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The Emergence of Gated Communities in the Poor Periphery: Reflections on the New Urban Segregation and Social Integration in Santiago, Chile¹

By Miguel Pérez A.

Abstract

The economic and political restructuring in Chile, carried out under the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), had its urban expression in a series of measures associated with the liberalization of land markets and the dominance of a subsidiary policy of public housing. Since then, poorer households have been settling mostly at the peripheries of Santiago where public infrastructure and social services are deficient. However, the same market logic brought middle and upper-income families to some traditionally poor municipalities, by means of a specific kind of urbanization: gated communities. Some contemporary Chilean planners affirm that this spatial proximity between different social groups will promote social integration. Rejecting these claims of urban integration based exclusively on the objective dimensions of urban segregation, the author argues for the importance of symbolic dimensions in any analysis of socio-urban integration.

Keywords: Social integration, urban segregation, neoliberalism, housing, Santiago de Chile

Introduction

Santiago de Chile, like other Latin American cities, has suffered significant transformations associated with the profound economic and political restructuring that occurred in the region during the past three decades. The collapse of the import-substitution model, and therefore the projects by which countries sought to be industrialized, brought about the predominance of neoliberal ideology. As a new paradigm of development, neoliberalism has been incapable of producing mechanisms to reduce the deep concentration of poverty in Latin America, which increases considerably in periods of economic recession. According to annual accounts of ECLAC (Economic Commission of Latin American and the Caribbean; see more at CEPAL 2009) both poverty and indigence show

1. A short version of this text, titled "The New Urban Segregation in Santiago, Chile: On the Urban Integration and the Proliferation of Gated Communities," was presented at the 109th Annual Meeting of American Association of Anthropology (November 17th to 21st, 2010, New Orleans, LA) as part of the session "Urban Struggles, Housing, and New Formations of Inequality: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue."

parallel tendencies based on economic cycles, and both reached 33% in 2008.

In the particular case of Chile, neoliberal reforms were carried out under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1973-1990), whose measures aimed at generating a dramatically unregulated economy. In the case of Santiago, reforms liberalized urban land and eliminated urban limits in order to configure a city under market rationality. Along with this ideological conception of national development and the withdrawal of the state from social planning, the economic crisis that took place in Chile at the beginning of the 1980s provoked a considerable rise of unemployment and especially poverty, the latter continuing to reach over 45% until 1990. Although Chile has reduced its levels of poverty and indigence since the 1980s², Santiago, the capital city—and with over six million inhabitants the most populated in the country—still has high levels of urban segregation. In contrast to the central and northeastern areas, which are the wealthiest places in the city, southern and western peripheral districts have arisen historically as the “natural” location for poor people. This social imaginary has been reinforced by neoliberal perspectives of housing policies that, as shown in many studies (e.g. Rodríguez and Sugranyes 2005), locate social housing far away from central areas. Thus urban segregation, on a large scale, maintains a clear pattern of spatial distribution, with rich and poor families living in very identifiable areas.

Paradoxically, however, the same market logic has promoted the incipient arrival of middle and upper-income social groups to some traditionally poor municipalities that received social housing during the 1980s. Taking advantage of the low cost of land and installing fortified enclaves, private developers have made significant investments oriented towards upper-income groups in peripheral districts, modifying the social homogeneity that had previously characterized such places. Therefore, on a small scale, it is currently possible to find a wider spatial distribution of socially mixed neighborhoods than before, as a function of the aggressive colonization of poor sectors by private enclaves (Sabatini and Salcedo 2007).

This paper will examine this “new urban segregation” in which middle and upper classes have been occupying the poor periphery. The main point of discussion will be how this spatial closeness, promoted by gated communities, came to be considered by some Chilean scholars as a means to promote social integration (e.g. Sabatini and Cáceres 2004; Sabatini et al. 2010). Hence, this text will be organized in three main topics: 1) the new patterns of urban segregation in Santiago; 2) the emergence of fortified enclaves; and 3) the question of social integration. Rather than

2. The last national survey on socio-economic characterization (CASEN, 2009) showed that poverty reached 15.1% of Chileans.

being a paper based on empirical information, this essay rests principally on my own conceptual discussion of the current debate in Chile about urban segregation and social integration. Although I will present some ethnographic data, my theoretical reflection should be considered a conceptual starting point to analyze critically and empirically the topic here discussed.

New Patterns of Urban Segregation

What do I mean by “urban segregation”? In Chile, Sabatini et al. (2001) define it as the degree of spatial proximity or territorial agglomeration of families belonging to, in this case, the same socioeconomic group. Segregation has three main dimensions, two of which are objective while the third is subjective. A) *Concentration*: the tendency of groups to be concentrated in a certain area of the city; B) *Homogeneity*: the formation of socially homogenous neighborhoods; and C) *Perception*: the subjective perception of residents experiencing concentration and homogeneity.

Both A) (concentration) and B) (homogeneity) capture distinct aspects of urban segregation. The former refers to the general tendency in Latin America for the elites to be concentrated in a cone-shaped area of the city. However, this does not prevent the elite class from sharing this space with other social groups also in homogenous groupings. With respect to C), for Sabatini et al. (2001) subjective segregation would always refer to feelings of marginality and of “being unneeded” as perceived by the inhabitants of segregated neighborhoods.

Nevertheless, inside of this conceptualization, the symbolic dimensions are underestimated by the idea of “subjective segregation,” since they are shown more as a dependent variable of the objective segregation (concentration and homogeneity) than as a dynamic process that emerges from the relationship between space and social practices.

Saravi’s work on “isolated worlds” in Mexico City (Saravi 2008) shows how the meanings of urban spaces are intersubjectively constructed, attributed, and accepted through the symbolic dimension. Saravi argues that these social constructions of meaning are without a doubt conditioned by objective segregation; however, social imaginaries of urban spaces can symbolically redefine their conformation as space with a certain kind of objective segregation. Thus Saravi accurately describes urban segregation as the self-contained result of the interaction between, on the one hand, spatial distances that join and separate different social groups and, on the other hand, the imagined construction of “the other” and his/her habitat.

Urban Segregation in Santiago

How do these dimensions of urban segregation manifest in Santiago? First, the arrival of middle and upper-class families to poor neighborhoods leads us to question the “novelty” implied by finding urban spaces shared by different social classes. Despite the fact that Santiago and other Latin American metropolitan areas have been historically shaped as segregated cities, this does not necessarily imply a drastic division, in residential terms, between different social classes. In the case of Santiago, when the city was not as extended as it is now and the physical barriers between residential areas were less violent and explicit than today, in old middle class neighborhoods—most of them located close to central areas—the social encounters between different classes seemed easier thanks to the multiplicity of actors inhabiting there. Actually, according to ethnographic studies (Márquez 2003), among “*santiaguinos*” there exists a nostalgic view of past urban experiences in which residential spaces seemed to be open to accepting a diversity of social agents.

Second, when we consider past urban movements in Santiago from the mid 20th century, we find several cases of squatter settlements (*campamentos*) that show us the importance of being located in socially heterogeneous areas. Using the concept of the “right to housing” as a common language among working class mobilization efforts, squatters understood that the socio-economic context of the neighborhoods was as important as the house itself, in terms of employment and access to public services. Thus, illegal occupations within rich areas—legitimated under the right to be part of urban networks in a fragmented city—occurred, as Castells shows (1983), most often during less repressive political regimes, especially under the government of the Popular Unity (Salvador Allende, 1970-1973).

What, then, is the novelty of the process I describe as “new urban segregation”? Two factors must be taken into consideration. First, unlike the processes already mentioned, the elite are currently moving to the poor periphery thanks to a specific kind of urbanization: gated communities. Second, the emergence of high-end residences in low-income urban districts must be understood as a direct result of political economic restructuring carried out over the past three decades rather than an expression of urban mobilizations.

By 1979, the military regime of Augusto Pinochet established new urban policies, including the radical liberalization of land markets. Instead of centralized state regulation and control, the pattern of urban development and expansion would be structured by market logic. A more “flexible” system of planning was established that treats locational decisions as only a “matter of supply and demand.” The market would

therefore determine whether some urban areas (central or peripherals) were capable of making economic profits.

The shift to urban policies driven by “market logic” required specific measures; it did not “naturally” emerge through deregulation, nor through the withdrawal of public policies. Among many others, three significant public interventions were necessary to integrate spaces with a high economic potential into the real estate market: a) the eradication of slums from high-income areas, and their relocation to semi-rural suburbs of Santiago; b) the creation of 34 municipalities (called *comunas* in Chile) derived from the 17 that already existed from the administrative reform of 1981, based on the explicit idea of generating socially homogeneous districts; and c) the transformation of social housing policies in which the state assumed a purely subsidiary role, shifting the management and construction of residential blocks to private firms.

In light of these policies, which created “poor districts” formed principally by public housing that received displaced squatters from high rent areas, it seems clear that the state promoted urban segregation. Furthermore, systematic research on these issues in Santiago (the most recent carried out by Sabatini, et. al., 2010) have shown how dangerous the persistence of a city formed by opposed realities can be, which while expanding its borders, relegates its poor citizens to live in a poorly equipped periphery. However, while improving its malignity in poor areas, urban segregation would be diminished by the emergence of fortified enclaves in old, deprived districts that promote the process of social intermingling. Does this proximity between different social groups mean higher possibilities for social integration?

The Emergence of Fortified Enclaves

In empirical terms, studies performed on Latin American cities in contexts of high and low levels of segregation (respectively e.g. Kaztman 2001; Sabatini et al. 2010) have indicated the need to reduce segregation as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty. When rich and poor live together in the same territory, based on the model of the “geography of opportunities” (Galster and Killen 1995), it has been shown that the latter receive material advantages through access to more work opportunities. However, what happens when “rich neighbors” come to live in enclosed communities?

In general terms, urban anthropology has understood the proliferation of these privatized spaces as the need of accommodated groups to find a missing sense of community in a socially fragmented city. Among many socio-cultural and urban studies existing on this topic, I will only quote

briefly some of those works that have examined the close relationship between fortified enclaves and the privatization of urban spaces.

According to Setha Low (2003), although the existence of gated communities has been traced to the first permanent structures built by humans, its emergence in current American cities is a response to social, political, and economic transformations of the late 20th century: "globalization and economic restructuring also weaken existing social relations and contribute to the breakdown of traditional ways of maintaining social order" (Low 2003, 17). Along with the rise of urban insecurity (real or imaginary), "the creation of gated communities (...)" is an integral part of the building of the fortress city, a social control technique based on the so-called militarization of the city" (Low 2003, 17).

Fear of crime and fear of others would be powerful reasons for inhabiting fortified enclaves among upper-middle and upper classes, an argument that also has been discussed by Latin American scholars during this decade. For example, focusing her analysis on Sao Paulo, Teresa Caldeira (2000) points out that spatial segregation would increase as a result of the emergence of privatized enclaves in a social context of fear of crime and violence. While the elites retreat to their fortified communities and abandon public spaces to the homeless and the poor, the number of spaces for public encounters between different social groups shrink considerably.

Using the suggestive book title *"Those Who Won: The Life in Country Clubs and Private Neighborhoods,"* Maristella Svampa (2008) investigated this phenomenon in Buenos Aires, giving a deep characterization of the sociopolitical and urban context in which Argentinean private neighborhoods arose, including privatization, fragmentation of the middle class, suburbanization, and segregation. The author affirms that living in new urbanizations implies several kinds of social and spatial distinctions, through which poor areas that surround them are observed as "dark spaces of vulnerability." Fortified enclaves are not only secure spaces to inhabit but also an opportunity for new elites to construct their identity. Thus, even being located close to peripheral working class neighborhoods, it is possible to deepen the distinction from "the other" (who lives outside of the walls).

Regarding the reality of Santiago, and following the academic tendency observed so far, Márquez (2003) understands the emergence of gated communities as the desire to recover traits of the old neighborhood life while avoiding the risks of the present day. Thus a certain kind of community and tribal sociability is promoted within a heavily protected, private, and homogeneous space. Beyond those isolated cases, doubtlessly the inflection point of the study of gated communities occurred once the

book “Enclosed Communities in Santiago, Chile: Among Integration and Social Exclusion” (Sabatini and Cáceres eds. 2004) was published.

Presented as a set of interdisciplinary studies, the authors come to provocative conclusions that I will summarize in three points. First, gated communities, being located in peripheral areas (many of which belong to working class neighborhoods), make geographic closeness between different social classes possible. Second, as this process implies the exodus of wealthy families from traditional bourgeois neighborhoods to poor areas, the urban segregation is changing positively and promoting better opportunities for social encounters. Because of the market reforms, Santiago is less segregated than three decades ago. Three, and most controversially, the authors argue that mere geographical proximity between rich and poor families—even mediated by walls—encourages social integration.

They support these ideas by means of the discourse of poor families, for whom the arrival of wealthy neighbors brings both positive material and symbolic aspects. The former are related to the installation of new public infrastructure and certain kinds of services (supermarkets, shopping malls) and employment opportunities. The latter involves social perceptions of old working class neighborhoods that are no longer stigmatized by the rest of the city, bringing dignity to some areas which before were referred to derogatorily. Thus some districts of Santiago, such as Huechuraba, Peñalolén or Puente Alto, along with being the material representation of a city less segregated, demonstrate how the proximity of the elite can be beneficial to the poor. However, as a general question, we could ask whether this process means that there is more “social integration.”

Is Urban Integration Possible

The concept of “social integration” used in the analysis just quoted was clearly expressed in a paper written by Sabatini and Salcedo (2007) when they pointed out that, according to the Chilean case, segregation itself is not necessarily associated with an exclusionary process. Therefore these scholars propose to redefine this concept, making a triple distinction between: a) *functional integration*, or the way through which people engage with society by functional means of integration, namely market and politics; b) *symbolic integration*, the meaningful relationship established with a territory; and c) *community integration*, intensive social networks between inhabitants from the same place who are able to recognize to each other.

In view of some findings shown previously, functional integration would doubtless be present in the cases studied by Sabatini, et al. (2010). As it

has been demonstrated by research carried out in other Latin American cities (e.g. Katzman 2001), poor people effectively derive material benefits from their closer relationship with rich families (employment, access to new kinds of services, better opportunities to be “heard” by political authorities, etc.). This objective material improvement of the poor makes these authors say that, rather than being an impenetrable barrier, “the walls” are a porous border ready to promote functional integration.

Nevertheless, is “social integration” accomplished by, as Sabatini et al. claim, functional relationships (market, labor) between different social groups? At first glance it seems difficult to assert any kind of social integration based on only one of its dimensions, especially when empirical data shows divergent results in a context of urban fragmentation (e.g. on Santiago: Márquez 2003; Pérez and Roca 2009; on México: Saraví 2008; on Buenos Aires: Svampa 2008).

From the fieldwork I carried out in one of Santiago’s gentrified municipalities (Peñalolén), here are two quotes belonging to two children: one coming from a gated community, and the other living in social housing.

In “Casas Chubi” [social housing formed by old squatters] there are thieves... a lot of people say that they steal and things like that, so I’m afraid to go through that neighborhood. (Gabriel, 13 years old, inhabitant of a “Casagrande” condominium).

I have been there (in gated communities), but I don’t know really... I never go there because I am always here in my municipality.

— But that also is your municipality; it is Peñalolén as well...

Okay, but, because they [rich people] call it ‘Quilín’ [“Alto Quilín”, the name of a gated community], for me that is another district completely different (Carlos, 12 years old, inhabitant of San Luis neighborhood).

Like Saraví (2008) and his “isolated worlds,” our findings focus precisely on the idea that geographical proximity does not necessarily imply mutual recognition. In both quotes children express a sort of stigmatization, prejudice, and ignorance of social realities of the other residential spaces. While the resident of the fortified enclave thinks of working class neighborhoods as forbidden zones or “dark spaces of vulnerability,” the other child feels himself completely estranged by private urbanization, as if it belonged to “another district.” Could these perceptions be considered a sort of “symbolic integration” with a “common” space?

In light of these social discourses, I deem that the “effect of place” defined by Bourdieu (1999) allows us to understand the complex relationship established between geographic and social distance in a way that does not seem to show a causal relation between them. This is exacerbated if physical borders mediate the relationship between individuals from distinct social classes. According to that relationship, the structure of space is manifested in the form of spatial opposites, in which inhabited space operates as a sort of spontaneous symbol of social space. Capital will allow one to get closer to desirable goods and people, and keep away unwanted individuals and goods. But what happens in those spaces of geographic closeness between social agents with distinct levels of different kinds of capital? The author would say that one can physically occupy a habitat without inhabiting it, when one does not have the required means, starting with a certain *habitus*.

Therefore, Bourdieu rejects the hypothesis that the spatial proximity of agents that are far apart in social space has an effect on increased social closeness: “in fact, [there is] nothing more intolerable than physical proximity (experienced as promiscuity) to people who are socially distant” (Bourdieu 1999, 123). To this I add the powerful “territorial stigma” (Wacquant 2001) operating over deprived spaces, a phenomenon that is both an instrument of social differentiation and a symbolic expression of power that tends to reproduce and naturalize social and urban inequalities.

Furthermore, as Auyero (2001) argues in his ethnographic analysis of deprived working class neighborhoods in Argentina, social exclusion has become the defining characteristic of slum populations that, along with a decreasing level of political mobilization and the structural state violence, have formed a new kind of shantytown, namely one in which social differences are inscribed not only in space but also in consciousness. Thereby, rather than a transitional territory such as observed by social sciences during the 1960s and 1970s, this new type of shantytown seems to consolidate and deepen the experiential correlate between social and spatial inequalities.

In view of Bourdieu’s, Saravi’s, and Auyero’s reflections, it is worth examining the “social integration” that is supposedly advocated in a context when, as some Chilean planners say, the social interactions rest on walls and enclosed spaces. Santiago urban movements of this decade have demonstrated how the working class’ desire to live in high-rent neighborhoods is observed with suspicion by rich residents. Such a phenomenon has occurred recently in gentrified areas of Peñalolén when, despite the rich families’ complaints, the Chilean state built social housing next to gated communities. In the middle of the struggle a social leader said in a national newspaper:

While we see how luxury housing and public parks are built for the wealthy people of this district, we are compelled to migrate toward the periphery, toward places where there is neither employment nor basic services such as hospitals or schools (La Tercera newspaper, March 16th, 2006).

Given the statement, can we think of an integrative process as one that depends on mutual mistrust? I completely agree with Sabatini and Brian (2008) in saying that these words are an expression of a sort of a general “right to the city” claimed by popular residents, or—as they argue—the right to use networks and opportunities distributed (unequally) by the city. At the same time, this testimony shows how much distance is left to base social integration only on geographical proximity, especially when, according to Márquez and Forray (2006), fear and mistrust of the other seem to be the main characteristic of the current urban experience in Santiago.

Before finishing, I would like to point out briefly some ideas that are often forgotten in urban analysis regarding the features of Latin American states, above all when we are discussing social integration. I highlight some Chilean scholars associated with “dependence theory” and their reflections after the takeover of neoliberalism. According to Enzo Falleto (2006), along with constructing national societies, Latin American states historically had the assignment of promoting social integration. In Chile the maximum expression of this process was reached in the 1960s by means of the expansion of political participation and the creation of several social reforms—all of them supported by political interclass alliances and strong popular movements.

In conclusion, any attempt to think about social integration requires a careful treatment of structural and contingent variables involved in the emergence of new kinds of urban practices. As I described, neoliberal reforms had the effect of manifesting urban consequences that, despite concentrating a large number of poor families in deprived and isolated neighborhoods, have increased the geographical proximity among different social groups. Nevertheless, from my point of view it is overly simplistic to think about this phenomenon as a real possibility of “social integration” insofar as—faithful to a market logic—we would be reducing complex sets of social practices almost to mere dyadic functional relationships. Even more, as Bourdieu points out, when these relations are mediated by different dispositions of diverse types of capitals (economic, political, cultural, and symbolic) the generation of meaningful relationships becomes extremely unlikely.

Doubtless in Santiago the objective dimensions of urban segregation are diminishing and the proximity between rich and poor families generates

material benefits for the latter, as has been well demonstrated by both empirical data and current urban movements. However, anybody could doubt that spatial proximity must be promoted as a means to improve social opportunities for the poor. However, since Chilean democracy retains aspects of the dictatorial period— principally the authoritarian constitution of 1980—and market rationality prevails as the language in political discussions, I seriously doubt if social integration could be understood only as a matter of spatial distance. Thus, I agree with Saravi's definition of urban segregation as a process framed within a broader discussion of urban sociability. Along with paying attention to structural processes, the objective possibilities of social interactions must be carried out meaningfully by urban agents; processes which, in relation to gated communities, make me question the so-called "porosity" of their walls.

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