

# Municipal logistics



## Popular infrastructures and Southern urbanisms during the pandemic

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Minim is a municipalist observatory that amplifies the voice of municipalism by sharing practical and theoretical knowledge with the support of a community of activists, scholars, journalists, and public officials.

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# MUNICIPAL LOGISTICS: POPULAR INFRASTRUCTURES AND SOUTHERN URBANISMS DURING THE PANDEMIC <sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The spread of Sars-Covid-2 prompted the Argentinean government to issue a decree enforcing strict mandatory social confinement. On 20 March, the normal circulation of goods and people was interrupted. Commercial and manufacturing outlets that were deemed non-essential were closed. Street-vending, the recovering and recycling of discarded materials, and the multiple and precarious modalities of making ends meet, were all suspended. The cancellation of movement, halted minor forms of exchange and changas<sup>2</sup>, stifling the circulation of money, so vital for those living in one of the more than 4,400 slums in the country.<sup>3</sup> In an attempt to diminish the impact caused by the shutdown of circuits of provision and trade, the cabinet implemented a series of programs, providing financial assistance to families and businesses: subsidies offered to poor households were multiplied and wages of furloughed workers were partly paid by the state. Yet despite these efforts, by April, the number of people requiring food assistance had jumped from 9 to 11 million. In July, sources from the Ministry of Social Development estimated that the figure could have jumped to 13 million: close to 30 percent of the total population. The pandemic rapidly dislocated procurement networks, disrupting contracts and financial commitments, shrinking an already battered and indebted economy. Those economic sectors associated with food production, distribution, finance, and on-line services strengthened their already dominant positions. For the vast majority, however, the pandemic meant further debt, uncertainty and an increased reliance on local networks of solidarity.

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1 We would like to thank the members of the social organizations and public institutions for sharing their experiences and views throughout the research project. Their politics beautifully illustrates the potentialities of a new municipalist agenda.

2 In Argentina changas refer to casual labour, often associated with the building and repairs sector.

3 In 2016, a law brought about the mapping and recognition of informal settlements in Argentina. The visualizations and geographical distribution of slums can be accessed at the “National Register for Popular Neighbourhoods”.

The alteration to the distribution and circulation of people and things, brutally exposed how dependant urban life has become on stable provision and services networks. Routines and patterns of sociability have become increasingly mediated by ever-expanding infrastructural set-ups, disfiguring the city as a bounded place of interactions. The territorial scale of the urban has morphed into unrecognizable spatial morphologies. Urban processes begin in distant hinterlands. They expand as roads, ports, and airports accelerate the flow of people and things. Conduits, pipes, and codes, connect specialized zones with factories and workshops. At each stage, satellites and spreadsheets weave the urban scale as an intricate topological terrain, that is superimposed over political boundaries and administrations. Through transformations and movement, minerals, grains and data are turned into commodities and their distribution generates other forms of valorization. Insurance, derivatives and securities, support a process of financial accumulation that is then offloaded in the form of urban regeneration, infrastructural projects, and large real-estate investments. The urban in its contemporary iteration is no longer associated with densities, forms, or patterns of sociability. Instead, it has turned into a set of infrastructural processes that initiate or cancel circulations. The civic imaginations that associated city life with fleeting encounters; where political parties and democratic confrontations organized the margins and reach of social and economic rights, are replaced by territorialities where urban identities are forged around residents' ability to become enmeshed with distribution chains, exchange platforms or solidarity networks.

As covid cases slowly began to spread; as the patterns and rhythms of normalcy started to fade, the urban level manifested itself as pure lack. Territories were engulfed by a generalized sense of abstinence produced by the sudden reconfiguration of the mediating and circulatory arrangements that sustain consumer patterns and reproduce life. With the pandemic, the urban condition grew into the dystopian vision that Mumford or Lefebvre had anticipated more than 50 years ago: a concatenation of endless infrastructural processes ceaselessly transforming the face of the earth, eroding the city as a place of experimentation and proximity, replacing it with interconnected territorial enclaves arranged to synchronize forms of capital accumulation.



Platform capitalism. Delivery workers on strike in Buenos Aires.  
Photo: [Politica Obrera](#), [link](#)



The sudden interruption of flows prompted, in Argentina, a public debate regarding the processes and spaces enrolled in the production and distribution of things. Logistics became political and the domain of politics was reconfigured into a set of critical logistical decisions: how are things moved? Who controls the platforms that organize virtual spaces of exchange? Are there ways of intervening supply chains? Discussions that until the pandemic could have seemed minor or peripheral; decisions that had been confined to the arcane spheres of business management, corporate boardrooms, and private security firms, were now held across a variety of public arenas: from normative adaptations in parliaments to tactical demands posed by social movements. As closures and disruptions forced a rapid transition to on-line territories, logistics and opposition to the widespread commodification of platforms and distribution channels emerged as defining ingredients of a radical agenda, that located municipal politics as an area of dissent and possibility. The endurance of logistical arrangements and the stability of the infrastructural networks that support them were rapidly scripted as strategic arenas from where to plan and administer both the production of urban space and the protection of public health. From the procurement of medical supplies and the construction of modular and temporary hospitals, to the distribution of food boxes, the movement of essential workers, and the arrangement of delivery solutions. Behind the noise of party-political differences, the struggle over the politics of logistics served to distil the true nature of the conflict. On one side were those actors benefitting from the reproduction and expansion of extractive logistical infrastructures. On the other, those calling for the municipalization of logistics and the commoning of platforms and supply chains.



La Poderosa working on a national campaign. “Pass on solidarity”.  
Photo: La Poderosa

Despite prompting the mobilization of national and international resources and forcing the implementation of state-led protocols, for the newly elected administration, the spread of COVID-19 was ultimately configured as an urban problem. Not because the policing and design of health policies were devolved – entirely – to local governments, but because the focus of politics shifted to the invention and governance of procurement solutions. The urban emerged as the level where decisions regarding the functioning and integration of infrastructural arrangements to sustain life were tested and implemented.

This essay traces the emergence of counter forms of logistics in Rosario, Argentina. It registers the material and virtual adaptations made by social movements, neighbourhood organizations, and public agencies to configure different forms of producing and distributing goods, services, and knowledge in the city. These counter-logistics contest the prominence of privatized and commoditized provision networks and prefigure modes of constructing more just alternative urban worlds. The article argues that the politicization of logistics offers a means of extending and problematizing the remit and purpose of municipalism. In a context where privatized distribution infrastructures mediate the expressions of urban life, the paper advocates the articulation of common and people's forms of logistics as a strategic dimension of a municipal politics.

The essay reviews the emergence of four different types of popular logistics in Rosario. The first section addresses the building of municipal platforms for the commercialization of goods and services. By looking at two different initiatives, one implemented by the local government and the other proposed by an urban alliance of parties, the section depicts how virtual exchange platforms have become territories of dissent. The case of Mercado Justo (Fair Market), presented as a radical alternative to the expansion of Amazon-like firms locally, rewires the urban economy around principles of proximity, makes visible the work of cooperatives and calls for the municipalization of logistical services. The second section addresses the logistics behind food production and distribution. Focusing on the work done by Pueblo a Pueblo and the proposal put forward by Ciudad Futura and Frente Patria Grande to create a public food company, the section examines how cooperative platforms between small farmers, segmentation hubs and non-commoditized forms of distribution provide an alternative to prevailing restrictive and concentrated patterns of food access. The section connects the municipalist agenda with the commoning of production and distribution of essential goods. The third section examines the role technical knowledge plays in the configuration of people's logistics. It describes the initiatives deployed by the National University of Rosario (UNR) during the pandemic. The section illustrates how academic units reconfigured research from a support input used to inform decision-making processes, to a critical component in the materialization of autonomous solutions. This institutional transition towards engaged and practical research, transformed the University into an infrastructure of knowledge, where open and public research underpins the production and distribution of essential materials like ventilators. The section illustrates how counter-forms of logistics rely on horizontal forms of knowledge and data production. Lastly, we examined how the pandemic prompted the consolidation of alternative care infrastructures: from supporting the elderly, to attending cases of domestic violence, and helping families with assistance when isolating or dealing with close Covid cases. Relying on the work done by feminist collectives in deprived areas, the section illustrates how prevailing forms of logistics reinforce patterns of inequality, condemning the female body to unrecognized and obscured forms of labour. The work carried out by members of La Poderosa and Terreno Saludable, describes how feminist logistics is prefiguring other forms of conceiving and constructing productive territories. The essay con-

cludes by highlighting how these popular logistics, born out of practised and shared histories of political struggles, confront the engrained injustices of extractive forms of urbanization. It frames and projects the call for the municipalization of logistics as a political struggle that cuts across territorial levels and geographical areas.

The paper is based on interventions developed and implemented during the pandemic in Rosario. It registers the views and voices of the actors that were directly involved in giving shape to other forms of organizing infrastructural and logistical arrangements in the city.<sup>4</sup> It is supported by a review of media reports and policy documents. We traced and registered interactions in social media platforms and asked activists to share visual material of their infrastructural spaces and logistical arrangements.

## Commoning platforms: Municipal logistics

A month after lockdown, with bars and shops closed; with open fairs and markets cancelled, the local government of Rosario develop an on-line service that would allow small enterprises to promote and advertise their goods and services: vidrieras en red (showcases on-line)<sup>5</sup>. The platform was divided up into three different pages: one was set up for outlets



Feminist logistics. La Poderosa administering soup kitchens (comedores). The white sign reminds everyone that misogyny is “men’s hatred towards women”. Photo: La Poderosa

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4 The team conducted over 12 different virtual interviews with key participants and transcribed and translated the recordings

5 Vidrieras refers to the old arcades. It projects onto the virtual realm, the physical experience of window-shopping. To visit Vidrieras en red.



that displayed information about their products and details about services, a second used the digital infrastructure to process purchases and commercial operations, and lastly, a third page was exclusively curated for those involved in the suspended green fairs, offering organic products, backed by the municipality’s social economy programs. The initiative, although it was limited in its scope and reproduced outdated developmentalist distinctions between formal enterprises and initiatives derived from social and people’s economies, did serve to identify imbalances and inequalities forced by the sudden virtualization of commercial exchange. The pandemic rapidly shifted demand to on-line platforms, like big supermarket chains or transnational virtual warehouse sites like Mercado Libre (Free Market) – an on-line service that began as a regional competitor to eBay and expanded to offer groceries, financial services, and wireless forms of payment, damaging local shops and enterprises that had no on-line presence. In addition, delivery platforms, like Rappi or Glovo, suffocated supply by adding 30 or even 40 percent to the exchange cost. In this regard, Rosario’s secretary of economic development and employment highlighted how delivery apps for goods and food were mistakenly presenting themselves “as partners of local shops and producers”, generating and capturing value by providing the digital infrastructure to establish commercial relations and the logistical support – rather than employment – to carry out the operation. With this initiative, the municipality posited logistics as a central political sphere of contestation. The survivability of the commercial and productive fabric of the city rested on the possibility of developing other means of guaranteeing the circulation of goods. The commodification of logistics, not only had accentuated patterns of exclusion and differentiation: it was accelerating physical and territorial transformations, enforcing a deeper disconnection between the sites of production and the places of consumption.

“Explosive growth”, that is how the CEO of Rappi characterized the expansion of the delivery platform during the pandemic. The app, even though it presents itself as a delivery

**Proyecto Aprobado**

QUÉ PUEDO HACER	mercado justo	mercado libre	Rappi Pedidos Glovo
<b>Comprar cosas</b> productos, muebles, tecnología	✓	✓	✗
<b>Perdir comida</b> bares, restaurantes, rotiserías	✓	✗	✓
<b>Contratar servicios</b> arreglos, albanilería, arquitectura, jardinería, legales, diseño gráfico	✓	✗	✗
<b>Entradas a espectáculos</b> recitales, teatro, deporte	✓	✗	✗
<b>DE QUÉ FORMA y VALORES</b>			
<b>Sin comisiones abusivas</b> plataforma sin fines de lucro solo gasto de mantenimiento	✓	✗	✗
<b>Priorizando lo local</b> solo figuran industria, comercio y servicios del gran Rosario	✓	✗	✗
<b>Priorizando la escala</b> no se permiten grandes cadenas	✓	✗	✗
<b>Envío empresa local</b> cooperativas, pymes, cadetes organizados	✓	✗	✗
<b>Algoritmos democráticos</b> no anuncios, muestra resultados según necesidad	✓	✗	✗
<b>Comunidad de ayuda mutua</b> foros entre usuarios y consumidores; guía de trámites para productores; líneas de financiamiento cursos de formación y capacitación e-commerce.	✓	✗	✗

CIUDAD FUTURA | FSP  
SUNNY CONCEJO MUNICIPAL

Ciudad Futura and FSP’s digital infrastructure for exchange. Against Amazon’s model. No commissions, democratizing algorithms, strengthening local economies.

service, is more than that: it fulfils urban logistical necessities, fusing the operations of sorting and distribution with credit offers. The apps generate a separate terrain of functions, where they govern the costs and rights of visibility. For small commercial outlets, which previously relied on flyers and word of mouth to promote their shops, it meant adding the cost of page notoriety and algorithmic privileges for exposure to already inflated rental costs. Throughout lockdown, the work carried out by the army of precariously employed cyclists was deemed essential: but their remuneration, insurance and protection seemed optional. What was regarded as essential was the sustainment of the distributing practices, the allocation of orders, the workings of the algorithms. Platform capitalism erodes the territorial frictions and impediments associated with the rigidities and regulations that are associated with work practices and the operations of commercial and industrial enterprises. The app economy is based on forms of accumulation that although unfold through space-time relations, are entirely deterritorialized. Exchanges and associations are replaced by points and nodes on live maps. Platforms turn this flattened, anonymized and standardized networks of connections, into operable terrains. It is this potential operability; the client base, the hits received, the ratings given, what is turned into objective measures to acquire financial investment. This form of digital valorization rests on the capacity to legitimise, through reviews, hits and exposure, the aggregated objectivity of a seemingly endless virtual territoriality of opportunities and profit. During the pandemic, Mercado Libre, a clear Amazon competitor in Argentina and South America, became more valuable on the stock exchange than Argentina's main oil company, YPF.

## From 'Free Market' to 'Fair Market'

In May, two months after lockdown, the initiative put forward by the municipality was superseded by a project presented by the urban political party [Ciudad Futura](#) (Future City) and the Social and People's Front (FSP). Building on previous policies they had developed during past economic crises to strengthen neighbourhood economies and include cooperatives in the supply chain, the two parties passed through the local legislature the framework to create "a digital infrastructure for exchange". The project, [Mercado Justo](#) (Fair Market), sought to strengthen local producers, privileging neighbourhood outlets, highlighting the values of "proximity, solidarity and community". The initiative envisaged not only the commercialization of goods, but also services, allowing the platform to function also as a job-centre hub. In contrast to the original municipal proposition, the creation of the digital infrastructure projected an economy that integrated local producers, shop-keepers, farmers, cooperatives and actors of the social economy, as part of the same network. Large enterprises were excluded. No commissions were stipulated. The project incorporated innovative financial alternatives, allowing for the possibility of vouchers or credits to be used for future purchases. In addition, and as a direct alternative to the extortionate rates charged and accumulated by competitors, the project incorporated the local municipal bank as a central actor, envisioning a radical expansion of public financial assistance

to economic players that had previously been side-lined or overcharged by lenders. The communication campaign developed to promote the initiative used the visual language of Mercado Libre<sup>6</sup>, its colours, and the oval shape of its logo. It positioned the project as a direct alternative: a counter model for exchange and logistics. Not simply as a competitor, but as a different model of wealth accumulation.

When discussing the political vision that underpinned the proposal for Mercado Justo, one of the activists involved in the writing of the Rosario ordinance, stated: “[w]e wanted to dispute the territory occupied by Mercado Libre and other platforms”. Here territory retains the



People’s logistics circuit. Other ways of thinking about production, distribution and consumption (Mercado Justo)



Play on logos. “Google - control. Amazon – big abuse” (@Alfredo Moreno, ‘Capitalismo de plataformas. Mercado libre o justo.’ July, 2020)

6 Mercado Libre, heralded as a regional digital success story, is a perfect example of how consumer patterns are becoming increasingly enmeshed with logistical and financial enterprises. Mercado Libre is, ultimately, a logistics company that cuts across the physical and virtual realm.

theoretical and practical references that accompanied the movements' struggles since their inception. For the members of Ciudad Futura, the territory is where the central disputes of late-capitalism are staged. Where logics of extraction operate through processes of displacement and expulsion; where tactics of accumulation by dispossession obtain material and physical form. It is also from where resistance grows, where counter visions of other economies are pre-figured. The same way a decade ago, when the political grouping was still named GIROS, they pushed for an ordinance preventing new building of gated communities in Rosario, illustrating how speculative real estate developments were accelerating fragmented and unequal forms of urbanization, the Mercado Justo initiative revives the notion of territory and extends it to the virtual realm<sup>7</sup>. The public platform challenges the commodification of logistics and uses it to articulate spaces of cooperation, where connection, association and distribution are not means of extracting and transferring value but form part of a politics of urban inclusion. The platform is presented as a strategic municipal infrastructure that rewires the local economy: exposing the exploitive and extractive commercial and logistical costs engrained in the configuration of existing supply chains for basic and essential goods and services, and showing the possibility of articulating a set of counter-logistical arrangements that disrupt hegemonic positions to articulate an urban economic commons.

## Counter-logistics of food circulation and people's production infrastructures

As contagion spread and government agencies faced decades of accumulated infrastructural limitations or neglect; as the configuration of emergency logistical arrangements to distribute food and essential items to deprived communities stumbled with the lack of technical, human and financial resources, South America saw a surge of improvised solutions from below. In Argentina, the new administration implemented a food assistance program to tackle the swollen poverty figures left by the previous government: it mobilized the army to support logistical tasks. But even with the distribution of a food card that allowed poor residents to purchase food items, the concentration and commodification of food distributing networks and infrastructures, weakened the effectiveness of the planned efforts. Cases of overpricing became widespread. In the city of Buenos Aires, for example, the local government outsourced the logistical operations of assembling and distributing boxes to working-class areas. Studies by the research institute associated to the People's Unity party claim that the government paid three different providers an extra 30 percent in direct contracts.<sup>8</sup>

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7 For an analysis of GIROS' prefigurative tactics, see Minuchin L. (2016) *The politics of construction: towards a theory of material articulations*, *Environment and Planning D*, vol. 34, 5: 895-913.

8 The Institute for Research and Public Policies (IPYPP) published the document with the title *The commodification of hunger*.



In this context, where governments at every level were struggling to secure, through the market, suitable contracts for food distribution, urban social movements, neighbourhood organizations and solidarity networks offered territorial experience and organizing capacity to channel government policies, but also to develop supplementary and alternative interventions. Networks of soup kitchens, barter markets, and improvised care and assistance volunteer squads improvised a landscape of infrastructural support. Organized collectives, some – like La Garganta Poderosa (The Powerful Throat) – spread like an articulated federation of movements across the country’s working-class districts, consolidated themselves as crucial political intermediaries. The pandemic fostered a plurality of organized people’s responses that sought to challenge and fill the void left by a politics of food production and distribution that favoured exporting agricultural commodities, the cartelization of food producers, and the prominence of a limited number of large supermarket chains.

In a context where food supply chains punish small producers by separating them from distribution hubs and commercial outlets, different collectives sought to prefigure a counter-logistics of food distribution, bringing together small producers and cooperatives and connecting them directly to distribution networks. The food crisis served to expose the multiple stages of financial speculation that underpin the formation of supply chains: future commodity and currency prices create a separate domain of accumulation and have a direct impact on food availability. In an attempt to position food as a public and common good, two different initiatives in Rosario sought to reconfigure the logistics of food.



Boxes ready for distribution [Pueblo a Pueblo](#).  
Photo: Pueblo a Pueblo

## Pueblo a Pueblo

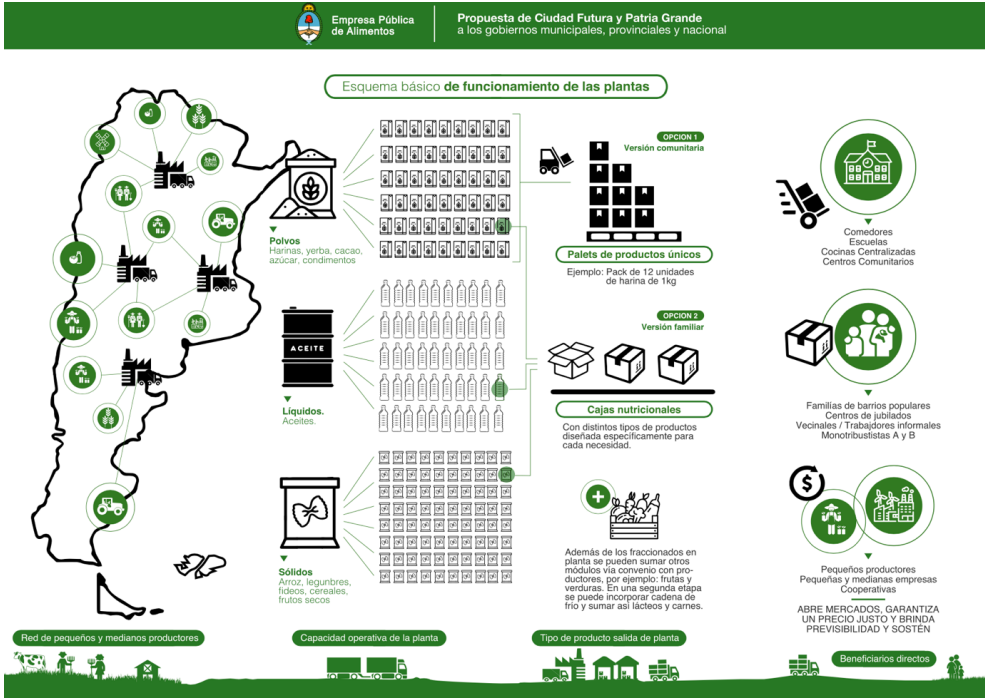
Mobilized by the pillaged geographies left after the 2001 crisis, militants that had been active in the unemployed collectives, created the movement of excluded workers (MTE). The MTE was born with the mission of improving the living and working conditions of those excluded from the formal sector, developing production alternatives, offering workshops and health assistance. The organization is split into strands that represent the different expressions of what they refer to as the ‘people’s economy’: those working in small construction projects, in recycling, textiles, farming and street vending. The MTE sought to give voice, presence and organization to more than 30 percent of Argentina’s active labour force.

Pueblo a Pueblo (People to People), was started up, within the MTE, as a commercial initiative for small farmers. It was first launched nationally in 2014. The Rosario branch began operating in 2016. As an organization it connects cooperatives, family-farmer associations, small producers and indigenous communities, with the objective of enhancing the quality and reach of environmentally aware forms of agricultural production. The aim was to establish what Gastón St Jean, the coordinator of Pueblo a Pueblo in Rosario, refers to as “a short chain”: creating direct relations between producers and consumers and protecting the rights and living condition of the former. At first, the network consisted of a few families. It now connects 150 family producers from rural areas around Rosario. The initiative allows the organization to prefigure logistical and productive networks that contrast with the extractive principles that govern the expansive fields of the world’s most important soya production hub. The group is organized around four different assemblies where activists and farmers discuss issues such as internal organization, gender dynamics, seed procurement and costs.

Pueblo a Pueblo functions as a networked cooperative, where family farmers rotate to provide the fresh vegetables that will make up the commercialized boxes. The coordinator explains the logistics as follows: “[e]ach box contains seven seasonal vegetables, the farmers organize themselves in groups of seven, and each of them provides one item for the box assembly. Every week or every 15 days, one group is in charge of preparing the boxes”. The products are then distributed through a group of volunteers based in Rosario. Details about the boxes circulate through social media networks from Tuesday to Thursday: orders are collected by using google online forms. Before the pandemic, distribution was organized on Saturdays, in four points across the city. Through this logistical set-up, cooperative rural forms of production became enmeshed with ethical consumer practices. The organization prefigured ways of materializing the reproduction of rural livelihoods by reconfiguring their relation with processes of urban consumption. Pueblo a Pueblo breaks with the idea that there is only one possible way of sustaining the metabolic requirements of urban life: there are alternatives to the established expulsionary and extractive agricultural practices. The organization highlights the importance of knowing where

food comes from, how it was produced, and by whom: it seeks to project an association between sustainable forms of agriculture and land use that has been eroded through expansive forms of monocultures and higher levels of land concentration. Through this proposed reduced network, producers receive 85 percent of the retail price: 10 percent is then left as a communal fund for all producers, and 5 per cent is used for running and logistical costs.

The pandemic tested the scalability of the network and the resilience of their logistical arrangements – as they could no longer have customers come to the pick-up points. Mandatory confinement meant they had to develop a home-delivery system. Demand spiked. They jumped from commercializing 150 boxes every 15 days to distributing 1500 every week. They enlisted volunteers and made arrangements with transportation services that were left without work during lockdown. Pueblo a Pueblo was now reaching peripheral and poor neighbourhoods in the city, establishing an infrastructure for cooperative and horizontal forms of food production and distribution.



Public Food Companies in Argentina. @Ciudad Futura/Frente Patria Grande, “Plantas locales de fraccionamiento”, p. 4, 2020.

## Public food company

The shortening of the supply chains, particularly in relation to the production and distribution of food, is a shared political ambition among urban social movements interested in strengthening forms of people’s economy. As inflation rates started to reduce the purchasing power of deprived communities, Giros – before they formed an urban political party (Ciudad Futura) – articulated

in 2014 what they referred to as “an anti-inflation mission”. Connecting producers with consumers, the movement organized through a membership system, the monthly distribution of boxes. Groups of friends and families will come together to purchase in volume, allowing them to save up to 40 percent of what they would have paid for similar products at a big supermarket chain. But the inflation and food crises were further compounded during the Macri administration. Escalating prices, higher unemployment figures and a greater concentration of distributors and commercial outlets, forced the newly elected administration to declare – at the end of 2019 – a food emergency in Argentina. The economic downturn triggered by the pandemic, placed food procurement as a critical political concern. Memories of riots and lootings demanded a set of radical responses to sustain and protect urban life.

In this context, members of Ciudad Futura and Patria Grande, proposed to dislocate established forms of food distribution, by problematizing its configuration as a commodity, and introducing other actors in the productive process. Food is valorized as it circulates: fractioning, sorting, packaging, marketing. This movement disfigures its original use value and dissociates it from the territories and labour that produce it. The movements proposed treating food as a public good and articulating a counter logistics that was not driven by accumulation through distribution. Instead, they envisioned a model that consolidates networks of cooperation, transforming how land is produced and value generated. The initiative works on multiple scales. On one level, the organizations have presented in parliament a bill seeking to create a network of Public Food Companies: these horizontally run enterprises, will distribute processing factories as

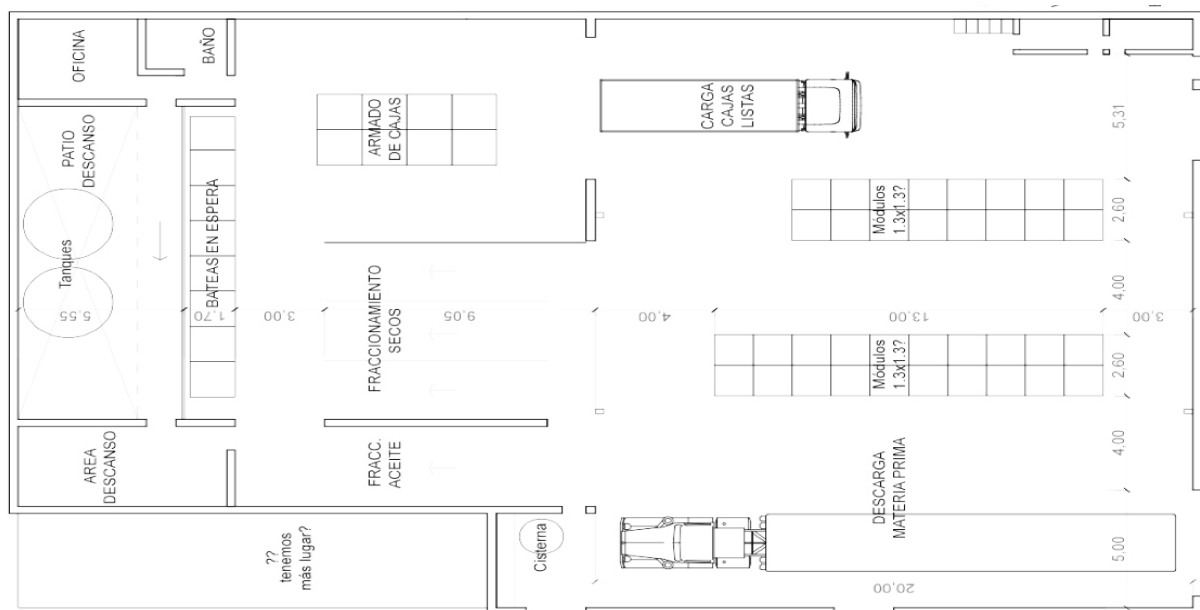


Activist preparing boxes for distribution at Misión Inflación. Photo: Ciudad Futura



points of connection between cooperative rural plots and deprived urban communities (see figure 8). As a means of prefiguring what that national network could look like, the movement has already started working on the first Public Food Company in Rosario. Intended as a social enterprise, the company will not be administered by the municipality or the Provincial government. Instead, projecting the ideas of autonomy that underpinned much of the territorial experiences of social movements in South America, the activists involved in the project, speak of *gestión social* (management by society). Precisely this is a form of governance structure that allows social movements, cooperatives and actors directly involved in the production of goods and services to be directly involved in the administration of public enterprises. Ciudad Futura has set up the ‘University of Doing’ to train and support activists in the development, co-production, and administration of public enterprises.

The Public Food Company, according to one of the activists in charge of its design and development, will “allow social organizations to run the factory, opening up job opportunities through the funds generated by fractioning, packaging and distributing food”.



Draft layouts for the Public Food Company factory. Fractioning oils and dry products. Ciudad Futura

Presently, the municipality and the provincial state pay a high price to obtain suitable products. Only a handful of companies qualify as providers, further enhancing monopolistic positions. The Public Food Company will not only shorten the supply chain but redistribute the benefits to local producers, sustaining smaller enterprises, rescuing them from punitive rental structures. The counter-logistics proposed by the Public Food Company establishes, through cooperative associations, the territorial footprint of the urban scale: it (re)produces territory, and introduces

new forms of governing an expanded commons. “We are always seeking ways of problematizing what we understand as public, a terrain where the state motorizes and finds allies in administering the commons...”, states the document that socializes the initiative.

Salinas, one of the persons in charge of designing the company, details how they envision the process of production and distribution: “the factory will have two forms of outputs. One is based on pallets or large bags of 25kg. These will be distributed to identified soup kitchens and institutions. A second form revolves around nutritional boxes. With these we will not only reach state agencies but also unions, pensioners and cooperatives”. In terms of scale, they expect to be able to produce 25,000 nutritional boxes a month: roughly the figure for the families expected to fall under the poverty threshold.

The making of a more egalitarian urban terrain requires infrastructures and logistical arrangements that extend beyond the remit and reach of local governments. Initiatives like the Public Food Company introduce an ordering and producing of territories that connects actors and practices that stretch across and beyond the cities’ administrative boundaries. They delineate a municipalist agenda, where the democratic control of logistic and infrastructure arrangements is practiced through linked platforms that extend and multiply the principles of *gestión social*.

## Infrastructure of knowledge

The articulation of supply chains; the monitoring and tracking of movement; the timings of productive processes and the allocation of slots, services and people, relies on the application of technical knowledge. Software, patents, and expertise are an integral part of the process of valorisation that is generated through logistics. The analysis and gathering of data, the hiring of consulting firms and the use of modelling, are all essential for the calibration and adjustments of logistical chains. There is a logistics of knowledge circulation and consumption: it connects research centres and analysts with decision makers. It circulates through reports, newsletter subscriptions and market analyses. Knowledge is commoditized to turn the urban scale into a speculative terrain, where projections for future physical transformations are configured as extended platforms for growth and accumulation. Simulations, smart-city laboratories and visual renderings of regeneration projects: the construction of probable futures mediates the present impacting on land prices, master plans and housing policies, advancing – in turn - the development of novel financial instruments and regulatory frameworks. Data – its production through aggregation and its analysis – is presented as an integral component of commoditized urban logistical networks: it turns flow and time into manageable units. In a context where the simulation of future scenarios underpins the decision-making process of extractive, productive and real-estate practices, governance over the sourcing and use of data becomes a central terrain of contestation.

Confronting the consolidation of extractive urban dynamics requires recovering and producing public forms of knowledge. Practices of research that are put at the service of a counter-logistics aimed at serving an expanded commons. As soon as the lockdown was announced, the National University of Rosario (UNR), positioned itself as a central actor in local efforts at tackling the health and social emergencies. ‘National Universities’ in Argentina have a long-standing tradition of engaging with the complexities of the territories in which they operate. Extension and social-responsibility programs have historically fostered alliances between academic institutions and local government agencies. But in most instances, the role played by Universities has been limited to offering technical support, testing capabilities, or specific consultancy work. The University of Rosario’s Vice-Chancellor won his campaign<sup>9</sup> in 2019 on a platform that sought to transform the institution’s relation with its territory, mobilizing a feminist lens to review interventions and power relations.

The pandemic brought urgency to the university’s administration. According to the vice-chancellor, “the health crisis accelerated the timings, and forced us to rework priorities”. As soon as the emergency was declared, the vice-chancellor informed local and provincial authorities that all the institution’s buildings, resources and expertise was available to be used by public agencies. The University managed to move academic activities on-line rapidly, building on



PPE equipment and hand sanitizers made by the [National University of Rosario](#)

early changes they had made to the IT infrastructure as soon as they had taken office. This virtual presence, which allowed debates and interactions to continue, underpinned the transforma-

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<sup>9</sup> Vice-chancellors in National Universities in Argentina are elected by students, graduates, and academic and non-academic staff.

tions regarding the university's external relations. The university was to move from a position of providing technical assistance and support, to become directly involved in the materialization of solutions. The secretary in charge of reworking the university's presence in its territory, speaks of critical engagement: reconnecting with the spirit of "Paulo Freire and Fals Borda". Action-research was no longer going to be restricted to specific projects but will shape the institution's perspective on how to position the production of public knowledge during the pandemic.

Research had to be put at the service of developing rapid practical and material solutions. The pandemic forced the University to transition from working as an institution to an infrastructure of knowledge: performing mediating functions to transform research into public resources, inserting itself within logistical networks directly involved in strengthening social capabilities. To alter the workings of the University, the vice-chancellor did away with the bureaucratic obstacles to institutional reform. Instead he introduced "executive units". Each one of them with the capacity to mobilize resources, establish protocols, and develop the network of actors needed for the intervention.

One of the units focused on tackling the food emergency. Nutritional experts from the university began working with engineers to develop a factory for the assembly of properly balanced food boxes. The plan is for the university to directly collaborate with small producers to expand the involvement of public institutions in the logistics of food distribution. The same team is transforming the existing university restaurants as sorting and distributing hubs. The University has transformed its public profile: it acts alongside municipal and provincial agencies in the planning of distribution routes. Yet it does all this whilst still retaining its autonomy, mobilizing its own financial resources, allocating personnel, and setting strategic objectives. The governance of public logistics enlists the work of a plurality of agencies and actors that go beyond the organizational footprint of local bureaucracies.

As a response to the health and sanitary crises, another executive unit started working immediately in producing sanitizing gel and specialized personal-protection equipment (PPE). The unit prepared a lab, relied on biochemists and engineers to establish a network of distribution across Rosario and southern Santa Fe. This counter-logistical arrangement established corridors of production and circulation that were not governed by market logics. The networks spread as nodes of solidarity, consolidating the University – in the public gaze – at the heart of a municipal commons, where relations, distributions, and territories are not arranged according to the procurement necessities of mercantile experiments. Perhaps the most important contribution during the pandemic was that made by a third executive unit: the development of ventilators. In association with a technical company, the university managed to engineer, assemble, and distribute ventilators throughout Santa Fe. The infrastructure of knowledge here not only serves to support the efforts of multiplying the availability of ICUs; it also reinforces the possibility of



imagining autonomy, not as detached or isolated territorial experiences, but as the consolidation of expansive publics that are capable of generating resources and creating value through rationalities of collaboration and production that are not those of businesses and private ventures. The university is prefiguring practical forms of autonomy, redefining the margins of what a municipalist agenda can do, experimenting with the materializations of a form of commons that extends the remit of public spheres well beyond the institutional machinery of government. It also prefigures a form of municipalism that is not restricted or reduced to technical and social support. It reconfigures the public and municipal areas as productive and generative spaces, that dispute the monopoly held by commercial rationalities over notions like efficiency and productivity.

The projects developed by the University of Rosario are expanding the municipalist agenda. They highlight the importance of public knowledge in the configuration of counter logistics. Forms of knowledge that emerge from practical experimentations, that multiply and are disseminated through direct interventions. They underpin the construction of logistical systems that are not driven by the need to guarantee the survivability and expansion of capital flows, but by the drive to sustain life and the circulations that give consistency to a common territory.

## Counter- and feminist logistics

Logistics emerged as a distinct area of knowledge linked to support for expansive military campaigns<sup>10</sup>. From the 16th century, reason and science were mobilized in an effort to sustain the lives of armies covering increasing distances: establishing procurement networks, administering resources, and planning for eventualities. Very rapidly the techniques that organized circulation were appropriated by imperial expeditions. The circuits of extraction demanded more sophisticated labour and capital flows: calibration of funds, transport, and enslaved labour. For the Southern Viceroyalties of the Spanish crown, the security and profitability of trade networks relied on a logistical operation that guaranteed, at the same time, the flow of silver and the forced labour of indigenous populations. Logistics always entailed a differentiated protection of life. Logistics never were (or are) neutral: sustaining trade and extractive networks required privileging the safety and reproducibility of commercial ventures and capital flows, establishing roles, hierarchies, and regimes of exploitation.<sup>11</sup> Logistics did not attend to the potentiality and

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10 For discussions on the origins of logistics see Cupini and Fraporti (2018) 'Logistics Genealogies: a dialogue with Stefano Harney', *Social Text* 136, vol. 36; Mezzadra and Neilson (2019) *Politics of operations: excavating contemporary capitalism*; and A. Tosacano (2011) 'Logistics and opposition', *Mute*, vol. 3, n. 3.

11 Arboleda, M. (2020) in *Planetary mine: territories of extraction under late capitalism* provides a sharp analysis of the relation between extractive practices and contemporary logistical arrangements, looking at the mining industry in Chile.

freedom of bodies but to their inclusion within regimes of labour and consumption. From its modern military configuration, logistics was instrumental in the expansion and discovery of novel territorial and spatial opportunities for capital flow and accumulation.

Today, the reproducibility of the urban level provides a new frontier for capital experimentation. Its scale connects, for example, the fertile provinces of Santa Fe and Buenos Aires with the commercial strategies and dietary requirements of a growing Chinese middle class<sup>12</sup>. It requires the arrangement of maritime routes, port infrastructures, and processing plants. The extractive practices mobilized to reproduce the urban on a planetary scale demand an integration of infrastructural networks that far exceeds not only the planning powers of local administrations but increasingly the sovereignty of national governments. This is reflected in the projects discussed within the Latin American Council for Infrastructure and Planning (COSIPLAN), where infrastructural and logistical schemes are projected at a continental scale: communications, roads, ports and electricity intermingle in a vision of development that still requires national economies that are primary.

A vicious circle of depletion is established. In order to sustain and reproduce this form of urban scale, public agencies will have to engineer regulatory frameworks for unprecedented levels of infrastructural investment. The closing of what development banks across the world term the infrastructural gap, demands turning infrastructural projects into assets, allowing hedge funds to move in and out of 'investments' as if they were stocks or securities. The result is a process of accumulation through infrastructural operations, environmental degradation, and erosion of public control over the distribution, access and valorization of those networks. In other words, infrastructure spaces develop where populations become secondary variables in logistical systems that privilege speed and efficiency.

The logistics that sustain and reproduce established patterns of urbanization cannot guarantee sustaining and reproducing social urban life: the required levels of consumption are aggregated figures. Decent wages for labour are not part of the equation: bodies who cannot join the established supply chains, who cannot mediate their circulation and sociability through formal infrastructural setups, become disposable<sup>13</sup>. The imposition of this commodified logistical space is instrumental to the calibration of contemporary forms of exploitation. It first frames patterns of inclusion and exclusion around degrees of access and connectivity to basic resources. Then,

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12 For a discussion on the urbanization of hinterlands see Brenner and Katsikis (2020). 'Operational landscapes: hinterlands of the Capitalocene'. *Architectural Design*, 90(1), 22-31.

13 In *La potencia feminista* (2019), Verónica Gago presents a lucid and timely analysis on the feminist movement in Argentina and the region and how it serves as a lens to interrogate the relation between bodies, exploitation and extraction.

in contexts where formal infrastructures abandon the basic provision of care, it is the female body that is regularly left with the task of arranging other forms of facilitating distribution and support.

Feminist forms of resistance are contesting these pervasive forms of exploitive and patriarchal forms of urban logistics. Across Latin America, residents that seek dignity and the right to decent forms of urban life in swelling poor urban areas, have developed through movements and organization – often shaped by a feminist militancy –, indispensable infrastructures of care. From food provision to assistance in cases of domestic violence; from the running of autonomous schools to the setting-up of clinics and hubs for psychological assistance; in slum organizations, federated urban movements and neighbourhood collectives; and participating in networked alternative forms to guarantee forms of procurement and circulation of goods and services. In Argentina, past crises and legacies of experimental forms of collective action have fostered an impressive network of social and political organizations actively working and shaping peripheral territories<sup>14</sup>. Through slow and deep integration with local dwellers they assembled circuits of counter-logistics: establishing cooperative forms of distribution, inventing modes of support that are not mediated by market rationalities, that disrupt the normalized and assumed roles of the female body. These forms of popular logistics rely on autonomous infrastructures: buildings, workshops, cooking facilities, which mediate and transform goods and services but not for the purposes of accumulation. These popular infrastructures are articulated through customary forms of cooperation and by the urgency of having to protect and sustain lives that have been left unprotected and disconnected.

## Popular organizations and infrastructures of care

For the activists of La Poderosa working in three different settlements in Rosario the pandemic changed the scale of the problem. It forced a reassignment of volunteers and the invention of new tactics of care, but it did not alter the finality of the programmatic agenda that justified their national presence across Argentina's slum quarters. They seek a recognition of the labour performed: a disruption of the patriarchal and oppressive rationalities by which established forms of production and value generation are organised; through the inclusion of people's modes of care as central economic practices.

“We want the women who work in popular territories to be recognized as territorial promoters”, an activist from La Poderosa declares. “We want the work we do to be recognised not only by the

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14 For a detailed chronicle of the work done by feminist movements and the reconfigured relation with the state during the pandemic, see the article by Tali Goldman, T. (2020) *Promotorxs comunitarixs: eso que llaman amor ahora lo paga el Estado*, published by the Latin American feminist portal LATFEM.

state, but also by society as a whole”. That quest for recognition is not staged as a demand to the state. It is prefigured, practiced through the multiple interventions they deploy in the territories. Each of these interventions connects volunteers with resources. They rely on rehearsed forms of regulating the circulation of food. They agreed on protocols on how to register the outcome and the timings of health visits. Each program, or *dispositivo* – as they refer to the initiatives –, combines and links levels, from the blocks and alleyways that are reached by the initiatives, to the municipal-health officials that operate local clinics; from the national offices of La Poderosa that orchestrate donation campaigns (see figure 2), to provincial and national ministries where supplies and food subsidies are discussed. Autonomy does not mean detachment or isolation but the power to act and organize. In the case of the militant female bodies, direct involvement means anti-patriarchal emancipation. In the case of these activists, counter-logistics is also a means of evading and disrupting the prevalence of the male gaze and the control it enforces over resources, organizations and spatialities. The infrastructures of care rely on adaptable and expandable logistics: WhatsApp groups and Facebook pages; email chains and spreadsheets that adjust real-time decision making. The platforms that on a global scale operate to extract value from data aggregation are appropriated by deprived urban collectives to establish ad-hoc cooperation platforms.

The pandemic forced an adaptation of existing infrastructures. The soup kitchens that once served hot meals, now operate as hubs for the assembly of ready meals that are then delivered, door to door to those families in need. They rely on a steady supply of dry ingredients that they get from multiple public agencies. Direct subsidies just cover the cost of gas canisters for cooking and heating. Donations complement the food offering with meat, and help support other logistical work. The pandemic forced the houses from where they operate to become legal support hubs. In living rooms turned into improvised offices, the female activists work mainly with other females for them to fill-out forms and join new public support programs, ringing gender helplines and dealing with police abuses.

The infrastructures of care developed by the women of La Poderosa not only contest the established lessening of the value of domestic labour as unproductive work. It also problematizes the assumptions that associate the productive and valued body, with entrepreneurial attitudes and predispositions. In this reductive view, the practices that are not engaged with accelerated patterns of accumulation – although essential for the reproduction of labour relations – are occluded and treated as secondary and voluntary. Their demands are not for an inclusion into the dynamics of contemporary labour relations. Through their activism, the feminist logistics prefigure other patterns of work and valorization: one where the circulation of bodies and exchange of support and services is not structured around dominance and exploitation.

As with the food initiatives by Pueblo a Pueblo or the Public Food Company, the infrastruc-

tures of care in working-class areas signal the need to reconfigure the commons. They project a notion of care that disrupts established associations between gender dynamics and domesticity, and situates the dynamics of home within a much wider set of physical and logistical support. These interventions view and recognize the work of feminist activists, not as voluntary or part of temporary emergency support but as a transformative mode of imagining the flow and insertion of networks of solidarity. The feminist counter-logistics developed by La Poderosa amplify the techniques available for governing increasingly complex urban scales. They illuminate a terrain of municipal politics that breaks the bounds of the regular consensual politics of institutional arenas and demarcates a clear line of dissent: those who sustain the logistical and infrastructural arrangements that serve to reproduce inequality and exploitation, and those who envision other forms of organizing the circulation and distribution of bodies and things.

## Other municipalisms: Constructing counter-logistics

The reproduction of the urban scale as we knew it, cannot guarantee sustaining life. The protection and expansion of infrastructural conduits that shape and transform the face of the earth with the purpose of enlarging dynamics of consumption, has become decoupled from environmental, human, and non-human equilibriums and expressions<sup>15</sup>. And in this spiral of accumulation and incessant search for new material and spatial frontiers for exploitation, agency has seemingly been devolved to algorithms and the efficiency of integrated processes. The urban scale has outstripped the institutional machinery and the regulatory capabilities of democratically elected governments: the unfolding of extractive logistical infrastructures has crippled the potentiality of politics. In South America, progressive movements that sought, at the turn of the century, to address the scars of inequality, subscribed to visions of development and progress that relied on the state's support for the reproduction of dependent and degrading forms of accumulation. The revolts and riots that spread across the streets of Quito, Santiago de Chile and Bogotá before the pandemic, should not only be seen as popular manifestations against neoliberal programs. The coup d'état that deposed Evo Morales' government in Bolivia, is not just a reactionary, racially motivated movement against the consecration of indigenous rights. These scenes of institutional unrest were also epicentres for large urban crises. Struggles over the control of resources, governance over basic infrastructures, and how they are distributed. The pandemic accelerated the dynamics of an era of infrastructural conflicts.

The pandemic exposed how the reproduction of the urban is wired to exacerbate forms of inequality and extreme patterns of differentiation: access to infrastructural and logistical arrangements are not evenly distributed. But it also made visible an intricate and expansive network

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15 For a reflection on the urban and environmental impacts caused by the pandemic see Buenaventura de Sousa Santos (2020), *La cruel pedagogía del virus*. Clacso.



of popular organizations that are practicing a different type of logistics. They shorten supply chains, they democratize technical knowledge, and substitute accumulation with care. These often improvised, autonomous infrastructures contest discourses of efficiency and profitability, and appropriate the expansive scales of logistical infrastructures to construct and promote different territories, organized around open and democratic supply chains, that value environmental resources and the sustaining of life.

The examined forms of counter-logistics proliferating in Rosario delimit and frame a territorial conflict that is going to shape the politics of the 21st century. The disputes on how we govern and change the way we produce, consume, and live require different technologies of power and the recognition and visibility of other lives and bodies. The municipalist agenda in South America needs to offer alternative ways of governing urban processes. Municipal politics should unchain itself from the rigid boundaries of local governance and assert the urgency of addressing and engaging with the organizational, environmental and economic interventions needed to reproduce the urban sphere. In a region where the interests behind infrastructural investments and the provision of basic services are going to condition institutional politics' room for manoeuvre, municipalism should serve to contest what is deemed possible and articulate a radical agenda. Through counter-logistical initiatives it should promote discussion on the reach and purpose of public infrastructures, addressing the conduits and platforms for exchange, distribution and care as essential services for a life in common.

The sense of emergency introduced by the pandemic will eventually fade. Some of the tactical alterations made to cope with different degrees of enforced isolation will be reversed. But the conflicts regarding the ownership and organization of supply chains, the logics of valorization and accumulation that underpin them will endure. The counter-logistics that emerged in Rosario and helped to prefigure other ways of imagining territories of care, will undoubtedly resonate, be replicated, adapted and expanded, as urban collectives across Latin America prepare for struggles over resources and distribution.

During the last decade there has been a blossoming of critical logistical studies. In the urban North, the attention has centred around the understanding of the injustices embedded in global supply chains and the possibilities of disrupting the flows and codes of platform capitalism. The forms of material and social inequality that underpin the unfolding of southern urbanisms, demand a more regionally attuned conception of logistics. One that registers its association with the sustaining of poor urban areas and the politics of care.