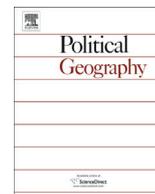




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De-fetishizing the analysis of spatial movement strategies: Polymorphy and *trabajo territorial* in Argentina

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ABSTRACT

Simplified notions of spaces of contention run the risk of misjudging and silencing the multifaceted reality of social movements. Spatial concepts like scale, place, networks, and territory are valuable complements in this regard and offer supplementary insights into political action in general and social movement action in particular. Thus, adopting a polymorphic approach can help to overcome misleading simplifications and to disclose the transformative potential of diverse social movements.

Nevertheless, polymorphy is very demanding as a guidance for the thorough representation of realities and difficult to close as a self-contained account. I argue that this does not represent a lack of conceptual closure but the precise strength of polymorphic frameworks based on scale, place, networks, and territory. Bringing together the de-fetishizing qualities of the four concepts, polymorphy is particularly open to different realities and empirically grounded research that gives way to path dependency.

This is exemplified with the Argentinean movement strategy called “trabajo territorial”, a widespread call for neighbourhood-based community action. Following the course of one neighbourhood assembly, I show how polymorphy opens our view for multifaceted realities and the transformative potential of seemingly constricted social movements in the Global South. It is thus also a methodological tool to build a bridge between specified area studies of the Global South and the Global North as well as between postcolonial criticism and material geographies.

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Introduction

Simplified notions of spaces of contention run the risk of misjudging and silencing the multifaceted reality of social movements (critically, Featherstone, 2008). Consequently, researchers of social movements have turned to new spatial concepts in order to reflect on the relation of space and social movements (Leitner, Sheppard, & Sziarto, 2008; Marston, 2003; Martin & Miller, 2003; Nicholls, Miller, & Beaumont, 2013; Pile & Keith, 1997; Sewell, 2001; Staeheli, 1994; Tilly, 2000). A special focus has been on de-fetishizing concepts that have been built as criticisms of conceptual –centrism, such as methodological nationalism (e.g. Brenner, 1999) or globalocentrism (e.g. Escobar, 2001). The concepts of scale, place, and networks have proven to be especially productive in this regard (Castree, 2004; Escobar, 2001; Juris, 2008; Martin, 2003; Miller, 2000; Oslender, 2004; Pile & Keith, 1997; Routledge, 1993, 2003; Routledge & Cumbers, 2009). Territory, in contrast, has long played a minor role in geographic social movement research, but has been recently included fruitfully (Agnew & Oslender, 2013).

These spatial concepts have evolved separately but offer supplementary insights into political action in general and social movement action in particular. Consequently, various authors have argued for a combination of these spatial concepts in order to develop polymorphic frameworks for spatial analysis (Brenner, 2001, 2009; Jessop, Brenner, & Jones, 2008; Leitner & Sheppard, 2009; Leitner et al., 2008; Nicholls et al., 2013; Sheppard, 2002). In line with these authors, I argue that adopting a polymorphic approach can help to overcome misleading simplifications and to disclose the transformative potential of diverse social movements.

However, polymorphy is very demanding as a guidance for the thorough representation of realities and difficult to close as a self-contained account. I argue that this is not a lack of conceptual closure but the precise strength of polymorphic frameworks based on scale, place, networks, and territory. Bringing together the de-fetishizing qualities of the four concepts, polymorphy is particularly open to different realities and empirically grounded research that gives way to path dependency.

This is going to be exemplified with an Argentinean movement strategy called “trabajo territorial”, a widespread call for neighbourhood-based community action. Following the course of one neighbourhood assembly, I am going to show how movement strategies like *trabajo territorial* imply multifaceted spatial practices that respond to the spatial complexity of neoliberal globalization. In order

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to understand this, we have to look at the specific context and set of action of social movements in Greater Buenos Aires. By combining the four concepts of territory, scale, place, and networks, we gain further insights into how neoliberal globalization manifests in the territories of Greater Buenos Aires and how social movements respond to these manifestations. Thus, the case of *trabajo territorial* shows how polymorphy opens our view for multifaceted realities and the transformative potential of seemingly constricted social movements in the Global South.

The assemblies and trabajo territorial as movement strategy

In December 2001, a massive protest movement overturned the Argentinean government. Critics of so-called globalization all over the world applauded these protests as an overdue resistance to one of the most prominent cases of forced neoliberalization; Argentinean protestors seemed to be part of a new globalized resistance movement (Negri, Cocco, Altamira, & Horowicz, 2003). Interestingly enough, many local analysts immediately opted for another way of referring to the actors of the ongoing protests: *Vecino* (“neighbour”) was one of the most used terms for identifying them (Schuster et al., 2002). What initially constituted little more than some kind of empty signifier for the analysts turned out to be a political project for the participants: The protestors started organizing themselves into hundreds of popular assemblies in their neighbourhoods.

The first assemblies appeared in the course of a mass demonstration at the end of December; within a few days, assemblies became a dominant model of organization (Schuster et al., 2002, pp. 42–43). The key purpose of the assemblies was to find a concrete answer to the main call of the protests. *¡Que se vayan todos!* (“Away with them all!”): Rejecting the ruling political class and the way formal democracy worked in Argentina, the former protestors now tried to practice modes of direct democracy in their assemblies. Most of them would by and by function like little local parliaments, meeting once a week, discussing current issues of political development and their plans of action which, in turn, were often prepared in separate commissions. The activists paid special attention to the “horizontality” of the assembly, i.e. equality in speech and decision-making between the members (Barbetta, 2002; Bonasso, 2002; Dinerstein, 2003; Pérez, Armelino, & Rossi, 2005).

This new model of organization quickly gave way to a new course of action. Two authors remark with respect to a reduction of mass protests between December 2001 and March 2002:

(...) the assemblies, the principle protagonists of this type of action, had not only changed their methods but also the orientation of their actions: they turned towards their territorial base, learnt about the neighbour’s necessities and tried to find solutions. (Feijóo & Salas Oroño, 2002, p. 25, translation by the author)

The protestors left the central public places of the city and opted for what they called *trabajo territorial* (“territorial work”). From self-administered bakeries and handcraft shops, workshops in political philosophy or health care to child education and street theatre, *trabajo territorial* embraces a variety of economic, political, social, and cultural activities. Its principal characteristic is that it aims at rooting actors and their networks in neighbourhoods.

This call for *trabajo territorial* was not new. Other new social movements that had evolved in Argentina during the 1990s and that had taken part in the mass protests in December 2001, like the unemployed picketers or the new generation of human rights activists H.I.J.O.S., had already dedicated themselves to the same call to neighbourhood action (Colectivo Situaciones, 2002; Colectivo Situaciones & MTD de Solano, 2002; Svampa & Pereyra, 2003). In fact, this was an overall tendency of political action in Greater Buenos Aires: social movement actors, NGOs, and even unions and parties

employed “territorial work” (Merklen, 2005). Moreover, *trabajo territorial* forms part of a greater tendency in Latin America. In the last decades, all over Latin America, as much in rural settings as in the urban peripheries, social movement actors have increasingly worked to reshape their own territories with new forms of communitarian politics (Agnew & Oslender, 2013; Escobar, 2001; Oslender, 2004; Zibechi, 2012). This also holds true for some of the more recent social movements in Europe and the United States that have developed in the course of the global financial crisis of 2007 and the European debt crisis and which have made similar shifts from mass protests to community work (Azzellini & Sitrin, 2014; Candeias & Völpe, 2014, also already: Juris, 2008, p. 288). In this context, the Argentine crisis of the years 2001 and 2002 represents an important stage in a gradual global revival of local organizing.

What made *trabajo territorial* so important to social movements in Greater Buenos Aires? Why did the protestors turn to the neighbourhoods as their primary or even exclusive ground of action? I argue that *trabajo territorial* represents an open, networked, place-based strategy that responds to processes of state-rescaling and territorial fragmentation that have been ongoing since the late 1970s and that have put the neighbourhoods at the centre of political struggles. The driving forces have been a central state’s retreat by privatization and decentralization and a reorganization of (partly informal) party politics (Auyero, 2001, 2007; Levitsky, 2003). A result is the production of what Guillermo O’Donnell (1999) has described as “brown areas” of state power. Thus, I am going to show that far from being a hopeless withdrawal to the local turf in times of uncontrollable globalization (Castells, 1997), *trabajo territorial* represents an active strategy that can contribute to political change and create new space for further action.

In the middle of the year 2002, about two hundred and forty assemblies existed in the city of Buenos Aires and its surroundings with usually more than one hundred participants each. By the end of 2003, the number of assemblies had reduced to approximately one hundred with an average of twenty participants (Hauser, 2003). In the following years, many of these remaining assemblies also dissolved, but not all of them disappeared. Nonetheless, they became more difficult to find once they had left the central public stages. Interestingly enough, after the first reduction, assembly action remained stronger in the urban extensions of Greater Buenos Aires outside the Federal District than in the city itself (Hauser, 2003). One of these remaining nodes persisted in the city municipality of Vicente López in the north of Greater Buenos Aires. In what follows, I take as an example the experience of one assembly of this remaining node, the *Asamblea Florida Este* (AFE). Its course of action was like an activist investigation into *trabajo territorial*, which from the moment of the constitution of the assembly figured as a normative imperative of “good” social movement practice.

The AFE came into existence in January 2002. In its beginning, there was an average of one hundred and fifty participants. In 2004, this number had reduced to fifteen. The assembly owes its name to the neighbourhood Florida of Vicente López in which their regular meetings take place. Vicente López directly borders the capital district, but is located in the Province of Buenos Aires. A specificity of this municipality is that it harbours the official residence of the Argentine president in the neighbourhood Olivos. This *Quinta de Olivos* had been one of the three most important spots of the mass protests in December 2001 – together with the seat of the national government and the national congress in the capital district.

In the following, I am going to discuss polymorphy as a framework for dealing with social movement action in Argentina and the specific conditions of local social movement action in Greater Buenos Aires. Taking the case of the AFE, I am going to show how social movements react to these conditions and try constructing counter-patchworks for political change. By analysing the AFE’s territorial work, I am going to show how polymorphy opens our view for

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