

Bolivian migrants and struggles for the right to the city in Argentina. A critical review of the perspective of the Autonomy of Migration

Migrantes bolivianos/as y luchas por el derecho a la ciudad en Argentina. Una revisión crítica de la perspectiva de la Autonomía de las Migraciones

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Abstract

In this article we develop an approach to the disputes around the “right to the city” that Bolivians have settled in La Plata in recent years, in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires in Argentina. Based on analyzing their characteristics and recognizing the social and political conditions that made them possible, we present a critical reflection on the conceptualization of the “migrant struggles” developed by some exponents of the Autonomy of Migration, seeking to broaden their reading. We conclude that the conflicts studied are not undertaken against the nationality-citizenship regime, questioning its existence and that they develop imbricated with the state control mechanisms and techniques. That is, when migrants can access regularity and documentation in their settlement contexts, they use the capitals and positions that the institutional framework enables them to dispute the place of foreigners in the nation and expand their rights, and/or its effectiveness.

Keywords: migrations, citizenship, nation, city, struggles.

Resumen

En este artículo se desarrolla un abordaje de las disputas en torno al “derecho a la ciudad” que en los últimos años protagonizan bolivianos/as asentados/as en La Plata, en el Área Metropolitana de Buenos Aires en la Argentina. A partir de analizar sus características y de reconocer las condiciones sociales y políticas que las posibilitaron, se presenta una reflexión crítica sobre la conceptualización de las “luchas migrantes” desarrollada por algunos/as exponentes de la Autonomía de las Migraciones buscando ampliar y complejizar su lectura. En contraposición a lo planteado por esta perspectiva, concluimos que los conflictos estudiados no se emprenden *contra* el régimen de nacionalidad-ciudadanía cuestionando su existencia y que se desarrollan imbricados con los mecanismos

Received on November 27, 2020.

Accepted on July 12, 2021.

Published on July 19, 2021.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE LANGUAGE:
SPANISH.



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CITATION: Rodrigo, F. (2021). Migrantes bolivianos/as y luchas por el derecho a la ciudad en Argentina. Una revisión crítica de la perspectiva de la Autonomía de las Migraciones [Bolivian migrants and struggles for the right to the city in Argentina. A critical review of the perspective of the Autonomy of Migration]. *Estudios Fronterizos*, 22, e074. <https://doi.org/10.21670/ref.2111074>

y técnicas de control estatales. Es decir, cuando los/as migrantes pueden acceder a la regularidad y a documentación en sus contextos de asentamiento, se valen de los capitales y posiciones que les habilita el marco institucional para disputar el lugar de los extranjeros/as en la nación y ampliar sus derechos y/o su efectivización.

Palabras clave: migraciones, ciudadanía, nación, ciudad, luchas.

Introduction

In recent years, in a context characterized by increased restrictions and the predominance of a securitarian approach to human mobility that has been described as a “global system of borders” (Varela Huerta, 2015; Domenech, 2020), a number of different authors inspired primarily by the autonomy of migration perspective have focused on “migrant struggles”. These are defined as “more or less organized *struggles* in which migrants openly challenge, defeat, escape or trouble the dominant politics of mobility (including border control, detention and deportation), or the regime of labour, or the space of citizenship” (De Génova et al., 2015, p. 80).

Different investigations have sought to explore the forms of dissidence that oppose the “permanent foreignization” (Varela Huerta, 2015) that nation-state regimes impose on certain people and that are not perceivable from and do not fit into the established paradigms of political representation. These conceptualizations are primarily informed by an analysis of demonstrations and demands for rights by subjects who are not considered citizens according to institutional frameworks. Accordingly, through their performances of protest, “undocumented migrants” and other excluded groups question the ways in which the boundaries of the political community are established (Balibar, 2012; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016; Cordero et al., 2019; Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2020).

However, the broadening of analytical possibilities and of the political imagination that this perspective entails presents certain limitations in its assessment of some of the most significant aspects of numerous conflicts involving migrants. If the focus is placed on the tensions that foreigners introduce into the migration control and exclusion regime through the connection between nationality and citizenship, does this not neglect fundamental aspects of demands that are not organized around this axis?

This question is particularly crucial in contexts such that of Argentina, where, despite some shortcomings and regrettable exceptions (Caggiano, 2008; Cerrutti, 2010; Domenech, 2020), most migrants arriving from Mercosur countries take advantage of the possibilities offered to them—and co-produce through their struggles—through “selective hospitality” (Domenech, 2020) and can access procedures for residency and even dual nationality.¹ Consequently, access to administrative regularity confers certain

¹ According to the 2010 census (INDEC, 2010), the main migrant groups in Argentina come from Paraguay (30%), Bolivia (19%), Chile (10%) and Peru (9%); in recent years, there has been a significant flow of people from Venezuela, which is estimated to exceed the number of Chileans. As will be seen in the paper, after the enactment of Law No. 25,871 in 2003, despite certain difficulties (Domenech, 2020) and during a period of clearly antimigrant official discourse and increased control policies between 2016 and 2019 (Canelo et al., 2018), these groups were able to gradually gain access to administrative regularity and documentation in large numbers. A completely different situation is that of non-Mercosur migrant groups, among which the hardships and persecutions experienced by Senegalese migrants are particularly noteworthy.

characteristics upon their ways of experiencing and contesting their participation in the political community. How can the demands for work, production, protection from discrimination, access to land, security, etc. that are emerging from ethno-national positions (representing Bolivians, Paraguayans, Peruvians, etc.) be contextualized?

To address the struggles over the “right to the city” that have been waged by Bolivian migrants who have settled in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires—specifically in the city of La Plata²—in Argentina and examine the social and political conditions that enabled them, we believe it is necessary to examine the ways in which the autonomy of migration approach conceives migrant struggles. In recent years in particular, foreigners have emerged as a population that partially shapes the dynamics of organization and collective action in shantytowns and informal settlements in the country’s large and medium-sized cities, influencing the configuration of demands and the logic underlying conflicts (Cravino, 2006; Baeza, 2014; Canelo, 2016; Perissinotti, 2016; Vaccotti, 2017; Magliano & Perissinotti, 2020). In dialogue with a broad field of studies that addresses the connections among migration, housing problems and the social production of habitat in contemporary Argentina, we seek to examine disputes that go beyond matters of the legal status of their protagonists, which are organized around access to housing (Magliano et al., 2015; Perissinotti, 2016; Vaccotti, 2017) and, in more general terms, what Harvey (2008) called the right to the city. In other words, these disputes are aimed at the production of urban space, its uses and its occupants and are linked to access to land, housing, urban facilities and the use of public space.

Our objective is to elucidate a type of highly relevant conflict whose primary characteristics are disregarded by the framework of the autonomy of migration approach and that is not consistent with the main empirical references that the authors of this approach cite in their formulation. The principal argument of this text is that although this approach prioritizes demonstrations *against* the nationality-citizenship regime and questions its existence, it is necessary to recognize other conflicts that are waged *for* it and seek to transform the social place of foreigners in the contexts of reception, expanding their rights and/or the effective implementation of these rights. In these struggles, the utopian horizon is not the abolition of the global border regime but the strengthening of the place of certain communities in the destination nation. Furthermore, at least in the Argentine case, these struggles are established at the intersection between the “territorial” logic underlying policies in the urban low-income sectors in recent decades (Merklen, 2005) and the inclusive migration policies of the first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. Consequently, an understanding of the different configurations of conflicts involving migrants allows us to visualize the scope and limitations of our analytical tools and our political imagination.

A highly significant aspect of our approach is that the enactment of Law No. 25,871 in 2003 in Argentina—which considers migration a right—and the implementation of regularization programs between 2006 and 2015 configured political frameworks that enabled the production of new demands and citizen positionings by migrants. Bolivians became key actors in this process and, based on the recognition of their

² La Plata is the capital of the largest province in the country: the province of Buenos Aires. It has a population of 740,000 inhabitants (INDEC, 2010) and a history of migration dating back to its founding in the late nineteenth century. Currently, more than 5% of its population is of foreign origin, and Paraguayan, Bolivian and Peruvian communities are among the most numerous.

social, cultural and even electoral importance, they demanded improvements to their neighborhoods and their full integration into the city (and access to goods that they consider its property). In short, rather than opposing migration regulations that place national limits on the exercise of citizenship, they use them to contest their place in the community.

Organization of the text and methodological strategy

The paper is divided into three sections, followed by its conclusions. The first section presents a conceptual discussion of the autonomy of migration perspective and its problematization of “migrant struggles”, attempting to synthesize the contributions of this perspective and identify its problematic aspects.

Then, in the section on “Territorialization of the migration policy”, we analyze the increased recognition that migrants have obtained and their integration into key aspects of political life in different areas following the enactment of Law No. 25,871 and the implementation of territorial documentation programs. Our analysis is based on contributions from the specialized bibliography as well as a review of public documents and interviews of senior officials at the former Undersecretariat of Entities and Communities of La Plata (Subsecretaría de Entidades y Colectividades de La Plata) that were conducted in 2015. Some passages also incorporate information obtained from interviews and observations of members of six Bolivian migrant associations in the city, which we carried out as part of previous studies from 2010 to the present (Rodrigo, 2019a, 2019b, 2021a, 2021b), although this information is not directly referenced.³

The third section, “Urban experience and access to documentation: struggles for the right to the city”, was produced using ethnographic materials that enabled us to problematize the urban demands made by Bolivians in a neighborhood on the periphery of the examined area. The text is based on field experiences in the neighborhood of Futuro, on the periphery of La Plata: the first was field study carried out in 2014 and involved interviews with members of a neighborhood council of migrants that was formed to deal with conflicts over land ownership. In 2016 and 2017, we also conducted participant observations during celebrations in honor of the Virgin of Urkupiña and Tata Toco that took place in the neighborhood and interviewed the organizers. Finally, in 2019, we conducted interviews and participant observations at two demonstrations in the neighborhood, at which we asked about the participants about their experiences and demands related to the “right to the city” (Harvey, 2008; Agier, 2015).

³ The organizations we worked with are the Center for Bolivian Students and Residents (Centro de Estudiantes y Residentes Bolivianos), located in the urban center; the Futuro Neighborhood Council (Junta Vecinal de Barrio Futuro), in Melchor Romero; the Plurinational Community Association (Asociación Comunidad Plurinacional), in Altos de San Lorenzo; the Moto Méndez Cooperative (Cooperativa Moto Méndez), in Lisandro Olmos; the Association of Bolivian Residents (Asociación de Residentes Bolivianos), also in the neighborhood of Futuro; and the Bolivian Cultural Center (Centro Cultural Boliviano), in Tolosa.

Struggles against and for the citizenship regime

A new epistemic perspective and sensibility regarding migration has emerged in recent years (De Génova et al., 2015). In a context characterized by increased restrictions and the predominance of a securitarian approach in the Global North, different researchers have problematized the tensions that arise between government strategies and mechanisms for human mobility and the multiple ways in which individuals and groups challenge control regimes (Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Mezzadra, 2012; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016; Cordero et al., 2019).

The autonomy of migration perspective was developed within this framework of concerns in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It sought to reinstate the understanding of new forms of migrant subjectivity and political agency, using the devices, experiences and conflicts that surround the inclusion of the labor force in the relations of capitalist production as a reflective horizon (Cordero Díaz & Cabrera García, 2016; Cordero et al., 2019; Casas-Cortés & Cobarrubias, 2020). In theoretical terms, this involved a distancing from explanations that view the movement of people as an effect of structural conditions or of the subjects' economic rationality, characterizing it instead as an "excess" that cannot be reduced to the codes of capital and the state (Mezzadra, 2012) and establishing migration as a political act in and of itself (Mitropoulos, 2011).

One fundamental aspect of this broad, heterogeneous and evolving perspective is the recognition of migration as a constitutive force that precedes and transforms modes of political production and subjection (Papadopoulos et al., 2008). Accordingly, proponents of this perspective argue that it is necessary to understand techniques and technologies of control as mechanisms that seek to detect practices of "escape" from and "disobedience" of the different types of borders established by the dominant devices (Cordero et al., 2019). At the same time, proponents suggest that migrant struggles emerge in opposition to those mechanisms, leading to mobilities that overstep those regimes.

Some proponents of the autonomy of migration perspective problematized the conceptualization of borders as "walls" whose sole functionality is to exclude certain groups of people, noting that the regulation of human mobility has been an integral aspect of the development of capital (De Génova, 2002; Mezzadra, 2012; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016). In other words, "there is no capitalism without migration, and the regime that attempts to control or attenuate labor mobility plays a strategic role in the formation of capitalism and class relations" (Mezzadra, 2012, p. 164). Whether through policies of openness, which expand competition in the labor market, or those that persecute migrants, placing them in vulnerable situations that allow them to be hired at wages that are well below average, capital develops forms of exploitation of (and through) the movement of people. Proponents of the autonomy of migration approach thus proposed that mechanisms of control are not aimed at the exclusion of foreigners but at rather measuring and managing mobility in economic terms. From this perspective, both regularization and illegalization are processes of a "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016) that aims to ensure low labor costs (De Génova, 2002). For this reason, they argue that the citizenship regime operates as a mechanism for assigning workers to a place within a status hierarchy.

Furthermore, the autonomy of migration approach posits that despite being embedded in the power relations that shape capital and the state, migrant practices and struggles are not wholly circumscribed by their parameters. By emphasizing the “autonomy” of these practices and struggles, this perspective seeks to highlight struggles that are not perceptible according to the established criteria of visibility and political representation. To this end, this approach proposes that “migrant struggles”—in which actors who are not formally recognized position themselves as subjects with rights who reject the status ascribed to them by the state—undermine the exclusionary mechanisms that underpin national order and state sovereignty (Balibar, 2012; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013; Caraus, 2018). Thus, this approach observes that people who participate in “migrant struggles” do not seek to integrate themselves into an existing legal and political framework; instead, the most significant aspect of their actions is the questioning of the concept of “foreigner” and their opposition to the hegemonic modes of managing population movements (Varela Huerta, 2015). Accordingly, by challenging the logic that organizes belonging to the political community and questioning its connection with nationality, “migrant struggles” are also demonstrations against some of the guiding principles of contemporary capitalism.

Several papers have focused on everyday life, indicating that the antagonism embodied by migrants should also be understood in terms of social reproduction. These papers thus suggested that the individual and community practices with which migrants circumvent the barriers and obstacles imposed in different contexts of reception should be considered part of their struggles (Cordero Díaz & Cabrera García, 2016).

In Argentina, some groups of non-Mercosur migrants—such as those from Senegal—who are subject to different types of persecution have, in recent years, been involved in a number of protests and demands that resemble the migrant struggles analyzed by the abovementioned authors. Similarly, collectives and alliances were formed, particularly between 2017 and 2019, that sought to reject the restrictive nature of the migration policy adopted by President Mauricio Macri’s administration, including by questioning the connection between nationality and citizenship, using slogans from movements located in the Global North (Gavazzo, 2018; Rho, 2020).

However, since the enactment of Law No. 25,871, which recognized migration as a right and provided possibilities for regularization, particularly for migrants from Mercosur member countries, only a small portion of the conflicts involving foreigners have unfolded within the logics described by the authors of the autonomy of migration approach. Insofar as the object of these disputes are mobility policies, the actions of those who have already obtained a regular administrative status and demand the establishment and/or broadening of rights that tether them to their fellow citizens are not included in the definition. What about migrants who claim ownership of land in the spaces where they have settled, who make labor or production demands or request permission to conduct certain practices (such as national or religious celebrations) in certain public spaces in cities? Do they not place pressure on positions in the political field and on institutional procedures? Is their migrant condition subsumed and/or assimilated by the framework of national citizenship in their contexts of reception?

We begin by assuming that citizenship is not a static condition that is associated with legal status and institutionally predefined practices and positions. In contrast, we understand it as a “conflictive [process] linked to power, which reflects the struggles over who will be able to say what, by defining what the common problems are and

how they will be addressed” (Jelin, 1993, p. 25). Accordingly, without disregarding the contributions of the above perspective, we believe that it is necessary to consider another type of conflict, in which migrants contest their place and recognition within the institutional framework in the effort to guarantee and expand their rights. That is to say, they do not struggle *against* the citizenship regime, but *for* it.

In these struggles *for* the citizenship regime, there are several key components that are particularly noteworthy. They are created by the imbrication of institutionally established logics of practice and other logics developed by subaltern subjects. In other words, as different authors have argued, struggles for citizenship take place within the framework of the parameters defined by states, but are not limited to that framework (Isin, 2009; Acevedo Rodrigo & López Caballero, 2012; Lazar, 2008). For this reason, it is necessary to consider the processes of subjectivation that are based on citizen positionings, which involve the interweaving of institutional categories and the specific backgrounds and experiences of individuals and communities (Ong, 2012; Mitra, 2013).

The originators of autonomy of migration question an approach that emphasizes established powers as the only factors that define social processes. However, they overlook the fact that practices of resistance also emerge from within mechanisms of control and are constituted both by and in opposition to the categories and subject positions defined by the dominant classification systems. In this respect, Nyers’ critiques the reductionist way in which some proponents of the autonomy of migration perspective oppose important population regulation mechanisms and migrant practices and ask us to consider the co-constitution of “control” and “resistance” (Nyers, 2015). In short, rather than starting from a position of abrupt and reified opposition, we return to approaches that propose the reconstruction of relational spaces that shape the power devices and the agency of subaltern subjects.

At the same time, administrative regularity and even access to documentation do not in and of themselves contain the necessary attributes for recognizing the legitimacy of the subjects who possess them; rather, the possibility of mobilizing demands in the name of a ethno-national community is established and reproduced contingently in specific political scenarios. That is to say that the power provided by documents in different conflicts is not contained in them; rather, it arises in part from the ownership capacity of those who possess them. As such, the recognition that state institutions and social and political organizations grant to migrant communities is part of what is at stake in their disputes.

Furthermore, if we understand that states construct national interpretative frameworks within which different social categories take on meaning, regulating ways of being *other* within the nation (Segato, 2007; Briones, 2005) and circumscribing the possibilities of attributing identity to, for example, migrant groups, the struggles we seek to highlight challenge the opportunities for intervention and public recognition from foreigner positions. In Argentina, the discriminatory hypervisibilization and creation of a defensive ethnicity in the 1990s, the subsumption of particularist positions into the viability of a “national project” in the context of the 2001-2002 crisis (Grimson, 2006, 2009) and the recent emergence of new demands and the prominence of migrant communities (Courtis & Penchaszadeh, 2015; Magliano et al., 2015; Vaccotti, 2018; Penchaszadeh & Condori Mamani, 2017) constitute some contextual configurations through and around which those communities act.

In recent decades, many countries around the world have undergone major legal transformations that have had an impact on the formal relationship between nationality and citizenship (Sassen, 2002; Caggiano, 2018). Although we do not intend to summarize the extensive debates on this topic that have occurred in the academic world, we would like to emphasize that although nationality and citizenship are closely linked, their specific connection results from contingent legal and sociocultural configurations. That is to say that being a citizen and being a national are not absolute equivalences, nor are the regimes that restrict access to these conditions, and this makes it possible to fight for citizenship rights from foreigner positions or to seek to broaden the social recognition of foreigners from citizen positions.

Thus, we have two different conceptualizations: The first is the “migrant struggles” that aim to control policies and that, through the challenges they pose, question the citizenship regime linked to nationality and undermine a fundamental parameter of labor management in the capitalist mode of production; the second is the struggles that focus on the place of migrants within the citizenship regime and thereby call into question the logics, parameters and limits of this regime. We understand that attending to how these conflicts are configured can help us to visualize the scope and limitations of our analytical tools.

In the Argentine case, migration policies were a key factor in migrant struggles *for* the citizenship regime. However, this was not because these policies were the object of the disputes but because their implementation and the way in which they were interwoven with other pre-existing social and political dynamics gave rise to new forms of collective action by organizations of foreigners. To deepen this analysis, we begin with the connection between the documentation programs developed in the period from 2006-2015 and the dynamics of the policy’s territorialization in the low-income sectors, which had been taking place on the periphery of the country’s large and medium-sized cities since the end of the twentieth century.

Territorialization of the migration policy

Within a context of increased exclusion and the dismantling of trade union actors that characterized Argentina beginning in the 1980s, there was a joint transformation of both the social policies and the modalities of organizing and mobilizing the urban low-income sectors. Food assistance programs and programs that provided a monthly income in exchange for productive, community and training activities—designed to address the growing poverty and social conflict during the period—were strongly promoted. These policies were co-constituted by movements and leaders that were established in the neighborhoods of impoverished peripheries, first around the demand for and distribution of food and, later, to mobilize the demands of a new social actor: “unemployed workers”. In 2002 in particular, through different modalities of protest and negotiation, this new social actor started to gain access to spots in these programs, which were implemented through the formation of work cooperatives (mainly in construction or cleaning) that performed tasks assigned by different state agencies (Svampa & Pereyra, 2003; Cerrutti & Grimson, 2004; Merklen, 2005; Ferraudi Curto, 2009).

As a result, the withdrawal from the formal labor market and the separation from an institutional framework that guaranteed social rights was partly compensated by a progressive “retreat to the neighborhood” (Merklen, 2005). In the neighborhood, assistance mechanisms were created, as were labor initiatives connected to social policies, and the groups that demanded and co-produced those mechanisms and initiatives gained visibility (Manzano, 2007).

To the extent that many of the urban peripheries where these modalities were established were also areas of migrant settlements, this dynamic—which Merklen (2005) characterized as the “territorial insertion” of the policy into low-income sectors—thus began to become part of migrants’ incorporation processes (Glick Schiller et al., 2006). First, social programs and the territorial organizations that demanded and managed them began to be seen as means of achieving different rights. Accordingly, particularly beginning in the second half of the 2000s, migrants became highly significant members (quantitatively and qualitatively) in different areas (Vázquez, 2005; Dodaro & Vázquez, 2008; Halpern, 2009; Grimson, 2009; Rodrigo, 2018, 2019c). This recognition, in turn, became an important incentive for gaining access to administrative regularity and documentation, which were formal requirements for processing.

In 2003, Law No. 25,871 was enacted; it recognized migrants as “subjects of rights”, creating an innovative scenario by establishing a universe of meanings that connects human rights, policies of difference and the development of regional integration processes (Domenech, 2007; Vichich, 2005; Novick, 2011). One of the main characteristics of the migration policy pursued between 2003 and 2015 was the development of regularization programs. Of particular note are the *Patria Grande* Program (2006-2010) and the Territorial Program for Access to Documentation (*Programa Territorial de Acceso a la Documentación*) (2013-2015), which sought to guarantee the regularization of the administrative situation of foreign residents. In this context, conditions were established that redefined both foreign residents’ relationship with state institutions and their logics of intervention in the public space: we can call these transformations a territorialization of the migration policy.

Domenech (2009) described the role of human rights movements and organizations in the identification of mobility issues towards the end of the 1990s, and the shift in perspective that occurred in Argentina following the change in the law, as a “citizenization of the migration policy”. In other words, the interpretative frameworks, logics of action, demands and state measures were developed around the language of rights. The documentation programs that were introduced in 2006, in turn, expanded and redefined this logic.

These programs involved the execution of “territorial operations” and an “operational decentralization”, which were carried out in coordination with provincial and municipal governments. At the same time, civil associations, in the form of Collaborating Social Institutions (*Instituciones Sociales Colaboradoras*), were authorized to participate in the processing of residency and nationality applications. The operations were carried out by transferring personnel from the National Directorate of Migration (*Dirección Nacional de Migraciones*) (often with staff from other areas of the National Ministry of the Interior (*Ministerio del Interior de la Nación*)) and the municipalities to different neighborhoods to assist the area’s inhabitants with regularization procedures. In practical terms, these procedures also involved the efforts of local organizations to disseminate information about the activity and ensure the participation of a considerable number of people.

The programs thus integrated a substantial number of actors that influenced characteristics and dynamics in the different areas where they were implemented. Accordingly, documents and the mechanisms for accessing them were incorporated into the relational logics of the actors that constituted the neighborhoods as political spaces and made it possible to build relationships between state officials and the leaders of different migrant communities.

Moreover, particularly in certain municipalities where the ruling parties developed a strategy for this purpose, these policies resulted in a very significant increase in the number of foreigners on the electoral rolls. Their exponential growth—which in La Plata, for example, rose from 8,800 registered voters in the 2005 election to 37,000 in the 2015 election—was the subject of a number of different media allegations that attributed a “clientelist”⁴ logic to the regularization measures. According to this interpretation, foreigners were vulnerable and passive subjects willing to participate in the exchange of “favors”—such as access to space within a social plan—“for votes” (Auyero, 2004). However, notwithstanding the fact that the proselytizing motivation was present in the ties that were established during the implementation of the program, we would like to emphasize here that the attribution of electoral capital to migrants not only did not contribute to their vulnerability but very quickly placed their organizations and leaders in a position of recognition and importance. In fact, in both La Plata and in other areas in the province of Buenos Aires—such as Escobar, in the case of Bolivians—different actors began to attribute the victory or defeat of a given candidate to migrants.

In short, the “territorial” documentation programs and the political dynamics surrounded their implementation redefined the place of migrants in specific social spaces, turning them into key subjects in some of the dynamics of low-income neighborhoods. Although a much more restrictive policy began to be implemented in Argentina in 2016 and, following Decree No. 70/2017, many of the progressive aspects of Law No. 25,871 were limited (Canelo et al., 2018), the transformations in the agendas of migrant organizations and in the recognition of Argentine state and civil institutions demonstrate that the processes of mobilization and citizen positioning that were conceived during the previous period have not ended.

Urban experience and access to documentation: struggles for the right to the city

The new visibility of migrants was also part of the development of logics of mobilization—and, more generally, of political and citizen subjectivation—that were somewhat innovative. Bolivian migrants in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires, particularly beginning in the latter half of the 2000s, and the religious festivals, folk music events known as *peñas*, dance groups, soccer championships, “traditional” celebrations and radio programs that comprise what we can call the “classic agenda” of their entities (Grimson, 1999; Gavazzo, 2004; Giorgis, 2004; OIM-CEMLA, 2004;

⁴ For a detailed description and analysis of this phenomenon, see Auyero (2004) and Vommaro and Quirós (2011).

Caggiano, 2005; Canelo, 2013), began to make other demands related to insecurity and access to urban land.

In recent decades, many Argentine cities have experienced a steady increase in land prices (Cisterna & Matteucci, 2015). This market dynamic has had a direct impact on existing barriers to home ownership in low-income sectors, making it difficult through commercial means. Under these conditions, informal collective land seizures occurred one after another as part of the strategies of different social and political organizations. At the same time, given the growing need for land due to demographic expansion and the lack of policies for the production and regulation of urban land, commercial lots were created in an informal manner. Both dynamics resulted in numerous settlements in which the ownership of land plots was contested by residents, social organizations, private enterprise and state institutions. In this context, the inhabitants of these plots adopted different strategies to request the integration of those neighborhoods into urban policies and gain access to different services (Cravino, 2006, 2014; Van Gelder et al., 2013). Furthermore, the recognition of the migrants and the dialogue with their associations and leaders—which became more dynamic as a result of the regularization programs—also enabled them to become legitimate actors in petitions to the authorities for the “right to the city”.

The housing problems that migrants in Argentina experience, which include overcrowding, precarious housing, irregular occupation of lots and a lack of access to basic services, have been extensively addressed in the specialized literature (Grimson, 2009; Matossian, 2010; Caggiano & Segura, 2014; Baeza, 2014; Mera, 2017; Magliano & Perissinotti, 2020). Research has shown that in addition to the difficulties these migrants face as foreigners, they must endure different dynamics of discrimination linked to their area of residence and are subject to the “place effect” (Dahau & Giglia, 2008) on different practices; this situates spatial distribution as a form of the “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2016) of this population that, along with other factors, determines the population’s subordinate status.

At the same time, particularly in recent years, numerous studies have recognized dynamics of organizing and collective action by migrants in shantytowns and informal settlements in the country’s large and medium-sized cities (Cravino, 2006; Baeza, 2014; Magliano et al., 2015; Canelo, 2016; Perissinotti, 2016; Vaccotti, 2017; Magliano & Perissinotti, 2020). These actions have developed an extensive agenda of demands that has different connections with foreigners. Seeking to elucidate disputes in which legal regulations or access to documentation are relegated to the background, Perissinotti characterized them as struggles for “a place to live” (2016, p. 62).

Futuro is one of the 152 settlements and shantytowns listed in the National Registry of Low-Income Neighborhoods (Registro Nacional de Barrios Populares, Renabap)⁵ in La Plata. It is part of Melchor Romero, located on the southwestern periphery of the city. Its occupation began in 1996, and since in the 2000s, it has experienced strong demographic growth, with more than 900 families living there at present (Adriani et al., 2020). Numerous Bolivian migrants from the Departments of La Paz, Tarija, Oruro and, primarily, Cochabamba have also settled in the area. Although no census can

⁵ Renabap was established by Decree No. 358/2017. A low-income neighborhood is defined as a residential area where at least eight families live together or contiguously and where more than half of the population does not have a land title or regular access to at least two of three basic services: running water, electricity with a household meter and/or connection to the formal sewage system.

confirm their numbers (which are undoubtedly very high), they are the most visible identity group, and the area is referred to as a “Bolivian neighborhood”.

One of the key characteristics of Futuro, like the other “low-income neighborhoods” in Argentina, is that most of its residents do not have land titles, bills of sale or any other document proving ownership of the lots and houses where they live. The informal development of these types of settlements also creates other difficulties, such as precarious streets, a lack of garbage collection and street lights and the impossibility of legally accessing electricity, gas, running water, etc. Safety and crime are also major concerns for the inhabitants of these neighborhoods, who say they feel neglected by the authorities and vulnerable to all kinds of dangers.

In recent years, these problems have led to the creation of a number of organizing groups and have been the motivation for different demands and protests carried out in the neighborhood. In other papers, we have discussed the emergence of a neighborhood council formed primarily by migrants, who drew upon their experience with organizing in the rural area of Cochabamba to engage in disputes—which, in some cases, led to violent confrontations—over land in this area of La Plata (Rodrigo, 2019a, 2021a). Additionally, there are a number of community kitchens run by different social and political organizations, as well as Catholic and evangelical religious spaces that—although they are not constituted around a Bolivian identity—also operate as spaces for ethno-national encounters and the collective analysis of the difficulties that the Bolivian migrants in the neighborhood face.

Saida, for example, is a woman from the Department of Potosí who arrived in La Plata in her early 20s at the beginning of the 2000s. Her connection with Futuro started with her involvement in an evangelical church that one of her sisters attended whose members included a significant number of Bolivian women. After living in different parts of the city, she moved to the neighborhood, where she got a job through the social policy and was able to leave her job as a domestic worker. In an interview conducted in the winter of 2019, she told us that she had been involved in different appeals to authorities before she moved there:

It was impossible to walk. I used to take a taxi to the church, and it had to drop [us] off at 155.⁶ It was all dirt; it was impossible to enter. We had [to walk] more than ten blocks like that, and it was all unpaved. And there, the sisters would tell us that they were going to block the roads to ask for pavement and to stop being isolated. [The policy makers] discriminate. We are Bolivian, but we are legal [regular]; they don't think we are important. (Interview with Saida, 2019)

In both this account and in many others, “papers” appear as the primary objects of the events. Having credentials (or not having them) is mentioned as a key aspect in the decision to make a demand and in the negotiations that ensue. In all these circumstances, personal identification is perceived as capital in the disputes—in this case, the demand for paved roads.

Saida refers to the roadblocks at the intersection of Avenues 32 and 155, in which different groups of residents participated starting in the mid-2000s. Although the

⁶ The intersection of Avenues 32 and 155 marks the entrance to the neighborhood and the end of the pavement.

Bolivian women at her church did not promote the actions, the religious group functioned as a social space in which issues were addressed and information about the protests was circulated. With this information, she joined the demonstrations that sought to make it possible for vehicles to enter and exit the neighborhood.

Streets emerge in different accounts as a key factor in neighborhood problems to the extent that poor streets hinder multiple activities. Their deterioration is a fundamental part of the sense of neglect that many residents perceive. The migrants say that they are “isolated” or “forgotten”, deprived of services that reach their homes. The demands for security are part of this same universe of meanings.

At a demonstration organized for this purpose after the murder of a young man from the neighborhood in late 2019, we encountered several people whom we knew from our previous fieldwork experiences and conversations with members of the neighborhood council. Daniel, a 40-year-old construction worker from Cochabamba, told us why he had joined the demonstration before continuing on his way to work:

Everything is linked. First the street lights, [then] the street that is damaged, the bus that is going to stop passing, the different cases of stabbings, robbery. This year, my house was burglarized. I went to file a report, and they didn't even listen. They don't help you. They keep you waiting, going in circles, and they don't do anything. (Interview with Daniel, 2019)

Women in municipal cleaning cooperatives who had taken a break from their work to participate in the demonstration reinforced the idea that “discrimination against the neighborhood” was primarily determined by the fact that most of its inhabitants are foreigners:

That is true. Yesterday, at two o'clock in the afternoon, my son was coming home from school (...). And they grabbed him there, in front of the eucalyptus trees.... We went to the police station [in the neighborhood] and I told them, “We called 911. Don't you have any information?” “Oh, but we aren't in charge of that [coordinating police intervention based on the reports received by 911]; that would have to be done by the central command”. I said to them: “Why don't you care? Your action says that you don't care about us. We are people. We are foreigners, but we have dignity; you have to give us the right we have as people. It doesn't matter if we are Bolivians or black or white”. (Interview with Mabel, 2019)

In both the mobilizations to demand security and those calling for other improvements, such as paved roads, the link that the demonstrators made between the neglect of the neighborhood and the discrimination experienced by Bolivians is particularly striking. Here, however, unlike what occurred in the late 1990s and early 2000s, their rejection of the situation was not confined to the “assertion of the culture” or “customs” that they brought from their places of origin in an attempt to demonstrate positive attributes that challenge xenophobic labels (Grimson, 1999; Caggiano, 2005). Instead, as a result of access to documentation and growing social and political recognition, migrants began to question discrimination as part of their assertion of rights and began to take a confrontational stance in different conflicts, which in some situations escalated to physical violence (Canelo, 2013;

Magliano et al., 2015; Vaccotti, 2018). In this case, the accounts clearly demonstrate the participants' assumption that, as residents, they deserve recognition from state officials and access to goods that would guarantee their right to the city.

Different authors have pointed out the existence of relationships between the experience of space and citizenship. There are links between the systems used to categorize different groups and the distinct urban configurations that they inhabit and through which they pass. These correlations have led to the idea that there is a "spatial capital" (Prévoit Schapira, 2001) or a "place effect", which reflects the social position of the subjects and marks their relationship with the urban fabric. Furthermore, the types of demands they formulate, the intensity of their political practices and their assertion of rights are closely linked to the nexus that connects them to different territories (Dahau & Giglia, 2008).

Holston (2008) argues that since the 1970s, the working classes on the periphery of Brazilian cities have produced an "insurgent citizenship". The process of organizing and mobilizing around the construction of houses and access to land titles and basic services, among other issues, transformed the periphery into a space for imagining an alternative future. Their experience in these neighborhoods thus became the context and substance of a new citizenship shaped primarily by their struggles for the "right to the city" (Harvey, 2008; Agier, 2015). Consequently, the urban agenda became just as important, if not more so, in these citizenship processes than labor and/or class-based demands.

Thus, in different circumstances, struggles for the right to the city occupy a central place in the creation of the relationship between subjects and the state. In this context, just as there is a debate about causality in the relationship of positions in geographic and social space, the link between spatial experience and citizenship raises relevant questions. While Dahau and Giglia (2008) find that the conditions of urban experience (such as access to house titles) are a determining factor in the formulation of other demands (labor, recognition, etc.), in our paper, we observe that citizen capitalization (such as access to a National Identity Document [*Documento Nacional de Identidad – DNI*] and social and political recognition) is an essential aspect of the Bolivians' struggles for the right to the city.

The migrants feel that they are legitimate members of the community and, as such, make various demands linked to their "right to the city". In their interpretation, the obstacles and difficulties that they face as Bolivians are connected to the neglect of the neighborhood. For this reason, in line with what has been reported by several studies on different settlement spaces, national belonging becomes a dimension of disputes in low-income neighborhoods (Baeza, 2014; Magliano et al., 2015; Vaccotti, 2018). Ultimately, struggles for the right to the city are related to access to citizenship and, at the same time, are a way to produce and expand the citizenship of the migrants.

This connection between locally coordinated struggles and citizenship struggles, however, does not represent a new development in the trajectory of many migrants. Lazar (2008) indicated that after the neoliberal reforms in Bolivia in the 1990s, which included certain demands by indigenous peoples (such as the possibility of collective land titles, bilingual education and the Popular Participation Law, which recognized the groups and their leaders as actors in municipal decisions) in different communities

as a diversity policy, places of residence became a space for constructing collective ways of shaping political subjectivities and the relationship that the subjects establish with the state.

In these ways of producing and experiencing citizenship that are organized around the place of belonging and primarily carried out through neighborhood and school councils, there is a certain continuity among the settlement spaces of migrants in Argentina. In some cases, as with the aforementioned Futuro Neighborhood Council, there is a direct connection, as it applies the same organizational logic mentioned by Lazar. In other circumstances, the links are indirect, but they maintain a clear connection: from the migrants' perspective, fighting against the neglect of a neighborhood simultaneously involves struggles to establish their place and gain recognition in the community. They thus constitute a collective subject (the Bolivian community, the neighborhood in Futuro) that is highly significant to the migrants' ways of positioning themselves as citizens.

However, the possibility of applying the experience of neighborhood-state relations to settlement contexts is conditioned by access to administrative regularity, documentation and some degree of social and political recognition of their associations and leaders. In this way, the goods and symbols that state institutions configure as fetishes of citizenship (Gordillo, 2006) are also part of an appropriation "from below" (Jelin, 1993, 1996) that connects these goods and symbols with premigration experiences.

Conclusions

In this article, we sought to characterize different political experiences that are not adequately understood according to the conceptualizations developed by different proponents of autonomy of migration. Based on our own fieldwork and on dynamics in Argentina reported in the specialized literature, we find it necessary to highlight different struggles that are shaped by certain particularities that make them important for understanding the relationship between agency and institutional arrangements.

The autonomy of migration perspective focuses on the capacity of migrants to create margins of action. It argues that migration represents an ungovernable moment according to the logic of capital and the state that enables subjects to escape from the social order and the logic of the exploitation of the labor force. At the same time, it indicates that control regimes are transformed by attempts to regulate these emerging practices. Although it recognizes multiple tensions, the approach is always based on a contrast between control mechanisms and subjects, not because it does not recognize the conditions and practices of control but because it understands that the "autonomous" capacity of subjects begins when they are able to detach some aspects of their subjective production from regulation devices.

Moreover, in the cases examined in this article, agency is constituted in the connection between premigration experiences and a specific way of integrating into state devices (which arise, in turn, from interaction with social organizations). We thus believe that it is essential to avoid the abrupt and reified opposition of institutional parameters and subaltern action, which ignores the multiple ways in which subjects use the positions enabled by state policies to contest their place within their contexts

of reception (and, thereby, some of the limits established by those policies). The autonomy of migrants' struggles is therefore not constituted by their distinction from control devices but manifests in the distortions that they introduce to, and through, those devices (Butler & Spivak, 2009).

Simultaneously, this distinction implies a counterpoint to the relationship between nationality and citizenship. While the "migrant struggles" perspective assumes that this relationship is one of full homologation, in our paper, we find it more productive to attend to the differential logics of recognition and action (both formal ones and informal ones, in the sense that they have an impact on institutional processes) (Sassen, 2002) that migrants constitute in their disputes. In short, we believe that identifying the configurations that the conflicts acquire can help us to visualize the scope and limitations of our analytical tools and our political imagination.

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