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A Novel Theory of Neoliberalism

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The conversation around neoliberalism has shifted considerably over the last decades, from its initial characterization as an ideological regime with its attending market-oriented policies, neoliberalism is now routinely discussed as a mode of production whose principle commodity is nothing less than the ‘neoliberal subject.’ Verónica Gago’s *Neoliberalism from Below* represents an important milestone in this biopolitical turn in the study of neoliberalism. Taking its place alongside another important volume of Foucauldian inspiration—Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval’s *The New Way of the World*—Gago’s study is an original investigation of Latin America’s statistically formidable yet often overlooked informal sector, in the context of what the author regards as neoliberalism’s repeated mutations over the last two decades. By tracing these transformations, even more than a novel theory of the phenomenon, Gago offers an analysis that opens up the possibility of pluralizing neoliberalism itself

by tracing its diversified—baroque, Gago would add—manifestations in the plebian practices and resistances of the Global South.

Prior to its publication as part of the “Radical Americas Series” for Duke University Press, *Neoliberalism from Below* had already become a true contemporary classic of Latin American social theory. In its original Spanish edition—published in 2014—*La razón neoliberal* presented a radical research program that sought to advance and deepen existing critiques of South America’s neo-extractivist, nominally progressive regimes, precisely by asserting the continued relevance of a term that had been virtually banished from the political dialogue: neoliberalism, particularly in its contemporary theoretical iterations, was the interpretive key for an understanding of a historical conjuncture in which the more orthodox features associated with the words—austerity, privatization, mass unemployment—may have been absent at the time of the author’s writing, but ‘neoliberal reason’ still structured the social terrain in which the region’s actual political struggles unfold.

The territory that specifically draws Gago’s interest is that where neoliberalism ‘from above’—financialization and rent extraction—touches down with neoliberalism ‘from below,’ taking root in the spatial-temporal flux characteristic of the region’s transnational network of informal economies. In short, Gago observes the grammar of neoliberalism at work in illegal markets, textile workshops and makeshift urban settlements, all across the entire social fabric in which these “proletarian microeconomies” are enmeshed (32). As such, readers may be surprised to find that nowhere in Gago’s ethnography of the region’s popular economies does there ever appear a positive definition of neoliberalism; her approach can best be described as ‘immanent,’ meaning neoliberalism is defined by “its landings and connections with concrete situations”, rather than through abstract postulates of policy or doctrine (160). The intersection between neoliberalism ‘from above’ and ‘below’ is centered on the spaces where profits are negotiated by agents of the informal economy “in the context of dispossession,” and, as Gago argues following Foucault, where master signifiers of western political thought such as ‘servitude’, ‘exploitation’, ‘freedom’ and ‘resistance’ are constantly subject to a series of contextual redefinitions that often frustrate the moralizing vocabulary of solidarity, denunciation, and victimhood (5).

Gago’s project is bounded historically by Argentina’s ‘long decade’, a trajectory bookended on one end by the nation’s spectacular ‘crisis of neoliberalism’ of 2001, and on the other, by the ‘post-neoliberal’ years synonymous with the export-fueled progressive rebound running from 2003 to 2015. The author grounds this periodization

in her deliberately provocative understanding of neoliberalism, which, as the ‘below’ in the title suggests, offers a counterpoint to the conventional theoretical cast the word has assumed with such figures as Ernesto Laclau and Wendy Brown, for whom neoliberalism signifies the imposed social dominance from without of *homo economicus* over the ‘autonomy of the political.’ Politically too, Gago takes exception to neoliberalism’s rhetorical deployment in the prevailing narrative of the Latin American Pink Tide: as the vanquished Washington Consensus, whose downfall inaugurates the ‘return of the state’ and the restitution of popular sovereignty. Gago, by contrast, is interested in ‘actually existing neoliberalism,’ a field of social action that can, and has been easily overlooked by the types of state-centric, nationally-circumscribed populist theories that have informed the neo-developmental historiography of the Pink Tide years.

Gago’s attention to ‘everyday neoliberalism’ is especially informed by the privileged role she accords to the region-wide debt crises of the late 1980’s and 90’s as factors influencing subsequent historical development. Although in a very different political tenor, the author’s methodological approach recalls George Ciccariello-Maher’s *We Created Chavez* and his genealogy ‘from below’ of the Bolivarian Revolution, which traced the origins of Chavismo back to 1989’s ‘Caracazo’; Argentina’s own crisis of 2001 likewise provides Gago with the backdrop in which to grasp neoliberalism’s subsequent mutations and derivations. On the one hand, these are understood as the resolution and management of the crisis by the region’s progressive governments, such as a mutation of governmentality. On the other hand, Gago detects the subterranean persistence of the most aleatory, plebian elements unleashed by the crisis as constantly introducing ambivalence into the otherwise settled nature of the progressive restoration. In concrete terms, the author locates the mutation’s pivot at the point where the most insurrectionary elements of the Argentine crisis—factory occupations, barter economies, unemployed workers movements—is eclipsed as the Kirchner administrations began to instate its cash-transfer programs and push for the expansion of popular consumption on the back of the commodity-export boom. At that point, she argues, an emerging model of citizenship-through-consumption began to crystalize that ultimately entered into tension with an expanding informal economy whose response to the consumption injunction was just as often refractory as it was obedient.¹

¹ Gago mentions the phenomenon in Argentina of routine, widespread looting as an example of the penetration of the consumption ethos into sectors that society itself cannot accommodate.

Neoliberalism from Below borrows from Foucault's familiar formulation of neoliberalism as a form of governmentality and pursues its corollary at the level of Latin America's popular sector: in the active appropriation of neoliberal reason—more or less antagonistically, more or less opportunistically—by the very subjects that are just as often written-off as the passive victims of the same system. Gago's interest in pursuing this line of inquiry is not simply to offer a clear-eyed view of neoliberalism. Theoretically as well as politically, 'neoliberalism from below' as a conceptual perspective seeks to drive a wedge between the purportedly natural relationship between popular sovereignty and the neo-developmental Latin American state of recent years. Gago's ethnographically informed study looks to develop a typology of a set of practices that are more 'plebian' than 'national-popular', more 'along the plane of immanence' and through self-activity than through an appeal to a higher authority or the collective creation of empty signifiers. In keeping with this broadly Deleuzian perspective, the author seeks to not only break with the false identity between informality and victimhood (or what amounts to the same, criminality), but to detect the elements of freedom and agency present in practices that are otherwise understood as mere survival. To that end, Gago introduces a lapidary phrase, repeated mantra-like throughout, that is meant to elucidate the promiscuous relationship she detects between neoliberalism and popular agency: "calculation is conatus," a phrase implying that the purportedly utilitarian rationality of neoliberalism—"survival," for the most disenfranchised of society—is constantly being repurposed through its contact with plebian practices and becoming, in Spinozian terms, a striving to exist and a resistance to destruction (8).

Calculation and reason, less acts of survival in the neoliberal wilderness than moments self-constitution and affirmation, are the principle conceptual models guiding Gago as she descends to the level of particulars, discussing the "vitalist pragmatics" through which cold, economic ratiocination is constantly woven into the inherently unpredictable reality of Latin America's informal sector (a term, incidentally, that Gago disputes since it asserts an identity between formlessness and unregulated economic activity). Gago considers a series of interlocking social spaces—'assemblages'—that under her treatment reveal a startling complexity: the Salada fair, South America's largest open-air, illegal market, where the accessibility of counterfeit brands comes to represent a market-of-markets, a model for an alternative paradigm of popular consumption; or, the clandestine workshops, where the "communitarian value" of immigrant Bolivian communities is inserted into global value chains. They disturb the

familiar conflation of sweatshops with slave labor and interrogate the very notion of ‘community’ as a spatially inert and historically immobile unit (121).

Gago’s discussion of Buenos Aires’ *villas* recalls many of the original insights developed by Italian *operaismo* regarding the neighborhood-as-factory, transposing them onto the landscape of Latin America’s ‘planet of slums,’ where the evident value of social reproduction becomes increasingly indistinguishable from productive activity as such. The English-speaking reader can likewise be forgiven for finding the description of these ‘borderland’ spaces as exotic or unfamiliar; the initial 2014 publication of Gago’s *La razón neoliberal* had an equally stirring effect on an Argentine readership who, almost to prove Gago’s point, had little familiarity with the types of practices rendered physically invisible—albeit, made visible through one dimensional cultural representations—by the dominant narrative of the progressive ‘golden years.’

Neoliberalism from Below is very much a book of keywords in the spirit of Raymond Williams’s renowned book with the same name, except where Williams’ book sought to uncover the contested nature of commonly held cultural signifiers, Gago’s book proposes a new theoretical vocabulary in order to contemplate an as yet unrecognized and little considered social terrain.

Indeed, one of the great virtues of Gago’s book lies in her ample use of some of Latin America’s most exciting theorists, who provide important precisions and sometimes even correctives to the theoretical keywords of European provenance. When not citing figures such as Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno, Gago regularly references a group of Latin American philosophers and social theorists, most of them women, who provide the author with her most incisive tools. Readers will feel encouraged to learn more about figures such as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, and Rita Segato, whose ideas come to life in Gago’s study. As just one example of this felicitous application of theory, Gago employs Cusicanqui’s notion of *ch’ixi* to mark an important distinction within a relatively congested debate around cultural heterogeneity and heteronomous modes of production in Latin America. Engaging in dialogues that range from the polemical—Néstor García Canclini, Álvaro García Linera—to the complementary—René Zavaleta Mercado, Luis Tapia—the author draws on the vision of an alternative Indian modernity implied by the *ch’ixi* worldview to both dispute the harmonious, sovereign subtext of such concepts as hybridity and *mestizaje*, while also countering possible negative interpretations, such as Zavaleta’s insinuation that the foundational socio-temporal misalignments of Andean “motley societies” ultimately act to prevent the formation of a national-popular identity.

Ch'ixi, as a perspective allowing for the multiple and parallel co-existence of antagonistic socio-cultural elements, is precisely the kind of political philosophy that allows Gago to grasp the strategic connection between incommensurable pairings such as communitarian social arrangements and neoliberal exploitation, or urban space and indigeneity.

The structure of Gago's book merits a separate mention. Concerned as it is with flows, modulations and mutations, *Neoliberalism* is divided into chapters that privilege movement in terms of scale as well as quality, between discontinuous territories and social arrangements, "[b]etween the Proletarian Economy and the Transnational Network"; "Between Servitude and Popular Entrepreneurship"; "Between Postnational Citizenship and the Ghetto". The chapter titles alone provide some indication of the ambitious nature of Gago's project, and at first glance, the study has a montage-like structure that could jeopardize its overall cohesiveness in less capable hands. However, Gago's exposition is abetted by the ingenious use of a set of key concepts—"popular pragmatics"; "baroque logics"; "community"; "ch'ixi" or "motely society"—that act as a fulcrum around which the book unfolds in a less linear, more spiraling fashion that ultimately advances the author's larger argument. Translator Liz Mason-Deese deserves special mention for her ability to convey the expressive bent of Gago's theorizing, always balancing as it does between ethnographic thick-description and large-scale sociological analysis.

Some readers of *Neoliberalism from Below* may be left looking for a fuller account of the interaction between Latin America's popular economies and the more familiar 'neoliberalism from above.' Gago does not sidestep the question; she dedicates a section of her book to sketching an expanded concept of extractivism to comprehend not only the region's insertion into the global division of labor, but also the comprehensive form of governmentality that traces a direct line between commodity-export dependency, popular micro-credit and the hegemony of consumption practices. Gago has developed this line of research in subsequent studies and the subject matter would provide an interesting companion to Gago's first work available in English.

Among several interesting volumes published today by Latin American social theorists, it would be difficult to find one that more aptly embodies what Argentine Marxist José Aricó once called "the epistemic virtue of backwardness."² For all its

² Aricó, José "Marxismo latinoamericano." Edited by N. Bobbio, et al. *Diccionario de política* (México: Siglo XXI, 2005), 942.

emphasis on singularity and difference, and its reluctance to reduce neoliberalism to an abstract system of accumulation, Gago's study of "peripheral neoliberalism" provides a compelling case for the importance of the emerging fields of social reproduction theory and feminist Marxist analyses in terms of their application towards an understanding of the universal grammar of neoliberalism. In fact, *Neoliberalism from Below* has already in Latin America become a kind of field manual for the type of militant research of which Gago is herself an important purveyor, and in its stimulating effects it may recall another classic—Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*—, which has similarly made visible a new arena for political and intellectual intervention.