COMUNIDAD E INTEGRACIÓN.
EL ESTUDIO DE CASO DEL "BARRIO PUENTE DE FIERRO" EN LA PLATA (ARGENTINA)

Resumen

En el presente artículo de investigación se analiza, mediante una metodología cualitativa, el estudio de caso del Barrio Puente de Fierro en La Plata, en la Argentina, que representa un ejemplo emblemático de la dinámica que se produce en los territorios que intentan reconstruir su tejido sociocultural. Estudiar los procesos de integración hoy en día no es fácil, considerando los múltiples factores que influyen en estos fenómenos, pero es aún más difícil estudiarlos en relación con contextos que parecen ser urbanos (por tener una alta concentración de habitantes o estar cerca de ciudades metropolitanas), pero que en realidad mantienen en su mayor parte la dinámica y las características de las zonas o comunidades rurales. El creciente fenómeno de la migración —incluso dentro de un mismo Estado— pone de manifiesto la necesidad de reconectar el tejido social prestando especial atención a la dimensión urbana de las ciudades.

Palabras clave

Comunidad, integración, marginalidad, desarrollo territorial

Abstract

The present research article analyze, with a qualitative methodology, the case study of the Barrio Puente de Fierro in La Plata, Argentina, an emblematic example of the dynamics occurring in territories that attempt to rebuild their socio-cultural fabric. Studying integration processes is not easy nowadays, considering the multiple factors that influence these phenomena, but it is even more difficult to study them within contexts that appear to be urban (because they have a high concentration of inhabitants or are close to metropolitan cities) but which mostly maintain the dynamics and characteristics of rural areas or communities. The growing phenomenon of migration —even within the same State—brings out strongly the need to reconnect the social fabric, paying particular attention to the urban dimension of cities.

Keywords

Community, Integration, Marginality, Territorial development

COMMUNITY AND INTEGRATION. THE CASE STUDY OF THE "BARRIO PUENTE DE FIERRO" IN LA PLATA (ARGENTINA)

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1. Space and everyday life

While the question of integration can be found since classical thought, it is with sociology that we try to systematize the reflections around this concept, although most of the time it is accompanied by

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This article is the result of active collaboration among the authors. In the final version, Emiliana Mangone wrote paragraph 1, and Giovanna Truda wrote paragraphs 2, 3, and 4.

that of deviance or is the continuation of the classical notion of social order (Luhmann 1981). The study of integration is mainly focused on analysing the conditions allowing for the existence not only of an ordered and peaceful society but of *any* structure that can be defined as society. For this reason, many theorisations take their cue from the analysis of deviant actions. Since the birth of sociology, integration has been one of the variables considered for the study of changes in society – see Durkheim's study on suicide (1879), emblematic in this sense.

There are many issues concerning the definition of integration, especially if we refer to aspects linked to the great migration flows. Indeed, movements of large masses of populations from one country to another, or from one continent to another, impose to look at differences in a positive perspective – which, however, can remain unfulfilled, causing conflicts. And yet all the definitions found in the various dictionaries of sociology or the encyclopaedias share one common element: according to Gallino, social integration is a variable state of a society —*i.e.* of a social system, a group, or other collectivity— characterised by the constant tendency and willingness of the vast majority of its members to regularly and effectively coordinate their social actions with those of others at different levels of the structure of the society itself (or of another system), thus generating a relatively low degree of conflict, or at the very least resolving conflicts, as a rule, by peaceful means (Gallino, 1988, p. 376).

This essay aims at trying, through a case study, to describe the dynamics taking place in integration processes that are not exclusively related to being "foreign" (meaning "coming from abroad"). To this end, it is paramount to focus on some aspects/elements of society. The concept of integration, from being a "social static", has become a "social dynamic" and therefore a "process". In this process, culture, relationships and "place" – understood as an expression of everyday life – become priorities.

For researchers in the social sciences, the concept of space is polysemic and remains an abstract entity unless we refer to some of its operational concepts (Gasparini, 2000) allowing for the construction of a system of meanings and knowledge that transform the space from a "container" to an "arena" in which people experience their daily life and build social reality.

Among the wide range of operational concepts (place, city, countryside, community, neighbourhoods, etc.), this work will consider mainly that of the city and its declination, *i.e.* neighbourhoods and

districts. It is believed that these operational concepts have undergone the greatest transformations in recent years, influencing both culture and people's ways of living.

The global society is strongly differentiated in both territory and social morphology. On the one hand, we find cities (in many cases metropolises), home to more than half the world's population, deeply fragmented, divided into districts and suburbs, and strongly differentiated by type of inhabitants, by a greater or lesser presence of services, by a greater or lesser comfort of housing structures. On the other hand, we find the countryside, which undergoes constant flows of emigration (Véron, 2008) and has lost those strong social and identity ties that had previously allowed farmers to survive wars, natural disasters and famine. This phenomenology, if read through its negative effects, takes on the configuration of social disintegration, "[taking] away from society the ability to provide stable values, the ability to regulate and control the conduct of individuals" (Mangone, 2010, p. 329). Furthermore, it increases marginality and poverty, leading to the exclusion of adults, putting a strain on their identity. Thus, what Augé termed "non-places" (1992) become an expression of unease and isolation.

According to United Nations projections, global urbanization will continue: "Today, 55% of the world's population lives in urban areas, a share that should increase to 68% by 2050" (UN, 2018). This would suggest that the steady growth of this process is no longer linked only to economic development; conversely, this phenomenon "may be largely independent of economic growth or development. Urbanization can also be caused by the repulsive character of the countryside. The phenomenon would, therefore, be ineluctable and, in any case, autonomous" (Véron, 2008, p. 11).

It should not be forgotten that the birth of the cities dates back to the expansive phase of industrialization and is due to the displacement of part of the population – those who were seeking their fortune away from the countryside, dazzled by the dream of easy socio-economic success, and by the estrangement from the lifestyles of a society characterized by a rural economy.

The urbanization process has given rise to urban aggregates developed along the dichotomy centre/periphery, where too often both terms have been considered exclusively according to the spatial dimension. Shils (1984), however, objected to this belief. He claimed that the concepts of "periphery" and "centrality" are not to be referred to space either in *al*-locative (spatial distribution) or *attributive*

terms (evaluation of social value), but rather in a metaphorical and even symbolic sense to recognize, in a social analysis, the stratifications of variables that create privileged (central) and subordinate (peripheral) positions. We should emphasize, however, that every "centre" (understood in a spatial sense) can be "periphery" and every "periphery has its centre", as is increasingly visible in the urban centres of contemporary society.

The latter consideration allows us to argue that cities must be incorporated into an idea of a "polycentric city", overcoming the classic centre-periphery dichotomy. The city should be conceived as the many realities linked together by non-hierarchical synergistic relationships, built and re-built for complementary parts, each with specific roles. In this way, even spaces considered by the classical concept as "peripheral" can promote and increase the sense of identity and belonging among citizens. The urban context must be considered as a complex space in which social and environmental networks find their closest relationship, according to the logic for which the sustainability (Davico *et al.*, 2009) of the initiatives is addressed taking into account its multiple dimensions (socio-cultural, environmental and economic). The case study here presented highlights how decision-makers, in reality, do not accept this idea and above all do not have a clear awareness that investing in the quality of contexts does not mean mere interventions of urban restyling (setting green areas, building beautiful squares and houses, etc.) or creating structures that tend to reduce the social distance in urban areas, but above all, it means encouraging the birth and growth of a "good" social fabric. The city, as an urban settlement, plays a central role in a global society for both the economy and politics, but with the great processes of urbanisation it takes on a paramount role also for people's sociality. The city is the *place*[1] in which everyday life takes place, and this is true both for the public and private sphere. We are, therefore, faced with a complex scenario which the language, styles and ways of living the "everyday", as well as its contexts, become, on the one hand, fundamental elements of cultural change, useful to read the social transformations, and, on the other hand, the instrument with which to manifest one's being "inside" or "outside" society. The ecological theory of the Chicago School founds

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1. With globalization processes, the concept of "place" is usually associated with that of "global" within the local-global dichotomy. In this paper, it is important to underline the importance of the term "place" for both spatial and relational/contextual aspects. The latter are well defined by Appadurai (1996) when he defines "location" as the phenomenology of social life, a structure of feeling produced by particular forms of intentional activity and producing peculiar types of material effects.

its principles on the study of the transformations of urban systems and the spatial dimension following the processes of industrialization and modernization. It tried to address, through the evolutionist conception of society, the relationship between environment and society, or between nature and culture. Indeed, one of the first studies on the city (Park *et al.*, 1925) —intended as a place where primary social control is lacking— highlights how interpersonal relationships change with the size of the population and its mobility.

2. Social space and cultural space

The behaviour of individuals living in a certain social group is largely determined by the socio-cultural characteristics of the group itself and of the area in which it lives. In other words, the social and cultural environment in which subjects are inserted contributes to defining their behaviour. This is at the basis of the concept of social disorganization in the ecological theory (Park, 1999). According to scholars of the Chicago School, the decreasing influence of the existing social behavioural rules on the individual group members explain *social pathologies* (Thomas and Zaniecki, 1968).

This highlights the importance of the environmental stimulus in the formation of the "social self", overcoming the approach of existing relationships between the individual and his structural and cultural referents.

The concept of social disorganization was used by the researchers of the Chicago School to explain the development and spread of problems in some urban areas (Scarscelli and Guidoni, 2008). The American scholars represent the "laboratory" in which, starting from Thomas and under the guidance of Park and Burgess, are analysed the characteristics and levels of that social disorganization that migration processes cause daily and that has spread together with the metropolitan order (Rauty, 1999).

Analysing social change through physical displacement from a rural to an urban centre allowed Thomas and Zaniecki to identify three ideal types of attitudes, in terms of values, among those who move from one place to another: those who pursue only economic interests, who remain anchored to their traditional values and reject any change (*Philistines*); those who decide to detach themselves and abandon the values to which they have been socialized, who take life as it comes (*bohémien*); and finally those who manage to find the right balance between

traditional values and new values of the urban environment and with the new experiences and giving rise to a new behaviour completely autonomous and different from both the original an native one (*creative*).

According to Condro (1988), the culturalist approach to the migration phenomenon is the most complex, and yet the most used to analyse and study the theme of integration; indeed, it is precisely the cultural differences between immigrants and natives that hinder the integration of the former in the host societies. This is not a hard truth, as it depends greatly on cultural traditions, economic and historical conditions, the degree of tolerance, which may be more marked in some places or areas, such as in schools, cities, prisons – and which is detached from the economic sphere.

The cognizance process of the foreigner follows the "cognitive dissonance" model; a subconscious phenomenon leading to a targeted observation that allows us to define the phenomenon by enriching and transforming our mental scheme of the world, enriching it with a new element. The foreigner navigates a social and cultural structure of the group that sets up relationship channels presenting the aspects of both inclusion and exclusion.

They are two different ways of relating to others and oneself and include the concepts of prejudice and responsibility. In both cases, the question of social proximity is essential. Prejudice produces social distance in the relationship with the other; responsibility is built through proximity (Allport, 1976). Being confronted with a different culture forces one to question their identity and cultural references.

In a reciprocal relationship between two groups, the actors may change but, in general, they always find themselves in front of each other. This confrontation determines a transformation of relationships both within the group and externally, *i.e.* with other groups.

Groups compete not only to access material resources but also to defend their social identity (Tajfel, 1985). Belonging to a specific ethnic group is not an individual choice but an ascribed character. Conversely, joining another group is a very difficult action because the will is not one-sided, as the aspiring joiner is faced with a series of action strategies that the reference group implements towards the foreigner (see Cotesta, 1992). Understanding the functioning of the host society is an arduous and difficult task for the residents as for newcomers; this complexity leads to the realization of significant spaces negotiated between culturally different subjects and between them and the institutions (Condro, 1988).

In this panorama, the planning and design of a city, in all its aspects, are faced with an organization that follows opposing criteria of integration and exclusion.

The socio-economic disparity is inscribed in the city's space and leads to the formulation of a new urban question. The disadvantaged social groups are settled together in specific neighbourhoods, with the better-off groups keeping their distance, thus achieving urban segregation. A problem within the problem is the space of the weak and disadvantaged in sensitive urban areas. Unemployment plays a significant role in the intersection of spatial inequalities, relegating some members or certain categories of people to the urban periphery.

According to engineers and architects, there is a territory of the contemporary city, in whose spaces there are evident critical issues caused by urban growth, suburban transformations, settlement dispersion, agricultural areas. This territory is made up of those dynamic places showing vitality and energy. Mariavaleria Minnini, ecologist and urban planner at the University of Basilicata, in her essay *Approssimazioni alla città* (2013) [Approximations to the City], argues that the contemporary city has been developing this new space for about twenty years, which lies between the city and its surroundings. It is a space with different problems and levels of complexity, the redevelopment of peripheral areas and their margins, the sustainability of low-density fabrics and their higher quality and habitability. This space is defined according to the category of *périurbain*, a term introduced and used by French scholars to explain problems related to territorial dynamics (Damon, Marchal and Stébé, 2016). Minnini argues that we speak of peri-urbanity when we think of those places and spaces around cities, invaded by urbanization, but which are still built and organized as agricultural and agriculture-related areas. They are places and spatial categories invested by a process of great renewal, while the categories of urbanity and rurality have lost their heuristic potential to be described. A large part of humanity lives and works in the peri-urban area, navigating and changing it incessantly. The peri-urban is multi-spatial, it is not a topographic or metaphorical space but a design space, which arises from the need to reconstruct new conditions of comfort and well-being; it manages to convey symbols, values and collective desires (Damon, Marchal and Stébé, 2016). In this sense, an emblematic example is the case of the *Barrio Puente de Fierro* in La Plata, Argentina.

3. The case study: the *"Barrio Puente de Fierro"*

The *Barrio Puente de Fierro* is a neighbourhood in the city of La Plata in Argentina, the capital of the province of Buenos Aires, with a very articulated urban history. It was designed at the end of the 19th century and is characterized by a constant tension between the ideal plan and the real process of urbanization, *i.e.* the presence of strong suburbanization since the mid-20th century. Indeed, 2/3 of its inhabitants now reside in the suburbs. The city also has a growing conurbation with the City of Buenos Aires.

In the 40s and 50s, the land in the most peripheral area began to populate with railway employees (as the main station of the provincial railway was adjacent to the city), and those from the refrigerators' factory Berisso, plus other self-employed workers. The railway crisis and that on the sale of refrigerators in the 70s did not change much the number of inhabitants on this territory, but from the 90s onwards its population and its urban network began to expand again, mostly due to the creation of settlements and precarious neighbourhoods located mainly on public land.

The outskirts of La Plata are made up of two peripheral areas, resulting from a process occurred in recent decades: the outskirts closest to the city, the first settlement, where those who work the land reside, and the later, more recent settlement, the area furthest from the city, occupied by newcomers, with weaker links with the labour market than in the past.

The suburbs do not consist of a homogenous space, on the contrary, we find many different economic, housing and urban conditions that get worse as we move away from "Viale 72", the so-called *Circunvalación Avenue*, considered the city border. The urban decay can be seen in the housing types and materials, in the diffusion and quality of urban services such as water, sewerage and asphalt.

3.1. The Barrio Puente de Fierro

Puente de Fierro is the result of this continuous expansion of the suburbs; a district created in the mid-1990s on the public lands of the abandoned railway. The district takes its name from its site, next to the old iron bridge, already known as Puente de Fierro, which was built in 1904 as part of the infrastructure of a level crossing when the area was completely uninhabited. The barrio *Puente de Fierro* is a neighbourhood of about 1077 families, of which 407 officially regis-

tered and the others just identified, for a total population of 3922, of which only 1852 are registered residents[2] (Bozzano, 2017).

Puente de Fierro is a barrio where poverty is extreme, the houses are made of sheet metal and lie between landfills, there are dirt roads and no services. Families here live in inhuman conditions.

In 2016, the barrio was at the centre of a 45-million-pesos-worth urbanization project, with national funds, by the Municipalidad de La Plata. The project included an extension of the water supply network for direct access to water, the construction of a sewerage system and public lighting for the neighbourhood. However, the situation in *Puente de Fierro* is still critical, abandoned by the Municipal State (Estado Municipal) and disregarded by provincial and national government policies. The many political promises over the past decades have remained unfulfilled.

Puente de Fierro was founded on a place rich in history and tragic events linked to the dictatorship of the 1970s. the deliberative council, in its extraordinary session of 22 March 2006 (Concejo Deliberante en su sección extraordinario), ordered through Ordinance 10076 that *Puente de Fierro* be declared a historical heritage for acts against humanity committed in these places.

Puente de Fierro was a site used, since 1976, by paramilitary bodies to execute people opposing the regime, and perhaps for this reason since the 1970s, the so-called dark years, when democracy returned, this territory no longer existed on Argentina's political map. Upon arrival, many families did not know the history of this place, they thought it was a grazing space near the railways, with some garbage.

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2. The data refer to the elaboration of the TAG, CHAyA, IdIHCS UNLP-CONICET Program on census data (Bozzano, 2017).

3.2. *Suburbs and disadvantage*

The inhabitants of the suburbs share their experience of moving to the city; they share the disadvantages in both the spatial and the social position, the dream of having a place their own, the many difficulties related to the lack of infrastructure, the scarcity of services, the long distances to reach their workplaces, as well as health and education institutions (Segura, 2013).

The history of the neighbourhood is steeped in struggles for access to goods and services. These are related problems that are part of everyday life and inevitably influence their way of thinking about the city, inside and outside (Truda, 2008).

The current socio-spatial configuration shows a strong correlation between residence time and living conditions, where the latter deteriorate as we move away from the boundary of the city's basic layout. Elias considers marginality as socially constructed rather than a "natural" fact: individuals in a social structure build their relational forms from below. The culture and cultural dynamics among groups are of enormous importance. The definition of oneself inevitably leads to the denigration of the other, his values, his moral code. One's sociality is progressively constructed and contains a set of shared symbols, a moral code, widespread rules and lifestyles; not possessing that set of codes and symbols does not allow others to enhance and appreciate their history and identity (Elias, 1990).

Belonging to one community rather than another can be an obstacle to one's inclusion in the new group, particularly at the beginning. Schütz (1979) emphasizes that a newcomer must deal with issues concerning everyday life and everything that happens is chalked under "familiar", from which we explain everything that surrounds us.

Every member born and raised in a group accepts a standardized scheme of the cultural model that has been handed down to him by his ancestors, learns its models, seamlessly orients himself and takes for granted the sense of what does. Obviously, this is valid only within the group to which the individual belongs. It is a difficult situation for those individuals who have a strong sense of belonging, but it is typical for the newcomer.

In *Puente de Fierro*, even if we talk about groups of newcomers, it is possible to refer to them as flows of migrations. Schütz's analysis can help in analysing these displacements. His approach is twofold: on the one hand, he studies the relationship of the community with its knowledge taken for granted; on the other, the foreigner's loss of

his familiar world because his cultural references are no longer valid in the new situation.

The newcomer —first spectator and then actor— must weave relationships requiring "appropriate approaches". His "usual" thinking no longer works.

He continuously submits cultural models, norms and values to comparison and analysis, and all this leads to the feeling of not sharing this world. The difficulty in orienting himself defines his situation as always marginal and at least initially poised between two models of life.

This process has been experienced by those who began to populate the periphery from the 1950s onwards in *Puente de Fierro*. In the life stories of the inhabitants, the closure of the railway and the military dictatorship are among the reasons why Puente de Fierro ceased to be a place of children's games and family outings for many years, a green and empty space intended for recreation and fun, also evoked with a bit of nostalgia for a now lost past (Bozzano, 2017). A place that gradually became an open landfill, where stolen cars were abandoned, and yet, a place where new settlements began.

3.3. The role of women

Women are the most active in the animation of the territory, they are presidents of associations and women like Rosa Eva Dejesús[3], whom I had the pleasure to meet, are active in every project throughout

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3. Rosa oversees the organization El Refugio de Puente de Fierro, Altos de San Lorenzo di La Plata, Argentina and co-founder of the permanent workshop "Puente de Fierro Territorio Posible 2016-2026".

the territory. The sustainable development of a territory cannot transcend the role and work of women, as clearly exemplified by *Puente de Fierro*.

The social sciences have reworked the concept of resilience in mechanical engineering. Charpy's Pendulum is the instrument used to measure the resilience of a material, *i.e.* the ability to resist breakage, impact bending or, in other words, the material's ability to absorb energy while it is elastically deformed.

The mechanical principle has been associated with the ability to resist severe and sudden changes by implementing adaptive strategies. Resilience and adaptability thus become two qualities of dynamic and open systems, undergoing sudden transformations.

Therefore, a resilient person can face and overcome life's adversities, coming out stronger and transformed, because she knows how to reorganize herself by giving meaning to what happened. It is not difficult to think of a woman. In a time of economic and social crisis like the present one, the territories are even more vulnerable; new social issues emerge, made of new poverty and new needs, and social capital networks are more and more flexible, bringing out particular interests and localized power groups (amoral familism). A greater participation of women in the labour market, the enhancement and recognition of their role and contribution in society and the workforce, would lead to three important results: contribute to the recovery of the country by activating alternative paths of territorial development, activate processes of participation in the sustainable development of a territory, increase personal and family awareness of being part of a development process.

Faced with a situation in continuous transformation, and a long-lasting crisis characterized by violent and unexpected shocks, the resilience, to which adaptation follows, is no longer enough. It is necessary to suggest new ways out of the crisis and find resources available and underused in the social context to reactivate development processes. When looking for available and under-utilised resources, women are a valid answer.

4. An experiment in territorial development

A group of social scientists from the *Possible Territories* scientific network, from the Department of Philosophy and Letters of the National University of La Plata, led by Horacio Bozzano and Guillermo Banzato, together with researchers from the Network of Environmental

Studies La Plata de Centros de Investigación CONICET, have included, between May 2016 and November 2017, *Puente de Fierro* in a larger PIO UNLP-CONICET project on "Integral Land Management" that began after the flood of April 2, 2013, in the city of La Plata.

It is an innovative spatial planning process on urban governance with the participation of representatives of the *Puente de Fierro* district. The project includes permanent workshops on the territory as a whole and specific topics such as people, environment, science, public policy. The objective is to activate paths of intelligence and territorial justice (Bozzano, 2017).

The project, that is yielding important results, envisages the development of the global management of the territory, *i.e.* the achievement of an ordered, planned and sustainable management of the area. It is divided into two phases: the first of investigation and evaluation and the second searching for solutions to the problems detected, with the active participation of citizens, institutions, scientists and companies. This is an experiment in territorial development with the active participation of the inhabitants of *Puente de Fierro.*

The research group aims to produce changes through management and intervention programs together with citizens, politicians, scientists and businessmen, according to the concept of territorial intelligence, around which the International Network of Territorial Intelligence (INTI) has been working for about three decades, in which UNLP and CONICET have participated and of which the University of Salerno (Italy) is part under my coordination. Territorial intelligence is the science having for object the sustainable development of territories and having for subjects the territorial communities (Girardot, 2008).

Puente de Fierro has always been a scenario of human rights violations. The need to reorganize the physical and social spaces causing disintegration can now be an opportunity to overcome territorial and community divisions, and propose a shared growth, in a new settlement mode with new tools and methods of urban and social planning. At this point, it is legitimate to wonder whether the category of peri-urbanity can be a potential answer to our questions.

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