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Space, urban borders, and political imagination in Buenos Aires

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ABSTRACT

The present article analyzes the relationship between urban borders and political imagination among popular sectors in contemporary Buenos Aires. On the basis of 100 qualitative interviews with leaders of social organizations from the 4 major regions of the city, different ways of comprehending and acting in particular spaces will be compared, and the role of urban borders and their relation to political processes examined. For this, the article focuses on the intersection between class, race, and ethnicity in the historical construction of urban borders in Buenos Aires. By identifying the tendency to naturalize and reproduce objectified social oppositions in a physical space as categories for perceiving and evaluating the social space, the article points up the relevance of local political matrices and neighborhood boundaries in the structuring of social bonds, local organizations, and political imagination.

KEYWORDS

Urban borders; urban space; political imagination; inequalities; territory; Buenos Aires

Introduction

Despite repeated pronouncements that globalization abolished borders, data and case studies accumulated by socio-anthropological research show that the particular type of globalization experienced in recent decades, which in many countries is characterized by the social withdrawal of the state and policies that increase social inequality, has been a veritable factory of borders (Vila 2000; Wilson and Donnan 1998). In Buenos Aires, this factory has proved powerful enough to create new urban barriers and recycle old divisions.

The metropolitan area of Buenos Aires is composed by the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, with a population of 3.1 million inhabitants, and the Greater Buenos Aires surrounding the city of Buenos Aires, consisting of 24 parties and a population of more than 9 million inhabitants. This is a complex and uneven metropolis, with a population of nearly 13 million inhabitants and three levels of government (national, provincial, and municipal). A substantial bibliography exists on the socio-spatial transformations occurring in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires in the 1990s: Torres (2001) and Thuillier (2005) focus on the impact of the suburbanization of elites in the transformation of the social map of the metropolitan area; Prévot-Schapira (2001) and

Janoschka (2002) examine changes from the perspective of social and urban fragmentation; and Ciccolella (1999) studies the correlation between globalization and dualization in the metropolitan region. In effect, according to the diagnosis supported by most research in social sciences in Argentina, one of the most significant transformations in recent decades has been the 'territorialization of popular sectors' (Svampa 2005), a process of 'territorial inscription' (Merklen 2005) based on – and modifying – one of the key figures of popular culture in Latin America: the *barrio*. Paradoxically enough, however, above and beyond indicating the territorialization of popular urban sectors in Buenos Aires, little has been done to investigate the practical dimensions of this phenomenon of boundary proliferation on the ways popular sectors represent, use, and imagine the city they live in.

A vast bibliography exists on the relationship among social processes, spatial configurations, and socio-spatial practices. In this regard, Henri Lefebvre (1974) pointed out the dialectical intertwining that takes place among material spatial practices (experience), spatial representation (perception), and representational space (imagination), by means of which the history of spatial practices can be read. Then, David Harvey (1998) proposed thinking the relationship among what is experienced, perceived, and imagined nondialectically, which he considered 'too vague,' by employing *habitus* as 'mediating nexus' between objective conditions and social and spatial practices. The point of departure for our analysis of urban borders is the idea that an *unsynchronized* relationship exists between space and society: the two terms are neither totally autonomous nor are they necessarily in correlation. More than a century ago, Georg Simmel (1986) grasped the dialectic between space and society that we are referring to: on the one hand, he held that a limit is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but rather a sociological fact that takes spatial form; while on the other hand, he emphasized that when converted into a tangible spatial product, a limit is something we delineate on nature independently of its practical, sociological sense, and this exercises a retroactive influence on the awareness of the relationship between parts. Expressed in terms of Pierre Bourdieu (2002), social space is translated into physical space in a more or less 'turbid' fashion. Usually, the agent's position in social space is expressed in his/her location in physical space. At the same time, by means of a naturalization process, objectified social oppositions in physical space (reified social space) tend, in language and practices, to take the form of constitutive oppositions of a principle of vision and division, in other words, as categories of perception and evaluation of social space.

The objective of this article is precisely to analyze the relationship between urban borders and political imagination among popular sectors in contemporary Buenos Aires, inquiring the role of race/ethnicity in these processes. In fact, in Latin American urban studies in general, and in the research on Argentine cities in particular, it has been common to contrast the prevailing segregation in American society based on racial criteria (Bourgois 2010; Massey 1990; Wacquant 2007) with the image of cities where predominates segregation based on socioeconomic criteria (Sabatini, Cáceres, and Cerdá 2001; Katzman 2001; Rodríguez and Arriagada 2004). One of our main arguments in this article is that this mechanical opposition (race versus class) should be revised. We do not claim that there are no differences between racial ghettos of American cities and popular neighborhoods of Buenos Aires, nor hold that the 'ghetto model' should be generalized to other latitudes. Rather, we argue that the places of poverty in Argentina

are usually *racialized* (Auyero 2001; Margulis 1998), that is, from the perspective of high and middle sectors is where 'blacks' live. This attached a racial or ethnic stigma to the inhabitants of these heterogeneous spaces in different social contexts such as public transport, educational and health institutions, and the workplace, among others.

The present article has employed the working hypothesis that both *local political matrix* and *territory* are relevant when it comes to understanding how popular sectors make demands and confront/negotiate. Municipalities for fieldwork were selected from the four zones comprising the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires (MABA): Avellaneda and Lanús in southern greater Buenos Aires; San Martín and San Fernando in the north; La Matanza in the west; and the southwest of the city of Buenos Aires. A hundred interviews (25 from each zone) were conducted with leaders of popular organizations classified, in principle, on the basis of demands made (work, land and housing, environment, security, and community kitchens), respecting ideological diversity. The resulting data were codified with the help of the Atlas Ti program; all references in the present article arise from an analysis of codes linked to the description of *barrio* and municipal actors given by interviewees, as well as to that of the limits, and borders the latter identified as pertinent to their daily life.

This article will begin by analyzing the primary socio-spatial characteristics of Buenos Aires, the 'classic' social and symbolic borders that have been fortified by the neoliberal experience. Then, on the basis of 100 qualitative interviews with leaders of social organizations from the four major regions of the city, different ways of comprehending and acting in particular spaces will be compared, and the role of urban borders and their relation to political processes examined. And finally, on the basis of results obtained, and a comparison of research carried out in other cities, reflections are made on a series of relevant dimensions for thinking urban borders.

Social shading and socio-spatial binaryism in Buenos Aires

Spatial distribution and socio-economic sectors are interrelated in Buenos Aires. Two superimposed spatial systems give meaning to social life in the city and environs. First and foremost are three concentric circles: the capital (with around 3 million inhabitants), and the first and second cordons of Greater Buenos Aires (where more than 9 million people live). By and large, the second cordon is poorer than the first, and the first, poorer than the capital, the district with the highest per capita income in Argentina. Within these concentric circles, the most prominent and significant difference is between the autonomous city of Buenos Aires, the capital of the country, and Greater Buenos Aires (the latter located in the province of the same name); this clearly drawn juridical-political border is paramount in determining how territorial imaginary and spatial practices are structured (Figure 1).

The capital/province border frequently actualizes another fundamental binary division in Argentina, capital/interior, with implications of Europe/Latin America, and even civilization/barbarism for capital dwellers. The internal migration from the country to the city since the 1930s of the 20th century was the principal cause of urban expansion of Buenos Aires beyond of its historical limit, established in the late 19th century. Against this process of urban expansion was verified a 'new withdrawal from the capital city on itself that ignored the formation of metropolitan radios' (Ballent and Gorelik 2002, 182).

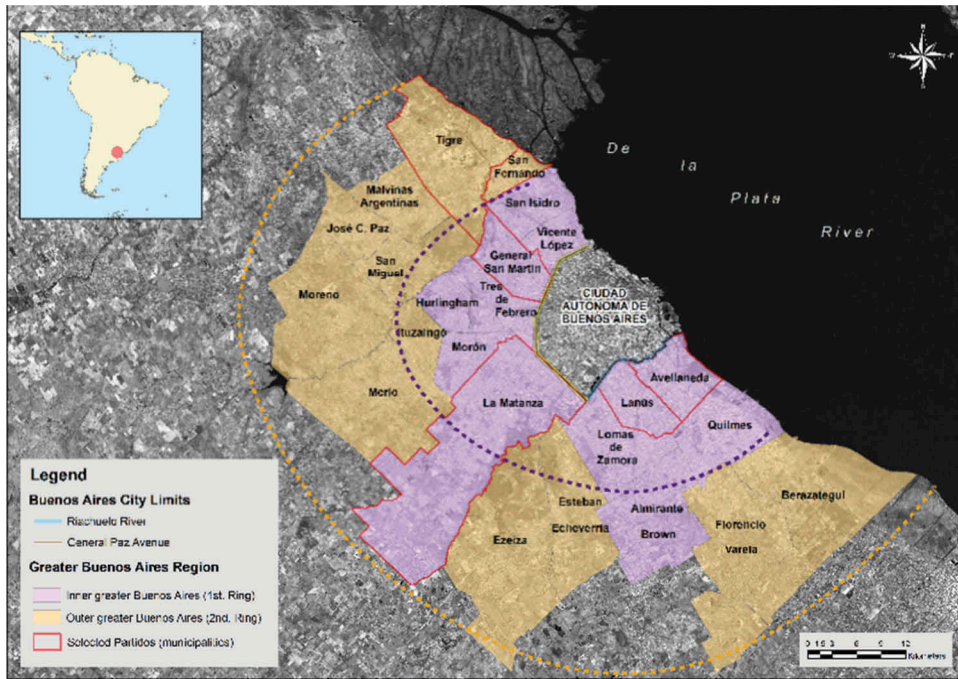


Figure 1. Map of Buenos Aires City, its limits, and Greater Buenos Aires.

In fact, urban sprawl found a quick response in the construction of the General Paz Avenue in 1936, the first brand of 'the two countries' in Buenos Aires. This avenue became quickly the symbol of the edge of the European city, the shameful limit behind which the new population was mostly localized (Gorelik 1999). From within the capital, the predominant tendency today is to consider Greater Buenos Aires in terms of alterity or difference. Upper-middle-class capital residents traverse safe expressways to reach their weekend-houses in Greater Buenos Aires and, while there, maintain as little contact as possible with areas unprotected by private security guards. By contrast, viewed from the provinces, Greater Buenos Aires is the city, the metropolitan area as antithesis of the interior. This has meant that, caught between two images, the metropolitan area is assimilated by neither of the two poles (Bonaldi and del Cueto 2009).

The second spatial system involves the four cardinal points, the prosperous north contrasting with the traditional south. 'No one ignores,' said Jorge Luis Borges (1974, 526), 'that the South begins on the other side of Rivadavia,' anyone 'crossing that avenue enters an older, firmer world.' Middle- and upper-class neighborhoods and state-of-the-art factories predominate in the northern sectors of both the capital and Greater Buenos Aires, while shantytowns or *villas*, popular neighborhoods, and a rustbelt of factories shuttered for decades characterize the south. The Río de la Plata lies to the east, the west constituting a transition area with features of both north and south.

The 'North' and 'South' of the capital are social constructs: *Barrio Norte* does not lie to the north of the *Casa Rosada*, the seat of the federal government, as the urban imaginary would have it. Indeed, if geography were the determining factor, it would be called *Barrio Noroeste*. The same is true of all middle- and upper-class neighborhoods

'north of it.' Each one is deemed socially to lie to the north of the one preceding it, while geographically speaking, the direction is northeast.

The social significance of 'north' alludes to an imaginarily legitimized reference. It should be understood, however, that its fictional nature in no way reduces the performative capacity of the social north: it is the single most relevant term for the cultural structuring of society. The point is not, of course, to confirm or deny the constructed nature of north; coinciding contingently with the cardinal point indicated would not make Buenos Aires' inhabitants good geographers. However, on the symbolic plane that is constitutive of culture and urban politics, this opposition does point up the persistence of the dichotomy in social life. The north/south binary simply serves to naturalize geographically a division that is social and historical in nature (Figure 2).

When the cardinal points are reduced to north/south, a difference appears between this opposition within the first concentric circle (the capital) and how it is articulated on the northern and southern borders separating this circle from Greater Buenos Aires. In the capital, moving from the Río de la Plata in the north toward the Riachuelo in the south, an inclined plane of upper to lower social sectors can be observed: crossing the avenues running parallel to the river (Libertador, Santa Fe, and, paradigmatically, Rivadavia and the avenues farther to the south), socio-economic levels also decline. Although neither automatic nor homogeneous, the descent is evident enough to be socially meaningful in shaping urban cognitive maps. This distinction is mirrored by the subway system in the capital. Because of an urban planning that responds to a centralist conception, four roughly parallel lines converge in Plaza de Mayo, the political and economic heart of the city. Riders on the line closest to the Río de la Plata are upper middle class, while those on the line farthest away from the river are, for the most part, popular sector residents, with the remaining two lines being spatially and socially intermediate. This same gradual change extends more than 20 kilometers in Greater Buenos Aires.

In this sense, Buenos Aires contrasts with Brazilian cities like Río de Janeiro where favelas can be seen from the most elegant buildings. As discussed by Adrián Gorelik (1998) in Río, Caracas, and Sao Paulo, natural accidents were a factor favoring the constitution of barriers between social sectors, while in Buenos Aires nature and the public will be converged in its spirit of leveling. In the latter city, a white-collar worker or middle-class professional can spend months or years without seeing *villas miseria*, or slums, which lie outside their daily circuits. This has produced in Buenos Aires the sensation of territorial social shading along borders, some all but imperceptible although significant, and others clearly marked.

In contrast with the consolidation of the urban grid during the last years of the 19th century and first decades of the 20th century associated with international migration from Europe, the internal migration began in the 1930s under the import substitution process was the cause of the expansion of *villas miseria*. Since that period, the *villas miseria* are a prototypical figure of popular housing in Buenos Aires and Greater Buenos Aires, usually associated with multiple and contradictory meanings: examples of the failure of Peronism in the 1950s; a laboratory for modernizing dreams in the 1960s; a cradle of the revolution in the 1970s; an obstacle to progress and germinating of subversion to the military dictatorship (1976–1983); and a space of immorality, crime, and lawlessness in recent decades (Auyero 2001).

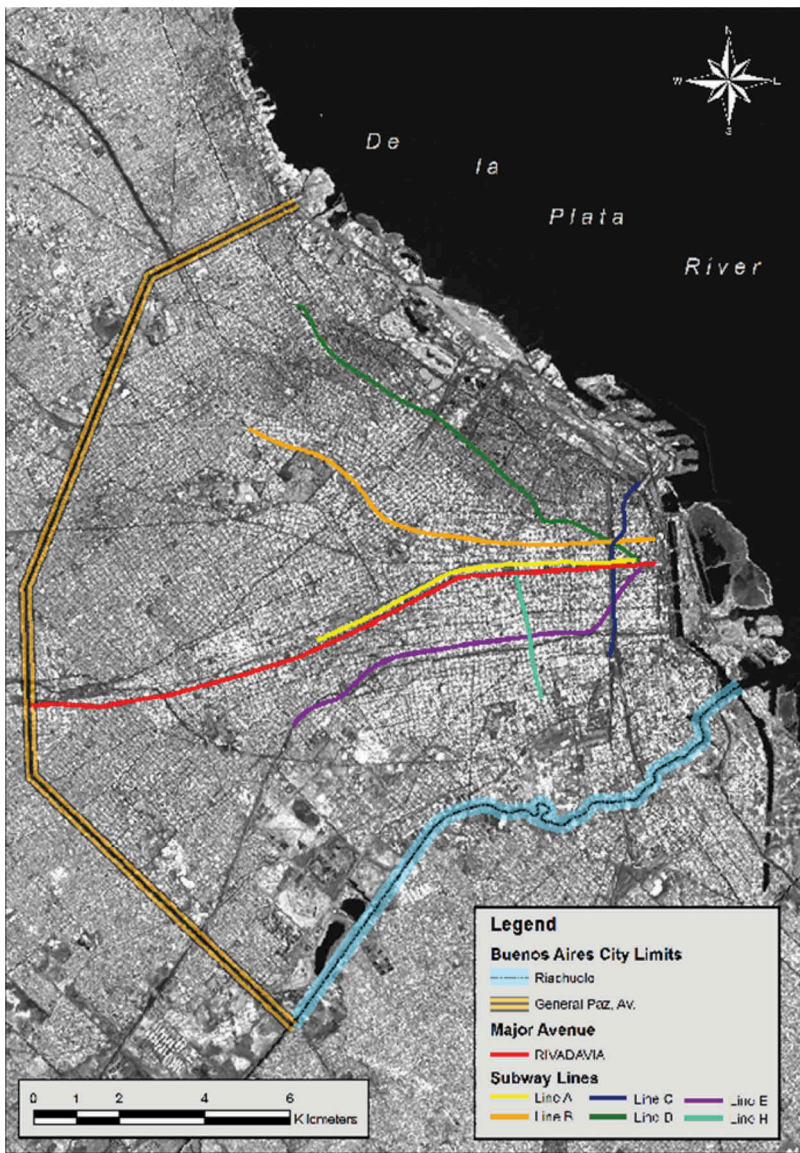


Figure 2. Map of Buenos Aires with main avenues and subways lines.

In the *villas miseria* in Buenos Aires, the intermingling of individuals and groups from different provinces and countries contrasts with the ethnic-racial ghettos in the United States. Traditionally, the relation between territoriality and ethnicity was marked by the *conventillo* model, entailing conflictive coexistence in a shared space (different rooms in the same rooming house) for migrants from far-flung countries. Although predominantly Jewish or Armenian areas of the city existed in the past, the neighborhoods were never ethnically identified nor in any way excluded people of other origins. Likewise, while small Bolivian, Chinese, and Korean *barrios* have sprung up in recent years, there are also many more people of the same origin in other parts of the city.

Thus, social class and socioeconomic conditions has been associated with territoriality more than any other element: poor neighborhoods where people from different regional, national, or ethnic provenances coexist. However, the socioeconomic parameters intertwine 'what is racial' and 'what is ethnic' in complex ways. In this sense, Auyero (2001) noted that, although different from that of North American ghettos, the dominant discourse that racializes the *villa* population, combined with and reinforced by insinuations of foreignness, should not be underestimated. From a historical point of view, Margulis (1998) pointed out that the long process constituting modern Argentina has entailed the 'racialization of class relations.' As a result of this process, the poverty map of Buenos Aires roughly coincides with the *mestizo* population represented by immigrants from the provinces and neighboring countries. In addition, Garguin (2007) showed that the emergence of Peronism in the mid-20th century was a break in the dominant national imagination. This imaginary held the European and white origin of Argentina's population. The working masses, however, had no place in this imaginary. It is in this specific historical context that the category *clase media* (middle class) appears to refer to a white, European, and civilized identity. The counterpart was alterization (racialization and ethnicization) of the Peronist masses that condense in the category of *cabecita negra* (black head). In this sense, racist operations in Buenos Aires do not support easy equivalence with constructions of blackness in other contexts (Briones 2005). 'Black' and 'black head' is not necessarily associated with African phenotypic traits, but with the poor, *mestiza*, and/or migrant population (Grimson 2012) who reside in popular neighborhoods and slums of Buenos Aires.

Thus, dimensions of class, ethnicity, and race are articulated in the ways to imagine and live the city. The current opposition between *ciudad y villa* (the city and the slums) involves not only economic and urban factors but also ethnic and racial brands built in the long and complex process of urbanization. When the urban poor cross Rivadavia, Corrientes, or Santa Fe avenues, they do so as workers, but not as neighbors. When they commute northward in the city, they do so as workers. By the same token, there are upper-middle-class young people from northern neighborhoods like Belgrano and Palermo that have only crossed Rivadavia Avenue to visit a friend or relative in enclaves like Flores or Caballito, a few blocks on the other side. Young people in northern Buenos Aires can circumscribe their movements to the strip along the river. Territorialities like these, associated with socioeconomic sectors for which impermeable borders are the frame of reference for social life, structure urban existence in cities like Santiago de Chile, Medellín, or the Pilot Plan of Brasilia; their significance far exceeds the phenomenon of private communities. By means of deep, subtle processes like these, borders are constructed that become the basic cognitive parameters for urban life.

In large part, the trips northward made by residents from the southern part of Buenos Aires, and southward by their counterparts in the north, are *instrumental*: there is a specific reason for the journey with a particular end in sight. It could be said that the city is full of metaphorical custom agents at border crossings. Police demand identification and detain poor people and immigrants for 'vagrancy' or because of 'ethnic profiling'; they tend to act more emphatically when their targets are found in 'foreign' territory. And within the borders themselves, the presence of a stranger in the neighborhood can upset residents. *A foreign body in the wrong place at the wrong time attracts attention and can prompt a call to the police.*

A sizeable number of Buenos Aires residents never cross borders. Indeed, returning to the layout of the subway and the main avenues leading away from downtown (with the exception of the C subway line and 9 de Julio, Callao/Entre Ríos, and Jujuy/Pueyrredón Avenues), all major thoroughfares and mass transit lines run in the same direction, paralleling socioeconomic sectors. Outside the downtown area, no subway line or avenue joins the Río de la Plata and the Riachuelo until you reach the beltway encircling the city (General Paz Avenue). Although suburban mass transit is more heterogeneous, there is still one train line paralleling the river that serves upper-middle-class sectors, while other lines connecting the capital with the west and south transport primarily workers and poor people. It is difficult to cross spatial and social borders; it is only done as a last resort. This intersection between space, social class, ethnic/racial dimensions, significance, and daily practices existed long before neoliberal transformations took place in the 1990s. Indeed, it is the foundation underlying changes in the urban landscape brought about by neoliberalism, reinforcing old borders and erecting new ones. The dismantling of Argentina's productive apparatus began in 1976, as did growing economic and social polarization. In 1974, unemployment was 5 per cent; in 2002 – after the deeper social, political, and economic crisis in Argentina in December of 2001 that was a product of the neoliberal policies of the 1990s – it was more than 20 per cent (Grimson and Kessler 2005).

In a city in which people cross borders to go to work, and in which more than 40 per cent of the population has serious employment problems (under- and unemployment), border crossings are less and less frequent. The number of commuters using public transportation has dwindled and service worsened. And a new urban panorama has taken shape, dominated by an inequality homologous to the growing spatial segregation. The surge in unemployment in a city with a broad swath of working-class neighborhoods has produced a marked increase in residential segregation. And neighborhoods of the unemployed have also made their appearance (Portes and Roberts 2005). This has affected family income and generated new meanings for the relationship between work and crime (Kessler 2004); existing social organizations such as housing cooperatives, factories recuperated by workers, and community kitchens have also increased in number during the years before the crisis of December 2001, and organizations of the unemployed have emerged as well (Grimson 2008). In what follows, we will examine the ways in which the leaders of these social organizations represent, live, and imagine the city.

Leaders of social organizations, spatial limits, and political action

Borders in Buenos Aires are what social agents have done and do with them. In different ways, *cartoneros* (trash-recyclers), *piqueteros* (picketers), mayors, workers, legislators, *murgas* (carnival music-makers), soccer fans, together with many other actors, intervene in the social and cultural construction of limits. As stated by Grimson (2003), border-building processes are open-ended, involving the meanings attached to the limits and populations on either side of them.

In general terms, the interviews showed that urban borders sedimented by historical, political, and urban processes have been incorporated into the perception and classification schemata and action of social actors. The ways in which social actors imagine

themselves, where they live, and their fellow man replicate certain urban borders. How groups are formed and actions undertaken grow out of them, at times in clear contradiction to them. In short, we hold that the way in which they view and represent the city depends on their socio-spatial position, their biographical spatial trajectories, and relevant frames of reference for political action. These will be the subject of the three sections that follow: first, the relevant frames of reference for political action by political leaders and how they are related to socio-spatial configurations; second, the ways in which neighborhood space is represented; and third, the links among urban borders, territorial and ethnic/racial stigmas, and political action

Frames of reference: local socio-spatial configurations

While it is possible to speak of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area as an urban phenomenon, a multitude of processes have created divisions within it. Primary among them is the basic fact of the juridical-political border separating the capital, with an autonomous government and an independent budget, from Greater Buenos Aires, which is divided into 24 separate districts. Thus, although common problems do exist among popular sectors (work, housing, the environment, among others), the interlocutors with whom leaders need to talk, make demands, negotiate with, and confront are different. And the policies and strategies implemented are often dissimilar as well. So, the first datum that emerges from the interviews is the relevance of municipal spaces as frames for interlocation and political action. In general, organization leaders refer to (and represent) these local spaces as the site for action. The modalities leaders of popular organizations use to represent these milieus arise out of the intertwining of a number of urban elements (such as avenues and roads, railway lines, infrastructure, and jurisdictional limits), as well as spatial experience, which depends on the socio-spatial positions from which the city is viewed and lived and the spatial trajectories followed, more often than not limited to local environments. Early on, Kevin Lynch (2006) indicated the relevance that 'paths' and 'tracks' have in delimiting and structuring the image of a city. Our emphasis placed on spatial and social positions in the comprehension about how spaces and their borders are experienced by the social agents seeks to reconstitute social mediation of this process, a dimension absent in Lynch's work.

For social organization leaders, the capital has two parts: the rich north and the poor south. As a referent from a community kitchen in the *barrio* of La Boca put it,

The city of Buenos Aires is cut in two; it has a very developed North and an entire southern zone with levels of unemployment, school dropouts, and infant mortality similar to those of provinces in the interior.

A community center leader in a *barrio* in the south asked: 'it is the richest city, the one that collects the most taxes, so how can we be in this situation? How can it exist?' For the referent from the community kitchen quoted above, the answer is simple:

Buenos Aires is the most inequitable place in Argentina, the biggest, richest city, it has the second largest budget in the entire country. But in spite of that, it conserves a lot of inequality; so sometimes the figures are averaged and it seems like the city has characteristics close to central countries, but there is a whole band of the population, the forgotten

South, that politicians always make a point of saying they are going to make policies for, the South that they then banish from their mind.

Therefore, contradicting the chronicle of the city's opulence and wealth, leaders of social organizations see Buenos Aires as consisting of two contrasting parts in social and economic terms: the north and the south.

Social leaders in different districts of Greater Buenos Aires contrast their own space to, and measure its relative distance from, the city of Buenos Aires. In Avellaneda and Lanús, they indicated both their proximity to the capital and the limit separating the two districts from it: the Riachuelo. The leader of an organization that fights contamination in the city maintained,

Avellaneda is a quite important city because it is stuck to Buenos Aires, and this means it has very close contact with the Capital and much influence; they share the Riachuelo, and it is a very contaminated city because we have a lot of factories, tanneries, petroleum companies, so it is a city with quite a few environmental problems.

Along the same lines, a referent from an environmental forum stated,

Lanús is 15 minutes away from downtown, the only thing that separates Lanús from Buenos Aires is the Riachuelo, after it is part of the Capital. Green spaces in Lanús don't exist, product of the accumulation of people. At one time Lanús was very industrial, today it isn't industrial, but the industrial debris remains.

Furthermore, in both northern and western Greater Buenos Aires, the general feeling in localities adjacent to the capital is that, roughly speaking, the relative distance from Avenida General Paz, the beltway boundary separating the capital from the province of Buenos Aires, directly expresses the living conditions predominating in the different localities.

Above and beyond the differences between northern and southern districts in Greater Buenos Aires, the cartographies of the leaders interviewed disclosed a configuration resembling the classic structure of center and periphery. 'Removing downtown San Martín and Ballester,' stated a steelworker leader, 'the entire cordon is marginalized; the municipality concentrates on the downtown, everything around it is abandoned.' In agreement, a land occupancy referent pointed out that 'one thing is what people live on the other side of Avenida Márquez, and another is the people that live in Malabert, Chilavert, and fundamentally Ballester.' References like this to Avenida Márquez are very powerful urban borders in the way space and social life are conceived. In this case, the territory alluded to 'has 22 per cent of the population of San Martín, the great majority of whom have very grave occupational, health, and formal education problems.'

Thus, in the district of San Martín there exists a middle- and upper-class downtown near the Avenida General Paz, and a periphery that becomes increasingly impoverished as one moves away from the capital in the direction of the district's northern limit, the Reconquista River. The same phenomenon can be observed in San Fernando, where, according to a *barrio* leader, 'it has its historical quarter where the middle and upper middle classes live. There is the western part and Virreyes that is working class. Within it you have 14 *barrios* or *villas de emergencia* that are small squatter settlements,' divided, according to a referent from a community kitchen, by the railroad tracks: 'if you cross the tracks, on the other side you have the upper middle class *barrio* and the station, on this side of the tracks are the *negritos*. On the other side of the northern access road, you

begin to find the *barríos*, the *villas*.' The panorama described by this leader from San Fernando paints a complete picture of the urban borders in the municipality and shows the intersection between class and race dimensions in the description of urban poor.

Similar configurations are present in a number of unemployed movement leaders from the southern zone. For one of them, 'on the one hand, you have the downtown, and on the other, the cordons that circle downtown Avellaneda, and the lack of infrastructure, housing programs, and the crisis accentuate this difference.' Many of these movements intentionally act on the limits between city center and periphery:

If you go near the station, they have no idea that here are unemployed movements, and they are 15 blocks away. If we, when we mobilize to go to the municipality, go through the commercial center of Lanús against the traffic, we do it so they see us.

Like a series of Chinese boxes, this type of city center-periphery configuration is repeated at the local level in all the municipal spaces studies.

There are other relevant differences between north and south as well. First, deindustrialization began in the southern conurbation in the 1970s, even as its northern counterpart expanded and became industrialized. Reactivation following the 2001 crisis did nothing to alter these tendencies: stimulated by new investment and the experience of worker-recuperated factories, industrialization proceeded in the northern conurbation, while in the south, severe unemployment has continued to be the rule. The experience related by a leader from a recuperated factory in San Martín tells the story: 'the *barrio* saw the factory grow, it saw it collapse, and is seeing it rise up; so the *barrio* is a witness, and the people who work here are from the *barrio*.'

The feeling of economic recuperation is strong in this area, contrasting with the south: 'Avellaneda was a moving force for development, and now we are a city you pass through,' stated the leader of an unemployed workers' organization. In the same area, a union member agreed: 'Avellaneda is a bedroom city because there are a lot of people that work in the Capital now or other places because in Avellaneda all the factories shut down.' This is why, unlike the north, there is a marked dissociation between place of residence and workplace, implying long daily commutes for those employed.

Second, while the impact of these processes has impoverished broad sectors of the population in the southern conurbation, middle- and upper-class members have been migrating to the north. This explains the growing socioeconomic contrast in localities in the north between upper and middle sectors located in the city center and the impoverished periphery. This is particularly noticeable in municipalities in which the new residential tracts of weekend houses and gated communities built for the upwardly mobile in the 1990s have proliferated. Referring to the change in Tigre and the sharpening of social contrast, a leader of an environmental organization stated,

Before the '90s it was a town where social class was not so apparent. There was a historic quarter where the most traditional people in Tigre lived, and poor *barríos* where people working in the sawmills, shipyards, and nautical industry lived. With the expansion of the private communities, two totally different worlds are now established.

The development and expansion of the northern conurbation is associated with the transformation in the social structure itself, in particular with an increase in the existence and visibility of inequality. A leader of a left-wing labor organization describes the landscape in Tigre visible from the train: 'look to the left, all the Las Tunas, Benavides, Pacheco *villas miserias*. And to the right, tracts of weekend houses.' This is how he

expresses the difference 'between a sector of very impoverished workers and a bunch of *nouveau riche* that have come to live in Tigre.' This stark contrast, absent in the southern zone, expresses the increase in social distance among northern zone residents.

And finally, the municipality of La Matanza, in the western part of the conurbation, presents a different panorama. Leaders of social organizations there underscore three characteristics: its large-scale population of around 2 million inhabitants, which makes it politically significant at election time; the weight of migration, both from the Argentine interior and neighboring countries; and the fragmentation of this large space into multiple and heterogeneous localities in socioeconomic terms, ethnic/racial composition, and lifestyle. 'It is very large; in terms of population size it is like another province. And with a huge number of social problems because of lack of work, a health system, [and] education, there is a huge housing deficit and a lot of social insecurity,' maintained the leader of a work cooperative.

While migration – both internal and from neighboring countries – is a recurring topic in the regions studied, it becomes preponderant among La Matanza community leaders. 'La Matanza is multicolored with cultures, we are practically a municipality where everybody came from the interior or from neighboring countries,' stated the referent from a women's organization. The notion of *invasion* is a recurring perception to explain the present situation:

It was a powerful community with an enormous quantity of industries and few inhabitants. Today it is a community that was invaded by squatter settlements that came from the Capital and different places with extremely high levels of poverty and very high unemployment.

To represent La Matanza, the city center–periphery configuration is replaced by that of an enormous space fragmented into multiple localities that are connected/separated by a network of roads. Here too the distance from the capital expresses economic status; that is, the farther from the capital, the worse the socioeconomic conditions:

La Matanza has an important middle class sector that would be, coming from the Capital, the first part, Ramos Mejía, San Justo, Lomas del Mirador. Afterwards, there are a number of important industries. Next, working class *barrios* and poor *barrios* where a lot of land has squatters and squatter settlements.

This is how the socioeconomic shading is described moving away from the capital in the direction of the first and second cordons of the western conurbation. While in the north and in the south, railroad tracks structure the image of localities and demarcate borders, for union and trash-recycler leaders in La Matanza, this role is played by highways, especially the *Camino de Cintura* or Beltway. Socio-spatial configurations refer back to specific divisions and borders linked to singular historical, political, economic, and urban processes. Going beyond particularities such as Buenos Aires as dual city with a center–periphery type structure in the south and north, and, in the west, a large space fragmented into multiple localities, certain common elements can be identified. First, we identified the prevalence among leaders a socioeconomic reading of the urban fracture. Beyond variations in the degree of contrast between the social sectors (that seem to be based on existing social distances among residents of each municipality), class inequality is for leaders the main explanatory key of the ways in which configures the local space. Second, as a result of a long historical and urban process, the ethnic and race dimension intersect with social class in complex and

different ways. In addition to the usual racialization of slums in key of *negros* (black) or *cabecitas negras* (black heads), ethnic and racial dimensions play an important role in the daily dynamics of the inhabitants of the popular districts themselves, as we show later. Third, these social inequalities and ethnic and racial brands are translated into strong spatial borders, such as avenues, roads, and railroad lines, which install 'zones of invisibility or urban banishment' in local spaces like the southern part of the city of Buenos Aires, the urban periphery in the northern and southern conurbations, and the localities farthest from the center in La Matanza. Fourth, most of the leaders interviewed speak and act 'on the other side of the border,' and the relevant frame of reference for their political action are municipal spaces, oriented in most cases toward reversing invisibility and urban banishment.

Certain environmental organizations and most labor unions are exceptions to the above for different reasons. Many of the environmental organizations combat consolidated limits in pursuit of redefinition in order to attain uniform policies for administering environmental areas that transcend political-administrative jurisdictions. The paradigmatic case in the region is the contamination of the Riachuelo-Matanzas basin in the southwest that affects more than 5 million people and involves the national, provincial, and municipal governments, together with several municipalities in the conurbation as well. The *Delta* (the zone of islands formed by the Paraná River) to the north is another relevant case. An environmental leader affirmed, 'We are on the other end of the sewer lines, on the other side of the sphincter of the big city. Everything produced in the city ends up in the river,' and the problem is that 'the Delta is divided into two provinces, Entre Ríos and Buenos Aires, and the Buenos Aires section is divided into nine municipalities.' This is why this leader's aspiration is that 'the Delta be an autonomous territory protected by a regime that has to do with nature in the region.' For their part, labor unions, except those representing municipal employees, do not see municipal boundaries as relevant. The municipality is not a valid interlocutor for making demands, and unions show little concern for local problems and conflicts.

Lived space: the barrio and its limits

The *barrio* in Buenos Aires is a key political space. The modality *barrio* demarcates contexts for interaction and social identification not analogously relevant in other societies and cultures. The *barrio* institutes a type of specific border that cannot emerge in the same way in urban areas comprising networks of suburbs with epicenters in malls, cities made for cars with highways instead of avenues. The urban layout in Buenos Aires grew out of a tradition that valued local space and, unlike other cities, linked them together in a formally homogeneous grid.

We will analyze how these places, and relationships of opposition and border crossings, are experienced, along with the extent to which these limits structure social links, local organizations, and political imagination. Far from being a totally new process, the *barrio* as sociability space and milieu for the territorial inscription of popular sectors goes back to the slow process that as noted Gorelik (1998, 18) produced, with nuances, ebbs, and flows, 'the "silent" conversion of a handful of amorphous, semi-rural neighborhoods into the cultural dispositive called *barrio*, a new type of public space on the local scale' that 'will restructure the identity of heterogeneous popular sectors.' We understand *barrio* as a social category

referring to space. Social leaders are not always concerned whether *barrio* alludes to quasi-cities or, at the other extreme, neighborhoods a few blocks in diameter. In addition, in certain contexts *barrio* refers exclusively to urbanized areas in opposition to *villa de emergencia* or *villa miseria*, where land occupancy is unplanned.

Interviews indicated that the *barrio* space lived as profoundly 'their own' by leaders is quite limited. A locality that, in appearance, sociodemographic indicators and urban infrastructure, is to a stranger's eye a relatively ample, homogeneous space, turns out to be a heterogeneous milieu for residents in which classificatory categories regarding people and groups proliferate, producing a multiplying effect in circumscribed spaces. The idea that an urban space is a single *barrio* or *villa* is an idea customarily advanced by group leaders that aspire to represent and organize all its residents, and also for administrative and managerial convenience. But within a milieu like a *villa*, inhabitants differentiate areas that, from their perspective, are the 'real' *villa* from others that are not, basing their judgment on diacritical factors such as infrastructure (presence or absence of illumination, asphalt, sewers, etc.), residents' origin (Bolivians, Paraguayans, migrants from the provinces), length of residency (old and new residents), or a combination of these dimensions. Thus, in addition to social borders as objectified forms of social differences manifested in the unequal access to and distribution of resources and opportunities, we should keep in mind what Lamont and Molnár (2002) call 'symbolic boundaries' or conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, persons, and practices that interact in complex ways (reinforcing, inverting, etc.) with social borders.

The case of Lugano, a *barrio* located on southwestern Buenos Aires, clearly exemplifies the type of situations we are referring to. 'In Villa Lugano you have a number of housing complexes, and then you have Villa Riachuelo,' specifies a housing cooperative leader. Along the same lines, a leader of the unemployed points out that housing complex residents 'don't feel like *villeros*, they feel they are much better than us, they consider themselves middle class. In Lugano I and II there are people worse off than I am. But since they are outside the *villa*, they don't want to fight.' A similar diagnosis is heard from the referent of another movement of the unemployed in the *barrio*: 'people that aren't from inside the *villas* are already differentiated and draw a line between them and us.' So the type of dwelling – apartment in a housing complex or shack in a *villa* – serves as the most evident basis for classifications and distinctions within the *barrio*. The *villa* and the *villeros* (slum-dwellers) are usually associated with foreigners, blackness, and immorality.

The *barrio-villa* opposition impregnates daily life, expressing the form social interaction takes among actors in both milieus. Because living in an 'apartment' implies not living in a *villa*, the relationship established with the state is different. The leader of a civil association in the *barrio* remarks on the reticence of housing-complex-dwellers to receive state assistance:

People in the *villa* go to community kitchens; people that live in apartments suffer in silence. The truth is that people in the *barrios*, in the apartments, have a hard time accepting the situation they are in; they are suffering in silence.

Another viewpoint is expressed by the leader of a housing cooperative, who points, not to the reticence of apartment-dwellers, but rather to the excessive benefits granted to *villa* inhabitants:

I believe that the *villa* receives a great many benefits from the State because in the *villa* there are community kitchens, a housing commission, a whole lot of things: as they hold a lot of people, politicians come here to campaign. And it seems to me that in Lugano I and II they are just as needy and don't have so many benefits.

Thus, the social assistance that *barrio* residents receive from the state is linked to being a *villero*, a conduct that serves as another distinguishing feature in determining *barrio* sociability.

This classificatory dynamic is not an exclusively endogenous process; state categorization plays a primary role. Independent of the distinction between *barrio* and *villa*, all *barrio* residents vote to elect the authorities that will govern what is unified by government under the category *villa*. Among many who question the participation of apartment-dwellers in these elections is a leader of the unemployed movement:

When there are elections, they vote like *villeros* too. I don't agree, there's no reason for those people to vote any more. What do they care while they are living in an apartment how we are living down here?

And even within the *villa* space divisions appear, in this case, linked to who owns the land that residents occupy and the types of organization to which they belong. 'There are three parts – described a local leader – one belongs to the Police, another to the municipality, and the other to the Cooperative.'

Urban borders are replicated in different situations like the one described earlier. In another *barrio* in Buenos Aires known as *Ciudad Oculta* (hidden city) because, according to one interviewee, in the past there was 'a high wall that covered the whole front part and the *villa* wasn't seen,' the leader of a housing organization says that 'it is a *barrio* called a *villa*, very populated with around 15,000 inhabitants.' And within it two types of space distinguished as strips and blocks. A member of a civil association in the *barrio* uses the same categories, stating that 'the strips are these houses. Then, from the corridor on, they're all blocks: from one to I don't know how many. Nucleus lots are municipal, and the blocks are private. This is called Villa 15.' According to the leader of a housing organization, strip inhabitants are 'like a kind of elite in the *villa*, as if they had more status, as if from a different social class, one thing is the *villero* and another is *barrio* people.'

Several diacritics converge in this story: building type, land ownership, and occupation history, with the corridor separating the two spaces. Once again, the *barrio-villa* opposition emerges in a space generally seen as homogeneous by an outsider and placed in the *villa* category. So, social categories like *barrio* and *villa* do not necessarily refer to the intrinsic qualities of spaces in a city; rather, they tell us about the social relations existing among residents. *Barrio* and *villa* function, therefore, as social categories that refer to the ways in which people are classified and imagined among themselves, and the ways in which they interrelate by virtue of such classifications and imaginaries: to live in an apartment or *villa*, in a strip or block, is relevant to the type of relations established in different interaction contexts and, specifically, in *barrio* politics. One leader of a trash-recycler organization in *villa* 1-11-14, located in Bajo Flores in the city of Buenos Aires, tells that people living in the neighboring *barrio* (called Rivadavia), with similar characteristics 'call you *villa* and they are meters away. They are in the next block and they call you *villa*,' recognizing that 'everyone roots for his jersey's side. We are from *villa* 1-11-14.'

Thus, when introduced into the classificatory processes present in the *barrio* space, a displacement can be observed in how differences and divisions are understood. Whereas in socio-spatial configurations, class inequality appears as the main explicative factor in urban fracture, which expresses in spatial terms a strong social border between rich and poor; the everyday dynamics within popular *barrios* reveal the existence of multiple symbolic boundaries that are the basis for distinctions of ethnic and race dimensions, national identity, lifestyle, and moral qualities in groups and individuals inhabiting 'the same' space.

Urban borders, stigma, and politics

Social and symbolic borders act both inside and outside the *barrio* space. For many of the leaders interviewed, the effects that these borders have on everyday interaction in the *barrio* space are negative and hinder organizing residents politically. The leader of an unemployed movement recognized that 'if it weren't for this separation that I'm from the Cooperative, you are from the *villa*, we could unify the struggle. Unfortunately, all the divisions there are in the *villa* are prejudicial for us that live there.' And another expressed the desire that 'here inside we absolutely have to reach a consensus' and say, 'here nationality ends, here we are all neighbors.'

Location and type of residence, land ownership, ethnic, racial, and national differences are some of the dimensions that, from the perspective of many popular organization leaders, fragment a reality they perceive as similar or common. 'You know what else divides us?' asked a leader of a land and housing organization in the northern sector. And he simulated the following dialogue: 'Where are you from? De la *villa* Tranquila, and you? No, I'm from Catanga ... an avenue away.' In recognition of the limited nature of the space lived as one's own *barrio*, some popular sector organizations have modified their mode of intervention. 'Starting from wanting to change the reality of their own *barrio* is when we are most effective,' reflected the leader of an unemployed organization in the southern sector. 'The people from Villa Inflamable talk about their own problem, which is a contamination issue. In more densely populated places like Corina or Villa Azul, the problem is housing.' Here, the limits are not something to be overcome but instead a starting point upon which to build. Although potentially effective, this strategy can lead to the consolidation of some of the limits organization leaders question but often (re)produce. Indeed, in some interviews politics appeared as one of the dimensions generating division in *barrios*.

At the same time, outside the *barrio* space, above and beyond existing internal divisions, all popular *barrio* residents are stigmatized and suffer discrimination. The symbolic boundaries reinforce the social border, permanently accompanying residents of popular *barrios* wherever they happen to be. As a member of a work cooperative related 'the truth is that people from all the *villas* suffer awful discrimination. For example, on my ID I have: block 12, house 22, *villa* 20.' The use of numerical references for indicating the location of dwellings in a city where almost all streets have names is interpreted as yet another way of setting *villa miseria* residents apart in their everyday life in the city.

The persistence of the territorial stigma (Wacquant 2007) toward popular *barrios* (and specifically, toward *villas* and *villeros*) is one of the main dimensions explaining why

territorialities within the city (and in the *barrio*) are limited and incursions outside what is considered one's own space are almost exclusively instrumental. Thus, even as a trash-recycler leader acknowledged that 'the city needs the poor to work,' the leader of a cooperative in the south remarked that 'kids from these marginalized places can't go, sit down and have something to drink like those from Palermo or Barrio Norte.' In the same direction, in his analysis of the socially relevant 'insecurity stories' circulating in Buenos Aires, Kessler (2009) has identified as belonging to young people from popular sectors and their mothers what he terms the 'stigmatization story' that revolves around always experiencing the *barrio* as stigma and being harassed and mistreated by police and bouncers in places of entertainment.

However, these situations lead us to question the nature of the stigma involved in these relationships. In fact, the stigmas are not only 'territorial stigmas' associating members of a social group with certain negative characteristics (crime, anomie) by where they live. By contrast, in the daily life of the inhabitants of the poor neighborhoods we identified a specific ethnic and/or racial stigma, present in various situations away from the place of residence: in the public transport, in educational and health institutions, and at work (Caggiano and Segura 2014).

At the same time, the existence of multiple urban borders in Buenos Aires does not presuppose a lack of interaction among parties on either side, nor does crossing a border in any way imply its dissolution. Some time ago, Barth (1976) revealed the existence of 'interaction structures' that regulate interethnic social encounters through a combination of precepts allowing articulation among different social groups in certain domains of activity, and of sanctions that ban interaction in others. Elias and Scotson (2000) reached a similar conclusion in their analysis of the outsider-established figuration in a working-class community in Great Britain: two basic categories of people meeting exclusively in the work milieu existed, while interaction in other milieus were prohibited or sanctioned by the community.

As the leader of an unemployed organization tells us:

My children come from school and say to me, 'Daddy, they said we are *villeros*.' And I tell them 'you have to feel pride because *villeros* are the people that make the buildings that are in Palermo.' Who made those buildings? People from the *villa*.

In this story, in addition to a momentary reversal of the stigma, the hegemonic 'interaction structure' in the city is condensed: the tendency of popular sectors to cross borders (not without suffering) only as workers, while their interaction in other milieus and domains of activity is prohibited and probably sanctioned by stigmatization.

Conclusions

In Buenos Aires, thinking divisions and oppositions in terms of spatialization procedures is an extended practice. Space is, on the one hand, a metaphor for referring to social segments. And on the other hand, each person and group inhabits precisely demarcated spaces that are often defined in powerful terms. More than a century ago, Durkheim and Mauss (1996) showed that in different societies spatial classifications are linked to the social structure. And once created, these classifications stand for and modify aspects of social configurations. For the groups studied (and for the rest of us as well), these spatial

regions function affectively, arousing different feelings and even implying virtues and religious values.

The different feelings generated in Buenos Aires residents by space-related terms obey classificatory processes interwoven in the social configuration of the metropolitan area. The undeniable complexity of the latter is something classificatory processes seek to simplify at times. Inquiring into the nature of spatial classifications, their meaning and performativity in Buenos Aires is a way of inquiring into the structure of certain political practices.

We have analyzed how social leaders from different parts of the city and different types of organizations experience, assign meaning to, and produce internal borders in the metropolitan area. In Buenos Aires, the *barrio* is a category constitutive of ways of perceiving, assigning meaning, and acting. As a classificatory system, it appears to function as a logos that, in contrast to the Chicano *barriology* analyzed by Villa (2000), not only entails a cultural affirmation of social practices, but a tactic or strategy as distinguished by de Certeau (2000). The *barrio* also culturally constitutes politics, which are interwoven into it and, at the same time, transcended by it, in the sense that this space encompasses and can influence the most diverse dimensions of social life. It can be surmised from the above analysis that neighborhood boundaries are relevant in the structuring of social links, local organizations, and political imagination: products of the objective social relations constructed in a particular space, boundaries tend to function as principles of vision and division of that space, organizing social relations and practices.

Comparing urban borders in Buenos Aires in the wake of the neoliberal experience with what is happening in other cities in the region prompts reflection on the role of borders, social classes, ethnic/race dimension, and the state. In a comparison of the North American ghetto with the Parisian periphery, Wacquant (2007) has shown that, above and beyond morphological resemblances and even similar personal experiences among residents, two specific socio-spatial types of organization come into play, each with its own logic. While a ghetto is a culturally homogeneous racial universe characterized by low organizational density and weak penetration by the social state, the Parisian periphery is fundamentally heterogeneous on the plane of ethno-national composition and class structure, with a strong presence of public institutions.

A first comparatively relevant dimension for characterizing urban borders in Latin America is the relation between space and society; that is, how space, limits, and differences interrelate in each concrete case in the processes that Bernand (1994) termed the 'spatial construction of cultural differences.' In the case of Latin America, many researchers argue that the historical persistence of a relatively strong and stable association between territory and social class is a feature that differentiates it from other regions like the United States, where race and nationality appear as crucial criteria in spatial organization. In this direction, it is common to contrast the American racial segregation with Latin American socioeconomic segregation. From this perspective, and taking up the figures proposed by Wacquant, the situation of the poor neighborhoods of Buenos Aires would be closer to the outskirts of Paris than the American ghetto.

From the point of view of this article we argue, however, that the aforementioned contrast must be nuanced. In effect, *coventillos* (a rooming house inhabited by families

of different ethnic–national origins in the late 19th and early 20th centuries) and *villas miseria* (informal residential spaces expanded from half of the 20th century, the product of internal and border migration) share a feature: spaces in the city where people of different origins who share similar socioeconomic conditions coexist. But this heterogeneity does not mean that ethnic and racial considerations are not relevant to the way urban space is organized and the forms taken by social interaction in the city. As we show in this article, racist operations in Buenos Aires do not support easy equivalence with constructions of blackness in other contexts and it is commonly associated with the poor, *mestizo*, and/or migrant population living in popular neighborhoods, and shantytowns. In this regard, the ethnic and racial stigmas are articulated with social class, influencing in the possibilities of access to the city by the inhabitants of popular neighborhoods.

The second basic dimension for comprehending urban borders is the relationship between space and state. In this regard, the neoliberal transformation of the state has not led, in any homogeneous way, to its absence or disappearance in Buenos Aires. Substantive modifications have been made in the forms taken by state intervention, but there is no evidence of what has occurred in other Latin American cities where spaces dominated by drug trafficking are inaccessible to public policy; in Buenos Aires greater control over diverse spaces persists through what could be characterized as state capillarity. The abandonment of the universalistic welfare state social policies has turned social policymaking into heterogeneous, fragmented manifestations that, in any event, do structure social links and often are of primary importance for reproducing life in popular neighborhoods. By the same token, the state is the key interlocutor for the great majority of social organizations, while *barrios* are privileged territory in political disputes. In this sense, a relevant datum is that in Buenos Aires' politics designates in these *barrios* both a language and a set of practices for the unfolding of conflict and search for solutions in everyday life.

And finally, another relevant dimension for comprehending urban borders is a quality that might be termed the porosity or crossability of borders, which addresses the social and relational distance between the groups the border separates. With reference to Sao Paulo, Teresa Caldeira (2000) indicates that the new segregation pattern undermines the values of accessibility, freedom of circulation, and equality that inspired the modern type of public urban space, substituting for it a new type of public space that has inequality, separation, and border control as structuring values. Once again, in comparative terms, urban borders in Buenos Aires appear as 'bland' and 'porous' with regard to those functioning in cities like Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo that are characterized as being 'hard' and 'uncrossable.'

Yet the relative porosity of urban borders in Buenos Aires should not lead one to lose sight of the fact that 'the city is more soft for some people than for others' (Hannerz 1986, 280). In fact, these historically sedimented borders are performative of the ways in which the city is imagined and practiced, and the accessibility and free circulation of poor inhabitants are not guaranteed. Indeed, in the case of Buenos Aires, urban social shading and the combination of certain hard borders (Buenos Aires/province of Buenos Aires, *barrio/villa*) with other more subtle, almost imperceptible ones, collaborate in generating the low day-to-day visibility of marked economic and social inequality and primarily instrumental interaction structures among people on both sides of the border.

These characteristics allow us to understand the impact social protest has had on the city of Buenos Aires as carried out by many of the social organizations referred to earlier, operating on the basis of (and along) urban borders in order to, among other reasons, modify them. In the final analysis, the emergence of these organizations in the public space has often been impelled by instituted and naturalized borders that their action helps to reinforce. In other processes and discourses, however, challenging these instituted borders has increased the scope of political imagination, questioning a type of access to – and interaction in – the city.

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