

# Round Trip Policies: Housing and Self-Management, from Europe to Latin America and Back Again

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**Abstract:** Current debates in radical urban studies and comparative urbanism focus in part on the denunciation of universalisation in urban theories as an expression of Eurocentrism. Decolonial and postcolonial scholars risk rejecting general theorising in the name of particularism, difference, and the fragmentary character of the world and reducing every urban policy transmission to the result of colonial relations. On the contrary, it would be more productive for radical scholars to pay attention to common pathways and universalist aspirations of anti-capitalist urban struggles. This paper traces the connections between three experiences of self-managed habitat production, developed by grassroots movements in Latin America and Europe. The comparative case study enables discussion of universalising aspirations of struggles against capitalist urban development. The paper concludes that collective and solidarity-based self-construction is a universal form of production of space, common to any culture at some point and to some extent, and that the self-managed production of habitat is a potentially universal paradigm for current anti-capitalist urban struggles.

**Resumen:** Los actuales debates en estudios urbanos radicales y urbanismo comparativo tienen uno de sus focos en las denuncias de universalización en teoría urbana como expresión de eurocentrismo. Esto puede conducir a investigadores decoloniales y poscoloniales a rechazar la propia posibilidad de teoría en nombre del particularismo, la diferencia y el carácter fragmentario del mundo, así como a explicar cualquier proceso de transmisión de políticas urbanas como resultado de relaciones coloniales. Por el contrario, podría ser más productivo para los académicos radicales prestar atención a las sendas comunes y las aspiraciones universalistas de las luchas urbanas anticapitalistas en distintas partes del mundo. Este artículo indaga en las conexiones entre tres experiencias de producción autogestionada del hábitat, desarrollada por movimientos de base en América Latina y Europa. El estudio de caso comparativo permite discutir las aspiraciones universalistas de las luchas contra el desarrollo urbano capitalista. El artículo concluye que la autoconstrucción solidaria es una forma universal de producción del espacio, común cualquier cultura en algún momento y en alguna medida, y que la producción autogestionaria del hábitat es un paradigma potencialmente universal para las actuales luchas urbanas anticapitalistas.

**Keywords:** housing policies, self-management, mutual aid, comparative urban studies, urban theory

## Introduction

Self-managed habitat production has become a key topic for housing studies in Latin America, especially for radical scholars. In this paper we investigate the diffusion of these ideas and practices through three connected and distant cases. On the one hand, the Federación Uruguaya de Cooperativas de Vivienda por Ayuda Mutua (FUCVAM) in Uruguay<sup>1</sup> and the Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos (MOI) in Argentina,<sup>2</sup> experiences rooted in Latin America. On the other hand, as a counterpoint, we provide the case of the Sindicato de Obreros del Campo (SOC) in Marinaleda (Andalusia, Spain),<sup>3</sup> a case with strong similarities to those aforementioned, despite being in a geographically distant area. This study aims to answer the following questions: To what extent is self-managed habitat production an alternative flow of urban theory and policy that challenges the dominant core–periphery pathways? Are these flows independent of capitalist-colonial structures? What universalist aspirations can we find in them? Can self-managed habitat production be an alternative to capitalist urban development in different regions of the world? This article contributes to the field of radical urban studies by explaining and documenting relatively unknown (in English-speaking academia) cases of the production and diffusion of urban politics based on practices that go beyond traditional capitalist boundaries and dominant knowledge flows. At the same time, these case studies allow us to discuss the universalising aspirations of struggles against capitalist urban development.

Current debates in radical urban studies and comparative urbanism focus in part on the denunciation of universalisation in urban theories as an expression of Eurocentrism. From this perspective, much of 20<sup>th</sup> century urban theory would be a spurious generalisation based on the experience of a few wealthy European and American cities (Robinson 2006; Roy 2016). This idea is also connected to the denunciation of intellectual colonialism, criticising the current patterns of the spread of urban theories, paradigms, and policies, which tend to follow a direction from core to peripheral countries, due to their greater resources (Beigel 2013, 2016; Lander 1999). Moreover, these questions are crucially relevant for current urban studies, where numerous reflections have been raised in the last decade on what kind of comparisons are valid and on what theoretical ground (Hart 2016; Lees 2012; Maloutas and Fujita 2016; Peck 2015).

Some authors have referred to an antagonism on this issue between poststructuralist and Marxist scholars (e.g. Chibber [2013] versus Chakrabarty [2009]), although there are scholars who may or may not self-identify as Marxists on either side of the debate (Hart 2016). Key postcolonial and decolonial scholars (Mignolo 2008; Said 1978) have denounced illuminism and universalist traditions, including Marxism, as part of the colonial expansion of Europe. However, as anti-imperialist non-postcolonial scholars pointed out, there are universalist traditions

related to modernity opposed to capitalism and colonialism. Within tendencies to the universalisation of capital, Chibber (2013) points to the universalisation of the resistance.<sup>4</sup> The most evident example is socialist theory and struggles, as an alternative path to modernisation (Achcar 2013; Badiou 2017).

In the field of radical urban studies, some scholars (e.g. Peake et al. 2018) have raised accusations of false universalisation and not paying enough attention to diversity against radical political economy works, such as those of Brenner and Schmid (2017) on planetary urbanisation. Postcolonial scholars have also denounced gentrification studies, largely influenced by Marxist theory, for falsely universalising the local experience of North American and British cities (Bernt 2016; Ghertner 2015; Jackson 2017; Maloutas 2012; cf. Lees et al. 2016; López-Morales 2015). These debates have been originally raised by postcolonial urban scholars and their reflections on comparative studies, starting with those of Robinson (2006, 2011, 2016). Consequently, most of the contributing scholars are close to postcolonial perspectives (Ghertner 2015; Hart 2016; Roy 2016). These scholars seem to agree on rejecting parochialist theory, identifiable almost exclusively by a false universalisation from the European experience, in favour of a cosmopolitan theory based on paying more attention to diversity and difference (Ren 2022). In many of these works (Hart 2016; Robinson 2006) universalisation is a spurious Eurocentric discourse homogenising the urban world, destroying difference, and ignoring global hierarchies of colonialism. On the other hand, we find non-postcolonial scholars contributing to the debate, usually from political economy perspectives. These types of scholars agree to accept much of the post-colonial critique but also warn against excessive particularism that prevents comparison-based theorising, ignores the global dimension of some phenomena, and assumes an immeasurable difference across a North–South divide (Aalbers 2022; Peck 2015; Scott and Storper 2015; Storper and Scott 2016).

Moreover, some radical scholars may have the temptation to critically characterise modern urbanisation as a unidirectional flow, from Western Europe and the United States to the rest of the world, representing peripheral urbanisation as a passive recipient of (Western, Northern) policies and theories (criticised by Beigel [2013] and Hart [2016]), while core countries remain unchanged in the process (Jajamovich 2013, 2017). The dissemination of urban theories and policies has not only been a matter of Southern poorer countries copying rich Western cities. Policy fluxes have gone in different directions and every policy is transformed in the process and adapts to different local realities (Jajamovich 2013; Peck and Theodore 2015). In a similar way, when postcolonial or decolonial scholars assimilate any degree of modernity to European imperialism, they would be ignoring multiple traditions of popular struggle and turning oppressed subjects from peripheral countries into passive and helpless observers of key political processes (Cadahia and Coronel 2023). Furthermore, while some postcolonial or decolonial scholars tend to focus on local stories of resistance to capitalism and colonialism (Carroza-Athens and Grosfogel 2023; Zibecchi 2008), they often lose sight of the universalist components of these popular struggles.

Decolonial and postcolonial scholars risk rejecting general theorising in the name of particularism, difference, and the fragmentary character of the world,

and reducing every urban policy transmission to the result of colonial relations. On the contrary, it would be more productive for radical scholars to pay attention to common pathways and universalist aspirations of anti-capitalist urban struggles.

From a decolonial and postcolonial perspective, examining the three cases in this study separately would take them as examples of particularism, highlighting the differences and fragmentary character of the urban world that express the failure of capitalist universalisation. Instead, by tracing the connections between the cases, we can see them as an example of the universalist tendencies contained in the resistance to capitalist urbanisation. We propose that studying these flows of ideas and discourses is key for radical scholars to pay attention to particularity, multiplicity, and grassroots practices without losing sight of universalist projects and general theories.

## Methodology and Case Studies: Three Cases of Self-Managed Habitat Production

This research is based on fieldwork in Montevideo (Uruguay), Ciudad de Buenos Aires (Argentina), and Marinaleda (Andalusia, Spain). The three cases present examples of the core subject of comparison: self-managed habitat production. For FUCVAM and MOI, self-management refers to a type of housing production by a politically collective and organised actor that maintains control and decision-making throughout the productive process, with a defined political strategy of social transformation (Jeifetz 2002, 2011; Rodríguez 2009; Rodríguez et al. 2007; Zapata 2017). In the Latin American experience of housing cooperatives, this idea of self-management is usually accompanied by the practice of “mutual aid”, referring to the collective self-building of housing and infrastructure by future dwellers.

This research, rather than looking for similar or geographically close cases, looks at possible cross-relationships of distant cases, going beyond the North/South or East/West binaries (Aalbers 2022; Ren 2022; Robinson 2016). FUCVAM in Uruguay is currently the most successful example of a public policy of housing cooperatives in Latin America. MOI is the Latin American organisation that has replicated the FUCVAM experience in a more successful way. Marinaleda, in Andalusia, offers an example of a core region (although part of the internal periphery of Europe), with strong connections to Latin American experiences. Here, we use the traditional differentiation between core, peripheral, and semi-peripheral regions of global capitalism, well rooted in Latin American critical urban studies (Castells 1973; Pradilla Cobos 1984).

The results are organised in two separate sections. The first section constructs a historical narrative of the spread of self-managed habitat production between different cases. It shows evidence of this spread, recognises the main practical and discursive elements connecting the experiences, and identifies the main innovations. The second section adopts the form of a comparative study in which four axes of comparison are considered: ideological referents, self-management practices, institutionalisation, and results. Tracing the diffusion of

self-managed habitat production policies, in combination with these four axes of comparison, will allow us to answer the research questions. Explaining the process of diffusion allows us to identify the trajectory of the policy and its interweaving in North–South, core–periphery relations. The comparison of ideological connections and concrete practices of self-management and mutual aid allows us to confirm the thesis of these forms of resistance to capitalism as a universalising practice (Chibber 2013). While the analysis of institutionalisation and outcomes allows us to discuss their conflictive relationship with dominant capitalist structures and their possibilities of generalisation as an alternative anti-capitalist form of urban development.

The fieldwork is based on three different and independent research processes, which we bring together here to meet the paper's objectives. Two of them, on FUCVAM in Montevideo (2012) and MOI in the City of Buenos Aires (2016–2020) are previous pieces of research partially published and cited throughout this paper. Both cases have been updated. In addition, new fieldwork has been carried out for the case of Marinaleda (2020–2022). The three periods of research differ in date and extent but respond to similar objectives and share a common methodology based on qualitative interviews with key informants (Valles 2002), participatory observation (Guasch 1997), and documentary analysis (Hart 2008). The first piece of research consisted of a short period of participant observation (two weeks) in a FUCVAM cooperative in the centre of Montevideo (Ciudad Vieja), and seven qualitative interviews with key informants. The second piece of research consisted of a longitudinal analysis rooted in fieldwork based on a long period of participant observation (between the years 2013–2015 and 2018–2020) in spaces of MOI political and cooperative construction (in the City of Buenos Aires), and 15 in-depth qualitative interviews with key informants, MOI militants, and cooperative dwellers. Previous research on FUCVAM and MOI was updated and complemented for the present work with secondary sources on housing cooperatives in Europe and Latin America and with the analysis of documents produced by both organisations and public documents referring to housing policy. This complementary work allowed us to focus on the pathways of dissemination of housing policies and theories. In addition, between 2020 and 2022, the three authors conducted research on the case of Marinaleda, based on the analysis of documents and a series of six qualitative interviews.

We classified the interviews in the three cases into three main categories. Firstly, interviews with dwellers and households involved in the process of self-managed habitat production. Secondly, interviews with militants, meaning active participants in socio-political organisations: the federations of cooperatives FUCVAM and MOI and the union SOC (the dominant social and political organisations in the process of self-managed habitat production in Marinaleda). Sometimes, but not always, the cooperative members may be militants of these organisations. Finally, interviews with state technicians, meaning professionals (usually architects) working for local or national governments.

## **Self-Managed Habitat Production: From Europe to Latin America and Back Again**

### *The Cooperative Movement and the Relevance of the Swedish Case*

The first sign of modern socialist cooperativism was in the United Kingdom, where firstly Robert Owen and his followers, then the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, developed consumer cooperatives. Birchall (1991) states that among the proposals of this first cooperative movement were housing cooperatives, although they generally ended up as failed projects. The first successful experiments in England would have to wait until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In parallel, there were similar projects in Central and Northern Europe. Sazama (1996) states that the first formal housing cooperative was organised in Germany in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. In the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in many European countries cooperative initiatives aimed at housing working-class households, led by the state, trade unions, or Christian organisations, multiplied, predominantly in German-speaking and Scandinavian countries (*ibid.*), but also in Mediterranean Europe. Cooperative development is parallel in most of America. The first initiatives in Argentina date from the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Cravino 2016), as in the USA, where the formula was introduced by Scandinavian workers' communities (Sazama 1996). In contrast to other countries in the region, we have not found precedents for housing cooperatives related to labour movements in Uruguay before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but did find mutual aid societies and production cooperatives linked to labour movements (Muñoz 2011; Porrini 2011).

The Scandinavian housing cooperative movement has been referred to as one of the most successful in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Bengtsson 1992). The Swedish case is key here because of its influence on the later Uruguayan cooperative movement. The Swedish cooperative movement has its origin in the labour and tenants' movement of the 1920s, when several housing cooperative organisations were created. The dominant system of the Swedish cooperatives was institutionalised by the Swedish Tenant-Owner Act of 1930. In this system, the building is collectively owned, and dwellers have the right to take part in the decision-making and to use a share of the cooperative (a specific dwelling). It played a key role in national housing policies in Sweden after 1945. Cooperative housing organisations were part of the politically dominant labour movement, and the cooperative housing model was widely supported by social-democrat governments. Another key element was the creation by the cooperative movement of the Swedish Cooperative Centre (SCC) in 1958, to promote cooperativism outside Sweden, financing projects in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. Currently, Sweden has the largest share of cooperative housing in Europe along with Norway. About 50% of all multi-family buildings in Sweden are owned and operated by cooperatives (Vogel et al. 2016). However, after the 1980s, cooperative housing organisations (including the SCC) lost much of their socialist ideals and became more market oriented (Sørvoll and Bengtsson 2018). Current housing cooperatives are mostly built by professional developers and building owners are not involved in the decision-making process (Vogel et al. 2016).



## *From Sweden to Uruguay*

Housing cooperatives in Uruguay began with three pioneering experiences in 1966, promoted by the Centro Cooperativista Uruguayo, a group of highly politicised architecture and engineering professionals (Irrueta 2018). This background laid the foundations for the enactment of the Uruguay's National Housing Law in 1968, which developed the housing cooperatives formula. In May 1970, the first completed cooperative was inaugurated, and FUCVAM was born. The Uruguayan cooperative movement responds to a context of informal peripheral growth of Montevideo in self-constructed settlements, which inspired key elements of FUCVAM's mutual aid construction system, combined with the limitations of existing public housing policy (Lora Chapela 2017; Solanas 2016).

Gonzalez (2021) conducted a study on the first cadres of FUCVAM. He concludes the influence of socialist-Catholic and anarchist ideas; specifically, he refers to the intellectual influence of Piotr Kropotkin. FUCVAM was also influenced by European cooperatives. A few of the main cadres of the future cooperative movement travelled in the sixties, contacting cooperatives from North Europe. One of the main promoters of 1968 Uruguayan Housing Law, Juan Pablo Tierra, previously travelled to Sweden, where he learnt about their housing cooperative model (*ibid.*). Sometime after, a member of the commission for the study of the Uruguay's National Housing Law affirmed in a parliamentary debate that "Sweden gave us an important example of how the public authorities encouraged the formation of cooperatives for the construction and use of social housing" (cited in Solanas 2016:168).

FUCVAM cooperatives have strong similarities with Swedish ones. The Uruguayan law distinguishes between different cooperative models, but FUCVAM groups only mutual aid cooperatives, collectively owned (Lora Chapela 2017; Nahoum 2013). Similar to traditional Sweden cooperatives, in this system houses are owned by the FUCVAM cooperatives, and each member has the right to use and enjoy one of the dwellings for life. A key innovation, and a major difference with the Swedish cooperatives, is what FUCVAM calls "mutual aid". This refers to the construction system, where part of the indispensable skilled work is done by professional workers, but the unskilled work is a contribution of future dwellers, allowing a reduction of the final cost. In addition, the houses are distributed once the work has been completed, so that all the builders work together, without knowing a priori which house will be theirs.

The organisation between cooperatives is also slightly different. The organisation of new cooperatives in the Sweden model is made by a cooperative matrix, organisational spaces within the main cooperative organisations dedicated to the promotion of new housing cooperative projects. The concept of a cooperative matrix was included in Uruguay's 1968 Law. However, further practice in Uruguay resulted in smaller housing cooperatives grouped in federations (Sánchez-Laulhe et al. 2013).

Similar to the Swedish case, the success of the Uruguayan cooperative movement relies heavily on its institutional support from the state. The 1968 Uruguayan Housing Law established institutions providing technical and financial support for cooperatives: the Technical Assistance Institute and the National

Housing Fund (Solanas 2016). A particular innovation of the Uruguay cooperative model is directly connected to this state involvement. Since 1990, a public land and real estate portfolio was created in the department of Montevideo, providing land for cooperatives in the city centre. This allowed an innovative rehabilitation policy in the historic centre, based on cooperatives recycling old buildings and facilities. This policy had a strong commitment from the local authorities, but also from FUCVAM militants. The politics supporting this policy are directed against speculation and abandonment of historic neighbourhoods and the displacement of the working classes to peripheral areas (Díaz-Parra and Rabasco-Pozuelo 2013; Font 2000).

### ***From Uruguay to Latin America: The Argentine Squatters' and Tenants' Movement***

Since the 1980s, the FUCVAM model of mutual aid and self-managed habitat production has been exported to other Latin American countries. In the second half of the 1980s, FUCVAM began to meet many different collectives of diverse countries, mainly Brazilian and Argentinian (Solanas 2016:499). The first contacts with the SCC were also made in 1984. From then on, there was a constant exchange between the SCC and FUCVAM (ibid.). In early 2000, the expansion of Uruguay's housing cooperative model in several Central American countries began, accomplished through an alliance with the SCC (Gonzalez 2016; Nahoum 2013).

One of the most relevant and early experiences that drew inspiration from FUCVAM was the MOI, which began its activities in the city centre of Buenos Aires in the 1980s. The creation of MOI coincided with an intense wave of squatting by popular sectors in the heart of the city centre, facilitated by the political context at the end of the dictatorship (Carman 2005). Housing activists began to work with these groups of squatters in the city centre (many immigrants from neighbouring countries), promoting the self-organisation of families. Housing activists had the opportunity to learn about FUCVAM's cooperative model, which MOI specifically aims to replicate, especially with regards to its strategy of reclaiming abandoned buildings for recycling in the city centre. The anti-displacement discourse is central to MOI, as its original objectives were explicitly to provide stable housing for poor families in an urban centre impacted by strong speculative dynamics (Díaz-Parra 2018).

In 1990, MOI was officially created and, together with other sister organisations in Latin America, promoted the creation of the Latin American network SELVIHP (Secretaría Latinoamericana de la Vivienda y el Hábitat Popular [Latin American Secretariat for Housing and Popular Habitat]) to consolidate a regional network of organisations oriented toward the self-managed habitat production. In the early 1990s, MOI created 15 cooperatives involving 600 families, most of whom came from precarious habitat typologies (boarding houses, downgraded tenements, squatted properties) in the central area of the city (Rodríguez 2009). Towards the end of the 1990s, as a result of a dialogue with social organisations involved in the housing problem and the Legislature of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, Law 341 was passed, leading to the creation of the Self-Management Housing





**Figure 1:** El Molino, La Fábrica, and Yatay Cooperatives (source: Cecilia Zapata archive and provided by MOI, Argentina, 2020)

Programme. On a local scale, this legal framework reproduces some of the key elements of the Uruguayan 1968 Law, which allowed the success of FUCVAM. This programme also relies on a portfolio of public land and buildings provided by the municipality of Buenos Aires (in a similar way to the role of the municipality of Montevideo). The law was sanctioned in the context of strong civil unrest breaking out in Argentina around 2001, and empowerment of grassroots organisations committed especially to self-management and cooperative initiatives. Some of the MOI cooperatives developed in this framework can be seen in Figure 1.

Most of the cooperatives in this legal framework do not strictly follow a self-managed habitat production model; only cooperatives federated in the MOI and few other organisations do so. Similar to FUCVAM, MOI's cooperatives are collectively owned and members participate in the whole process, from the design to the final layout of houses, as well as in the construction process, providing unskilled work and reducing construction costs.

### ***From Latin America to Andalusia: Marinaleda***

The Andalusian self-construction programme emerged in the late 1980s, but Marinaleda's pilot experience began several years earlier. It dates to the first democratic town council. In Marinaleda, the first development of this type was carried out in 1982 thanks to occasional funding from the Spanish government, and the second in 1986 with the municipality's own funds and resources from a European aid programme. In both cases, the construction of houses was carried out collectively by the future dwellers, together with the voluntary work of the municipality population, which coincides to a large extent with what MOI and FUCVAM currently call mutual aid. In any case, the main political cadres in Marinaleda, interviewed for this study, did not recognise any influence from abroad.

The Andalusian government launched its Housing Self-Construction Plan in 1988 (PAV in Spanish). The transfer of housing powers from the state to the Andalusian government in 1984 and the previous experience in Marinaleda created the right context for experimentation and innovation, in which young civil servants and technicians from the left-wing urban militancy designed the initiative with the aim of extending it to other municipalities. The Andalusian government architects and urban planners took as a reference the Uruguayan cooperative model. Figure 2 shows an example of a neighbourhood developed within this framework.

Luis Gonzalez Tamarit, the main figure responsible for the PAV from its creation to its temporary suspension in 2008, interviewed for this work, confirmed that it took inspiration from the FUCVAM mutual aid model. In his opinion, the experiences are very similar. Gonzalez Tamarit and other left-wing architects travelled to Argentina and Uruguay in the 1980s and met FUCVAM cadres. From this date onwards, the first institutional contacts with the municipality of Montevideo were made. Between 1987 and 1989 there were various meetings and conferences in Seville, organised by the Andalusian government, also involving cooperative cadres from Uruguay (Solanas 2016:499–450; Waisman and Naselli 1989). In the words of another of the main technicians responsible for the PAV:

Andalusian self-construction developments owe much to the Uruguayan Federation of Mutual Aid Housing Cooperatives [FUCVAM], where this type of action was already being carried out many years ago. In this case, as in so many others, the real transfer has taken place from the South to the North. (Morano 2008:4)

From the Uruguayan experience, Andalusian technicians would have mainly adopted the idea of mutual aid and the issue of returnable public funding, which was a radical departure from existing housing programmes in the country (Lora Chapela 2017). The future dwellers in Marinaleda work together on the construction of the houses and beneficiaries are not assigned a specific individual residence a priori. On the contrary, even though it was the initial intention, the cooperative ownership model was not replicated. In the opinion of some PAV heads, the cooperative formula was too restrictive in the Spanish legal framework, and they preferred to legislate everything from scratch from the Andalusian government.



**Figure 2:** Collective self-built housing, Marinaleda, June 2022 (source: Cecilia Zapata archive)



**Figure 3:** Circularity case study (source: map by authors)

### ***Round Trip Policies***

We have illustrated a clear map of flows of urban practices and theories (see Figure 3). It begins in the old Northern European cooperative movement, travels to Latin America's Southern Cone, and back to the Southern European periphery. This set of practices and theories included solidarity-based construction of housing and collective control of the process and its theoretical interpretation as an alternative paradigm for urban development. The reproduction of the FUCVAM model by MOI militants is very clear. We have also seen the influence of FUCVAM on PAV technicians. However, the case of Marinaleda shows particularities. Dwellers, militants, and technicians would not refer to a previous experience that first influenced the developments in Marinaleda, but the tradition of collective and solidary self-construction of Andalusian day labourers and the strong communist-libertarian tradition in this region. Further institutionalisation and rationalisation of the process by the Andalusian government took the Uruguayan cooperative movement as a reference point. The links between the cases are thus deeper than the mere occasional dissemination of a particular policy, and we must look for connections in earlier or even beyond socialist and anti-capitalist traditions.

### **Comparative Analysis** ***Local or, rather, Universal?***

The link with socialism and the labour movement is evident in the interviews and documents of FUCVAM and MOI. Their militants are usually also involved in



labour unions and left-wing socialist parties. Besides, the key concepts used by these housing organisations to describe their practices, such as self-management and mutual aid, also have their origin in the 20<sup>th</sup> century labour movement. The idea of self-management (*autogestión* in Spanish) is a practice that gained weight from the 1960s onwards within Western European left radicalism, originally imported from the Yugoslav socialist experience, to refer to the organisation of factories in cooperative formulae under workers' control (Guillerm and Bourdet 1976). Later, it spread to other areas, including the organisation of housing production. On the other hand, "mutual aid" was developed by Piotr Kropotkin (1902) and widely used by the Russian and Spanish communist-libertarian movements of the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This terminology is also very present in the Latin American socialist tradition. Notably, in describing Inca communism Mariátegui (1976:83) uses the terms cooperation, federation, and mutual aid (*ayuda mutua*).

The term "mutual aid" was present in the documents of the PAV (Morano 2008), but is not commonly used by grassroots militants and dwellers in Marinaleda. However, SOC can be seen as one of the main descendants of the old communist-libertarian Andalusian movement, which was hegemonic among day labourers until the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). They are not using the cooperative formula nor the organisation in federations, but the ideological influence of cooperativism is strong, nevertheless. In the interviews, some dwellers referred their neighbourhoods as cooperatives, even if the PAV did not use this legal term.

FUCVAM brings socialist and anarchist-communist concepts to the dialogue with the practices of self-construction of popular classes in Montevideo. Much of the explanation for the success of the FUCVAM model is linked by militants to Latin American particularities. For FUCVAM, as well as for MOI militants, self-management and mutual aid would be a formula to which Latin American working classes adapt easily because it is a traditional way in which they have had access to housing. A considerable part of today's large Latin American cities has its origin in self-construction, usually supported by solidary work of family and neighbourhood networks. In addition, MOI, as well as FUCVAM militants, state that the greater adaptation of Latin American peoples to cooperatives and collective ownership would be linked to pre-Columbian cultures, where land would constitute a common good for collective use.

There are also relevant similarities in the discourse regarding local referents between the Marinaleda, MOI, and FUCVAM experiences (see Table 1). In the SOC militants' opinion, demand for self-management and mutual aid is part of the ideological background of the Andalusian day labourers' movement. Furthermore, collective self-construction carried out by family and social networks is a traditional form of access to housing for the working classes in Andalusia, especially in rural areas (Urbanía 2015:257), but it was also relevant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century growth of large Andalusian cities like Seville (Marin 1980). Both the local actors involved in the Marinaleda programme and the Andalusian government documents on the experience state that PAV was partially inspired by the tradition of self-construction in Andalusia.

**Table 1:** Comparative cases (source: authors' elaboration)

	FUCVAM	MOI	MARINALEDA
<b>Ideological and theoretical referents</b>	<p>Swedish cooperative model</p> <p>Cooperative movement, anarchist-communism, socialism</p> <p>Traditional uses of Indigenous/pre-Hispanic societies; construction of precarious settlements in LA cities by working class</p> <p>Cooperative assembly</p> <p>Federation of cooperatives</p>	FUCVAM	<p>Traditional uses of rural day labourers and working class in Andalusia</p> <p>Assembly of builders</p> <p>Marinaleda's town assembly; SOC</p>
<b>Spatial anti-capitalist practices</b>	<p>Collective work of dwellers + paid professional work; distribution of dwellings at the end of the process</p> <p>Collective</p>		<p>Collective resignation to private ownership titles</p> <p>Housing Self-Construction Plan (1988)</p>
<b>Institutionalisation</b>	<p>1968 National Housing Law</p> <p>Provision of soft loans and subsidies by the state</p> <p>Technical assistance paid by the state loan</p>	Law 341 (2000)	<p>Direct provision of technical assistance by regional and local government</p> <p>Free transfer of public land to builders</p> <p>Low impact on the regional level but hegemonic in Marinaleda</p>
<b>Results and limits</b>	<p>Private land and public land, paid by the loan</p> <p>High rate of households in the whole country</p> <p>It depends on the cooperative or the builders' assembly; the ideological commitment and sense of community among the inhabitants is usually lost after the construction process is completed</p>	<p>Low relevance in the city or the country</p> <p>Limitations to go beyond local scale; highly localised impact</p>	
	<p>Long-term stability</p>		

## *Spatial Anti-Capitalist Practices and Institutional Supportive Contexts*

The use of future dwellers' unskilled work as a way of reducing costs, as well as the distribution of the dwellings when the building is finished, seem to be a main innovation of FUCVAM transmitted to MOI and the Andalusian PAV. Future dwellers contribute with a mix of savings and unskilled construction work, while the necessary skilled work is developed by professional workers. In the construction process, the future inhabitants do not know which home will be theirs until the project is completed, at which point housing is allocated based on household needs and the decision of the cooperative or dwellers' assembly. This is very similar in all three cases with some particularities. The criteria of the assemblies to distribute dwellings may be slightly different, considering savings and work performances, amongst other elements. MOI integrates a construction workers' cooperative that is hired by most of the housing cooperatives integrated into the federation. From its side, Marinaleda's local government gives tools free of charge to the future dwellers and aid from municipal skilled workers, including the municipal architect.

Another key element in common is control of the full process of building by the dwellers—what they refer to as self-management. In the three cases, control of the whole process of design, construction, and distribution of the dwellings is in the hands of future dwellers. This element has been disappearing in the Swedish model according to research on the case (Vogel et al. 2016). Future dwellers organise themselves democratically in a cooperative assembly (MOI and FUCVAM) or builders' assembly (Marinaleda) that is sovereign. Federations like FUCVAM and MOI have their own operating rules that new cooperatives have to follow, while in Marinaleda consensual rules have been developed over the years and compiled into a code (Candón-Mena and Domínguez-Jaime 2020).

With regards to collective ownership, in all cases there are at least mechanisms to put limits to private ownership and speculation on housing. In FUCVAM and MOI cooperatives, similar to the Sweden model, the building is collectively owned, and builders have a cession of use on their dwellings for their whole lives, that can be inherited and even sold without profit (first they must offer the housing to the cooperative assembly). In the PAV, the local state can retain ownership of the land, but not of the dwellings, which are transferred to the households after the construction process. In Marinaleda (also in other villages), on the one hand, the municipality retains ownership of the land. On the other hand, the builders' assemblies have so far agreed to renounce private ownership. To ensure this, the builders' assemblies collectively agree not to register the ownership of the buildings.

Self-management, mutual aid, and collectivism are spatial practices in dialogue with the effects of capitalist urban development. In all three cases, the starting points are situations of indignity, of material need to which subaltern groups are relegated by the capitalist organisation of space: the popular masses who cannot access the housing market in Montevideo, squatters and immigrants in Buenos Aires, and day labourers in rural areas of Andalusia. On the one hand, mutual aid allows poor households to live in better locations and better houses than if they



were self-constructing on their own. On the other hand, collective ownership is presented as insurance against displacement provoked by increasing land prices (in the city centres of Buenos Aires and Montevideo), or at least to fight land speculation (Marinaleda).

These three cases consolidate their self-managed habitat production experiences in supportive political contexts. State involvement is completely essential in all three cases, as it is key for the legislative progress, financing, acquisition of land, and technical assistance. Credit is granted through public institutions, at low interest rates, and with a long repayment period (25–30 years) (Solanas 2016; Zapata 2017). The credit pays for public or private land, construction materials, and skilled and technical labour. The state provides public land portfolios for cooperatives in Uruguay and in the city of Buenos Aires. Within the PAV, land for development can be publicly owned or acquired from third parties and subsequently sold or given free of charge to future dwellers. In the case of Marinaleda, the municipality provides the land for free, as well as technical services, so the loan is only necessary for construction materials. Besides, some of the self-managed neighbourhoods of Marinaleda have been supported directly by non-refundable European Union development aid (Candón-Mena and Domínguez-Jaime 2020). In every case, these anti-capitalist practices are realised through articulation with state institutions. In the words of MOI militants, “self-management is a struggle for people to manage these state resources that belong to them”.

### **Results and Limits**

The success of the Uruguay cooperative movement is unmatched by any other case in Latin America, or by the PAV of Andalusia. Today, much of the new housing is still made throughout the FUCVAM model of mutual aid and self-management. As of 2019, housing cooperativism in Uruguay has enabled the construction of 53,265 dwellings (including those built and under construction between 2011 and 2019) throughout the country. This value—in 2019—represents 4.27% of the country's total housing stock (1,247,820 dwellings). In terms of state housing production, cooperatives represent 45.3% of the housing constructed (Bozzo et al. 2022). Of this total, according to data published by FUCVAM, this organisation has so far enabled the construction of 610 cooperatives (approx. 23,600 dwellings) throughout Uruguay (FUCVAM 2023). Currently, 95% of cooperatives are collectively owned and more than 80% are built through mutual aid (Lora Chapela 2017). Uruguay shares some conditions of other countries in Latin America in relation to a large part of the population being excluded from the formal capitalist market of housing and credit, while this has ceased to be a major problem in Andalusia. The development of the model in Uruguay was made at a key moment for the country, in a context of demographic growth and immigration flows self-constructing precarious settlements in the periphery of Montevideo and interventionist governments in Latin America. In contrast, the self-management model arrived in other Latin American countries, including Argentina, in a different context, against the backdrop of the consolidation of

neoliberalism. This neoliberal context explains MOI's highly localised experience, but also that of Marinaleda, and its limitations to go beyond the local scale.

In Buenos Aires, only 45 cooperatives (1,261 housing units) managed to acquire land and build under Law 341. Unlike Uruguay, the implementation of this policy has not been prioritised by the different government administrations over traditional centralised production (Zapata 2017). In Buenos Aires, the accession of a right-wing government in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the inflationary land market have made it very difficult to create new housing cooperatives in the last 15 years. The self-managed cooperative system currently represents 0.07% of the existing housing stock in the city and approximately 0.6% of the new housing built in this period.<sup>5</sup> Besides, despite being one of the main policy objectives of the MOI, national legislation supporting this model of habitat production has not yet been passed.

In the Andalusian case, it is necessary to differentiate the success of the PAV from the experience of Marinaleda. The Andalusian PAV managed to build 5,000 houses, but its usefulness was exhausted at the end of the 1990s. According to the technicians in charge of the programme, (neoliberal) economic development since the 1980s has been changing the practices of the Andalusian popular classes, favouring a type of access to housing based on private credit (Morano 2008). The collective construction system has covered up to 90% of new housing in the municipality of Marinaleda and has continued to build even when the PAV was suspended, between 2008 and 2020. However, it has not managed to spread outside the cities where the rural day labourers' union (SOC) is hegemonic, or to other territories in Spain.

The anti-capitalist character of these urban practices is evident in their limitations. On the one hand, the exacerbation of market logic makes it harder for these experiences to work. The development of a capitalist housing market in Europe has been the end of many of these traditional forms of solidarity in Andalusia and has turned the Nordic housing cooperative movement into big housing corporations without any kind of socialist aspirations (Sánchez-Laulhe et al. 2013). The strong speculative market of Buenos Aires and the turn of political conditions seem to be determinant of the stagnation of MOI. On the other hand, militants express similar concerns in all three cases, referring to the loss of ideological commitment and sense of community among dwellers once the building process is over. Once households have their place, they tend to be less interested in collective management (Díaz-Parra 2018).

## Discussion: On Radical Theory

The postcolonial critique of the universalisation of capital assumes the emergence of a homogeneous social landscape. This lack of homogeneity is taken as a refutation of the universalisation (Chakrabarty 2009). However, the universalising tendency of capital, as Chibber (2013) shows, can homogenise under certain conditions, and ignore or even produce differences in others. The controversy over the misinterpretation of abstract labour as homogenising labour exemplifies this problem (Lowe 1992). A similar misinterpretation could take place with

Lefebvre's (1991) idea of abstract space. In Lefebvre's view, the production of space is universal. Each society produces space, its "own" particular space. The space of capitalism is the abstract space characterised, not by a formally homogeneous space, but by the imposition of commodification and the fragmentation of private property (Lefebvre 1991). The diversity and particularity of space is subordinate to the commodifying logic of capital without being formally homogenised.

Equally diverse is opposition to this logic, which is not unrelated to universalist aspirations. Some types of universals have been the basis of internationalist socialist or communist movements in the last two centuries. However diverse they may be, some form of traditional collectivist organisation of labour and space is a basic reference for any communist project, from the primitive communism of Marx and Engels, to the Inca collectivism of Mariátegui, to the traditional forms of cooperation and mutual aid in Siberia observed by Kropotkin.

At the same time, current struggles against capitalism are diverse and locally embedded, but they have historically shared the aspiration for a post-capitalist future for the peoples of the world. Concepts such as cooperativism, self-management, and mutual aid capture the spatiality of these post-capitalist aspirations. These concepts together define a spatial project (in the sense expressed by Madden [2014]), drawing on the practices of working and popular classes in different parts of the world and at different times in dealing with the consequences of capitalist development. Robert Owen's theoretical and activist work on cooperativism is at the origin of modern socialism, which is a response to the conditions of the working class in industrial England. Kropotkin (1902) develops the concepts of mutual aid, autonomy (very close to the more recent self-management), and federalism from his observations of human communities during his period as a geographer and from his political practice in promoting anarcho-syndicalism. Mariátegui (1976) also depicts Inca cooperative and federative practices as a form of resistance against colonial and capitalist domination.

As we have already noted in the introduction, we find in postcolonial thought a rejection of universalism, as well as proposals for a more cosmopolitan theory. From a Marxist perspective, all theory (philosophy, ideology, or system of thought) is related to concrete practices. Theory about space is within the social and lived space itself (Lefebvre 1991). A cosmopolitan theory (Robinson 2011) must respond to concrete cosmopolitan practices. Liberal cosmopolitanism has been the ideological accompaniment of global capitalist development for more than two centuries (Achcar 2013). Similarly, cosmopolitan urban theory responds to such cosmopolitan processes, either apologetically (liberal theory) or critically (e.g. Marxist theory). A critical analysis of capitalist urban development, as a cosmopolitan and universalising practice, need not be at odds with the study of particularity and concrete struggles.

Cases presented in this work make clear that the particularity of culture and geography and the universal aspirations of socialism do not contradict but complement each other. A theorisation based on these particular, diverse, but internationalist and connected practices would be the most interesting option for authors interested in concrete anti-capitalist struggles in diverse places (Carroza-Athens and Grosfogel 2023) who want to go beyond a simple description of the

irreducible particularities of each urban casuistry. Popular struggles are not alien to the universalising tendency of capitalism, nor to state institutions. On the contrary, such examples of struggles are linked by their confrontation with capitalist logic and as part of the historical popular attempts to make the state a mechanism for emancipation (Cadahia and Coronel 2023).

Revolutionary theory, in its radical meaning (Harvey 2009), cannot be just a new enumeration of the injustices of capitalist urban development, but the construction of a new revolutionary paradigm with the ultimate objective of progressive social change. It begins with the criticism of existing theory and the construction of categories and concepts related to concrete processes of social change.

A comparative study of three cases is not a sufficient basis for theoretical generalisations. However, it does allow for a better understanding of the processes under evaluation and for questioning certain theoretical assumptions. In particular, the case provides empirical evidence to reject the idea of universalising tendencies within urban development as being driven solely by the Eurocentric and colonial impulse of capitalism. In our case study there are universalising expectations that are not based on capitalist and colonial urban practices, but on their opposite.

Moreover, a case study such as the one presented here allows for the construction of new and more solid theoretical propositions that can be further developed and discussed in future works. In this respect, there are two fundamental assertions that emerge from this research. Firstly, a certain type of collective and solidary self-construction is a universal form of production of the space, common to any culture at a given time and a type of production of space that can disappear under the commodifying and industrial dynamics of building construction, but which may remain in other cases ignored or even functional for capitalist urbanisation. This claim is consistent with a critical theory of capitalist urban development and the present study offers empirical material to support it, although it must of course be discussed further.

Secondly, concepts such as self-management, mutual aid, or cooperativism, which are part of the recent history of socialism, refer to these pre-capitalist forms of spatial production and the solidarity that generates them, while at the same time implying a paradigm of urban development that actively opposes a capitalist one. The ideas of Owen, Kropotkin, or Mariátegui are rooted in the revolutionary practices of their respective eras. Today, they are part of the stock of radical urban theory, and as we show in this study, they continue to guide anti-capitalist spatial practice. These formulae directly oppose the objective and symbolic aggressions of capitalist urban development: displacement, deprivation, spatial alienation, and so on. Self-managed habitat production is a potentially universal practice based on cooperation and mutual aid, which draws on aspects of pre-capitalist societies as well as learning from confronting current capitalist development.

In the spatial practice of FUCVAM, MOI, and Marinaleda, traditional self-building is the basis and is integrated for the development of a self-managed habitat production. This relationship is very similar to the relationship between Inca (primitive) communism and communism as a political project, explained by

Mariátegui (1976) as a dialectic between past and future. Mariátegui saw the communalist traditions of Latin American indigenous peoples as a potential starting point for a utopian project (Lowy 2008:9–10). Self-building and self-managed habitat production respond to a similar dialectic in the experience of FUCVAM, MOI, and Marinaleda.

## Conclusions

One of the best-known cultural expressions of Andalusia and its neighbouring territories is *flamenco*. This cultural phenomenon includes many styles of singing. Some of them are called *cantes de ida y vuelta* (“roundtrip songs”), as they arise from Andalusian folkloric traditions that arrived in America during the period of the Spanish monarchy’s rule and returned transformed by their fusion with Creole and Afro-American culture. *Palos* such as the *milonga*, the *rumba*, the *colombiana*, the *guajira*, or the *habaneras* of Cádiz arise from the fusion of *flamenco* with Caribbean rhythms and Spanish-American popular music. We have lived in an interconnected world for a long time, with complex relations between territories and cultural exchanges, and this is also applicable to urban practices and theories.

We have shown here how the theory and practice of self-managed habitat production has spread across different regions in a multidirectional way. We have demonstrated that this process of diffusion is far from any unidirectional flow from an active core to a passive periphery. The opposite is more accurate in this case. Also, we do not find here an imported and exported, copied, or imposed model, but a set of practices and ideas that are researched and selected by social organisations, adapted for better or worse to different contexts, and transformed in this process, generating diverse and innovative forms.

However, these patterns of spread do not escape an unequal and hierarchical global pathway that conditions the flows of ideas and policies. Development cooperation projects organised by institutions in central countries are involved in the flow processes. Cooperative practices and discourses have part of their origins in Northern Europe, and this geostrategic position is undoubtedly related to the capacity of institutions such as the Swedish Cooperation Centre to promote the development of certain policies. Similarly, the position of the young progressive technicians of the Andalusian government, in the context of European integration, allows them a certain freedom of experimentation and provides them with resources. These structures have to do with a geopolitical and geoeconomic structure, with core and peripheral regions, which is based on a colonial heritage.

This is also key to the results of the various experiences and the possibilities of disseminating these practices. Capitalist urban development tends to erase traditional solidarity practices in habitat production, not by creating a formal homogeneous space, but by replacing them with market practices and institutions. The limitations detected in the experiences of MOI and Marinaleda respond to periods of intense development of capitalist land, housing, and credit markets. The self-managed habitat production can be a massive housing policy in urban regions and historical contexts where collective and solidarity-based self-construction is

still relevant and market logics encounter more obstacles to their functioning. In this trend, this experience would fit especially well in urban areas of peripheral regions of global capitalism where it would be an effective tool for socio-spatial transformation. In contexts with highly developed land and credit markets, self-managed housing production is a very localised and limited experience and can only contribute to improving the living conditions of marginal parts of the population. For self-managed housing production to become a massive experience, as in Uruguay, it would be necessary to subvert the dominant market logics of land, housing, and resource allocation.

Regardless of the ways and possibilities of their dissemination and the resulting diversity of forms, the set of practices and theories analysed in this paper contain the universal aspirations of the socialist tradition applied to the production of space. In this trend, self-managed habitat production is a practical and theoretical anti-capitalist urban paradigm, key to the development of a critical cosmopolitan theory.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Federación Uruguaya de Cooperativas de Vivienda por Ayuda Mutua: <https://www.fucvam.org.uy/>

<sup>2</sup> Movimiento de Ocupantes e Inquilinos: <https://moi.org.ar/>

<sup>3</sup> Sindicato de Obreros del Campo: <https://www.marinaleda.es/es/ayuntamiento/Sindicato/>

<sup>4</sup> Chibber and other current Marxists speak on universalism not as preexistent and objective essence of humanity but as an historical process or project (for an updated discussion on universalism, see Žižek [2009] or Balibar [2020]).

<sup>5</sup> These percentages were calculated based on data provided by the 2022 National Census of Population, Households, and Housing, and data provided by the Institute of Housing of the City of Buenos Aires.

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