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Generational Inequalities in Argentina's Working-Class Neighbourhoods

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The COVID-19 pandemic produced a generalized crisis that made visible pre-existing social dynamics. This chapter will focus on the multidimensional social inequalities, taking an intersectional approach, including the generational, gender, territorial and labour dimensions. I will shed light on young people from the *barrios populares*[1] of Latin America's urban centres. For this, I will mobilize some specialized literature available in a multidimensional and situated perspective (Vommaro, 2017b), considering the inequalities in the living conditions and the generational inequalities as constitutive features of contemporary Latin American youths (Vommaro, 2017a and 2019).

Before the pandemic, the living conditions of young people in Latin American were shaped by multiple intertwined inequalities. According to data from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) and the World Bank, young people between 15 and 29 years of age living in Latin America and the Caribbean represent 20 percent of the total population. That is approximately 150 million people. Almost two-thirds of them live in poor households, a percentage that is even higher among young women (ECLAC, 2019). In Argentina, approximately 10 percent of young people live in slums and precarious settlements (approximately 850,000 young people), according to data from the Observatory of Argentina's Social Debt (Observatorio de la Deuda Social Argentina, 2020). The data shows that, in the first semester of 2020, 38 percent of the population between 18 and 29 years of age were considered to be poor.

Young people from the barrios populares

Since the beginning of the pandemic, lockdown measures have been implemented in Latin American and the Caribbean. What used to happen in the public space started happening at home. The processes by which the private space of the household in the barrios populares becomes public by being appropriated and reinvented by the community intensified. The households of representatives of the barrios populares had already been transformed into headquarters for territorial and community organizations.

In times of a pandemic, the retraction of social life towards the domestic space reinforces the precariousness of living conditions, jeopardizing, for instance, the possibility of carrying out schoolwork and of following remote learning. On the other hand, the restriction in the use and appropriation of public spaces reinforces the spatial and territorial segregation processes that characterize most large cities in different forms.

These processes are experienced particularly by young people who were restricted, even before the pandemic, from moving freely through various cities. The symbolic and geographical separations between neighbourhoods produce invisible borders that are difficult to cross, especially for young people from the barrios populares. These borders and separations weave networks of inequality (Reygadas, 2004) that are experienced and configured differently depending on age, and they have deepened during the pandemic.

The closure of public space and the increased control over its use has reduced the possibilities for young people to meet together. Young people from the barrios populares are particularly affected as they have lost the corners, parks and squares as their places of socialization. Surveys (Facultad de Psicología, 2020; Fundación SES, 2020) conducted in the first months of the lockdown and the young people I interviewed clearly show that the possibilities for socializing, supporting each other and having a sense of belonging provided by the public space cannot be entirely replaced by the virtual space.

The segregation experienced by young people from the barrios populares coexists with a second dynamic: stigmatization. The stigmatization produces 'discredited social identities' (Goffman, quoted in Valenzuela, 2015) that deny, make invisible or criminalize ways of being and of presenting themselves as young people to others. Likewise, the stigmatization denies the recognition of different youth lifestyles and attributes all social ills to one of these lifestyles. Thus, young people representing a particular lifestyle are negatively labelled as responsible for a specific social problem (increased crime, spread of COVID-19), and are disqualified and persecuted for their practices and bodies.

Spatial segregation and subjective stigmatization constitute two features of generational inequalities expressed and produced in the territory. Both dimensions converge in police harassment and institutional violence against

youth, which have increased in the recent months in various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. Persecutions, criminalization, arbitrary detentions, harassment, humiliation, torture and cases of disappearance and murder of young people have grown with the pandemic, especially in the barrios populares (but also in rural areas), and hand in hand with the greater powers that security forces have received to enforce lockdown measures.

In Argentina, 40 percent of the population of the barrios populares said that, between April and May 2020, there were no more conflicts with the police (understood as police harassment and criminalization of stigmatized youth) than before the lockdown, but there wasn't an increased police presence either; 20 percent described various types of harassment by the security forces (National University of General Sarmiento, UNGS, 2020).

Strengthening community organization

The crisis fuelled by the pandemic has also fostered the strengthening of the way in which the barrios populares organize. Representatives of different municipalities of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area report that since mandatory social and preventive isolation was decreed, there has been a significant reactivation of community- and neighbourhood-based organizations (clubs, local support groups, mutual companies, food banks, soup kitchens, cultural centres), as well as more support and commitment from neighbours (UNGS, 2020).

The strengthening of the territory and community's organizational fabric in the barrios populares (mainly led by women and young people) provides a possible answer to the following frequent questions: In economies with a large informal sector (40 or 50 percent), is it possible to implement mandatory social isolation? Is isolation or quarantine really enforced in the barrios populares? Does the call to stay home imply class privilege?

Undoubtedly, these questions will be answered in practice and by experience. Social and economic policies to support people working in the informal sector and the inhabitants of the barrios populares should be implemented, such as a universal basic income.

Is lockdown a class privilege?

It is important to challenge the idea that isolation applies only to the middle or upper-middle classes and that prevention measures are not followed in the barrios populares because poverty generates chaos or anomie.

First of all, the resistance to comply with social isolation grows as the population's income increases according to reports and opinion surveys (see Kollman, 2020). The authors' experience with the inhabitants of the barrios populares allows us to affirm that neighbourhoods, communities and

territories deploy support strategies in other ways, with other modalities. We haven't found an empirical basis to sustain the notion that isolation and prevention measures against the pandemic are only implemented by the middle or upper–middle classes.

Of course, the overcrowding makes social distancing difficult, and informal and precarious workers need to earn income every day. However, the communal social organization's persistence and power should not be underestimated when it comes to ensuring prevention, when necessary, through isolation or distancing. The inhabitants of the barrios populares comply with it by creating other forms of support and prevention. For instance, they implement distancing and community healthcare strategies in shared spaces, such as schools, clubs and soup kitchens. They collectively control circulation within the neighbourhood and care for individuals at higher risk as a community. Likewise, in many instances, the social representatives of the barrios populares carry out contact and case tracing with a capillarity and management capacity that the state rarely achieves.

The patterns and intersections of inequality experienced by young people from the barrios populares in major Latin American cities include work and labour relations. During the lockdown, homeworking appears as a solution for carrying on with activities and ensuring basic productivity for companies. Nevertheless, can all workers homework? Obviously not, and that depends on the type of activity, as well as on the individual's working and living conditions. Remote work can increase precariousness and social and labour inequalities, and can weaken young people's employment opportunities in the barrios populares.

Inequalities are reinforced and reproduced for precarious workers (for instance those employed in home delivery, supermarkets or platform economies), who tend to be young people and often continue to work during quarantines without the possibility of adequate precautions or protection. These job opportunities have grown at the same time that job insecurity has increased. In this way, the paradox is that, during the pandemic, youth unemployment may decrease – it is currently between two-and-a-half and three times higher than adult unemployment, according to various reports, such as one from the ECLAC (2019) – but the jobs will become increasingly precarious, with fewer rights and degraded working conditions.

David Harvey (2020) suggests that there is a 'new working class' that is bearing the brunt of the crisis, both because it is the workforce that bears the most significant risk of exposure to the virus at work, and also because these workers can be fired without compensation due to the economic downturn and the precariousness of their rights. Who are the workers that can actually work from home? Who can afford to self–isolate or to quarantine (with or without pay) in the event of contact with a confirmed case or of contagion? These multidimensional inequalities intensify and intersect with gender,

territory, class, race/ethnicity and generation. It is thus a 'class, gendered and racialized pandemic' (Harvey, 2020).

The emergence and persistence of generational inequality

How can the majority of young people's lives not become more precarious in a situation such as this? How to prevent the policies implemented in the face of the pandemic from becoming an engine that accelerates the production and reproduction processes of multidimensional social inequalities? How to counteract persistent and emerging inequalities in times of a pandemic? The resolution of these dilemmas and crossroads will depend on social and political disputes, many of which young people are already developing.

On this point, Judith Butler (2020) argues that the pandemic shows the speed with which radical inequality and capitalist exploitation find ways to reproduce and strengthen themselves. Butler points out that the deepening of inequalities will also manifest in the disputes over vaccines and medicinal products. In an unequal world, where competition, commodification, racism, xenophobia, segregation and stigmatization dominate, the distribution of vaccines and medicinal products will follow the prevailing logics. Those living in the barrios populares could be deprived of their rights to health and to a decent life. The closure of borders, segregation and reinforced control of circulation would help achieve the exacerbation of what Foucault and Deleuze have discussed as the dynamics of biopolitical control and domination societies: the politics of 'making live and letting die'.

Youth resistance, expansion of the public sector and equality policies

Young people's realities in the barrios populares of Latin America are marked by multidimensional and intersectional social inequalities that have been deepened by the pandemic. However, young people also resist, dispute meanings, deploy alternative practices every day and reaffirm their ways of being and producing themselves daily. We can distinguish five forms of resistance and youth activism in times of pandemic:

1. Occupation of public space using mobilization techniques that allow maintaining care and distancing measures. For example, in Chile the protestors used floor markings to identify the distancing requirements, and in Uruguay they protested in cars or on bicycles.
2. Appropriation of public space using modalities that already existed before the pandemic, even if wearing masks and avoiding close contact

is difficult, particularly in the face of police repression, as has been the case in Colombia, Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile.

3. Use of balconies or house doors to protest and for enhancing the expressive, aesthetic and communicative dimension of youth collective action and transformation of the domestic space into a public space (as has been the case in most of the cities in Latin America and the world).

4. Use of digital social networks, such as TikTok and Instagram, the politicization of which intensified with the pandemic and the impossibility of on-site mobilization.

5. Densification of social organization networks at the territorial and local levels and a search for ways to strengthen the communities' or neighbourhoods' resistance based on pre-existing and emerging affections and affinities.

Conclusion

The educational inequalities have deepened with the digitalization of learning at all levels (see Chapter 13 of this book by Nicolás Arata). Some governments have reinforced their control over the occupation and use of public space, especially by young people, through repressive measures supposedly aimed at fighting the pandemic. The changes in young people's social lives and disputes over public space show that this conjuncture has reopened and fuelled the discussion and conflict over the commons in Latin America.

Youth resistances and activism demonstrate that the public cannot be viewed only as of the state; it is necessary to consider the communal and social as part of the public. Will these disputes over the commons, strengthened by the youth's collective actions, signify a revitalized place for the state? Or will the social eagerness to defend and expand what is public overwhelm the state and drive back capital, reducing the commodification of different spheres of life? Will these disputes over the meaning of public and collective space include an understanding that market forces weaken and narrow the commons? According to our analysis of youth initiatives during the pandemic, persevering in the public and common and putting life at the centre is a path forward for today and for tomorrow.

Assuming that prevention is fundamental at this time and perhaps in the years to come, it seems that social responsibility and solidarity, together with comprehensive, situated, territorialized, unique and effective public policies (not only state ones), are a possible path towards constructing alternatives. We require different public policies in order to counteract the social devices of production and reproduction of multidimensional social inequalities and advance towards producing diverse equality, which recognizes and is configured by the difference. We need equality-based policies focused on

listening, recognizing and making visible the diversities and the different ways of life of the youth living in the barrios populares in order to counteract stigmas and segregation. It seems that equality has returned to centre stage. Let us imagine that it is just a starting point.

Note

[1] *Barrios populares* is a Spanish term that covers 'slums', 'working-class neighbourhoods' and 'informal settlements'.

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