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## Book review: *The Urban Enigma: Time, Autonomy and Postcolonial Transformation in Latin America (Rowman & Littlefield)* by Simone Vegliò

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## **Book review: The Urban Enigma: Time, Autonomy and Postcolonial Transformation in Latin America (Rowman & Littlefield) by Simone Vegliò**

In her autobiography, *An Indian Woman in Guatemala*, Rigoberta Menchù dissects many references that situate the K'iche' Maya people in the contemporary world. Based in Central America, her community is read through many practices and customs that make their societal relationship so unique. While reporting the realities of an indigenous community marked by poverty and exploitation, Menchù's account is an extensive interplay of her traditions, represented by habits and impressions extracted from Guatemala's streets. As Venezuelan author Elizabeth Burgos-Debray argues in the book's introduction, Menchù's work condenses a lot of Western influences in the storytelling, cultural and religious institutions, as far as her account remains a quintessential indigenous perspective of modernity put up by an observer woman living the urban experience.

This layering between cultures and the co-existence of competing spheres of time and space makes post-coloniality in Latin America such an intricate subject, which has its most visible aspect in how the public space is constituted. In *The Urban Enigma: Time, Autonomy, and Postcolonial Transformation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), author Simone Vegliò asks how much of the region's postcolonial urbanisation has shaped and has been shaped by forces that are not necessarily aligned or follow the standard historicist narrative of change. Instead, Vegliò proposes a series of temporal or spatial relations at the heart of a shared notion of space. The book covers three public projects sponsored by local elites justified by a problematic notion of empty space. Interestingly, the author defends the idea of autonomy as a decolonial tool from which one can trace a new

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genealogy of the Latin American urban space, which, in turn, attests to the continuation of many pre/colonial designs and internal imperialism.

Centring in Buenos Aires (1880-1946), Mexico City (1920-1960), and Brasília (1956-1964), Vegliò anchors in these cities' urbanistic endeavours to illustrate several positions taken regarding the post-colonial question. Each case study takes on how every society has dealt with notions of modernisation and change, seeing in their future an ambiguous attempt to detach from their colonial past without leaving its conceptual space. For example, one learns about the Argentinian Pavilion that mirrored Paris as the archetypical ensemble of old and new. The Palace of Public Education aimed to project a unique local identity in Mexico City. Or, as the new capital built on the steps of Le Corbusier's architectural modernism, Brasília was supposed to represent the nation's future. As the book delves into the genealogy of these projects, local elites have, in effect, planned function, location, and novelty based on a discourse of monumentality that served each nation's "internal colonialism" in multiple ways. This notion works at length to debate these projects' re-affirmation of racial and economic inequalities.

And what is the Latin American urban enigma? Chapter 3 discusses the choices made by the local elites to accommodate such modernising projects. These have arguably existed alongside local communities even if constrained by the "walls" left behind by centuries of colonial rule. By carefully pondering each of these cases, the author contends that post-colonial urban projects may dwell in new old ideas retrofitted into these societies. In the case of Mexico, it was about settling and organising around a different logic of city reorganisation, which had seen other imperial projects in pre-colonial times. Other projects have deliberately excluded indigenous people from the city's territory, as in the case of Buenos Aires, or had the national power space moved away from the coast, in the case of Brasília. The choices for solving had "capital cities imagined themselves within the national space" (p.63) and consequently determined all the future investment in technology and infrastructure for the whole country. Either because of the economic cycle each nation founded itself in or due to ideas of dependence on the developed world, these three Latin American cities never lived up to an ideal Euro-American urban organisation, or non-Eurocentric approaches were there to better engage with local geographies.

The following chapters deepen these three architectural contradictions. By reviewing several details before their construction, the context informs how innovation emerges from local elites taking the lead but also falling prey to a series of contradictions. Vegliò exposes time and space wired to ideals of modernity, but those rarely confronted the existing post-colonial realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As

far as these projects echoed the technological advances of European cities, some, like the Argentine Pavilion, failed to represent the country's indigenous population adequately. Except for some voyeuristic incursions among the latter, the Pavilion confirmed Argentinian elites' dreams of Europeanness on plain South American soil. In a similar equation, but aimed at bringing the countryside into the city, the Palace of Public Education in Mexico City hosted a sense of Latin American ethnic unity, which became elusive as no housing conditions for the indigenous city migrants existed in the following decades.

As the last case study, Brasília is borne out of the will of decentralisation, or as the author puts it, the repurposing of a "hegemonic centre over the national space." This would build a new city away from the historical capital, Rio de Janeiro, and escape the overpopulated São Paulo. Overall, the new city came to correct the unbalanced relation between power and resources that have characterised the country. The problem with Brasília, however, previously suggested by David Epstein in his 1973 study, was its proximity to theoretical visions of modernism as an amalgamating style while disconnected from the country's massive social debt. Vegliò, focusing on Oscar Niemeyer's Three Powers Plaza, sees the project much inserted in a Pan-American, international order of progress that failed to live up to the country's political instability – namely, the 30-year military dictatorship that succeeded Brasília incomplete opening, which furthered the city's broken integration with the impending peripheries.

The book concludes with a reflection on the urban/rural dichotomy that has plagued most of the projects invited here. In consonance with other regions of the world, the nature of these projects was never meant to concatenate with a vast layer of the indigenous, rural populations. They were left alienated from these projects' conception and occupation, sabotaging the local elites' answer to the urban enigma. On the other hand, even if the author does not collect more impressions from marginalised citizens about these projects or the dialogue established with the streets and communities surrounding them, a "postcolonial" anxiety pivoted their existence and maintenance. Here, *autonomy* is read as part of these discontinuities and ruptures from colonial expectations, but which, in turn, do not fructify into a single idea of an urban future for all. The urban enigma continues to signify this permanent dialogue between the past, present, and future while awaiting decolonisation in practical terms.