

THE RIGHT TO THE AS ANTI-AUTHORITARIAN

Places of despair, places of hope: the spatial dimension of political imagination

As many of the contributions to this volume show, political projects always have spatial dimensions (even if they are not always explicit). At the same time, space is a social construction, and therefore always political. Plantations, *haciendas*, and factories; prisons, schools, and hospitals; housing and public spaces; technology and digital tools; collective memory and narratives. All of these relate to the values and power relations that shape our societies. Whether around social control, oppression, and exploitation, or for supporting emancipation, mutual care, and wellbeing (*buen vivir*), the ways in which social activities are organized in and through material and symbolic spaces are relevant and have multiple implications. Space (including place and scale) is not a flat, empty surface where things happen, but an active component in making things possible. Space is not just something out there, but a product of social action and interactions.

Since time immemorial, Indigenous Peoples all over the world have practiced this tacit ethical-political knowledge based on the respect, care, and protection of all forms of life – human and more-than-human – that need physical and immaterial connections to exist and flourish.¹ Within the so-called Western tradition, many authors have discussed the relationships between society and space in dialectical terms, highlighting their mutual imbrication and permanent tension.² On the one hand, space reflects and reinforces the social, economic, and cultural dynamics at play, including domination, conflict, and resistance. On the other hand, it opens countless possibilities for social transformation and collective sites for prefigurative imagination. For instance, housing and land policies, as well as the design and use of public space, infrastructure, and facilities can reproduce gender and racial inequality, socio-spatial fragmentation, alienation, and segregation; conversely, they can also bring about opportunities for alternative presents and futures, based on redistribution, equity, and radical justice.

Authoritarian and anti-authoritarian imaginaries and practices can therefore be reproduced, challenged, or transformed in real and virtual spaces. Based on such premises, and reflecting from the Latin American experience, this piece contributes some reflections about the relevance of conceiving spatial struggles – especially those for the right to the city – as anti-authoritarian and emancipatory struggles. As Natalie Koch argues, “cities can offer an

CITY REFLECTIONS FROM LATIN AMERICA AND BEYOND TARIAN STRATEGY

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especialmente útil para entender cómo las prácticas autoritarias y las espacialidades se cruzan en los cuerpos, instituciones, aspiraciones, y animosidades”; en particular porque “la relación entre el espacio urbano, el lugar, y la identidad es clave para entender cómo el autoritarismo es tanto hecho como no hecho”.³ Los académicos y activistas han señalado la peculiar y no convencional naturaleza del derecho a la ciudad, llamado en su momento no solo para reclamar inclusión o acceso a lo que ya existe sino para radicalmente transformarlo (ciudad y sociedad como un todo integrado e inseparable). Más específicamente, han descrito este derecho como una apertura y un compromiso que cuestiona y supera la mercantilización de todas las esferas de la vida bajo las relaciones capitalistas, así como las limitaciones de la democracia bajo un enfoque liberal occidental. En otras palabras, la ciudad entendida como un cuerpo político, colectivo, y autodeterminado, y no solo como un conjunto de edificios.

Más de 50 años en el making, el derecho a la ciudad puede verse como un dispositivo político dinámico y expansivo que conecta narrativas y avanza prácticas para más justicia, democracia, y vecindades ecológicas y territorios. En su núcleo están procesos socio-espaciales y pedagógicos que desafían las relaciones de poder y la distribución de recursos a nivel material, simbólico, y político. Originalmente definido como “un grito y una demanda”,⁴ los movimientos sociales han promovido el derecho a la ciudad como una visión compartida de otras “posibles ciudades”⁵ así como las agendas de acción necesarias para lograr estos objetivos. Sus valores y propuestas resuenan con los de un programa municipalista revitalizado centrado en la feminización de la política y la reconstitución de los comunes. El derecho a la ciudad no es un derecho tradicional,⁶ sino un compromiso de asumir la responsabilidad de crear espacios acogedores, anti-racistas, y decoloniales donde la gente pueda vivir con dignidad y en paz.

Las notas a continuación se presentan bajo tres viñetas temáticas, organizadas en marcos temporales flexibles y superpuestos. La primera aborda las trayectorias paralelas de *urbanización popular* y democratización “desde abajo” (1940s-1980s); la segunda discute las limitaciones y desafíos de la democratización “desde arriba” a través de la imposición de una agenda neoliberal (1980s-2000s); y la tercera y final propone una reflexión abierta y de futuro sobre la relevancia de un nuevo derecho a la ciudad y el activismo municipalista en un tiempo de (post-)autoritarismo neoliberal (2000s-2020s y más allá). Cada sección cierra con breves reflexiones sobre cómo estos temas se conectan con algunos de los testimonios y obras de arte incluidos en este volumen.

Latin America is a highly urbanized region. Eight out of ten people live in cities of diverse sizes and characteristics, including hundreds of millions in megacities and metropolitan areas. It can be said that cities here have been built by the people, many of them migrants from within and beyond the national borders, with women as the main driving force behind community mobilizing. Around an incipient industrialization process fuelled by the Second World War in Europe, in the period between the 1940s-1980s millions of *campesinas/os* (peasants) and rural inhabitants moved from the countryside to the cities in search of opportunities and the promise of better living conditions. Many arrived in overcrowded and precarious housing arrangements located in deteriorated buildings in city centres (*conventillos*, *vecindades*, *patios* – known as tenement homes in English). Many others had to occupy parcels of land in the peripheries and start building shelters, as there were no adequate housing policies in place to meet the growing demand.

Those *villas miserias*, *colonias populares*, *barrios jóvenes* (which are three of the many other terms used across the region) are today consolidated neighbourhoods visible in most Latin American big and medium cities; in many places, they represent between half and two thirds of the urbanized environment, achieved not only without the state but also despite the state. Those complex and difficult processes required efforts that went way beyond families and their close circles. Social organizing was crucial in guaranteeing a place to live. Access to land, introduction of services, and construction of facilities demanded both sustained mobilization from within the communities and a significant amount of support from other actors. University students and professors, unions leaders, professionals, and a wide range of activists, from political parties to faith-based institutions, engaged in decades-long processes with relevant political implications, which are still visible today.

In those decades, the inhabitants of self-built neighbourhoods were not only deprived of means to address their basic needs; they were violently displaced, tortured, and assassinated for vocalizing their political and social demands, and for daring to create their own alternatives. Young women and men – from poor communities, working, and middle-class backgrounds – were the main targets. While millions were living in inadequate conditions, massive investments were dedicated to building major urban infrastructures. Highways that cut through city centres, evicting hundreds of people and destroying livelihoods, became material and symbolic targets of the struggle against authoritarian rule. In the context of civic-military dictatorships affecting most of the continent, denouncing injustices and claiming rights was a challenging and dangerous endeavour that so many can painfully attest to. For many communities, claiming the right to be part of the physical urban setting was necessarily linked with the right to be considered full citizens participating in the decision-making processes affecting their lives and the places they live in.

One of the early explicit references to the right to the city in the region can be found in Bogotá, where the term was used to articulate widespread opposition to a highway project financed by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) as part of a city-wide urban plan. Massive social mobilization of thirty-two *barrios* and other popular organizations successfully opposed the initiative. The following excerpt issued in July 1973 by the *Llamado de Unidad de la Unión de los Comités Pro Defensa de los Barrios Orientales* (Call for Unity by the Union of the Committees in Defence of the Eastern Neighbourhoods) expresses their claims and proposals in a compelling manner:

“Some years ago, they expelled us with *La Violencia* [the civil war from 1948 to 1958] from the countryside, stealing our land. And now they want to chase us away from our *barrios* ... with violence, with decrees of expropriation and with the highway. They want to drive us out of the city with urban development plans: *a city that is being constructed by our labour* and which moves day and night thanks to our efforts. We don’t even have a *right to the city*! ... we demand that they let us live in the communities where we live ... that they ask us our opinions about what they want to do with us. And especially that the unnecessary and wasteful highway should not be built, because for us, it means expulsion, more poverty ...”⁷

The strategic use of the right to the city is already symptomatic of a deep understanding of the multi-layered struggle for redistribution of material and political power. The shared experience of resistance to guarantee the appropriation, use, and structuring of urban space became a key factor for political identities and common agendas. For a long time now, the *barrio* (neighbourhood) has been a crucial arena not just for claiming political and social rights but also for experimenting with alternative power relations and spatial arrangements. *Poder popular* (people’s power) can be seen as the nickname of a multitude of efforts to build territories of autonomy and horizontality, based on non-hierarchical, radically democratic, anti-authoritarian, and anti-capitalist ways of living. As such, together with factories and universities, those spaces were visible targets of the repressive state apparatus.

The contemporary global campaign to rename city streets in honour of Marielle Franco (1979–2018) is a powerful testimony of the continued relevance of territorial struggles against invisibilization, oppression, and violence. Self-identified as a Black lesbian woman from the periphery, Marielle was a prominent activist from the Rio de Janeiro’s *favelas*. As an elected representative in the local council, she denounced the growing militarization and marginalization of poor communities. She was assassinated in public in March 2018. As described by the authors of the piece included in this volume (see page 102), the grassroots initiative to remember her legacy through re-appropriating city space represents “[a]n urban poetic gesture, that at the same time reclaims the right to the city and the right to memory”.

The imposition of the neoliberal agenda: democratization from above and the commodification of life

Across the region, the 1980s and 1990s saw the fading away of dictatorships and the (re)installation of formal procedures associated with liberal democracy, such as the separation of government branches, periodic elections, and other civic and political rights, including organization, assembly, and participation. Intrinsically limited, particularly for those traditionally marginalized and oppressed, these mechanisms were further hindered by a weakened institutional framework (with explicit tensions in relation to military and paramilitary forces) as well as the excessive influence of multilateral agencies in charge of the drastic and violent imposition of the neoliberal agenda. So-called structural adjustment policies brought about the accelerated privatization of basic infrastructure and services, including water, energy, and communication services, education and health care, public

spaces, as well as banks and pension funds, to mention only the most significant. In many countries, economic instability, lack of adequate employment, and rising prices translated into massive impoverishment and precarization of living conditions for the majority of the population. Activists and scholars affirm that cities were transformed in “institutional laboratories for a variety of neoliberal policy experiments”, by way of promoting public-private partnerships, increasing financialization, “and state repression associated with new strategies of private appropriation of space”.⁸

Urban and housing policies during this period present contrasting features as well. In general terms, a noticeable shift in the approach to self-built neighbourhoods brought a focus on “improvement” programmes that provided resources for community infrastructure and, to a lesser extent, for granting security of tenure. Although prominently top-down in its elaboration and implementation, some of these initiatives included space for interesting exercises of participatory planning and even participatory budgeting. A new generation of community organizations, NGOs, and academics engaged in supporting these processes of *autogestión* (self-management) and political pedagogy, was actively involved in generating capacity-building and nurturing trans-local, regional, and international networks and alliances of learning, solidarity, and advocacy. Paired with decentralization and devolution dynamics, the possibility of voting for local authorities translated into progressive municipal governments in many cities across the region, which included numerous urban social movements leaders as new public officials at local and national governments, as well as in legislative positions.

Occurring in parallel, but on an evidently contradictory note, housing policies were overall marked by a clear neoliberal character. Directly inspired by the so-called “Chilean model” developed during the Pinochet regime, and following the strict dictates and formulas put forward by the World Bank,⁹ housing provision was almost totally transferred to the private sector, accompanied by generous public subsidies and the *ad hoc* modification of legal and financial frameworks to facilitate their functioning and maximize their profits. A visible result of these policies can be seen in the experience of small single family homes mushroomed in the far peripheries of cities, where very poor or inexistent infrastructure and services, as well as lacks in employment and cultural opportunities, deeply affected community cohesion and social mobilizing, notably weakening participation in democratic processes too. Massive new housing programmes since then have focused on individual property ownership as the only option, while at the same time collective forms of organizing and claiming rights were actively obstructed and undermined. In clear opposition with the tendencies of the previous decades, cooperatives and other associative arrangements were not only not supported but made practically inviable by forcing them to comply with the rules designed by and for profit making companies.

At the turn of the millennium, the “pink tide” would bring some hope to the possibility of change in several Latin American countries. Sustained popular uprisings forced neoliberal presidents to step down, launching constitutional processes in Bolivia (2007) and Ecuador (2008) to reclaim not only alternating party politics and governments but a profound reformulation of the social contract. Indigenous peoples’ principles and values such as *buen vivir* and the notion of plurinationality were integrated into the republican and modernist framework¹⁰ and incorporated as ethical-political goal for policy-making. At the same time, the societies embarked on bold (even if limited) exercises of reconfiguring the public sector, promoting commoning and re-nationalization processes paired with social control and direct collective management.

Despite those promising transformations, housing and urban policies maintained a distinctive neoliberal orientation and a highly centralized, technocratic character. Urban sprawl became the norm, with widespread negative repercussions at physical, economic, and administrative levels. Medium-size cities and metropolitan areas grew on average two- or threefold in relation to the population, destroying environmentally relevant resources including forests and farming lands, while at the same time adding enormous operational strains to under-resourced small and rural towns, many of them characterized by Indigenous Peoples' and *campesinas/os* long-standing presence. Housing was seen only as a product, a crucial commodity to reactivate the economies affected by cyclical crises, instead of as a right, a process, and an act of inhabiting.

The social impacts, which are still visible, were catastrophic. Houses in their millions remain empty as people found it impossible to sustain a livelihood in such ill-designed, underserved, and isolated residential settings. Lack of adequate services, facilities, and opportunities made for divided families, with wage-earning parents renting an expensive room somewhere downtown during the week while having to pay off a decades-long mortgage for houses with serious structural issues (including shrinking soils and breaking walls) after only few years of being built. In the meantime, single mothers, children, teenagers, and grandparents are locked in more or less gated poor communities, surrounded by ghost towns under very precarious and ever-deteriorating conditions. Crime-related activities, insecurity, and violence are permanent concerns in neighbourhoods with little social cohesion, which are practically forgotten by public institutions. In many places, violent gangs and parapolice private groups control local residents and small businesses through continuous threat and extortion.

For decades now, several authors have been alerting us to the risks of "urbanization without cities".¹¹ Framed as a profit-making and electoral strategy, urban sprawl has not been accompanied by an enhancement of city-living. On the contrary, contemporary urbanization has been presented as a major threat to city and countryside alike, since it destroys live-sustaining resources and traditional livelihoods, while at the same time reducing inhabitants to mere taxpayers or constituencies without much individual or collective political agency. Housing monocultures can be seen as a metaphor of the imposition of a homogenizing and extractivist regime. Characterized by a dangerous mixture of pro-business management and the continuity of authoritarian narratives and practices, the (re)nascent democracies in Latin America made evident their multiple contractions and limitations.

Collective counter-cartographies have long been a powerful tool to understand and denounce what is going on in rural and urban communities across the region, while at the same time providing material and symbolic space for imagining emancipatory alternatives. Visualizing everyday struggles against land grabbing, displacement and harassment, they are able to strengthen resistance and crystallize aspirations for more egalitarian and peaceful futures. As shown in the case from the Philippines included in this book (page 80), as well as dozens of examples from around the world gathered in *This is Not an Atlas*,¹² participatory grassroots mapping represents an effective way to reclaim and democratize power relations both in knowledge and space.

From the squares and neighbourhoods of cities in Latin America and beyond, last decades have seen multiple social movements confronting authoritarian rule, neoliberal urbanization, and the commodification of all aspects of life – as well as experimenting with more just, democratic, healthy, and sustainable paradigms for organizing our societies. Linking local and global struggles, the several editions of the World Social Forum that started in the early 2000s were crucial arenas for peer-learning and alliance-building, condensing into forward looking collective documents such as the World Charter for the Right to the City, that have become highly influential.¹³ At the same time, and converging on their opposition to austerity measures imposed in the context of the 2007-2008 crisis, the Arab Spring, Occupy, Indignad@s, and hundreds of similar mobilizations brought housing and land rights, public spaces, and radical democracy to the centre of shared agendas. An expanded conception of citizenship – not linked with nationality but with place of residence and access to rights – and participatory practices grounded on autonomy and self-government, are today key political proposals of social movements across regions towards different institutional regimes.

Building on these powerful streams and its own historic roots, a renewed municipalist movement has showed some concrete possibilities for recreating the local state, away from corporate mantras based on competitiveness, privatization, and non-democratic decision-making processes.¹⁴ By explicitly committing to the feminization of politics, during the past decade newly formed citizens' independent parties and progressive platforms in local governments have been openly challenging conventional, hierarchical, and masculine leadership models. In this context, radicalizing democracy gains a new meaning: it does not just address gender inequality and women's institutional under-representation, but it also implements policies that dismantle patriarchy and focus on everyday life and well-being for all. Affective politics and an ethics of care are then at the centre of narratives and practices in a wide range of cities and territories that are being proclaimed as "refuges" or "sanctuaries" to welcome migrants and refugees; which "rebel" against national and international policies that seek to impose austerity agendas and greater social injustice; or are "fearless" in challenging transnational corporate power and all forms of violence. Although not always explicit, an underlying notion of the commons can certainly be detected in most of these transformative urban agendas. The re-municipalization of services and public-community partnerships are proving to be fundamental tools for advancing those goals.

The global pandemic made painfully clear all that is wrong in our increasingly segregated, unjust, and environmentally unsustainable societies; by doing so, it has also signalled the priorities and the ways forward. First and foremost, it suddenly and simultaneously focused our attention on the vulnerability and interdependence of life (again, something that Indigenous Peoples all over the world have known for millennia); the centrality of care and essential workers, the majority of them women and many of them migrants or from racialized groups; and the critical role of neighbourhood cohesion and the proximity of services essential to social reproduction (something a multitude of feminist academics and activists have been pointing out for decades). The sanitary crisis, and the massive social and economic impacts that it carried, made visible and exacerbated pre-existing and longstanding gendered, racial, and class-

based inequalities that have exponentially increased in recent years – a consequence of neoliberal policies, the privatization of public infrastructures and services, unpaid and underpaid care work, and the greedy commodification of the commons.

Public debates on social media and countless webinars have addressed the urgent need to rethink the way we organize cities and territories, and the way we design economic activities and set up decision-making processes at different scales, with cooperation and solidarity as key words in framing claims and proposals arising from a wide range of actors. Local governments and communities were once again the first responders, although often lacking adequate resources and in many cases confronting reluctant – and even authoritarian – national authorities. Even with limited budgets, several local and regional actors took rapid and bold measures to address the emergency.¹⁵ By mobilizing a wide network of in-kind support and de-commodifying access to essential goods and services, they sought to guarantee housing, water, food, and electricity. Rent moratoriums on public housing, lifted fees, and an increase in the provision of food banks were combined with pop-up clinics and remote healthcare services. Repurposing buildings, land, and public space became a critical tool. Empty housing and hotel rooms, conference centres, and other community facilities were adapted to provide shelter for homeless people, women suffering domestic violence, and healthcare workers in need of isolation. Empty streets were rapidly being transformed into wider lines for bikers and pedestrians.

The initiatives taken to confront the crisis were certainly not enough, but they expanded collective imagination and showed that rapid transformations are indeed possible. At the same time, they made clear that while the role of the public sector becomes critical, with it also comes the renewed risks of bureaucratic centralization, non-democratic political agendas, and crony capitalism. In the context of growing ecological cataclysm and violent social polarization fuelled by algorithmic, post-neoliberal authoritarianism and transnational corporate capture, grounded radical imaginations are needed more than ever. Together with long-standing Indigenous *cosmovisiones* like the *buen vivir* and contemporary eco-feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial transformative agendas, the spreading of right to the city and new municipalist practices and narratives might help us create the futures we need around an ethics of redistribution, solidarity, and care.

Across the region, women's, LGBTQIA+, Black and Indigenous movements reclaim bodies, monuments, and public spaces as interconnected sites for political struggle. Massive feminist protests in Mexico City, Santiago de Chile, and elsewhere¹⁶ continue to unmask and challenge colonial and patriarchal discourses, objects and institutions through collective rebellion and mutual care. Everyday violence, discrimination, and oppression are made visible as social phenomena that require naming and shaming of the concrete perpetrators, from family members and neighbours, to private companies, the police and the state. Cities are once again transformed into megaphones, hugs and songs that manifest our anti-authoritarian indignation and hope.

Political imagination takes shape in and through material and symbolic spaces. A poem on the wall reminds us that we have the right – and the commitment – to transform our minds and territories into places of emancipation. Confronting non-democratic and speculative forces, whether at the main square or in the middle of the forest, our collective voice reveals that we are not afraid. We are in this together.

Endnotes

- 1 Something graphically condensed in the notion of the *altépetl* in Mesoamerica.
- 2 See for example Doreen Massey, *For Space*, London: Sage (2005) and Henri Lefebvre., *The production of space*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing (1991) [La production de l'espace, 1974] and Lefebvre, H., *Writings on Cities*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing (1996) [Le droit à la ville, 1968] for some groundbreaking work on this.
- 3 Natalie Koch (Ed.), *Spatializing Authoritarianism*, New York: Syracuse University Press (2022), p. 15.
- 4 Lefebvre (1996 [1968]), p. 158.
- 5 Intentionally linked to the “another world is possible” propositions arising from within the global, regional, and thematic editions of the World Social Forum since the early 2000s, around which several social movements and allies coalesced and created the World Charter for the Right to the City (2005).
- 6 For more details on how dozens of civil society organizations and international networks are expanding and implementing the right to the city in different regions follow the work of the Global Platform for the Right to the City, right2city.org.
- 7 As cited in Roel Janssen, “Class practices of dwellers in barrios populares: The struggle for the right to the city”, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 2 nos. 1-3, p. 153. Italics inserted by author.
- 8 Aysegul Can & Hugo Fanton, “Neo-liberal Authoritarian Urbanism. A Comparative Study of New Patterns of Urban Development in Brazil and Turkey”, In International Research Group on Authoritarianism and Counter-Strategies (Ed.), *Global Authoritarianism. Perspectives and Contestations from the South*, Berlin: Transcript (2022). doi.org/10.14361/9783839462096, p.77.
- 9 World Bank, *Enabling housing markets to work*, Washington, D.C.: The World Bank (1993).
- 10 Certainly not without tensions and contractions, given its evident racist and persistently colonial features.
- 11 Murray Bookchin, *Urbanization without Cities. The Rise and Decline of Citizenship*, Montreal: Black Rose Books (1992).
- 12 The publication as well as maps, videos, and other materials can be accessed at notanatlas.org
- 13 See for example the Constitution of Ecuador (2008) and the Mexico City Constitution (2017).

- 14 For more details on the recent wave of municipalist movements and local governments see Laura Roth & Kate Shea Baird, "Municipalism and the Feminization of Politics", *ROAR Magazine*, no. 6, pp. 99-109. Retrieved from roarmag.org/magazine/municipalism-feminization-urban-politics/; Vicente Rubio-Pueyo, *Municipalism in Spain. From Barcelona to Madrid, and Beyond*, New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (2017); Bertie Russell, "Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities", *Antipode*, vol. 51, no. 3, pp. 989-1010; Matthew Thompson, "What's so new about New Municipalism?", *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 45, no. 2, pp. 317-342. doi. [org/10.1177/0309132520909480](https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132520909480)
- 15 Several examples available at beyond-theoutbreak.uclg.org and right2city.org/news/right-to-the-city-initiatives-facing-covid-19
- 16 See: Communicating Vessels in the Feminist City, p. 186; Not 30 Pesos, 30 Years!, p. 30; Marielle Franco Street Transcending Boundaries, p. 102; The Art of Sustaining a Movement, p. 108; and others