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Nancy Diaz Laranaga, María Victoria Martin, Claudia Villamayor, María de La Paz Echeverria, Luciano Grassi

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*TEMPORALITY AND PUBLIC SPACE.  
ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS IN YOUNGSTERS AND  
ADULTS FROM THE CITY OF LA PLATA.*

**Nancy DIAZ LARRAÑAGA  
María Victoria MARTIN  
Claudia VILLAMAYOR  
María DE LA PAZ ECHEVERRIA  
Luciano GRASSI  
UNLP-TAG**

**Introduction**

This document presents some insight which intends to question the reconfiguration of social and temporal-spatial relations and representations about sociality and uses of public space in youngsters and adults who live in the city of La Plata, Argentina.

With this aim, we have tried to crystallize the progress of the first lines of analysis of the research we are doing within the frame of two complementary research projects: “Temporal representations and social practices: invariance or change” from the National University of La Plata and “Temporality and public space: analysis of social representations in youngsters and adults from La Plata” from the National University of Quilmes.

In this sense, we are investigating the ways in which youngsters and adults from the urban area of La Plata shape the representations of institutions, practices and strategies that allow them to constitute specific modes of interaction; and we have wondered about their ways of participation and the definitions that prevail among them when thinking about public space, as we believe that investigating public space means “dealing with the social bond between people and the collective representation of the tie”<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Ortega, E. et al., *Desarrollo humano en Chile. Nosotros los chilenos: un desafío cultural*, Santiago de Chile, PNUD, 2002.

### **Methodological Strategies**

In this research, which is exploratory in nature, the field work involved in-depth interviewing inhabitants from the urban area who have lived in the city of La Plata for at least three years. They were divided in two age groups: 18-30 and 45-60, as approximate ages that enable us to consider a generational relationship which may be that between parents and children.

The sample consisted of an intentional selection of cases from which we intended to obtain variety; considering age, gender and a minimum of three years of residence in the urban area of the city of La Plata as exclusive variables, and educational level, socio-economic level, un/employed, marital status and with/without children as non exclusive variables. In search for data overload, the interviews done in the first part of the field work amount to 36. The insight presented here comes from the analysis of this first stage of the survey as a way to reflect on and rethink a second stage that will be subsequently developed.

With the aim of analysis, we have taken up the "Grounded Theory", which was developed by Barney Glasser and Anselm Strauss, as a technique of data analysis. This enables us to know what people say in order to produce theory in relation to that and then make an interpretation based on the data.

Specifically, we will take Anselm Strauss' and Juliette Corbin's proposal, who suggest an adjustment of this method considering that it is possible to gather information starting from some previous categories and giving rise to the emergence of new categories in the data analysis. The use of this technique of analysis gave rise to emerging categories born out of observing and establishing a hierarchy of the data obtained during the field work.

### **Modes of seeing/constructing the world**

If representations are social constructs that enable an individual appropriation and make it possible for us to have particular perceptions of the world, as a result, the interviewees' "modes of seeing the world" account for that. In this brief paper we will introduce some ideas concerning how the social, the practices and the subjects shape our daily life, our relations and our sociality practices.

Youngsters' and adults' daily life<sup>2</sup> is highly institutionalized. Although we may say that this is one of the typical features of modernity, the recurrence of some institutions when it comes to

describing daily life turns out to be surprising. Most of them are recovered from their instituted aspect showing what is given and structured in social terms. They are embodied from repetition and routine, taking what precedes us -and shapes us in a sense- as inevitable.

Daily practices are marked in a high percentage by work as a social organizer. We refer to organizer at various levels -temporal, attitudinal and relational. In other words, the account of the day composition is articulated in a narrative way around work as a central core, defining the moments of the day, the activities (work and leisure ones) and the social bonds.

It could be mentioned that the family sphere appears at a second level as the second organizer of daily life. Here the relational/emotional aspect mainly prevails over the chronological order of actions. The remaining prevailing institutions involve politics, religion, education, leisure time and

the market, among the most frequently-named ones. From passing through the daily experiences, a highly mediated tour around these institutions, subjects shape a social imagery anchored in two big places: on the one hand, the fragmentation of society and, on the other hand, the insecurity that causes the break of the social fabric. Both readings are presented as a problematic root of the disarticulation that comes about in the social fabric, hegemonic constructions that prevail in youngsters and in adults as well.

We may say that in the analysis of the interviews there strongly appears an interpretation of society in which a negative idea prevails that can be summarized with the phrase "everything is wrong". In this context, the prospect for a near future indicates a deepening of this situation and a strengthening of this negative perception. These negative interpretations are based on the recognition of a society impregnated with the neo-liberal model where the scant presence of the State in fundamental issues stands out but also an individualistic culture in which consumption and image have become axes is noticeable .

### **Interpretations about the public space**

With specific reference to the public space, it is remarkable how the current meaning and use of the public space differ significantly from the representations and uses that the same subjects note from previous experiences. This change, in general terms, is negatively assessed by adult subjects mainly while this reading is softer in youngsters. It is in the daily practices where these collective representations are validated causing a transformation in the use of the public space that, in

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<sup>2</sup> From now on, every time we refer to youngsters and/or adults, we will make reference to the interviewees within the scope of the project, ruling out any possible generalization.

turn, reshapes, not in a causal but in a procesual way, the conceptions that the subjects of a certain society understand about the sense of the public space.

Within this frame, we can record that there are two cities that at certain times are melted into one and at other times exacerbate their differences: on the one hand, the center of the urban area represents a model of a positivist city, tied to the idea of progress, stressing the University and the various spheres of the State and the public while, on the other hand, we come to find a beltway that acts as a symbolic and material frontier of a city that grows disorderly apart from the first one, setting a limit that accounts for the end of the urban area and a change to a poorer quality of life as well. Furthermore, even in the same urban area, this strong reference to the links between center and periphery are based on another comparison which is neighborhood-city<sup>3</sup>. The neighborhood is defined as a close place of belonging, in many cases associated with certain ways of life which that city (to which those neighborhoods belong) seems to forbid.

However, even for those who report a strong sense of belonging to the Neighborhood (they are generally those who have lived in the same neighborhood for a long time and have grown up there), there is a certain idea of changes in the neighborhood from the past until now<sup>4</sup>, which are specially related to the type of practices that these places allow (playing in the street, using it as a place to meet friends, relatives or neighbors, etc.), and although they still exist they do not have the validity they used to have some years before. In many interviewees' opinion, this can be related to the insecurity and the development of new technology, which have changed the usual past practices in the street, the sidewalk, the square, the vacant lot and other shared places.

The prospects that the neighborhood should acquire more and more characteristics typical of the city center are seen a little reluctantly because the integration with the center is not considered as a way to improve -as it may be expected- the life conditions of the place inhabitants. On the contrary, it will turn out to act to the detriment of its features. There persists a certain idyllic view of a neighborhood where two main aspects are highly valued: the neighborhood as a different place from the center, which preserves some characteristics related to living calmly and getting to know the other.

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<sup>3</sup> It makes reference to the commercial and political administrative center of the city

<sup>4</sup> Two are the main temporal references which prevail with respect to this: "10 years ago" and "since

And in that particular context, the belief that this kind of places allow a higher degree of participation in the public space: "*But what is great is that in the neighborhoods the collective issue is still supported even in this kind of resistance. There is something like subsistence stuff, which I believe is clearer for those from the neighborhood than for those who enforce public policies in the neighborhood*"<sup>5</sup>.

One of the aspects that turns out to be striking from the analysis of the interviews is the strong withdrawal behavior expressed by youngsters to the private sphere, to the home. The home is regarded as a private space par excellence as opposed to a certain idea of the public as a space shared by everyone.

We can relate this withdrawal behavior to home with different factors: on the one hand, the characteristics of the current society (stressed, in a hurry, individualistic, etc) give the home a connotation of shelter, some peace and a place where youngsters are able to manage their own time. What is more, the sensation of insecurity and fear are present in the representations of youngsters who highlight the need to take certain precautions when walking in the street and mixing with other people, and they find refuge in the private sphere, understood as safer. The insecurity issue is a permanent reference among youngsters. On the one hand, facing this issue a transformation in the way of behaving in the neighborhood is presented: "*When I was 5 or 6 I used to live differently. I was able to go to the street to ride my bike and now I can't ride my bike two blocks to get to the kiosk because I'm stolen or killed for my bike*" .

In connection with this, the subsequent withdrawal to home, a naturally private space, where a priori nothing is supposed to happen, as opposed to the public, which is appropriated by a violent, marginal "other": "*What I see is what can be seen everyday. Insecurity which doesn't only mean stealing but also the loss of lives, murders and more and more people out of control. More and more citizens locking themselves at home and more and more violence groups taking the street*". As opposed to what we may believe, for many of these youngsters, the street means the place for the illicit rather than a sphere of freedom and exchange.

In general terms, the public is discursively constructed in relation to the role of the State and the government and the enforcement of public policies. But, at the same time, there exists a generalized distrust of politicians and the insertion that politics may have in the neighborhoods.

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<sup>5</sup> All the highlighted quotations in italics belong to interviewees during the field work.

Therefore, we may say that representations become public spaces and in order to support them, there are material reasons, which are political, economic, accounting for the pre-formative character in the social.

### Strategies

The representations about society and the modes of sociality reconstructed from the interviews with youngsters and adults have presented continuities with what we shall call “strategies” in this paper. We use strategies to refer to the practices or the discourse constructed by subjects with a view to a relatively near future, with more or less possibility of transforming their daily life. In principle, it is about ideas and desires developed by subjects around a recognition of their reality, an imagery of the future and the process that these subjects should undergo within their context in order to eventually achieve that desire.

It turns out to be striking that within this frame, the daily citizen participation does not strongly appear as an alternative way out either although certain voices have emerged suggesting a more hopeful view and presenting a criticism of the “uncommitted” attitude of society towards the improvement of the public: *“And if we Argentineans go on having this individualistic mentality, honestly, the outlook isn’t that good as this is how we have lost the social bonds, the community work, the communication between ourselves and our rulers, and this leads to a chaotic state of our lives”*.

A few other people can see with more clarity the possibility of constructing public space bound to the collective, therefore challenging the predominant individualism: *“Well, for me, individualism will be stronger day after day; but on the other hand, neighborhood organizations seem to be appearing, there is some new stuff emerging, as the counterpoint of what is being intensified on the other hand.”*

These ideas related to other types of participation are bound to a more micro notion, in the neighborhood organization or in a small community organization. It is in those minor cases where possibilities of generation of spaces and participation by which the “common” citizen can bring about changes are visualized.

In addition, in some cases, facing the criticism of an absence of the public, the way out is perceived as individual: *“I think that I can change small things from my place and that if each of us can change small things from our own circumstance, big things can be changed in the long run”*.

On the other hand, in many cases, the public space is handled (not lived, not constructed) as a link among different private spaces, especially in those

cases in which people go out from their homes just to go to work. From these senses they are constituted in actions and objectives performed by subjects in order to carry out their daily practices and intervene, within a frame of possibilities, in a possible scenario.

Here we can also distinguish individual from group strategies. Firstly, individual strategies are directly connected with the representation of the other. Here the other as economically “lacking” and socially segregated stands out. The strategy articulating it is solidarity; sometimes revealed as welfarism. This course of action stems from a recognition of the other in his/her needs and it aims to take action in order to reverse this situation by means of economic or other kind of support. This strategy is also connected with two different positions; on the one hand, putting oneself in the other’s place and committing oneself to his/her situation and, on the other hand, finding evidence of society deterioration in them.

On the other hand, facing the recognition of the other, indifference appears as a strategy. In this sense, subjects choose not to commit themselves to those “others” although they know of their existence. The individual strategies are completed with what in this paper is called individualism.

This term is regarded as the political modes of action, by which acting as a collection of individualities is the option of improvement or change in society. It becomes an individual option facing the recognition of the situation, from which the social change lies in the group of unrelated individual transformations.

Individualism has, in turn, two more senses and objectives according to these subjects from La Plata: on the one hand, the search for economic and emotional stability in front of an unstable social situation and, on the other hand, the search for peace in front of an insecure or worrying situation; it is a strategy of an attempt to keep out of a context which is perceived as harmful.

Although youngsters express the desire to see a change in the attitude of society as regards social commitment, solidarity, taking the other into account; when thinking about who is responsible and in charge of solving that situation, they do not seem to consider it as a shared responsibility, or at least as a possible space of construction but rather as an ambivalent situation in which the construction of a promising personal future is assumed to depend mainly on a personal effort; but the construction of a collective future is delegated to the responsibility of third parties (State, society, etc.): *“Things that don’t depend on me, and...it must come from the country’s side and more specifically, from the*

*people who rule it. If this doesn't make progress, the country gets stuck and we all get stuck".*

### **First conclusions**

Although the results presented are partial since the research is still in progress, we consider that the representations of the modes of social relation reconstructed in the analysis become meaningful in various aspects.

First of all, the understanding of society from fragmentation and social break, the majority representation of the interviewees, is strongly impregnated with the practices that they perform daily. This fragmentation at the macro social level can be visualized at the micro level, in the modes of handling the city, in the ways of mixing with others.

The meaning of the State, of what means the grouping of the public according to those interviewed and the mode in which, consequently, they place themselves in it, essential to understand a mode of being and inhabiting the singular world we are discussing.

The strategy associated with this way of experiencing sociality finds an answer in individualism and indifference, with the political implications that may come about. However, although an explicit axis of investigation was not constituted, subjects do not visualize these implications. In this sense, discourse is constructed from the individual rather than from the collective.

Secondly, it is worth highlighting the modes of narrating the daily and the relations held through the day as relations lacking other objectives that do not involve sharing that particular moment.

This stage is defined as "mere being" as a logic anchored in an empty sociality, where neither individual nor collective plans can be visualized.

The mere being was configured as a majority mode of narrating sociality in the interviewees. A sharing

time that includes activities but does not include action from the political point of view.

We consider that it is necessary to investigate this aspect deeply so as to understand the social meaning of it.

Finally, another aspect that needs deeper insight is the restructuring of the use of public space. In this train of thought, associated with what has been developed in previous paragraphs, the transformation of daily practices mediated by the representation of the social fragmentation finds emptiness of the use of public space.

This could probably be the most visible parameter of subjects' withdrawal to the private sphere, fostered by individualism. This shift from public to private is experienced as a loss, therefore allowing us to wonder about other ways of experiencing the social.

These other ways of experiencing the social challenge the idea of the public but more strongly they challenge the idea of "the common" and even more the meaning of "the collective". Making one's way to observe this constitutes a challenge to broaden the logics of our progressive thoughts but we should also make our way to observe the socialized turn and modes of existence that are constantly changing.

As it was stated in the first paragraphs of this paper, our research questions the possibility of a social change. Perhaps because of that, as opposed to the utopian thought of the transformation anchored in communicative practices where the social frames as social constituents have privilege, we believe that it is relevant to recover the idea that the public can be appropriated differently from the way it is happening nowadays. It can be a door that may enable us to rethink and reconstruct ourselves as a society. Or, why not, it may enable us to consider that we are constructing another society, as a result of new subjectivities.