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Territories of schooling and schooling territories in contexts of extreme urban poverty in Argentina: Between management and abjection

Silvia M. Grinberg

National Committee of Science and Technology (CONICET)/National University of San Martín (UNSAM)–National University of Patagonia Austral (UNPA), Argentina

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ABSTRACT

We are living in a time when large masses of workers have become large masses of the unemployed and, to borrow Butler's term, their bodies constitute an army of bodies that don't matter. This is probably one of the greatest dilemmas in our society, in the globalized world and in regions like Latin America in particular. In the framework of governmentality studies, this paper presents advances in research geared towards characterizing schooling practices in contexts of extreme urban poverty, specifically in an area on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (Argentina) with one of the highest concentrations of shantytowns. Starting in the late 1960s with the crisis in Fordism and the closing of factories, a dense population has come to inhabit these urban spaces in the midst of a process of extreme decay. I will focus, in this work, on the characteristics that I understand to distinguish the pedagogical devices and processes of subjectivation bound to the configuration of these abject territories.

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1. Introduction

For the last four years, I have been conducting an ethnographic research project in three schools in Argentina that operate in contexts of extreme urban poverty. In this article, I focus on the characteristics of pedagogical devices evident in these schools after years of educational reform and a series of social and economic crises that, in Latin America in general and Argentina in particular, have meant a steady impoverishment of the population and the steady growth of neighborhoods that are often called "shantytowns." The questions I explore about these pedagogical devices revolve around their relationship to the processes of subjectivation in these urban territories. I suggest that there is a continuum between the school territory and the neighborhood territory, both of which are marked by a management logic that has left a large portion of the population to its own devices. Here, I discuss the nature and forms of schooling in times when biopolitics no longer takes the form of *making live and letting die* (Grinberg, 2008; Rabinow and Rose, 2006; Rose, 2007).

In the relevant literature, the nineties are often identified as key years in relation to a number of aspects of social life: the crisis of rationality, the crisis of the accumulation model, of the State, of political parties, of representation, of meta-stories, of institutions, of the family, among others. In this context, the school was, and still is, one of the target institutions of both the crises and the neo-liberal reforms that set out, among other things, to modify an educational system that these reform policies believed was no longer in keeping with social and economic demands. I am speaking, here, of the constitution of a new discursive formation (Foucault, 1999, 2007) which, in the field of education, has emphasized decentralization as key to a democratic and participatory practice. Concepts like management, project, innovation, reflection, autonomy, the new school, change, participation/democracy and self-management became the keys to a new discursive landscape (Ball, 1994, 2007; Da Silva, 1998; Grinberg, 2008; Popkewitz, 1996; Whitty et al., 1999; Youdell, 2006).

Educational research projects have attempted to describe both crisis processes and neo-liberal educational reform. Nonetheless, specific studies on the changes in pedagogical devices in everyday schooling in general and, specifically, in contexts of urban poverty in Latin America and in Argentina, are few (Grinberg, 2005; Orlando, 2008). Such studies are indispensable both for the production of knowledge and for a political intervention that manages to improve, if only slightly, the current state of schools.

Using field notes, in this paper I attempt to describe the particularities of pedagogical devices tightly bound to the dynamics of the territorial placement of schools: that is, the power relations, the specific forms of schooling and the way in which educational policies are experienced in a certain territory. In the following pages, I present first a conceptual and methodological approach to the project and then delve into the field notes, which

E-mail address: grinberg.silvia@gmail.com.

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are organized in two tightly bound parts, one that describes the neighborhood, and a second that discusses school life and its relations to the former.

2. Pedagogical devices and territory

The reflections presented here offer a description of territory and school life in light of the concept of pedagogical devices. Through Foucault (1983), I use the term "pedagogical devices"[1] to refer to the meanings, norms, temporal and spatial distributions that shape schooling at a determined historical place and time. Pedagogical devices presuppose a certain organization and use of space (including the arrangement of furniture and equipment) and of time (including the organization of a school schedule, the sequence of school tasks, etc.). The term also entails notions of appropriate school clothing, the use of certain words and means of communicating, textbooks, curricular contexts, school rules and means of punishment, monitoring attendance, grading systems, school routines and rituals. That is, it refers to a battery of details that constitute techniques and procedures connected to the production of subjectivity (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). In this paper, I describe some of these aspects, focusing specifically on two of the basic coordinates of the life of schools and the subjects in them: the organization and distribution of time and space.

Initially, sociology dealt with the tight connections between urban space, social groups and/or social identities (Tonkiss, 2005). According to Simmel, spatial divisions are not only simply physical facts but also social products that, in and of themselves, constitute spatiality. In his study of the State's governmentalization processes, Foucault (2006) finds a close connection between the problem of government and the configuration of urban life which, he says, must reconcile the existence of the city and the legitimacy of sovereignty. The logics of discipline and of security devices ceaselessly articulate the problem of how to frame, establish, protect or broaden territory. In the field of problems linked to governmentality (Dean, 1999; O'Malley, 2007; Rose, 1999; Rose et al., 2006), the question revolves around how conduct is handled in school life and its dynamics in the context of management societies and abject urban spaces.

The notion of territory is important insofar as it allows us to understand the school as a material location where the meaning, constellation, and inclusive and exclusive nature of space are significant (Youdell, 2006; Helfenbein and Gonzalez Velez, 2007). The construction of school space entails the intersection of local, national, regional as well as global spatialities. This is the context for a discussion of how objects become technological and are incorporated into discourses. In other words, the discourses and technologies of government are spatial: they are inextricably located in other spatial relations. As Gulson and Symes (2007: 2) point out, this perspective allows for a greater understanding, "of the competing rationalities underlying educational policy change, social inequality and cultural practices".

At present, this perspective is particularly important given the dynamic of social and territorial segregation that increasingly characterizes urban life (Wacquant, 2001, 2007). Fearnley (2005: 2) points out that health and security – and I believe the same holds true for education – are being resituated "in a new social geography in which disease is thinkable and visible. By organizing and breaking up the world in new ways, this technical rationality displaces and re-inscribes the populations and territories that underpin the practices of war and health."

Here, the markings of place and territorial configuration operate according to a double dynamic: on the one hand, in relation to how schools – and, in the contexts discussed here, the neighborhoods in which they are located – produce these markings and, on the other, how they express them. The meanings of place inscribe persons, urban spaces and institutions in particular ways. "They are codes underpinned by local knowledge, or what we will frame as discourse, that index racial and classed meanings of people as well as construct places within institutional and city spaces." (Buendía and Ares, 2006: 1).

The dynamic of urban segmentation constitutes one of the ruptures in pedagogical devices in the management age (Grinberg, 2007; Grinberg, 2008). In keeping with Foucault, disciplinary devices entailed the enclosure of childhood by grouping differences in a single establishment and effecting their normalization. Until the 1980s, many studies in the field of the sociology of education evidenced the mechanisms used to effect the homogenization of childhood as well as processes of educational selection and segmentation. Among the most important investigations along these lines are works by Bourdieu and Passeron (1985), Bowles and Gintis (1981), Baudelot and Establet (1971) and, in Argentina, Braslavsky (1984). The problem discussed here is related to the new dynamics that have been taking hold in the production and reproduction of social and educational inequality in this region starting in the late 20th century (Kessler, 2002; Tiramonti, 2004). Fieldwork suggests that we are now operating under another logic, one that does not revolve around learning to work (Apple and King, 1983), but rather around learning to make time go by.

In this paper, I suggest that school is ceasing to be a space for grouping and/or differentiating identities, subjects and social groups. More and more schools, like the neighborhoods they are in, partake of the logics of territorial and social fragmentation. As discussed below, these schools are placed in neighborhoods where there is no public transportation. It is, therefore, difficult for those who live in such neighborhoods not only to get out, but also to get in, to circulate, to come and go every day; this is even more difficult for those who do not live in these areas.

In the context of workfare policies that shift responsibility to communities and subjects, the contents of schools and neighborhoods vary according to how they manage themselves and the situations in which their lives unfold. I believe that these logics of transferring management responsibility to the community and to subjects (Ball, 1994, 2007) are central to understanding current school processes.

It is in this context that this research has come across emerging ways of feeling, thinking, fantasizing and dreaming. When I speak of the production of subjectivity in these abject spaces, I do so understanding that these are not abstract processes but rather specific ways that subjects constitute forms of living, of inhabiting, of taking pleasure and of imagining their existence.

3. Methodology

By working at the level of educational institutions themselves, it is possible to heed the ways in which policies and actions planned and implemented from and by centralized agencies (indeed, sometimes international and global agencies) are experienced, filtered, contested and/or reconstructed at the level of school life. This often produces contradictory logics, as well as power relations, struggles and lines of flight. By means of an ethnographic study, it was possible to explore the multiplicities and nuances of daily

[1] The notion of pedagogical devices was developed by Bernstein (1998) to evidence processes different from those described here. His work deals with the general principles that underlie the transformation of knowledge in the framework of pedagogical communication. Given the particularities of the research project discussed here, I use the notion of device as it is defined and used by Foucault, among others, in works like *Discipline and Punish*.

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