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“Crossing Greater Buenos Aires with Rallyconurbano”

Abstract:

Condemned by the European Union for violations of brand copyright laws, *La Salada* is the largest informal flea market in Latin America. Located in a poor area on the outskirts of Buenos Aires city, immigrants from bordering countries and from the Argentine countryside gather here to live and work. Most of the products sold at the market come from clandestine sweatshops that make knockoff brand names. But the market is not only a site of commerce; it is also a place to celebrate, to make demands, to hold religious ceremonies and to organize assemblies. The market serves to reaffirm the identity of immigrants and workers. Not recognized by any formal legal system, *La Salada* has its own laws and occupies a territory between legal systems and nations. The State is at the heels of this reality, intermittently employing an array of strategies to engage it.

From this confused space of political representation, the *Rallyconurbano* collective (which consists of urbanists, architects, artists and sociologists as well as amateurs and activists) put together a map-glossary that gathers the different voices currently acting on this market: political officials, stallholders, local bosses, judicial experts and the media. Attempting to represent the market in a contradictory and plural manner might allow us to discover the importance of these transnational agents of urbanity who, though devoid of “formal” power, engage in informal practices, constructing a small city that disputes the “legal” city.

Alternative Models of Urbanity and City-zenry

Transnational public speeds: *La Salada flea market as a case of spontaneous urbanity in relation to the informal micro and macro circulation of goods and persons in the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires.*

Crossing Greater Buenos Aires with Rallyconurbano

Located on the La Plata River, Buenos Aires is the capital of Argentina. Towards the west, the “urban cone” – an image that describes a radial organization that moves from the center to the suburbs - sprawls. The word *conurbano* comes from the words *cono* (cone) and *urbano* (urban). The tip of the cone would be the downtown financial district, and the circulation and flow from it into the periphery would define the base of this socio-territorial pyramid. Except the affluent strips on the northern river banks, the rest of the outlying cities are largely middle and lower class. They gather the migratory rural population as well as immigrants mostly from bordering countries such as Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay. In all, Greater Buenos Aires houses more than twelve million people (almost a third of the population of Argentina), of whom only three million live within the city limits, while the remaining nine million live in the outlying areas. Most of the inhabitants of Greater Buenos Aires work in the city and spend almost three hours per day in some form of public transportation: almost five million people engage in daily peri-urban migrations on seven train lines and more than three hundred bus lines.¹

The rally's Context

Rallyconurbano is a “third sector” initiative, a mixed collective that uses public transportation to explore the outer-city landscape. Shaped by micro and macro migrations, these landscapes trace out new modes of urbanity, new social contracts and, hence, new urban models, which mainly arose in the wake of the 2001 – 2002 crisis.² *Rallyconurbano* entails activism insofar as it attempts to “activate” the visibility of certain outer-city problems. In open-to-the-public outings on public transportation, the presence of certain sites is made palpable by connecting resources, institutions and social actors. Exploring a place in conflict -and the debates and interdisciplinary reflections that ensue from that exploration- generates critical thought in a

collective aesthetic experience. The resulting chronicles, commentaries, photos and opinions are later published and shared on a blog, another platform for debate and exchange.³

Immigrant stallholders, an NGO for the handicapped and *piquetero*¹ business associations are just some of the protagonists of these journeys: their resources are at stake as they exchange opinions with the day-trippers in a public exercise in politics and urbanity. Out of its interest in passing urban phenomena and in institutional connectivity outside the State and its logics, *Rallyconurbano* (along with other associations grouped together under the organization Tu Parte Salada) is currently working on the informal *La Salada* flea market, a 40-hectare conglomeration with its own laws and institutions that is assembled and disassembled twice a week.

La Salada, a Passing City

Physical Location

La Salada is, in fact, four markets: “Punta Mogote,” “Urkupiña,” “Ocean” and “de la Ribera.” It is located to the south of the city, on the contaminated banks of Riachuelo River, in the county of Lomas de Zamora. This is an area of dirt roads and tin shack. There are clandestine textile workshops that sell knockoff brand-name merchandise in (partially declared) warehouses as well as outdoors, on the provincially owned banks of the Riachuelo. These lands are currently being filled in by city-associated companies in order to generate more surface area for camping and selling.

History and Economic Information

The names of the warehouses are inspired on ocean themes, since they once housed thermal baths. The saltiness of the water was thought to cure rheumatism, arthritis and muscle pain. In 1961, the baths were closed by the Department of Health because the bath and tap water had high levels of bacterial contamination. Later, the serious flooding in the area and the presence of large numbers of pig farms would be blamed for this contamination.⁴ Starting then and through the early nineties, the terrains were unoccupied; at that point, a group of unemployed Bolivians got together to form the “Urkupiña” cooperative. They purchased a section of the riverfront land and opened a clothing and ethnic food market.

Currently -in addition to the Bolivians- Paraguayan, Peruvian and even Senegalese immigrants work at the market. Each day it is open, more than 20,000 people go to the market to shop. Directly or indirectly, the market supports over 6,000 families and the approximate profit level per day is 160 dollars per stall (the average salary in Argentina is 475 dollars per month, or 16 dollars per day).⁵ By means of double-decker, long-distance buses, the market welcomes and supplies more than 200 markets both in the rest of Argentina and in bordering countries, in a transnational migration of goods and persons. Though *La Salada* is located in a historically impoverished area, its current GDP is well above the level of the city of Buenos Aires, thus reversing the paradigmatic role of that city as the hegemonic economic center. Its main attraction is the “brand-name” clothing that it sells at extremely low prices. *La Salada* has been able to efficaciously market knockoffs and, as a result, has been denounced by the European Union. It is cited as an example of illegal commerce in Latin America for not respecting brand copyright laws and for not paying taxes on most of the 125 million dollars it moves per year.

Safety

Though located in a poor area where violence is a daily reality, the atmosphere at the market is relatively calm. Indeed, a minimal, if scantily perceivable, order must be guaranteed for business to take place, and about this everyone involved in the market seems to agree.⁶ Stallholders don't want a lack of safety to impede the great flow of persons and capital. There is, on the one

¹ Translator's note: *Piqueteros* are groups of people largely impoverished by the structural economic reforms of the nineties. They protest by blocking access to the city.

hand, self-regulating by which people monitor each other and invent anti-theft devices used in the stalls. But it was also decided to contract private security companies, creating a parallel police force. The “official” police only controls access to the market, but doesn’t intervene in what happens within it. Indeed, *La Salada* establishes its own laws and its “legality” is determined by how it operates, making it a de facto institution rather than a constituent body. The market exists due to the fact that it is happening and effecting temporary agreements via “real time” negotiations.

*Democratic Caudillos and the Salado Lifestyle*²

Though governed by *caudillos*, decisions about the market’s operations are made democratically. When faced with specific problems, such as at what time the market should open, an assembly is convened and held on the market’s premises when it is closed. The assembly is run by the *caudillo* – a “strong man” who proposes the issues to be discussed and tries to persuade the participants–stallholders of his point of view. The floor is then ceded, other opinions are expressed and, finally, a decision is made by means of an “applause meter,” which registers the level of applause and booing. The market’s newspaper or its radio announces the assembly, which is neither mandatory nor representative. That is, no one is required to participate though s/he must respect the resolutions passed. There is no representation: each stallholder expresses his or her own view, as in a direct democracy.

But the activities of the administrators and members of the cooperative are not limited to regulating commerce. They use their own resources to pave streets; they run a soup kitchen for children, give out medicine, ensure “safety” on the market’s premises and its surroundings, publish 4,000 copies of a weekly paper and even finance the AM radio station *Ribera Sur*.

The market is a way of life and a means to record and celebrate an identity.⁷ On the day of the Urkupiña virgin, for whom one of the markets and warehouses is named, an itinerant celebration is held that spreads to all the streets around the market down to the river. In the area in the back, which is usually a parking area, a chapel full of all sorts of adornments is put up. The *morenadas* (musical groups) play Bolivian songs but only after they have played the Argentine national anthem. All the Andean Indian women wear traditional dress and the men decorate their cars with ponchos, dolls, fake bills, flags and an array of other objects. In a procession, they march through the entire empty market area as well as the surrounding streets. They use incense to purify their stalls while tossing bills so that the virgin will look over their businesses.

Punta Mogote, on the other hand, organizes a celebration commemorating “Stallholders’ Day.” In this case, the reason and source of social cohesion is not religion but trade, a celebration of the stallholder, which entails a celebration of a national identity as well. While the Urkupiña market does not consist exclusively of Bolivians, nor is the Punta Mogote market solely Argentine, here the festivities have Argentine themes: horse races, *gaucho* storytellers, folk dances, traditional barbeque, and the presence of Daniel Scioli, governor of Buenos Aires province.

In addition to commercial, religious, political and celebratory activities, the market also has a symbolic side: it serves as a form of protest. When the “la Ribera” stallholders wanted to denounce the police’s violence when attempting to evict them, they decided to organize a mourning market day, placing black crepes next to Argentine, Bolivian and Peruvian flags.⁸

Thinking without the State

All of these spontaneous urban phenomena occur behind the back of the State or, rather, outside its logic.⁹ The market took shape at a time (the early nineties) when the State began to sell off its utility companies (waterworks, gas, electricity, transportation) and started a process of downsizing that culminated in the 2001- 2002 crisis. When the State no longer serves to connect institutions, no group or social collective has a monopoly of resources, but each has the

² Translator’s note: In addition to salty, the adjective *salado* means something like spicy or hot.

ability to produce encounters and define areas of alliance. The State is no longer the underlying context in which things happen, but just another player. It is no longer the one to regulate how and whether a place is inhabited, let alone the only force to determine the conditions of inhabitability.

Overwhelmed by all the socio-economic processes that the market entails, the State is at the heels of its reality, playing according to the market's modalities, where the exception is the rule. Hence, the State engages in something like multiple and shifting guerrilla warfare. It launches surprise attacks on the market and then withdraws, taking the shape of an array of institutions: at a certain moment, it can appear as the AFIP (tax agency), demanding property taxes; then it might appear as the Judiciary, investigating violations of copyright laws; it can also take the shape of the Department of Health, demanding sewage systems that don't pollute the Riachuelo. Indeed, the State can even break its own laws in an attempt to include the market in its domain: the Lomas de Zamora city government invented a new commercial category for the stallholders because none of the existing ones took them into account. A local ordinance registered them as "Indoor Markets" in order to be able to wage city taxes.

Nonetheless, no State intervention is final. The aim, rather, is to keep the market's actors negotiating with State agencies, which are willing to create exceptions to their own laws in order to stay in the playing field.

Indeed, in its vitality and exuberance, this exceptionality within the parameters of the law, this possibility for a territory that exceeds jurisdictions and nations (municipal authorities as well as the European Union seek to act on these territories) criticizes the law of the traditional capital city.

La Salada constitutes a new geography of centrality. It radically questions the center-periphery model, whose terms no longer occupy geographically stable positions. There are "outer-city holes" in the city of Buenos Aires, and the outer city contains new centralities in offering "urban products" ¹⁰ unavailable in the city. Hence, the market reformulates the experience of the urban and the real structure of the metropolitan area. Unrecognized by official legislation and the formal economy, its new transnational social actors are capable of establishing another city, one appealing enough to gather "citizens" who cannot find what *La Salada* has to offer in the formal city.

Producing a Representation of a Elusive Territory

How to evidence the urbanity of this free zone, this autonomous field of exception outside State sovereignty? What tools for visibility can contribute to the representation of this new territory? How to represent a de facto territory and its mode of constitution? How to map the fleeting urban phenomena that take place there?

In this confused situation of (political) representations, *Rallyconurbano* (together with other groups and associations named *Tu Parte Salada*) organized a tour to develop a folksonomy of *La Salada*. Explore the market in order to develop a map-glossary of its urbanity, one that combines the different voices that act on it: official politicians, stallholders, porters, local bosses, legal experts, as well as the media and its opinions. "A glossary as a set of words and definitions pertinent to a restricted field. Here, the selection has to do with the word 'urbanity.' The word urbanity refers to a type of interaction between persons in a public medium that might open up a possibility: a type of social back-and-forth or contract much weaker and more diffuse than the one proposed by the word 'citizenship' with its attendant rights and obligations. Urbanity is what might exist between a foreigner and a local, a citizen and stranger, or two citizens who don't know each other as such." ¹¹

On September 9, 2006, *Rallyconurbano* gathered a group of twelve people to hold a series of semi-private interviews and informal conversations with individuals involved in the market and its politics, and to discuss media reports. Each participant was asked to define the market by means of key words in different categories: logistics, infrastructure, control, gastronomy, mobility, administration and others. The aim was to come up with a multiform representation of the market through these declarations, expressions of desire, types of knowledge, fears, as well

as statistical information and media reports. This information was then gathered in order to generate a collectively edited map located on the *rally's* blog, where debate and exchange could become massive, and new information and testimonies necessarily entail constant updating and change. Attempting to represent the market in a contradictory and plural manner might allow us to discover its unlikely vital processes. It is an attempt to recognize the importance of these transnational agents of urbanity and urban sectors without "formal" power whose informal practices constitute a small city that disputes the "legal" city. It is a way of producing visibility for the geopolitical possibilities opened up by *La Salada*, which forms a parallel State with its own economy and entails modes of government and control enacted by a group that the formal economic and legislative powers cannot include.

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