

DOSSIER: REFOUNDING URBAN-REGIONAL LATIN AMERICAN THINKING: NAVIGATING VARIEGATION, NEGATION, AND CONSTITUTION

DECOLONIALITY, LIBERATORY EDUCATION, AND THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: THE PRAXIS OF TECHNICAL ADVISORY SERVICES BY EXTENSION GROUPS OF THE RED ULACAV IN BUENOS AIRES AND RECIFE

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to examine the praxis of technical advisory services carried out by Latin American university extension groups that seek to strengthen community participation and advance the struggle for the right to the city. Within their theoretical–methodological approaches, the article identifies the articulation of contributions from decolonial critical thought, Paulo Freire’s theory of liberatory education, and the Lefebvrian concept of the right to the city. Two extension groups were selected for analysis, with which the authors engaged directly during the research process: the Taller Libre de Proyecto Social [Free Studio for Social Design] (TLPS) at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA), and the Comunidade Interdisciplinar de Ação, Pesquisa e Aprendizagem [Interdisciplinary Community of Action, Research, and Learning] (CIAPA) at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE). Adopting a dialectical approach, the methodological procedures included interviews with group members and participant observation of their technical advisory praxis in two communities: Rodrigo Bueno (Buenos Aires) and Vila Sul (Recife). Field reports and documents produced during the advisory processes were systematized, along with original photographic records. The findings have indicated that the extension practices, grounded in decolonial and Freirean theoretical–methodological frameworks, and in the concept of the right to the city, strengthen the social production of

habitat, expand political agency and community organization, and challenge hegemonic models of urban planning. In doing so, the study demonstrates the transformative potential of territorial praxis in the Latin American context.

Keywords

Decolonial Critical Thought; Education for Liberation; Right to the City; University Extension and Outreach; Urban Planning; Community Participation and Technical Advisory Work; Latin America.

DOSSIÊ: REFUNDAR O PENSAMENTO URBANO-REGIONAL LATINO-AMERICANO: ENTRE VARIEGAÇÃO, NEGAÇÃO E CONSTITUIÇÃO

DECOLONIALIDADE, EDUCAÇÃO LIBERTADORA E DIREITO À CIDADE: PRÁXIS DE ASSESSORIA TÉCNICA DE GRUPOS EXTENSIONISTAS DA RED ULACAV, EM BUENOS AIRES E NO RECIFE

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Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar a práxis de assessoria técnica de grupos acadêmicos extensionistas da América Latina que visam fortalecer a participação popular e a luta pelo direito à cidade, identificando, em sua atuação teórico-metodológica, a articulação entre as contribuições do pensamento crítico decolonial, da teoria da educação libertadora de Paulo Freire e do conceito lefebvriano de direito à cidade. Foram selecionados dois grupos extensionistas, com os quais as autoras tiveram a oportunidade de desenvolver a pesquisa: o Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (TLPS), da Universidade de Buenos Aires (UBA), e a Comunidade Interdisciplinar de Ação, Pesquisa e Aprendizagem (Ciapa), da Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE). Por meio de uma abordagem dialética, foram utilizadas como procedimentos metodológicos entrevistas com membros dos grupos e observação participante da práxis de assessoria técnica desses grupos em duas comunidades: Rodrigo Bueno (Buenos Aires) e Vila Sul (Recife). Relatos de campo e documentos produzidos nos processos de assessoria foram sistematizados, além da realização de registros fotográficos próprios. Os resultados indicam que a prática extensionista, fundamentada em marcos teórico-metodológicos decoloniais e freirianos e no direito à cidade, fortalece a produção social do habitat, amplia a incidência política e a organização comunitária e coloca em xeque modelos hegemônicos de planejamento urbano, demonstrando o potencial transformador da práxis territorial no contexto latino-americano.

Palavras-chave

Pensamento Crítico Decolonial; Educação Libertadora; Direito à Cidade; Extensão Universitária; Planejamento Urbano; Participação Popular e Assessoria Técnica; América Latina.

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Introduction: theoretical–methodological assumptions

In the contemporary globalized context— marked by political, economic, and socio-environmental crises—diverse epistemological currents have emerged that challenge the capitalist system and its Eurocentric, and colonial model of development imposed on formerly colonized countries. Urban transformations in Latin America can be examined through the analytical categories proposed by these critiques, with the aim of understanding territorial disputes in large cities, where socio-spatial inequalities have long been historically entrenched and, in many cases, intensified.

To frame the discussion, it is useful to briefly outline the central tenets of Paulo Freire and of the Modernity/Coloniality research group, a collective of researchers from different social science disciplines across Latin America that first convened in 1999. Particular emphasis is placed on the contributions of Aníbal Quijano, Arturo Escobar, Catherine Walsh, Enrique Dussel, Ramón Grosfoguel, and Walter D Mignolo, among others.

As presented by Arturo Escobar at the Third European Congress of Latin Americanists, held in Amsterdam in 2002, the group argues that, although colonialism has formally ended, coloniality persists, reproducing the structural positions of the

1. The authors would like to thank the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), which supported Verónica Cremaschi's academic exchange at PPGDU-UFPE (Move la América Programme), and the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) for supporting the research conducted.

oppressor and the oppressed. This study adopts the premise that modernity inherently contains coloniality as a constitutive dimension—an indispensable condition for sustaining the ideals of progress and civilization, as well as their attendant promises of development. One cannot be conceived without the other, hence, the modernity/coloniality dyad is understood as two sides of the same coin (Mignolo, 1995). From this perspective, modern imperial coloniality has been transformed into the coloniality of financial capitalism. Moreover, for its realization, European, androcentric, and white modernity presupposes the exploitation of the “other”—those who do not conform to this paradigm (Quijano, 1992).

It is possible to trace the genealogy of critical thought on Latin American realities, revealing the emergence of different intellectual currents across the region: Liberation Theology and the Philosophy of Liberation (with particular emphasis on Enrique Dussel); Dependency Theory in the 1960s and 1970s; Latin American debates on modernity and postmodernity in the 1980s, followed by reflections on hybridity in cultural and anthropological studies in the 1990s; and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group (1992–1998), which contributed to discussions on subalternity in Latin America in comparison with South Asian studies.

To these antecedents are added the contributions advanced in Paulo Freire’s seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), in which he developed the concept of a liberatory education. Freire conceptualized the educational act as a transformative practice, advocating a pedagogy oriented toward the emancipation of the oppressed and the transformation of social reality. He critiqued modes of content transmission that render the student a passive subject, proposing instead a horizontal and emancipatory form of education grounded in dialogical pedagogy—one based on listening and the collective construction of knowledge (Freire, 1997).

From this perspective, Freirean liberatory education provides critical tools for resisting the mechanisms of coloniality, insofar as it mobilizes processes of critical consciousness, mutual recognition, and the collective production of knowledge. This articulation underscores how critical educational practice directly confronts the multiple dimensions of coloniality. A dialogue is thus established between the reflections of Freire (1970, 1997) and Quijano (1992), for whom coloniality constitutes a structuring pattern of power in the modern capitalist world, organizing the hierarchical classification of groups and individuals through racialization. This dominant pattern is reproduced across the world-system through distinct yet interconnected dimensions that seek to: position certain human beings as inferior (coloniality of being); marginalize and render invisible indigenous and local knowledge systems (coloniality of knowledge); and hierarchize human groups

and territories, subjecting them to coercive exploitation in the service of expanded capital accumulation (coloniality of power) (Restrepo; Rojas, 2010).

These multiple dimensions of coloniality permeate the production of urban space, revealing consequences intrinsic to the system—such as the concentration of land and income—that intensify socio-spatial inequalities in large cities. The State is pressured both by social and political rights and by rights already established by dominant power structures. In this ambiguous position, it oscillates between attempts to confront deep-seated inequalities and the reinforcement of historically constructed forms of segregation. It seeks to mediate disputes among social actors over the prioritization of exchange value over use value, individual property rights over collective rights to access urban services and opportunities, and technocratic and centralized public management over the right to participate in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of inclusive public policies (Chaz, 2023). In the face of these disputes, the public university, through extension activities, has been fulfilling its social role by mediating the relationship between residents and the state with regard to the social production of habitat (PSH) and the struggle for the right to the city (Andrade et al., 2023).

The aim of this article is to present the praxis of technical advisory services carried out by Latin American university extension groups that seek to strengthen popular² participation and the struggle for the right to the city, identifying, within their theoretical-methodological practice, the articulation between contributions from decolonial critical thought, the theory of liberatory education developed by Paulo Freire, and the Lefebvrian concept of the right to the city. To this end, the research was conducted through participant observation of the technical advisory praxis of two academic groups affiliated with the Red Universitaria Latinoamericana de Cátedras de Vivienda (Red Ulacav), located in the cities of Buenos Aires, in Argentina and Recife in Brazil.

Over the past thirty years, Red ULACAV has advanced theoretical and methodological experimentation of urban interventions grounded in the social production of habitat (SPH) and knowledge, based on the work of Paulo Freire. The community participation and technical advisory practices of the two groups analyzed herein make it possible to understand the role of public universities, anchored in the tripartite mission of teaching, research, and extension. Within Red ULACAV, SPH is a foundational concept, since it presupposes the leading role of residents in the active construction of their territories through self-managed

2. A term widely used in Latin American studies to refer to working-class and marginalized communities engaged in collective struggles for housing and the right to the city.

and participatory processes that promote the collective production of housing and shared spaces, with State support (de la Mora, 2010). This approach is essential in Latin American cities, where land concentration and real estate pressures on territories occupied by low-income populations intensify socio-spatial inequalities.

This study, without adopting a comparative framework, examines the experience of two university extension groups: the Taller Libre de Proyecto Social [Free Studio for Social Design] (TLPS/UBA) and the Comunidade Interdisciplinar de Ação, Pesquisa e Aprendizagem [Interdisciplinary Community of Action, Research, and Learning] (CIAPA/UFPE). Guided by a dialectical approach, the methodological procedures combined interviews with group members and participant observation of their technical advisory praxis in two communities: Rodrigo Bueno (Buenos Aires) and Vila Sul (Recife). The analysis draws on systemized field reports and documents produced throughout the technical advisory processes, complemented by original photographic records.

In the Brazilian case, contact between the researchers and the community was maintained continuously throughout the monitoring of CIAPA's technical advisory work, which has been ongoing since 2017. This long-term engagement enabled the construction of a relationship of mutual trust, supported by multiple forms of presence, including recurring in-person meetings, field visits, participation in community activities, extension courses involving undergraduate and graduate students with fieldwork components, and listening sessions with residents. Additional meetings were also held at the university with actors involved in urbanization and land regularization processes, in addition to the monitoring of institutional spaces for popular participation.

The central question addressed in this study was: how can academic extension groups affiliated with Red ULACAV draw on decolonial critical thought and Freirean theory of liberatory education in their praxis to strengthen popular participation and the struggle for the right to the city in Latin America?

The findings have indicated that extension praxis, grounded in decolonial and Freirean theoretical-methodological frameworks, together with the concept of the right to the city, reinforces the social production of habitat, strengthens community organization and political agency, and challenges hegemonic models of urban planning. These outcomes thereby demonstrate the transformative potential of territorial praxis in the Latin American context.

1. Subverting dominant epistemologies in urban planning

Space, simultaneously a product and a social producer, conditions relationships, labor, and networks of exchange. It is neither natural nor given;

rather, it embodies and reproduces social inequalities within its very fabric. There is a politics of space because space itself is produced to serve particular interests, and in doing so becomes inherently political (Lefebvre, 2013). Historically, urban production has privileged functional dimension over social and environmental dimensions, resulting in segregation rather than a collective city project.

Socio-spatial inequalities are thus produced in a dual manner: on the one hand, through land concentration, since the dominant class holds the right to private ownership of land and property; on the other, because this same class possesses the knowledge and strategies necessary to intervene in space (Lefebvre, 2013). Territory is shaped by social groups holding political and economic power (the State, the bourgeoisie, technocrats), while those excluded from these processes, including residents of informal or precarious housing, the homeless, and the unemployed, are marginalized in their access to goods, services, and urban opportunities. Accordingly, the coloniality of knowledge, which privileges the technical knowledge of public authorities aligned with the market over the knowledge of residents themselves, reinforces the perpetuation of this unequal urban model (Quijano, 1992).

In the rational production of the Latin American city, the emergence of suburban populations occupying available land, often under precarious sanitary conditions, is commonly regarded as a natural and inevitable outcome of urban growth. This naturalization, which frames the existence of excluded sectors as a given, tends to obscure the fact that the formal city, a product of the free-market capitalist system, necessarily entails the presence of its informal counterpart (Abramo, 2012). Socio-spatial inequality is therefore an inherent feature of the contemporary city, whose very structure comprises two cities coexisting in an inevitable symbiosis.

This duality has been present since the origins of Latin American cities. Following pillage and destruction, these territories have been marked by inequality and racialization. Colonial cities were laid out “from scratch” on an abstract space that erased the Indigenous past upon which they were built. In practice, however, they were divided along a color line that segregated the population by race. Socio-spatial inequality persists, intensifying with the intervention of private actors in the territory, due to features inherent to the capitalist system, which relies on a center-periphery opposition for its reproduction (Coelho; Cunha, 2020).

This conceptual framework resonates with Dussel (1996), who argued that the oppressed—the legitimate inhabitants of the periphery—do not encounter spaces conducive to their ways of life, since these are not fully compatible with the modern capitalist world. A similar situation is observed in large cities, where

capital dominates the urban agenda and exerts pressure onto marginalized groups, valorizing urban centers while systematically displacing these groups from territories on the basis of race, gender, or class, thereby imposing a dual segregation—both social and spatial (Harvey, 2005).

This dualistic organization, evident in the segmentation between privileged and excluded zones, does not imply chaos, but rather a specific form of territorial organization in which poor inhabitants, guided by their own logics, find housing solutions and access to services (Abramo, 2012).

For Lefebvre, as well as for decolonial theorists such as Quijano (1992) and Mignolo (1995), the first step toward a more just reality involves developing critical consciousness, observing and analyzing capitalism, and recognizing that society and its urban correlate are not naturally unequal. The construction of a city as a collective work is possible through the democratization of its production, guided by emancipation, which guarantees the right to decide the type of city in which people wish to live and anchor their identity-based ties (Lefebvre, 2013). The right to the city extends beyond access to urban services; it is intimately connected to social struggles of resistance, including those of peasants, feminists, Indigenous peoples, and residents of informal settlements (Lefebvre, 2013).

Due to its dynamic nature, the city functions as a space conducive to social transformation through the active participation of its inhabitants, who thereby express their desires and needs. The social use of space thus becomes a tool for emancipation (Harvey, 2005). However, in contexts marked by accelerated urbanization, urban planning has often drawn inspiration from cities in the Global North, whose norms prove inadequate for Latin American realities. Consequently, counter-hegemonic initiatives emerge that integrate diverse forms of knowledge within the territory. The interaction between academic knowledge, extension practices with technical advisory services, and popular knowledge enables the construction of a renewed epistemic framework, capable of fostering critical consciousness of the world and generating situated alternatives for socio-spatial transformation in the Global South (Frota; Freitas, 2024).

As decolonial thinkers have observed, it is possible to identify decolonizing practices that are anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-racist, as well as their intersections, driven by diverse collectives across different geographies (Carroza-Athens; Grosfoguel, 2023). Experiences linked to the social production of habitat, in which community participation converges with the technical advisory of the analyzed groups, allow for a better understanding of the role of public universities as facilitators of “other urban practices” (Delgado; Ruiz, 2014). These practices, in

turn, reinforce the struggle for the right to the city—a concept embraced by Latin American social movements as a possible utopia in contrast to the unequal project of capital.

2. The role of university extension in Argentina and Brazil

The construction of the Latin American conception of university extension began with the University Reform of Córdoba, in Argentina, in 1918, which recognized the social role of the university and the need to mobilize academic knowledge in support of social projects (Vuksinic; Méndez, 2018). The First International Student Congress, held in Mexico in 1921, underscored the responsibility of student associations in the cultural dissemination of extension activities (Portantiero, 1978).

In the 1950s, the First Latin American Conference on University Extension and Outreach, organized in Chile, consolidated extension as a social commitment of the university, highlighting its connection to civic education (Tünnermann, 2003). Since then, various meetings promoted by academic networks, such as the Latin American Union of University Extension (ULEU) and the Association of Universities of the Montevideo Group (AUGM), have broadened the concept, bringing extension into closer alignment with teaching and research practices and strengthening its ethical role in the defense of human rights (Tovar, 2018). This process of moving beyond an assistentialist perspective has integrated extension into academic training, positioning it as an essential instrument for promoting social justice and for addressing regional inequalities (Ortiz-Riaga; Morales-Rubiano, 2011).

In Argentina, although institutionalized since the 1940s, it was only in the 1970s, under the influence of Paulo Freire's ideas, that extension assumed the character of a practice oriented toward social transformation (Gómez; Dalla Corte, 2023). However, as in Brazil, the military regime (established in 1976) curtailed these activities, confining them largely to the teaching sphere. With redemocratization, extension was re-signified as a practice articulated with teaching and research, and, following the reforms of the 1990s, it incorporated elements of Corporate Social Responsibility, and was formally institutionalized through the Higher Education Law (Law No. 24.521/1995). The creation of the National University Extension Network (REXUNI) and the enactment of Resolution No. 233/2018 further consolidated the importance of extension for fostering critical and socially committed academic training.

In Brazil, university extension emerged over the course of the twentieth century, driven by student movements inspired by the Córdoba Reform. Although formally established in the Statute of Brazilian Universities (1931) and in the

University Reform (Law No. 5.540/1968), it did not achieve effective integration with teaching and research (Wociechoski, 2021). It was only after 1985, with the process of redemocratization and the introduction of direct elections for the university president, that extension assumes a more explicit social commitment, strengthened by the active engagement of faculty and students.

In 1987, with the creation of the Forum of Pro-Rectors³ for Extension in Brazilian Public Universities (Forproex), efforts to institutionalize extension were consolidated, as reflected in the Federal Constitution (1988) and in the Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education (LDB, Law No. 9.394/1996), which affirmed the inseparability of teaching, research, and extension (Gómez; Dalla Corte, 2023). The National Extension Plan (Forproex, 1999) and the National Policy for University Extension (Forproex, 2012) further systematized its principles and guidelines, while the National Education Plans established the requirement that 10% of undergraduate course hours be allocated to extension activities. With the publication of the National Guidelines for University Extension (DNEU) (Brazil, 2018), extension was consolidated as a structuring axis of comprehensive academic training, a role reinforced by the National Seminar on the Integration of Extension into the Curriculum (2021), which called for curricular reforms. Overall, it was only from the 1990s that university extension became integrated into institutional evaluation processes, gaining greater visibility in Argentine and Brazilian universities (Wociechoski, 2021).

More recently, theoretical frameworks grounded in critical Latin American thought have proven particularly pertinent for understanding proposals that seek alternatives to the logic of the unequal production of cities, especially those formulated from university extension experiences. A significant initiative in this regard is the 1st National Meeting on Extension in Postgraduate Studies and Technical Advisory Services for Habitat Production, which aimed to reflect on experiences of academic residencies, lato sensu specialization programs, and research and extension groups engaged with the complexity of habitat production and technical advisory, within the framework of Federal Law No. 11.888/2008, which guarantees low-income families the right to free public technical advisory services. The academic experiences presented have explicitly adopted theoretical frameworks that challenge the hegemony of traditional technical knowledge (Andrade et al., 2023).

The longevity of the Red ULACAV network, together with its significant contributions to extension experiences developed by Latin American academic

3. Pro-rectors (pró-reitores) is a Brazilian institutional designation referring to senior university administrators responsible for specific areas such as extension, teaching, or research.

groups—systematized in the proceedings of its annual meetings—constitutes a further indicator of the incorporation of decolonial critical thought and a Freirean methodological approach into the praxis of university extension in Latin America. In pursuing its mission, Red ULACAV seeks to integrate teaching, research, and extension in the social production of habitat through an interdisciplinary approach; to promote the exchange of knowledge and collaborative work among academics from different countries, contributing to professional training in the field of social housing; to transfer knowledge to public and private institutions, supporting the management and formulation of housing policies, programs, and projects; and to propose alternatives for the housing crisis, strengthening practices that are appropriate, democratic, and socially just (Red Ulacav, [n.d.]).

In both countries, extension has become consolidated as an essential function of higher education, although it continues to be shaped by tensions between social commitment and market-oriented logic. Despite these advances, its inclusion in the curriculum remains effectively limited in Brazilian universities (Forproex, 2012), while in Argentina, notwithstanding the requirement established by Resolution No. 233/2018, the implementation of extension practices remains heterogeneous, varying across higher education institutions.

The dominant logic of academic productivism continues to prevail, shifting the responsibility for the co-generation of knowledge and institutional transformation onto those who are able to resist the hegemonic model. Moreover, extension remains undervalued: fieldwork does not conform to the pace of productivism, and outputs derived from these activities, such as reports or videos produced in accessible language, are often regarded as less valuable than traditional research outputs (Andrade et al., 2023).

It is therefore necessary to further examine the Red ULACAV network by identifying its contributions to the consolidation of an extension praxis among Latin American groups. Such an understanding is essential for analyzing the work of its members, particularly the two groups examined herein, which, through a dialectical theoretical–methodological approach grounded in decolonial thought and liberatory education, seek to strengthen the struggles for the right to the city among historically subalternized communities.

2.1. Red ULACAV: the social production of Latin American knowledge

Although we acknowledge the limitations identified by Wociechoski (2021), who argues that the inclusion of extension in the curriculum has assumed a more bureaucratic than democratizing character, we contend that it also holds transformative potential. In this regard, we highlight the practices developed within

the Red ULACAV network, which promote curricular innovation, all-inclusive student education, and the social engagement of the university—elements that constitute forms of resistance to the advance of conservatism in Latin America.

Created in 1994, the network brings together Latin American academic groups, institutes, and research centers linked to undergraduate and/or postgraduate programs that address the social production of habitat in an interdisciplinary and multidimensional manner. Its members adopt teaching–learning practices associated with technical advisory services, responding to the demands of vulnerable communities (Red Ulacav, [n.d.]). The systematic, long-term immersion in the everyday lives of these residents within their territories results in a dialogical relationship of knowledge production, grounded in the horizontal integration of popular and academic knowledges. This approach runs counter to historically hegemonic processes associated with the colonality of power and knowledge, seeking to deconstruct the locus of the university as a symbol of power and as the arbiter of valid knowledge, grounded in scientific rationality (Escobar, 2023).

Drawing on Freirean constructs of autonomy (Freire, 1997, 1970), technical advisory services developed through university extension both enable the democratization of knowledge and strengthen struggles for the right to the city among the communities served and contribute to the training of undergraduate and postgraduate students as professionals attuned to local and broader Latin American social realities (Gómez; Dalla Corte, 2023). Self-funded through annual contributions from its members, the network currently comprises 65 academic groups—approximately thirty from Argentina, ten from Brazil, five from Mexico, and the remainder distributed across five other Latin American countries. In 2023, Red ULACAV received the World Habitat Award, organized by World Habitat in partnership with UN-Habitat, in recognition of its work with Latin American social movements. The collective construction of knowledge, stemming from interdisciplinary articulation and collaboration among the actors involved in urban planning processes, contributes to the formulation of inclusive, participatory, and sustainable public policies.

In 2024, Red ULACAV marked the thirtieth consecutive annual meeting, all of which have served as key moments for theoretical–methodological debate on the extension experiences of technical advisory services developed by its members, while consolidating networks and a collective body of knowledge grounded in decolonial thought. In 2025, the meeting took place in Buenos Aires, at UBA, (Figure 1) and, in 2019, was held in Recife, at UFPE (Figure 2), with TLPS and CIAPA acting, respectively, as the organizing host groups. In the fields of architecture, urbanism,

and urban law, the work of these university groups has been fundamental in providing technical advisory services in support of the right to the city, particularly in contexts of urban informality and land tenure conflicts.



Figure 1. Thirtieth Red ULACAV meeting (Buenos Aires, UBA, 2024)

Source: Authors (2024).



Figure 2. Twenty-fifth Red ULACAV meeting (Recife, UFPE, 2019)

Source: CIAPA/PPGDU collection, UFPE (2019).

A careful assessment of the activities and publications of Red ULACAV, together with participation in its annual meetings since 2019, allows us to argue that the network's university groups have adopted a praxis grounded in a decolonial perspective and in liberatory education, as discussed in the previous section, in order to strengthen the social production of habitat as a means of achieving the right to the city in its Lefebvrian sense. The World Charter for the Right to the City (Carta Mundial..., 2005) advocates the adoption of institutional mechanisms and instruments to support the social production of habitat (SPH), particularly through processes of self-management (Art. IV), within a political perspective of social transformation through anti-capitalist practices oriented toward producing and managing the commons. This form of self-management arises from the leading role of coordinated action among residents, civil society organizations, and governmental entities in the management and financing of housing.

2.2. The extension praxis of the Taller Libre (UBA) in Buenos Aires

The Taller Libre de Proyecto Social (TLPS), an interdisciplinary group within the Faculty of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (FADU-UBA), was established in 2002 and serves as a reference point for Freirean decolonial pedagogical practices. A member of Red ULACAV since 2005, the TLPS received the Berta Cáceres Award⁴ in 2022.

The group adopts the guiding construct of the SPH to promote participatory and co-creative planning in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, where processes of urban reconfiguration are ongoing. With a focus on professional training committed to popular habitat, the TLPS develops housing, infrastructure, communication, design, and re-urbanization projects in partnership with social organizations, cooperatives, and communities in situations of socio-spatial vulnerability, using critical methodologies and participatory action research that articulate teaching, research, and extension (Pedro, 2022).

Self-produced spaces are characterized by the active participation of residents in the management, decision-making, or execution of construction processes, whether through collective or family initiatives. Comprehensive construction practices, supported by popular knowledge and carried out with no professional technical advisory services, are made possible through resources derived from

4. The Berta Cáceres Prize aims to preserve and disseminate the vision of *bem viver* [well-being] defended by the Indigenous leader after whom the award is named, who dedicated her life to resisting extractivist projects that threatened the rights of Indigenous peoples and nature. The prize is usually awarded during the Forum for the Defence of the Environment and *Bem Viver*, an event that brings together activists and environmental defenders.

informal work and unfold according to temporal and evolutionary processes of varying time scales. In the design and project domain, TLPS's work values the role of individuals, recognizing them within their environment, including their personal histories and social ties. The group collaborates with neighborhood representatives to articulate conceptions of housing and social urbanism from a practical and integrated perspective. Over more than two decades of activity, the TLPS has developed around 50 projects involving hundreds of students and postgraduates from across Argentina (Pedro, 2017).

As an example of its work, the technical advisory services provided to the Rodrigo Bueno community merit particular attention. During the 30th Red ULACAV meeting (Red Ulacav, 2024), a field visit to the community enabled network members to observe the interventions in situ and hear testimony from community leaders, confirming the theoretical–methodological foundations that guided the TLPS's extensionist technical advisory services in that community.

After years of institutional neglect in addressing urban integration in informal settlements—where interventions have been largely limited to emergency responses or partial urbanization measures, such as the issuance of individual property titles or implementing isolated public-space improvements—in 2016, the Buenos Aires government announced the launch of social and urban integration processes in five neighborhoods, including Rodrigo Bueno (Baldiviezo, 2018). Throughout this process, the TLPS played an active role in accompanying and supporting the community.

Rodrigo Bueno (Figures 3 and 4) emerged in the early 1980s, when residents began settling along the shores of the Río de la Plata under conditions of extreme vulnerability, including exposure to flooding, rodent infestations, dengue outbreaks, and structural risks in their homes. Located on public land at the edge of the Reserva Ecológica Sur and adjacent to Puerto Madero, the settlement occupies an area of exceptionally high real estate value in Buenos Aires and is therefore coveted by the property market. In 2003, the investment company IRSA proposed the construction of high-rise towers and a luxury housing complex on the site of the former Boca Juniors sports city, next to the settlement, thereby initiating plans for its eradication. In 2009, the president of FADU-UBA, architect Jaime Sorin—who had previously worked with the City Housing Institute and related working groups—prepared a report demonstrating the feasibility of urbanizing the settlement and recommending active community participation in the process (Arechaga, 2023).



Figure 3. Self-construction in Rodrigo Bueno

Source: Authors (2024).



Figure 4. The Rodrigo Bueno Community Center

Source: Authors (2024).

In 2017, Law No. 5.798 was enacted in Buenos Aires, establishing the framework for a re-urbanization process. The project, developed in agreement with residents, was based on the principles of integration, equity, and socio-spatial justice (Chorny; Arias; Polanco, 2023). However, according to Baldiviezo (2018), the city government failed to address the demands of residents and

social organizations to include urban policy instruments that would protect the community against real estate pressures, ensure long-term social integration, and capture surplus value for collective benefit, thereby preventing processes of gentrification. Consequently, public indebtedness generated by the urbanization works became a justification for land privatization, ultimately benefiting large financial and real estate enterprises.

Researchers and faculty affiliated with the TLPS and the Cátedra Libre de Ingeniería Comunitaria [Independent Chair of Community Engineering] conducted critical monitoring of these transformations, emphasizing that, although urbanization is framed as progress in official discourse, its concrete implementation—without adequate social protection mechanisms—jeopardizes the right of long-standing resident families to remain in the Rodrigo Bueno community (Baldiviezo, 2018).

2.3. The extension praxis of CIAPA (UFPE) in Recife

The Interdisciplinary Community of Action, Research, and Learning (CIAPA), linked to the Postgraduate Program in Urban Development at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (UFPE), has been a member of Red ULACAV since 2009. It participates in technical and political representation within institutional participatory spaces, such as the Recife City Council (Concidade)⁵ and the Forum of the Special Zones of Social Interest Regularization Plan (PREZEIS),⁶ aiming to secure recognition of new Special Zones of Social Interest (ZEIS) in municipal urban legislation and to strengthen their shared-management model. To broaden the reach of its outcomes, CIAPA offers extension courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, fostering reflections on decolonial thought and promoting the inclusion of residents in central areas—close to employment opportunities and equipped with adequate infrastructure and services—while addressing exclusionary legacies shaped by class, gender, and race (Rocha, 2023).

As a promoter of practices developed in partnership with social movements to strengthen the struggle for the right to the city, CIAPA was approached by the Movement for the Struggle in Neighborhoods, Settlements, and Favelas (MLB) to

5. Concidade is a permanent collegiate body tasked with discussing and monitoring public policies related to urban space. The commission is composed of representatives from the public and private sectors, social movements, professional associations, and NGOs, as well as scientists and researchers.

6. Established by the municipal law known as the PREZEIS Law (Law No. 16.113/1995), the forum is a deliberative body that brings together all leaders elected by the communities, along with representatives from public authorities, academia, and NGOs. The management model also includes the Urbanization and Legalization Commissions (COMUL), which are responsible for the participatory planning of each ZEIS.

support the consolidation and regularization of its self-managed settlements and housing complexes. Its contributions include the development of participatory projects and social organization for the Dom Hélder Câmara Housing Complex (2009–2016), spanning planning, execution, and post-occupation stages. Since 2017, CIAPA has been systematically collaborating with the Vila Sul Community (Figures 5 and 6) through technical advisory services linked to undergraduate (Architecture and Urbanism) and postgraduate (PPGDU) programs. The initiative aims to lend the public university's endorsement of the community's coordination with diverse actors—including MLB, municipal authorities, local businesspeople, and the judiciary—particularly to defend the residents' right to remain in a central territory valued for its location along the Capibaribe River and its inclusion in the expansion corridor of the real estate developments associated with the Novo Recife Project.



Figure 5. Vila Sul Community: field visit

Source: Authors (2025).



Figure 6. Vila Sul Community: visit by architecture and urbanism postgraduate students from UFPE

Source: Authors (2025).

In 2015, the MLB organized the occupation of a vacant plot under the responsibility of the Ferrovia Transnordestina [Transnortheastern Railway], located in the Afogados neighborhood. In the initial phase, community leaders delineated circulation routes and individual lots, and from 2017 onwards they received support from CIAPA to advance urban and land regularization.

The actions undertaken included territorial reconnaissance, the sectorization of the area, and the social registration of families, all aimed at underpinning a project designed to strengthen both the right to housing and the residents' right to remain in the territory. Between 2017 and 2019, postgraduate cohorts enrolled in CIAPA extension-based courses and developed activities to gather information on the socio-demographic profiles of residents, building conditions, and local infrastructure. These activities employed georeferencing technology for data collection and processing and diagnosing land tenure conditions. During this period, the municipal government—acting alongside owners of warehouses on neighboring plots—approached CIAPA with a proposal to finance the resettlement of families to a nearby site to free the area for a middle-class housing development; the MLB and the community rejected the proposal.

Activities were interrupted during the pandemic and later resumed through elective courses—each with a 75-hour workload—offered within the Architecture and Urbanism program at UFPE in 2023 and 2024. A new round of social registration was conducted, and the cartographic base was updated with support from faculty in the geography and cartographic engineering departments. These efforts culminated in an application to recognize Vila Sul as a Special Zone of Social Interest (ZEIS) at Recife City Hall and within the PREZEIS Forum. This process proved lengthy because establishing a new ZEIS requires drafting specific legislation (Rocha; Lima, 2024). However, the drafting of the new Land Subdivision, Use and Occupation Law (LPUOS – Law No. 19.426/2025) created an opportunity to advocate, during a public hearing, for the inclusion of new ZEIS. Pressure from PREZEIS representatives, combined with CIAPA technical and political support—particularly through its role in representing the academic sector within Concidade—fostered a convergence of knowledge and power. This culminated in Concidade’s approval of the LPUOS bill and, consequently, in the creation of 16 new Type 1 ZEIS, including Vila Sul and Sete Mucambos—communities that had received advisory services from CIAPA—bringing the total number of ZEIS of this category in Recife to 87 (Rocha, 2025).

The significance of CIAPA’s work over a nine-year cycle (2016–2025) within Concidade lies in its contribution to advancing the right to the city among popular sectors and in enabling the communities’ rights-based struggles by providing technical advisory support to obtain the necessary technical-political support for legal implementation. During this period, representatives from social movements, academia and other sectors actively participated in discussions on the Master Plan (2018–2020) and in the regulation of urban planning instruments (2021–2024), culminating—despite ongoing disputes and challenges—in the approval of the draft LPUOS (2025). At the 7th Municipal Conference of the City of Recife, held in June 2025, CIAPA contributed to the debate on the National Urban Development Policy (PNDU) and will continue to represent the academic sector and UFPE in the new cycle of Concidade.

Within the framework of the Red ULACAV, over three semesters, CIAPA/UFPE delivered the interinstitutional and international distance-learning course *Produção Social do Habitat na América Latina* [Social Production of Habitat in Latin America] (30 hours). In 2023 and 2024, the course convened faculty and students from academic groups affiliated with the network, including the Universidad Veracruzana (Xalapa, Mexico) and the Universidade Federal de Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN). In 2025, the course was offered through a partnership between UFPE, UFRN, and the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Critical reflection on processes that

challenge technicist and market-oriented approaches to urban planning in Latin American cities—grounded in extension-based technical advisory practices—has contributed to a productive body of knowledge within a decolonial paradigm. This has resulted in articles developed by interdisciplinary and transnational working groups and presented at Red ULACAV meetings.

These integrated actions seek to consolidate an urbanization project that promotes social inclusion by expanding access to the right to the city and strengthening the consolidation of informal settlements, from a perspective that resists market pressures and the exclusionary practices traditionally associated with urban governance. Rather than reproducing hierarchical models in which technical experts impose their vision upon a territory, the approach fosters dialogical processes that confront coloniality and empower residents.

The community's struggle for permanence and land tenure regularization gained momentum during the revision of the LPUOS, enacted in 2025. The new legislation incorporated 16 new ZEIS, including Vila Sul, as a direct result of the coordinated action of residents and community leaders, supported by CIAPA/UFPE through its representation in institutional participatory arenas in which UFPE holds a seat (Recife, 2025). The inclusion of the community within the new urban zoning framework constituted a crucial legal and urban planning milestone, enabling the advancement of land tenure regularization and helping to prevent evictions. By securing formal municipal recognition of the area as a Zone of Special Social Interest, the measure established a legal basis for both urban and land regularization processes.

Thus, the designation of Vila Sul as a ZEIS inaugurates a new cycle of negotiations, studies, and administrative decisions aimed at ensuring that formal legal recognition effectively translates into tenure security, urbanization, and dignified permanence in the territory. This remains an ongoing process, sustained by community mobilization, university-based technical advisory practices, and continued dialogue with multiple levels of government. The outputs developed by CIAPA through its extension-based courses constitute valuable inputs that may significantly advance the subsequent phases of the process.

Despite the efforts of CIAPA and the MLB's organized resistance, the Vila Sul community continues to face constant pressure from neighboring actors and business interests seeking to capitalize on rising land values, given the territory's strategic location opposite the Pina Basin. This dispute exposes a fundamental tension between urban redevelopment dynamics driven by economic valorization and the socio-spatial inclusion needs of popular sectors.

3. Results and discussion: toward a decolonial praxis in extension

As demonstrated by the extension experiences of TLPS/Fadu/UBA and CIAPA/UFPE, the critical engagement of universities within the territories of local communities is essential for strengthening the struggle for the right to the city through the social production of habitat. The participation of both groups in the Red ULACAV has further consolidated the theoretical–methodological frameworks that underpin their technical advisory practices with subalternized communities marked by the coloniality of power.

In these initiatives, extension is structured around a dialogue of knowledge, active listening, and close articulation with social movements, reaffirming the transformative role of the public university in contrast to technocratic models that perpetuate the coloniality of knowledge. Thus, university extension is configured as a counter-hegemonic practice within an institutional context that remains permeated by the historically elitist character of universities, despite ongoing recommendations, since the 1990s, to integrate extension more fully into university policies.

The engagement of these groups in a Latin American academic network grounded in decolonial assumptions and Freirean liberatory education strengthens community participation and the social production of habitat, constituting a formative instrument capable of transforming both faculty and students.

In the field of technical advisory practices oriented toward urban space, the primary contribution of TLPS and CIAPA lies in expanding the possibilities for low-income populations to remain in highly-valued areas of the city. In this context of dispute, university extension operates as a counterbalancing force vis-à-vis structural inequalities, insofar as it places technical-scientific knowledge at the disposal of social movements and marginalized groups. In the face of pressures from the real estate market and urban policies that often render subalternized subjects invisible, the experiences of these groups demonstrate that critical extension enhances struggles for dignified housing, urban inclusion, and socio-spatial justice. As such, they are consolidated as spaces of resistance and of the collective production of knowledge committed to popular emancipation. Their praxis of technical advisory services should be understood as a form of critical action, rather than as the mere transmission of knowledge. Grounded in the notion of work as an activity that produces use values, it assumes a philosophical and educational character, with the capacity to transform both social reality and the university itself—a perspective aligned with liberatory education, which challenges exclusionary practices and contributes to social change (Freire, 1970).

From this perspective, the experiences of the UBA and UFPE groups analyzed in this article demonstrate the transformative potential of critical university extension, grounded in Paulo Freire's pedagogy, articulated with the decolonial thought of the Modernity/Coloniality group, and anchored in Lefebvre's construct of the right to the city. As such, their set of actions emerges as an active form of emancipation from a decolonial perspective.

Final remarks: toward a decolonial utopia for the right to the city

This article has identified the contributions of decolonial critical thought to strengthening popular participation and the struggle for the right to the city in Latin American urban contexts. By examining the praxis of technical advisory services by academic extension groups in Latin America, it has given visibility to their advances and to the challenges they face in promoting socio-spatial justice in the cities of Buenos Aires and Recife, while also underscoring their relevance as a tool for confronting and overcoming coloniality.

The experiences of Rodrigo Bueno (Buenos Aires) and Vila Sul (Recife) have revealed that epistemological entanglements in the social production of knowledge contribute to a multiscalar and multidimensional approach to Latin American urban space. From a decolonial perspective, these practices stand in opposition to exclusionary models of urban planning, in which the State and real estate interests promote the expulsion of popular communities from highly valued areas of cities—an expression of the coloniality of power and knowledge.

In both communities analyzed, the involvement of public universities has contributed to mitigating the pressure exerted by large-scale urban projects—such as Puerto Madero and the Novo Recife Project—grounded in the commodifying logics of financialized capitalism. Such projects seek to impose a systematic pattern of dispossession that subordinates community life to the imperatives of urban rent. In response, forms of resistance have emerged which, in the cases examined, have been supported by groups affiliated with the Red ULACAV. These processes of resistance challenge the displacement of original inhabitants by higher-income populations, reinforcing the hierarchical logic of the capitalist city (Marco; Santos; Möller, 2020) and pushes working-class populations toward peripheral areas lacking adequate infrastructure, thereby reproducing socio-spatial marginalization.

Despite the structural and institutional challenges that continue to constrain the full integration of extension into curricula and academic practices—such as limited resources and infrastructure, the unequal valorization of teaching, research, and extension, the restricted workload allocated to extension activities, bureaucratized procedures, and the absence of sustained institutional support

policies—the initiatives of the Red ULACAV have demonstrated that network-based action can be a fundamental tool. These initiatives foster the consolidation of a liberatory educational approach committed to social transformation, urban inclusion, and the collective production of knowledge oriented toward the demands of historically excluded communities. Faculty and students engaged in these technical advisory processes thus assume a central political role by placing technical knowledge at the service of popular struggles and by strengthening community-based discourses and knowledge, promoting the recognition of residents as rights-bearing subjects.

It may be argued that the formative praxis of these groups, expressed through critical extension and operationalized via technical advisory services, is closely aligned with decolonial thought. In this sense, it challenges commodified, technocratic models of planning while strengthening the struggle for the right to the city as a political, ethical, and aesthetic process central to the transformation of social reality.

Lastly, it is evident that network-based action and the exchange of experiences—both within the Red ULACAV and in the Modernity/Coloniality group—are fundamental to subverting hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms and to advancing decolonial epistemological practices and forms of knowledge oriented toward the right to the city as a utopia to be pursued.

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