

The triple nexus of housing struggles and urban social mobilizations in Chile

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At the apex of modernization in Chile in the late 1950s, thousands of homeless households began squatting at the edges of Santiago and other cities. These squats were characterized by high levels of political organization. As their clamour for social housing grew, the state responded with an increasingly sophisticated system which was nevertheless insufficient to meet the burgeoning demand; however, both the increasing number of politically organized land seizures (known as *campamentos*) and the considerably enlarged public housing provision of the late 1960s and early 1970s contributed to transform the traditionally segregated socio-economic structure of Santiago (Castells, 1999).

Almost 45 years of market-oriented policies have increased social polarisation by progressively reducing the quality of the housing provision, reducing the access of the poor to quality houses, and expelling them to the city fringes or enclosing them in inner areas in highly dense multi-occupied slums, insofar as state-led subsidies did not meet the increasingly higher expected returns by private developers (López-Morales, forthcoming). For the last two decades, a growing financialized mortgage market has also enlarged mortgage debt burden for Chilean households. Private housing producers obtain higher profits by increasing sales prices, whilst production costs are kept relatively stable by purchasing and developing the cheapest land available, both on the fringes and the inner sectors of the main metropolitan areas. Currently in Chile, housing is a commodity that, although accessible for many, deeply stratifies and segregates society according to household incomes. This leaves considerable numbers of households at the bottom of the social ladder, which are forced to rely on minimum levels of housing provision, and therefore denied basic access to urbanized land, centrality, public goods, preservation of environments and urban heritage conditions, among others, according to strict rules imposed by private investment in urban space.

In the *The City and the Grassroots*, Castells (1983) took a dynamic approach to the analysis of urban social movements in Chile and Latin America until the 1980s, arguing that scholarship must keep pace with the production of cities under capitalist contexts and the forms of urban social movements that emerge in response. Taking this approach as an inspiration, we argue that urban struggles need to be re-thought amidst a still highly unregulated and currently deeply financialized urban land and housing system (López-Morales, forthcoming) in a country that has been regarded by the OECD as one of the most unequal in the world. Discomfort and protest arise as the effects of the laissez-faire market in social reproduction and the preservation of land and housing as rights are evident, but this is done in novel ways, combined with other claims for different rights.

Working with conceptual advances in the literature on Latin American urban movements,

and refreshing the analysis by drawing on evidence on the contextual socio-economic and market changes from the case of Chile today, we argue that a signature outcome of over three decades of neoliberal urbanism on social movements there has been the production of a triple nexus of:

1) Class recomposition: a growing cross-class consciousness of inequality and grassroots movements - somewhat divorced from historical working-class consciousness - exhibiting practices detached from the traditional language and histories of class struggle but also acquiring new discourses of rights to the city (ie to quality dwellings and neighbourhoods, to social participation in political decisions concerning their environments, to self-management of state-provided funding, etc.). *Pobladores* now re-emerge also through spatial/local struggles against what Harvey (2010) refers to as “speculative landed developer interests” in cities: the concentration of economic and political power by certain tightly-linked elites, and the political and social exclusion this generates. As Pérez (2015) claims, novel political and ethical judgement is being performed vis-a-vis what it means to be *poblador* in a neoliberal city, engendering new formulations of (urban) citizenship and rights through which the right to housing can be reframed. Murphy (2015) agrees with this idea, adding also that grassroots’ demands and state policies are always on convergent paths, promoting property and social recognition. As housing policies until the 1990s transformed squatted land into regularized environments, *pobladores* were turned into homeowners; in fact, historically, the Chilean housing sector can be seen as a transition from marginalization into a unique form of deprived citizenship.

2) A more concrete and sophisticated demand for space and recognition: the re-emergence and reconfiguration of new *pobladores* housing movements in Santiago (the children and grandchildren of those who participated in the 1960s housing movements) are increasingly claiming the right to both obtain housing solutions in their places of origin and not being chained to enormous amounts of mortgage debt (as the completely privatized housing market has made dwelling prices increase). *Pobladores* aim to remain for the already established social networks they can rely on. At some points these demands articulate with those coming from those claims coming from certain fractions of the middle class for staying put, at some others they conflict because the stigmatised presence of *pobladores* is still seen as a threat in a still highly upward aspirational urban mid-income strata. This fact becomes more evident in areas undergoing severe gentrification processes (López-Morales, 2015). At a discursive level, many demands for space in the city intertwine with other demands for gender, sexual recognition, alternative transport systems and environmental rights.

3) A more variegated repertoire of protest performances and production of space: claims for space and centrality in the city are materialised in an insurgent but institutionalized way (Holston, 2009; López-Morales, 2013). Housing activists have learned to occupy institutional spaces for action and power building, as well as deliver material advancement to the claimants’ needs (eg. subsidies and state-funded self-organized housing production; see Cociña and López-Morales, forthcoming). Paradoxically, there is a relation between the increased social mobilization and the spaces aimed to individualistic claims that comprise the neoliberal state (i.e. vouchers aimed to the individual purchase of housing are now put together to meet communal demands for housing). The increasingly “urbanized” housing activism now produces “normalized enclosures” (Soja 2000), spatial forms of states of

exception (Agamben 2005) that dissolve barriers to practices of sharing, self-organization and self-managed systems of cooperation, encouraging creative encounters and negotiations through which forms of sharing and housing production are organized and common life takes shape, especially around social estates (the closest example of this is Argentina's 341 Law and its use given by self-organized low-income settlers to produce alternative residential spaces in inner quarters; see Rodríguez and Di Virgilio, 2016). Current urban social practices do not simply produce or distribute goods but essentially create new forms of social life, forms of life-in-common (Stavrides, 2016), in radical ways opposed to the dominant practices, rules and institutions inherent to the capitalist social organization which promotes and establishes a "desocialization" of the commons (Hardt and Negri 2009).

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