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Crisis of the social and emergence of sociality in the new scenarios of identity. The San Francisco district of Bilbao

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Resumen

Crisis de lo social y emergencia de socialidad en nuevos escenarios de identidad. El distrito de San Francisco de Bilbao.

El barrio de San Francisco, en Bilbao, está pasando por un profundo proceso de transformación urbana en el que están convergiendo diferentes dinámicas —económicas (especulación inmobiliaria), sociales (emergencia de asociaciones y movimientos sociales) y políticas (planes de rehabilitación)—. Con el fin de explicar estas transformaciones, trabajaremos en este artículo con dos hipótesis: la de la gentrificación y la de la crisis de las instituciones sociales (política, religión y trabajo) que articulaban tradicionalmente la sociedad. Para compensar las limitaciones de ambas hipótesis las redefiniremos como meras condiciones de posibilidad de la emergencia de nuevas formas de socialidad, de despolitización de los significados y de la producción de nuevos espacios. De este modo, San Francisco constituye un cronotopo interesante en la medida en que provoca cierta difuminación en las configuraciones sociológicas y sociales.

Abstract

Crisis of the social and the emergence of sociality in the new scenarios of identity. The San Francisco district of Bilbao.

The San Francisco district in Bilbao (Spain) is undergoing a deep process of urban transformation in which there is a convergence of different dynamics — economic (property speculation), social (appearance of associations and social movements) and political (rehabilitation plans). In order to explain this transformation, we test two hypotheses in the article: gentrification and the crisis of the social institutions (politics, religion and work) that traditionally articulated society. To counterbalance the shortcomings of the two hypotheses we redefine them as mere "conditions of possibility" of the emergence of new forms of sociality, the depoliticisation of signifieds and the production of new spaces. San Francisco constitutes a variable cronotope that provokes a blurring in sociological configurations and in social norms and sanctions.

Palabras clave

Socialidad, gentrificación, cambio social, espacio urbano, crisis de las instituciones

Key words

Sociality, gentrification, social change, urban space, institutional crisis

Índice

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1) INTRODUCTION[1]

This paper addresses the problem of the emergence of new solidarities in contexts of the crisis of social institutions. *Social creativity* in situations of crisis is our problem; *sociality* is the concept that will aid us in giving it theoretical form; and the district of San Francisco in Bilbao is the place where that solution materialises.

The concept of sociality is a delicate and polysemic one. It has frequently been understood as social activity that is exhausted in the pure social relationship without seeking objectives beyond the relationship itself; a social relationship with scarce or null political consequences; a relationship that has yet to be institutionalised. However different they might appear, these definitions nevertheless coincide on one point: *concern for what happens when the social becomes orphaned from the features that were long assumed by sociologists to be necessary to it.*

On the contrary, sociality in this paper refers not only to what happens when what was understood by society is *absent* —the negative perspective; but above all to what occurs when social life is *emerging*— a perspective that becomes positive.

The San Francisco district of Bilbao offers a fascinating panorama for undertaking an analysis of this emergent sociality. It is a territory awaiting definition, arranged, at the most, around networks of relationships that do not —unless forced to— indicate any process of institutionalisation at all. San Francisco is, as we shall

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see, a suitable place for enquiring into the old hypothesis of the re-enchantment of social life, and it permits us to do so without having recourse to the traditional logics of constructing meaning. As a *space of possibilities*, the San Francisco district is replete with situations that take form without at any moment pointing to the "classical" social forms or institutional crystallisations that sociology, with more than due frequency, assumed to characterise its object (religion, work, politics…).

The plan of this study begins from a contextualisation of our research that aims to proceed further than the many incursions into the San Francisco district already made by a certain sociology obsessed with detecting, investigating and solving *social problems*. Similarly, in our analysis of the transformation undergone by the district, we employ an alternative reading of the much used concept of *gentrification*: understood not only as a process of change, but as offering a perspective of the social relations which that process sets in motion. Thus we have recourse to this concept to the extent that it can help us in explaining how urban transformations are always the condition of possibility of the emergence of new social relations.

Here we reach the second objective of our proposal, the concept of sociality understood as *what happens in social life in the absence of the features presumed by sociologists to be inherent to it*: institutions, politically connoted spaces… In our search for concepts to approach this second objective, we have been attentive both to what happens when *serious social life* decays and to what occurs when something new emerges. The result of that work is four *scenarios of analysis,* constructed with the aim not so much of establishing a correspondence with the empirical as of providing a frame of reference that combines varying doses of the following ingredients: the crisis of traditional links and new solidarities; spaces associated, or not associated, with traditional links; the permanent or ephemeral character of social relationships.

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2) SAN FRANCISCO AND THE PROCESS OF GENTRIFICATION

2.1 Notes on the revitalisation of Bilbao and the context of the San Francisco district

In the late 1970s, the metropolitan area of Bilbao began to undergo an economic decline as a consequence of a depression in the industrial activity that had determined the type of urbanisation and the socio-spatial configuration of the city in previous decades. This decline had a notable effect on income, population and employment. In the 1980s and 1990s, the economic restructuring that followed this period of decline brought about deep changes in the labour market, a spectacular increase in unemployment, a profound transformation of the work structure (due to an increase in the number of technicians and a reduction in the number of industrial workers) and the spatial destructuring of the industrial network due to the closure of several industries (Rodriguez, 1998).

These economic processes were accompanied by certain urban transformations associated, on the one hand, with planning and the value of land and, on the other, with suburbanisation and a proliferation of new residential spaces that were an attempt to counteract the situation of decline through a reorganisation in urban planning. Thus the process of *revitalisation of Bilbao* was articulated around an ensemble of initiatives aimed at encouraging specialisation in the service sector. The principal result has been a recovery of urban industrial spaces and the creation of new axes of urban centrality through the construction of broad areas of institutionalised leisure, within which the museums occupy an outstanding place.

On the other hand, the political exercise of Bilbao's urban regeneration has been accompanied by a process of intervention in districts characterised by high levels of "marginality". This is the case of San Francisco, one of the oldest districts of the Township of Bilbao, located to one side of the railway lines of the Northern

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

Station (see map), in one of the central areas of the city, across the river from the Old Quarter [Casco Viejo].

San Francisco is the zone with the highest density of population in the city. It has a total of 14,500 inhabitants, which represents 4.1% of the population of Bilbao, and it occupies 1.43% of the surface (figures for 2003), a density that is four times higher than in the rest of the city. Thirteen percent of the population has taken up residence in the district in the last four years. Until 2000, its population growth was much lower with respect to other city districts due to the high number of people of advanced age (30% of the total), although in the last three years there has been a notable increase in the weight of the younger population, balancing the population pyramid with respect to the rest of Bilbao (the population below the age of 30 is 30% of the total population and the population over 60 has fallen to 27%)[2]. Besides, San

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[2] Data obtained from Ayuntamiento de Bilbao 2000: "*Estudios sobre el sector servicios de Bilbao La Vieja, San Francisco y Zabala*", prepared by the Ikertalde consultancy group. Also see: Diputación Foral de Bizkaia, 1994.

Francisco has an important contingent of immigrant inhabitants (nearly 10% of the population over the age of 16). With regard to its economic structure, it is a zone characterised by a high level of unemployment (17.8% in 2004), the highest in Bilbao and in the Basque Country[3]. It is also characterised by a structural deterioration in its urban infrastructure. Its businesses are dedicated to a different activity from those of the rest of the city, with less sales of traditional products and a higher presence of bazaars, "ethnic" shops and other similar establishments. The structure of the businesses and shops has an eminently family character; they are of a small size with few salaried employees.

2.2 The process of gentrification: a limited hypothesis

A panorama of such characteristics suggests that we are witnessing a double process in the San Francisco district: on the one hand, a process of *pauperisation,* since this is the space in Bilbao that receives the immense majority of the contingent of immigrants and where the highest levels of poverty are found. On the other hand, a process of *rehabilitation,* since the district has absorbed a significant population contingent with both purchasing power and a medium-high cultural level; this has been accompanied by an increase in urban rehabilitation in the district, as well as a notable proliferation of business and cultural initiatives.

For this reason we could employ the much-employed hypothesis that this area of Bilbao is undergoing a process of *gentrification*[4]*,* a term used by urban

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[3] The district of Bilbao with the highest population percentage receiving social benefits is San Francisco. Twenty-one percent of the families resident there receive some type of social assistance.

[4] The origin of this concept is found in the analyses carried out in the 1960s of the transformations undergone in many working class districts of London that were penetrated by the middle classes. An alternative terminological proposal and a good history of the concept can be found in García Herrera (2001) who, facing the Anglicism "*gentrificación*" and other imprecise or too biased alternatives such as "*aburguesamiento*" or "*aristocratización*", proposes use of the concept of "*elitización*". Given the relative relevance of the concept in this text, we have chosen to maintain the usual term "gentrification".

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

sociology to designate changes that occur in districts with pronounced features of marginality when they are inundated by a population proceeding from more favoured social sectors: higher incomes, higher level of education, in short, greater social capital.

Certainly, the process of gentrification, which following Manuel Castells (1974) we could call "urban reconquest", usually coincides with a "profound reorganisation (…) of an economic, social and spatial nature" (García Herrera, 2001). However, it is doubtful that this concept serves to describe "everything" that is currently happening in San Francisco. We would certainly agree with the presumption that this tendency will be confirmed in the long term, and that the future will bring a substantial displacement of the original social groups from these spaces and their replacement by others with a higher purchasing power, as has happened in other well-known cases — the districts of Chueca, Lavapiés or Malasaña in Madrid, the Rabal or the Gothic District in Barcelona or the Old Quarter of Bilbao itself [5]. But, considering the evolution of the San Francisco district, it is no less certain that what we are witnessing at present, rather than the replacement of a situation of pauperisation by one characterised by full gentrification, is a *transition period* in which the combination of these two tendencies is giving rise to a more complex panorama, whose analysis requires the use of another theoretical arsenal, less tied to an extensive or structural analysis, and more sensitive to a qualitative and

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[5] The two following extracts from an interview show that this transformation is perceived in this way:
"The district is undergoing an evolution. It is a district where there are a lot of elderly people; then there's more brutal things like drugs, unemployment; and [then] there are a lot of people here who haven't enough money to get a flat and so have had to leave…or they've come to live here, so there's a growth of that public (…) It's the usual thing, it's a completely marginal zone, very well situated, and the same thing has happened as in the rest of the cities of the world: marginal zones very well situated within the city (…) that experience a progressive advance of people with few possibilities and a lot of creativity and very little fear because they've nowhere to go, who advance and create a place.(…). It's happened in Barcelona, Chueca in Madrid, in the Old Quarter in Seville; it's happening in Bilbao, it happened in the Old Quarter that's become impossibly expensive and it's happening now in [San Francisco]" (E3).

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

intensive reading of urban spaces. Thus, alongside the aim of understanding the logic that structures social relationships in the San Francisco district, we will work with the hypothesis that these relationships are only partially conditioned by the process of gentrification; that, in other words, *the process of gentrification is not so much an explanatory factor as the condition of possibility of new social relationships.*

2.3 Gentrification as the condition of possibility of new social relationships.

Beyond the structural aspects that are the source of a diagnosis of gentrification, the rehabilitation and the rapid socio-spatial transformation of Bilbao have made possible new strategies of relating to, and living in, the urban space of the city in general and the San Francisco district in particular. We are referring to a more qualitative dimension of the processes of urban transformation, which concerns the relationship established between the physical-geographical delimitation of space and its echo in the social imaginary: the ensemble of representations and forms of relationship between space and society, what Walter Benjamin called the *sensorium* of the city.

Thus, San Francisco, a traditionally depressed zone that was socially and symbolically —although not geographically— remote from the commercial and administrative centre of Bilbao, has been transformed into a space open to new types of living, new forms of nocturnal leisure, and to property speculation. This all contributes to producing a complex landscape, with an extremely wide spectrum at the socio-cultural level, where businesses, the majority belonging to immigrants, coexist in the same zone with highly modern leisure areas and renovated flats that are featured in magazines covering the latest tendencies in interior design.

Our starting hypothesis is that different identities coexist in a small area, making San Francisco a *place of places* and a *potential space*. As this diversity is

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

what interests us, we make use of the concept of gentrification solely to the extent that it serves to mark *a profound transformation in the occupation and use of space* and to the degree that it indicates how this transformation brings strong expressions of *social creativity*, giving rise to:

1) the *coexistence* of the old (decadent) and the new (emergent);

2) an *evident polarisation* —economic, cultural, even aesthetic— of the San Francisco district;

3) strong *social tensions*;

4) the *convergence* of highly different projects of social, political and sociological *engineering*: from those that aspire to reconstruct traditional spaces and activities, to others whose dynamics give rise to places without any communitarian framework.

With these premises, we can assert that, within the context of the revitalisation of Bilbao, San Francisco can be read potentially as a *space open to complex modalities of coexistence*, in which the institutional attempt at rehabilitation planning (Ayuntamiento de Bilbao, 2000) is not at odds with the emergence of new spaces of reference in which numerous forms of living and identities are arising, many of them not envisaged in the planning initiative.

3) *SOCIALITY*: CRISIS AND ABSENCE OF THE SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS AND EMERGENCE OF NEW SOLIDARITIES

The changes taking place in the San Francisco district of Bilbao are making a significant moment of change visible. To the extent that we find ourselves dealing with a "space of possibilities", as we have indicated above, we must consider what is novel, both socially and sociologically, in the *genesis of social relationships* in the

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district of Bilbao

San Francisco district. With this intention we make use of an old concept in the social sciences, the concept of *sociality*, which we resignify in order to propose it as a suitable tool for analysing social life when this is caught between, on the one hand, its *crisis* and *absence* and, on the other, its *restructuring* and *emergence.*

The reasons why San Francisco presents itself as a laboratory for this proposal are of two orders: some refer to examples of the emptying of social life in this district, while others refer to the indicators of the emergence of new forms.

3.1 Sociality in the empty spaces of the crisis of the institutions and the absence of the social

Social networks and links are developing in San Francisco that do not fit into the scheme of the social articulated by the institutions —politics, religion, work— around which order has traditionally been articulated and through which social identities have been channelled. Analysis of the district forces us to adopt the perspective of a *crisis of the traditional institutions*. San Francisco is a tangible example that the traditional references are losing value when it comes to conferring meaning on the social, that is to say, they are ceasing to be strong markers of identity and meaning. In a word, they no longer explain the totality. The very idea of a totality that explains everything is called into question. This does not mean that the traditional references disappear: they survive by loosening their limits and leaving a margin for a shift of social meanings, for new modalities of understanding and expression of the social.

The field work carried out in the San Francisco district has made evident the absence, or crisis, of the centres that configure social order, such as work, religion and politics (CEIC, 1999): (i) There are scarce references to the institutions that we had traditionally understood as articulating the social order; (ii) The terms in which these references are defined make the traditional definitions of these institutions

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

diffuse; (iii) Sociality is not inscribed in the logic of institutionalisation through the channels of political participation and social mobilisation; (iv) Politics, work and religion do not appear as articulators of discourses and practices.

Now, it is important to raise certain reservations when having recourse to the also much-employed hypothesis of a crisis of the social that speaks only in terms of "vacuums" and "absences". In any case, the relevance of this corollary extends beyond the loss of centrality of the institutions. What we wish to underscore is that in the interstices of these absences there is a *presence* of other forms of meaning and solidarity, which are far from exhausting their meaning in the breakdown of the *instituted* or the novelty of the *instituting*.

3.2. Sociality as restructuring and emergence of social life

The sociological process of the emergence of the crisis of the social leads us to intuit that not only are we witnessing a process of institutional transformation, but also *instituting tendencies* that exceed the more or less conventional sociological gaze, making evident the rigidity of a sociology that contents itself with the allocation of absences. We refer to a sociological gaze which, because it is tied to a limited conception of sociality and of the spaces in which this materialises, questions that it is far from problematising, shows itself to be insensitive to other articulations of social life. In this respect it is useful to recall the distinction that Marc Augé makes between places and non-places to calibrate the limit of a sociological perspective that shelters behind the thesis of the crisis or the absence of the social.

This conception of the social that gives priority to the instituted, to the permanent, speaks of and from the *anthropological place* (Augé,1994). Firstly, it speaks *of* the anthropological place as its object, a space that is observable since it is instituted and clear in its outlines. The anthropological place is, in this sense, the place of history and memory, a relational place, a place of social relationships; a

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

place, in short, of clearly outlined social identities (political, religious, work, gender, age, etc.). But it also speaks *from* the anthropological place, from an imaginary position of social life that shows itself insensitive to those dynamics that do not have lasting meaning. Insensitive, in short, to the sociality that develops in *non-places*, which, in opposition to places, are non-instituted or *de*institutionalised spheres, characterised by the ephemeral, anonymous and non-permanent condition of the sociality that develops within them.

Non-places promote the permanence of relationships between strangers, a merely physical presence, which, for those who speak from the nostalgia of anthropological places, would annul or level out all subjectivity. From a viewpoint centred on what remains, non-places would correspond to a sort of empty space, one without meaning, a container of activities that are purely "convivial", peremptory; an unarticulated, non-social space. In essence, experience of non-places is seen from this perspective as refractory of meaning. That is to say, they are insignificant spaces not because they are empty but, on the contrary, because they are considered empty, or, more precisely, non-visible since they lack social meaning (Baumann, 2003). It is not, then, surprising that from this standpoint on the hypothesis of the crisis of the social there is a resounding echo of absences.

Nonetheless, from parameters that are less indebted to the instituted, non-places are not spaces empty of social life but spaces where, while there is an evident *absence* of the most solid and permanent parts of the social, other presences emerge. Certainly, there is in non-places an evident absence of those social (and sociological) references that traditionally gave meaning and spatial-temporal moorings to social identities. Does this mean to say that non-places produce no meaning or that they produce nothingness as meaning? To hear the murmur of non-places and to capture the true meaning of the crisis of the social will largely depend

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on our being able to practice a sociology *of* non-places, but also a sociology *from* non-places.

In synthesis:

1) From the perspective of a sociology concerned with instituted social life, a diagnosis is made of a loss of centrality of the traditional institutions in the articulation of meaning and identity. A *relative crisis of the institutions* that, while it does not imply their disappearance, does suppose a transformation and redefinition of their meanings.

2) While, from the perspective of a sociology concerned with forms of non-permanent sociality, the absence of instituted social life is followed by curiosity about the emergence of new articulations of social life.

It is in this sense that we asserted above that there is a confluence in the San Francisco district of traditional logics (in crisis and undergoing transformation) and emergent logics, but as instances that relate and intersect in spite of one not necessarily being a consequence of the other. A confluence that is in keeping with the hypothesis that confers on San Francisco the characteristic of a space of social and sociological possibilities, which has guided our field work, to which we will now turn.

3.3. Matrix of analysis: the scenarios of sociability

In short, what we face in the San Francisco district is a network of multiple scenarios that contain diverse social networks, articulated in a complex manner and according to logics that we will analyse by working with the following premises:

1) San Francisco is a space where diverse scenarios converge; these range from those constructed around *traditional logics* to those that find their reference in *emergent logics*.

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

2) San Francisco is a space of social possibilities: a space for the *invention of solidarities*.

3) Finally, San Francisco is a space of sociological possibilities, a space for *sociological intervention* and *conceptual invention*.

We have restricted our analysis of sociality in the San Francisco district to four scenarios that are obtained by the intersection of two pairs of concepts: social / sociality and places / non-places. The two first concepts of each pair correspond to the traditional or decadent logics of the hypothesis of the *crisis of the social*, while the two second concepts of each pair correspond to the emergent logics of the *new forms of sociality*.

With respect to the first pair of concepts, we understand that it is possible to distinguish between solidarities associated with a more established conception (the SOCIAL, agglutinating forms of instituted solidarity, orientated by conventional logics of the construction of meaning) and other solidarities that indicate a less crystallised conception, which we shall call SOCIALITY (forms of solidarity that are not instituted or orientated by conventional logics of the construction of meaning). With respect to the second pair of concepts, we understand that each one of these types of solidarity develops in spaces that can be linked to different types of social relations, activities and institutions, some of which are more permanent (PLACES), while others are more ephemeral (NON-PLACES).

Four *scenarios*[6] of work emerge from the combination of these pairs of concepts, the analysis of which will provide sufficient indices for understanding the

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[6] The categories *place* and *non-place* refer to the articulation and attribution of social meaning to spaces through the development of social activities. We will speak of *space* as a neutral physical dimension. While *scenarios* will be units ("spatial samples") marked off with a purely methodological or analytical intention, in order to be able to analyse within them the social relations that weave the social life of the district and from which meaning is given to social spaces and the activities developed in them.

different forms of understanding the social relationships, the ways of making use of
the social spaces and the different meanings given to the activities developed within
them. In summary: indications on the degree to which the uses of the space become
solidified in more established social relationships or become dissolved in solidarities
that, although intense, do not set or become institutionalised[7].

The four scenarios that emerge from these premises are shown in the
following table:

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[7] The application of these analytical keys to the development of the field work resulted in the definition
of five situations of study: (1) places orientated to conventional forms of participation and/or political
mobilisation; (2) places orientated to non-conventional forms of participation and/or political
mobilisation; (3) places assigned to restoring social relations orientated by conventional forms of
participation and/or political mobilisation; (4) places orientated to pure sociality, without any prior
definition of activity and not orientated by forms, whether traditional or not, of participation and/or
political mobilisation; (5) places orientated to pure sociality, with a prior definition of activity and not
orientated by forms, whether traditional or not, of participation and/or political mobilisation.
The following field tasks were concretised in accordance with these situations: **E1**: interview and
observation of places and activities associated with conventional forms of participation and/or political
mobilisation; **E2**: interview and observation of places designed with the intention of serving as a basis
for networks of sociality orientated by activities associated with that place; **E3**: interview and
observation of a container place for diverse forms of sociality, not associated with any concrete
activity; **E4**: interview, observation and identification of the trajectories of several agents whose daily
life is developed wholly or partially in the San Francisco district (resident of the district, party in a
student flat in the district, nocturnal trajectory through the district, expert trajectory through the district).

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

Social relationships built around previously existing relationships (the social)	Spaces associated with those networks (Places)	**SCENARIO 1: PLANNING** Planned scenario to make previously constructed relationships plausible.
	Spaces not associated with those networks (Non-places)	**SCENARIO 2: PRECARIOUSNESS** Scenario that makes previously constructed relationships plausible
Social networks not constructed around previously existing relationships (sociality)	Spaces associated with those networks (Places)	**SCENARIO 3: PARADOXICAL INSTITUTIONALISATION** Scenario that authorises the emergence of social relationships exclusively associated with those spaces, with a variable cronotope[8]
	Spaces not associated with those networks (Non-places)	**SCENARIO 4: PURE SOCIALITY** Networks of fleeting relationships that find their conditions of possibility in those spaces with a variable cronotope, but not the conditions for their institutionalisation

4) THE SCENARIOS OF SOCIALITY

We shall now give a detailed explanation of those scenarios and, through them, of the social dynamics that are produced in the San Francisco district. Each of the scenarios will, in general, reflect typical-ideal forms of the adaptation and

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[8] *Cfr.* Bajtin (1989)

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

development of sociality on the basis of the four central concepts: *planning*, *precariousness*, *paradoxical institutionalisation* and *pure sociality*.

4.1. Scenario 1: the restoration of the conditions for traditional solidarity

The first scenario is *conventional* with respect to the forms of solidarity and the type of activity predominant within it, as well as regarding its spatial component, which is organised, maintained and managed according to a *close association between "type of solidarity" and "space"*. In this case what we encounter are social spaces planned according to patterns provided by old logics and old solidarities. Spaces that are designed and planned, as occurs in many recently created places of leisure (bars, pubs…) as genuine "anthropological places" for the different groups that wish to be recognised within them. In the words of the owner of a bar that has recently opened in the district:

> "This was something different. But even so, we weren't going to be opening a bar in a totally alien place. That is, the *Bodeguilla de Imanol* wasn't a typical bar, but it's a place that's known to many of us who've always hung out in the Old Quarter." (E1)

Anthropological spaces: spaces planned and managed under the protection of the idea of accommodating "familiar things" within them: old solidarities, recognisable links… However, there is an important novelty in this scenario: the *strength of planning*, even of *planning the old*. This is a complex scenario: it articulates *the familiar* ("the well-known") with *the novel* ("different things") and both are things that are sought after. Although it might seem paradoxical, the novel is the condition of possibility of the familiar.

> "[San Francisco] was the traditional queer milieu of Bilbao. Like it or not, it's now a zone where there are different things at least, and then we also knew that a lot of young people live in the lower part of *Sanfran*. People who are more or less like us, interests and sensibilities like ours or similar…" (E1)

The reference to traditional social relationships incorporates the novelty of making use of the condition attributed to the San Francisco district as a "space of possibilities" for *reflexively planning* social relationships. This allows us to introduce a first feature of the character of sociality: PLANNING, in the sense that spaces of this nature make it possible to design social relationships. Thus, in the following quotation, where the space is designed and considered according to an express intention of planning styles of life, which although familiar —the "vegetarian", the "informal" — are proposed as new. The features of the district, what was happening in the district ("what was being seen") and in one of its main streets — Dos de Mayo — is what makes it possible to think that these traditional solidarities will find a place where they can become real again, a place, in short, for planning the conditions where possibilities can be realised ("to create a new space"):

> "We wanted a vegetarian scene but calmer, that could be a place for stopping a while and there wouldn't be any problems in having a drink, not a fundamentalist vegetarian scene, not for smoking joints nor for that ambiance. What was happening there, in the Dos de Mayo zone, was that you could start to create a new space in Bilbao…" (E1)

4.2. Scenario 2: old solidarities in search of places to overcome precariousness

The second scenario that emerges in San Francisco is *relatively conventional*. It is organised around activities and forms of solidarity that, in spite of being orientated by traditional links, develop in spaces that are not planned for that type of networks of solidarity. Spaces, then, that are not connoted, that act as *container* spaces, capable of enveloping and protecting different social networks. Thus, the owner of a bar in San Francisco shows what kind of character he wants to give his bar, in the past a place with private areas, which are given a new use as they are now fitted out as flexible, malleable spaces, adaptable to any social relationship:

Papeles del CEIC # 39, septiembre 2008 (ISSN: 1695-6494)
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social and emergence of sociality in the new scenarios of identity. The San Francisco
district of Bilbao

CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

"I don't want my bar to be a place where the only people who come are from the gay movement; I want my place to be where all types of people come and for them to come because they feel like being there, not because of the type of people" (E3)

In a certain way, multifunctional places, non-places, that is, places that can embrace and be embraced by the style of different communities of meaning:

"(A space) where people calmly come to enjoy themselves" (E3)

A container space, where meaning is found by different, already existing groups, which lacked a space in which to develop themselves:

"Thursday is the day when I most like […] because… on Thursdays my mother usually brings all her friends from the bank. One day you see all those fifty-something year olds, sixty year olds, my mother brings them for 'a quick drink and we´ll be off'. Really delighted. Until three in the morning we're together: four from the Fine Arts Faculty who are there for I don't know what reason, my mother and her friends…" (E2)

It is this type of *institutionalised solidarities that require a physical, spatial medium which they lack*, in order to give form to their identity, that meets in this type of scenario in the San Francisco district. We are not talking, as in the case of the previous scenario, of groups with a monopolising vocation in the scenario they occupy, since in this case all accept the need of conviviality with others. What is certainly surprising amongst these old socialities in search of a space for development is that we repeatedly find groups whose nexus of union is of a political nature. Here, these old solidarities run into more ephemeral solidarities and all coincide in the aim of *finding places for overcoming the fragility of their relationships, albeit temporarily*:

"The public at the bar generally comes to have a drink, listen to music, but to talk about trivial things, people come here to chat and talk about their things. Well! On Fridays a group of kids come who

really surprise me, about 25 years old, a sort of street-fighter
[*borrokilla*] style [9]" (E3)

While in the first of the scenarios we mentioned a certain planning of social
relations, in this scenario we find a second theme: that of PRECARIOUSNESS. Isaac
Joseph has described this very well when he points out that private anomies
generate a need to reconstitute regimes of socialisation (1988: 71); that is, in
contemporary life different groups, aware of their shortcomings, attempt to correct
these and seek places where they can be plausible. Space functions as a container
of multiple solidarities, adopting a kaleidoscopic form.

> "There are bars there that are completely gay, no girls can go in
> there, they can't enter, it's absolutely clear, there's the […] that's got
> a totally gay public or there's the […] (…) then there's the […] where
> people go to hear *soul* and who feel like hearing good music and
> the […] where it's exactly the same, at first the public was totally gay
> and now…." (E3)

These are groups that make use of ductile spaces and adapt them to
different situations and interests. This is what happens, for example, in a space in
principle as traditional as a students' flat. During an ethnographic observation of a
party in a students' flat in the San Francisco district, we experienced this plasticity or
adaptability of even traditional places as containers for the variable production of
space. The students´ flat becomes a metonym of the district. The following passage
is taken from the fieldwork notebook:

> "During the party, as they arrived at the place, friends and guests
> formed clearly differentiated groups: the "friends" conversed seated
> around some joints and bottles of beer in one of the bedrooms,
> forming a group that was closed to the other participants in the
> party. Another group was formed by the "heavy metal" people,
> clearly identifiable by their tight pants, black shirts, long hair, etc.
> These showed their links of friendship and group solidarity all the
> time. They remained in a single place throughout the party, the

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[9] "*Borrokilla*" and *"Borroka"* — expressions designating the aesthetic characteristics by which sectors
of the radical Basque left are identified.

Papeles del CEIC # 39, septiembre 2008 (ISSN: 1695-6494)
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social and emergence of sociality in the new scenarios of identity. The San Francisco
district of Bilbao

bedroom at the back that gave onto the street. They only came out looking for drinks, which were in the kitchen at the other end of the flat. Another group was formed by the girls from Fine Arts and their guests. In another room, the one at the end of the flat, slides were shown to the rhythm of music that was selected by one of the heavy metal people. One of the rooms had been prepared as an improvised space for dancing. Another group was formed by theatre students, most of whom weren't from the district. Their radius of action was the kitchen and the living room".

In any case, the networks of traditional solidarity are associated with new categories of sociability, which involve new ways of occupying space. These are attitudes that are represented through an imaginary that calls up ideas of "appropriation" and the "creation of free and malleable spaces"…

> "Obviously, it's really obvious that in the […] what's happening is that each person can let out their own demons, they can exorcise them and everyone feels much freer, in […] people are much more free, from the moment they come through the door, from that moment on…" (E2)

… ideas of "exaltation of difference and diversity" as aspects that encourage conviviality and relationships. And although these attitudes are always developed around a continuous recognition of traditional references, such references are exposed in the process and put at risk, through a type of - probably necessary — exorcism, in order to make enjoyment the form of living the social, and the requirement for emphasising the capacity of choice and the production of alternatives. Thus these attitudes accentuate the vision of the district and its numerous niches as a space of social possibilities, "free spaces" where you "go and you feel good", where "you just let people be":

> - "There's a mixture of punks, "white rastas", people out for the whole night, and then there are people, cool progressives…there was nowhere else where you could mix with that type of people. And in the […] the people mixed well. I clearly saw that …the space was important to us…the space is where you go and you feel good. So we wanted everyone to feel good.
> - How do you bring that about?

Papeles del CEIC # 39, septiembre 2008 (ISSN: 1695-6494)
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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

- I think it's by creating free spaces, nothing more nor less. Spaces without much repression, where you just let people be. Without standing out much, I don't know… I think that we managed to achieve that type of thing because there were people having a snack, there was a bit of everything…there were mixtures… you could find squatters and, at the next table, or further along the same table, a group of well-off students, or cool progressives" (E1)

Old solidarities in search of places where precariousness can be overcome; places that make mixing possible —"white rastas", "squatters", "punks", "cool progressives", "students"— in barely connoted spaces, small laboratories that act as container spaces as catalysers of social relationships.

4.3. Scenario 3: institutionalised "pure" socialities

The third scenario of sociality is no longer conventional, but instead *relatively emergent*. Relatively, as it emerges from non-traditional solidarities, and is developed in places with a variable physiognomy, in which a sociality takes form as a result of continuous interaction. A paradoxical solidarity, *emergent* and *institutionalised* at the same time, which in the majority of cases can only be developed and established in spaces of a type where change and novelty become the norm. In this sense, the space is transformed into an unconventional space since it is planned to accommodate sociality:

"It's no longer a place where people come, have a drink and leave, no, the people come here to spend an hour, two hours" (E3)

"In this type of space, which we'll call 'non-posh', people have less trouble than in the posh bars. There are less problems in the zones where extravagantly dressed people drink than in the posh zones, so the relation is reversed. That is, you're a hippy-punk-white rasta and you can go to a lot of places in the centre and you get disapproving looks. On the other hand, in the bars of the hippy-punk-white rastas that's not the case…man, if you look really posh, well, they might look at you and wonder where the hell you came from" (E1)

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Which doesn't prevent them from being spaces that are also envisaged for transformation, activity and the game of appearances. Condition of possibility of relationships and expressions of identity that are far from being feasible or probable in other spaces; here a strong feature distinguishes the space from other spaces "out there":

> "What we're achieving is that people transform themselves in the bar. What happens is that obviously this happens in the bar, but I don't know if it has any influence out there, but in the bar, as I see it, we achieve a mixture, people get on with each other" (E2)

> "Man, people open their minds, that is, they open their minds in the […], what I don't know is if that later means anything outside" (E2)

In short, these emergent modalities contribute to a certain process of institutionalisation, arising, on the one hand, from the dynamics generated around the novel, and, on the other, from the institutionalisation of the district as a space of possibilities:

> "For example, I hear that they're soon going to open another art gallery here, they're going to set up another place here in Aretxaga, I think this zone is going to be *the* alternative zone" (E3)

> "And I think it's going to get more so, I think that in a couple of years time this is going to be *the* zone of Bilbao" (E3)

This is a singular institutionalisation: so much so that we can speak of a third theme of sociality, PARADOXICAL INSTITUTIONALISATION, which adopts the following formula: SOCIALITY (social activity that is exhausted in the pure social relationship) BUT DURABLE. So we are speaking of what is probably one of the oldest processes described by sociology: the process of institutionalisation, the construction of a we, a space/time, a common name: "*fans*", "*the public of the Arrebato*", "my world"…

> "The […] doesn't have clients, it has fans" (E2)

> "Yes, I am making it into my world, I'm getting respect for my life" (E2)

This is a way of institutionalising chance, that is, the relationship transmits stability and permanence through pure repetition. In the following extract from the fieldwork notebook, as the party progresses we can observe that what was in principle a fortuitous meeting of dispersed groups is transformed into an amalgam of experiences that shape the party. The party is not the product of a prior ritualisation. It is ritualised to the degree that trajectories intersect and encounters are intensified.

> "To a large extent the people who came to the students' flat didn't know they were coming to a party: some were invited, others went there looking for other people and others simply showed up with their friends. In this sense, nobody had organised a party. Some defined the situation as a meeting of friends, others interpreted it as a party. The definition depended on the place where one was and the group one was in, as well as on displacements through the flat".

The same degree of paradoxical institutionalisation can be observed in some groups when they enter into contact with new cultural referents. The following is what happens to a "classical" group, identified in political terms as *militants* [borrokas][10], who approach certain uses and tastes (musical tastes, drug use) of other groups proceeding from the techno culture. This hybridisation gives rise to a new form of nomination —*technomilitants*— who fuse two already institutionalised references into a third that appears to be stabilised as a collective identity:

> "Well, there's the zone with *militants*, and there's a type of *militant*, those who've recycled themselves, who we call "*technomilitants*", who like techno music and take synthetic drugs and they come to our bar" (E2)

Frequently, although novelty is institutionalised and the ephemeral becomes fixed, new directions are required to avoid stagnation. Facing a situation where the provisional becomes permanent, an opposite reaction takes place, the permanent becomes provisional. This occurs in spaces characterised by a high level of reflexivity.

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[10] See note 9.

"That amused me for a while… I'll make sure there's expression, that I'm different, that I communicate. I know that this will end up as something commercial. Then I'll go somewhere else and do crazy things elsewhere and it'll become commercial as well" (E2)

4.4. Scenario 4: pure sociality

The sequence closes with what might be a social impossibility from which —unless we show sensitivity to what occurs beyond the evident— one would have to infer a sociological impossibility; a sociality that is not supported on preceding practices or routines and that is not developed in places designed with the aim of promoting new forms of solidarity. This disconcerting "unsociable" sociality is exhausted in the fleetingness of pure interaction and requires a particular topology in which to develop: places lacking any mark, refractory of any social imprint, places that exercise the function of being mere containers. These are scenarios that contain non-political and non-social relations; they escape from all fixedness and it is not even possible to conceptualise them, represent them or categorise them with the arsenal of mainstream sociology. Proof of this is that even the normal rhetoric of fieldwork becomes awkward in face of such places. That is why in this section the reader will not find the extracts from interviews and ethnographic descriptions that illustrated the previous scenarios.

What is disconcerting is that one is facing a scenario in which a fleeting, agonic sociality develops, one that is exhausted at the very instant it is expressed, that is, one in which any degree of permanence and stability is limited to its emergence. The result is a *pure sociality*. Pure emergence, unlike the previous scenarios and the types of solidarity that operate within them, which answered to different logics of the social/instituted and of the instituting.

However, considered without prejudice, this fourth scenario forms a *place where sociality is invented*. Socialities solely associated with the space/time of

interaction are expressed within it. Spaces, in short, that make it possible to speak of a fourth theme of sociality: the EMERGENCE OF FORMS OF SIGNIFICATION. A double emergence and a double challenge, since it appeals both to the social forms and to the sociological categories we employ to describe them. Thus, this fourth scenario, this social impossibility, is the pretext for a sociological emergence, as it lays the foundations on which to rethink (the uses of) social space and the social link itself.

5) CONCLUSIONS

We close this text by first reviewing our initial hypotheses concerning the coexistence of traditional and emergent logics in the San Francisco district; more specifically, the hypotheses referring to gentrification and the crisis of the institutions, premises that we posed at the outset as possible diagnoses of the current panorama of the district. Next, we will centre the elaboration of our argument on the proposal of the notion of a *space of possibilities* as the axis for elaborating three conclusions, two referring to the *social possibilities* —the images of the *container space* of sociality and the *empty space* provide the necessary metaphors; the third is intended to make San Francisco into a laboratory for *sociological creativity*— the concept of *depoliticisation of meaning* models the suggestion that we make in this section.

5.1. Reviewing hypotheses: coexistence of traditional and emergent logics in the San Francisco district

Before concluding with a definition of the profiles of the forms of signification that are emerging in the San Francisco district of Bilbao, we will return to the aspect that we considered to be structurally most relevant at the start of our trajectory: the coexistence in a single social space of traditional and emergent logics. In order to deal with this social phenomenon we had recourse to two explanatory hypotheses of

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district of Bilbao

CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

change. The first responded to an *ascendant* meaning from the social point of view, although conservative from the sociological point of view: gentrification understood as the transformation of the district and the replacement of the population that occupied it by another with radically different patterns with respect to housing, culture, consumption, etc. On the contrary, the second hypothesis presented a *decadent* meaning from the social point of view — although more risky from the sociological point of view: the crisis —or the absence in the case of the San Francisco district— of the institutions structuring social order. It is now opportune to introduce a series of nuances into these hypotheses, which although opposite in meaning, coincide on one point: the univocal character of their interpretations. Both hypotheses are thus closed to any other interpretation or emergence of social signifieds, beyond a limited understanding of emergence — the case of gentrification —or a decadence that is irreducible to any other sociological consideration— the case of the crisis of the institutions.

Concerning gentrification

With respect to the hypothesis of gentrification, our analysis has made it evident that the situation of the San Francisco district is structurally very similar to that of other districts —Chueca, Lavapiés or Malasaña in Madrid, the Rabal in Barcelona, etc. — where analyses based on this concept have been carried out. However, the results we have obtained in our research make it plain that, rather than a univocal and coherent process of renovation of the population and the socio-cultural characteristics of the district, what we are witnessing in San Francisco is a complex process of *transformation in progress*, whose most relevant aspect is the coexistence of different strategies for the management and use of the space - strategies that are not so much agonic as antagonistic. The casuistry is broad: gay and lesbian circuits, traditional bars, restaurants serving international cuisine, barely defined spaces… all landmarks of varied itineraries that, their differences

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

notwithstanding, coincide on a single territory and intersect in ways that are unforeseen on occasion, irreducible in any case to the strategies through which traditional solidarities are woven.

Returning to the hypothesis proposed, gentrification, it could therefore be said that if it exists, it does so as a condition of possibility of the emergence of new forms of construction of meaning, as a generator of new forms of sociality. In our case, we do not understand gentrification as the construction of a new unit of meaning —a new district— but as the process that makes possible the coincidence in a single reduced space, the San Francisco district, of groups that activate different itineraries and activities and, while they experience and objectivise the district in a different way in each case, all coincide in representing it as a type of "multiple unit"[11].

Concerning the crisis of the institutions

The process of change observed in the San Francisco district also leads us to propose the hypothesis that the emergence of novelties and transformations was due to the exhaustion of the institutions that traditionally articulated social life and that it could be understood that this was the cause of the emergence of new forms of collective life. However, if at the outset it was thought that the crisis of certain social institutions (essentially politics, religion and work) produced, through a type of automatism, a redefinition and transformation of social meaning, this was later shown to be a hypothesis that, if not false, was certainly insufficient.

Indeed, what emerges from analysis in the field is the diffusion of the significations and social codes produced by the traditional institutions, that is, their loss of centrality. Now, analysis cannot end with the observation that the old

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[11] Hence the fact that in all the discourses we have collected there is a unanimous appreciation that the district constitutes something *different* from the rest of the city: when any of the bridges separating San Francisco from the rest of the city has been crossed, it becomes evident that nothing will be the same once inside this district.

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CEIC   http://www.identidadcolectiva.es/pdf/39.pdf

architecture, the *social*, has entered into crisis, it must be completed by also observing how another logic underlies this crisis, one that is parallel to the first but of a contrary sign: it is emergent and is not in crisis; it corresponds to what in this work we have grouped under the name *sociality*, the emergence of new solidarities and new forms of signification.

With this proposal, our perspective appeals to a form of practising sociology that rather than allocating absences attempts to reveal presences; that does not allow itself to be subjugated by the central institutions of social life and fixes its gaze on aspects that, although dispersed, less solid, more fleeting and, in short, less institutionalised, do not cease to be relevant. This is the viewpoint that has guided us when drawing up our conclusions on the San Francisco district.

5.2. Proposing a result: San Francisco as a "space of possibilities"

We thus insist on affirming the hypothesis that the crisis of the institutions alone does not provide a clear view of the processes of emergence of new socialities, as it speaks more of what is absent than of what is present; more of what is in decline than of what is emerging. In order to centre our attention on the latter we have paid special attention to what is novel in San Francisco, both regarding the use of space and the production of meaning in the scenarios of sociality that we have analysed.

But we wish to go beyond the merely descriptive, not to say voluntarist, characterisation of San Francisco as a "space of possibilities". From what has been proposed through analysis of our *quartet of scenarios of socialities* can be deduced in broad outlines what we understand by *space of possibilities*:

i)   Firstly, that these scenarios are free of traditional subjections — political, religious, etc., subjections that transcend them.

ii)   Secondly, that this desertion of old solidarities makes it possible for such scenarios to be reutilised as spheres of identification for new groups and in accordance with new variants.

We will conclude the development of that hypothesis by affirming that all those scenarios are united by a common denominator woven around three images: i) *container spaces*; ii) *empty space*; and iii) the *depoliticisation of signifieds*. While the former two synthesise what has been extracted from *social* logics, those that are proper to *the field*, those that are emerging in San Francisco, the latter refers to the *sociological* possibilities that are suggested by this district. Our conclusion, the idea of San Francisco as a "space of possibilities", takes theoretical form from all of these images.

The container space

A certain tradition leads us to find coincidences of *meaning, activity* and *identity* in the scenarios of social life. As we have already seen, this impulse probably derives from the logic of the old anthropological places. However, it is worth considering that spaces marked by previously structured meanings —meanings that transcend and explain them, meanings that seem to determine their purposes— can be consumed with unforeseen purposes; that is, with (and in) *other meanings*. A deviation of purposes that makes it possible to think of certain changeable, even promiscuous, expressions of social life, and also to qualify these already-existing-spaces as *container spaces*: different activities that were previously dispersed become concentrated in terrains planned for other effects; terrains that are born with one purpose finish up containing —making possible— activities with which they held no *a priori* relationship.

We have just called them "promiscuous spaces", and indeed they are: they articulate the more classical socialities with new forms of leisure or commerce; they

make possible the passage and trajectory of different groups. Flexible spaces that are defined as the day passes and according to modalities of occupation and use that are developed by the groups that inhabit them at each moment, becoming unfixed points of reference for urban trajectories. All that remain —and are rigid— are the limits, the frontiers of the territory that contains sociality; its contents are, however, highly variable.

The empty space

When encoding the topology of these new forms of living the scenarios of the social, it is pertinent to have recourse to the concept of *space as an empty signifier* (Laclau, 2000). When facing an improbable coincidence of signifier and signified —a coincidence that refers to an absolute stability of social relations, one of those spectacular "anthropological spaces", full of identity, relationships, history, in short, *meaning*— this concept indicates how an *empty space* contains *equivocal* and *ambiguous* social relationships. Equivocal as they can be associated with several signifieds (*ibidem*: 94); ambiguous as there is a coexistence and articulation of signifieds within them that is unforeseen, and even improper.

Affirming that spaces such as those analysed in the case San Francisco are empty signifiers does not imply defining them as lacking meaning. Rather, it means defining the space as something that contains different activities, a space which, because of this, is therefore a type of battlefield where there is a convergence of practices, uses, activities that attempt to hegemonise the space and create a meaning around it.

Space as empty space; the possibility, even, of thinking of a production of space that exceeds the meaning adopted by the rigid opposition between places and non-places, between the permanent and the ephemeral.

The depoliticisation of signifieds

Sociology has made a subject of empty spaces as *waste spaces*; spaces that are hostile to a logic of the social that is more sensitive to spaces that are open, clean, public, communicative, full of meaning and that is less sensitive to those that are precarious, interstitial, obscure, elusive, empty[12]. It is therefore not surprising that such an imaginary attributes no value at all to the sociality developed in spaces peripheral to the public space[13]. This is the case of our fourth scenario, which is "unthinkable" for a conventional social and sociological logic.

It is also the case of our theoretical proposal as a whole: spaces without meaning, or similarly, *spaces without political meaning*, spaces from which the meaning attributed to what is conventionally understood by public spaces is absent. But this is where one of the most outstanding features of the solidarity analysed in San Francisco emerges: the depoliticisation of the signifieds that are articulated around that vacuum in which they seem to function.

A *politicised signified* implies the association of a determinate content with a context of established use and with a concrete signification. *Depoliticisation* suggests the exact opposite: the perversion, profanation or alteration of that association; that is, the same contents are used in different contexts and with other meanings, in this way preventing the direct transmission of the meaning it originally sheltered.

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[12] "Many empty spaces are not simply inevitable waste but rather inevitable ingredients of another process: that of "mapping" the space shared by many different users (…) For a map 'to make sense', some areas must be rejected since they lack meaning and are not very promising (…) Cutting out these places enables the others to shine and to be filled with meaning (…) Those places are empty that we do not enter and in which we would feel lost and vulnerable and somewhat alarmed before the gaze of others" (Baumann, 2003:112).

[13] A clear example of the estrangement produced by these non-public spaces is the characterisation of "vile corners" in the following extract from an interview:

"However, you come here, and any weekend here, a Friday evening, any vile corner is a space…it has no other use than that: to drink some litres of beers"(CEIC, 1999: 90).

In opposition to the vile corners, the civic centres are clean, fully meaningful spaces:

"…they've just opened the Civic Centre. That's a space which I think, with time, to the extent that it's made use of, could be a pleasant space, and it could be a space where people can be a little more open"(ibidem: 92).

This depoliticisation occurs both by virtue of the planned use of empty spaces as container spaces and by virtue of the actions of those who use these spaces. The latter actions, which are more *flexible* than reflexive, form a pragmatic that bends significations towards the spatial, in the double sense of a physical path and the displacement of signifieds.

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In short, San Francisco constitutes an emergent and hybrid space in which the articulation between spaces and activities —clearly distinguishable in other areas that are more consolidated from the viewpoint of the meaning they generate— is blurred. Activities with a vocation of permanence are developed indistinctively in spaces designed in order to channel these practices or in spaces that lack any political framework. Similarly, ephemeral practices traverse both container spaces fitted out with the single aim of facilitating the social encounter, without pretensions of durability, and other spaces whose outlines are clearer, more planned and connoted from the viewpoint of the project that is born within them. In summary, San Francisco constitutes a variable *cronotope* that provokes a blurring in sociological configurations and in social norms and sanctions.

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