COLONIALITY AND INFORMALITY IN UNEVEN URBANISATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Abstract

This article critically examines urban informality as a selective and patrimonial rationality that structures urban governance in the peripheral social formations of Latin America, with emphasis on Brazil. Grounded in critical geography and decolonial approaches, the study adopts a deductive and qualitative method, based on bibliographical review and hermeneutic analysis of Latin American authors and critics of Eurocentric urbanism. It argues that informality is neither the absence of the state nor an anomaly, but a political technology of regulation that enables public power to modulate legality and manage exceptions according to economic and patrimonial interests. The text demonstrates that urban and environmental inequalities stem from selective and racialized governance, sustained by the coloniality of power, state selectivity, and patrimonialism, which transform popular territories into zones of sacrifice and exclusion. The article concludes that understanding informality as an analytical key shifts the focus from lack to agency, recognizing in these territories insurgent practices and subaltern knowledges capable of refounding Latin American urban-regional thought and projecting more just, plural, and decolonial forms of urbanity.

Keywords: Urban informality; Spatial coloniality; Global South.

Resumo / Resumen

COLONIALIDADE E INFORMALIDADE NA URBANIZAÇÃO DESIGUAL NO SUL GLOBAL

O artigo analisa criticamente a informalidade urbana como uma racionalidade seletiva e patrimonialista que estrutura a governança urbana nas formações sociais periféricas da América Latina, com ênfase no Brasil. Fundamentado na geografia crítica e nas abordagens decoloniais, o estudo adota método dedutivo e abordagem qualitativa, apoiando-se em revisão bibliográfica e análise hermenêutica de autores latino-americanos e críticos do urbanismo eurocentrado. Argumenta-se que a informalidade não é ausência de Estado nem anomalia, mas tecnologia política de regulação que permite ao poder público modular a legalidade e administrar exceções conforme interesses econômicos e patrimoniais. O texto demonstra que as desigualdades urbanas e ambientais derivam de uma governança seletiva e racializada, sustentada pela colonialidade do poder, pela seletividade estatal e pelo patrimonialismo, que convertem os territórios populares em zonas de sacrifício e exclusão. Conclui-se que compreender a informalidade como chave analítica desloca o foco da carência para a potência, reconhecendo nesses territórios práticas insurgentes e saberes subalternos capazes de refundar o pensamento urbano-regional latino-americano e projetar alternativas de urbanidade mais justas, plurais e decoloniais.

Palavras-chave: Informalidade urbana; Colonialidade do espaço; Sul Global.

COLONIALIDAD E INFORMALIDAD EN LA URBANIZACIÓN DESIGUAL DEL SUR GLOBAL

El artículo analiza críticamente la informalidad urbana como una racionalidad selectiva y patrimonialista que estructura la gobernanza urbana en las formaciones sociales periféricas de América Latina, con énfasis en Brasil. Fundamentado en la geografía crítica y en los enfoques decoloniales, el estudio adopta un método deductivo y una aproximación cualitativa, apoyándose en revisión bibliográfica y análisis hermenéutico de autores latinoamericanos y críticos del urbanismo eurocéntrico. Se argumenta que la informalidad no representa ausencia del Estado ni anomalía, sino una tecnología política de regulación que permite al poder público modular la legalidad y administrar excepciones según intereses económicos y patrimoniales. El texto demuestra que las desigualdades urbanas y ambientales derivan de una gobernanza selectiva y racializada, sostenida por la colonialidad del poder, la selectividad estatal y el patrimonialismo, que convierten los territorios populares en zonas de sacrificio y exclusión. Se concluye que comprender la informalidad como clave analítica desplaza el enfoque de la carencia hacia la potencia, reconociendo en estos territorios prácticas insurgentes y saberes subalternos capaces de refundar el pensamiento urbano-regional latinoamericano y proyectar alternativas de urbanidad más justas, plurales y decoloniales.

Palabras-clave: Informalidad urbana; Colonialidad del espacio; Sur Global.

INTRODUCTION

The production of urban space in the peripheral social formations of Latin America must be understood as an expression of a historical rationality based on inequality, dependence, and racialization. This historical rationality shapes specific urban governance forms, whereby territory is regulated and controlled through selective and patrimonial practices.

In Brazil, urbanization did not emerge from a universal project of modernization or rational planning. Instead, it unfolded from colonial logics characterized by state selectivity, patrimonialism, and the systematic marginalization of specific social and territorial groups. In this context, urban informality should not be seen as an exception to the urban order but rather as a structural component of its formation. This article aims to critically analyze urban informality and its relationship with the selective practices of the State, institutional patronage, and the coloniality of space. It will demonstrate how these elements contribute to an urban governance structure that is selective, exclusionary, and racialized. Territorial informality is thought to be more than just a relic of pre-modern times; it actively influences the dynamics of urban areas within peripheral capitalist regions. It serves both as a survival strategy and as a method for accumulation and social control.

This research employs a deductive method, drawing on theoretical references from Latin American critical and urban geography, with a focus on decolonial and postcolonial approaches. The study is exploratory in nature, aiming to enhance the conceptual understanding of complex urban phenomena that remain inadequately systematized within the framework of coloniality. Methodologically, the article is structured as a qualitative investigation, supported by a thorough and critical review of the academic literature in the fields of urban and regional studies.

The theoretical data survey was conducted through an analysis of books, scientific articles, and institutional documents, with a particular emphasis on authors who examine informality, segregation, state selectivity, and urban financialization processes in the Global South. The analysis procedure adopted is hermeneutic in nature, involving the interpretation of empirical phenomena through various analytical categories. This approach enabled us to develop a relational, critical, and context-specific understanding of the spatial dynamics that influence the Brazilian urban periphery.

The relevance of this study stems from the urgent need to develop an urban critique that is attuned to the realities of Latin American cities, moving beyond both Eurocentric urban models and methods that depoliticize informality. We propose an integrated and critical analysis of urban informality, highlighting concepts such as patrimonialism, state selectivity, and environmental injustice. We view urban informality as an expression of various forms of domination, but also as a space for resistance, territorial agency, and the creation of insurgent knowledge.

The text is organized into five sections, in addition to this introduction. The first section revisits the historical connections between urbanization, coloniality, and patrimonialism in Brazil. The second section discusses informality as both a territorial structure and a political instrument. The third section analyzes urban environmental injustice through the lenses of environmental racism and infrastructural selectivity. The fourth section proposes a rethinking of urban-regional theory based on intermediate and situated theoretical categories. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and suggests both theoretical and political pathways for a decolonial urban critique.

UNEQUAL URBANISATION AS A PROJECT: COLONIALITY, PATRIMONIALISM AND STATE SELECTIVITY

The production of urban space in the peripheral social formations of Latin America must be understood in the light of its dependent, unequal, and racially hierarchical historical constitution. In Brazil, urbanization was consolidated not as part of a comprehensive integrative project, but rather as a direct consequence of colonial logic, characterized by coronelismo, which was supported by state patrimonialism and enacted through selective public policies. As a result, patterns of access and territorial appropriation were shaped by inequality.

As Milton Santos (1994) notes, space serves as a mediation between techniques and norms. In the Brazilian context, this mediation has historically functioned through social, geographical, and political selectivities. Rational-universal planning does not determine the organization of urban space; rather, it arises from a combination of various selective strategies employed by both public and private agents. Consequently, the resulting territory is characterized by informality, precariousness, and inequality, which are fundamental elements of peripheral urban logic rather than mere exceptions.

By examining the Latin American city through the lens of the coloniality of power, Quijano (2005) demonstrates that the organization of urban spaces follows a pattern of racial and economic domination. This pattern links control over land to social hierarchy. This pattern, which originates from the establishment of colonial and modern capitalism, establishes the racialization of social relations and territorial differentiation as the foundation of power. Therefore, urban informality, often labeled as "illegality," is not a deviation from the norm but rather a consequence of the colonial logic of domination. This logic systematically excludes racialized and impoverished populations from their rights to the city.

The concept of "illegal space" should be understood as a normative construction used to justify the denial of rights. The idea of legality itself is influenced by mechanisms of racial, social, and territorial selectivity, serving as a tool for control and exclusion. Urban modernity does not represent a neutral and universal ordering process; instead, it reproduces colonial patterns of power.

Arturo Escobar (2007) argues that colonial modernity imposed not only economic and institutional patterns, but also spatial epistemes that structure the way we conceive the urban. The ordering, planning, and spatial normativity exclude alternative ways of producing, inhabiting, and signifying space.

In Brazil, modern urban expansion, as noted by Carlos (1994) and Corrêa (1994), has been consolidated through land concentration and the selective neglect of the State in ensuring universal access to housing, urbanized land, and infrastructure. Unlike central countries, where the State has historically assumed functions of redistribution and socio-spatial cohesion, Brazilian urban policy has developed through intermittent actions influenced by vested interests, electoral cycles, and local power coalitions.

In the classic analysis by Faoro (2001), the Brazilian State is described as having developed under patrimonialism. In this model, the distinction between public and private interests is tenuous, and power is wielded through favors, exceptions, and personal relationships. This pattern persisted, with some adaptations, throughout the twentieth century, influencing practices in urban planning, land regulation, and the implementation of territorial policies.

Oliveira (2010) revisits the critique of the patrimonial State, highlighting that Brazilian modernization has been deeply contradictory. This has led to the emergence of an institutional "platypus": a state structure that, despite integrating elements of economic liberalism and rational planning, still retains the authoritarian and selective characteristics of its colonial origins.

At the urban level, this results in ambiguous state action, promoting "modernization" plans and regulations while also supporting practices of selective illegality, as noted by Raquel Rolnik (1997, 2015). The expansion of Brazilian cities through irregular land allotments, informal occupations, and unregulated territories often takes place with the connivance, tolerance, or even indirect encouragement of public authorities. These authorities manage the enforcement of periods of legality based on their political interests. This situation highlights an urban governance approach that relies on exceptions, where legality is used as a political tool.

This arrangement is not dysfunctional; rather, it serves to reproduce inequalities and maintain territorial control. Informality acts as a political tool that enables the State to regulate the application of legality, selectively granting or denying rights based on local pressures, real estate interests, and clientelist alliances.

Authors such as Robinson (2002) and Roy (2005), drawing on the experiences of the Global South, contend that informality should not be perceived as the absence of the State, but rather as a reflection of its selective actions. In Brazil, Holston (2013) supports this viewpoint by discussing the concept of "insurgent citizenship," which focuses on urban self-construction processes and the conflicts surrounding the legality and legitimacy of popular territories.

Informality should not be seen as an anomaly or dysfunction of urbanization; instead, it plays a crucial role in the process of spatial production, particularly in peripheral and dependent contexts. The issue stems from two main factors: the limited access to legalized and urbanized land and the selective actions of the State. These actions either permit, regulate, or criminalize land occupation based on the political and economic interests involved.

In this context, the State is not simply absent; rather, it is present ambiguously and selectively. It promotes specific regularizations, precarious titles, partial infrastructure, and repression, creating a framework of territorial governance that reinforces inequality and legitimizes its continuation.

Understanding these dynamics requires careful consideration of analytical categories that are disconnected from their original context. The concept of "neoliberalization," often seen as the retreat of the State and the rise of the market, might overlook the reality in Brazil. In this country, the State has never fully guaranteed social and territorial rights for all citizens. Instead, recent changes in its structure have only intensified existing selective and patronage-driven practices.

According to Brandão, Fernández, and Ribeiro (2018), the task of redefining urban-regional thinking in Latin America requires the development of intermediate analytical categories. These categories should be sensitive to the unique characteristics of local social settings while also being connected to global processes involving the reorganization of capital, the State, and urbanization. This analysis goes beyond the dichotomy between variation and negation. It seeks to establish an understanding that acknowledges the roles of informality, state selectivity, and the coloniality of space as essential elements in comprehending urban dynamics in the Global South. This perspective enables us to view urban governance in the Global South not as a lack of state presence, but rather as a selective practice that manages space through informal mechanisms.

BETWEEN THE FORMAL AND THE ILLEGAL: INFORMALITY AS A STRUCTURAL TERRITORIAL OPERATOR

For decades, the dichotomy between formal and informal spaces has been a central interpretative pillar for understanding urbanization in Brazilian and Latin American cities. Clandestine subdivisions, favelas, self-built occupations, territories without infrastructure, or legally precarious were framed under the generic category of "informality" — generally understood as the absence of regulation, disorder, or deviation from the "planned" city.

However, this simplifying framework overlooks the fact that so-called informality is not the antithesis of formality, but rather a structural part of the production of urban space. Authors like Rolnik (1997; 2015) have pointed out that informality is not merely a by-product of the State's periphery; rather, it arises from the State's historical pattern of selective and unequal actions. In this sense, informality is politically produced and serves as a legitimate and functional urban form within the existing territorial framework.

The very separation between what is "legal" and "illegal" is fluid, continually mediated in urban practice. This dynamic fosters a selective urban governance, in which informality operates as a political instrument of regulation and territorial control. In his studies on São Paulo and other Brazilian metropolises, Rolnik (1997) demonstrates how illegal subdivisions, informal occupation areas, and formal enterprises coexist and are continuously shaped by legal instruments, administrative actions, and local political networks. The production of the city does not occur in two parallel circuits (formal/informal), but rather through a hybrid system, supported by a form of territorial governance that negotiates exceptions, authorizes irregularities, and recognizes partial legalities.

This framework is far from being transient or exceptional. Informality has been institutionalised as part of the politicised urban structure. The lack of legal access to urbanized land for most low-income populations forces self-construction in unregulated areas, while public authorities intervene selectively - sometimes promoting regularization, sometimes ignoring occupations, and sometimes promoting removals.

This dynamic reiterates Carlos's (1994) diagnosis that the Brazilian city is the result of a social production marked by inequality and conflicting mediation between capital, the State, and popular segments. Space can be viewed as a field of dispute, where the boundaries between the legal and the illegal are continually reconstructed in accordance with hegemonic interests. This unequal production of urban space also defines the patterns of environmental vulnerability, which will be explored in the following section.

The selective action of the State on informal territories does not mean the absence of regulation; rather, it represents a specific form of governance. Roy (2005) suggests that informality serves as a "planning modality," allowing the State to adjust its actions based on specific contexts. It provides legitimacy when there is a political or economic interest, and denies it when precariousness serves a purpose.

This analysis is echoed in the Brazilian reality. Corrêa (1994), in his study on the production of urban space, notes that real estate capital and the State operate jointly in urban expansion, utilizing different scales and instruments of intervention. In this context, illegality does not oppose the formal market; instead, it supports it by either freeing up land for subsequent informal urbanization, enhancing the value of previously delegitimized areas, or exerting social control over territories considered "marginal."

Similarly, territorial informality has been progressively incorporated as a cog of urban financialisation in the peripheries of capitalism. Land regularization programs, the conversion of ownership rights into credit securities, and the valuation of "invisible" real estate assets now function as tools for the subordinate integration of peripheral areas into the global financial circuit. This logic partially aligns with the arguments made by De Soto (2001), who identifies land informality as a major barrier to capitalist development in peripheral economies. According to De Soto, the lack of formalized property titles prevents the poor from transforming their assets into productive capital— a process he refers to as the "death of capital."

The formulation proposed by De Soto (2001) has faced significant criticism for its theoretical superficiality and for overlooking the political, historical, and structural aspects of informality. By reducing the issue of land to simply a failure of legal registration, De Soto neglects the selective mechanisms involved in state actions, the socio-territorial conflicts, and the functional role of informality within the logic of capitalist accumulation, particularly in peripheral contexts. Instead of viewing informality as an anomaly to be corrected, it is more accurately understood as a mode of governance and value extraction in the cities of the Global South.

Financialization in the Global South, as discussed by Brandão, Fernández, and Ribeiro (2018), is characterized by subordination and diversity. It is intertwined with patrimonial regimes and reflects unequal structures of ownership and power. Consequently, informality is not simply overcome by the formal market; instead, it is integrated, utilized, and monetized, highlighting its crucial role in the contemporary territorial dynamics of peripheral capitalism.

Holston (2013) explains in his study on insurgent citizenship that informal spaces are not just targets for State and capital intervention; they also serve as arenas for political agency and autonomous social production. The development of the city from the grassroots level, through community networks, associations, collaborative efforts, and self-management practices, demonstrates that these territories can also be sites for the construction of rights, even when they exist outside of strict legality.

Ribeiro (2018) warns that recognizing rights in informal territories is often precarious, as it is influenced by state or business interests that exploit land regularization. Legalization may not foster inclusion but instead impose regulatory frameworks that undermine community practices, leading to forced removals, gentrification, and the prioritization of market value over social use.

Informality is not just a remnant of the past; it is a fundamental aspect of urban dynamics in Brazil. It influences how access to the city is granted, shapes the interactions between the State, capital, and society, and affects the ways urban life is reproduced. Therefore, it should be viewed as a key structural element of peripheral modernity, closely tied to the unequal processes of urbanization.

Considering its structural and articulating role in unequal urbanization, informality should be viewed not only as an object of analysis but also as a starting point for reconstructing the analytical categories of urban thought. Robinson (2002) suggests that considering cities that are "off the map" of

the dominant global perspective can lead to the development of broader, more inclusive, and context-specific urban theories. This approach challenges Eurocentric models that often view the Global South merely as a deviation from the norm.

Informality, in this context, challenges and destabilizes the conventional frameworks of legality, property, normativity, and the rationality of modern urban planning. Rather than being viewed as a mere absence or failure of regulation, informality should be seen as a form of territorial production with its own logic, deeply rooted in the material and historical contexts of marginalized social groups. Analyzing it in relation to state selectivity, patrimonialism, and the coloniality of space enables us to question universalist concepts derived from Eurocentric urbanism, which often disregard the unique characteristics of Global South contexts.

This critical perspective allows us to move beyond a simplistic binary distinction between formal and informal spaces. It reveals the hybrid arrangements that characterize the Latin American city, where informality plays a crucial role in shaping political and territorial dynamics. As demonstrated throughout this study, informality is not merely an exception; rather, it is an integral and functional component of the urban landscape, particularly in peripheral areas. This phenomenon is shaped by the selective practices of the State, patrimonialism, and colonial legacies that influence and racialise the production and control of space.

Viewing informality as an analytical lens opens up the possibility of creating a situated urban critique, rooted in the concrete experiences of resistance, appropriation, and production of the territory carried out by subalternised subjects. The effort to refound the interpretative categories of the urban-regional in Latin America is inscribed in this context, recognising that the popular ways of inhabiting, building, and signifying space are not archaic residues, but insurgent expressions of other possible urban rationalities.

ENVIRONMENTAL INJUSTICE AS A SPATIAL FORM OF INEQUALITY AND COLONIALITY

The unequal distribution of risks and infrastructure represents selective environmental governance, a clear manifestation of the coloniality and patrimonialism influencing urban management in the world's peripheries.

In Latin American cities, which have historically been shaped by inequality, the contradictions between territorial modernization and social exclusion consistently manifest in the unequal distribution of environmental degradation, climate risks, and infrastructure, which disproportionately affects informal, racialized, and vulnerable territories.

This geography of vulnerability is not merely a by-product of urban processes; rather, it is an essential aspect of the territorial logic underlying peripheral capitalism. Leff (2001) and Porto-Gonçalves (2006) note that in the peripheries of the world system, relationships between society and nature exhibit a colonial pattern. Territories occupied by marginalized populations are turned into sacrificial zones marked by pollution, risk, and inadequate protection.

In Brazil, informally occupied areas—like slopes and floodplains—often experience flooding, landslides, and environmental contamination. Research, including a study by Acselrad (2001), illustrates the concept of environmental injustice, showing that certain social groups are systematically exposed to these risks while lacking access to vital urban environmental resources.

This socio-environmental injustice arises not only from the material precariousness of informal urban settlements but is also deeply rooted in the selective and exclusionary nature of state actions. It represents a pattern of territorial governance characterized by omissions and unequal interventions. Access to essential environmental infrastructures—such as sanitation, urban drainage, green spaces, and risk management—is influenced by political, economic, and racial factors. According to Maricato (2001), Brazilian urbanization has historically been designed for a limited segment of the population, thereby consolidating a dual model in which urban and environmental rights are distributed asymmetrically.

Selectivity in urban environmental policy reinforces the inequalities already embedded in city structures, creating differentiated patterns of environmental vulnerability. For working-class communities, the precarious State of infrastructure, increased exposure to extreme weather events, and lack of risk mitigation become defining aspects of their urban experience. These communities are often unjustly blamed for the consequences of a process that has marginalized them.

Environmental injustice in urban areas of Brazil highlights not only socioeconomic disparities but also underlying power dynamics, including environmental racism. This concept, extensively discussed by Porto and Pacheco (2013), challenges the perception that the unequal distribution of environmental risks is a natural phenomenon. Instead, it argues that socio-environmental harm is the result of historically constructed processes involving racialization, social exclusion, and the unequal allocation of public policies and environmental protections.

In Brazilian cities, environmental racism is evident as predominantly Black and marginalized communities endure unhealthy living conditions, including inadequate sanitation, water insecurity, and proximity to polluting industries and dumps. They often live in unstable or flood-prone areas yet remain overlooked in state investment priorities. These populations not only face greater environmental vulnerabilities but also encounter significant barriers to the recognition of their territorial rights. They are often criminalized, delegitimized, or forcibly removed under the guise of legality or "urban requalification" (BENINI et al., 2025).

Porto and Pacheco (2013) argue that this logoc cannot be attributed solely to technical oversights or planning shortcomings. Instead, it should be understood as a reflection of a larger power structure characterized by institutionalized racism. This framework links urban policy to the dynamics of coloniality and environmental necropolitics. The selective nature of public action perpetuates inequality by directing infrastructure, afforestation, drainage, and sanitation services to areas that are perceived and classified as "white" and "formal." In contrast, these same services are either denied or rendered precarious in popular areas, where the majority of the population is Black.

In this context, environmental racism operates as a spatial rationale that legitimises the constitution of sacrifice zones and hierarchises forms of urban life. It structurally defines which bodies and territories are considered worthy of environmental protection, access to urban infrastructure, and permanence in the territory, while exposing others to risk, environmental violence, and silent exclusion. Understanding this logic requires shifting the environmental debate beyond a purely technical or normative approach to include political and epistemological disputes, permeated by issues of socio-spatial justice, collective memory, and the right to the city.

Vainer (2000) argues that urban planning in Brazil is shaped by neoliberal, market-driven logic, where the exchange value of land often takes precedence over its use value. This approach leads to the depoliticization of urban decision-making and obscures exclusionary practices. Marginalized communities, often in vulnerable areas, are underfunded and targeted for land revaluation, either through forced evictions or selective environmental upgrades.

Interventions that claim to focus on sustainability or addressing "environmental risk" often serve as mechanisms of exclusion, disguised as urban innovation. These actions reinforce the idea of the coloniality of nature (Porto-Gonçalves, 2006) by prioritizing the environment according to capitalist values and disregarding local knowledge. This approach is a rationality that combines environmental governance with the logic of real estate capital, reinforcing state selectivity and the coloniality of urban practices. Instead of guaranteeing environmental justice, these policies exacerbate inequalities and establish a new form of exclusion, in which "environmental progress" is achieved by denying popular ways of inhabiting and producing urban space.

In recent years, urban environmental policies have become integral to planning and land use. Terms such as "resilience," "revitalization," "green infrastructure," and "urban sustainability" have become central to master plans, environmental legislation, and urban projects. However, as Harvey (1992) and Swyngedouw (2010) caution, these terms are often co-opted by neoliberal technocratic discourse, which instrumentalises the environmental agenda for land valuation, gentrification, and population control.

In Brazil, the implementation of linear parks in valley bottoms and high-risk areas serves as a notable example. Projects with an environmental focus—such as the Mananciais Programme in São

Paulo (GODOY; BENINI, 2024) and the PAC interventions in Rio's favelas—have often resulted in the removal of community residents under the justification of protecting environmentally sensitive areas. However, these initiatives frequently lack guarantees for dignified resettlement or territorial permanence. In this context, policies often reinforce the exclusionary logic of urban planning by displacing informal residents to even more precarious or peripheral areas.

This dynamic underscores the ambivalent and contradictory nature of contemporary urban environmental policies. While these policies formally acknowledge the risks, vulnerabilities, and socio-environmental damage affecting working-class communities, in practice, they often serve as tools for expulsion, containment, or land revaluation, rather than functioning as instruments of justice or reparation (GODOY; BENINI, 2024). Instead of promoting territorial inclusion or expanding the right to the city, such policies are utilized to reform urban spaces to align with market interests and selective governance logic.

The term "environmentally planned city" refers not to a universal urban project, but rather to a strategy for territorial reorganization that undermines, terminates, or replaces established modes of land use and occupation. By ignoring the historical contexts of these territories—their social structures, sense of belonging, and housing functions—environmental interventions often reinforce gentrification, displacement, and social cleansing, even when they present themselves as efforts to promote sustainability and technical rationality.

In light of this situation, it is essential to connect the criticism of urban environmental injustice with efforts to rethink urban development based on experiences from the Global South. As Escobar (2014) suggests, we must move away from developmental and environmental paradigms that are centered on Northern models. Instead, we should create alternatives grounded in territorial epistemologies, popular knowledge, and resistance practices that arise within local communities. A noteworthy example is the indigenous communities in Chapadão do Parecis, Mato Grosso, who have engaged with cutting-edge agribusiness technologies, significantly altering the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous populations across nearly all municipalities in the region.

This suggests that the informal city is not merely a space of need but also a site of active production of alternative socio-environmental approaches. Community gardens, self-managed drainage systems, occupations with collective land management, and experiences fighting for infrastructure and sanitation are all manifestations of an insurgent urban ecology that challenges conventional technocratic planning models.

Miraftab (2009) reminds us that "insurgent planning" involves understanding popular territories as more than just objects of public policy. Instead, these areas should be seen as collective subjects of urban transformation, actively working to create spatial, environmental, and political alternatives to the dominant logic.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE REFOUNDATION OF LATIN AMERICAN URBAN-REGIONAL THINKING

The study reveals that urban governance in the Global South functions through selective and patronage-based rationalities, which are upheld by the coloniality of power. Analyzing how informality, state selectivity, patrimonialism, and environmental injustice shape the production of urban space in Brazil reveals more than just a specific empirical reality. It underscores the limitations of applying analytical frameworks developed from the urban experiences of the Global North to understand the territorial dynamics of the Global South. This finding, which is not new in the Latin American critical tradition, gains renewed urgency in light of the current dominance of totalizing interpretations in urban studies. This is especially true for those interpretations rooted in concepts such as "neoliberalization," "urban governance," "financialization," and "resilience."

A tension between two epistemic positions characterizes Latin American urban-regional thought. On one side are perspectives that look for local variations in response to global trends. On the other hand, there are those who reject the validity of universal theories and emphasize the uniqueness of territorial processes in the Global South. Both, however, run the risk of reinforcing the divisions they

wish to overcome: either they absorb local specificities into external analytical models, or they reject any potential for theoretical connection between scales.

The proposal to redefine urban-regional thinking in Latin America, as suggested by Brandão, Fernández, and Ribeiro (2018), necessitates the development of intermediate categories. These analytical frameworks should arise from the unique historical, territorial, and political contexts of Latin America, but they should not be limited to these contexts alone. These categories are situated within the global processes of capital reorganization, the State, and urbanization, serving as theoretical mediations that emphasize and expand traditional interpretative frameworks.

This approach rejects both the simple application of Eurocentric analytical models, which often obscure the specificities of peripheral social formations, and the defense of a self-contained particularism A task of double theoretical inscription is proposed: first, to break away from the coloniality of knowledge that universalizes Western experiences as the norm, and second, to develop a critical theory grounded in concrete spatial practices, forms of resistance, and subaltern rationalities that arise from the territories of the Global South.

By connecting the local with the global, the empirical with the conceptual, and the historical with the structural, these intermediate categories facilitate a way of thinking about urban issues that can grasp the complexities of Latin American cities. This approach avoids oversimplifying them as merely imperfect versions of urban areas in the Global North. Thus, refounding urban-regional thinking is a political and intellectual act of decolonization. It involves recognizing that alternative ways of producing, inhabiting, and contesting space not only exist but also possess analytical strengths that are vital for critically examining the contemporary urban landscape.

The first step toward this reestablishment is to dismiss the notion that Latin American cities are merely variations of Western urban centers. For instance, informal settlements cannot be viewed solely as a lack of formal structures or as a local manifestation of neoliberalism. Instead, they are part of a unique historical context of territorial management, characterized by a blend of patrimonialism, coloniality, and selective state interventions.

According to Brandão, Fernández, and Ribeiro (2018), financialisation in the Global South does not simply replicate the patterns of central countries; rather, it assumes subordinate forms that are linked to local structures inherited from peripheral social formations. Interpreting these forms requires categories that capture the simultainety of the modern and the archaic, the legal and the illegal, as well as capital and clientelism, as illustrated by Oliveira's (2010) image of the platypus

This image is not just a literary device; it serves as a crucial framework for understanding the complex structures of Latin American urban life. It depicts a space where global accumulation processes, local forms of domination, and popular practices of resistance and survival exist together in a contradictory manner. The Latin American city is not an incomplete version of Western urbanity; it represents a distinct form of urban life that must be understood through its unique characteristics.

The refoundation of urban-regional thinking also requires recognizing the epistemologies of difference, as suggested by authors such as Escobar (2007, 2014) and Santos (2018).This means acknowledging that how space is produced in peripheral contexts should not be viewed merely as variations of the European or North American model. Instead, they should be understood as unique methods of organizing, inhabiting, and contesting territory, featuring rationalities and practices that challenge the dominant logic of modern urbanism. From this perspective, urban governance is a crucial concept for considering territorial regulation as a colonial and selective tool.

These epistemologies do not dismiss theoretical construction; instead, they suggest that it should be based on concrete experiences, utilizing categories that are partial, relational, and subject to revision. Concepts such as informality, patronage, environmental injustice, state selectivity, and insurgent planning practices should not be viewed merely as empirical objects. Instead, they serve as starting points for developing an urban theory that is relevant to the Global South.

In this context, refounding Latin American urban-regional thinking cannot be confined to the epistemological realm; it necessitates an inseparable connection between theory and practice, as well as between critique and territorial transformation. Miraftab (2009) argues that it is crucial to recognize insurgent practices—such as land occupations, self-managed urbanization experiences, and popular solidarity networks—not only as responses to precariousness but also as legitimate and creative forms of

urban space production. Although these practices are often labeled as illegal or informal, they represent subordinate territorial rationalities that challenge the dominant structures of order, normativity, and property.

Rather than viewing these experiences as shortcomings or deviations, it is essential to recognize them as urban projects in contention that create alternatives to prevailing urbanism on a daily basis. By transforming areas marked by denial into spaces of life, belonging, and resistance, these community agents create a different urban environment — one not recognized by the State, but rooted in the struggle for the right to the city. It is essential to recognize that urban criticism should arise not only from academic theories but also from the insurgent knowledge that emerges in the gaps of legality, in the areas lacking formal planning, and on the edges of the established city.

CONCLUSION

The article aimed to analyze urban informality as a selective and patrimonial rationality that shapes urban governance within the context of colonial power dynamics and uneven urbanization in the Global South.

Urban informality, as discussed in this article, is not configured as a deviation from the norm or a transitory stage of the urbanisation process. Instead, it serves as a structural operator in the socio-spatial configuration of peripheral social formations in Latin America. Its articulation with patrimonialist practices, state selectivities, and colonial legacies illustrates that urban inequalities are not simple products of lack or poorly executed planning, but an expression of historically rooted and racially hierarchical logics of power.

Throughout this text, it is argued that informality serves as a political technology for territorial management. It is selectively mobilized by the State, instrumentalized by capital, and resisted by the social practices of marginalized subjects. This dynamic challenges the conceptual binarism between legality and illegality, between the State and absence, between centre and periphery, requiring theoretical frameworks capable of capturing its complex and contradictory nature.

The critique of environmental injustice enhances this structural perspective by highlighting that risks, damages, and state interventions are distributed based on selective and racialized criteria. In this context, environmental racism serves as a mechanism of territorial hierarchy and the legitimization of sacrifice zones.

In this context, it is crucial to re-establish urban and regional thinking in Latin America by focusing on categories that reflect the unique territorial and epistemic characteristics of the Global South. This reformation requires a shift away from Eurocentric paradigms and the development of an urban critique informed by practices of resistance and insurgent epistemologies.

Understanding informality as an interpretative key involves shifting our persoective from lack to power. Far from being the object of compensatory policies, informality constitutes a strategic arena for the formulation of a decolonial urban critique. From the concrete experiences of the Global South, it is possible to project other forms of urban living that are more just, insurgent and plural.

In this context, informality ceases to be the object of compensatory policies or subordinate integration strategies. Instead, it is understood as an interpretative key and strategic field for the construction of a decolonial critique of the urban. Criticism rooted in the actual experiences of the Global South is essential for developing alternatives to the prevailing urban model. This shift in perspective not only enhances our understanding of current cities but also paves the way for envisioning and challenging different forms of urban living, inspired by the resilience of marginalized communities.

DATA AVAILABILITY

Not applicable.

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