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BEYOND INFORMALITY: CULTURAL MEANINGS, MORAL ECONOMY, AND GENDER AUTONOMY IN THE POPULAR TRADE OF BOGOTÁ AND OTAVALO

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes informal trade in two urban contexts of the Global South: Bogotá (Colombia) and Otavalo (Ecuador). From the perspective of economic anthropology opposed to the traditional economicist bias, we argue that the informal economy does not constitute a simple anomaly or a precarious survival strategy. Through an ethnographic methodology based on life stories and thick vignettes, it is demonstrated that this trade operates as a moral and symbolic system where notions of dignity, belonging, and sovereignty over time are contested. Crucially, fieldwork with female traders reveals that popular commerce is a vehicle for emancipation and subjectivation against subordinating formal structures: "freedom of work and life" and the rejection of managerial authority ("having no bosses") emerge as the cultural rationality that organizes and drives these economies from below.

Keywords: Economic anthropology, Moral economy, Labor autonomy, Popular trade, Global South.

1 INTRODUCTION

The recognition as late as the 1970s that informal economic activities do not necessarily represent an anarchic chaos, but rather a structured system of opportunities for the populations that practice them (1), invites anthropology to question the varied cultural meanings that the popular economy acquires according to its social context. Traditionally, orthodox economic sciences have conceptualized informality through a narrative of deficit: a structural anomaly, a residue of underdevelopment, or a mechanism for fiscal and institutional evasion. This economicist bias reduces the practices of millions of workers in the Global South to mere algebraic strategies for biological and precarious survival, stripping subjects of their capacity for agency, symbolic production, and ethical deliberation.

Faced with this reductionist reading, this article aims to analyze informal trade in two markedly different Andean urban contexts: the city of Bogotá – Locality of Teusaquillo (Colombia) and the municipality of Otavalo (Ecuador). The relevance of this comparison lies in their historical trajectories and socio-spatial configurations: while in Bogotá street

trade is commonly associated with the urban *rebusque* (makeshift livelihood) in a fragmented and hostile public space, in Otavalo trade is firmly articulated with an indigenous transnational tradition, ancestral fairs, and dense Kichwa kinship networks.

Our central research question asks: How does the informal economy in Bogotá and Otavalo operate not only as a material subsistence strategy, but as a moral system and a vehicle for practical autonomy that redefines work, dignity, and gender?

We hold as an interpretive hypothesis that popular commerce in both contexts transcends the logic of precariousness to constitute a space for female subjectivation and emancipation. Through a qualitative methodology based on life stories and thick ethnographic vignettes, we demonstrate that "freedom of work and life" and the explicit rejection of managerial subordination ("having no bosses") emerge as the fundamental cultural rationality that endows these economies from below with meaning and moral legitimacy.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF POPULAR TRADE

To understand informal trade in Bogotá and Otavalo beyond indices of precariousness or tax evasion, it is imperative to turn to a theoretical platform that situates economic action within the fabric of social relations and local value systems. In this essay, this platform is built from the conceptual intersection between Karl Polanyi's (2) notion of embeddedness and James C. Scott's (3) proposal of moral economy.

Karl Polanyi (2) argued that, historically, the human economy has not functioned autonomously as a self-regulated market detached from society, but has been deeply "embedded" within social, religious, political, and kinship institutions. From this perspective, the exchange of commodities does not respond solely to the rational maximization of individual utility (*Homo economicus*), but to logics of reciprocity, redistribution, and forms of collective subsistence. When transferring this approach to the contemporary popular trade of Bogotá and Otavalo, we observe that street and fair transactions do not occur in a cultural vacuum. On the contrary, they are regulated by customary norms, neighborhood alliances, and kinship ties that dictate who can sell, where, under what codes of mutual respect, and how risk is managed. The space of the street and the market is not conceptualized as a legal vacuum, but as a field of moral ambiguity regulated by alternate codes (4,5). This relational web is reinforced by specific forms of associative social capital, transforming family, neighborhood, and ethnic networks of trust into solid commercial infrastructure (6).

Likewise, this commercial framework cannot be separated from the critical axes of the coloniality of labor and racialization. Following Quijano (7) and Mbembe (8), the informal economy of the Global South frequently functions as a space where the hierarchies of a racialized and stratified labor market intersect, pushing historically subaltern populations to develop economies of precariousness and lives exposed "to the elements".

For his part, E.P. Thompson (9) complements this vision through the concept of moral economy, originally developed to analyze popular societies facing the penetration of market capitalism, conceived as economic practices evaluated according to criteria of social justice and the notion that all members of a community have the right to secure their elemental material reproduction.

Scott (3,10) would deepen this concept, demonstrating the existence of a "subsistence ethic": a shared social agreement according to which all members of a community have the moral right to secure their elemental material and biological reproduction. When the formal structures of the State or the corporate market fail to guarantee this subsistence—or worse, when they threaten it through punitive regulations or labor exclusion—subaltern populations deploy what Scott (10) terms "everyday forms of resistance." These resistances do not necessarily manifest in open revolutions, but rather in silent, persistent, and collectively legitimized infractions, such as occupying public space to work or trade outside of official legality. This constant tension with institutional alterity reveals that the State frequently operates at its own margins, managing the street ambivalently by producing and tolerating informality at the same time it sanctions and persecutes it (11).

By crossing both authors, "informality" in Bogotá and Otavalo ceases to be a macroeconomic anomaly and is revealed as a structured ethical-social response. Scott's (3) moral economy provides the justification of social justice that traders assign to their practices against a legal order that excludes them. In turn, Polanyi's (2) embeddedness allows us to understand the practical mechanisms through which that justification operates: through community networks, cultural heritages of exchange, and, fundamentally, the autonomous management of one's own time and labor. The informal market thus becomes a social field where the economy is reappropriated by the actors to serve life, dignity, and domestic sovereignty, challenging the alienating disembeddedness of the contemporary formal market.

3 ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of this research is inscribed within the interpretive and comparative ethnography of classical economic anthropology. Far from aiming for a statistical quantification of financial transactions or a macroeconomic mapping of the informal sector, the methodological design was oriented toward capturing the density of local meanings, biographical trajectories, and moral justifications that the female actors assign to their daily work practices. To this end, a light-methods and thick-vignettes approach was chosen, a highly effective methodological resource for the analysis of anthropological essays, as it privileges the semantic depth of ordinary discourses over the extensive accumulation of homogenized data.

The fieldwork was developed in parallel in two comparable spatial units, purposefully and qualitatively selecting the participants under the following criteria and techniques:

3.1 Units of analysis and spatial contexts

- **In Bogotá – Teusaquillo Locality (Colombia):** The observation scenario focused on the commercial center of the Teusaquillo locality, in the neighborhood of the same name (Park Way sector). We worked with street vendors and traders with semi-fixed stalls in public spaces, characterized by high pedestrian saturation and constant tension with municipal control regulations.
- **In Otavalo (Ecuador):** The ethnographic epicenter was located along the Pan-American Highway that crosses the entire city from south to north, with peripheral vendors. Here, we interacted with traders dedicated to selling cold soft drinks.

3.2 Data collection techniques

The architecture of the fieldwork was sustained by three fundamental ethnographic tools:

- **Brief participant observation:** Short periods of accompaniment were carried out during the traders' workdays (setting up the stall, interacting with clients, neighborhood dynamics, and packing up). This allowed for contrasting discursive narratives with actual practices of solidarity, risk management, and disputes over space.
- **Informal conversations at the workplace:** Spontaneous dialogue was privileged, taking advantage of moments with low customer influx. These light interactions proved crucial for mitigating the researcher's distance and capturing daily discourses in their natural environment, where concepts like "honest work," "*rebusque*," or "daily struggle" emerge more fluidly.
- **In-depth interviews and focused life stories:** Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with female traders who met the profile of primary drivers of the domestic economy. The thematic axes explored included: previous work trajectories in the formal sector, motivations for entering independent trade, family support networks, relationships with authority figures (police and municipality), and subjective meanings of labor freedom.

3.3 Analytical categories for comparative analysis

To guarantee the rigor of the comparative exercise between two culturally diverse realities, textual and observational data were coded and analyzed using a matrix of homologous categories:

- Dignified work versus "illegal" work (moral legitimacy).
- Perception of risk and urban uncertainty.
- Networks of trust, reputation, and associative social capital.
- Relationship with institutional alterity (the police, the boss, and the municipality).
- Labor affects: pride versus shame in the practice of commerce.

Finally, the process of collecting and editing the testimonies presented in this article followed strict verbal informed consent protocols, guaranteeing the anonymity of the participants through the use of pseudonyms (such as Doña Carmen and Sayri), thereby safeguarding their security and integrity in contexts where economic informality often borders on margins of legal vulnerability.

4 EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: VOICES OF AUTONOMY AND FREEDOM OF LIFE IN BOGOTÁ AND OTAVALO

The data collected through in-depth interviews with female traders in Bogotá and Otavalo reveal a fundamental empirical finding that shatters victimizing narratives of economic development: the primary motivation for remaining

in informality, above and beyond merely obtaining income, is the conquest of personal autonomy and sovereignty over one's life time.

Despite the geographical and cultural distances separating the *rebusque* in the crowded streets of the Teusaquillo locality in Bogotá from the beverage vendors on the highway crossing Otavalo, the testimonies radically converge in their rejection of managerial authority and in valuing labor freedom as an undeniable pillar of gender dignity.

4.1 The case of Bogotá: Dignity against urban rebusque and exploitation

In the context of Bogotá, the popular urban economy is often marked by the hostility of public space and institutional persecution. However, for women working independently on the streets or in semi-fixed stalls, street trade represents a line of defense against the exploitation and humiliation they previously experienced in precarious salaried jobs, such as domestic service, cleaning, or outsourced services.

4.2 Testimony of Doña Carmen (54 years old, street vendor in the Teusaquillo locality, Park Way sector)

"I worked for almost ten years cleaning offices for a cleaning company. The salary wasn't enough for anything, but the worst part wasn't the money; it was the treatment. The bosses look at you as if you were invisible or a piece of trash, they yell at you, they adjust your shifts however they feel like, and if you ask for permission because a child got sick, the response is that if you don't like it, you can leave. One day I said no more. I came to the street with a few boxes of cigarettes, cookies, chocolates, candies, coffee, and then over time, cell phone items. I've been here for fifteen years. Does the police bother us? Yes, of course, the street is hard and you always have to be running. But look, here the business is mine. Nobody is ordering me around, nobody yells at me, I don't have a boss on top of me messing up my life. If my daughter needs me, I close the stall and go. I wouldn't trade that freedom of being the owner of my time and my body for any minimum wage from a company."

This testimony vividly illustrates the moral economy thesis: the occupation of the street is morally justified because it restores the dignity and sovereignty that the formal labor market destroys. The absence of a boss becomes the primary indicator that the work is, finally, "honest" and one's own.

4.3 The case of Otavalo: Youth, public space, and self-governance at traffic lights

In the context of Otavalo, informal street trade along road axes and traffic lights introduces a highly rich generational and gender dimension for economic anthropology. Unlike the traditional dynamics of established fairs, young indigenous women contesting the vehicular traffic space face a double exposure: climate and traffic vulnerability, and the tensions inherent to public visibility within a stratified urban structure. Nonetheless, for new generations of Kichwa women, this modality of trade is not experienced as social degradation, but rather as a flexible platform that allows them to finance their modern lifestyles and safeguard their individual projects against the rigidity of a subordinating salaried labor market.

4.4 Testimony of Sayri (24 years old, street vendor of bottled water, ice cream, and soft drinks at the traffic lights of the main road in Otavalo):

"I sell here at the traffic light when the cars stop. I sell cold water, sodas, and ice cream to the drivers and to the people passing by on the buses. Sometimes I feel a bit ashamed because I'm a shy person, I don't like speaking much in public or drawing attention to myself. But this job gives me something that no other job can give me: freedom. Before this, I looked for work in shops and restaurants downtown, but they want to pay you a pittance, they control what time you enter, what time you leave, and you have to tolerate the bosses ordering you around all the time with a bad face. I don't want to have bosses in my life. At the traffic light, the money I earn is for me. I decide which days I come and what time I leave. Thanks to that freedom, in my free time I can go to the gym to exercise, which is what I like, and plan my things without accounting to anyone. Being the owner of my time is being the owner of my own life."

Sayri's account is deeply revealing for the theoretical frameworks of Polanyi and Scott. Although the economic activity takes place in a space of high transience and urban friction (the vehicular traffic light), and despite the emotional barrier of her individual shyness, the moral justification of her work remains anchored in the ethical principle of autonomous subsistence. Sayri does not pursue capitalist accumulation or insertion into the canons of formal corporate success; she uses the informal market as a tool for youth and gender emancipation. The flexible scheduling of the traffic light allows her to "embed" her economic activity with contemporary practices of personal care and urban leisure—such as her regular attendance at the gym—demonstrating that informality among Otavaleño youth functions as a tactical space of freedom, where the absence of a managerial employer is the *sine qua non* condition for the sovereign design of her future.

5 ANALYTICAL DISCUSSION: THE EMBEDDEDNESS OF AUTONOMY AND EVERYDAY RESISTANCES

The ethnographic testimonies of Doña Carmen in Bogotá and Sayri in Otavalo force us to displace the analytical frontiers of traditional economic anthropology. By crossing Karl Polanyi's (2) theoretical contributions on embeddedness and James C. Scott's (3,10) on moral economy, the voices of these women cease to be mere chronicles of urban marginality to become powerful manifestos of alternative economic rationality and modern subjectivation.

In the case of Bogotá, Doña Carmen's account harshly exposes the validity of Scott's (3) moral economy. For her, the transition from precarious formal salaried employment to street vending does not respond to a failure, but rather to a tactical retreat from humiliation and the stripping of her dignity within the legalized corporate market. Labor formality operated as a device of subordination that alienated her time and punished her caregiving responsibilities. By occupying urban space, she performs a "silent infraction" that is morally justified. The statement that "I wouldn't trade that freedom of being the owner of my time and my body for any minimum wage" demonstrates that, in the popular economy of Bogotá, the use-value of time sovereignty far exceeds the exchange-value of a fixed but alienating salary.

For its part, Sayri's testimony in Otavalo introduces a generational twist that redefines Polanyi's (2) concept of social embeddedness. Unlike classical readings that tie the indigenous economy exclusively to ancestral fairs or traditional kinship networks, Sayri's experience at the vehicular traffic light demonstrates how new Kichwa generations employ urban informality to embed their economic needs within aspirations of popular modernity and individual development.

Despite her constitutive shyness and the natural "shame" generated by exposure in the public roadway space, the traffic light is transformed through her agency into a territory of self-governance. For a 24-year-old woman in the contemporary socio-economic order, the informal market is not a condemnation to precariousness, but a platform of resistance against assimilation and exploitation in low-paying salaried jobs. The flexible hours of street commerce allow Sayri to articulate material subsistence with projects of personal self-realization outside the labor circuit, such as attending the gym in her free time and shaping her own daily life.

When contrasting both testimonies through the lenses of Polanyi and Scott, it becomes evident that the figure of the boss represents the violent disembeddedness of the economy from the sovereignty of life. For the mature trader in Bogotá and the young indigenous woman in Otavalo, "having no bosses" does not mean anomie or a lack of structure; on the contrary, it means governing oneself by other rules: those of the domestic economy, self-managed physical health, control over one's own time, and respect for personal dignity. The popular market, reappropriated by urban maturity and indigenous youth, ceases to respond to the blind maximization of corporate utility to subordinate itself once again to the concrete needs of the free development of the subjects.

This reinterpretation simultaneously subverts the classical postulates of popular neoliberalism proposed by De Soto (12), given that the actors do not conceive their practices under the ambition of formalizing themselves as micro-enterprises within the bureaucratic gear, but rather under the existential premise of safeguarding their own freedom.

6 CONCLUSIONS

The comparative analysis between the informal trade of Bogotá and Otavalo, enriched by the generational perspectives of the actors, allows us to draw three fundamental conclusions:

- **Reconfiguration of informality as an ethical space:** The popular urban economy moves beyond the label of legal marginality or biological survival. Empirical experiences demonstrate that street commerce constitutes a field of cultural production and an autonomous moral system, where economic subjects actively construct regimes of legitimacy and distributive justice against an excluding formal labor market.
- **The transversality of gender labor sovereignty:** The most robust finding of this research reveals that the fundamental driver for female traders, regardless of their age or ethnic context, is the conquest of "freedom of work and life." [1] The unanimous rejection of managerial subordination ("having no bosses") deconstructs the vision of the informal worker as a passive victim. Sayri's youth in Otavalo and Doña Carmen's maturity in Bogotá converge in the defense of independent trade as a chosen trench for bodily and temporal self-governance.
- **Modern and identity-based appropriations of public space:** The comparison demonstrates that public space (the downtown street or the traffic light) is contested and resignified in diverse ways. While in Bogotá dignity is defended day by day through everyday resistance against institutional hostility, in Otavalo indigenous youth reinvents urban street trade, transforming it into a flexible support that finances new individual lifestyles—such as physical care at the gym—without renouncing their autonomy or subordinating themselves to the colonial hierarchies of formal employment.

In short, the traders of Bogotá and Otavalo demonstrate that, faced with the failure or precariousness of the labor promises of the State, society, and capital, the popular economy emerges as a practical rationality capable of sustaining life and freedom from below.

STATEMENTS ON COMPLIANCE WITH ETHICAL STANDARDS

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding this manuscript.

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