

Neoliberalism, its critics and the modes of a known genre

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Neoliberalism from Below: Popular Pragmatics & Baroque Economies, by Verónica Gago, translated by Liz Mason-Deese, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2017.

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Neoliberalism may have lost legitimacy as a state-directed political project, Verónica Gago tells us in *Neoliberalism from Below*, but its protean elements infect the logics of social relations even amongst those who are understood to suffer from it the most. The book focuses on a subset of the latter, the micro-merchants, producers and immigrants of Buenos Aires' La Salada, one of the world's largest markets of counterfeit merchandise, as well as the workshops/sweatshops where they eat, sleep, produce and reproduce garments and social relations, and the shantytowns where they live. Gago's argument is that the calculative, instrumental reasoning at the heart of the neoliberal self and project suffuses a strategic *conatus*, in the Spinozan sense of a restless, organic perseverance in being. Conatus overflows the "cold calculations" of neoliberal reasoning, Gago continues, resulting in a "vitalist pragmatic": these immigrants' affective, multimodal, embodied orientation to the economies they inhabit, irreducible to dichotomies of public/private, modernity/tradition, individual/society and others that the Argentine state and its neoliberal modernity try to cram them into.

The first two chapters introduce La Salada, its people and economies, and Gago's highly intricate theoretical reservoir: a Spinoza-Deleuze-post-colonial tradition combined with feminist critical theory and political economy. The aptly named "baroque economies" emerging at this very busy intersection through the immigrants' communitarian capital: embedded in networks entwining kinship, production and political representation, these immigrants take advantage of, and are taken advantage of, because of the "commons" formed

in the obligations and reciprocity that mobilize them and other resources across the lower third of South America. The third and fourth chapters study how communitarian capital is put to work and how Buenos Aires judges, governmental authorities, NGOs, police forces and middle class cultural representations frame these immigrants and their relations as abusive, exploitative, “traditional,” underdeveloped or subject to moral codes beyond economics (and crucially, beyond Argentine labor laws). The fifth and sixth chapters explore these immigrants’ capacity to constitute themselves as a collective actor beyond the neoliberal understanding of associative life, freedom and individuality, as well as their use of space in the city and their relations with the rest of Buenos Aires in infrastructural, economic and political terms.

This edition is a translation of Gago’s *La Razón Neoliberal*, published in Spanish for an Argentinian audience in 2014, which was quickly taken up by Latin American academics, among whom the author is a very well-known and highly respected intellectual spearheading the battles of feminism, decoloniality and other social movements that are waging now. Beyond the biographical anecdote, this matters because this linguistic transposition into English has not been met with an equivalent contextual, and especially epistemological, counterpart. The author’s references to Peronism, Argentina’s most powerful political myth (27, 52) and crucial to understanding certain possibilities of popular politics quite relevant to the argument (230), are lost to a reader unfamiliar with the Argentine context. As a more epistemological example, the “national and popular will” (28, see also 63) seems at face value a neutral reference to the nation and the people, yet its original version, *nacional y popular*, was fundamentally attached to the Kirchner administrations in Argentina (2003-2015), and to a very specific discourse on Argentine politics; lost in translation, the unaware reader cannot even reflect on the possibility of problematizing it, even if to agree with it. Similarly, whereas the author’s use of “neoliberal” and “liberal” as wholly interchangeable (4, 161, 220-222, 233...) is a common (and pejorative) rhetorical strategy amongst Argentine intellectual and social militancy, their unedited rendition in English is conversationally confusing at best (in certain contexts cultural liberalism and economic neoliberalism are antagonists) and passes for theoretical imprecision at worst.

The book’s position in the by now modular genre of militant anthropology against neoliberalism further compounds the potential for imprecision beyond matters of epistemological translation. Gago theorizes neoliberalism only through Foucault’s work on it

(154-160), a recurrent touchstone among social scientists outside of economics. Declaring it “impossible to define (...) in an homogenous way” (160), she distils neoliberalism as “the cold and restricted idea of liberal (sic) calculation” (10) and proceeds to add something defined as irreducible to such calculation: conatus, communitarian vitality, vitalist pragmatic, vitalism, resistance and so forth. This is a common strategy in the genre: compensate for an allegedly undersocialized individual with a cultural, affective or contextual socialization (Callon 1998). Yet, outside extreme neoliberal orthodoxy, more interesting on account on being extreme *and* orthodox than on account of being neoliberal, the only ones understanding (and producing) the canonical neoclassical *homo oeconomicus* in as narrow, unidimensional and restrictive a sense are neoliberalism’s contemporary critics. Neoliberally-trained economists would theoretically and instinctively find Spinoza’s conatus quite at home in their canonically-defined self, striving to preserve their being. Readers more conversant or more interested in the logics and rhetoric of neoliberalism and neoclassical economics than in the epistemological horizon of activist anthropology might find this line of argumentation exhausted, contrived and possibly superseded by fertile, recent critiques in sociology, philosophy, history and political sciences targeting neoliberalism’s propensity to trivial tautology, perennial presentism, confusion of the natural and the social, etc., (Whyte 2019, Peck 2013, Mirowski 2019).

Gago’s discussion of the micro-financialization and debt circuits that enable neo-extractivism to discipline and exploit precarious lives and relations even outside the market is particularly interesting (24-44). However, the progression of the analysis hinges on a deployment of usually sister categories at uneven scales and a carefully curated differential moral endowment of the new gap between them. The author harnesses the epic, trans-historical (and ultimately, moral) universality of “labor” in the Marxist sense to flesh out the abuses and silences of neoliberal production (88-89), yet the same sewing in the same room is then framed as part and parcel of an indigenous pragmatic vitalism that the author repeatedly asks us not to moralize (15, 18, 19, 54) or see as exploitation. Similarly, the author deploys the notion of “baroque economies” as fluid, immanent, non-hierarchical, bricoleur-like relational logics of production (69), opposed to the cold, ruthless and exploitative hierarchies of neoliberalism. Yet the notion of the baroque in the very sources she references (70) is inherently and explicitly hierarchical, as is in the Deleuzian watermark across the book, where the baroque is made of the lowly and the grand, the authority and the subaltern, and so

on. These are twinned, co-constitutive and never complete, but they define the baroque precisely by the hierarchy that separates them.

In spite of the brilliant instances of direct ethnographic analysis, like the study of competing problematizations of immigrants (126-140), this is an eminently theoretical book in the philosophical-argumentative sense of the term (and indeed included in the press' "social and political theory" collection). It would yield the most among advanced graduate students, readers already interested in the theoretical intersections described above or those seeking to problematize neoliberalism through its most popular critiques.

References

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