

## **Placemaking as Utopia in Latin America: Displacement as a Double Condition in Times of the Pandemic**

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### Abstract:

This essay is based on long-term research in self-built neighbourhoods on the urban fringes of the Peruvian capital of Lima and describes the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, in an epitomised way, on these populations, which mainly work in the informal sector. Displacement and uprooting have become a double condition for these migrants, who built their homes decades ago but for whom survival has always been precarious. The pandemic, which has caused a wave of returns to places of rural origin, could mean the end of a historic cycle of rural-urban migration in Lima and other Latin American metropolises. This has opened a new perspective on informality as a normative economic condition.

*Der Essay basiert auf Langzeitstudien in im Selbstbau entstandenen städtischen Randgebieten der peruanischen Hauptstadt Lima und beschreibt exemplarisch die Folgen der Covid-19-Pandemie auf die überwiegend im informellen Sektor beschäftigte Bevölkerung. Entwurzelung wird dort zu einer Art doppelten Bedingung, da die Überlebenssicherung für die vor Jahrzehnten zugewanderte Bevölkerung nur unzureichend gegeben war, wodurch ein Rückwanderungsstrom in die ländlichen Herkunftsgebiete ausgelöst wurde. Die Pandemie könnte das Ende eines historischen Zyklus der Land-Stadt-Migration für Lima und andere lateinamerikanische Großstädte bedeuten und macht einen neuen Blick auf die informelle Ökonomie zwingend erforderlich.*

'Urban planning has largely failed to create a better human environment and has mostly had negative repercussions for lower income groups. The people themselves have become the modern builders of Latin American cities... Contemporary Latin American cities, like their predecessors, have been constructed by many builders, mostly anonymous, forced to find their own solutions in the face of government neglect and sometimes repression.'

Jorge E. Hardoy in *The Building of Latin American Cities* (1982)

'Latin America is Africa, Asia and Europe at the same time.'

Félix Guattari in *Molecular Revolution in Brazil* (2007)

In the face of the pandemic, the inequalities and fragility of urban migrants have become ever more evident in Latin America. The recent Peruvian presidential elections show a social divide that could not be deeper: between the urban elites, who fear for their privileges consolidated in an economic boom (which promised a trickle-down effect towards the poor that never materialised), and the rural poor, who feel excluded from an increasing welfare. The latter, due to a continued underdevelopment, and keep migrating to urban areas, where they fail in securing better living conditions in precarious settlements on the edges of the large cities, especially the capital Lima, and, if working, then in the informal sector without any social security. In Colombia, the violent police reaction against a whole young generation protesting in Cali and various other cities against the lack of perspectives reveals the political failure to respond to the challenges of the pandemic. In Brazil, a denial of migrants' rights raises concerns about the country's (as well as the region's) commitment to upholding human rights in general – something the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted.

These snapshots of unsettling conditions in Latin America were preceded by a situational brief published by the UCL-Lancet Commission on Migration and Health in 2020. It addresses the very pressing issue of a missing right to health for displaced people from Central America: refugees and especially the more than 4.5 million Venezuelans who had fled their country by the beginning of 2000, escaping unprecedented economic depression, political turmoil, violence, and severe humanitarian crisis (Riggirozzi, Grugel & Cintra 2020: 3). In the principal reception countries of the region – Colombia, Brazil and Peru – these people depend on work in the informal sector and struggle to survive between the health crisis, the economic impact of quarantine, the threat of forced eviction, and the stigmatisation of being potential virus carriers.

### **Unsettling conditions under the persistent impact of colonialism and the trap of informality**

While Néstor García Canclini considers the generalisation of 'the Latin American' as problematic (García Canclini 2013), there is indeed a specific mode of modernity that marks the majority of the region's cities. It embeds a long history of large waves of migration, major displacements and pronounced movements, especially from rural environments to large urban centres. It is a period in

which people migrated to the cities searching for work and opportunities, but also for something more: for participation in a political space and for having the same rights as those citizens who live in urban areas (Rocco 2021).

These rights were only partially achieved within this mode of modernity, where the so-called 'informal city' appeared as a rapidly growing phenomenon. Having emerged without planning, through occupation and collective building processes, such cities only later acquired legitimacy and infrastructure (Caldeira 2016). Informal city-making and economies were pushed by a somewhat delayed industrialisation, an extended neoliberal ideology, weak states, and a persistent colonial order and racial and class division. These improvised cities of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries can be seen as a development owed to massive migration and a lack of financial means. At the same time, urban displacement strategies and the resettling of unwanted populations to the urban periphery can be aligned to a historic tradition of this practice in Latin American cities, including Peruvian cities and the nation's capital, Lima (Gyger 2019), on which this essay, based on my extensive and long-term research experience there, sets a specific focus.

Lima, like most Latin American cities, embodies social inequality and conflicts alongside hybrid or unfinished urban identities (García Canclini 1995, Biehl & Locke 2017) and multiple forms of non-formal urbanism. For more than half a century, the self-built city has been the predominant form of housing production. In 2020, however, in the face of the pandemic, these 'modern builders', whom Jorge Hardoy praises in the introductory quote above, stand in front of their self-built neighbourhoods and, after decades of struggling for citizen rights, infrastructure, basic healthcare and education, financial support for auto-construction, gradual consolidation, constructing a sense of belonging, and accepting informality as a general economic and living condition, find themselves trapped in this very mode of existence: the initial restrictions, quarantine, and the state of emergency imposed by the government (as one of the first and strictest in the region after 15 March 2020) deprived them of all income. Even the remittances from family members living abroad stopped arriving because, under confinement, the urban day labourers of the informal capitalist economy – in Peru and elsewhere – lost their economic livelihood and therefore any basis to make a living.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be over-estimated in a city like Lima, where 70% of the population work in the informal sector and literally live from hand to mouth. Many members of such households, lacking a refrigerator or any savings and unable to buy food in advance, were forced to keep going to the market on a daily basis and risk infection; likewise those who sold food or other goods in the streets were in danger of losing their source of livelihood under quarantine and therefore kept going out – even when displaying symptoms of the illness and risking infecting others – because if they did to stay home due to sickness, the family would lose all income. People were more afraid to die of hunger than of COVID-19. Briefly and drastically said: having a house, even one where no rent has to be paid, means little if it is the only security. All placemaking efforts remain a utopia if the place people inhabit does not guarantee a minimum level of subsistence.

At the time this essay is being written, Peru has the highest COVID-19 mortality rate per capita in the world. The severe crisis of the last year visualises, in a dramatic way, that the neoliberal ideology, paired with promises and the gradual acceptance of informality as 'the third way', has failed. Such ideas have been pushed since the mid-1980s by the economist Hernando de Soto, among others, who maintains that the self-built young towns should be seen as key actors in a new, emerging

popular capitalism and as the engines for the creation of urban employment, as well as places of enormous potential, due to their invisible, dormant property capital (De Soto 1986). The current situation urges a new perspective on informality as a normative economic condition of the Peruvian and other populations of the entire region, and a global change of perspective regarding the globalised economy, its potentials and its setbacks, as well as on housing and urbanisation itself.

1\_caretas1960\_kgp

2\_emigración 2020\_kgp

### **The end of a historic cycle – the case of Peru**

Contemporary Lima gives the impression of an endless city spreading along the Pacific coast: low-density residential areas sprawl beyond a new skyline of skyscrapers, form nodes in the arid hills, and finally fade into the desert. At present, more than 10 million of Peru's total population of 32 million live in greater Lima, 60% of them in the more or less consolidated self-built (or non-formal) city. Close examination of the metropolitan expansion along the milestones on the Pan-American Highway, bearing in mind the pre-pandemic predictions of some local urban planners, would suggest that greater Lima, as a macro-region and magnet of migration, will gradually become an urban agglomeration of some 400 kilometres in length over the next few decades. The metropolitan area will then stretch from the northern city of Barranca to Ica in the south, and extend way beyond the so-called areas of Cono Norte and Cono Sur that form the Lima metropolitan area (Golda-Pongratz 2015: 32). The recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the first signs of a possible inversion of that phenomenon: people have massively started to return to their villages of origin in rural areas – a trend that might persist and slow down the growth curve in the long run.

Lima's dominance and the roots of centralism in Peru can be traced back to colonial times, when the city was the seat of political and ecclesiastical power and a centre of culture and knowledge. The promise of progress, health, education, work, and better living conditions continuously attracted people from rural areas to the capital. Since the forties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the migration of rural populations has been the most-decisive factor of life in Peru. The hegemonic white and *mestizo* population provided the Indian migrants with neither housing nor any possibility to acquire land, as the periphery of Lima belonged to the oligarchy's *haciendas*. Slum-clearance programmes threatened inner-city dwellers with the loss of their living space in central, densely populated and decaying inner-city slums called *tugurios*, so intra-urban migration became another decisive pattern. The invasion of uncultivated territories turned out to be a viable and more frequent alternative, as the government gradually tolerated it (Lloyd 1980: 5).

From 1940 to 2000, Lima's population increased from 645,000 to 7.5 million inhabitants, and its urbanised land area multiplied by a factor of almost sixteen, from 5000 to approximately 78,000 hectares. A failed attempt at agrarian reform from the late sixties onwards, the increasing inequality between urban and rural areas, the terrorism of the Maoist Shining Path movement (*Sendero Luminoso*), and the violent counterattacks by the armed forces and police in the eighties and nineties led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people from the Peruvian Andes, particularly the Ayacucho area and the Central Highlands (Golda-Pongratz 2004: 40).

Attitudes of tolerance, and later even the active instigation to land invasions, became efficient political instruments and the self-made cities, or *barriadas*, turned into a mode of urbanisation. 'The *barriada* that was scorned in the fifties by an elite that called for its violent expulsion, and was later accepted and grudgingly integrated, has now, less than fifty years later, led to a total blurring of the boundaries between the formal and informal city [...] (Ludeña Urquiza 2012: 4).' The 1990s were a decade of massive land invasions, encroaching more and more on land less suitable for residential use. In the mid-1990s, around 700 clandestine occupations emerged in Lima, and 14 mayoral ones between 1998 and 2002. In quantitative terms, the invasion of public territory and self-construction are responsible for the majority of city and housing in Peru (Escalante 2003: 16).

20<sup>th</sup>-century as well as early 21<sup>st</sup>-century migration was also driven by push factors such as the social and economic marginalisation in the Amazonian and Andean areas, the damage caused by natural disasters such as earthquakes and flash floods, and the consequences of the El Niño phenomenon in the nineties. The 2017 floods in the north of Peru, the on-going exploitation of mining territories in the Andes, and the progressive destruction of livelihoods in the rainforest are likely to trigger more migration waves towards the capital in the near future.

The COVID-19 outbreak has nevertheless marked a turning point in this respect: three decades of failed policies of urban and land development (Marzal Sánchez 2021: 190) and a continuous lack of planning strategies towards a real and holistic integration of these settlements seem to be culminating in the closing of a historic cycle of migration, which is reflected in the massive exodus of dwellers from the improvised and informal margins of the major urban centres towards their rural communities of origin.

### 3\_lima norte\_urban pressure\_2016\_golda-pongratz\_kgp

#### **Displacement as a double condition**

The hashtags #Stayhome and #YoMeQuedoEnCasa ordered and incentivised people around the globe to stay home and prevent the pandemic from further transmission. In Peru, the governmental command to stay home was challenged, in April 2020, by a massive exodus of people with migration background. Trying to escape hunger and discrimination in Lima, they saw their only mode of survival in returning to the rural communities where they originally came from. The research and media platform Ojo Público, quoting official numbers, estimated that during the first wave of out-migrants, 165,000 people headed back, initially even marching on foot, from the capital city to the remote departments of Madre de Dios, Loreto, Huancavelica, Puno, Lambayeque and Moquegua (Ojo Público 2020). *Aquí termina Lima* ('Lima Ends Here') is the title of an early essay drawing attention to this phenomenon: it looks at the harsh end of a dream and the livelihood of millions of dwellers of the urban peripheries and, in turn, on the decisive change this exodus might mean for the future of Lima (Montoya Rojas 2020).

A pre-pandemic longitudinal research on self-built settlements in Lima Norte, areas which are now particularly affected by the impact of COVID-19, has already noted a decreasing spirit of the collective identity that the generation of 'invaders' formerly had, as well as a loss of territorial attachment. Two major issues were identified as challenging the process of consolidation and integration of the self-built settlements within the context of a globalised informal economy: an

increase of massive land speculation through the illegal subdivision of remaining empty land and land trafficking through mafia-like organisations<sup>1</sup> (especially on the urban fringes, natural reserves and fragile territories), and a simultaneous rise of crime levels and breakdown of civic solidarity and traditionally strong community ties (Golda-Pongratz 2021 fc). Further research is needed to ascertain whether conditions of previous and persistent uprooting have reinforced the desire to leave the city, a location that has abruptly ceased to be a place of promise and has transformed into a territory of fear and hopelessness. Certainly, the general feeling of threat and neglect was drastically increased by the pandemic-induced loss of minimal wages and the basis for subsistence.

'In the village we have at least the grange, a chicken and some potatoes' is the simple message conveyed in May 2020 in a personal communication of a young mother planning to return to the department of Puno in the high Andes, hence she had migrated to Lima in the late 1990s. Many of the returnees, however, faced rejection upon their arrival in the villages, occasionally even physical blockades: villagers wanted to prevent the returnees from entering, stigmatising them as being possible carriers of the virus and criticising them for reclaiming spaces and conditions that had once driven them to migrate to the city.

Displacement, in that sense, is acquiring a double meaning for the returnees: having failed to make a home and a place in the city, and not being able to simply return and reclaim the formerly abandoned territory.

The situation can be seen as an opportunity for a more-complex rethinking and a political shift towards a long-promised decentralisation, the gradual abolishment of the historic centralism, a true revalorisation of rural territories, and the recognition of intermediate cities and landscapes as well as historically fertile lands and territories. Self-sufficiency would be easy to achieve there with minor efforts in modernisation, a general improvement of living conditions, and access to basic services and infrastructure. The recent election of President Pedro Castillo, a newcomer to the Peruvian political system and former *campesino* and school teacher of rural origins, is undoubtedly a testimony of recognition of the other half of the society that has, for a long time, been politically forgotten. It is hoped that he will tackle the major challenges of reducing inequalities and the politically rethinking of rural and other forms of development.

Finally, resistance is also an outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic, and offers a perspective and strategy to face a difficult present and future for those who stay. Within these urban fringes, resistance also encourages an internal rethinking: the historic concepts of mutual aid, solidarity and self-organisation are being reactivated, as is the case in the previously mentioned settlements in Lima Norte. People who have survived after being forced to find their own solutions in the face of government neglect have collectively organised meals for the poorest and, likewise, bought oxygen for those infected by COVID-19 who had to be treated at home due to lack of hospital beds. They have started to reconnect with their territory, and have acquired or reinforced ecological consciousness and awareness of the environmental threats and the urgent need for collective open spaces. Awareness has increased immensely regarding the acknowledgement of the importance of

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<sup>1</sup> The phenomenon is widely known but very difficult to grasp, as the leaders of land-trafficking networks and organisations remain largely unidentified within a system of threats, corruption and connections to people within the public sector who provide them with information. Their influence has caused 'a total control over the territory', while the creation of 'annexes' to urbanised areas 'turns out to be a more and more common mode of illicit land accumulation'. (Research-related interview with the Peruvian anthropologist Eduardo Arroyo, Lima, 4.4.2017.)

public green and recreational spaces, and collective labour initiatives (*faena comunal*) now engage in reforesting hills to both improve their livelihood and avoid further illegal land occupation.

Within these signs of local hope and from a contemporary perspective, the unheard claim of the British economist Barbara Ward at the Habitat I Conference in Vancouver in 1976 for a 'new international economic order' in a 'world society' (Ward 1976) is more urgent than ever: what is ultimately at stake is how we understand and how we reconstruct collective life.

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