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Contested Streets. Narratives on the Legitimate and Illegitimate Uses of Public Space in Buenos Aires City¹

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ABSTRACT

In the City of Buenos Aires, the sale of popular consumption goods in public spaces, carried out by the so-called “manteros” (street vendors), emerged during the social, economic and political Argentine crisis of 2001. Given the deterioration of living and employment conditions of the population, public spaces became a place of economic access for a large number of people excluded from the formal labour market, particularly unemployed migrants. In this article, we analyse the narratives of various political and social actors — the City of Buenos Aires Government, SMEs chambers, neighbourhood associations and the media — on the legitimate and illegitimate uses of the public space since the “manteros” first appeared in the city centre. Throughout the analysis, we see that behind these narratives lies a logic of space regulation with an expulsion and eviction focus, aimed at those subjects considered “intruders” and “invaders” of the street.

KEY WORDS

Public space, uses of urban space, narratives, manteros (street vendors), City of Buenos Aires.

LA CALLE EN DISPUTA. NARRATIVAS SOBRE LOS USOS LEGÍTIMOS E ILEGÍTIMOS DEL ESPACIO PÚBLICO EN LA CIUDAD DE BUENOS AIRES

RESUMEN

En la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, la venta de mercancías de consumo popular en la vía pública llevada a cabo por los denominados «manteros» surgió durante la crisis social, económica y política argentina a finales de 2001. Ante el deterioro de las condiciones de vida y de empleo de la población, el espacio público se convirtió en un lugar de acceso a la reproducción social para buena parte de las personas excluidas del mercado laboral formal, especialmente migrantes desocupados. En este artículo analizamos las narrativas de diversos actores políticos y sociales —el Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, las cámaras empresariales de la pequeña y mediana empresa y los medios de comunicación— sobre los usos legítimos e ilegítimos del espacio público a partir de la presencia de los «manteros» en el centro porteño. A lo largo del análisis veremos que detrás de estas narrativas subyace una lógica de regulación del espacio a partir de la expulsión y el desalojo de aquellos sujetos considerados «intrusos» e «invasores» de la calle.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Espacio público, usos del espacio urbano, narrativas, manteros, Ciudad de Buenos Aires.

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Introduction

We will analyze in this work the narratives of different political and social actors — Buenos Aires City government, small and medium enterprises business associations, and the media — on the definition of legitimate and illegitimate uses of public space in Buenos Aires City, concerning the presence of workers, the so-called *manteros*², who resell goods for popular consumption on the streets of downtown Buenos Aires as their main means of self-sufficiency. One of the main rhetorics of the actors that take part in the city's production system is that they often value public space as an ecstatic place for the mere movement of people, a crossing point where certain ways of appropriation, considered “uncivil and insolent”, are denied, which affects the allegedly “harmonious” cohabitation in the city. Throughout this analysis, we will see that behind these narratives lies a logic of public space regulation that entails the eviction of those subjects who are considered street “intruders” and “invaders”, such as *manteros*, street vendors, sex workers and people living on the street.

The conflict we study takes place in the context of a restructuring and reconfiguration process of public space within Buenos Aires City, regarding the implementation of urban planning and renewal policies carried out by the current city government since 2007. Our working hypothesis is that these policies create some urban order where certain space practices are shaped and regulated as more legitimate than others and where control mechanisms are deployed against the allowed and the forbidden uses of urban space. This entails symbolic struggles over the imposition of sense (Bourdieu, 1985) throughout public spaces in constant dispute.

The findings gathered in this article derive from a first research stage on the production processes of urban space in Buenos Aires City within the hegemonic logic of *conceived space*, a “dominant space in any society (or mode of production)” (Lefebvre, 2013: 97) and the way in which the narratives on how public space “must be” according to the local government, business associations and the media consolidate. On a second research stage, we will seek to analyse the *manteros*' narratives with relation to the results presented below. Nevertheless, we have considered for this work the contribution of Perelman (2013 and 2014), Rullansky (2014), Camji, Kligman and Peralta (2016), Peralta (2017) and Canelo (2018) to the study of resellers' spatial practice as a way to “appropriate” the streets and to dispute and resignify planned and structured spaces. Thus, and following Henri Lefebvre (2013), actions of configuring, regulating and

2. The name “*manteros*” is based on the fact that the products on sale are displayed on “*mantas*” (blankets) that are laid on the city's pavements.

controlling public space carried out by the political, technical and economic power take part in the social production of that space, as well as the ways to inhabit it, live in it and make use of it (Marcús, 2017).

Our methodological strategy has been based on qualitative analysis of secondary sources, such as news articles by the most read and consulted newspapers nationwide (*Clarín* and *La Nación*), by small and medium enterprises business associations, and discourses and campaign materials from the political parties involved in the conflict.

In the first part of this article, we present a brief summary of the urban conflict regarding the use of public space by *manteros*. In the second section, we examine the hegemonic notion of “public space” as a sphere of harmonious cohabitation among equals, a conceptualisation that excludes the dimension of struggle and resistance taking place on the street. In the third section, we analyse the origins of the conflict over the appropriation of the streets by the *manteros* in Buenos Aires City, at a time when the first arguments related to how public space “must be” started to be shaped. Afterwards, we explain the relationship between this particular urban conflict and the restructuring and reconfiguration processes of public space in the capital city, specifically related to the implementation of the so-called *Plan Microcentro* (Downtown Plan). Finally, we analyse the development of this urban conflict, as we describe the juxtaposition of narratives that have defined the use that *manteros* make of the streets of Buenos Aires City as illegitimate.

1. Buenos Aires City’s *manteros* and their emergence as an urban conflict

At the end of 2001, living and employment conditions for a large part of the Argentine population suffered a rapid deterioration because of the social, economic and political crisis in the country. In such context, the streets of Buenos Aires City and other big cities in Argentina turned into an access point for social reproduction and the main means of self-sufficiency for a great deal of people who were excluded from the formal labour market, particularly unemployed migrants (Consejo Económico y Social de Buenos Aires, 2015; Perelman, 2017). Three years after the outbreak of the crisis, the presence of the so-called *manteros* in Buenos Aires City was targeted as a conflict they held against small and medium enterprises business associations, Buenos Aires City government and the media. As we will see throughout this work, the conflicts unleashed by the presence of *manteros* on the streets of Buenos

Aires has deepened in the last years, during the PRO (*Propuesta Republicana* party) city administration.

After the Argentine peso devaluation in 2002 (and, thus, the end of the convertibility regime) an economic process of recovery and growth started in the country, which implied a considerable reduction of the unemployment rate and a relative increase of the consumption capacity of the medium and high-income strata of the population (Arceo, Monsalvo and Wainer, 2006). Despite the economic growth experienced at the time, since then, a segment of the population (mainly, popular sectors), depending on its consumption capacity and expectations of social mobility, has shifted towards the consumption of low-price goods and it has constituted itself as the demand of goods and services in the informal economy that emerged during the 2001 crisis (Consejo Económico y Social de Buenos Aires, 2015).

The use of public space by resellers on the street was protected by the urban Coexistence Code (*Código Contravencional*) from Buenos Aires City enacted in 2004, by considering sales on the street to be aimed at “mere livelihood” as long as they did not imply an effective unfair competition against settled shops (Article 83, Law 1472/2004). This permission was in force until December 2011, when Article 83 was modified via Law 4121, and the expression “mere livelihood” was removed from the original text; since then, the activity has started to be considered a misdemeanour under penalty of fines ranging from 500 to 1,000 Argentine pesos³.

This reform has meant a huge success for small and medium enterprises business associations from Buenos Aires City which, after the enactment of the urban Coexistence Code (*Código Contravencional*), have expressed themselves against the permission for street vending they consider as “unfair competition” against settled shops. Throughout seven years, business associations led by the Argentine Confederation of Medium Enterprises (CAME, in Spanish) lobbied legislators and public officials from different political parties for the regulation of the activities of street vendors, mainly of those settled on Florida⁴ pedestrian Street and in San Telmo neighbourhood.

3. That is the equivalent to US\$117 and US\$233, respectively (conversion based on the US dollar exchange rate in December 2011 in Argentina: 1 US\$ = 4.28 Argentine pesos). Source: Argentina’s Central Bank. Available at: http://www.bcra.gov.ar/PublicacionesEstadisticas/Cotizaciones_por_fecha_2.asp (Accessed February 22, 2019).

4. Florida pedestrian Street, located in downtown Buenos Aires, is one of the most important shopping arteries in the city and in the whole country. Its pedestrian nature makes it one of the main commercial promenades and tourist attractions in the city. Along it, different historic and architectural heritage buildings can be found, most of them built in the last

After the reform of the the urban Coexistence Code, the mass media made the conflict regarding the use of the *porteño* pavements by street vendors visible. Although it had been going on for years, this conflict was presented to the public as a new one. Social actors (the CAME, the media and political parties) deployed different arguments to build public consensus concerning the eviction of *manteros*: besides accusing them of creating a continuous “unfair competition” against the settled shops, they enunciated that the presence of street vendors entailed the “degradation of public space”⁵ in the areas where these shops were located, besides producing “dirt and traffic difficulties”⁶, as factors that fostered the “increase of insecurity”⁷; they also denounced the “illegal provenance of the goods”⁸ produced as the result of “slave labour”⁹ to be commercialized through an activity managed by “mafia organized for illegal sales”¹⁰. As these discourses emerged, all the mentioned dimensions juxtaposed; thus, the presence of *manteros* on the streets was discursively built in a complex and multidimensional way. According to these discourses, this was a matter of “the other” being considered an “outsider” who appropriated a landscape they assumed as lacking conflict: the streets. In the following

quarter of the 19th century. Sources: Cutolo (1994) and <https://turismo.buenosaires.gov.ar/es>. As we will see in the section “The street as a transit point versus inhabiting the street”, since 2012 the city government has carried out a process of urban renewal in downtown Buenos Aires which includes Florida pedestrian Street, among other streets in that city area.

5. “The city will evict *manteros* in Once [*neighbourhood*]” (January 13, 2014), *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/la-ciudad-desalojara-a-los-manteros-de-once-nid1655191> (Accessed September 20, 2018).

6. “Ten warehouses that supplied a network of *manteros* with goods were broken into” (September 2, 2015), *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/allanaron-depositos-mercaderia-abastecian-manteros_0_rk0aj7Fwme.html (Accessed September 20, 2018).

7. “*Manteros* blamed for shop shutdowns in San Telmo [*neighbourhood*]” (March 23, 2014), *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/culpan-a-los-manteros-por-el-cierre-de-negocios-en-san-telmo-nid1675955> (Accessed September 20, 2018).

8. “*Manteros* come face to face with Ritondo over selling on Florida Street” (January 13, 2012), *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/sigue-el-operativo-para-evitar-que-los-manteros-se-instalen-en-florida-nid1440265> (Accessed September 20, 2018).

9. “Blow on the warehouses that supplied *manteros* on Avellaneda Avenue with goods” (January 22, 2016), *Clarín* newspaper. Available at <http://www.treslineas.com.ar/golpe-depositos-abastecian-manteros-avenida-avellaneda-n-1359220.html> (Accessed September 20, 2018).

10. “A kingdom of fake goods covers 25% of illegal sales in the city” (January 10, 2017), *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/reino-trucho-concentraba-25-venta-ilegal-ciudad_0_r1pEByQUg.html (Accessed September 20, 2018).

section we will address the process through which the streets become “quality public space”.

2. What *streets* “must be” like

It seems impossible to speak about urban space without taking the notion of public space into account. According to Manuel Delgado (2011), conflict, resistance, struggles and negotiations are constituting characteristics of the *street*, a place for the unpredictable and the hazardous, a dynamic sociability space under constant evolution and transformation. In this context, the street is a chaotic and unstable space in which the (re)definition of its use as either legitimate or illegitimate is constantly in dispute. For the Catalan anthropologist, the concept of “public space” implies a political and ideologized category that architects, urban planners and government administrations draw on to define what the street “must be” like, not only by means of design and space planning but also, and most of all, through the moral disciplining of its dwellers and the deployment of rhetorics of civility. The aim is to guarantee fluent and regular practices of city dwellers. In the words of Delgado,

It is about avoiding and dissuading any dissent, any capacity for contestation or resistance and — also by extension — any appropriation of the streets or the squares considered inappropriate. This is exerted by means of violence if it is required, but previously, and most of all, by means of a disqualification that is no longer carried out because of some *subversive* origin, but because of a much subtler classification as *uncivil* behaviour, that is, which contravenes abstract principles of “good civic cohabitation” (Delgado, 2011: 26-27).

For Buenos Aires City government and the CAME, that value “quality public space” in the city, its opposite is not private space but some “*espacio fusional*” (Delgado, 2015), that is, the unpredictability of the street itself, which has to be disciplined and regulated. The experience of sociability in an ideal public space is that of a non-fusion agreement, i.e., one based on distance and reserve among those who practise it. The appropriation of the streets by users — in our case study, *manteros* — means the opposite: a provisional denial of the differences in order to attain a unity that allows achieving a specific and circumstantial goal (Delgado, 2015), such as using the street as a resource and means of livelihood. Thus, public space as an ideology masks real social relationships, that is, troubled ones.

Social and political actors analysed in this work — Buenos Aires City government, the CAME, the media — prescribe certain uses of urban space while they legally or morally condemn others (Bourdieu, 1985). Those people or groups that do not behave according to the representation of “good citizenship” will be considered as “inappropriate” presence or “bad citizens”, categorizations that underpin their marginalization, stigmatization, criminalization and even their repression (Parra Vera, 2006). Hence,

Public space is not for them [*manteros*], since public space must remain orderly, predictable, smooth and lacking conflict or ugliness [...]. And let's not mention whether public space is proclaimed as 'quality' space. *Manteros* lack 'quality', thus, their exclusion becomes urgent. The place for *manteros* is not a chimerical 'public space'; their place is the street, a scenario for everything that shapes society to emerge, as well as what is good and bad, the wonderful and the arbitrary, and also poverty. *Manteros* embody the truth of the streets against the lie of public space, as that which, certainly, does not exist, since all of it has already been privatised (Delgado and Espinosa, 2018).

Below, we present the background of the conflict concerning *manteros* and the narratives on the proper and improper uses of the streets that became public space.

3. Background of the conflict's visibility: definition of the uses of public space (2001-2011)

As we have analysed in another work (Peralta, 2017), from the emergence of the conflict to the moment it became visible, the uses of *porteño* public space did not seem to be the core of the dispute; on the contrary, what was socially built as a *problem* in the first place was the “unfair competition” that the activities of street vending were said to mean for settled shops.

As we have mentioned before, a Coexistence Code for Buenos Aires City (*Código Contravencional*) was enacted in 2004 (Article 83, Law 1472/2004), which authorised the resale of goods in public space and, in a paragraph of Article 83, allowed the sale of trinkets on the street for “mere livelihood”, as long as it did not imply an effective unfair competition against settled shops. The fact that the text of that law allowed activities for “mere livelihood” can be related to the immediately preceding crisis context, since those activities had guaranteed the possibility of reproduction for those sectors that were the most affected by the crisis.

As soon as the Code was enacted, small and medium enterprises business associations in Buenos Aires started meeting regularly to express their opposition to the text included in Article 83. In the first of these meetings, the associations criticised the content of the article because it admitted that “the streets of Buenos Aires could be ‘invaded’ by pseudo street artists who may impede the free transit of pedestrians, a situation which, thus, entailed insecurity”¹¹, among other circumstances. Afterwards, a consideration of public space as a place aimed for pedestrian transit arose, a functionality that should be preserved among diverse subjects who infringe that use.

The claims made by the CAME to the political class lead to the effective elimination of the “unfair competition” of street vendors. But the public commitment from political actors could not be exclusively based on the demands from a particular sector in society. It was in the crystallisation of this political commitment in the public arena — though not in a massive way — that the CAME had to discursively articulate other critiques against the activity of *manteros*: it was then when the representations regarding public space started to be in dispute. The presence of *manteros*, according to the CAME and the political parties committed to it, infringed the *right* of free transit of *pedestrian/citizens*; by using a normative language, “empty” streets, conceived in a static way as transit points and mere passages that lead somewhere else, appeared as a condition for democratic freedom to be exercised, which the State must safeguard (Peralta, 2017). Thus, business associations formulated as a problem for the whole citizenship the fact that the space that “belongs to everybody” should be used by a few, aiming at its own reproduction. At the same time, they justified the pertinent participation of political authorities in the conflict, since it was placed within Buenos Aires city’s public space. Accordingly, on December 23, 2011, *Clarín* newspaper published a brief article in which the presence of *manteros* as a problem “belonging to everyone” was built and where public bodies were called to intervene in a straightforward way:

It is a pedestrian street but, unusually, there was almost no room to walk yesterday. The space that belongs to everyone was occupied by some people who used it to make money [...]. And all this is allowed by control bodies that decide not to intervene, while no one ignores the situation.¹²

11. “Repudiation of illegal vending from the commerce sector” (October 18, 2004) CAME. Available at <http://www.redcame.org.ar/contenidos/comunicado/Rechazo-del-comercio-ala-venta-ilegal.320.html> (Accessed October 13, 2018).

12. “The occupation of public space. They are right there, no one wants to see them” (December 23, 2011) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/vista-nadie-quiere-ver_0_H1muyEYnvQx.html (Accessed October 13, 2018).

A legislative debate over Article 83 of the urban Coexistence Code (*Código Contravencional*) would take place seven years after the CAME's first claims about it. It was in 2010 that the executive branch of Buenos Aires City announced its intention to both modify the polemical Article 83 of the urban Coexistence Code and to prevent *manteros* from settling on Florida Street, considered to be the city area *manteros* had “invaded the most”. It was after the eviction of vendors from Florida pedestrian Street that the conflict became visible.

The amendment of Article 83 of the urban Coexistence Code, promoted by the CAME, coincided with the beginning of Mauricio Macri's second term as Buenos Aires City Mayor in 2011. By means of Law 4121, the expression “for mere livelihood” was removed from the article's original text and, thus, so was the legal figure that until then protected the activity of various workers on the street¹³. This event meant a decisive success for the CAME, which, since the beginning of the legislative debate over the amendment of Article 83 two months before, had led a series of daily street blockages to visibilize its demand and to lobby for that legal amendment and for the eviction of the *manteros* who worked on the mentioned pedestrian street.

At this time, the mass media appeared as a new actor regarding the conflict, as it made the CAME's demands and protests visible. The press guaranteed the coverage of daily protests by the mentioned business organization¹⁴, it published opinion articles referred to the “difficult objective to evict *manteros* from Florida [street]”¹⁵ and it spread the news about a paid open-letter by the CAME titled “Invasion of public space”, in which the CAME's member entities denounced that “never had the city been so invaded by illegal sales on the streets, pavements, in squares and shops”¹⁶.

That was how the expression *invasion of public space* arose, wielded as an argument that gathered and summarized the critiques of the mentioned actors against resales on the streets. That expression built the figure

13. See article by Ignacio Rullansky (2014), who analyses the legislative debate that led to the amendment of Article 83.

14. “Fifth day of protests and blockage on Corrientes Avenue” (November 26, 2011) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/quinto-protesta-corte-avenida-corrientes_0_Sknx9452wQe.html (Accessed October 13, 2018).

15. “Between the lack of police support and the demands from shopkeepers” (July 6, 2011) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at http://www.clarin.com/ciudades/falta-apoyo-policial-reclam-ocomerciantes_0_512348899.html. (Accessed October 13, 2018).

16. “Invasion of public space” (December 22, 2011) CAME. Available at <http://www.redcame.org.ar/contenidos/circular/Solicitada-Venta-clandestina-e-invasion-del-espacio-publico.1308.html> (Accessed October 13, 2018).

of *the other* who, located in the city centre (Boy, Marcús and Perelman, 2015), used public space in ways that were considered illegal and illegitimate. It meant *the other* — in the singular, although it comprised a variety of subjects, namely street artists, who inhabit public space and (re) create it through their own appropriations, as we will see in the following section. The characterization of a street vendor as *the other* appeared in relation to the figure of a “mafioso”: this criminal image of *manteros* was built based on the illegal origin or the informal nature of the goods destined to resales, on their participation in the business networks we mentioned before, or even on the migratory¹⁷ origin of most street vendors.¹⁸

The promotion of the CAME’s demand contributed to the entity’s aim, which was to lobby political authorities and legislators in Buenos Aires City before and after the legislative debate over the amendment of Article 83, a reform that materialised on December 7, 2011. After some attempts to evict vendors, which they resisted, an operation led by the Metropolitan Police prevented *manteros* from laying their blankets on Florida pedestrian Street, in January 2012. Since that day, police presence continued steadily, which eventually dissuaded vendors from working there. In the days following the eviction, *manteros* demonstrated against the impossibility of continuing with their activities on the pedestrian street. In an article about an *olla popular*¹⁹ carried out by *manteros* as a protest on Florida pedestrian Street, *La Nación* newspaper categorized the use they made of the streets as follows:

Yesterday, the *olla popular* that *manteros* staged to block the crossing with Corrientes [Avenue] was heated in the midst of both office workers’ contempt and the photographic curiosity of Brazilians and Japanese to whom the fact that a few people took control of the streets through drama and momentum seemed completely picturesque (and very Argentine-like), while those few are used to the everyday unrest the streets have turned into.²⁰

17. There is a great deal of theoretical and empirical works on the controversial relationship between immigration and crime. See Martínez and Lee (2004) for a systematization of some of these research studies.

18. “Legalizing illegality” (January 25, 2005) CAME. Available at <http://www.redcame.org.ar/contenidos/comunicado/Legalizacion-de-lailegalidad.359.html> (Accessed November 28, 2018).

19. *Ollas populares* or *comunes* refer to a collective meal, with community participation in Latin America destined to relieve hunger within social groups in poverty contexts. They are also organized as an act of protest on the streets to make a social conflict visible, as in the case of *manteros* that we analyse in this work.

20. “Florida, a pedestrian street full of contrasts” (January 18, 2012) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/florida-la-peatonal-de-los-contrastes-nid1441404> (Accessed November 28, 2018).

Nine months after the eviction, Buenos Aires City government announced the beginning of works of renovation in Florida pedestrian Street, as part of *Plan Microcentro*. In the following section, we will analyse the implementation of the urban project that meant evident transformations in the *porteño* downtown area public space, as well as in the determination of new legitimate and illegitimate uses of that space.

4. The street as a transit point *versus* inhabiting the street

The *Plan Microcentro*, implemented during the 2007-2015 PRO term in Buenos Aires City, implied deep changes in the urban landscape, as well as the definition of new uses of the space. Downtown constitutes a crucial part of Buenos Aires City, a strategic area that entails multiple uses: political, financial, commercial, religious and tourist ones. We can consider it a key city area, since almost all subway lines and three of the main train lines connecting the *Conurbano* area with the rest of the country originate there. However, although it is a very busy area in the daytime, it almost has no stable population, since most of its buildings are used as offices (Berardo and Vazquez, 2016).

The main works the *Plan Microcentro* included were: the renovation of avenues and pedestrian streets (through pavement changes, LED luminaries, flowerbeds and trees, the rearrangement of newspaper stands and the removal of noncompliant signage) which implied the homogenization of the urban landscape in the area; the restoration of heritage buildings; an increase in the police presence in the area; and the establishing of pedestrian areas through pavement widening and levelling as well as traffic management.

It is possible to consider that these measures were planned not only with the aim of creating more space for circulation and to increase the subject's protagonism but, most of all, to turn the street — a conflictive space by definition — into “quality public space”, which is likely to be sold in the market as a harmonious space where the subject is invited to “stroll” and where the collective imaginary sees a chaotic area (Berardo and Vazquez, 2016 and 2017). But the “invitation” is not for any subject, but for the *pedestrian subject* and the *tourist subject*, that is, the one that uses the street as a transit to another place or the one that contemplates it as a “shop window” to be consumed. Thus, downtown renovation policies aim at restructuring that space for the mere circulation of pedestrians and for tourist contemplation, and not for the presence of subjects and their appropriation of that space. As we will see further on, not all users

will be “welcome”²¹, neither will they be entitled to circulation and, even less, to remain in that reconfigured public space.

When the *Plan Microcentro* started to be carried out, the then *porteño* Mayor, Mauricio Macri, expressed that it is in public space where “gathering and relationships among people originate, where a collective spirit and individualities express themselves, where civic identity is built”.²² This kind of discourse, shared by other officials in Buenos Aires City Government, revives the rhetorics of contemporary urbanism and understands public space as “a friendly and nonconflicting proscenium in which abstract principles of state mediation territorialize” (Delgado, 2013: 55). This idyllic and ideological conception identifies public space with the place where an abstract citizen exercises their rights of freedom of expression and association, which is characteristic of the conception of political liberalism.²³

Thus, as we have posited in the second section, public space operates as a harmonization tool according to an idea of civil society where pacifism, tolerance and consensus are desirable values that are presented as the flip side of contrasts among social classes. The conflict is therefore shown as undesirable, and the clear aim of these urban and social projects is to eliminate it. In other words, the notion of public space itself that is created deliberately excludes any hypothesis of conflict among subjects and subjects/consumers in the city.

Therefore, the projects of neoliberal urbanism that highlight the need to intervene in urban space to accomplish “quality public space” are aimed at producing a space for “good civic practices”, where the liberal utopia of “a cultured, friendly and clean society [...]” can be developed, that in which “all those who have been declared as undesirables are expelled or excluded, even if it is just because of their inability to prove middle-class manners”

21. In 2011, Mauricio Macri’s political campaign for his reelection as Buenos Aires City Mayor presented the suggestive slogan “You’re welcome” to the city, as if it were a private space whose owner reserved the right to refuse admission. For further information on this subject, see Marcús, 2014.

22. “The humanization of public space”, Ministry of Urban Development, Buenos Aires City Government, 2011 (Berardo and Vazquez, 2017: 177).

23. Buenos Aires City Government has followed the propositions of strategic planning based on the ideas of Danish architect Jan Gehl to reconfigure the *porteño* downtown; these guidelines proposed creating cities on a “human scale” while they criticized the loss of the “traditional place the urban space took as a social forum for the city inhabitants” (Gehl, 2014: 6). The conception of public space built by PRO as a vital place in cities that must promote gathering, association and good cohabitation among the different social actors leads to the urgency to humanize it. The paradigm of “humanization of public space” is based on considering that material modifications in urban space have social effects, i.e., changes in the uses and behaviour of its inhabitants. For an in-depth analysis of the ideological propositions regarding the “humanization of space” carried out by Buenos Aires City Government in the *porteño* downtown, see Berardo and Vazquez, 2017.

(Delgado, 2013: 57). Attuned to this idea, an adviser to Buenos Aires City Government related the way in which the *Plan Microcentro* addressed the challenge to turn the “street” into “quality public space”:

[we have answered] the city problems with actions aimed at neutralizing certain unscrupulous humans — who are many, by the way — and their personal aspirations, for the common good [...]. In these terms, humanizing means to generate actions to be attuned to the uses and customs of a species and the community that contains it, suggesting solutions to the immediate and — of course! — at the same time, policies that build the mediate: prevention, education and punishment.²⁴

According to its planning, the *Plan Microcentro* aimed at reorganizing the uses of public space through new regulation and material interventions that fostered certain activities and restricted others. The strong regulatory nature of the project was intended to organize a landscape presented as chaotic through explicit actions that determined what and who could remain in that space, how they should do it, and what and who should be removed from it. Thus, the PRO’s conception of public space as a democratic place of gathering for society’s diversity found its first limit. As part of the reorganization of the area, operations carried out by police forces were ordered to evict the *manteros* that were working on Florida pedestrian Street²⁵, as we have described it in the previous section.

The behaviour of Buenos Aires City Government through its security forces can be understood as a clear example of the neutralization of the subjects considered as “undesirable”. From this perspective, street vendors make “improper” uses of public space, which was why it was decided to expel them from the street. Behind this narrative that showed public space as a place for democratic cohabitation, the existence of unequal social relationships was hidden, as well as the social order that is imposed through violence against the excluded from public space.

Moreover, the media underpinned the *porteño* government’s narratives and actions, and they expressed that the eradication of *manteros* from the mentioned pedestrian street was a fundamental condition to reclassify the area to be intervened. An article published on *La Nación*

24. “The humanization of public space”, Ministry of Urban Development, Buenos Aires City Government, 2009 (Berardo and Vazquez, 2017: 182).

25. “We have already solved the question of *manteros* and now we want [Florida pedestrian Street] to shine as in other times”, Diego Santilli, Minister of Public Space. In “A plan to renovate Florida pedestrian street begins” (September 29, 2012) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/arranca-poner-nuevo-peatonal-florida_0_ryO11VyHdme.html (Accessed December 10, 2018).

daily affirmed that “with the expulsion of *manteros* from this downtown paradise, Florida gains a passable landscape”.²⁶ Five months after their eviction, *Clarín* daily published: “Florida Street now seems recovered and walks take place more at ease, without the invasion of *manteros* and street vendors it used to suffer from”.²⁷ Once again, these social actors promote their evaluation of public space as a transit point, as a space that belongs to them and that, therefore, must be “recovered”, since it is “occupied” by subjects who are “outsiders”. This is about public space “recognized as the private property of a centralized political power [...] that has self-proclaimed the function to supervise it and to impose its own senses” (Delgado, 2004: 12). While for these actors the street turned into public space is conceived as “property”, for *manteros* it means an “appropriated” place. Therefore, their spatial practice can be understood as a way of “inhabiting” the street, a place for opportunities for survival and social reproduction.²⁸ In terms of Lefebvre, “[...] dwelling, for the individual or for the group, is to appropriate something. Appropriating is not to have as a property but to create as a work, to shape it, to build it, to give it a unique signature [...]” (1973: 209-210). It is by inhabiting the city that a notion of it reaffirms, that of a *collective work* where urban users configure and provide with different space logics, as they create new senses. It is about signifying processes in the environment which are held throughout time and which, therefore, can never be considered as “finished”, since they are continuously in progress (Duhau and Giglia, 2008).

In the following and last section, we will analyse the shift of this urban conflict to other city neighbourhoods as a consequence of new evictions, as we will describe the juxtaposition of narratives that have defined the use of the *porteño* streets by *manteros* as illegitimate.

5. Off with their blankets: snapshots of a shifting conflict

The eradication of *manteros* from Florida pedestrian Street did not mean the end of the conflict that started in 2004; on the contrary, it meant a

26. Source: Florida, the pedestrian street of contrasts (January 18, 2012) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/sociedad/florida-la-peatonal-de-los-contrastes-nid1441404> (Accessed December 10, 2018).

27. “Five months without *manteros*” (June 20, 2012) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/meses-manteros_0_H16GDTG2PQe.html (Accessed December 10, 2018).

28. For further information on the tensions between the spatiality created by the sphere of power and the uses *manteros* and street vendors make of the streets, see the works by Perelman (2013 and 2014), Camji, Kligman and Peralta (2016) and Canelo (2018).

shift of this dispute to other city areas. The evicted vendors settled in other neighbourhoods in Buenos Aires City, such as San Telmo, Costanera Sur, Caballito, Floresta and Once, where they continued with their resale activities.

The transfer following eviction entailed a new *tactic* (De Certeau, 2000) for vendors to appropriate the streets. These displacements suppose a creative appropriation of the space, in which the *manteros*' dispersed cleverness constantly undermines the intention to keep them still and to eradicate them from the street. It is by means of these creative appropriations that the street is constantly (re)organized by the people who interact there; moreover, it is through the *body* — through its presence and by remaining in this space, through the work it does and the resistance it offers — that *manteros* behave throughout space.²⁹

The media communicated this *tactic* by informing about the unfavourable opinions of the shopkeepers from the new areas where *manteros* settled. One shopkeeper on Avellaneda Avenue told *La Nación* daily about it: “There are more and more vendors on the pavement; they are not direct competition, but they occupy more and more space and that is very annoying for clients”³⁰. The difficulties passers-by find as they walk along a street where *manteros* work were described in the following way: “The entrance is blocked by obstacles. A clothes rack, from which bags hung, occupies a third of the passable space”³¹. As these excerpts express, the argument against the activity of *manteros* reaffirmed more and more by focusing on the difficulties for pedestrian circulation than on unfair competition, which was the CAME's original argument.

Therefore, the place of enunciation progressively modified: while the discourses focused on “unfair competition” correspond to actors from settled shops (namely, a specific segment within the private sector, related to a sectoral interest), the argument considering the difficulty to circulate on the streets can be formulated — and this is how it certainly appears — by any *subject/pedestrian*. The “we” that places “the other” this way in the city centre comprises the whole citizenship. In 2016, several police operations were carried out with the aim of evicting vendors from

29. For an analysis of the material and symbolic struggles these actors wage to be recognized by “the others” (pedestrians, shopkeepers, Buenos Aires City Government, neighbours, other vendors, etc.) as “legitimate” subjects to “inhabit” the streets, see Rullansky (2014) and Peralta (2017).

30. “The confrontation between shopkeepers and *manteros* moved to Once and Floresta [neighbourhoods]” (April 1, 2012) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/la-confrontacion-entre-comerciantes-y-manteros-se-mudo-a-once-y-a-floresta-nid1461441> (Accessed January 15, 2019).

31. *Idem*.

Caballito neighbourhood, a city area where the business organizations' initiative to place moveable flowerpots on the pavements to dissuade *manteros* from settling there had failed in 2013³². *Manteros* organized themselves to resist their eviction, which finally took place in a violent way³³.

In parallel with the operations and the resistance in Caballito neighbourhood, a new strategy consisting of a relocation of *manteros* in fairs or closed spaces for them to develop their activity emerged³⁴. The government's proposal provoked opposing views among street vendors: while some considered it was an alternative that would provide them with more safety for the development of their activity, others distrusted the proposal due to the insufficient numbers of stands or because it was considered economically unfavourable since, as one of the vendors said, "sales come from the streets, not from inside a shed"³⁵. Two months after the relocation of *manteros* to Once's commercial promenade (*Paseo Comercial Once*), an article on *La Nación*³⁶ Daily confirmed the failure of the initiative due to the scarce circulation of clients in the fair. A female vendor, interviewed for this article, expressed about it: "I thought this would work. It's a closed space, we aren't exposed to weather conditions, and it's safer, but I'm worried about the situation. To come here, they've asked us to pay the *monotributo social*, which is a little bit more than \$A200 [Argentine pesos]³⁷, but that money can't be earned here".

This new shift in the City Government's strategy to regulate, organize and control public space meant an attempt to expel and even "invisibilize"

32. "Avellaneda Street: flowerpots placed in front of shops, against *manteros*" (April 11, 2013) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/manteros-ponen-canteros-frente-negocios_0_rjYxprtoPme.html (Accessed January 13, 2019).

33. "Clashes with violent *manteros* in Flores neighbourhood" (April 13, 2016). *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/seguridad/enfrentamientos-con-manteros-violentos-en-flores-nid1888732> (Accessed January 10, 2019).

34. "*Manteros* relocated from Flores to a shed located in Once neighbourhood" (April 12, 2016). *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/mudan-manteros-de-flores-a-un-galpon-ubicado-en-el-barrio-de-once-nid1888436> (Accessed December 12, 2019).

35. "There was an agreement with *manteros*, and the pavements in Once were cleared: see the before and after images" (January 12, 2017) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/acuerdo-manteros-veredas-once-liberadas-mira-despues_0_S1QxoLSig.html (Accessed December 15, 2019).

36. "Demands from the vendors transferred to Once" (June 28, 2016) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/reclamo-de-los-vendedores-trasladados-a-once-nid1913152> (Accessed January 10, 2019).

37. That is the equivalent to US\$ 13.49 (conversion based on the US dollar exchange rate in June 2016 in Argentina: 1 US\$ = 14.93 Argentine pesos). Source: Argentina's Central Bank. Available at http://www.bcra.gov.ar/PublicacionesEstadisticas/Cotizaciones_por_fecha_2.asp (Accessed March 10, 2019).

manteros, who, according to the government, the CAME and the media, make an “improper use of public space”.

The following year, in January 2017, a new police operation deployed at dawn prevented street vendors in the Once area from developing their activity. *Manteros* resisted eviction for two days, during which violent events against police took place. The discourses enunciated during those days contributed to shaping the sense of public space that emerged throughout the long “conflict within *manteros*”. For instance, the city’s public prosecutor ordered eviction, attuned with the conception of space as a “transit point”, and he argued in the media that “pavements were made for circulation, not for sales”³⁸. Moreover, the city’s Minister of Modernization expressed that by means of the eviction “we have recovered public space for the neighbours”³⁹, an idea that is reinforced by a news article that includes the testimony of a neighbour from Once neighbourhood: “This is complete quietness; now we are allowed to walk”⁴⁰.

Throughout the eviction operation, the City Government announced the implementation of an urban reclassification project called *Once Peatonal* (Pedestrian Once), a similar plan to *Plan Microcentro*, which was analysed in this article, that included the pedestrianisation of streets, pavement widening, putting value on shops located on Pueyrredón Avenue (an area called Open-air shopping centre), cable burying, organizing marquees and including streetlights and trees⁴¹. The works included in the plan would start once the conflict with street vendors were solved; that way, the reclassification proposal for Once area worked as a legitimating element for the eviction of *manteros*, which was still part of a negotiation process.

The result of that negotiation brought a new shift in the city government’s strategy towards *manteros*: as a flip side of their eradication, they were offered to attend a course of 39 lessons on “business and entrepre-

38. “Incidents, chases and hits from stones in Once: police clashed with *manteros* and there are three arrested ones” (January 10, 2017) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/manteros-desalojo-once-avenida-pueyrredon-nid1974528> (Accessed January 10, 2019).

39. “There was an agreement with *manteros* and the pavements in Once were cleared: see the before and after images” (January 12, 2017) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/acuerdo-manteros-veredas-once-liberadas-mira-despues_0_S1QxoLSIg.html (Accessed December 15, 2019).

40. “Once: from streets without *manteros* to frequent protests” (January 14, 2017) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/once-entre-calles-sin-manteros-y-protestas-frecuentes-nid1975725> (Accessed January 10, 2019).

41. “What the plan to improve Once will be like when *manteros* are finally transferred” (January 11, 2017) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/plan-mejorar-zona-once-desalojo-manteros_0_By3YVnQ8g.html (Accessed January 22, 2019).

neurship tools”, for which they would get a monthly subsidy of 11,700 Argentine pesos⁴².

Both the course and the grant would be financed and carried out by the CAME. The training would be divided into three modules: the first one, referred to communication elements, consumer’s behaviour and defence of arguments; the second module, about “basic entrepreneurship notions” (leadership, value proposal, business plan, costs table, market assessment, adjustment to consumer’s needs); and the last one, referred to labour rights, cohabitation rules in the workplace, tools for a job search and a job interview⁴³. Those who finished the course would be allowed to carry out resale activities in formal commercial promenades and would be given a certificate “that authorized them to access the formal labour market”⁴⁴. A hundred and seventy street vendors enrolled in the course and 90% finished the studies two months later⁴⁵.

In this stage of the conflict, we understand that, in a Barthesian (Barthes, 1991) sense, the CAME applies the rhetorical figure of “identification”, which consists of denying the other by turning it into oneself (in this case, formal shopkeepers or even *entrepreneurs*) (Peralta, 2017). Through the course, presented by the press as a true way of resocialization (with headlines such as “From *mantero* to entrepreneur” or “The *manteros* who have become entrepreneurs”), the authorities in the City Government and from the CAME offer “the other” a means to redeem themselves from their condition of otherness. The mutation regarding the CAME’s discourse and strategy towards *manteros* from the beginning of the conflict to the last events that took place is evident. In the words of the president of the CAME during the street vendors’ “graduation ceremony”: “the vendors’ enthusiasm and willingness to grow has infected us

42. That is the equivalent to US\$ 735 (conversion based on the US dollar exchange rate in January 2017 in Argentina: 1 US\$ = 15.90 Argentine pesos). Source: Argentina’s Central Bank. Available at http://www.bcra.gov.ar/PublicacionesEstadisticas/Cotizaciones_por_fecha_2.asp (Accessed February 22, 2019).

43. “From *mantero* to entrepreneur: what the course that will be offered to *manteros* from Once will be like” (January 19, 2017) *La Nación* newspaper. Available at <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/buenos-aires/de-mantero-a-emprededor-como-es-el-curso-que-se-les-dictara-a-los-vendedores-de-once-nid1976928> (Accessed January 22, 2019).

44. “*Manteros* from Once: what the course turning illegal vendors into entrepreneurs is like” (January 17, 2017) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/manteros-once-curso-convierte-vendedores-ilegales-emprededores_0_HyNDI8g.html (Accessed January 22, 2019).

45. “Graduation party: *manteros* who have become entrepreneurs” (April 18, 2017) *Clarín* newspaper. Available at https://www.clarin.com/ciudades/fiesta-egresados-manteros-transformaron-emprededores_0_rJN8klVCg.html (Accessed January 22, 2019).

with hope. Unlike what many people thought, we have learned from them [...] that united we could beat the scourge of illegal sales”.

We consider that the peculiarity the conflict acquires at this stage of its development implies a combination of space *disciplining* through *Plan Once Peatonal*, as a continuation of *Plan Microcentro*, which proposes a reorganization of the “street” to turn it into “quality public space”, and the *disciplining* of “*the other*” through a course to “turn *manteros* into entrepreneurs”.

Concluding thoughts

We have gone through the conflict regarding the uses *manteros* make of public space in Buenos Aires City, with the aim of reconstructing the definition of legitimate and illegitimate uses of the “street” and the construction of an otherness in downtown Buenos Aires, an area where social inequalities converge and disturb (Boy, 2017). Through content analysis of public discourses, we have accounted for the divergent senses that the social actors involved in this dispute attribute public space.

In the discourses of the diverse social actors (public officials, business organizations, political leaders, the media), public space is conceived as a sphere of harmonious and peaceful cohabitation among individuals, where the urban experience par excellence is *circulation*. For these actors, public space *must be* the foundation and guarantee for citizens to exercise their right of free urban transit. Conceived that way, public space appears juxtaposed with the pro-citizen myth for which urban life is synonymous with civilized life, and in which the formal and courteous behaviour of users in the city excludes any possibility of conflict. This is how the emergence of the conflict is understood as an “invasion” of such urban community by people who infringe the right of circulation, since they make an “improper use of public space”.

As *manteros* are evicted from the streets, permission and exclusion symbolic and material boundaries reaffirm, which define who “deserve the city” (Oszlak, 1991) and who do not. However, neither movable flowerpots, nor bollards, nor concrete seats, nor even violent evictions could completely impede the presence of *manteros* on the street. As we have seen, the eradication of vendors from certain city areas meant both the transfer of the conflict and the displacement of *manteros* themselves to other neighbourhoods in search of better opportunities for subsistence. Thus, it is possible to understand this displacement as a *tactic* of space appropriation that questions the intention to discipline and invisibilize them.

Through the analysis of this urban conflict, we consider there is a permanent distance and contradiction between the public space designed “on paper” and the real urban space where innumerable and heterogeneous social actions take place (Marcús, 2019). Therefore, designed public space is thought as a text that conveys a single discourse, simplifying the complexity and multiplicity of the real urban space, that is, the street. The intention of *conceived space* (Lefebvre, 2013) is, hence, to endow that real space with coherence but concerning its projection. According to this logic, there is a permanent attempt to normalize and domesticate the use of urban space, to regulate the unpredictable and the haphazard, to organize the always-conflicting street to turn it into “quality public space”. Nevertheless, rarely would spatial practices fully comply with the coherence rules that are intended to be imposed through the representation of spaces, since, as Lefebvre (2013) has stated, it is impossible to keep the urban completely still. Against public space surveillance and control mechanisms, “urban survivors” (Boy, 2017) struggle daily to access, to inhabit and to remain in the city, a city in constant transformation and restructuring, where disputes over the definition of the legitimate and illegitimate uses of space are a constituent element of its production.

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