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Repoliticizing Territories Experiences of Popular Politics in an Urban Settlement

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In the self-building practices we do not see just a response to exclusion, they are producing urban imaginary patterns at the same time and they should be considered as a laboratory for policies of cooperation and transition from the public space to the common space. For a better understanding of these processes, I aim to focus on the role that territories and inhabited spaces play in the experience of self-organization in a popular settlement on the outskirts of Xalapa, Veracruz, Mexico.

I have divided the paper into three sections, first I will focus on Mexican housing policies, dwelling on the new housing model proposed for the public-private alliance. Then I will describe some of the principal dynamics which occur in a popular settlement during the building phase. I will conclude with considerations on the role of territory in a context of popular politics shaped by relations of governmentality.

Introduction

My analysis starts with stories of land occupations by the inhabitants of Xalapa who build their own homes. I came to learn about these stories through my master thesis work which focused on an urban renewal project carried out by UCISV-VER (Union of Veracruzans Settlers Demanding Housing). UCISV-VER has a micro-credit program that aims to finance the building or the improvement of participants' homes. Observing the development of the program allowed me to study the realities of the city of Xalapa and the production of urban spaces, considering the regular and irregular ones. I was also in contact with different urban actors, both governmental representatives and squatters, which allowed me to conduct structured and semi-structured interviews and to inquire about personal histories.

Mexican housing policies and the neoliberal housing pattern

We can divide the Mexican housing policy in two major periods: the first one starts in 1940, with the begin of the accelerated expansion of cities, and ends in the 1990s. The other period lasts from the 1990s up until today.

In the first phase the State acted as the major guarantor of housing rights by promoting the production, financing and maintenance of the houses. In the '70s the Sistema Nacional de Vivienda was founded, which still exists nowadays, its mission was to respond and to cover the entirety of the housing demands.

Part of the Sistema Nacional de Vivienda are also four institutions that contribute in practical terms to the financing and building of homes through the granting of loans. They differ according to the economic and social situation of their customers.

Starting from the second half of the '90s these financing and production models of low cost housing, the so-called viviendas de interés social (social interest housing), experienced substantial changes. In particular, the trend around the deregulation state led to the vigorous increase of the influence of private agents, from both the financial and the construction sectors. These reforms are strictly bound to the policies of the World Bank and IMF, which acted to raise the number of private properties pertaining to the land and simultaneously asked to simplify regulations on land trade.

Accepting these terms meant the transition of Mexican public housing institutions from housing advocates to a whole financial apparatus, which led to the conversion of the State into an agent who facilitated the involvement of the private sector in housing production.

Furthermore, the State had to assume equal trade conditions of the private sector and requiring the beneficiaries of its policies to pay the market prices for the services offered. Thereby the poorest segments of the population were the most affected by this situation.

The national organizations listed above changed their rules and regulations in order to act like a mortgage company lending at the market rates and often the private sector played as an intermediary between the public institution and the population by giving a loan.

Combined to this political change, the loss of the influence of the State and the progressive sale of agricultural land, by then cleared by the forms of collective property, a new settlement pattern came to represent the actual version of social housing: the conjunto urbano. These new housing arrangements are a break from the previous forms of production of urban space. It used to be bordered by perimeter walls contrasting with the open track of the modern city and it used to be located in remote peripheral areas.

The great distance from these residences and their inhabitants' places of work implies a car owner population and the structure of the habitations and of the housing complex do not allow the installation of the usual informal activities, thus favouring the new big shopping malls.

This is therefore an urban model that is not appropriate to the financial means of most of its inhabitants. It is important to stress this last point: the new housing complexes, even if they are almost all built by private corporations, are sponsored and promoted by the State, particularly by those institutions that are in charge of housing policies. These housing solutions are so designed for mid-and lower-middle population, which is offered a subsidized loan to buy one of these houses.





Figure 1 | ex. conjunto habitacional

The popular settlement, a briefly description

Self-building houses are quantitatively the most important and effective ways of production of the urban habitat of Mexican towns and cities.

In the city of Xalapa the self-building is practiced both in already populated contexts and in greenfield sites, not covered by the plan, often agricultural areas, mostly located on the outskirts of the city. In this second case the self construction does not deal only with the house in the strict sense: the entire district has to be created. Anyway we can also see that the already populated neighbourhood had to organize itself in order to provide the block with platforms, green areas and more.

Due to the scarcity of resources and the poor soil conditions these homes often do not have good levels of comfort and health. They used to be very dark, poorly ventilated and humid.

If we refer to the report *The challenge of Slum* (2003), it describes a slum as “a run-down area of a city characterized by substandard housing and squalor and lacking in tenure security”, as defined by UN-HABITAT. That definition could certainly represent a slum, but a slum is not only that. A popular settlement can also be considered as a sort of slum, despite the fact that sometimes they can boast toilets, a roof and a sewage system (hardly obtained). Indeed, they are produced by the same logic that creates slums: speculation on public land, lack of State regulatory role, the foreign debt, chronic unemployment and job insecurity. Besides they also share the same degree of precariousness.

Hence we must expand the definition of slum by entering social and economic coordinates that characterize its inhabitants' conditions, such as the ability to access to credit, to protect themselves against real estate speculation, to join the formal market and to enjoy the work of the state institutions aimed at making their rights real.

In this sense, with the official definition of slums adopted, the UN states that only 19.6% of Mexicans lives in precarious conditions, or in slums, while housing insecurity and poor conditions represents a much more general and widespread problem in the country.

Quoting an UAM-A's investigation on the subject (Coulomb, Schteingart, 2006), at the date of 2000, 12.6 million of houses presented poor condition, which is equivalent to 56% of the total number of dwellings recorded.

Another terminology which is used to define a popular settlement is spontaneous or irregular settlements. Although the character of irregularities may be appropriate if we situate in a legal context, it becomes less

appropriate when it is used to define a practice which usually follows collective patterns of implementation quite experimented and thus rarely spontaneous, i.e. impulsively or random, (Duhau, Giglia, 2008). These patterns concern the way in which residents build the house and the forms of organization through which they gain access to infrastructure.

Lastly, referring to the kind of people we can meet in a popular settlement, it is wrong to identify the fact of residing in a colonia popular with the fact of being poor. Popular settlements in Xalapa achieve significant levels of social heterogeneity, including non-poor families, many of whom belong to the middle class. We can explain the presence of the middle class and the consequent social mix by two main reasons: the first one refers to the economic conditions needed in Mexico to get a bank loan or to join the government houses programs. The second reason is as important as the first one and it concerns beliefs about housing and comfort which lead to refuse the new model of the conjunto abitacional, even if it means privileging another kind of precariousness.

Politicizing territory

In the case of the Xalapa's popular settlements whose inhabitants took part in the microcredit program of UCISV-VER, we may observe two processes occurring on the territory and upon conceiving the territory. One concerns the production of public space as a negotiated and collective space.

As we said, the housing construction represents only the first moment of the urbanization process, it must be followed by the limitation of the private environment with respect to the public one. Thus, parcelling-out represents the first moment for the definition of public space.

Non-private spaces are not just about roads and squares, they could also involve a health center, a kindergarten or other services structures not provided by the State.

For instance loans obtained by the micro-credit program of the association UCISV-VER do not concern only the house but also the construction of green areas, parks, platforms, market spaces.

The need to negotiate the use of space with other people requires self-management in order to provide it with facilities or to exert pressure on the authorities for regularization and supply of services.

People are settling in a context where public space as such is not given: it has to be produced through cooperation and the establishment of common rules. Public space is translated as collective space as the result of a shared process.

Since these spaces are often the result of conflicting processes deploying both outside as inside the settlement, inhabitants learn self-management and participatory approaches in order to develop and to improve their collectives spaces. This social interaction represents the culture that fills the meaning of the public space in a popular settlement.

One important effect of this practice is the revaluation of the role and importance of the surrounding area and the environment regarding housing. Sense of responsibility towards the surrounding space grows at the same time as the awareness about the results that these forms of organization and participation may lead to. The second process could be considered as a consequence of this last one as it concerns the way in which the environment is framed so that the people claim the validity of these spaces in order to counter the pressure exerted by authorities which deny to recognize them.

What I would like to stress here is the effect of the shift from conflict to organization as a way for self-building of common areas and for shaping the dialogue with the government. This allowed the passage from a claim for recognition and assistance to the awareness of representing an alternative to a dominant urban discourse and the consequent desire to influence the definition of public policies. While the participatory process is developing, people achieve to recognize, assert and argument the superiority of their urban space on the one offered by the State and described above.

These practices of management and sharing the territory are also shaping the ability to imagine as feasible an idea of territorial self-government as a strategy to contrast the new city pattern and its environmental features.



Namely, the movements I analysed used to translate their claim of housing right or services in a health claim where health referred not only to a physical situations but also to the environmental conditions of life. Albeit the presence of several urban problems linked to the poverty and insecurity, the struggles to improve livelihood and to adapt to changing circumstances have given new meanings to local politics and social life. In this context, the effect of the use of local cultural resources means the re-shaping of the social fabric by re-configuring the meaning. It testifies to the emergence of identities that can not be interpreted just through an analysis based on class. Indeed they include actors defined by different forms of domination and subordination, thus their understanding must include other characterization such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, generation, social role.

Conclusion

Talking about the conflict above land, house and environment the concepts of neotemporalidad and neoterritorialidad (Santos, 2007) can be helpful. The first aims to unmask the tension, conveyed by the ideologies of development, between modernity and backwardness. The second contextualizes the new demand for land and urban areas, namely the renewed centrality of the local dimension, within the transformations produced by globalization.

The discourse of development, a soft and de-politicized translation of the progress discourse, pretends to place on a continued historical line the different declinations of present. In this respect, country and people that had to be developed are condemned to an earlier stage and their near future is already mapped out. One of the logical consequence of this unidimensional view of history is to consider the resistance struggles of the people of the south as archaic in some sense and their solutions or proposals as solutions to a problem that is not ours. Thus misunderstanding how these struggles represent a number of contemporary declinations of a global and common process which is inscribed in the frame of an economic model and global governance which seems to have territory as its point of greatest pressure.

Therefore we can refer to a neoterritoriality on the side of capitalistic process, testified by the renewed importance of geographical and physical space in politics-economic studies. But also because most of the resistance to this process proceeds from representations of territory and local living which are structured on the bases of a sort of defence of that same territory where the global processes are insisting.

Another aspect which is called into being by the struggles here described is that they are an example of popular politics as Partha Chatterjee (2004) defined it, namely politics made by people which produce public effect even if they are situated outside institutions or policies frames.

Understanding the popular politics in the sense suggested by Chatterjee allowed us to deeply inquire the process through which these practices are structured in relation to the governmental and economic process. Chatterjee uses *Gramscian and Foucauldian concepts*, adapting them to the politics in the postcolonial dimension.

Observing the relation adopted by institutions towards marginal classes, the author describes two dimensions of governmental activities. In order to understand the political sense of popular practices we have to situate them in the space of Politic Society where people take part not as citizens, holding right and duties, and which differs, in this sense, from Civil Society which is populated by citizens in the legal and theoretical sense of this definition. Conversely marginal people are weak bearers of rights, they are involved in the space of Political Society as a group of population, which from the government standpoint represents the empirical category usable for defining an object of policy. The concept of population as it is used in Chatterjee defines the way through which subalterns become the subject of politics in the process of nationalization of the post-colonial state, thus participating in the national reality.

In order to understand the gap between Civil and Politic society, we should consider for example that most of the negotiations between the State and the community occur in a illegal context. As the State is making arrangements with illegal squatters to ensure the enjoyment of civil services or to subject them to welfare policies, so people are taken into account not as normal citizens and judged for invading foreign property.

Despite their illegality they are in some kind of political relationship with the State: a strategical one. Through this analysis, we are able to understand the bargaining process that leads a state to enter in an illegal dimension and accord services and dialogue with squatter people. So that this relationship is resolved in a positive way, the strategy is determined mainly by the side of the governed people through their ability to be recognized as belonging to a precise group of population. As the governmentality is structured as a particular relation between government and population, it does not just shape the governmental act but also a people strategy to interact with the government.

Understanding this process therefore means to examine the governmental processes not only through the eyes of government, but also to inquire the process adopted by people that need to be recognized in a policy dialogue by wearing some functional characterization to mobilize support and influence the implementation of government policies in their favor.

Hence are the actors' strategies central, particularly that kind of strategy that mobilizes a notion of territory intertwined with the local dimension of living. How we should consider the no-economic dimension in which it is framed? Is the environmental dimension strongly taken as the endowment of moral conflicts that arise as a result of a dysfunction in the sphere of distribution? Does it refer to economic and urban resources management?

Finally, the notion of governmentality in Foucault also allows a positive reading of conflict as a space for the production of government. It allows the recognition of power as relational and its constitutive relationship with freedom. This also means that the power comes after the "making society" of subjects and subjectivity, it is not monolithically and unilaterally constituted.

Thinking in terms of resilience allows us to read the government as an always-on tension between government and governed. If we certify the rise of the importance of territory and space in the new local and global struggles, we should wonder in what way the growing politicization of environment respond to a need to shape the relations between government and governed in order to influence the way in which the governed want to be governed.

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