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Abstract

This paper explores how, in the Buenos Aires of neoliberalism, middle-class residents strove to make sense of their own impoverishment and their disenfranchisement by generating a consensus on how this city's modernity was being eroded by the presence of a large mestizo lower class. Through an analysis of the discourse that constructed the urban poor as "barbaric" (i.e., dangerous, polluting, and foreign), I suggest that this representation not only sought to reinforce the fading social difference between the middle- and the lower class, but it also contributed to denying the latter its citizenship in a Buenos Aires that struggled to be "modern".

The Denial of Citizenship: "Barbaric" Buenos Aires and the Middle-Class Imaginary

Introduction

María[1] lives in a condominium located in what she defines as a solidly middle-class area of the Greater Buenos Aires. Like many middle-class Buenos Aires residents, María, too, has seen better times. For several years she has been struggling to make a living from her small shop in the *microcentro*, which she inherited from her father. Her wealthy aristocratic family migrated from Europe during World War II; their first residence in Buenos Aires had been a sumptuous petit hotel in the elegant Barrio Norte. Even though María had led a privileged lifestyle well into the 1970s, since then things have changed dramatically for her, too. When I met her in 1997, her two children were unemployed, and her business was not doing well, either.

On one of my frequent visits, I happened to notice a man sitting on the threshold of the house next door to her triplex. His disheveled appearance struck me as somewhat out of place for that part of the city, but my reading remained subconscious until my friend brought up the issue. When María saw the man, her broad smile immediately contracted into an expression of distress. "Did you see them?" she whispered as she dragged me inside her gate and quickly locked it behind us. Rumor had it that the condominium next to hers was housing a group of squatters. "Seven men" she added. "All *ladrones* (thieves) who just came out of a penitentiary. All Paraguayans and Bolivians of the worst kind, didn't you see their faces?" I asked her how she knew, and she replied that her neighbor had heard it from the owner of the small grocery shop across the street.

Apparently, the whole street was in turmoil about this unwanted presence. "Yes, we are all scared: once they move in, they start watching your every movement. You can't leave your house empty, not even for an hour, because they'll break in and steal everything. Plus, they'll pick your phone line to call God knows where. Look at my latest bill: over a hundred pesos, whereas all my previous bills were all about twenty pesos. And I hardly called anybody…" María's daughter volunteered more information: "[Our neighbors] say this is an *aguantadero* (refuge): these are all criminals who moved in to keep an eye on the neighborhood." Then, waving her hands in circles to simulate a centrifugal movement, she concluded: "Once they find another suitable place, they call in more of their people and settle into that, too." "Do you know what they do once they move into somebody's place?—María interjected-- They remove all the metal parts they find—pipes, taps, doorknobs, everything--and sell it as *chatarra* (scrap metal). And if they find hardwood floors they'll burn them to barbecue their beef. *Te das cuenta*, do you understand what class of people they are?"

María's experience of a proximity to a social difference that she perceived as both intrusive and threatening was hardly unique in the Buenos Aires of the late 1990s, a time when the social and spatial boundaries between the local middle-class and the urban poor were increasingly thinning. The way María represented her new neighbors was part of a common strategy of reproducing social difference through a discourse that posited a white, middle-class, and modern "normalcy" as the only legitimate modality for spatial and cultural citizenship in Buenos Aires.

By defining social space as "a locus, a medium, and a tool" of the perpetuation of social inequality, in his *Production of Space* Lefebvre (1991:32) argued that discrimination is spatially reproduced through a discursive economy of representations that valorize "certain relationships between people in particular

places" (1991:56), thus generating "consensuses" on these places as well as the identity and ownership of those who dwell in them (*ibid.*). A consensus over what qualities define an ideal urban space can be an exclusionary strategy that supports a social group's entitlement to the city while physically and/or symbolically evicting its "others." The denial of a marginal group's "right to the city" is what Lefebvre elsewhere (1996) categorized as the alienation of the right to *inhabit* urban space by dwelling in it and using it on one's own terms. Drawing on this notion, in this essay I explore the discourse and practices through which, in the late 1990s, middle-class Buenos Aires residents who faced their own impoverishment strove to generate a consensus on Buenos Aires as a quintessentially white and middle-class city whose "modernity" was being eroded by the presence of a large mestizo lower class. As it reinforced representations of a white and "civilized" middle-classness, this narrative sanctioned segregation and exclusion by generating normative cartographies of "belonging" that blended a sense of ownership of things and places with a stylistically and performatively reiterated membership in a social group (Fortier 1999:42), thus establishing not only what belonged to whom, but also who belonged where, and who belonged nowhere.

Modernization through the Looking Glass

The Buenos Aires middle-class--the largest of its own kind in the whole Latin American continent—was mostly formed by the offspring of the European immigrants who flooded Argentina between 1870 and 1930 as part of this country's postcolonial modernization project (Svampa 1992, Rock 1985, Germani 1964). Throughout the 1900s, this social group kept claiming its own participation in elitist mythologies of metropolitan modernity: representations of *civilizaciòn* and *barbarie*

originally disseminated by Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the founding father and first president of the Argentine Republic. By picturing *mestizos* and *indigenas* as ignorant, violent, and primitive, i.e., lacking cultural proficiency in the unspoken and unwritten rules of bourgeois metropolitan modernity, these categorizations provided the dominant classes with an ideal of citizenship that justified the eviction of the subaltern from the urban sphere.[2] At the end of the century, old/new modernity narratives continued to haunt the social imaginary of the Buenos Aires' middle-class.

As suggested by Gaonkar (2002:4), social imaginaries are held together by shared self-understandings that "underlie and make possible common practices," and are "embedded in the habitus of a population or are carried in modes of address, stories, symbols, and the like". Much like Gramsci's "common sense" as that "already formed and 'taken for granted' terrain, on which more coherent ideologies and philosophies must contend for mastery" (in Hall 1986:20), a social imaginary is the medium through which a social group both understands and (re)produces the world it lives in. Though sedimented with inherited representations, social imaginaries are deeply situated in their current and ever-shifting sociopolitical settings. As they re-contextualize representations and practices, they provide a seemingly orderly map for orienting oneself amidst the disorder of social life (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992:30).

After a decade of neoliberal propaganda centered on Argentina's modernization and its miracolous inclusion into the first world, in the late 1990s the social imaginary of the Buenos Aires' middle class was informed by notions of modernity that, in many respects, were reminiscent of the constructs that had helped legitimize bourgeois privilege in the postcolonial nation (Guano 2002). However, *pace* the official rhetoric, by the end of the twentieth century the Buenos Aires' middle strata found themselves confronting what Ferguson (2002:137) called

"modernization through the looking glass": a foreseeable future of poverty in a third world country where everyday life experience not only contradicted the neoliberal narrative of progress towards first world status, but blatantly turned it upside down.

As a 1999 INDEC statistics shows, during the same year about 80% of the Buenos Aires population found itself living below the poverty line, i.e. earned less than the 1,030 pesos/U.S. dollars needed for the survival of a family of four. The main cause of this impoverishment was the political and economic course that was pursued by the 1989-1999 neoliberal/neoperonist government led by President Carlos Saùl Menem, and that had been widely acclaimed by conservative economists as the "Argentine miracle". Between 1991 and 2002, the Argentine peso was pegged to the US dollar: as a result, the local manufacturing sector all but vanished under the flow of imported goods that quickly found their way into Argentina. Unemployment rates soared. At the same time, essential public services were privatized, and thus made more difficult to access. A decade of neoliberal reforms rearranged the Buenos Aires' society along a pattern whose contour increasingly resembled the asymmetrical hourglass described by Gibson (1997) in her analysis of inequality in late capitalist societies. At the top of this imaginary hourglass was the tiny and extremely wealthy elite that had not only profited from the privatization spree, but had also successfully converted to the import business. The base of the hourglass was formed by the increasingly unemployed working class, as well as by the quickly expanding ranks of the poor. Between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, these two social groups had lost 32.8% of their income (Minujín and Kessler 1995). The situation of the middle-classes was equally polarized. Whereas a small segment of the upper middle-class found its niche in the new service economy at the managerial-professional level, the Buenos Aires' middle- and lower- middle-classes kept sinking into poverty. By the

late 1990s, much of what used to constitute the large Buenos Aires middle-class—a middle-class that, still in the 1980s, amounted to 70% of the total Argentine population (Minujin and Kessler 1995)—had been deprived not only of many of its traditional sources of white-collar employment, but also of the access to the public services that had characterized the Peronist welfare state.[3] While the upper class had increased its revenues by 21.2%, between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s the lower middle-class had lost 22.3% of its income, and the middle middle-class had lost 12.5% (the largest loss in financial volume).[4] Soon enough, the results of President Menem's much vaunted "surgery without anesthesia" were under everybody's eyes—especially those of a middle-class that was painfully conscious of its own decline.

At the time of my 1997-1998 fieldwork, the awareness of this process of impoverishment had transformed the daily conversations of middle-class individuals into arenas for the exchange of fears. "Will the middle-class disappear as they say?" was the question many kept asking. Their anxiety found an obsessive echo in the headlines of local and national newspapers, for which "*la caida de la clase media*," the fall of the middle-class, had become a trope. As more and more middle-class families slipped below the poverty line, the hopelessness became increasingly palpable. While telling me about how their European grandparents had sought and found their fortune in Argentina, my middle-class friends and acquaintances consistently declared their fear at being caught in an endlessly declining parable that reversed their ancestors' successes, and brought them every day a step closer to the slum. To many of them, their proximity to a quickly growing lower class epitomized both a symbolic and a material threat: a threat they strove to fend off by enhancing difference while discursively reconstituting their own white, and modern, middle-classness.[5]

Between First and Third World

While, as Sebreli (1992:83) put it, the Buenos Aires bourgeoisie lived in its own "private world of gated neighborhoods, hermetically sealed houses, and fast cars," the local middle-classes continued to share the city with the urban poor. In the elegant *microcentro*, crowds of white-collar employees rushed daily to and from their offices parading the latest fashion accessory--which, for the most part, they had purchased on credit, and paid for in endless installments and at a very high interest rate. Adrift in the mass of those who were struggling to keep up with the requirements of taste and fashion, the growing numbers of peddlers, panhandlers, homeless and slum-dwellers provided a striking counterpoint to the performative narrative of metropolitan elegance. Yet both publics inhabited the same spaces, and most of their public interactions were modulated along (and only occasionally across) the lines of their class differences. Most of the time, the script followed in these public interactions was one of "civil inattention" (Goffman 1963), or better a form of coexistence whereby members of different social classes ostensibly ignored each other (Sampson 2003:182), and occasionally approached one another in a more or less unthreatening manner.

Every now and then, middle-class individuals would stop at a vendor's stall to purchase a lottery ticket or roasted peanuts, or they would slow their steps to slip a few coins into the outstretched hand of a beggar. Peddlers would board crowded trains and buses carrying loads of small toys, sewing implements, and other household tools. After installing themselves into the most visible spot in the vehicle, they would chant their advertising litanies to their captive audiences. Some passengers would roll their eyes, resenting the intrusion into the solitude supposedly granted by such non-places

(Augé 1995). Others listened, and then perhaps bought a little something: a crayon box or a pair of scissors sold at an exceptionally low price. Customers at local *confiterías* (coffee shops) and restaurants also grew used to having their conversations frequently interrupted by the procession of panhandlers dropping a small object—perhaps a pen, or a card featuring a Catholic saint--at every table before returning to collect *un pesito* (one peso, i.e., the equivalent of one US dollar) in payment for the item.

And yet, as they went about their daily routines, both lower- and middle-class Buenos Aires residents were constantly aware of the possibility of encroachment, and even aggression, that loomed in the background. On one hand, the transgressions included physical violence in the form of the muggings and kidnappings that the middle-class increasingly feared, as well as police harassment and the arbitrary detentions of low-income dark-skinned individuals: a practice that brutally reiterated its victims' out-of-placeness in the "Paris of the Río de la Plata". On the other hand, symbolic violence pervaded the disdainful top-down gazes (Grimson 1999:37-38), the racist and classist jokes (Edelstein 1999), and the insults that were occasionally dropped on *mestizos*, the poor, and the immigrants (or those who were thought to be such). Often used interchangeably, slurs like *cabecita negra* (little black head), *negro*, *villero* (slum-dweller) *bolita* (pejorative for *boliviano*: Bolivian), contributed to collapsing a variety of class, race, and national/ethnic classifications into a large category that marked poor, dark-skinned individuals as "not belonging" in white Buenos Aires. Yet another, and equally pernicious, form of symbolic violence was the widespread habit of blaming these "others" for Argentina's predicaments. Confronted with a high unemployment rate, working class individuals, for example, would occasionally vent their resentment against the "*extranjeros indocumentados*"

("undocumented foreigners", i.e., illegal immigrants) who allegedly "stole their jobs" by agreeing to work for much lower wages (Grimson 1999:38-39). Middle-class Buenos Aires residents, instead, were more likely to blame the non-white lower classes for Argentina's poverty, its corruption, and its disconnect from modernity (Guano 2003). In this discourse, old tropes of civilization and barbarism were recontextualized through the terminology of modernization promoted once again by the neoliberal regime.

At a time when President Menem and his government kept announcing Argentina's imminent inclusion into the first world (Guano 2002), many middle-class Buenos Aires residents voiced their discomfort with the increasing closeness to the poverty that kept materializing in the streets of the city: a poverty that, they feared, was about to swallow them along with their self-ascribed modernity. As the primary location of their everyday experience of social difference, to them the city had become the stage of Buenos Aires' modernity drama—a drama where, as McDonogh (1991:324) once put it, urban life actors had come to embody categories in this social group's symbolic universe.

"Menem says that Argentina is the first world, but here it's like being in Bolivia" was the trope that often glossed the presence of peddlers and panhandlers in Buenos Aires' *microcentro*. As the poorest country in Latin America and the place of origin of the largest immigrant group in Buenos Aires,[6] "Bolivia" epitomized what Koptiuch (1996) once called a "third world at home": an intrusive presence that disrupted dominant representations of Buenos Aires as a white, middle-class, and "European" city.[7] Its reterritorialization at the heart of Buenos Aires was both an explicitly sarcastic retort against the official rhetoric of Argentine neoliberalism, and an implicit wish to see Buenos Aires restored to its pristine modernity.

The neoliberal government--it had become clear to many--had little interest in protecting the middle-classes.[8] In the perceived absence of institutional policies and interventions, everyday strategies such as spatial segregation, symbolic evictions, and the construction of social invisibility were among the measures enacted to contain the alleged intrusion. All of these strategies had deep roots in the local history of class struggle.

The Denial of Citizenship

As Mitchell (2003) suggested, dominant social groups may prevent urban space from becoming more "public"—hence more inclusive--by tailoring the rules for spatial practice on themselves. As they claim to embody the legitimate urban public, these groups attempt to undermine the right to the city of those who fail to comply with the dominant prescriptions for belonging. It is through social struggle that marginal social groups can strive to establish a "space for representation" (2003: 33) where it is possible for them to become socially and politically visible. A space for representation is an arena where one can posit oneself, and be publicly acknowledged, as a citizen: a legitimate member of "the public," and a political actor endowed with the right to advance claims about what reality is and should be.

Throughout the twentieth century, much of the struggle over visibility in the Buenos Aires' urban sphere was closely connected to the clash over the cultural and political citizenship of the subaltern: the thousands who lived in the slums, the tenements, and the working class barrios at the margins of the bourgeois city. It was between 1945 and 1955 that the socially and politically mandated invisibility of the Buenos Aires lower classes was finally shattered—even though only temporarily. During this time, Perón's army of the "shirtless" (*descamisados*) succeeded in

appropriating Buenos Aires' bourgeois downtown as its own "space for representation": an arena where it could exert the role of the most visible public of Peronism. As the physical embodiment of the *pueblo argentino* (the Argentine people), the poor could be periodically seen as they acclaimed Perón and his wife Evita in raucous ceremonies held in Plaza de Mayo. Most supporters of Perón's 1946-1955 government were members of those mestizo lower classes that had been consistently disenfranchised by the elites and their governments, as well as by many of those who opposed them. Poor, dark-skinned Argentines had also been consistently excluded from the vision of social justice that was upheld by immigrant European socialist activists (Walter 1977). By bringing a mass of mestizo workers and lumpenproletarians to the heart of Buenos Aires, Perón launched a symbolic aggression against the white middle and upper classes (Foster 1998:6; Ciria 1983:277).[9] Under his presidency, the bourgeois city became a stage for the glorification of a proudly self-referential barbarism and its challenge to the exclusionary civilization of the elite (Svampa 1992).[10]

In 1955, however, the reactionary coup that overthrew the Peronist regime pushed the Buenos Aires' poor back into political and social invisibility. As Peronist discourse and imageries were banned from the public sphere, a sequel of authoritarian conservative regimes returned Perón's "*pueblo argentino*" to the status of the "rabble" that had to be kept out of sight. Their presence in an urban sphere dominated by the middle and upper classes was still categorized at best as invisible, and at worst as that of the intrusive Other. During the 1976-1983 dictatorial Process of National Reorganization, the rules for the performance of an appropriate citizenship in Buenos Aires' downtown plazas were set by the military regime, and those who transgressed them were often abducted, tortured, and murdered by the army (Taylor 1997).

Continuously at risk of being "disappeared" by the army or having their meager property bulldozed overnight (Auyero 2000b:60), the residents of the shantytowns were evicted not just from the Buenos Aires' public sphere, but also from the city space itself. In 1977, the military *junta* introduced a *Ley de Erradicación* (law of eradication) that banned villas from the Federal Capital: the following year, Buenos Aires was to host the World Soccer Championship, and the sight of urban slums would have tainted Buenos Aires' international reputation as a most civilized "Paris of Latin America." As a result, at least 200,000 people were evicted from their shantytowns in Buenos Aires city, and many more were denied access to downtown. Democracy was reinstated in Argentina in 1983. A year later, a new law was issued that countermanded the Ley de Erradicación (Keeling 1996:103-106). However, under the neoliberal regime of the 1990s, the citizenship of shantytown-dwellers was still in question.

While Menem's government kept stubbornly denying the existence of a soaring poverty rate in Argentina, by the late 1990s the population of the Buenos Aires' shantytowns had reached 86,666 (Auyero 2000b:62). [11] In the meantime, a discourse perpetuated by much of the middle-class contributed to denying the citizenship of the poor.[12]

The consensus among members of the middle-class was that the vicinity of a villa constituted a threat. Residents of areas that host slums or *asientamentos* (small pockets of self-help housing) were particularly vocal about the danger allegedly posited by these settlements and their inhabitants.[13] Villas, many of them pointed out, brought about drugs, prostitution, criminality, and disease.[14] Inevitably, this representation helped reproduce social invisibility through patterns of stigma, avoidance, and segregation. Many of my informants expressed anxiety at the thought

of even driving—let alone walking--near a slum: as an interviewee put it, "if you stop at a traffic light [near a villa], they'll come and mug you". Not surprisingly, several of my acquaintances and interviewees had lived their entire lives in Buenos Aires without having ever entered a villa. "If you walk into a villa," I kept being told, "you will never be able to walk out. It's too dangerous for you to go there." A frequent concern was that, in the villas, streets had no names: a fact that many middle-class individuals found puzzling, since to them this lack of orderliness and specification would make the task of orienting oneself basically impossible. Apparently, many institutions were equally uneasy in dealing with the villas: even the census was done rarely, and mostly at a distance, approximated on the basis of a presumed number of inhabitants per square-kilometer.[15] Not only did the white middle-class gaze fail to discern qualities and quantities of the people of the villa, but, in the hegemonic categorization of place and identity, villas and the people who inhabited them also embodied the negation of modern urban life. In addition, since villas *should not* have been there, their presence was stubbornly denied even by the official cartography. Looking for them on any Buenos Aires map would have been a waste of time: none of them was reported anyway.[16] As an example of what Harley (1988) called the cartographic "silences" that exclude unacceptable aspects of the landscape, this spatial invisibility was instrumental to the symbolic ousting of slum-dwellers not only from the city, but also from the Argentine nation as imagined in middle-class Buenos Aires.

As Zhang (2002) proposed, the boundary between national and spatial citizenship is a porous zone marked by a traffic in entitlements and exclusions. There is a deep connection between the right to belong in the city and the right to be included and represented in a nation whose essence is often construed as grounded in geographical space. Both types of citizenship—which Holston (1999:169) calls

respectively "substantive" and "formal"--are brought into being through the workings of social imagination. Both emerge as membership in a community that not only comes into existence by attaining public visibility in a space that is physical and social at once, but also constitutes itself as a legitimate public precisely through its claim to "its" place (Mitchell 2003:148). In the case of the Buenos Aires' slum-dwellers, their loss of the right to the city foreshadowed an erosion of their national citizenship. In middle-class discourse, the disconnectedness of the slum from the larger society (Auyero 2000a:98) was powerfully indexed by, and reproduced through, the trope of foreignness.

In the late 1990s, a common perception about villas was that they were inhabited exclusively by *extranjeros indocumentados*, undocumented foreigners.[17] Based on phenotypical categorizations that posited porteños[18] as white, and dark-skinned individuals as necessarily from elsewhere, these perceptions perpetuated the myth of Buenos Aires' essential Europeanness. Not only would many from the Buenos Aires middle-class firmly believe that Bolivian, Peruvian, and Paraguayan immigrants outnumbered the Argentine residents in the villas (a perception that was invariably disputed by those who lived in the slums, as well as by those who worked there), but several of them were also hesitant to extend the (implicitly white and middle-class) category of "porteño" even to those villa residents whom they identified as Argentine. Hardly unique to middle-class common sense, the representation of the foreignness of slum dwellers occasionally spilled into the sphere of official political discourse. In 1998, a high-ranking politician declared in a televised interview that "there are no Argentines in the villas," but only illegal immigrants. Residents of a few Buenos Aires' shantytowns responded with a small round of street protests. "We are all Argentines," their banners read. Yet this public protest did little to alter the hegemonic

representation, and shantytown-dwellers kept being routinely referred to as undocumented foreigners.

Defiling Identities

The out-of-placeness of the poor in Buenos Aires—their foreignness to the modern city--was reiterated through the pervasive representation of the "danger" that, to paraphrase Mary Douglas (1966), they allegedly posited to the "purity" of middle-class spaces. The discourse that constructs marginals as agents of defilement, too, has deep roots in the classifications of class and race that emerged out of modernity (Stepan 1991, Sibley 1995), and that, in postcolonial Argentina, legitimized the civilizing mission of the Europeanized porteño elites. Until well into the twentieth century, hegemonic representations of hygiene and morality in Buenos Aires had been a staple of eugenic attempts to isolate a pure national body from the defiling presence of subaltern social groups: blacks, mestizos, Amerindians, immigrants, and the poor (Stepan 1991, Salessi 1995).[19] In the late 1990s, fragments of this discourse continued to be recontextualized in the social imaginary of the middle-class. Non-white individuals, for example, were occasionally referred to as having a disturbing "odor," which was attributed to a manifestation of barbarism: a lack of hygiene, as imputed to Bolivian immigrants, or an unseemly diet, as in the case of Koreans, whom many accused of "eating cats". Needless to say, villa residents were particularly vulnerable targets for this negative signifying process.

Not only did most Buenos Aires' shantytowns lack sewers and access to clean water (except for a few public taps), but their cesspools also contributed to compounding the sanitation problem. At the time of my fieldwork, malnutrition, HIV, tuberculosis, and asthma were on the rise among villa and tenement dwellers all over

the city. In addition, scavenging for food, clothes, and recyclable goods was a common survival tactic among the Buenos Aires' poor.[20] Every night, a number of people flocked out of the shantytowns to look for food in the trash bags piling up at each street corner. The scavengers were called *cirujas*—perhaps because, a bit like *cirujanos* (surgeons), the urban poor made a living out of dissecting and searching organic matter.[21] Among middle-class residents, such a daily spectacle of poverty evoked a plethora of reactions ranging from a compassion often laced with anger at the government ("before neoliberalism kicked in, Argentina was a country where even the poor ate beef every day" was a common refrain), to the resentment against the shantytown-dwellers themselves ("it serves them right: they all voted for the Peronist party, look what they got,"[22] was yet another anti-Peronist/anti-neoliberal commonplace).[23] Another prevalent emotion was the concern that scavenging would result in a proliferation of rats, roaches, and possibly even diseases that--some kept pointing out--would be unheard of in *really* civilized cities. As one woman put it upon spotting a family intent on cutting trash bags at the corner of her apartment complex: "I cannot imagine that something like this could ever happen in "real" first world cities like London or Paris, don't you think?".[24] While the spatial separation between the "clean" first world and bourgeois city on one hand, and the "dirty" slum on the other was impossible to enforce, the perception that trespassing caused contamination served to reproduce not just the conceptual boundary (Pellow 1996) between the middle-class self and its lower class other, but also the latter's out-of-placeness in a city that strove to be modern.

Fencing out Danger?

Carefully threaded though they were, the discursive meshes of social invisibility invariably failed to fully conceal the presence of poverty from middle-class experience. As a result, the impossibility of "fencing in" the perceived intruders led to attempts to "fence them out". Throughout the 1990s, gates, walls, and surveillance became a more common sight in a city that, many lamented, seemed to be on the verge of losing its Parisian openness to become increasingly similar to a "Los Angeles" of gated enclaves (Guano 2002). As Pellow (1996:3) pointed out, physical and conceptual boundaries are intrinsic to the creation, maintenance, transformation, and definition of social relations. In Buenos Aires, the proliferation of walls and surveillance went hand in hand with the rise of poverty--by 1999 about 80% of the population of Greater Buenos Aires was living below the poverty line[25]--and it signaled a fear of the other that amounted to the criminalization of the poor. The social anxiety of the Buenos Aires middle-class helped generate the narrative of an extraordinary crime wave plaguing Buenos Aires (*ola de inseguridad*): a phenomenon that is characteristic of the socio-spatial reorganization of the increasingly polarized societies of neoliberalism (Caldeira 1996, 2000; Low 2003). A news media industry that catered mostly to the urban middle-classes indulged in daily descriptions of bloody robberies in restaurants and bars, shoot-outs in trafficked streets and inside crowded trains, and senseless violence around soccer stadiums and clubs.[26] As the news media continued riding the scare wave, police officers kept raiding the Buenos Aires' shantytowns in search for the usual suspects.[27] In the meantime, those who could afford it built fences and walls around their homes, or hired private security firms to protect their apartment complexes.

Ironically, those who had hired private security firms to protect their homes often ended up living in fear of being burglarized and robbed by these very same guards, who inevitably belonged to a less privileged social class. If surveillance systems often grant little more than a symbolic protection to their concerned users (Low 2003), in Buenos Aires even gates and fences were occasionally suspected of diminishing, rather than increasing, safety. At the time of my fieldwork, the residents of single-family homes were becoming more and more worried about being followed home by robbers. After sneaking past the gate, the criminals would lock it behind themselves. Once inside, they could proceed to attack their victims, protected by the same privacy and barriers that the latter had created for their own security. The anxiety this feeling of vulnerability triggered often caused even progressive individuals to blurt out that, during the military *Proceso*, crime rates had been much lower than under the current democratic regime. While the statement was usually framed as a matter-of-fact observation about an objective reality, the negative comparison it posited pitted the "order" of totalitarianism against the "disorder" of democracy (Mitchell 2003), thus implicitly indicting the social inclusiveness of the latter and the openness of urban space as one of its mediums.[28]

The Villa from Within

In his *Casa Tomada*, the Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar (1969) offered a metaphorical insight into the dynamics of trespassing and the struggle over space and identity between the Buenos Aires' middle-class and the urban poor. The protagonist and narrator of Cortázar's story is a middle-aged man who lives in his large ancestral house with his sister Irene. Irene and the narrator cherish the house, because it is saturated with mementos of their family's previous generations. Both characters are

unmarried. Both engage in gendered—and unproductive---bourgeois activities. The narrator spends his time reading French literature, while Irene knits obsessively. They also inherited so much money from their ancestors that they do not need to work. One day, the narrator hears steps and whispers in the other wing of the house. Squatters are breaking in! He slams the connecting door and locks it. Now he and Irene are left with their two bedrooms, the kitchen, and the bathroom, whereas the squatters settle in the rest of the house. Yet, their feelings of loss are mitigated by a sense of relief: the narrator and Irene still have their essential living space after all, and no longer need to clean up all of their dusty ancestral furniture. For a while, the protagonists continue to knit and read their French novels, while sharing the house with the invisible squatters—whom they never see, but identify only through the muffled noises they produce. One fateful night, the narrator hears whispers creep into the kitchen, then into the bathroom, then into the corridor leading to his and his sister's bedrooms. He grabs Irene, and runs out of the house. At this point, they have really lost everything to the squatters: their house, their belongings, their wealth. Just like the squatters who expelled them from their home, now they are left with nothing. However, unlike the squatters, they still have their "respectable," petty bourgeois frame of mind. Before leaving the house, the narrator locks the door from outside: "just in case some scumbag got the idea of breaking into our home, at this time of the night and with the house full of squatters."

Thirty years after its first publication, the social critique intrinsic in Cortázar's story has hardly lost its currency. As Cortázar pointed out, the Buenos Aires that had been lavishly built by the Europeanized bourgeoisie was "inherited" by a middle-class that anchored its entitlement in its past connections to metropolitan modernity. There may have been squatters in this city: "invisible" people who were perceived as lacking

a legitimate claim to inhabit it (possibly because they did not share this city's European culture). And to a certain extent, for this city's middle-class residents losing a tiny portion of this inherited urban space might have been an endurable pain—as long as the squatters were not seen, and only barely heard, and as long as the space they occupied was not the middle-class's own. After all, all over Buenos Aires there were plenty of deserted, semi-destroyed buildings that could be silently broken into and occupied without creating any significant problems to the rest of the city. But the invisible intruders did not limit themselves to occupying far away and unused quarters. On the contrary, they spilled right into the living space of the middle-class family--its living room, its kitchen, even its bedrooms. In the end, those who felt they had "inherited" this urban space risked being evicted and becoming just as poor as the squatters, though they retained their distinguished (yet now pathetically useless) cultural sensibility.

Even though squatting was a frequent occurrence in Buenos Aires throughout the twentieth century, its incidence increased in the late 1990s, progressing hand in hand with the growth of poverty and the unmet demand for affordable housing.[29] Despite the large number of vacant properties,[30] apartment rents often exceeded the means of many. While many a school teacher or retiree earned less than US$100 a month and immigrant construction workers averaged US$5 a day, renting a small apartment in Buenos Aires city would usually cost US$200 and above.[31] In addition, a condition for leasing was the payment of a deposit equivalent to six months of rent. Tenement leases did not require a six-month deposit, but rents were still comparatively high: in 1998, a dilapidated *pieza* with shared use of restroom and kitchen in one of la Boca's notorious *conventillos* would run at around US$ 200 per month. As a result of the difficulty in renting legally, squatting incidents became more

and more frequent. By 2000, it was estimated that about 200,000 families lived in *casas tomadas* (houses occupied by squatters) scattered all over Buenos Aires.[32]

While villas had a larger impact on their surroundings, many felt that their contours could be more or less easily mapped. Squatters, instead, were perceived as carrying out capillary encroachments that further intensified the drama of infringed social and spatial boundaries. Needless to say, the people who felt they were most at risk were those who owned property, but often could not afford to guard it through expensive fences, gates, and top-of-the-line security systems: in other words, the middle- and lower-middle-classes. As they lived in a city they experienced as increasingly anomic, many middle-class residents were appalled to see the villa emerge from within the places they claimed as their own. The vicinity of a *casa tomada* would often cause a considerable amount of anxiety: the presence of squatters, many contended, would increase the incidence of muggings and break-ins in the neighborhood. A few of my acquaintances and interviewees had even lost their own property to squatters: an event that, they pointed out, had dragged them even closer to the brink of poverty.

For example, Verónica, a retired teacher, had made a living for many years by renting out two apartments: one in la Plata and one in la Boca. Her rental property had enabled her to support not only herself, but also her unemployed son, his jobless wife, and their infant son. In the mid 1990s, however, squatters occupied her apartment in la Plata. The complex manager had sold them the key. When Verónica requested their eviction, the squatters exhibited a forged lease. The subsequent trial lasted three years, during which Verónica lost not only more than half of her meager income, but she also had to squander a considerable amount of her savings on legal expenses. By the time Verónica had finally managed to evict the squatters, the apartment was so

damaged that it could no longer be rented out. Its resale value had diminished considerably, too. At the time of our interviews, Verónica was grappling with the difficult decision of whether to invest whatever was left of her savings in renovating the apartment, or to take a big loss and sell it well below its value. What made her particularly bitter was that, before leaving, the squatters had removed all wooden and metal parts from her apartment. Her hardwood floors were gone, and so were all the knobs, faucets, and even some of the pipes. "They always do that—she informed me—they sell taps and pipes as scrap metal, and burn the hardwood planks to barbecue their beef."

In neoliberal Buenos Aires, definitions of proper and improper use of property constituted a battlefield in the war of position over boundaries and livelihood. While the poor grappled with the paucity of affordable housing, small property owners felt threatened with a damage that, in many cases, could hasten their fall into poverty. Faced with the loss of a considerable portion of their income, and, in some cases, even the homes they lived in, they felt helpless. They did not expect protection from the authorities, either. Given the police' reputation for corruption and brutality, even having to request their intervention was a source of anxiety. Many feared that, upon entering a police station, they would be asked to pay bribes, and they would be threatened if they refused to comply.[33] Moreover, the consensus among property owners was that the already slow judiciary system could be easily obstructed through fake rental leases.[34] All in all, prevention was considered to be the best defense against squatters. In some parts of the Greater Buenos Aires, this would involve not leaving one's home unattended for more than one day, even if it meant renouncing opportunities for travel and vacation. Several of my acquaintances indicated that an important factor in acquiring property was whether it could be effectively guarded

against illegal settlers either through a network of friends and relatives who would "keep an eye" on their apartment, or, alternatively, by hiring a private security firm. Yet, even the onsite presence of private guards and managers was no guarantee of protection. Private security officers were often suspected of promoting robberies, and dishonest managers had been known to provide squatters with apartment keys and even fake leases.

Horrific stories were exchanged in middle-class circles about how squatters hardly limited themselves to using property the way "normal" middle-class owners and tenants did. On the contrary, they were almost invariably described as being keen on a destruction that was beyond middle class rationality and comprehension.[35] Accounts abounded about how squatters removed all plumbing fixtures to sell them as scrap metal, and burned the hardwood floors to barbecue beef. (In other versions of this story, a similar destiny would befall doors, windows, banisters, and even marble stairs.)[36] Rumors, as Kroeger (2003:244) proposed, help redress situations of crisis and uncertainty by reinforcing the individual's membership in a social group while simultaneously defining one's enemies and antagonists. In all the narratives of loss and defacement circulating among middle-class Buenos Aires residents, the culprits were always again the urban poor who, like the faceless squatters of Cortàzar's story, crept out of their unmarked space to usurp the places of the middle-class.[37]

At a time when one's property was possibly even less expendable than ever, the threat of losing one's home—one's foremost asset—to squatters had to be taken very seriously. Yet the way this experience was constructed and narrated in middle-class discourse was not limited to pointing out the menace seemingly posited by the poor to the middle-class' quickly vanishing economic capital, but it also essentialized cultural and symbolic capital, and spatialized notions of modernity and distinction

(Bourdieu 1984) for the sake of symbolically evicting the poor from the places that the middle-class claimed as its own.[38] Could there be anything more "barbaric" than burning expensive hardwood floors to barbecue beef? How could modern principles of privacy and hygiene be enforced in a house where all doors, taps, and pipes had been removed? In this discourse, the presence of the poor in the places of the middle-class prospected not only a crime against *proprietorship*, but also an offense to *propriety*: a propriety that concerned members of the Buenos Aires middle-class claimed as quintessential to their identity and practice. While most members of the middle-class could do little to effectively protect their property from theft and damage, the narratives they disseminated reproduced their entitlements by denying the lower class its citizenship in modern Buenos Aires.

Conclusion

Faced with their own "disconnect" from modernity—a disconnect that blatantly contradicted the neoliberal shibboleth of Argentina's successful modernization, in the late 1990s many middle-class Buenos Aires residents experienced urban space as a location where the drama of modernization through the looking glass struck them with the force of first-hand experience. Fully aware of their precarious hold on middle-classness, many of them tried to reiterate their symbolic entitlement to a city that they viewed as coessential to their own class identity, and on the verge of being swallowed by the disorganizing forces of a reterritorialized "third-world". In the attempt to explain and resist their predicament, those who were concerned with their own fall from grace inscribed a legacy of modernity into what they envisioned as "their" urban space, and erected physical, but most often conceptual, boundaries in the hope of safeguarding the social and spatial integrity of

middle-class Buenos Aires. Tropes of foreignness, pollution, and propriety

supplemented practices of segregation and surveillance in the attempt to redress the

trespassings. Articulated along the distinction between civilization and barbarism, first

and third world, and modernization and its opposite, pervasive representations of

spatialized identities and identified spaces helped middle-class residents to reinforce a

fading social difference, while simultaneously blaming their predicament on graspable

culprits: those who did not belong in the modern city.

Endnotes

[1] All names are fictional.

[2] Till well into the twentieth century, the Buenos Aires elite had held the monopoly on the definition of civilization, which it described as a "matter of style" (*cuestión de estilo*, Svampa 1992:148-170). Much of this bourgeois "style" consisted in a competent appreciation of things European that had to be acquired during Grand Tours of Paris and London (Viñas 1982, Orlove 1997). As upper class porteños displayed their competent consumption (Appadurai 1989:41) of such products of European civilization as French wines and British tweeds, Buenos Aires grew into a sophisticated replica of Paris (Scobie 1974): a stage where wealthy residents and fashionably dressed passers-by paraded their proficiency in the "matters of style" that were imperative for belonging (Scobie 1974:220, Gayol 2000). In his *Social Justice and the City*, Harvey (1973: 310) suggested that the question to be asked when investigating inequality in the urban sphere should be "in whose image is space created?" The thriving Buenos Aires of the turn of the twentieth century was indisputably created in the image the local bourgeoisie was intent in projecting about itself. Its downtown plazas and corridor streets supplied the most adequate setting for the persuasive presentation of the bourgeoisie's social self, thus helping sustain this elite's view about what modernity was and should have been. At the same time, the inscription into the city of a class-specific "style" for spatial practice helped legitimize the continuing exclusion of those social groups that were increasingly seeking to dismantle the social, political, and geographical boundaries of their own disenfranchisement: on one hand, the rising middle-classes of mostly immigrant European origin, clamoring to acquire a new relevance in the political life of the country, and on the other, the lower classes that, though for a decade only, would eventually manage to reverse their social and political invisibility under Perón's leadership.

[3] The decline of the Buenos Aires' middle class actually began with the introduction of neoliberalism in 1976: the year when Videla, the ruthless head of the junta that "disappeared" tens of thousands of Argentines, entrusted the economic management of the country to Martínez de Hoz. Martínez de Hoz dismantled the concentration of economic power in the state, and pursued foreign investments into the increasingly liberalized Argentine market (Rock 1985:368). For some, these were the years of the *plata dulce* (easy money) (Colás 1994). For most middle- and especially lower-middle-class families, however, this was the beginning of a steep decline.

[4] Argentina's social and economic crisis became even more acute under Fernando de la Rúa's 1999-2001 presidency, and eventually led to the December 2001 riots and the street protests in which the disgruntled Buenos Aires middle-class participated actively by banging pots and pans (*cacerolazos*).

[5] On class as discursively constituted, see Ortner 2003.

[6] Between 1992 and 1996, 93,760 Bolivian nationals reportedly settled in Argentina. The second largest immigrant group was formed by US nationals, with 87,154 individuals, followed by 32,837 Chileans, 21,951 Paraguayans, 5,368 Brazilians, 4,798 Peruvians, and 3,660 Uruguayans (Szulik and

Valiente 1999:240). Yet another immigrant group that kept growing during the 1990s is that of the Koreans, with an estimated presence of 32,000 as of 1996 (Courtis 2000:18).

[7] By the same token, one may argue that the visible "intrusion" of the poor into the city of the privileged was also instrumental to the fantasy of a homogeneously white and homogeneously bourgeois urban space (Deutsche 1996:278)—one whose normative desirability was enhanced through its very same defacement (Taussig 1999:38-39).

[8] Yet, it would be incorrect to claim that the Buenos Aires' middle-classes monolithically opposed Menem's neoliberal government. In fact, with its spectacularization of a consumable first world modernity, the latter exerted a degree of seduction on many middle-class porteños. On this topic, see Guano (2002).

[9] The elitist requirement of proficiency in the rules of civilization continued to mark the antagonized bourgeoisie's discourse throughout Perón's tenure as the head of the Argentine state. As it dismissed the "sweaty, loud… ill-mannered, and criminal-minded" (Ciria 1983:312) crowds of the "shirtless" convening in their newly claimed downtown plazas, the porteño elite kept charging Peronists with occupying a place where they did not belong. The fault of the lower class mobs and their representatives was that of no longer "politely keeping themselves elsewhere" (Koptiuch 1996:219), but rather materializing right at the heart of the bourgeois city as a massive presence whose demand for citizenship could no longer be ignored.

[10] The en-masse appearance of Perón's supporters in downtown Buenos Aires was the epiphany of a presence that had been ignored for too long, confined as it had been to the geographical and social margins of the city or the rural interior of the country. As the presidential Plaza de Mayo—the very heart of bourgeois Buenos Aires--kept filling up with raucous crowds of Peronist supporters drumming their *bombos* and chanting slogans to Evita, public invocations to the "shirtless" and the "greasers" as the true embodiment of the *pueblo argentino* (the Argentine people) became the staple of Peronist propaganda (Ciria 1983:277). To underscore their expropriation of the social and political heart of Buenos Aires, Peronist officers even planned to install a gigantic (60 by 40 meters) monument to the *descamisado* right at the center of Plaza de Mayo (Pittelli and Somoza Rodríguez 1995).

[11] The social invisibility of the Buenos Aires' poor was partly reproduced through a widespread social fatalism. The indigence that afflicts so many Argentines is what Argentine sociologists call "structural poverty" (*pobreza estructural*) (Minujín 1997). The *nueva pobreza*--the poverty of the middle-class of European descent--is a new phenomenon: one that several of my informants described as an unnatural disaster that is reversing the upward mobility of this middle-class' immigrant ancestors. Due, among others, to the close relationship between the Buenos Aires media and their predominantly middle-class publics, throughout the late 1990s the new poverty was granted a high public visibility. Structural poverty, instead, was often viewed by those who had never experienced it personally as a natural and unavoidable matter of fact. As Carlos, an engineer in his early sixty, put it, "A lot of people in Argentina are very poor… That's the way it has always been. You can't change that". Propaganda aside, the consensus in the late 1990s was that structural poverty had become worse since the onset of neoliberalism. Those who were inclined to support president Menem's rhetoric of the need for a "surgery without anesthesia" on the ailing national body dismissed this deterioration as collateral damage. Others, instead, blamed the conjuncture squarely on the lower classes' allegedly mindless support for the ruling Peronist/neoliberal party (Guano 2003).

[12] By 1997, seventeen slums were thought to exist on the territory of Buenos Aires city (*Capital Federal*). With the exception of the slum of Retiro, an upscale and very central neighborhood, all the officially recorded shantytowns were located in the relatively poorer south of the city. Many more dotted the immense territory of the Greater Buenos Aires.

[13] While most of my middle-class informants expressed anxieties about the vicinity of a villa regardless of gender and age, men often phrased their concerns in terms of the danger villas posited to their wives and children—like Diego, a manager who lived in San Isidro and forced his reluctant wife to keep a cell phone with her because she drove by a villa on the way back from work, or Andrés, who worried that the children of his apartment complex in la Boca were increasingly targeted by youth gangs from the nearby Isla Maciel slum, and campaigned to have fences and gates installed around the block.

[14] On the representation of the Buenos Aires slums as "no go" areas, see also Auyero (2000b:62).

[15] In November 2001, a large number of the volunteers who were to run the census of several Buenos Aires slums refused to enter the villas, thus causing what the local newspaper *Página 12* called "black holes" in the Buenos Aires census (Dandan 2001).

[16] On the absence of slums from the maps of Buenos Aires, see also Grassi (1996).

[17] Several of my informants attributed the status of "*inmigrante*" exclusively to the Europeans who settled in Buenos Aires between the late nineteenth and the mid twentieth century. The immigrants from neighboring Latin American countries were, in their words, only *extranjeros*: foreigners.

[18] Porteños are residents of Buenos Aires city.

[19] At the turn of the twentieth century, for example, working class Italian immigrants were thought to carry a biological/moral *herencia* (heritage) that made them into dangerously polluting elements in a society where they did not belong.

[20] Many of the men from the shantytowns made a living by taking on temporary jobs in the construction business for wages that were well below the legal minimum. Women were often employed as maids. Slum dwellers would also work in sweatshops, or do *changas*: occasional chores that were paid in cash.

[21] Since the 2001 crisis, another category of scavengers has grown exponentially: that of the *cartoneros* who focus primarily on recyclable materials.

[22] The neoliberal party that ruled Argentina between 1989 and 1999 was, in fact, the Peronist *Partido Justicialista*. Many of the votes reaped by the PJ had come from the Buenos Aires' shantytowns through a Peronist network that sought to promote the political loyalty of villa residents by distributing favors and assistance. For an analysis of Peronist networks in a Buenos Aires villa, see Auyero 2000b.

[23] On the discursive articulations between the middle-classes' anti-Peronist and anti-neoliberal sentiments and their antagonism to the lower class they accused of supporting President Menem's regime, see Guano (2003).

[24] Upon returning from her Grand Tour, a porteña lawyer expressed her surprise and sadness at seeing garbage littering the streets of London. "You can't walk around without stepping on trash" she informed me, and then concluded: "the British do not litter: the Pakistani and Indian immigrants do. They eat their junk and then drop whatever is left in the streets."

[25] Data from the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censo (INDEC).

[26] According to Isla and Miguez (2003), the "moral panic" that blamed the rise in crime rates squarely on the Buenos Aires' poor was instrumental to covering up for the responsibilities of the neoliberal state. The latter ranged from the increase in mortality rates caused by malnutrition and the difficulty of accessing a largely privatized health care system to the murders and robberies committed by *bonaerense* police officers.

[27] A current trope in the discourse on villas and criminality is that of the *favelización* of the Buenos Aires' slums: a reterritorialization of Brazilian slums (*favelas*) that, once again, associates local poverty with foreign danger.

[28] Not only did the more or less hidden nostalgia for the safety allegedly guaranteed by the totalitarian regime fail to identify state violence as a criminal practice, but it also occulted the historical and political continuities between the indifference to civil society professed by Menem's neoliberal government and its brutal repression at the hands of the military state in its various embodiments (Isla 1999).

[29] For an account of living conditions in villas, tenements, and casas tomadas in the Buenos Aires of the 1990s, see Powers (2001).

[30] In 2001, the number of empty and/or abandoned properties in Buenos Aires was estimated at around 40,000, for a total of 3,000,000 square meters.

[31] Between 1991 and 2002, the Argentine peso was pegged to the US dollar.

[32] Data reported in *Página/12* 11/26/2000.

[33] On the fear of police brutality and corruption, see also Isla and Miguez (2003).

[34] In 1999, President Menem issued a law mandating immediate eviction as soon as a homeowner reported the presence of squatters in his or her property.

[35] And yet, the presence in Buenos Aires of vacant rundown properties was often instrumental to developers who bought cheap and sold at much higher prices. One example is the area known as Abasto. The Abasto produce market was closed in 1948, after which the surrounding neighborhood underwent a steep decline. Due to its vacant houses, empty lots and storehouses, and the high incidence of squatting, the Abasto has been known till recently as the "*Bronx porteño*." In the 1990s, however, the Alto Palermo corporation bought the market for the sake of installing a large shopping mall on its premises, along with a gated residential complex endowed with swimming pool, solarium, and jogging path. As soon as the purchase had been closed, the porteño police initiated an unprecedented eviction campaign in Abasto (Carman n.d.).

[36] The trope of the "barbaric" usurpation of a middle- or upper-class home allegedly perpetrated by lower class individuals is well-sedimented in the social imaginary of the Buenos Aires middle-class, dating back to the bourgeois resistance to Peronism in the mid-twentieth century.

[37] In 2000, the state-run Canal 7 television station broadcasted a series, *Okupa*, featuring the vicissitudes of a handful of drug-addict squatters. Instead of presenting romanticized underclass heroes, director Bruno Stagnaro declaredly purported to tell "things as they are." As a result, the series indulged in a disturbingly crude realism. Though successful with a large segment of middle-class audiences, Stagnaro's *epatez le bourgeois* strategy was not well received by the real occupants of the Buenos Aires' *casas tomadas*, who resented the stereotypes of squatters as criminals, drug-addicts, and prostitutes.

[38] As Bourdieu (1999:128-129) pointed out, those individuals who, upon moving into a place, fail to fulfill the conditions that that space tacitly requires, end up symbolically degrading it—and symbolically degrading themselves at the same time.

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