social decline, government neglect, and socioeconomic crisis that affected the poorest areas of cities in Latin America. Continuing to place the subjects in the center of the analysis, in the final essay of the book, Javier Auyero talks about informal urban dwellers as victims of sustained environmental and economic violence. The last line of Auyero's text, however, leaves the reader with a more pessimistic feeling than the one toward which the previous essays had built. Auyero states, "Powerless waiting, in other words, is a recurring and almost modal experience among the destitute" (258).

What starts as an optimistic repositioning of the informal city toward center stage, the foregrounding of local dynamics and networks, and the celebration of its inhabitants as active and resilient, ends up as a denunciation of the informal city as a forgotten and, moreover, a purposefully excluded entity. Despite the grim feeling that inundates the end of the book, however, the informal city is successfully made visible as an entity in itself throughout the pages of *Cities from Scratch*. The more comprehensive look at informal cities that this book offers is paramount for the future of urban settlements' research worldwide. The particular conception and understanding of this phenomenon will not only impact present and future urban planning discourses and guide public policy. It will also have a substantial effect in the day-to-day urban dynamics and life of urban dwellers, both "formal" and "informal."

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Notes

¹ The favela-pavement boundary on the one hand refers to the actual lack of paved streets in many Latin American informal cities, where dirt roads abound. It also serves a metaphor of the general lack of infrastructure (beyond roads) in most informal cities.