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Making cities by mobility. Ethnography by mobility in Santiago de Chile.

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## **Making cities by mobility. Ethnography by mobility in Santiago de Chile**

### **Abstract**

Nowadays transformations of Latin American cities pose a set of questions directed to explore the role of real estate markets as main actors in urban development, metropolization processes, and an increasing fragmentation of urban structure, among others. In the case of Santiago de Chile, researchers in the realm of urban studies have described the main characteristics of urban dynamics, using classic measures such as income level of income, types of housing, educational levels, rates of criminalization, among others. In this context ethnography becomes a powerful tool to comprehend experiences of people with and in the city.

Everyday mobility practices become an important experience for the people, people spend more and more hours and energy to move through city in order to carry out their daily lives. People put in practice strategies to move. They construct a picture of the city, encounters with others are possible, the urban landscape becomes experience.

The presentation shows some preliminary results of a research in Santiago de Chile about everyday mobility practices in which the use of ethnographic tools is central. Specifically, the research uses techniques of shadowing, the researcher accompanies a subject through their day and registers with different devices the journeys through the city. The main objective is to grasp the experience of mobility itself and the experience of the city through mobility.

### **Introduction**

“From my words you will have reached the conclusion that the real Berenice is a temporal succession of different cities, alternately just and unjust. But what I wanted to warn you about is something else: all the future Berenices are already present in this instant, wrapped one within the other, confined, crammed, inextricable.” Italo Calvino (*Invisible Cities*).

The urbanization's fever of the second half of the twentieth century in Latin America is gone. Nowadays transformations of Latin American cities pose a set of questions directed to explore the role of real estate markets as main actors in urban development, metropolization processes, and an increasing fragmentation of urban structure, among others. Even though some of these phenomena are present in very different places around the world, in each place the urban phenomenon is composed of specific power relations, actors and histories.

In the case of Santiago de Chile, capital city with 6 million inhabitants, we can speak about a broad consensus that defines at least three characteristic features: A very social-spatial segregated city; a rising process of fragmentation of urban structure based on multiple centers; and social housing policies which further contributes to the segregation of a poor population. All that plays in an extreme neoliberal background: weak law regulations and an uncontrolled free market as the “hero” of urban development.

Researchers in the realm of urban studies have described the main characteristics of urban dynamics, using classic measures such as income level of income, types of housing, educational levels, rates of criminalization, among others. From the urban research perspective a clear picture of the form and structure of the current city has been reached. However less attention is taken by researchers what these dynamics mean for the inhabitants. Physical structures are still separated from the people who live in them in the point of view Chilean urban studies. Indeed habitat means a multidimensional experience. We are interested in the experience of people in the city, how indicators are experienced by inhabitants, and finally how to grasp the meaning of living in the current Santiago.

In this context ethnography becomes a powerful tool to comprehend experiences of people with and in the city. Don't forget that from a culturalist point of view urban space is being shaped through relations. Indeed the space of the city is formed through what subjects do in everyday life. From the perspective of people multiples cities emerge, these cities must be turned into object of reflection for urban planning.

Some characteristics of the current Santiago indicate a growing need of mobility. In the last twenty years the population of Santiago grew 20% while the urban area grew in 50%. The city spreads out and at the same time the need for mobilities rises. Everyday mobility practices become an important experience for the people, people spend more and more hours and energy to move through city in order to carry out their daily lives. People put in practice strategies to move, the outcomes are journeys which fulfill specific goals: moving from A to B. But that is not all. The people explore the city while they are moving. They construct a picture of the city, encounters with others are possible, the urban landscape becomes experience.

The presentation shows some preliminary results of a research in Santiago de Chile about everyday mobility practices in which the use of ethnographic tools is central. Specifically, the research uses techniques of shadowing, the researcher accompanies a subject through their day and registers with different devices the journeys through the city. The main objective is to grasp the experience of mobility itself and the experience of the city through mobility.

The paper has two parts. The first one discusses a mainstream view about the experience of the city from social sciences in Latin America. It is argued, that the recent process of rural-urban migration shapes a specific form to experience the city. The rising of a Latin American modern city is marked by a set of islands in which the experience of its inhabitants is restricted to the neighborhood (barrio). People arise in the context of urban analysis as neighbors, residents of a specific portion of city. But people do meaningful things in different places in the city. Through mobility a broader experience with the city can be accessed. In fact, an ethnographic approach is necessary to achieve this point of view.

The second part shows a specific case, in which low-income and precarious work meets mobility practices as a form to create an appropriation of the city.

### **Development of the modern Latin American city.**

Modern cities have grown and been transformed through migration. In the case of Latin American cities, rural to urban migration took place on a massive scale towards the mid 20th century, changing the definitive shape of the internal structure of the cities (Verstädterung) and above all, giving to an urban society (Urbanisierung). The modern Latin American city is the product of the rural to urban migration process. Although the impact of Latin Americans migrating abroad is clearly felt in cities such as Sao Paulo, Buenos Aires and Montevideo, in most of the continent, the arrival of populations from rural areas to urban centers gave birth to an urban modernity, related to an emerging industrial development and the configuration of state bureaucracies (Germani 1976).

The during the 20th century migrants were mainly farmers of indigenous or *criollo* origin, who brought with them their provincial customs and traditions and social networks and reterritorialized these within the city . These characteristics are expressed in urban space, these migrants ethnified the city, in the sense of ethnic as an ample reference to a group with a common origin. Commercial activities, meeting places and migrant institutions signified territories within the city.

The designation of a migrant territory establishes a clear idea in common knowledge of where and how this foreign groups become visible within the city, while at the same time it enables a form of control of this new population on the part of local authorities (Garcés 2007). Ethnic neighborhoods as an object of observation, as a device to observe cultural

differences in the city, have a long tradition in Latin America. Especially in Urban Anthropology they have become a popular subject in understanding the relationship between diversity and space (Low 1996).

The development of the modern Latin American city has been powered by the settlements built by migrants. In them, micro-societies take shape in which their inhabitants share a common origin, family and solidarity networks. These networks, based on the places of origin, make it easier for the migrants to find housing and work in the city.

Here we encounter two fundamental differences between the rise of modern day European and Latin American cities. In Europe rural to urban migration was supported by the emergence of a new social segment: the bourgeoisie. In Latin America the causes for migration are related to the collapse of rural economies. In other words when migrants arrive in the city, work, housing and infrastructure are lacking. This point is closely related to the second main difference. The modern European city represents the emancipation of its citizens from traditional ties (*stadtluft macht frei*), it puts emphasis on the individual, while in Latin America the migrants, far from finding freedom from traditional ties (family, community. Etc.) are in the need to reterritorialize those ties, because those are their resources of integration in the city. Family friends and *compadres* who help with housing and work. In these terms, the city constitutes itself as separate territories, a mosaic, in which populations must organize themselves in order to survive in the city.

This phenomenon has been broadly described and has given a basis for a consolidated theoretical point of view to address the discussions about difference and city (Milan y Lange 2003). There is a whole series of publications following this line and tracing a route which goes through the continent's major cities. Early studies about family integration strategies in Mexico City (Lewis 1992) as well as research about local solidarity networks carried out by Lomnitz (Lomnitz 1977)(Lomnitz 1996) mark a precedent on the importance of primary relationships in urban Latin American life. In this same direction, in the Andean region we could highlight the observation about the silent "invasion" of migrants from the mountains to Lima described by Golte and Adams (1990) and the construction of a parallel city by the migrants themselves, a world of Aymará migration in El Alto presented by Albó (Albó 2006). These works are references which permeate the point of view about how Latin American cities are constructed based upon family ties and circles of communal character.

The deterritorialization of social networks based on places of origin seems to be, simultaneous to being a decisive source which guarantees urban insertion, a way of reconfiguring space in which the new inhabitants settle (Gissi Barbieri 2009)(Golte 1991). The formation of neighborhoods marked by an ethnic ascription or through place of origin gives way to the ethnic enclave, understood in the broad sense as a concentration in physical space -generally a metropolitan area- of ethnic enterprises which employ a significant amount of migrant workers from the same groups (Wilson and Portes, 1980:220; Werbner, 1987). The configuration of an ethnic enclave points to a process in which a cooperation and assistance network – which helps migrants upon their arrival in the city- is structured in a continued manner so as to become a migration network, in other words, an institution which eases the integration of migrants of a group based on common origin (J. MacDonald y L. MacDonald 1974).

The term *ethnic enclave*, an ethnic community with a fixed territory within the city, is still currently one of anthropology's most visited strategies to address processes of identity construction in the city, constituting the central and defining space of urban experience. In a review of Urban Anthropology – focused on the USA – S. Low (1996) stated that the ethnic enclave, a self contained language, economic and social unit, although empirically of controversial existence, continues to be an important research subject within anthropology, especially linked to the insertion of the ethnic in urban space.

Certainly this conception of the city, as an ensemble of internally homogenous and clearly defined among each other spatial units, has had broad circulation in the way organization within the Latin American city is understood. At this point the neighborhood arises as a basic structure which endows the inhabitants of the big city with feelings of belonging. The *barrio* (neighborhood) is not only seen as an urban structure but as a moral territory as well. The Chilean writer Carlos Franz (Franz 2001), researches the construction of Santiago in Chilean literature and concludes that the city emerges there as a group of units which are separated by an invisible wall, differentiated units, isolated. Nevertheless this separateness has nothing to do with the concept of *countries* and gated communities, so in trend nowadays, the idea of fortress cities. It is related to culturally differentiated spaces, whose limits appear as moral limits within the city, territories which are outside of those who are subjected to their rules. Any promise of freedom in the modern city in literature seems to get buried in the confinements of the *barrio* and its communal logic.

The rest of the city is *terra incognita*, never explored and incomprehensible. This approach certainly populates the imagination of how urban society is organized in the Chilean capital.

Latin American urban anthropology has been apologetic of the city composed of local units, almost closed in themselves following the model of cultural mosaics, the classical and still influential formulation of the Chicago School (Park 1984). García Canclini has recently stated that the contribution of Latin American urban anthropology has been the comprehension of the metropolis based upon the barrios (García Canclini 2005:14). The barrio appears in these formulations as a spatiality based upon residence and immediate space, as if the inhabitants experience outside this terms were nonexistent or insignificant. Seen from this perspective, the sources for identity always arise upon face to face relationships, in a compulsory search for the lost community, such as it has been stated by J. Bengoa (Bengoa 1996).

But of course, the inhabitants of the city do not carry out their whole lives solely in their barrio or place of residence. A static conception of fixed space which observes subjects as fixed and stationary makes the analysis based on barrios very limiting. Every day mobility is a fundamental resource for life in the city, not only referring to the public transport, but as an experience which results in a spatiality all of its own (Urry 2007). In those terms mobility is seen as a practice, experience and, simultaneously, as an observation device.

In the last decades, a critique of the spatially fixed societies view has consolidated (Lacoste 1977; Hiernaux 2007), such as the discussion stated by Augé (Augé 1995) about the limits of the “total social unit” which establishes an isomorphism between space, society and culture. The nature of social relations does not allow for a limiting to spatial determinism, as Gupta and Ferguson correctly noted (Gupta y Ferguson 1997) in reference to the character of the ethnographic subject and his mobile condition. It can be deduced from these discussions, as noted by Kokot (Kokot 1991), that cultural differences can no longer be located, but that they are superimposed in different spatial constructions.

This turn of events has supposed a shift in paradigm in how to make ethnography, it has promoted an ethnographic practice which goes from local to multi-local, multi-situated, to work with moving objects of observation and developing multiple places of observation (Cucó 2004). From this perspective, observing the practices of residence and their extensions through mobility, a complexer approach to social experience is being built,

more effective in revealing the experience of space and its role in the construction of identities (Clifford 1997).

### **Rosa´s mobility**

Rosa lives in an old and poor neighborhood in the south of Santiago. Her parents participated in a “Toma” in the 60s (illegal occupation). Together with hundreds of families, her parents struggled for their right to urban space, in this case the right to housing or more specific, right to a plot of land. It was the time of fast growth of the city, migrants from rural areas were still arriving in Santiago. Their neighborhood established as a paradigmatic working class area in the city. The people built their own houses and infrastructure and founded social organizations. At that time solidarity was a meaningful word. Life was hard but through organization the people believed to improve their quality of life. Rosa was 18 when she started to work as maid, indoors, this is the term used when a maid stays to sleep in the house in which she works. Without formal education and coming from a family with low income she had to go out looking for a job, an unskilled and low status one. From Monday to Friday she worked, slept and lived for another family, even after she got married and a couple years after had one son and two daughters. During twenty years she worked as service maid indoor. During weekdays she did not get out, she was living like in jail. During this time the city did not exist for Rosa.

She wanted to see her son and daughter everyday, they were growing while she was in the strange house, then she decided to end the indoor job and started a new kind of work-relation, she became house-cleaner. A more independent and more precarious job. She now had several chefs, has to clean one house per day, has to organize her jobs, contacts and schedule herself. Mobility became a work resource as well.

At 7 early morning she begins her journey. She is around 50, small, long black hair, she wears circular glasses, black blouse and skirt. She goes forward with short steps, her legs are short, the irregular walkway does not allow walking faster. She walks and thinks about the future of her daughter: “no more service-maids in this family, they have to study, they have to get a good job”. It is a cool morning. Rosa meets some neighbors in the same route, they all walk to the bus stop. She talks about the neighbors, in the *poblacion* one knows everyone, there is a friendly atmosphere. At the corner a group of people are waiting for the bus. Bus-stop has no sign, the people know that the bus has to stop in the right



corner. After 5 minutes the bus comes, she jumps into the bus, it is empty, she sits down fast, "I try to sit down, I have leg pain. I am standing up all day long because of my job, at least I can sit down when I commute". She puts her bag on her legs and looks through the window. She is the first to awake at her home, she makes breakfast for the rest of the family, she leaves the house while the family members are getting up. Inside the bus Rosa salutes others who are getting on. After a couple of minutes most of the commuters fall asleep, the bus shakes, the engine sounds loud, but the commuters keep sleeping. She talks to me about her job, she thinks that the people who work as service-maids are treated in a humiliating way. Her situation now is better as an independent worker. Everyday she works in a different house, all of them are located in the high-income neighborhoods. The bosses know each other. Everyday she has to apply a different mobility pattern, she spends 10% of her income to cover her mobility. 2 trips per day, 2 tickets, every ticket is valid for two hours, Rosa commutes on the limit. The planning has to be exact.

She continues talking: ever since she is independent, she can choose who she works for. In general the women are "well-educated", nice people but distant. The bus rides on the highway, it does not shake anymore. Inside nothing disturbs the dreams of the commuters. Rosa silences and looks outside. Industrial structures are the landscape besides the highway. At 7:35 they arrive downtown, commuters wake up slowly. Last station, we get off and walk in direction to the subway, the sidewalks are full, the mob walks together straight ahead. Rosa goes down to the subway, the platform is full, Rosa is small and moves to the wall, "here is safer", she tells me. We get on the train. Inside there is not a lot of room, Rosa holds on to a rail, every couple of minutes she puts up one foot because of her leg pain. The train has a few seats, they are all occupied.

After 18 minutes we get off. The mob gets off as well. A long line stands in front of some young people who give away free newspapers. Rosa takes one and says: "it is for my husband, he reads at night, when he comes home". Inside the subway station there are a lot of shops, among them a supermarket, small restaurants. Rosa shops for groceries on her way back home, in the shops of the neighborhood, she would not be able to carry bags in the subway and bus. We take some stairs up, outside the station there is a small market. People with baskets sell sandwiches, breakfast for little money. Rosa walks forward. We are in a business district, the people on the streets wear suits, this here is another city, far away from the poblacion where Rosa lives. She arrives in an old building, after a one hour trip she is ready to start the job.

At 3 pm I pick her up. We walk slowly in direction to the subway. It is warm. While we are walking Rosa looks at a gym, through big windows people doing fitness can be seen. Rosa tells me: "I am a little envious, they are fit and me fat, I do not know why I can not lose weight, I sweat all day long in the job". When we arrive in the subway station, she tells me: "we will get on in the front of the train, there is more room there, at this time the people smell awful"

Inside the train she sits down, beside her there is a young mother with her baby, Rosa smiles, tries to talk with the baby. This reminds her when she was a young mother, at that time they were living in only one room: two adults and three kids. We change subway line. The bus she takes in the mornings does not operate now, it is an express and rides only at rush hours. Today she comes back earlier as usual. Rosa gets in the train quickly and then finds a free seat. The train rides above ground, Rosa looks at the sky, it is a clear and bright day. She looks tired. We still have to ride with a bus. She tries to pay only one ticket, up to 2 hours ride. Sometimes the trip becomes longer, then she takes the last bus on one ticket. A second ticket would be a lot of money for her. She says that the poorer people always pay their tickets, but she has seen young people from high-income districts who do not pay for their bus rides. She is walks home, says hello to some people, walks slowly, she has to cook for her family, wash clothes and sleep, tomorrow another route awaits.

## **Conclusions**

The use of an ethnographic perspective is quite appropriate to grasp the construction of urban space through everyday practices. The exploration on how people experience the city opens up multiple dimensions to understand dynamics and urban culture in the city.

Observing mobility practices it can be discussed more traditional form to analyze the city, Specially in the Latin American context the neighborhood has been the more relevant unit of observation of urban life. The barrio as a closed place and its inhabitants as fixed in the territory can be turned into broader comprehension on contemporary experience.

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