Social Sustainability in the Use of Public Space

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Abstract. Public space is a bone of contention between different groups that try to impose their own values and interests. Both the way of devising the pattern of roads and their names, monuments, architectural works, and the uses and transits given to all these elements, result in a subjective construction that when imposed unilaterally or in a context of plurality consensus, give rise to social conflict or sustainability in relations, exchanges and coexistence within the “polis”. A review of the manner in which the public space of the city of Temuco has been organized can provide an intimation for, on one hand, understanding the conflicts arising therein, and, on another, thinking of social sustainability solutions to those conflicts where interacting groups can identify with and feel represented by that public space.

1. Introduction

In general terms, the social sciences give priority to arguments of a social, economic or political nature regarding society, its history and development, setting aside explanations of a cultural character. In this text we seek to defend the idea that in order to understand social phenomena it is necessary to take cultural aspects into account, such as the devices that are installed in the public space. More distinctively in urban spaces, the elements that are placed in them are more significantly set out by those in possession of greater power. This does not mean that those with less power do not strive to install their own cultural symbols. Given that it is a product of society, the space is created and shaped collectively on the basis of sociocultural dialectics issuing from the struggle for hegemony. Michel Foucault indicates that “when I think of the mechanics of power, I think of its capillary form of existence, of the extent to which power seeps into the very grain of individuals, reaches right into their bodies, permeates their gestures, their posture, what they say, how they learn to live and work with other people.” [1]

Power concentrates in cities, and not only political power but also economic, productive and cultural power, among others. Production methods are insufficient to explain all the problems. A city cannot be understood to be a closed and coherent system in which everything is given, and in which there is no space for the emergence of manifestations, new expressions. The notion of a territory, prior to being built upon with urban constructions and furnishings, is first shaped in the mind of those participating in the political power. In the case of the city of Temuco, both the signage and the statuary reinforce a rhetoric of the conquest and colonisation of a territory that was annexed to Chile at the end of the 19th century – an operation serving to legitimise the invasion and pillage that was inflicted upon the territory of the Mapuche people.
The visual elements that we observe in a city give rise to a specific identity in its inhabitants. The infrastructure, the name of the streets, the monuments and images are tools, whose purpose is to build that identity, and also participate in the mechanisms used to discipline the population. These are elements that build an ideal, a common view regarding how society is supposed to be and what values should be safeguarded. In broad terms, it can be said that while, on one hand, the hegemonic groups try to stage symbols that exalt and reinforce the idea of a unitary, homogenous and integrated nation-state, as well as legitimising their right to govern everyone else, on the other, are social groups that resist and generate legitimate or illegitimate formulas to install/include their own symbols.

2. The Ways in Which a Territory is Occupied

Images convey something about a cultural territory. The idea installed regarding a country or a city depends in large part on the images that are present in the public space. Consequently, territorial occupation involves not only subjecting and dominating a territory, it also involves a symbolic domination of the space. Therefore, the reconfiguration of imageries and the modification of the common viewpoint of a society is one of the greatest concerns of those in power, because if they can bunch people together around certain signifiers, an identity is created.

Why is it so important to instil a homogenous identity in the population? According to Michel Foucault, power homogenises the population in order to control it more easily. Therefore, power develops different mechanisms or devices that Foucault calls normative: “The normal is established as a principle of coercion in teaching with the introduction of a standardised education” [2]. If we all accept the same parameters as our own, it is no longer necessary to oblige us to incorporate them, it is we ourselves who begin to defend and promote such standards. And once hegemonic groups manage to impose their values on the population, the population has no problem in marginalising itself from political power. It can be said that the functioning of our society depends on believing in certain symbols institutionalised by the political (or religious) power, which depends precisely on how effective it is in installing its legitimacy.

However, although the hegemonic reach of the dominant groups or classes is vast, it does not produce the absolute submission of the marginalised sectors. There are always sectors arising that resist the imposed rulings. Those who feel postponed begin to appropriate multiple mechanisms via an accumulation of experiences and knowledge that will allow them not only to escape from their situation but also to organise social/political movements.

The rules for the foundation and construction of the “polis” in Chile were based on a checkerboard model. Around a central public space, the Plaza de Armas, were placed the edifices of power: political (currently municipality and governorship), religious (Catholic cathedral) and economic (banking and commerce). The roads are built in a parallel and perpendicular pattern, giving rise to the classic grid design that governs the use of the territory/city. The disciplinary operation goes even further, numbering the space and giving the streets names that reinforce the idea that one is in a Chilean city. For example, the streets closest to the Plaza de Armas are named after figures who embody the national ideal, mostly men such as Bernardo O’Higgins, José de San Martín, Arturo Prat, Manuel Bulnes, Antonio Varas, Benjamin Vicuña Mackenna, to mention a few.

In this context, it is noteworthy that in the city of Temuco, there is a street that escapes the normative pattern and its name represents a member of a subordinated culture: Caupolicán. This street, which is neither parallel nor perpendicular but diagonal (oblique), appears as a flaw in the grid of the “polis”, reinforcing the idea in the collective imagery that the native Mapuche is slanted (crooked). Can we believe this to be a coincidence? If we look for synonyms of oblique and crooked, we find words such as: deviant, twisted, sneaky, weird, extravagant, perverse, devious, malignant or treacherous. And if we look for the antonyms of oblique or crooked, we find straight, right, noble or sincere.
The same operation is repeated in the Monument to Caupolicán, located in the intersection of Manuel Montt and Av. Caupolicán. Journalist Pedro Cayuqueo makes the following comment regarding the statue: “As a Mapuche child I never saw [...] any “lonko” (tribal chief) lugging around a heavy tree trunk to earn his position. My teachers in elementary school said that Caupolicán had done so for three or four days, beating everyone else and thus being named head “toqui” (leader in times of war) in the Arauco War. He was, by far, the most brutish. That image always seemed surreal to me, somehow clumsy, a crude caricature of don Kalfulikan, his real name. Even now, every time I pass his statue in the downtown avenue that bears his name in Temuco, I think about this; about how official history portrays us, and also how it lies to us.” [3]

Figure 2. Monument to Caupolicán (1939), José Troncoso Cuevas.
3. Multiplicity

“Without multiplicity there is no space” [4], states Doreen Massey. The different expressions, signs and symbolic representations that shape the public space in the city are a result of the cultural action of different social groups. In general terms, we observe that there are those that conceive it as the cultural expression of a territory, and others that conceive it in economic terms. But if we observe the city, we see that it is in continual change, and therefore it cannot in any way be looked upon or addressed as something fixed or immobile. Both in global and what we could call intimate contexts there is always a process of formation, never finished, never closed. The city is a space where a plethora of interrelationships exist, where there are multiple trajectories that are in constant metamorphosis provided by the different power dynamics that shape it.

The results sought by the elites through different cultural operations are directly related to the search for their own legitimisation in power. Based on that logic, cultural, educational and normative programmes that presume to be modern, western and white are put into action. Proof of this is that the native populations of Chile are denied their right to freedom of determination and autonomy of their territory and resources, in addition to the refusal of the political power to recognise Chile as a plurinational State.

![Image](https://radio.uchile.cl/2019/03/21/temuco-indh-se-declara-inquieto-por-represion-de-carabineros-a-mapuches/)

**Figure 3.** Protest in the city of Temuco. Image taken at the intersection of Av. Caupolicán and Manuel Montt. Source: https://radio.uchile.cl/2019/03/21/temuco-indh-se-declara-inquieto-por-represion-de-carabineros-a-mapuches/

Images do not appear out of nowhere; they arise from life itself. Some are connected to interests, beliefs, values, prejudices and paradigms, and others emerge as an expression of the dissatisfaction of some regarding the circumstances they have to live in. Many networks blend together to create each of these images: on one hand are the promoters, patrons and sponsors, and on the other are the creators, those whose work consists in combining physical and symbolic materials. An example of this is the
mural painted by the collective group *Alapinta*, which is installed in the centre of the city and eulogises the symbols of our colonisation, with the Mapuche identity banished to a part of the mural that can hardly be seen.

![Mural created by the collective group Alapinta](https://example.com/mural1.jpg)

**Figure 4.** Mural created by the collective group *Alapinta*, in the centre of the city of Temuco, specifically in the upper section of Galerías Massmann in Arturo Prat St., between Diego Portales and Manuel Montt. Source: https://www.endemico.org/medioambiente-es-cultura/alapinta-murales-para-chile-desde-el-corazon-de-la-arucania/ (the first two) and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8diS_Ebbpc (the third).

The different disciplinary institutions controlled by the groups in power “educate” those that are under their dominion to accept the supremacy of the elites, to perceive their submission as natural and inhibit their desire to change the social structure. In the meantime, in multiple ways although with far less financial resources, the marginalised sectors also try to disseminate their ideas; by availing
themselves of the technologies and anything that can be useful to them, they imagine and develop cultural practices that will help them to press for a change in the common view that power installs and reinforces continually in public opinion. Thus, as the different groups in dispute go gaining ground in the subjective sphere, new collective identities are built that strive not only to permeate the minds of people but also the public space.

4. Antagonistic Forces
For Antonio Gramsci, hegemony refers to the political, intellectual and moral leadership exerted by a group with power to fit the interests of the rest of the population into a historic bloc. That is to say, groups that have the power to build a collective will or to transform the common viewpoint, whether intellectual or moral. Gramsci was one of the first to understand that the State is not only coercion but also depends on certain elements of consensus in the society it manages. This is what he called an Integral State.

Gramsci considers that there is always a dominating class whose articulating principle is to establish hegemony of its beliefs and try to impose them on the rest, but this would not simply be the forcible imposition of a specific ideology. Looked at this way, society is a discursive space structured by hegemonic political practices where the subjects are not given in advance, neither are the identities simply the result of relations of production, because if it were so the idea of a hegemony would be unthinkable.

In this sculptural work we can see how the integration of the Mapuche identity is forced into the Chilean culture, in this case, the Chilean part is dominant and the Mapuche recessive. This is a clear example of how integration is a homogenising device, where the dominant cultural element is what is manifest and the recessive cultural element fades away, or in the best of cases remains as a residual element. We observe, then, a territory in which diverse wills confront each other, where the
antagonists are those that fight against hegemony. To think of a society, it is necessary to think of it as a discursive territory, where a battle of antagonisms takes place, a confrontation of projects that need to be negotiated and included, not integrated.

According to Chantal Mouffe [5], counter-hegemony does not necessarily depend on the articulation of a predetermined group. That is to say, no group or class has the exclusive privilege to lead the battle. The battle for hegemony arises from the confrontation between an “us” and a “them”. This confrontation involves a battle between collective wills with different projects as to how to organize society. However, these collective wills do not appear out of nowhere, they are the articulation of different demands that on the basis of multiple strategies become transverse, i.e., new forms of subjectivity that arise from new alliances (for example: the alliance between students, farmers and workers). These alliances are crucial in the construction of counter-hegemonic operations, because they are the result of the formulation of a subjectivity that convinces individuals of the need to group together in a common project.

5. Positions and Contradictions that Arise in the Study of Space

The analytical perspective that guides this text is that the space in which we are immersed is made up of ideological models that structure not only the ways in which the processes of economic development unfold but also how the multiple forms of political and cultural domination are exercised. The characteristics of a city play a role that goes beyond being a mere stage for human experience, its elements are shaped in terms of political power. Thus, the importance of understanding in what measure the elements that the different dynamic forces install to affect the collective subjectivity are the representation of a struggle for political and cultural hegemony.

According to Milton Santos: “space is made up of an indissoluble, joint and also contradictory set of object and action systems, not considered in isolation but as a single context in which history develops.” [6]. That is to say, in any territory, such as in the city of Temuco, the object systems cannot be separated from the action systems, because the purpose of the objects – which can be constructions or installations in the public space – cannot be understood if their context or the intentions underlying their installation are not examined.

Space is never independent of the actions that are exerted upon it, and thus it is not possible to produce an explanatory hypothesis if actions and objects are analysed separately. As it is our cultural, economic and political actions which produce a specific spatiality, a city is a social construction guided by the conflicts, contradictions and tensions that occur in the society that territorialises it.

6. Conclusions

Understanding that the struggle for political hegemony also encompasses the subjective sphere (common view or public opinion) makes us comprehend the importance that lies in opposing and resisting the system. Homogenisation, integration, squashing differences, standardises people into like beings, acting the same way, becoming predictable and interchangeable. In modern States, visual artists, publicists, sculptors and architects are similar to policemen, professors, physicians or psychiatrists in that they exert on us what Foucault called a pastoral power, that prerogative that priests used to have before to correct and reprehend the wayward.

Identity is not something established once and for all, its historic development requires adapting to the circumstances. And if the circumstances are not the same for each person, it is a fact that each one has a particular history that makes him/her different. Therefore, the pressure exerted to make us all fit in the moulds that power has established for our bodies does not produce good results. It is urgent to escape toward a meeting of identities where our body feels more comfortable, less enchained, less pinned down. Emancipation comes through rethinking the system, setting aside the conservatisms that fetter us, the stale ideologies, absurd paradigms and formulas that we know do not work. To resolve our conflicts we need imagination, creativity, new ideas that will serve to obtain greater degrees of freedom, without forgetting that emancipation is impossible without the community.
Can we escape? Yes, the first thing is to question the prefabricated identity with which power holds us down. Then decide whether we run away or stay where we are. Faced with that decision, Foucault exhorts us: “always with the incapacity to cross the line, to pass over to the other side, to listen to and make heard the language which comes from elsewhere or from below; it is always the same choice, for the side of power, for what power says and what it causes to be said.” [7]

The capitalist episteme really likes this Darwinism from which the idea of constant competition between individuals, organisms and species stems, but forgets that, in nature, among individuals of the same species, such cruel strife does not occur. There are numerous cases in nature where the community organises itself on the basis of cooperation and mutual support. Humanity, like the rest of the species, has developed thanks to collective action. In fact, we are continually doing things for others disinterestedly and are surrounded by examples of mutual support. But these ideas go against the capitalist episteme.

Mapuche thinking, above all the significant contribution of Mapuche women in the development of networks of affection, protection and support, are an example of how joint action gives us power, in that it kindles in us other forms of sociability, such as reciprocity, interdependence or mutual support systems. Interdependence is not a threat to society, as is individualism. Themes such as globalisation, urban expansion, the proliferation of ghettos of poverty, inequality, exclusion, sustainability, etc., require different models of analysis, diverging outlooks, new instruments and new ways of interpreting the political dimension of counter-hegemonic struggles.

Figure 6. Mapuche vegetable vendors selling their products in Temuco, in the centre of town, in the intersection of Manuel Montt and Manuel Bulnes. Source: https://www.desdeabajo.info/mundo/item/37462-el-colonialismo-se-estrella-con-las-mujeres-mapuche.html

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