SQUATTERS AND THE POLITICS OF MARGINALITY IN URUGUAY

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Latin American Political Economy

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For Martin, who put my whole life in perspective, including this book, and therefore made it possible for me to finish it.

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This book emphasizes the power of networks. Without mine, my support, academic, and in-field networks, I would never have been able to write it. Time and my maturing process did their work too. When I finished my dissertation at the University of Pittsburgh under the guidance of the most generous and wise man I have ever met, John Markoff, and of my wonderful and very much involved committee including Kathy Blee, Javier Auyero, and Pat Doreian, I wanted to publish right away. Many obstacles impeded this, leading to great frustration despite the joys and challenges of a new job in a new country. Now, 7 years later, having returned to the field numerous times, written several articles about the topic, and having a longer longitudinal perspective, as well as a few more years under my belt, I feel a smoother pen, one that flows more easily, and that is more certain, more me.

The book would have remained on a desk had it not been for the two people that pushed me to get it out from there. Juan Carlos Rodríguez Raga, my partner in crime and love, knew that this was a painful debt I had to pay myself and reminded me of that, every time I wanted to give up. Juan Pablo Luna, a friend and admired colleague with whom I learned most of what I know about clientelism in our country, was the other force pushing me to send this book out. I could not be more grateful for that encouragement. My parents, sister, nephew, and brother-in-law are of course the most basic network, the basic emotional network, which is always the happiest and proudest even if what

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Introduction

The last decades of the twentieth century combined two conditions that triggered mobilizations throughout Latin America: neoliberal reforms and democratization (Johnston and Almeida 2006). As such, we have witnessed the flourishing of indigenous rights movements in several countries, from the Zapatistas in Mexico to the Mapuches in Chile, great activity by the MST (Movement of Rural Landless Workers) in Brazil, the mushrooming of NGOs and other civil society organizations, the emergence of the unemployed *piquetero* movement in Argentina and many other similar forms of austerity, and anti-privatization protests especially among the popular classes (Walton and Ragin 1990). Although Montevideo's squatters were not protesting against economic policy, they were clearly part of its consequences and, as we will see, some of them implied collective action in the context of a democratizing society. Housing, labor, and other basic needs were behind the two waves of squatters' mobilization in the Montevideo of the 1980–2000 period. Yet, unless we look at how politics mediated between people in need of housing and land seizures, the picture remains incomplete. As much as it was shaped by economic changes, the squatters' mobilization was also shaped by democratization.

Uruguay was not an exception to this wave of mobilizations. The end of the military dictatorship in 1984 was repelled and subsequently welcomed by such a wave of mobilizations and a revival of civil society (Filgueira 1985). The labor movement, the cooperative housing movement, the human rights movement, and the student movement took the

lead and were quickly followed by a myriad of smaller forms of collective action such as soup kitchens and neighborhood associations (Rodé et al. 1985). In this context of active mobilization, a group of very poor accretion invasions that had slowly grown in the outskirts of the city and the state, mobilized as a reaction to evictions and managed to set up an umbrella movement. This unlikely mobilization of the destitute requires more explanation than the mere need for housing. The brokerage role of NGOs and church networks were crucial allies in this mobilization born at a time when the dictatorship started to crack but when parties were as yet forbidden. Most of the mobilization dissipated during the first 5 years of democracy (1984–1989); once political parties recovered their traditional central role in a very party-centric society (Caetano et al. 1987) channeling and co-opting civil society demands (Canel 1992).

Soon, opposition to state retrenchment triggered a new wave of mobilization including different forms of collective action, especially among the middle and working classes that had enjoyed the benefits of the early and relatively robust Uruguayan welfare state during the twentieth century. A landmark in that fight was the 1992 anti-privatization referendum (Moreira 2011). Another was the successful campaign against water privatization which ended in a constitutional amendment popularly voted for an election day in 2004 (Santos et al. 2006). It was exactly that day that *Frente Amplio*, a coalition of leftist parties, won national office breaking away from 175 years of electoral dominance by the traditional *Colorado* and *Blanco* parties. This victory can also be interpreted as Frente Amplio's consistent opposition to neoliberal reforms, in a context of deep economic crisis, albeit combined with programmatic moderation (Luna 2007).[1]

In the midst of this reaction against neoliberalism, a silent urban revolution was taking place. During the 1990s, Montevideo squatters suffered a quantitative and qualitative change. On the one hand, they peaked in number. Between 1984 and 1994, the number of houses in squatter settlements tripled (INTEC 1995), the population living in squatter settlements grew to almost 145.000 in a city of less than 1.5 million inhabitants (INE-PIAI 2006), and the number of informal settlements rose to about 400. These figures become more puzzling considering the fact that the city's population had stagnated for decades. The informal city grew without the population as a whole growing. On the other hand, land invasions became increasingly planned and organized. Structural conditions, such as persistent deindustrialization; poverty; state retrenchment; low

real wages; and perhaps, and even more directly, rising rent prices were undoubtedly behind these changes (Alvarez-Rivadulla 2000; Amarante and Caffera 2003; Kaztman et al. 2005). However, as mentioned earlier, political variables tended to interact with economic needs. In particular, the electoral competition for the urban poor's votes was an incentive for political networks and brokers to develop and facilitate squatters' access to land and state services. This book unveils the political economy of land invasions in Montevideo. Through a multi-method project that involved a year of fieldwork in 2006–2007 and several follow-ups, this book describes and explains the origins and trajectories of squatting in Montevideo as an elusive form of collective action since it began in the late 1940s. Putting together ethnographic and archival data with official records and maps, I was able to reconstruct the yearly time series of squatting events. Through historical press articles and documents, 80 interviews with squatters, politicians, government authorities, bureaucrats, and other key informants, and visits to 25 different neighborhoods in Montevideo, I was able to reconstruct the land invasion histories of different types of neighborhoods that squatted at different points in time. I describe the peaks and changes in squatting, and conduct the statistical analysis that shows how relevant electoral and post-electoral years were for squatting, particularly during the 1984–2004 period, even after controlling for hardship measures such as real wages. Thus, in this book, I illustrate how the relationship to politics varies depending on the type of settlement and the political context. Brokerage emerged as a powerful mechanism explaining how disenfranchised people reached valuable resources such as land security. Yet, the type of brokerage changed depending on the political context; while toward the end of dictatorship some NGOs and local parishes acted as brokers for squatters, this role was later taken over by local leaders or party activists tied to political parties and the state.

On Squatting

For the first time in history, the majority of the world's population lives in cities (54% in 2014). The vast part of this growth, 90% in fact, is taking place in the developing world, and a big portion of it happens in squatter settlements that are residential communities which are mostly or completely inhabited by poor residents who build their own houses on illegally occupied land. One-third of the population of the developing world currently lives in squatter settlements (UN-Habitat 2014).

Different perspectives have attempted to explain this enormous, informal urban growth. On the one hand, Davis' (2006) famous *Planet of Slums* offers a catastrophic yet compelling prospective. He relates the growth of squatters around the world with neoliberalism, including state retrenchment and the making of a more atomized and insecure lower class, very fitting to the case of Uruguay. Yet, his interpretation leaves us paralyzed in the face of an inevitable process of societal polarization between the shrinking haves and the growing have-nots that may not be completely accurate.[2] Moreover, Davis sees the urban as an automatic mirror of the inequalities in the economic arena. And he forgets a very important variable: the trends he describes coincide with another global trend, that of a new wave of democracy (Markoff 2015), and that this may have empowering consequences even for the most destitute of all.

On the other hand, other authors emphasize the constrained yet existing possibilities for agency among the poorest. Holston (2009), for example, highlights the coexistence of urbanization and democratization as a generative combination that leads to "insurgent citizenships" in the peripheries of the world. It is in their daily life struggles, rather than in the civic square that the poor generate new ways of solving their problems and fight for their right to belong to the city. Far from idealizing these insurgent citizenships, the author recognizes their limited and unequal nature. Yet, from his anthropological perspective, he highlights the heterogeneity among those that remain voiceless and faceless in more structural accounts. This book follows this perspective and advances it by showing how the possibilities for insurgent citizenship change with changing political conditions.

I see squatter settlements as sites of both suffering and agency. More often than not, the media, politicians, policy makers, and the public portray squatters as suffering individuals, as citizens that lack what others have. This is indeed objectively true given that they are poor, and they do not have access to a decent life in the city. Moreover, many squatters perceive themselves as suffering individuals, who lack what they need or what they are entitled to, such as land titles. And this is what you see when you enter into deprived households, when you talk to people who do not have jobs, health insurance or hope, when you walk along the streets of neighborhoods that look like lost nonplaces in the middle of nowhere, and see barefoot children playing with rundown toys close to a smelly, polluted river. However, there are many poor people with similar needs and rights who do not squat. I do not know whether

"it takes a certain personality" to be a squatter, as I was told by a social worker, referring to how tough one needs to be to survive the ordeal of being cold, hungry, or having no running water, especially at the beginning of a land invasion. What is clear is that squatting takes a lot of individual, family, and collective work. In more academic terms, it takes a lot of agency. As Gay (1994: 1) puts it, "victims they undoubtedly are; innocent however, they are not. Indeed, there's increasing evidence from a variety of contexts that the urban poor have been active, organized, and aggressive participants in the political process and that the popular organizations, in particular, have had a significant impact on the relationship between the urban poor and political elites."

Squatter settlements all over the world share their illegality and their most important demand: land security, their right to the city. Yet they vary from city to city, within cities, and in time. They vary, for instance, in the social composition of their dwellers, from the poorest of the poor or immigrants to the working classes. They vary in their construction materials, depending on climate conditions, available materials, dwellers' assets, eviction expectations, and so on. Their landscapes differ, from crowded slums to neighborhoods with streets and blocks that look just like regular neighborhoods in the formal part of the city, and their location within the city is also heterogeneous. While some of Rio's *favelas* are in the middle of the city alongside other more affluent neighborhoods, in most cities, squatters locate in the periphery, but in others, like Mumbai, for example, they populate the fringes of the railway lines. They vary in their degree and type of organization both initially and through time (e.g., accretion, planned, and fraudulent sale). This variation also relates to their relationship to external agents such as NGOs, religious organizations, other social movements or political parties, and the state.

The prevalence and the mobilization of squatters greatly depend on population pressures, the housing market, and the labor market. But it also depends on the relationship between the popular classes and the state, which involves housing policy and specific actions for the benefit of those who squat. State agencies may encourage, tolerate, forbear, ignore, harass, or crush squatter settlements. More often, however, their acts fall within a gray zone that includes some tolerance, some repression, some cooptation, and some assistance. In addition, and to add one more layer of complexity, the state is not monolithic. Different state agencies may pursue different policies or specific actions and those policies may change. State actions tend to depend, in turn, on squatters' levels of

organization and the elite's interest in the political support of squatters. In other words, the argument that guides this book is an interactive one. Harsh economic conditions are a necessary but not sufficient condition for the prevalence and mobilization of squatter settlements in a city or at a point in time in the same city. Economic conditions interact with political factors to make squatting happen, and to shape how it happens.

The relationship between squatter settlements and politics in Latin America has received much more attention than in other parts of the world, in part, because this relationship has been much stronger here than elsewhere. Collier's (1976) seminal work in Lima persuasively unveils how intertwined *squatters* and *oligarchs* are, and how extensively, though often silently, the Peruvian elite has been involved in the creation of the dozens of settlements that make Lima one of the most informal cities of the region. Also for the case of Lima, perhaps the most frequently studied city when it comes to urban informality, Dietz (1998) analyzes formal (vote) and informal (community participation) political participation, in six poor neighborhoods in Lima over a 20 year time span, finding more participation in newer settlements and more radicalism in older ones. More recently, and comparing political contexts, Dosh (2010) finds that Lima's land invasions keep growing because the government is much more permissive than it is in Quito. For the Chilean case, another of the most frequently studied, Schneider (1995) investigates how the Pinochet military regime reduced political opportunities for Santiago's squatters—who had previously been highly mobilized—and repressed them. Hipsher (1998), in turn, looks at how democratization revived great, though not long lasting, mobilization in Chilean *poblaciones*. More recently, and after dozens of removals and massive social housing construction and relocation, there are basically no more *poblaciones* in Chile, and Murphy (2015) questions the important yet limited effects of property on citizenship among the still urban poor (and currently also segregated) of Santiago. Similar research has been carried out for almost every city in Latin America and for different points in time, from which we learn that the relationship between squatters and politics varies through time and space but that, in the region, it is often fluid.[3]

Specialists on different global regions often point out the distinctiveness of Latin American squatters. In their attempt to bring together different traditions in the study of urban informality, Alsayyad (1993) and Alsayyad and Roy (2003) argue that, in contrast to what happens

in Latin America, in the Middle East, it is the relative depoliticization and invisibility of squatters that has enabled their survival. Also, in her comparison of squatters in Brazil and South Africa, Huchzermeyer (2002) notes huge differences between the slum upgrading programs of Brazilian cities and the eradication policies as a violent shortcut to meet the Millennium goals of current South Africa.

Yet, even in Latin America, and even within one same city, the relationship of different types of squatter settlements with the state varies depending on the organizational capacity of residents and the availability of allies and brokers, and, moreover, these relationships change over time depending on the available political opportunities and the existing level of hardship. This book tells the story of the relationship of squatters and politics in one particular context throughout history to show its relevance and changes over time: Montevideo, from the mid-twentieth century to present day.

THE CASE IN A NUTSHELL

The explosion of squatting in Montevideo took place later than in the region's other metropolises. Some land invasions, dubbed *cantegriles*, existed in Montevideo before squatting peaked in the 1990s. Mostly populated by recyclers and other very poor workers that squatted one family at a time, cantegriles had very precarious housing and little urban planning. Yet, the Uruguayan capital developed differently to other Latin American cities. Despite already starting to show signs of urban socioeconomic inequality in the 1980s (Portes 1989), Montevideo was more egalitarian than other cities of the continent, both economically and spatially. Today, about 8.5% of the city's population lives on illegally occupied land (PMB-PIAI 2013).[4] This percentage is low by regional standards even today if we consider cities like Lima where half of its almost 7 million inhabitants lived in one of about 300 settlements in the 90s (Dietz 1998). Yet Montevideo's smaller but a little more than 300 current squatter settlements have expanded the city limits leaving a very concrete and profound trace of urban and social fragmentation. Aerial pictures of Montevideo today look very different from those taken in the 1960s. Areas that in the past were green are now gray.

So far, no one has written about the history of land squatting in Montevideo. This work recovers this history from oblivion and puts it in dialog with the literature on popular politics. From a social

movement/contentious politics perspective, in this book, I challenge the assumption that socioeconomic factors such as poverty were the only causes triggering land squatting. I argue that the political scenario also shaped the number and type of land invasions. Although politics were crucial throughout the cycle, in particular the various mechanisms of democratization, it affected different types of land invasions in different ways.

Thus, while accretion invasions, cantegriles, have always been mostly invisible to the state, with the exception of police raids or the occasional visit paid by politicians before elections, they were main characters in the mobilization during the democratization wave in the 1980s. The first signs of political opening, still under the dictatorship, combined with threats of eviction and with nonpartisan allies, and the church and NGOs with international funding both interested in working with grassroots movements among the excluded, created a configuration that led to an unprecedented mobilization of squatters. Hence, squatters from the city's poorest cantegriles, together with young motivated professionals and volunteers inspired by Paulo Freire's ideas and priests from a Catholic Church inspired by Liberation Theology, created an umbrella movement, MOVIDE.

MOVIDE turned reaction into action and shifted from the initial concern and fear about eviction to the members constructing their own houses drawing from the important cooperative housing movement in Uruguay (FUCVAM) and later to the streets, participating in the public arena as never before. They were invited to the negotiation table that led the democratic transition (CONAPRO) where, together with other social organizations, they made the housing deficit and high renting prices a priority among social demands. They appeared in the news for the first time in the early 80s, and they participated in the first and a few of the following Homeless Day (Día de los Sin Techo) marches, which have taken place every October since 1987. However, as I mentioned earlier, the wave of mobilization which MOVIDE was part of started fading, and the parties recovered their traditional central power during the first democratic period.

A second wave of mobilization followed, also triggered by structural economic needs combined with politics, but this time, it was party and electoral politics instead of social mobilization in times of democratization. An unprecedented peak of land invasions occurred in 1989 and 1990 and a lower peak followed in 1994 and 1995 (electoral and post-electoral years respectively). Land invasions became increasingly

popular and planned, with streets and blocks and with a clear intention to belong to the city. Their leaders reached the state often through political networks, and politicians helped or forbore (Holland 2017) in a context of pronounced electoral competition for popular votes.

Through the Lens of Social Movements Theory

Through the study of squatter settlements, we learn about urban popular politics in Uruguay. They provide a window through which to understand broader changes in the country and the whole region: from industrialization and its related problems to deindustrialization and state retrenchment ending with the rise of the left in the 2000s. However, this book also contributes to the literature on urban studies, showing the processes behind and the consequences of two of the greatest societal trends of the last century: unstoppable urbanization and growing inequality. It shows the politics and the agency behind the informal urbanization of our cities. In fact, Montevideo is an excellent case for discussions on informality, given that they normally assume either that informality is in Third World cities to stay or that it will disappear in time as it did in the First World. Montevideo is therefore interesting in its outlier condition, as a city that increased its informality after being almost completely formal without immigration or natural disasters. A city which expelled its former dwellers from its core, and, in so doing, challenged many of the assumptions about old and new versions of Modernization theory (informality is just a stage in development) and sides with more structural accounts of informality, which are a product of processes of expulsion in the midst of neoliberalism (Sassen 2014).

The main theoretical contributions of this book, however, because of its questions, regard the literature on social movements or, broadly speaking, contentious politics. First, it expands its scope to less visible and structured forms of collective action more generally, forms that I dub here as *elusive*. Most of the literature on collective action, and concretely that of the political process theory, has been based on empirical research conducted in wealthy Western democracies about more or less clearly structured movements such as the labor or civil rights movements that leave traces in archives or the press. Political opportunities are dimensions of the political system that suggest that effective action is possible and thereby encourage people to engage in contentious politics (Tarrow 1998; McAdam et al. 1996). This book shows that such a