Self-help settlements as insights to urban conflicts: the case of Toma de Peñalolén in Santiago, Chile

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the meaning of 'urban conflict' from the perspective of a self-help settlement. It is understood that conflicts, like settlements, are multi-dimensional and multi-scale. Rather than perpetuating a notion of settlements as 'conflict' that certain places in the world suffer from (the global South), we chose to understand them as an expression of diversity, contributing to imagining and building an alternative part of the city (Robinson, 2006). Three dimensions will be emphasised: governance (Swyngedouw, 2011), sense of place (Harvey 2001), and planning (Roy, 2005; Friedmann, 2005). Some of the conclusions suggest reconsidering the planning that denies the existence of conflicts and tries to 'solve' the problem of settlements by any means. Settlements also impact on the way in which agreement to govern the city is shared, prioritized and obtained. Finally, places affect the nature of the conflict and its solution. As a case study, we will consider the Toma de Peñalolén (Occupation of Peñalolén),

located in the western sector of Santiago, Chile. The results shown come from a recent research based on 35 interviews, a survey and secondary sources.

INTRODUCTION

One of the aspects in which Chile ranks higher than neighbouring countries is the low number of 'informal' settlements (OECD, 2013; Ozler, 2012), where nearly 5% of the population live. At first sight, this success could be associated (since Chile went back to democracy) to the adoption of a wide range of international recommendations destined to solve the 'problem' of the fast urbanisation of Southern Cone societies. These recommendations are associated to measures such as housing subsidies and systems of property titles, basic services, and public-private cooperation to govern informality, among others[1]. For entities like the World Bank (1993), what is relevant is the capacity to reduce urban poverty without neglecting urban development as an engine of economic growth and fostering public-private cooperation. For the former government coalition, the Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia *, reduction in the number of people living in settlements has been the result of their socially oriented economy (Lagos, 1999).*

Nevertheless, many criticise the way in which these measures are territorialised and affect the right to the city (Lefebvre, 1996) for those who live in self-help settlements and illegally occupied sites. Authors like Giannotti (2014) suggest

that in Chile, the State capacity to manage urban poverty is not only a result of adopting 'good international practices' nor a consequence of the specific management of political coalitions after 1990. This capacity was rather built in time, as his research about the 1950s and 1960s suggests. Rodríguez and Sugranyes (2005) already point out that governance of urban poverty by means of the subsidy system to social housing rather postpones and avoids urban conflict instead of creating a political dynamic system exploring the potential of popular organization and participation. On this occasion, we shall deal with self-help settlements (shanty towns and 'occupied sites', for instance) as urban conflicts. Rather than generalise at country level, we shall take a deep look at a settlement, La Toma de Peñalolén[2], *describing some of its characteristic multidimensional (Lugo, 2005) and multi-scale relationships (Lapeyre, 2013). The idea is to give an account of some of its causes and part of the process of formalisation. This will allow us to explore the relationship between urban conflict and planning dimensions (Roy, 2005; Friedmann, 2005); urban assemblages (Swyngedouw, 2011) and notion of* place *(Harvey, 1996). Finally, we shall state that formalisation is not far from the cultures of governance and urbanisation (Elgert & Krueger, 2012) that operate in the same territory.*

SOME CAUSES OF THE OCCUPATION

The case study is the Toma de Peñalolén. *The occupation of the site took place on*

5th July 1999. One of its particularities is that, at first, the occupants openly resisted being formalised by the State. Although in their origin self-help settlements are multidimensional (Lugo, 2005) and multi-scale (Lapeyre, 2013), we shall only stress some of the triggers to begin to understand an urban conflict.

First, the occupation was a reaction to the kind of urban development that since the 1990s has socially, economically and spatially restructured the communes[3] west of Santiago (González, 2015). This was part of the expansion of the high and middle income sector, which became a territorial transformation from Las Condes to La Florida, by means of multiple projects (such as housing, retail, education, motorways, and so on). These commune transformations do not allow for alternative ways to imagine or build the city (Robinson, 2006). Evidence of this, as several residents interviewed in the study expressed, was the increase in the number of lodgers and tenants of the commune of Peñalolén who simply have not featured in the Plan Regulador Comunal *(Communal Master Plan) for at least a decade. This happened while large portions of agricultural land in Peñalolén were urbanised without taking into consideration the lack of social housing in the sector, nor the scarcity of redistribution tools of the planning. This might be interpreted as an exercise of a state of exception (Roy, 2005) that lasted several years. For the interviewees, the success of the* Toma de Peñalolén *was a consequence of a planning that had started four years before.*

On the other hand, the commune had been increasing its rate of human development since the 1990s (UNDP, 1999). This is mainly attributed to the increase of gated communities that made room for new residents in the

commune, who, on average, had a higher income than the original residents, which explains the communal 'development'. However, implementing the occupation forced the formal *system of planning to assume and acknowledge the existence of urban poverty hidden in house backyards, in the form of lodgers and tenants. Eventually, the first 300 people taking the territory increased to 9,000 in the short term, indicating that for many of them the occupation was an alternative to obtaining a house and living in Peñalolén. Local and central governments, that for several years had not considered planning sites nor housing projects in that commune, could not offer an immediate alternative to lodgers and tenants. This forced them to negotiate with the occupation leaders while they gradually activated their capacity to provide housing. This was a key moment where the influence of the occupation 'overflowed', changing the way to plan and urban governance of the west sector of Santiago. Thus, a* space *for capital accumulation was transformed into a* common and current place *(Harvey, 2001).*

Finally, according to what was expressed by two government authorities in the interviews, the occupation is perceived *as the beginning of the loss of control over who delivers and builds social housing. After the occupation, it was feared that the occupations might be extended to other popular sectors of the city, creating alternatives to the system of housing planning and subsidy. It was also feared that building companies might see the occupation as an obstacle and decided to freeze their investments in Peñalolén, since the image of the sector and its strategic position would affect the attraction of their projects. The occupation was neither totally peaceful nor negotiating. The settlers often*

protested, took government premises and occasionally became violent. All of this justified the new measures taken by the Minister of Housing and Urban Planning (MINVU), forcing an agreement with the occupation leaders, measures that cut off the occupation from its capacity to influence the conditions of formalisation (the type of housing and where to build).

To conclude, the causes of the occupation are associated to the urban development of the west sector and to the formal culture of planning (Friedmann, 2005), creating an 'informal' culture of planning. Until then, technocratic ways of governance of urban poverty (Frösén, 2013) were predominant, also related to a state of exception (Roy, 2005), which came into crisis with the emergence of the occupation. Finally, we can see a relationship between space and urban conflict. The occupation was the creation of a place that generated different political relationships in the city, and alternative ways to solve conflict.

POLITICIZATION AND DEPOLITICIZATION OF THE OCCUPATION

Politicization

There were initially seven housing committees and these went through a process of territorialisation[4]. Part of the process of transforming territory into a visible place implied organising committees, which put together the expertise of the occupation residents. Their knowledge was shared and used for the process of implementing infrastructures such as drinking water, sewage system, electricity and housing.

The sewage and drinking water system installed by the committees covered at least fifty percent of the occupied territory. Thanks to the contribution

of the families and (informally) the local government, a formal sewage was installed connected to the commune system. The 'housing committee' had a secondary role until the third year. Initially, it helped the installation of the families and supported the delivery of materials. The 'children's committee' also created various opportunities for improvement and cooperation. It started with the building of a type of media agua[5] *(shack) and then enlarged it, formalising its installation through the National Kindergarten Council (JUNJI) and the NGO Integrando. Professionals were involved eventually, but the residents retained administration control.*

Electrical wiring had a different governance route. It started illegally but, eventually, through negotiations, Chilectra, the electricity company, installed wiring and meters in the passageways. At first, a delegate collected the money to pay the company but he had to be replaced when overcharging was detected. This resulted in a new step to formalisation by agreeing with Chilectra the installation of meters in each site. On the one hand, the new formal system improved internal governance, but, on the other, the old system of payment per passageway was also one in which all the residents subsidised those who did not have the same payment capacity. Thus this solidarity and community interaction began to disappear from the occupation.

All the committees channelled numerous support initiatives from public and private organisations, neighbours, and so on. In spite of the hard conditions of living in the settlement, they formed an efficient and productive support network, based on organised and voluntary work.

Depoliticisation

According to two interviewees, the shift from building a dwelling of 'light material' (wood, tinplate, plastic) to 'solid material' (brick and concrete) was determining for authorities to take the decision to evict the occupation. Therefore, the Government adopted the measure of infiltrating the occupation getting a former leader who entered the site with goods and presents, managing to be elected as a leader by popular vote. The interviewees say that this leader offered paid, stable jobs to key leaders on condition that they left political activity, which generated conflict among leaders. Eventually, the seven housing committees broke up into twenty three, twenty one of which were under the control of the infiltrated leader. With absence of leadership and fragmented political organisation, negotiating was easier for the Ministry of Housing and Urban Planning (MINVU).

This caused depoliticisation of all the committees. The process of participative housing finally built just one type of dwelling. Then the MINVU installed its offices inside the occupation, carried out a survey of families and organised eviction in three stages. Most of the families would continue to live in three separate projects in the Commune of Peñalolén. These were located away from the gated communities whose residents protested against the nearness of the occupation. They were also adjacent to sites and infrastructure of drinking water, high tension towers or bus terminals. In addition, El Canelo kindergarten was replaced, as well as its administration controlled by residents, moving it away from the occupation (its place was used by the NGO Integrando). Finally, the improvised 'nursery teachers' of the occupation were offered jobs and, in some cases, scholarships to study on

condition that they did not organise a kindergarten in the occupation again.

During the eviction, the occupied territory underwent numerous physical modifications as a way of control and social discipline. Each evicted lot became a rubbish dump which discouraged re-occupation. As a high government official said: "If I make the place too good to live in it, nobody will leave. If I make it not fit to live in, I am pressed by la Moneda[6], [telling me] that I have to make it habitable. It is a balance or semi-balance, [otherwise], nobody is going to leave [the occupation]". (Anonymous source, personal communication, January 14, 2015). The police installed themselves permanently in the site. A strict materials control policy was also implemented: no building materials nor television sets were allowed in, as these might create permanent conditions for the families.

After the eviction, the site became a way to re-encourage building investment. First it was called 'park', in order to avoid a re-occupation and obtain political agreement for the use of the site. Although the park is used intensely by the neighbouring population, its design included earth mounds to avoid new settlements, and also sports infrastructure and a museum for indigenous cultures whose image is attractive for central government and well-to-do sectors as well as at international level. Besides, the site was divided into two due to an expropriation for a motorway that increases North-South connectivity. All of these are elements that assemble (Swyngedouw, 2011) integration and make up for the incapacity of the planning to be a platform for relevant changes in development and governance. They are elements that are useful to come

to agreements, discipline and attract various groups that govern the same place. As Harvey (2001) says, these elements reflect the transformation of a place into a space structured towards conditions of capital accumulation. The physical changes of the occupation are an attempt to give a solution to complex urban conflicts.

To conclude, it can be appreciated how, controlling the significance of the place and the organisational basis, the occupation is politicised and depoliticised. The capacity of self-help and independence of the occupation was intervened and replaced by political and organisational dependence. In spite of the fact that the occupation managed to obtain many of the objectives of present urban policies (social cohesion, safety, support networks, participation, sense of community and neighbourhood, and so on), its achievements in organisation and cooperation are not taken into consideration. Moreover, an essential part of taking control was remaking the image and significance of the place, where erasing what had happened is a relevant aspect of the formalisation process. Only the actors controlling the place changed. According to Swyngedouw (2011), this is an urban assemblage.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN ABOUT URBAN CONFLICTS FROM THIS OCCUPATION?

Observing the causes, we can stress the relationship between planning and conflict; or rather, how planning creates and solves urban conflicts. If we assume that the city is diversity (Robinson, 2006), then it is relevant to stop thinking the city as if there were no conflicts, or without paying attention

to the way in which they are solved. For Roy (2005), rather than making residents responsible for the conflict, the change begins with a new epistemology of planning. For Varley (2013) this change begins by acknowledging settlements as places that can teach us a lot about the operation of urban policies. Therefore, planning requires understanding the city as diversity in the way of imagining and producing what is urban space (Robinson, 2006).

We can also observe the relationship between governance and conflict. The occupation creates a different way of solving the housing problem. It shows us that it is necessary to safeguard the political dynamics of the various groups and ways of governing the territory. We observe a tendency to manage conflicts. In addition, practices to 'solve' conflicts have varied from democracy direct to infiltration, co-opting and even resorting to violence. Nevertheless, there was great progress in what former Mayor Orrego calls the 'modernisation' of municipal management. The more visible changes are reflected on public infrastructure; greater care of the image of the commune based on diversity and cultural integration; and reorganisation of municipal administration. Among the changes that make Peñalolén stand out in comparison to other western metropolitan communes is its efficient system to obtain space to build social dwellings. This, in addition to reaching an agreement between the main actors as to how and where social housing for the occupation families should be built. But there is uncertainty as to how long this new governance culture will last. Moreover, the interviewees perceive political agreement as fragile. Some even suggest that a culture of decision

making 'within four walls' will trigger again a struggle between planning cultures (Friedmann, 2011), as it happened with the Toma de Peñalolén.

It can be observed how creating a place changes the nature of urban conflict. Besides, we can appreciate the transformation of space into place and place into space. The occupation in the west sector of Santiago also appears as a place that contradicts the process of globalisation. One of the consequences was the creation of a whole governmental system of management and purchasing of sites for social housing that ensures that there are alternatives to occupations.

Finally, control of basic infrastructure was the key to create an inhabitable place as well as adapting the eviction to the demands of higher income social classes and institutions involved. In this sense, it can be suggested that it is not possible to understand the use given to basic infrastructures without taking into consideration the relationships between the governance power and cultures (Elgert & Krueger, 2012) that operate in the same territory. **m**

NOTES

(1) These are some examples of urban policies destined to overcoming poverty and informality. However, their impact is considered significant to understand the present situation of many Chilean cities.

(2) '*Toma*' means occupation of territory.

(3) *Comuna* is the smallest administrative division of Chile´s territory with its own local government.

(4) The comitees that organized the Toma de Peñalolén were: 1) Education; 2) Ornament; 3) Health; 4) Domestic problems; 5) Library; 6) Culture; 7) Radio 98.8.; 8) Children; 9) Security; 10) Electricity; 11) Construction; 12) Water; 13) Sewer; 14) Red Cross; 15) Housing. Source: Author´s own based on interviews.

(5) Prefabricated modular building system with materials such as wood and zinc (for roofing). This is one of the cheapest housing type in Chile.

(6) *Palacio de la Moneda* is the seat of the Executive.

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