



Urbano

ISSN: 0717-3997

ISSN: 0718-3607

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Universidad del Bío Bío

Chile

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Urbano, vol. 23, no. 41, 2020, May-October, pp. 84-101
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22320/07183607.2020.23.41.05>

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=19864376006>

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THE SETTLEMENT TERRITORIES ON THE METROPOLITAN FRINGES OF BUENOS AIRES, FROM 1980 TO THE PRESENT DAY

LUCAS JORDÁN DOMBROSKI

I. INTRODUCTION

The informal habitat is a relevant issue in Latin America, and a wide range of debates has arisen around this, especially since the 1970s, that try to provide answers to the phenomenon at a regional scale (Turner, 1977, Padrilla, 1982, Hardoy & Satterthwaite, 1987, Clichevsky, 2001). More recently, studies have focused on case analysis, where they try to understand the specificities of the phenomenon for each site. This, given that the issue is substantially different among the largest cities on the subcontinent. While for cities like Mexico City, Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Caracas or Bogota, informality represents between 30 and 60 percent, in others like Santiago or Montevideo, it is around 10 percent (Clichevsky, 1991). The same applies for Greater Buenos Aires ³ (GBA), with a total of one and a half million inhabitants living in more than a thousand neighborhoods (Cravino, 2018). The specificity of the processes is also different in environmental, social and political terms. In the GBA, the “settlements” ⁴ or “land occupation” have been subject of academic studies, press columns, debates about government administration, and policies since the end of the last century, when it was shown that this was a phenomenon that had come to stay, and was very different from the so-called “slums” and other informal habitat processes. Their location and the players involved in the process, have also been an important issue and have been the subject of different studies. Unlike the slums, which started to emerge in the 1930s and were concentrated in the city of Buenos Aires and the districts in the first ring; the settlements began to appear at the beginning of the 80’s and have been built on the fringes of the urbanized area. The specialized literature (Izaguirre & Aristizabal, 1988; Merklen, 1997; Di Virgilio, 2012; Cravino, 2018) for this phenomenon considers, as an important matter, their location “in districts of the second ring” (Di Virgilio et al., 2012:32), in general, in unconsolidated areas “where most are located on private land, (...) on sites that, in general, were landfills, brushlands, or floodable areas, which is why the owners did not have any interest or possibility to exploit them economically or

would suffer regulatory restrictions for this (Cravino 2001: 8)”. In addition, over time, political and community organizations, organized neighbors, public servants, and other players who have taken part in the land occupation were defined as different to those from the slums, and they have been changing as time has gone by, growing as such around the settlement process. As will be seen throughout the article, many works explain the reason behind the emergence and growth of the occupations, the players involved, the physical specificities of the neighborhoods, or their localization. However, some of the relationships between these specificities over time had limited research. The goal of this work is to reconstruct the interpretation of the land occupation process in GBA between 1980 and the present day, related to the players involved and the specificities of the land that has been occupied, in order to understand the sites in play and their purpose in the Metropolitan area. This implies reviewing different material, from specialized texts to primary qualitative sources, along with quantitative data and plans. From the viewpoint of public action, with the analysis of the actions of several players that take place around the extension process of the settlements over time, it is understood that this interpretation brings to light the material and social particularities, and is key to distinguish the process and to design more effective public policies.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Different areas and perspectives of analysis regarding the study of the players and the territory itself contribute to this work. From there, and regarding the works that have addressed public policies, it is deemed necessary to deconstruct the idea of the State, that is assumed as monolithic in a hierarchical, rational and static direction of the policies (Lascoumes; Le Galés, 1984), that are created around the informal habitat, and consider instead, the interaction of the players in terms of public authorities and social players. This as the implementation and redefinition of the habitat policies are played out onsite, where the players become so from their participation (Chiara & Catenazzi, 2009). The latter leads to talking about public action, not just regarding the policies in their preparation and implementation, but in a more general sphere that implies considering urban transformations in general, and that allows visualizing more accurately, the actions of public authorities and considering, in a different way, the social players in their capacity to impact said transformations. Now, what is understood by public action? In theoretical terms, and for the study of settlements, it must be understood as Thoenig (1997:30) outlines, where the public power does not have a monopoly over politics, and transformations, in this

³ Here, Greater Buenos Aires is considered as comprising the Autonomous City and 30 districts that surround it, successively forming three rings or “coronas”, from the center to the outskirts.

⁴ There is agreement among researchers who are specialized in the study of the informal habitat in the GBA regarding the denomination of “land occupation” and “settlements (plainly speaking)” as equivalent. The denomination “informal settlements” or “popular settlements” refers to a more general process that includes, for example, the “slums”.

case the size of the settlements, “takes place in an ‘arena’, where different logics and values, very diverse modalities, circumstances and planned interventions, technical rationality and political elections, scientific expertise and militant commitments, scheduling and concertation, coexist”. This means considering the study of the players and territorial transformations from that ‘arena’, which some authors operationalize around the identification of different ‘moments’ (Merlinsky, 2017) of interaction or turning points in a process. The considerations of the territory are played out on a different plane, but here interact with that of public action as a notion, as the territory is understood as a “dynamic and active area, a social structure that arises from the interaction of the subjects and the specific and physical material and immaterial characteristics of the different spaces” (Governa, 2007:23) which is why, apart from being a specific area comprising extensions, limits and obstacles, it also consists of flows and nodes that act as networks of relations and connections of the players (Amin, 2005). Starting from this basis, this work focuses on some of the territorial specificities that may be of interest from a metropolitan scale.

III. METHODOLOGY

The settlement territories, as an object of study, and in the terms that are of interest here, comprise the players involved – from the point of view of public action – and the specificities of the places where the neighborhoods are located, both spatially and temporally.

The study technique consisted of historic review about the interpretations of the land occupation process that took place between the 1980s and the start of this century. For more recent years, the technique was based on building a metropolitan-scale map with the geographic and temporary location of the neighborhoods and the identification of the different players involved.

Specialized texts were used, paying special attention to the valuations of the authors about the features of the occupied areas, the localization of the occupation, the players involved, their means of organization and their relations with other players. To rebuild more recent processes, data from web platforms was used (Provincial Record of Slums and Settlements through the Fair Access to Habitat Act, Law 14.449, the National Working-Class Neighborhood Record and Google Earth). In addition, at a different level of approach, the case studies that resulted from the doctoral work made by the author were relevant, from the contribution of information about the territories both in their material and immaterial specificities. Semi-structured interviews with key players (a total of 15 made with municipal workers, standout neighbors and organization members), the preparation of targeted maps and field work carried out from the study of neighborhoods of local districts with the most occupations (Moreno, José C. Paz and La Matanza), helped to understand why these areas were occupied

and how, the players that took part, the policies that were applied and the strategies and resources that were deployed. From the reconstruction of the occupation process, different “moments” could be identified regarding the articulation of the players involved and the areas that were occupied. Thus, this is about territorial specificities over time, which will be brought to light later in this article.

IV. RESULTS

The results are presented in two parts. The first is linked to the analysis of the literature over a period of time between the 1980’s and 2003. The second is from 2003 onwards, where progress is made about the quantitative and qualitative data of the phenomenon.

Construction, from the literature, of the settlement territories in recent decades

Before moving onto the extensive path that settlements have taken to the present day, it is necessary to look back at their origin. This as, until the 70’s, there were less restrictive possibilities of accessing land and housing for the working class compared to today, related to State policies and market dynamics. The role of the measure to freeze rentals and “cheap parceling” (without requiring utilities) stands out (Cravino, 2001; Di Virgilio et al., 2012) This ended during the civilian-military dictatorship, with the sanction of the Urban Locations Law N° 21342 from 1976 and the Decree in Law of Land Use and Territorial Regulations N°8912 from 1977. As part of the series of measures, it is also necessary to consider the sanction of the Municipal Planning Code of Buenos Aires and the eviction of population through the eradication of the slums (Pacheco, 2018), or due to demolitions to build highways (Izaguirre & Aristizabal, 1988; Cravino, 2001).

By analyzing the specialized literature, four moments in the settlement territory construction process can be seen.

First moment. The occupations in the southern area and the church organization

Around the start of the 80’s, during the decline of the civilian-military dictatorship, settlements arose in the southern part of Greater Buenos Aires as a new phenomenon, especially occupations of large empty lots. This was related to the work of church-based groups which, to a great extent, due to the overriding political outlawing of those years, had become a key player in containing the impoverished and displaced population. Church organizations, as the years went by, were building their influence by accompanying the occupations that took place, as Cravino (2001:10) stated, from the south, “towards the west and, to a lesser extent, the north, where the high-income sectors were concentrated”.

One of the first works that refers to the settlement phenomenon

is that of Izaguirre & Aristizabal (1998), which talks about the collective and organized occupation of the land, considering the role of the working classes and their transformation in the context of the dictatorship and the return to democracy. It is from this moment that a direct link is suggested between the generation of major infrastructure works for the GBA and the localization of the land occupations. Thus, the projection of a partial construction and setup of the Green Belt and the Buen Ayre Highway were set up as projects that marked off the areas that were meant to be free of settlements from those that could be susceptible to new occupations. The authors understand that, therefore, there was a “series” of measures that had different impacts on the affected population groups, and point out, in this regard, a very clear intentionality: “pushing the urban poor towards the outskirts of parts of Greater Buenos Aires, beyond the so-called “green belt” clean corridor, a future green reserve area that, under the ideological robes of “clean air”, facilitated the strategic control of the poorest sectors...”, “spreading them to these areas in a far wider radius, which limited their threatening concentration near the seat of the groups of power” (Izaguirre & Aristizabal, 1988: 7). The following map (Figure 1), built from the data collected by Aristizabal, shows the settlements that arose from the occupations in 1981 and those which took place later, now in democracy between 1985 and 1986. Although the records from that period are not that accurate and are based on journalist-style reports, the importance of the occupations is clearly seen along the line between the Almirante Brown and Quilmes districts, which share nine neighborhoods between them, on the banks of the Las Piedras and San Francisco streams, in the area of influence of the Diocese of Quilmes (six in '81 and three in '85). Later, in '86, three occupations were recorded in La Matanza, one in Merlo and one in Morón, but all smaller in terms of surface covered and number of families.

Figure 1. Land occupation from 1981 to 1985. Source: Own preparation using the records of Izaguirre & Aristizabal (1988)

Second moment. Occupations in some districts of the second ring, from the “non-partisan” organizations to the links with Peronism.

In the first years of democracy, during radicalism, “the state position had aimed at trying to avoid occupations, facing off with the occupant movements” Merklen (1997: 7). From the Peronist government, the relationship was presented in a different way, thus building very specific areas where settlements were developed, with a certain accompaniment and political consensus.

From a study which links territorial registration with social policies as part of a new repertoire of action of the working classes, Merklen (1997: 6) states that there have been two moments in the organization of the settlements. A first one linked to the broad participation of the neighborhood's inhabitants, where the “organizations were built upon the idea of autonomy regarding the political parties”, as non-partisan or

apolitical, and a second towards 1988, where “with the arrival of Peronism to power in the Province of Buenos Aires, a new link with the settlements is seen, no longer recognized by the desire to eradicate them”.

In this context, just as the author outlines, the Pro-Land plan is created at a provincial level, which among its goals included support to consolidate the community organizations of the neighborhoods and the sale of occupied land to its occupants. Here, leadership was taken, according to Merklen (1997), by some territorially-based organizations like the Land and Housing Federation (FTV) and the Classist and Combative Current (CCC) in La Matanza. At the same time, in Lomas de Zamora, “Houses with Land” is launched with similar goals to the provincial plan. Also, during those years, other social organizations and NGOs begin to have a more relevant role, like the case of Caritas, where the Mother Earth (Madre Tierra) organization emerged from, acting in the northeast area of the city on the areas of influence of the Bishopric of Merlo-Morón. From the actions of social organizations and their political connections, Cravino (2009) will state that the land occupations were “institutionalized” as a way to access urban land. In this sense, already by then the strong ties between different territorially-anchored players and the construction of new settlements in their areas of influence can be seen, but furthermore, the structuring of new settlement territories, where the political organizations that will take part and the agreement of municipal governments will be determining factors.

Thus, from this “institutionalization”, lands begin to be occupied that belonged to, apart from the Catholic Church, the State, workers unions, and private abandoned or environmentally damaged lots.

Third moment. The fall in occupations, in the Peronist organization due to subsistence

Towards the mid 90's and up until 2003, Cravino (2009) states that, due to the economic recession, there has not been a significant growth of the settlements, especially because there were no expectations regarding salary increases, and there was no reception by government agencies of the population's demands regarding housing.

In this same sense, Merklen (1997) will point out the role of Peronism and its organization with regard to the social support of the most impoverished sectors of society, which was then focused on sustaining a model that was falling apart. The basic food supply distribution policies through the “manzaneras” (voluntary women from the neighborhoods), guaranteed the subsistence of the population, while aspects related to granting access to the land or housing fell out of the limelight.

Fourth moment. New occupations and social housing in some districts of the GBA's second and third ring

From 2003 onwards, a period that will be seen later, the number of occupations started to grow again, especially because of greater expectations of employment and growing income,

accompanied by population migration from neighboring countries and northern provinces. Diverse policies related to retrofitting and the construction of housing accompanied this period, but a "real" transformation that would provide formal access to urban land for lower-income classes did not happen. In this context, a new land occupation movement was seen, at the same time that social housing of social interest began to be offered in numbers that never happened; "in this way, some of the occupations were, actually, a means to pressure access to this housing and not an intention to really occupy them" (Cravino 2009: 39).

Current setup of the settlement territories

From 2003 to 2015, the occupations on the Metropolitan outskirts grew exponentially as a result of economic and employment expectations, which also brought migration of a lower-class population from neighboring countries (Cravino, 2016), especially from Paraguay, and to a lesser extent, Peru and Bolivia. The Argentinian population who lived in slums, or who came from other provinces in the country, was also displaced from the central areas of the city. This period saw a permissive policy regarding new occupations from the aim to urbanize the neighborhoods and avoid violent evictions. Likewise, on another plane, a broad range of programs and regulations was approved that sought to resolve the issue of access to land and, more broadly, to the city ⁵.

As can be seen in the following chart (Table 1), which considers the settlements in the GBA, there are large differences between districts regarding the number of settlements they had up to 2015, as well as the neighborhoods that appeared from the new occupations in different periods. Here, the occupations are analyzed in sections: before 2003, between 2003 and 2010 and finally, from 2011 to 2015.

If the occupations of recent years (2011 to 2015) are considered, it is possible to see that the first five districts have 94% of the total, with the most relevant ones being Moreno, Florencio Varela, José C. Paz, La Matanza and Almirante Brown, in that order, all districts in the second ring, while the first and third rings have not seen new neighborhoods. If the 2003 to 2010 period is seen, it is possible to identify that, by a wide margin, the occupations are concentrated in three of the aforementioned districts and, also, in Malvinas Argentinas and Pilar.

Table N°1. Total occupations by districts of the GBA, by years. Source: Own preparation based on the Provincial Record of Slums and Settlements by the Fair Access to Habitat Act, 14.449 and Google Earth.

Starting from this, it can be said that the settlements as a problem are not an issue of the whole of the GBA, nor are

they specifically concentrated in the second ring like some authors say (Apaolaza & Venturini, 2018). But rather, they have historically emerged in very precise areas, and in recent years have been mainly concentrated in five districts spread over the south, northeast and west areas. By quickly checking the following map (Figure 2), what has been analyzed in the previous table can be seen.

Figure 2. Current settlements by years of occupation. Source: Own preparation based on the Provincial Record of Slums and Settlements by the Fair Access to Habitat Act, 14.449 and Google Earth

Understanding that the districts seem to be the natural environment where the neighborhood activists or leaders are politically contained (Cravino, 2009) in some, like La Matanza, it is important to consider the role that territorially-based organizations played, like the Land and Housing Federation and the Classist and Combative Current or the Organizations in Combat Front (FOL), as movements linked to land occupation processes, through accompanying families in need. In other districts, like Moreno, the role of the Mother Earth civil association stands out along with the Autonomous Municipal Institute (IDUAR), whose policy has been not supporting occupation eviction requests and promoting a socio-urban integration and accompaniment process. In other districts, social movements and organizations have been involved, like the Evita Movement, Neighborhoods Afoot (Barrios de Pie), CETEP, among others, which have been better contained in given government periods. In the sense of the latter, in recent years there have been different local governments – with continuity in the processes – that were more or less permeable to the settlement extension processes, be this by action or omission. In addition, these governments could not break a segregation dynamic that went beyond the policies they could implement.

The transformations on a Metropolitan scale that emerged from the economic reactivation of 2003 led to radical changes regarding housing production for all social classes. On one side, there were administrations that were served by the highways and had land that was greatly coveted by the property market to build large projects like industrial parks, large commercial areas or enclosed developments and neighborhoods. This process was studied both from the morphological point of view (Colella, 2019) and that of the property market (De Mattos, 2016), or that of the urbanization consumption and production process (Pirez, 2016). On the other hand, there were administrations that focused on receiving provincial and domestic plans and programs with the placement of social housing neighborhoods. According to Aramburu and Chiara (2016), in the 2004 to 2014 period, in the GBA's districts, the construction of housing of the Federal Program was 50% of the total implementation in three of the twenty-four districts of the first and second ring. These

⁵ Public programs like PROMEBA (neighborhood improvement), the Federal Plan and PROCREAR were some of the most representative.”

were: José C. Paz (with 5,306 homes), Florencio Varela (4,540) and La Matanza (3,814), followed by Moreno (3,218) and Esteban Echeverría (2,252). Considering that the program involved the allocation of housing to districts that made land available, according to their possibilities, the benefitted administrations were those that had large expanses of land in areas with relatively low prices on the outskirts. The following diagram (Figure 3) tries to connect the multiple factors that have been involved in determining the areas occupied by new settlements and that have defined the territories. The dominance of land occupation in the aforementioned districts can be seen, as can the close ties with the social housing neighborhoods, and on the other hand, the enclosed neighborhoods linked to the highways.

Figure 3. Settlements, social housing and enclosed neighborhoods, from 2003 to the present. Source: Own preparation based on the Provincial Record of Slums and Settlements and Google Earth

V. CONCLUSIONS

This article sought to show what has been labeled as “settlement territories”, considering the first occupations in the city and other background information, right up to the most recent ones. From this approach, it has been possible to shed light on the areas that were occupied, those who took part, how they did it, and how this was seen and studied over time. Thus, some relationships could be explained and their specificities revealed, along with the players who took part in the land occupation process, the type of land occupied, its spatial and temporal location, its spread or concentration at a Metropolitan level.

From the Metropolitan dimension, diverse factors explain the size of the settlements and their location, as could be seen. Some of these are constant, while others have changed. First, it can be confirmed that the physical specificities of the land, its legal ownership and the zoning it is part of, play an important role. With very few exceptions, these have always been on the outskirts, on spoiled land, with pits or floodable areas, generally with irregular ownership, and in rural or complementary-type zoning adjoining the urban area. In the same sense, the cost of the land played a key role, but has become more relevant in recent years, especially with a growing residential segregation and the overriding pressure of the property market on the land in the outskirts. But beyond the different factors mentioned, the players that have come to be through the settlements process played a key role.

The habitat and housing policies these were subject to or were implemented by local governments, which were developed further in the 2003 to 2015 period and were added to the national and provincial programs, had a differentiating impact between administrations that choose to include them and those that did not, resulting in a population reception by the former that exceeded the capacities they had to manage them. The areas of influence or legal or administrative divisions, be these of local governments, religious groups, community or political organizations and cooperatives, also play a relevant role in the

determination of the areas being occupied. The local governments always had an essential role in the matter, as has been made evident in this article, but the role of religious organizations, like the Catholic church and more recently the Evangelists, is not a minor one. On the other hand, in the period considered here as the fourth moment, the social, political and cooperative organizations have had a great deal of influence from an active participation and with possibilities to finance different projects. In this matter, the links between these different players, who have different origins, make up networks that are linked to the territory, which are able to have a predominant role at a metropolitan level over the land occupations, as well as over the possibilities to carry out socio-urban integration and normalization programs. Finally, although there is still much work to be done, understanding these territories from the proposed perspective can be an essential tool to define or redefine territorial policies that guide the processes, by accompanying the players and networks of players that are important at a metropolitan scale, who also contribute to understanding the settlements as an object of study. In this sense, a way to explore and account for certain specificities of the different types of informal habitat, that have not been explored enough, is also suggested.

