

URBAN FRAGMENTATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS IN SAN DE BARILOCHE CITY, PATAGONIA - ARGENTINA (1983-2015)

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1. INTRODUCTION

Cities under capitalist development have experienced, over recent decades, deep urban fragmentation processes. Those with a tourist function worsened this situation because of the urban land value increment. Such is the case of San Carlos de Bariloche city in Argentina's Andean Patagonia. High fragmentation combined with large spatial dispersion of its township lands and hilly landscape, have limited the functionality and inner cohesion of the city.

San Carlos de Bariloche city is one of the main population centers of the Patagonia region and a well-known national and international tourist destination. This intermediate city of 133,000 inhabitants, according to the 2010 census, condenses several elements of complexity: it belongs to a border region between Argentina and Chile, it is inserted into a protected area, the Nahuel Huapi National Park, and its economy is highly concentrated and globalized around tourism (ABALERON, 1992). It has regional hierarchy and like other middle tourist cities of Patagonia, its fast population growth and poorly planned urban sprawl generated urban fragmentation and a deep social division of space.

The aim of this article is to advance in understanding these urban fractures from a neighborhood associations study perspective.

The hypothesis proposed is that the management, relationships and functions taken from the Neighborhood Councils, closely linked to its population class status, allow better interaction in the intra-urban scale and promote more inclusive positions in the popular sectors. Moreover, the role of Neighborhood Councils is relevant in the construction of urban imaginaries affecting the intra-urban social distances.

To analyze these processes this article has worked with statistical data obtained from the last two national censuses (2010 and 2001) with highly detailed scale information in order to register socioeconomic differences within the city. Then, these variables were mapped as well as other characteristics of the urban inland: from a material, topographic approach, and overlapped with the symbolic approach. The result was different thematic synthesis maps.

Qualitative techniques were also used in this work, specifically through the development of in-depth interviews to members of the executive committees of "Neighborhood Councils" (Juntas Vecinales). The role of these local associations were analyzed in the construction of urban imaginary having impact in the consolidation of social distances.

2 SOCIOTERRITORIAL INEQUALITIES AND FRAGMENTATION

There are several ways of conceiving the urban fragmentation. PRÉVÔT SCHAPIRA (2001: 34) states that fragmentation "associates spatial components (physical disconnections, morphological discontinuities), social dimensions (community withdrawal, exclusive logics) and political (dispersion of actors and autonomy of management devices and urban regulation)". Meanwhile, the socio-territorial inequalities are often conceived from a more comprehensive perspective. According to (HARVEY, 2007) it is a large and critical concept that allows to comprehension of both the increase of socio-territorial gaps, and the urban fragmentation which is produced and reproduced within the cities.

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Among all these dimensions that are articulated in these processes, mapping the differences by social class of the population can account for certain types of urban fractures. We understand social class composition through three ways: structural, cultural and identity way (GRIMSON, 2009). The statistical indicator measured by the Argentine censuses referred to Unsatisfied Basic Needs (NBI) can be likened to the structural meaning of that definition.

It is also interesting to contrast these socioeconomic urban elements with those related to the location of the city, linked to the physical dimension of urban fragmentation. Inside the urban area of San Carlos de Bariloche city, there are complex irregularities due to its topography, typical of a mountain town.

This geomorphology determines the development of the city from different planes. From the functional perspective because it generates discontinuous surfaces in the occupation due to the steep slopes, which reach ranges between 30 and 45%, categorized as "unsuitable for urbanization" according to the Environmental Urban Plan of the city (MUNICIPALITY OF SAN CARLOS DE BARILOCHE, 2011).

From the mobility and communication perspective this topography hinders the accessibility to the central area from suburban different sectors. Also, the different altitudes (between 750 and 1200 meters above sea level) defined severe weather conditions in those neighborhoods in the southern zone of the city, in the highest portion of the glacial moraine, where snow precipitation are more intense than that recorded in the lake shore.

Then, the topography is a significant element that imprints more or less favorable conditions to people who inhabit these spaces. And takes center stage in the processes of urban fragmentation. It is necessary to add to these elements the symbolic level which offers an opposition between the area near the Nahuel Huapi Lake, the city "for tourism" and the area known as "El Alto", with a direct negative connotation linked to poverty and marginalization.

3. SYMBOLIC DIMENSION OF INNER SPACE

The idea of the two sides of San Carlos de Bariloche city was installed more than half a Century ago. It is a model of dual city consisting in a binary reduction: a city immersed in the beautiful lakes and mountains landscape, for tourism and upper classes and the "other", the city of poverty and exclusion in vulnerable urban sectors, far away from the lake and the touristically valued landscapes, recognized as "El Alto". These representations continue sedimented in the common sense that reproduces inequalities, naturalizes and ignores the complexities within apparently homogeneous sectors. Far from such binary conception, the city has a complex and heterogeneous social and spatial composition.

4. THE CITY AND ITS FRAGMENTS: THE IMPORTANCE OF NEIGHBORHOOD POLICIES

The notion of city as a meeting place for different people, Baumann refers to a battle between the two ends of human behavior under the terms of "mixofilia and mixophobia"; finally he says, "everything fall in the local population, the city, the neighborhood" (BAUMAN, 2010).

This is one of the centers of interest: the neighborhood, which should not be considered a mere judicial, administrative or physical division, it is also a historical and cultural making with high material and symbolic importance for all its inhabitants. In addition they have a strategic role in urban fragmentation processes, in the multiple dimensions of socio-spatial inequality and as jurisdictional unity in the citizen participation mechanisms.

From this multidimensional and multiscale perspective, from the global to the neighborhood scale, where the conflicts of urban life are intertwined with issues of cultural diversity, this work seeks to contribute to the knowledge of the political dimensions of the uneven insertion of neighbors and their right to the city. We understand the right to the city, including the full exercise of citizenship of its inhabitants, closely linked to a type of democratic management. This right is expressed by the direct and active society participation in urban planning and governance.

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The analysis of the right to the city from the neighborhoods point of view recognizes these spaces as opportunities to develop collective power and group participation in the urbanization decision making, despite the existing asymmetric and differential relations.

The neighborhood scale focuses global, national and local issues and the figure of the "Neighborhood Council" (Junta Vecinal) is considered as the primary unit of participation and main linkage in relations between neighbors, neighborhoods and local government.

5. NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATIONS: THE "NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL" LEADING CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

At a local level, different mechanisms and styles of citizen participation, in dialogue with the municipal government, aware about the tensions in legitimacy building among neighbors, according to their social class. Moreover, this kind of participation represents an opportunity to mitigate socioterritoriales inequalities reproduction.

The Neighborhood Councils are recognized in the Río Negro Province through Article No. 240 of its Provincial Constitution which states that "the municipalities and communes recognize the existence of elected neighborhood councils. They are created to promote the progress and development of better living conditions for the inhabitants and their neighborhoods". In addition, the municipality recognizes and encourages the creation of Neighborhood Councils for "satisfying common needs, through all manner of community participation".

From a socioeconomic point of view, the importance of the Neighborhood Councils is highly relevant in everyday life of residents with low incomes (FUENTES *et al.*, 2007; MATOSSIAN, 2010), but barely important for rich people.

These neighborhoods dynamics illustrate, as Harvey says, that private or almost-private interests linked to political and economic elites, interfere in an abrupt manner the right to the city practices. In the extreme case of "Arelauquen Gated Community", its residents decided that the Neighborhood Council was "unnecessary". This evidences how socioeconomic inequalities are articulated with the formation and development of the Neighborhood Councils.

6. RELATIONS BETWEEN NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCILS AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Another analytical axis to understand the impact of Neighborhood Councils in the socioterritorial dynamics of the city is the existence, or not, of inter-relationships between. So, the collective work was investigated either to recognize if these associations are articulated to strengthen their claims towards the municipality, or conversely, if there are no networks among Neighborhood Councils.

The city local government is divided into 5 Municipal Delegations and 9 Territorial Service and Planning Centers (TSPC). The results show elements of interest within the possibilities of interaction Neighborhood Councils - Municipality. On the one hand, the TSPC have relevant roles in the dynamics and struggles to improve conditions in poor neighborhoods, which tend to cluster with regard to specific issues. Simultaneously, in wealthy neighborhoods there is no direct link between the Neighborhood Councils and the municipality.

7. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

San Carlos de Bariloche city displays deep urban fractures, deployed on a context of longstanding socioterritorial inequalities. The complexity of this situation, experienced in most cities under capitalist development, is exacerbated by its condition of tourist city, its topography which tends to reinforce asymmetries, and its social representations linked to the demographic component in which population groups images are constructed in a more or less "legitimate" depending on its origin.

This article has attempted to reflect advances in the understanding of relations between socio-territorial inequality processes and citizen participation dynamics within Bariloche's urban space.

This first approach shows the existence of participation circuits and interactions between spaces, central municipality institutions and neighborhoods, articulated through the work of the Territorial Service and Planning Centers. These relationships enable inclusive policies implementation in the territory and a collective treatment of social problems affecting large number of neighborhoods.

These interactions between different institutional spheres improve the relations between distant areas, in a symbolic and material perspective. This way, the high urban “walls”, which reinforce the idea of the two sides of the city are slowly been overcome. The challenge depends on: these institutions, the political will of the current and future local governments and the neighborhood leaders’ commitment and politic management.

Finally, another huge challenge that must be faced is the cultural transformation of local society in order to construct a more inclusive San Carlos de Bariloche.

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