
Issues of Legitimacy among Social Housing Residents in Soacha, Colombia

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Having carried out a three-year fieldwork among social housing residents in Soacha, a municipality in the southern outskirts of Bogotá, Colombia, I thought that discussing legitimacy might sound like a far-fetched task. How to reflect on legitimacy from a city in a country that has never experienced it? If I had told my interlocutors that I would attend a workshop to discuss ‘erosions of legitimacy’, they would probably have asked, Erosion of what legitimacy? What has never existed cannot be eroded.

This is the context in which my ethnographic analysis takes place. Soacha is a municipality whose government has historically been conceived as failed, in a country that is experiencing a crisis of legitimacy on a macro scale. In Colombia the consequence of the kind of systematic failure of governance that Pardo and Prato warn to be dangerous for the democratic order has already taken place; a country where the risk that ‘people’s distrust in those who staff the relevant institutions may extend to the institutions themselves’ (Pardo and Prato 2010: 2-3) has become a reality. In Soacha, lack of trust in the local government and ordinary people’s low expectations about the actions of their rulers has caused citizens to resort to private governance schemes to manage their daily lives. In terms of local law, one thinks, for example, of the Horizontal Property Regime that regulates residential condominiums. This is how Ciudad Verde emerged as a privately built and managed ‘new city’, where middle- and lower-middle income households live and where most are first-time homeowners.

However, the perspective offered by the concept of legitimacy allowed me to see aspects of the lives of Ciudad Verde’s inhabitants in a new light. Specifically, it allowed me to identify the link between people’s subjective experiences and broader processes. Ordinary people experience legitimacy by contrasting their trajectories and social practices with the available economic, political, legal and material ‘matrix’ of their environment. In this process, some aspects are seen to fit into the matrix and others do not. The ways in which people manage those aspects tell us about the relationship between agency and structure, between individual and society, between social reproduction and social change, and between the possibilities and constraints of exercising citizenship in urban settings that, in Colombia, are increasingly becoming the dominant way of housing the ‘emerging middle classes’.

Three interlinked processes coexist in the residents of Ciudad Verde’s experience of legitimacy. The first concerns the ways in which some practices that are legal — such as hanging clothes on windows — become illegitimate through the acceptance and promotion of aesthetic and behavioural restrictions marking the horizontal property regime. Here, the ‘criminalization of actions that are widely regarded as legitimate’ (Pardo and Prato 2010: 2) is carried out not by ‘the rulers’ but by residents themselves. The second process concerns illegal practices — such as pirate transportation and commercial activities inside the

apartments — that become legitimate in order to overcome structural limitations. The third process involves moral disputes among residents when there is no consensus about the legitimacy of certain practices, such as street vending. In these processes, the (thin) dividing line between legitimate and illegitimate modes of production of livelihoods (Comaroff and Comaroff 2016), and the disputes in defining this boundary, have less to do with what is legal or illegal than with an interplay between the moral aspirations and the material needs of the residents of Ciudad Verde.

Graeber (2015) argues from a feminist and race theories perspective that those at the bottom of any unequal social arrangement — in terms of gender, race, or class — must do most of the interpretive work to understand the social dynamics of the context in which they live. They invest much time imagining the perspective of those who are ‘on the top’ and empathizing with it, which is not mirrored from ‘the top’. In this ‘lopsided structures of imagination [...] the powerless not only end up doing most of the actual, physical labour required to keep society running, they also do most of the interpretive labour as well’ (Graeber 2015: 80). This is clear in my ethnography, where the hyper-regulated environment that residents embrace and reinforce restricts their possibilities of sociality and citizenship. Thus, residents who come from popular neighbourhoods must invest much of their material and symbolic resources to understand the vision of a middle-class citizen and to interact with their material environment and with their neighbours and the institutions in the same way they imagine a middle-class citizen would do. So, ordinary people deal with the failures of the municipality and the unfulfilled promises of real estate developers by filling the gaps of legitimacy with their own material and symbolic resources, without challenging governance. They are doing a great share of material and interpretive work in their efforts to ‘manage existence’ (Pardo 1995).

This leads us to highlight some theoretical and methodological aspects about how an ethnographic analysis in an urban context can contribute to the study of legitimacy, and beyond that to our understanding of how broad processes are linked to the life of ordinary people. Pardo states that power is lost because the dominant élite ‘fail to link to the broader society’ (Pardo 2000: 22). Therefore, ‘a key task of governance is to establish and nurture the connection with citizens’ values, needs and expectations, the strength of which depends upon the observable quality of the link between political responsibility and trust and authority in the exercise of power’ (Pardo and Prato 2010: 1). In this light, a crisis of legitimacy could be seen as an issue of unequal distribution of interpretive work. If the problem is that rulers lose connection with the citizens, that they are unable or unwilling to understand the worldviews of ordinary people, ethnographic knowledge has an important role to play because it can help to bring out the way in which ordinary people imagine and face the structural conditions they live in; it can help us to understand their motivations and expectations; it can help to clarify whether, and to what extent, the latter are met with specific reference to the question, who delivers what and to whom?

In my specific case, people ‘from the top’ — local government officials and employees of the construction companies — take for granted that the problems of coexistence in the

residential compounds are due to people not knowing the rules or being unwilling to follow them. On the contrary, from the bottom up we see that knowing and enforcing the rules is the main way for people to ascend socially and to exercise citizenship from their social and spatial position. Residents are indeed keen on rule-enforcing and mutual and self-regulation. In practice, however, sometimes reality makes it difficult to follow the rules. Structural deficiencies, caused precisely by governments' failure to deliver to the citizens, force the latter to turn away from the normative regime, reminding us that 'people may choose to operate regardless of if their actions are strictly legal; what is not legal may, thus, acquire an aura of moral justification and become accepted as legitimate' (Pardo and Prato 2010: 2). This translates into confrontations between people who at all costs want the image of the 'good citizen' dictated from above to prevail and those who act by other moral principles to get ahead. In this context, the challenge for urban governance does not lie in promoting citizens' rule-compliance but in creating new possibilities of urban citizenship that provide solutions to the residents' material and moral needs and address the limitations that ordinary people face in their daily lives.

Another aspect that emerged from the analysis of my empirical material in the light of the theoretical discussions on legitimacy is ordinary people's efforts to reconcile the different deficits of legitimacy at different levels. In my work, as in that of other participants in the workshop (Abraham 2018a and 2018b; Koechlin 2018a and 2018b), the neighbourhood exerts agency either in terms of social control or as a place that offers new possibilities of citizenship to those who are marginalised. In the neighbourhood of Ciudad Verde, people clearly process their (ambiguous) relations with the law by generating normative frameworks that, on the one hand, exceed what is legal and, on the other, tolerate practices that are not legal but are necessary to cope with daily life. Here, the neighbourhood is the sphere where legitimacy arrangements at various levels take place which generate opportunities and constraints for social life and citizenship. Through neighbourly relations and emerging moralities, residents engage with legitimacy and try to secure the upward mobility promised by the 'dream of homeownership', conditional to the enforcement of strict aesthetic and behavioural regulations that involve limitations on one's own freedom and socialization. At the same time, they try to overcome contextual limitations — the crisis of metropolitan governance, socio-spatial segregation and accessibility problems, unemployment and limitations in the design of the megaproject — by legitimizing some illegal practices. Symbolically, local residents endeavour for Ciudad Verde to become a middle-class neighbourhood despite its peripheral location in a segregated urban area. Materially, they connect with Bogotá through public and 'pirate' transportation and secure their livelihoods through formal jobs and informal home businesses and street stalls.

Reflecting on my ethnography from the perspective of legitimacy made me realise that the dynamics of legitimacy among the inhabitants of Ciudad Verde respond to the failure of rulers, but also to the prevailing local notions of social mobility and middle-class citizenship. Thus, by analysing how ordinary people engage with gaps in legitimacy at different levels of governance in their daily lives and by tracing the emergent moralities that result from this

engagement we can gain a better understanding of contemporary configurations of citizenship and social life. As stated by Comaroff and Comaroff ‘ours, after all, is an epoch –if not the first, then certainly the latest– in which law-making, law-breaking, and law-enforcement are especially critical registers in which societies construct, contest and confront truths about themselves’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2016: xii).

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