

Global cars, transnational inequalities

On the (in)formal economy of vehicles

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This dossier¹ presents the first results of the thematic project *Global cars: A transnational urban research project on the informal economy of vehicles (Europe, Africa and South America)*², in which we develop some analytical and theoretical questions and broaden the empirical scope of the research project that resulted in the book *Stolen cars: A journey through São Paulo's urban conflict* (Feltran, 2022)³. Coordinated by Gabriel Feltran and developed over five years, this project unveiled the mechanisms of the reproduction of violence and urban inequalities in the value chain of stolen cars in Brazil. From 2021 onwards, thanks to the joint funding by the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (Fapesp) and the Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR), the team became an international one and our repertoire of themes, concepts and methodologies achieved a global scope. This is why we

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3. The book invites the reader to follow the journeys of five cars from the moment the theft happens until they are discarded. We watch a series of actors that are sometimes allied, sometimes in conflict, when it comes to the accumulation of wealth generated by the (il)legal economy of vehicles: thieves, police officers, auctioneers, chop shops, large insurance companies, private security companies etc.

turned our interrogations to a seldom studied phenomenon which gives empirical concreteness to what is conventionally called “globalization”: the informal, criminal and illegal dimensions of the system of automobility.

The car, as a defining socio-technical element of the 20th century, propels transnational markets, legal and illegal production chains, public and private infrastructures, and highly complex logistical systems (Dennis and Urry, 2009; Feltran, 2020; Fromm, 2022, 2023; see also the “Automobilities” dossier, Featherstone [ed.], 2004). The impacts of the automobility system affect consumer practices and spaces (shopping malls with endless parking lots), housing forms (from the suburbs in the USA to the gated communities of Brazilian elites, including the motor vehicle itself turned into a living unit), and, until recently, was at the center of “the good mobile life”.

A vast repertoire of images, rules, moralities and aesthetic investments orbits around the car and sustain both the perennial and the ubiquitous character of the automobility system (Urry, 2004). The car is the materialization of a logic of hierarchical mobility which fosters individuality, competition, aggressiveness, and domination over the speed of movement (Virilio, 1996). Freedom and submission: just as the car offers the necessary flexibility for the territorial expansion of cities, it imposes models of space occupation in which other forms of transportation are inhibited, subordinated or antagonized (Sheller and Urry, 2000; Giucci, 2004; Rolnik and Klintowitz, 2011; Moraglio, 2018), causing an absurd number of yearly deaths and injuries all over the world (Culver, 2018).

In theoretical-analytical terms, we highlight two dimensions in this dossier: the connections between “marginal markets” and “central (or established) markets”; and the role of crime as the driver of formal markets in a global scale. Establishing a dialogue with the long-standing fields of urban and crime studies, but also incorporating contributions from the so-called mobilities turn (see Sheller and Urry, 2006, 2016; Freire-Medeiros, Telles and Allis, 2018), our hypothesis is that economic practices considered marginal, and undertaken mostly by agents from the (formal and informal) lower classes, make up a fundamental, but seldom studied, part of the automobility system (Feltran and Fromm, 2020; Feltran, 2022; Fromm and Motta, 2022; Fromm, 2022, 2023).

Our premise is that social inequalities, conflicts and violent practices take up very specific configurations, although always relational and asymmetric, in the several territories connected by “global cars”. This happens because, on the one hand, the car-related markets, wherever they are, must deal with the reality or the anticipation of illegal dynamics – fraud, swindles, thefts –, which means that the risk/trust pair becomes a constitutive element of these markets (see Onto, 2017; Fromm, 2022; Motta *et al.*, this issue). On the other hand, the illegal markets of car parts and resales

affect, and are produced by, important illegal value chains: drug trafficking, consumer goods smuggling and money laundering (Feltran, 2022). Our choice for a multi-sited, multimethod approach in which mobile, relational, collective ethnographies are privileged, has allowed us to join both ends, as we shall see below.

The growing field of socio-spatial mobility studies, although revealing the interaction between infrastructures, discourses and practices that constitute the action of several socio-technical entities, sometimes assumes a conceptual standpoint that considers the experiences of the rich North as universal (Freire-Medeiros and Name, 2017). In urban studies, informality and criminal organizations can quite often be seen as belonging only to the “underworld” of the “megacities of the global South” (Roy, 2011). Especially in research on European cities, there prevails an understanding that informality and illegality are residual practices, or specific to certain groups of migrants or immigrants (Jacquot and Morelle, 2018). Against this view, we approach informal, illegal and criminal economies as constitutive elements of economic systems and transnational mobilities, and also of the urban landscapes in both hemispheres.

What does this heuristic focus that places crime – or its imminence – in the center allow us to say about the mutual constitution between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal, the local and the global that make up the automobility system? How does the market of stolen vehicles impact the global value chains of the car industry? In the different national contexts, how do state regulations and sanctions work, and which other institutional arrangements arbitrate the (im)mobility of the different actors and objects, information and residues that make up the (in)formal economy of vehicles?

The paths that these questions led us through are peopled by agents with different profiles, anchored to different urban contexts. In the broader research project from which this dossier comes, we interact with street mechanics and car parts dealers; owners of large car dealerships in Paris (France), Brussels (Belgium), Accra (Ghana), and Dubai (UAE); workers of import/export businesses that operate at important port regions in Europe (Rotterdam and Hamburg), Latin America (Santos) and Western Africa (Tema and Cotonou); car thieves who live in the peripheral areas of São Paulo; medium and top executives linked to the car industry and car auctions in Brazil; executives and regulators of the insurance sector in Ghana and Brazil; police officers and legal-illegal businesspeople who act at the border between Brazil and Bolivia. Our everyday research work also involves diving into online car parts platforms and car auction websites in Brazil and the USA. Our team⁴, made

4. Prof. Dr. Sebastien Jacquot (University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne), Prof. Dr. Gabriel Feltran (CNRS/

up by undergraduate and graduate students, post-doc researchers, and professors of sociology, anthropology, and geography – and only partially represented in this dossier – has been undertaking fieldwork in these different parts of the offline and online worlds.

From this vast map of multidimensional questions, the five papers presented here illuminate certain aspects of the phenomenon of the (re)production of inequalities in the (in)formal economy of vehicles in Brazil, Ghana, and France. We begin with the paper signed by Gabriel Feltran, Rafael Rocha, Janaina Maldonado, Gregório Zambon and Fernanda de Gobbi that investigates, based on the state of São Paulo, the possible relationships between the variations of the rate of vehicle theft and the regulation of violence and illegal markets from 2003 to 2021. The regulation of the chop shop market in São Paulo, the recent transformations in the universe of criminal factions (in particular, the “Primeiro Comando da Capital”) and the new economic arrangements associated with the car industry take the front stage in three explanatory hypotheses for this oscillation.

The following paper, by Luana Motta, Luiz Gustavo Simão, Deborah Fromm and Juliana Alcantara, focuses on the disputes between fractions of economic elites over the popular car markets in Brazil. Contrary to expectations, the market of second-hand cars sold in auctions and shops, and the services of property protection linked to it, are not only of interest to “poor” and “marginalized” people. The authors show how large multinational corporations and parts of the global financial elites – represented by large auction and insurance companies – compete with traditional and emerging local elites for the centralization and accumulation of resources that results from these activities. In these disputes, crime (either actual or possible) appears as a driver of (il)legal markets, but also of discourses over economic regulation of informal markets, the construction of a *safe and trusted* environment for economic transactions, and the limits of what *fair competition* means.

Economic regulation and political alliances are also at the center of Corentin Cohen’s paper on Ghana’s role and position in the global value chain of second-hand cars. Ghana, like other Western African countries, is a great consumer of “trash” –

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i.e. cars considered too old to circulate in European and North American countries. Taking into account the geopolitics of the global automotive chain and, at the same time, the everyday economic dealings of used car parts traders in the Abossey Okai market in Accra, Cohen discusses how a car's value is shaped both by local practices and categories and by transnational commercial networks, as well as by unequal structures of work conditions and informality.

In turn, Sébastien Jacquot and Marie Morelle teach us that “old cars” are also resources and accumulation sources beyond the countries of the so-called Global South. Based on the French case, the authors discuss how the automobility system, in a context of ecological transition, increasingly turns its remains and residues into lucrative commodities. By inserting junkyards and chop shops into globalized economies and at the center of the European Union's regulatory disputes over climate change, sustainability, and transportation, the authors focus on cars (and their parts) reaching the end of their lifespan as elements from which the lexicon of the so-called green economy is fine-tuned. The advocacy of gradual incorporation of electrical vehicles (or hybrid technology) is exemplary: one can sell the promise of an ecologically correct post-carbon world without having to break decisively with the more perverse mechanisms of the automobility system.

Closing this set of five papers, André Pimentel, Isabela Pinho, Apoena Mano and Anna Clara Soares creatively unveil the most recent transformations in the global automotive chain and their consequences for the Brazilian car sector. By taking seriously the agency of the “microscopic world” and the characteristic mobilities of what Caroline Knowles (2017) calls “globalization's backroads”, the authors highlight the inevitable frictions in global flows. While the minuscule Sars-cov-2 disrupted the mobility system throughout the world, the semiconductor shortage – essential microchips for several electronic devices, from cars to mobile phones – was at the forefront of a productive chain crisis that impacted the geopolitical arrangements between the United States and China, with consequences that are yet to be known. Based on a relational analysis, they connect small things to large transnational processes, Santos' gigantic port infrastructure to a small chop shop in São Paulo.

This diversity of subjects and approaches demonstrates the complexity of the global car and car parts market (both new and second-hand) when examined, on the one hand, by the standpoint of the categories of “crime” and “trust”; and, on the other hand, as a phenomenon whose articulations between physical, imaginative and communicative mobilities reveal in an exemplary way the complex, unstable and situational relationship between the “center” and the “periphery” of globalized capitalism. It is also an example of the profitability of collective,

international research efforts – it was this collective character that allowed us to take the discussions as a whole and to extract common questions from all of them, despite their diversity.

The collective character of the project that resulted in *Stolen Cars: A Journey Through São Paulo's Urban Conflict*, edited by Gabriel Feltran, becomes clear in the book review written by Ludmila Ribeiro. Her text, called “Dissecting a ‘new’ illegal market?”, acknowledges the book’s originality, focused on a phenomenon still rarely present in social-scientific academic research even though it has an extremely large media presence and is part of the everyday lives of large Brazilian cities, especially São Paulo. In what Ribeiro calls “a captivating narrative”, one sees the connection between actors usually thought as coming from very different and separated social worlds, such as young, poor Black men who work in the “crime world” and rich white men who handle a market that involve chop shops, auction houses and private security. The sociologist highlights the possibilities present in this analytical and methodological perspective, including a broad agenda of transnational research such as the one we have been developing in our current project whose first results are shared here.

This positive evaluation of the collective work undertakings is also reinforced by Finn Stepputat, professor at the Danish Institute of International Studies (DIIS), in his interview for Isabela Pinho, Janaína Maldonado and Apoena Mano. Stepputat’s shares aspects of his academic career and his original approach to central themes of the contemporary sociological debate which are also present in this dossier, namely: the relationships between politics and markets, logistical supply chains and infrastructure; State circulation and formation policies; the reproduction of inequality and violence. It is an interview that unveils in a frank and inspiring way the “research backstage”. Broaching both deep theoretical discussions and empirical situations experienced in the field, the talk allows us to learn from and be moved by the hardships of ethnographic research and Stepputat’s sophisticated analytical framework.

It is important to wrap up this Introduction with some methodological remarks. As the papers make clear, beyond investing in comparative schemes between self-contained territories, actors or situations, our relational and multiscale approach interrogates their coproduction and the conflicts that result from it. In other words: if we are interested on the empirical connections between diverse elements (human and non-human) inscribed in the (in)formal economy of vehicles, we must not previously assume an essentialist North *versus* South opposition (see especially Cohen, this issue). But when we deal with the transnational mobility of cars and car parts (new and second-hand), how can we operationalize this simultaneous exam of different

places and nodes, scales and subjects? How should we proceed in face of a sort of jigsaw puzzle made up of tiny pieces spread all over the planet?

The flows of what we call global cars cannot be taken as self-evident, because what must be explained is precisely the mobilities and infrastructures that support them and the normative regimes involved in each empirical case. As Marcus (1995) correctly points out, multi-sited research is not made from linear or successive arrangements of multiple “cases” taken as bounded, self-contained “fields”. On the contrary: we are interested in the processual connections, disjunctures and discontinuities between territories, objects and actors. Discarding dichotomies such as local *versus* global, multi-sited and multiscale ethnography seeks to “empirically [follow] the thread of cultural process itself” (*Idem*, 97). We are convinced that ethnography is not limited to the “be there” experience and can rather emerge from an empirical focus on constitutive elements of the larger system of transnational mobilities (see also Appadurai, 1986; Knowles, 2017).

There is a clear affinity between what is suggested by multi-sited research protocols and what the mobilities turn brings under the umbrella of the so-called mobile methods (Buscher, Urry and Witchger, 2010; Fincham, McGuinness and Murray, 2010; Buscher e Veloso, 2018)⁵. In both cases, although through different theoretical affiliations, there is a set of approaches and techniques which aim to follow, document, understand and explain physical, imaginative and virtual mobilities. Shaping while being shaped by sociability patterns, socio-technical interactions and power dynamics, such mobilities generate and are affected by socio-spatial inequalities that a sedentary approach cannot properly capture (Freire-Medeiros, 2022; Segura, forthcoming).

Our team sought to overcome the limitations imposed by the hegemonic views that consider the “crime world” as an “underworld”, or as “disorder” or a set of immoral individual behaviors, thus losing sight of its orderings. We highlight the normative regimes (Feltran, 2020, 2022) that are operational and in dispute in the (in)formal economy of vehicles and their processes of reproduction of inequalities and violence. Therefore, we attempted to establish relationships between spatially dispersed and/or moving unities across different time scales. As the papers that make up this dossier make clear, this perspective can be built through different tracking

5. For almost two decades, the “mobilities turn” in social theory was especially prolific in the analysis and proposals of methodological frameworks. But we acknowledge that many years before the mobilities turn was institutionalized, several of the procedures and sensibilities mentioned here were already present in the social sciences, although in a non-hegemonic way. By the same token, there are countless researchers that do not claim to belong to the mobilities turn but contribute to a non-sedentary science (Freire-Medeiros, 2022).

techniques of people and things, information and policies, and also by composing *typical trajectories* (see also Feltran, 2022). As the papers of Motta *et al.*, Jacquot and Morelle, Pimentel *et al.* in this dossier show, the systematic following of face-to-face interactions and of telemediated ones have the same heuristic value.

D'Andrea, Ciolfi and Gray (2011) point out that despite the predominantly micro-sociological and phenomenological approaches in research connected to the mobilities turn, mixed methods have become more widespread. We agree with Manderscheid (2016) when she proposes that mobile ethnographies should consider quantitative methods, taking advantage of “the power of persuasion possessed by numbers”, which is especially welcome when we seek to inform public policy. This disposition to go beyond the so-called quantitative/qualitative division can be seen throughout our research project and is particularly noticeable in Feltran *et al.*, this issue.

Methods are not mobile only because they are used to collect data on movement, but mainly because they capture the pauses and turbulences that moving entities in specific situations go through. By stressing connectivity and connections, the authors assembled here refute the principle of “freezing for analyzing”, so common when researchers are interested in inspecting, recording and defining attributes that can analytically isolate social phenomena. It is from multi-sited, multiscale observation of the fixities, flows, and frictions that make up the motor vehicles and car parts markets in different parts of the planet that emerge *global cars* in their systemic, complex and conflicting quality.

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