

A theory of the institutional space in marginal neighborhoods: Conceptual tools from a research in progress in Santiago de Chile

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This paper is aimed at providing an innovative and operational theoretical framework for the study of marginal neighborhoods. The focus is put on the practices of powerful institutions, whose administration lies outside those areas, in order to create an alternative perspective to the 'neighborhood effects' thesis.

A large number of urban scholars and public officials believe that the **concentration of poverty** creates **harmful social problems** (e.g. crime, unemployment, school dropout, teenage pregnancy, single-parent households, domestic violence, drug consumption and trafficking, etc.). This belief has an important empirical and conceptual base: the literature on 'neighborhood effects', which points to the social environment as a powerful influence over individual results. In the urban field, these beliefs have been particularly useful for the creation of urgent public policies of poverty dispersion (including demolition in critical cases), and social mix policies. But a vast amount of literature has shown that none of these policies has been effective in providing more social justice.

In addition, the 'neighborhood effects' literature suffers from an important problem: the intensive focus on the environment of neighbors conceals the intervening role of the institutions that shape that environment. In fact, several scholars have questioned the research on neighborhood effects for assuming the consequences of segregation as mere products of ecological aggregations, and for obscuring the active role of powerful institutions in poor and excluded neighborhoods. In fact, critical authors affirm that social problems actually come from institutions whose administration lies outside poor areas. From an institutional perspective then, we assume that institutions not only force the segregation of poor population, but can also participate in the creation of further social problems, by their action and inaction. Thus, this paper is intended to elaborate conceptual tools to analyze marginal neighborhoods by describing how their 'institutional space' is related to the creation of social problems. To do this, we draw on two bodies of literature: the idea of 'total institutions' and the 'institutional perspective' of the Urban Political Economy paradigm.

First, the idea of 'total institutions' proposes that powerful institutions that have complete control over the lives of individuals can define the fate of their inmates, beyond the mere effect of physically grouping them. While marginal neighborhoods cannot be said to have this strict rationalization of life, except for some policing practices, they do have a significant degree of separation from the outside world, and a complex web of bureaucratic management. Second, the Urban Political Economy paradigm emphasizes the role of capitalism in driving socio-spatial inequalities, and highlights the influence of social power and human agency on the social production of urban space. Within this paradigm, the 'institutional perspective' sustains that different institutions not only react but often drive social and economic processes, like residential segregation, through their action and inaction.

Next, space has been understood from different perspectives in social theory, at least in four different ways. First, the Chicago School and Pierre Bourdieu, although very differently, talked about social space; an environment defined by the compositional characteristics of the individual members. Second, architects, planners and some geographers are concerned about physical space; an environment shaped by its visual, material and tridimensional characteristics. Third, Manuel Castells (in his most structuralist texts) and the

Global City literature are both focused (although at different scales) on economic space; an environment defined by collective consumption and capital flows. And fourth, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant often mentioned the idea of a symbolic space; an environment shaped by lifestyles, status groups and visible distinctions. Then, **institutional space** for urban studies would be another reading of space in which the environment is defined by a group of public, private and civil institutions which participate in shaping the fate of its residents, through different practices of action and inaction. And for this research, that 'environment' is represented by marginal neighborhoods.

Then, in order to understand the creation of social problems, **we hypothesize** that a conglomerate of dominant institutions can affect the life chances of a poor neighborhood through **three different mechanisms**: i) investments and disinvestments, ii) inaction and inefficacy, and iii) symbolic branding and stigmatization.

This theoretical framework is the starting point of a large, three-year investigation that we are currently developing in Santiago de Chile. The main question of this research is: ***How do the practices of external institutions influence the creation of social problems in poor and excluded neighborhoods?*** To study this problem, we are conducting a **mixed-methods case study** of three poor and notoriously stigmatized neighborhoods in Santiago, mainly based on interviews to institutional actors and residents, and complemented with document analysis, descriptive statistics, short surveys, and regression analysis of neighborhood effects. At the end of the paper, we show some preliminary findings, regarding the historical development of the neighborhoods and the different institutions that have participated in them.

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