

AN ARGENTINE VERSION
OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Matías DEWEY, *Making It at Any Cost. Aspirations and Politics in a Counterfeit Clothing Marketplace* (Austin University of Texas Press, 2020, 276 p.)

One of the greatest strengths of the ethnographical approach to produce knowledge rests on its ability to destabilize our ways of addressing the phenomena we study: a way of knowing that, with wonder at a given social organization as the starting point, works based on an exercise in category and analytic procedure displacement, enabling us to broaden our understanding of social life. That “jeweler’s eye” reveals a continuous movement between a broad theoretical perspective and an attention to the most minute, following Brazilian anthropologist Maritza Peirano [2018], not in terms of details, but rather in terms of everyday aspects, ordinary life¹. *Making it at Any Cost. Aspirations and Politics in a Counterfeit Clothing Marketplace* is a masterpiece of that exercise in ethnographical sensitivity. Just as delicate as it is challenging and hard to textualize, and like the best examples of jewelry-making, it displays a multiplicity of facets that enable multiple interpretations.

Based on ordinary situations, carefully curated and described with elegant simplicity, Matías Dewey crafts over the book’s eight chapters the facets of a piece created by the jeweler. He weaves a sensitive and original interpretation of the transformations undergone by the labor market and the garment industry in Argentina, its relationship with regional migratory circuits, consumption practices among the popular sectors, spatial geographies of the Greater Buenos Aires Area, and government actions at the national and local levels. At the same time, by focusing on the lives of Pablo, Leo, Javi or César, Dewey crafts a painstaking description of the way in which a particular type of entrepreneur is produced that upholds, and is in turn upheld by, the production of informal rules—an entrepreneur that could be classified as “popular”. Starting from the bottom, he sheds light on the production processes of a complex structure in which marginality and informality coexist (a “social order in the shadows”, to borrow the author’s terms), renewing the analysis of informal economies. Thus, as a social space which synthesizes a complex fabric of relations and

¹ Maritza PEIRANO, 2018, “A eterna juventude da Antropologia: etnografia e teoria vivida” in R. Guber, ed., *Field Research in*

Latin America (Buenos Aires: Paradigma Indicial).

practices, La Salada stands out in Matías Dewey's work as an icon of this endogenous transformation process, and also as a phenomenon whose sociological relevance transcends local borders.

At the first level, the book attempts to explain the existence of La Salada and of the sweatshops in which the products sold there are manufactured, distancing itself from a standpoint based on its connections with global circuits. Not ignoring these connections, the analysis Dewey puts forward highlights the way in which those links fall short of explaining the marketplace's existence and accelerated expansion. This is the main focus of the first part of the book, in which he explains the rise of La Salada based on an analysis of the deeply transformational process of productive dynamics, labor relations, consumption behaviors, and ways of life that Argentine popular sectors have undergone in the last few decades. This is integrated into an ethnographical work in which he reconstructs broader spatial and historical transformations.

At the second level, Dewey's aim is to contribute to an analysis of the role played by aspirations and visions of the future in generating a bottom-up social order, underscoring the capacity of such aspirations to discipline behaviors. His proposal entails an acknowledgement of the power of perceptions of the future, expressed as aspirations that are deemed truly plausible—regardless of their realization—to understand the strength of social norms in informal or illegal environments. To provide these aspirations with an analytical status as an everyday disciplinary force, as a decisive behavior for business success, proves fundamental in the analysis suggested by Dewey in explaining the development of a group of popular entrepreneurs: it is both the result and the precondition of this informal normative structure upheld and built in a bottom-up fashion.

One of the book's strengths is the fact that it manages to keep La Salada's starring role—in keeping with its iconic status as the largest informal marketplace in Latin America—without becoming an ethnography that begins and ends at its borders. Never straying from its nature as a book about La Salada, it is not confined spatially or analytically by its perimeter. Rather, Dewey moves through time and space. Through time, to reconstruct historical dynamics spanning decades that make it possible to understand its development and growth in a masterful work articulating scales and analytical dimensions; through space, to the outskirts, the sweatshops, the houses—in sum, the lives of the people he talked with. And, in that movement there is a series of theoretical-methodological decisions, based on which the jeweler's eye chooses some relations, spaces, processes, and practices over others. In that way, it distances itself from a perspective in which sweatshops arise in the

garment industry as the result of the progressive extension of offshore production and subcontracting mechanisms that are characteristic of an industrial sector prone to instability and constant change.

Dewey manages, through that movement, to highlight the agency of the entrepreneurs, by shining the spotlight not only on the central nature of their aspirations as drivers of their behavior, but also on their capacity to generate—very successfully, in some cases—a business that mobilizes massive amounts of money. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, he highlights the creative nature of the designs used to manufacture garments, which adapt to the market's needs and preferences, a factor that is central in explaining their commercial success. This is, without a doubt, a particularly strong point of the book.

However, the way in which he frames his analysis is problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, it leaves in the background the fact that the rise of the clandestine sweatshops, which provide clothing to large segments of the population for whom access to major brands is impossible in current-day Argentina, does not take place separately from formal circuits, as has been pointed out in other works [Montero, 2020²]. But, most importantly, because the attempt to explain how aspirations work to discipline behavior, producing and upholding a social order of illegality and informality, renders invisible the way in which those entrepreneurs resort to exploitative relations. These are acknowledged in the ethnographical description but are left out of the analysis based on the formulated thesis. Inasmuch as his thesis attempts to show how that aspirational rationale shapes behaviors and entrepreneurial trajectories, in his description, exploitation is not experimented as such—something which, from a different perspective, would be interpreted as false consciousness. It is as if it were necessary for the book to distance itself from an analysis of class and the way in which the different dynamics of accumulation and value production come into play to reinforce the thesis that it crafts intelligently and with empirical soundness. La Salada can be explained by the American dream of individual progress towards a better life, from which emerges an entrepreneur who produces and is in turn produced by illegality, mediated by situations of precariousness and violence that are accepted in the name of that desired future horizon.

On the other hand, the places Dewey visits over time and space to prepare his ethnography limit his analysis of “politics” to specific

² Bressan J. MONTERO, 2020, “From Neoliberal Fashion to New Ways of Clothing,” *Socialist Register*, 57: 1-17.

processes, practices, and relations. This renders other elements are invisible. If clientelist relations, mafia-like bonds, and the role of neighborhood leaders as political brokers become central, other trajectories and politicization dynamics are left aside. As such, there is a limited possibility of considering, for instance, how certain failed journeys can lead to politicization experiences in which that aspirational horizon of individual progress can coexist with collective organization narratives [Señorans, forthcoming]³. Not because it is necessary to delve into the organizational processes of the garment industry, which grew in a sustained fashion in the last few years in spaces such as the Union of Workers of the Popular Economy (UTEPE), but with the goal of contributing through a careful and situated analysis to the processes of transformation in the garment industry with its local specificities. Not to put forward a “romantic” interpretation of a set of community or resistance practices, from which the author explicitly tries to distance himself, but to recognize the motley nature of popular economies, which Verónica Gago [2017]⁴ very successfully problematized in *Neoliberalism from below*. In an attempt to contribute to a bottom-up analysis not of the production of norms, but of neo-liberalism as a form of government, Gago shares Dewey’s concern with steering away from a romantic reading of “the popular”. Instead, the aim is to put forward an interpretation in which the entrepreneurial practices that make up the core of Dewey’s analysis are seen as part of a strategic composition of micro-business elements, with formulas of popular progress and with a capacity for negotiation and a struggle for public resources. In this, the ideas of individual economic calculation coexist ambiguously with and in contradiction to a series of community dynamics. *Making it At Any Cost* can be read as more of a continuation of that approach than it assumes, without ignoring the author’s attempt to recognize the role of a type of entrepreneur that has been absent from the specialized literature. That role is crucial to understanding the way in which La Salada is coproduced through the negative experience people have of the state and of politics.

The book, thus, opens up a highly interesting path, unexplored by the author. This involves understanding the emergence of this group of popular entrepreneurs, in particular the aspirational dimension in the terms analyzed by Dewey—including the idea that the future only

³ Dolores SEÑORANS, forthcoming, “Precarious Labour, Migration and Collective Politics in the Garment Industry in Buenos Aires, Argentina,” in I. Ness, and A. Hammer, eds, *Informal and Precarious Labour: Accumulation,*

Class and Resistance in the Global South (Leiden, Brill).

⁴ Verónica GAGO, 2017, *Neoliberalism from Below. Popular Pragmatics & Baroque Economies* (Durham NC, Duke University Press).

appears in the singular and the complete lack of political aspirations. Such an understanding can be useful in comprehending—and building—processes of subjectivity and political organization in our country and the region. It does so against a backdrop in which the discourses put forward by the conservative right are gaining traction, a reality that urgently requires us to sharpen our creativity.

Dewey's highly attractive writing captures one's attention immediately. After only a few pages, the reader feels that *Making it at Any Cost* is an indispensable reference, a work to be revisited with the certainty of finding new avenues for reflection and a source of inspiration for future studies.

MARÍA INÉS FERNÁNDEZ ALVAREZ