

Occupying spaces, constructing identities: the importance of the movement of *pobladores* for the political and social history of Chile (1950-1970)

Ocupando espaços, construindo identidades: a importância do movimento de pobladores para a história política e social do Chile (1950-1970)

Márcia C. O. Cury*

RESUMO

A luta pela conquista de direitos sociais para além do âmbito do trabalho deu a tônica das mobilizações populares que se intensificaram a partir dos anos 1950 no Chile. A proposta do presente artigo é analisar um aspecto fundamental dessas ações que constituem parte do processo de formação da classe trabalhadora urbana chilena, a ocupação do espaço urbano, mobilizada a partir de ações diretas dos trabalhadores na luta por moradia. E também demonstrar que as suas ações foram de vital importância para forjar a sua identidade coletiva, bem como para a ampliação do debate político em torno dos impactos da estrutura capitalista sobre as condições de vida dos trabalhadores. Tais lutas, travadas pela conquista de direitos básicos, contribuíram para uma maior democratização daquela sociedade.

Palavras-chave: lutas sociais; *pobladores*; Chile.

ABSTRACT

The struggle for social rights, beyond the scope of the work, gave the keynote to the popular unrest that intensified in Chile from the fifties onwards. The purpose of this paper is to analyze a key aspect of these actions, which are part of the process of formation of the Chilean urban working class, consisting in the occupation of urban space. The mobilization was organized through direct action of the workers in the struggle for habitation. Another purpose is to demonstrate that these actions were vital to forge their collective identity, as well as to expand the political debate about the impacts of the capitalist structure on the workers living conditions. Such struggles, waged by the conquest of basic rights, contributed to a greater democratization of Chilean society.

Keywords: social struggle; *pobladores*; Chile.

* Historian, Doctorate in Political Science, Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp). curybr@yhoo.com.br

The actions of Chilean workers in the first decades of the twentieth century allowed an expansion of the space for political participation and the guaranteeing of some rights, principally in the world of work. However, in the middle of the same century, following the growth of cities and urban life, the permanence of the exclusive nature of that society became obvious in many aspects. Thus, the struggle to conquer social rights began to move beyond the work space and to give rise to numerous popular mobilizations, which intensified after the 1950s, and lasted until the fall of the democratic regime in 1973.

At the center of social mobilization in the 1950s was the demand for housing. It began to profile the tensions between social struggles and institutional actions in a context in which autonomous forms of struggle were fully developed, on the one hand, and the institutionalization of social conflicts on the other, through the greater insertion of popular representation in the state. The connection and expression of popular demands decisively contributed to insert elements of democratization into the Chilean state.

The struggle of the *pobladores*¹ developed during the twentieth century and acquired various features, persevering until the dictatorial regime of Augusto Pinochet, when it assumed a leading role in struggle for the re-democratization of the country.² In this article, it is intended to contribute to a reflection on the importance of the *pobladores* movement for Chilean society, highlighting the elements which converged in the formation and development of what would become one of the principal social forces during the Popular Unity government and after the military coup.

In this analysis I will seek to demonstrate how the dynamic of the mobilization of workers occurred, how contacts occurred, and to perceive the mechanisms used to influence the process of the occupation of urban space, in a movement which joined survival strategies, resistance to exploitation, and political mobilization. This action transformed them into fundamental actors in the following political dynamic. Resorting to the recent historiography and to the wide sociological debate about the *pobladores*, documentary sources, newspapers, and oral reports. I will also highlight how these actions unfolded, in a tense relationship involving, on many occasions, community organizations and other institutional forms, such as trade unions, the Church, political parties, and the state.

In these popular experiences, along with the daily struggles and difficulties experienced workers, a strengthening of sociability can be noted, shaped by ties of solidarity, and also by internal conflicts which configured political learning experienced through practices of collective action. Practices which were

generalized such as the *tomas* (occupations) assumed more complex forms through close relations with political groups and with state channels, assuming the form of what are usually called *pobladores*.

The formation of networks and informal relations between workers laid the basis for a true self-formed organization and a large part of the political actions undertaken by the poorer classes in the city of Santiago at that period. At the same time, the contacts of *pobladores* with institutional actors and channels were expanded in an active relationship in which the workers suffered influences, but also reoriented political parties and exercised a decisive pressure on the public authorities to have their demands met, in activities which dialectically contributed to strengthen their sense of unity and collectivity, and for the recognition of their rights.

ORIGINS

The extraordinary urban and industrial expansion experienced during the economic development of Santiago at the beginning of the twentieth century raised numerous challenges for workers. The concentration and growth of industry in the state administrative apparatus and of public and private services in Santiago, added to the moment of agrarian crisis, a fall in saltpeter exports, and the de-structuring of craftwork in the provinces, meant that the capital became a center of demographic concentration.

As a consequence, the profile of the class structure changed. The less advantaged urban sectors began to acquire their definitive configuration. Alongside the expanding industrial proletariat and the transforming craftwork sector, the large number of workers who performed unstable and low-paid functions began to gain significance. Poorer sectors adopted fundamental strategies not only for the insertion, adaptation, and confrontation of the problems of the world of work, but also for the process of migration, and in dealing with the difficulties of the new urban life.

At the center of these difficulties was undoubtedly housing. The struggle for housing in Santiago had been connected with workers' movements since the 1920s. A movement which intensified over time, as shown by the increase in the migratory flow to the city and the increase in the cost of living. The workers who reached Santiago would live in the *conventillos* (tenements) and *callampas*, which we can describe as *favelas* or shantytowns mainly built on riverbanks, rubbish dumps, and in waste land in the city, in general in areas cut off from the existing urban fabric.³

It was in this context that there began to emerge a dynamic of mobilization for housing and for improvements in the living conditions of these workers. The precarious conditions of housing, which occupied reduced spaces, divided between many residents, with risky conditions of hygiene, and especially low or non-existent income to pay rent for the tenement, led people to look for other spaces to live, such as the *callampas* occupations.

Also during the 1950s the effects of the growth of the population of Santiago began to be felt. With the reduction in employment in relation to the increase in the labor force, there was a rise in the amount of people with low living standards residing in areas with minimum urban infrastructure. It was these sectors who participated in the two principal expressions of these deficiencies: *callampas* and the organized occupation of land, which intensified.

In the oral reports of these people it is possible to understand the reasons which led them to enter *callampas*, and principally the conditions they were subject to in these areas. The *pobladora* Guillermina Farías brings us close to this reality in her very realistic statement. According to her, thousands of men, women, and children arrived in the *poblaciones* having migrated to the capital in search of better living conditions, but “after wandering through the city” discovered that they needed somewhere to live and that there was no housing for them. After this came the advice of a friend or relative to form a *callampa*. All that was needed for this was some *fonolas*⁴ and discarded materials. Almost always the idea was to get through a bad period, *pasar la mala racha*, wait for things to settle. However, the truth was that “once there,” in the *callampa*, “it was very difficult to leave.” She added: “there reined misery and multiple sicknesses, although at this time there were some laws to resolve some things. The mothers who had newborns had to sleep with the lights on so that the rats would not bite them.”⁵

At this time the organized occupations in the city had begun. In 1946 the occupation of land in a region called Zanjón de la Aguada started, when the first families evicted from the *conventillos* arrived. After this the process continued, becoming more intense, until it had been transformed into a wide-ranging social movement, which included as much as 10% to 15% of the population Greater Santiago in 1970. The responses of the state to this mobilization differed, depending on the political context.

Both problems, wages and living conditions, were part of a social reality which had been worsening since the end of the 1940s. In turn, state action, the principal resource of the less advantaged sectors at the time to meet their most

important needs, such as housing, health, and education, was weakened by the crisis which affected the public finances and by the liberal policies of the then president Carlos Ibáñez del Campo.⁶

What was witnessed from the end of the decade onwards were important reflections of the economic crisis which impacted on the urban structure of the country and the living conditions of workers. To the extent that these were removed from tenements in the center of city, they came to form different types of popular housing which developed with the occupations and housing policies.

Among these were the *callampas*, which we mentioned above. Sometimes the so-called *mejoras* were formed, which were *poblaciones* originating from the illegal occupation and organization of waste ground, generally formed by *agregados* (a sort of sharecropper) who had been forced to abandon the divided *callampas*. The *población de erradicación* was formed of former *pobladores* from *callampas*, transferred by official agencies, especially *Corporación de Vivienda* (Corvi), and lands prepared on the basis of a special program and the minimum points required by the *pobladores*, with family criteria and the payment of 'quotas.' These counted on the minimal basis of housing and had very basic services. This policy was adopted in the administration of President Jorge Alessandri, between 1958 and 1964.

The industrial *poblaciones* were those built by companies around their establishments. Their occupants were skilled workers or managers, who in general rented these houses after being selected by their employers for this benefit. Finally, many neighborhoods were built thanks to Corvi programs, where houses were built with loans either from this government agency or from savings and loans associations. They were fully finished houses, and their *pobladores* were characterized by having better conditions of health, education, and employment.

Only after 1948 were substantial private sector initiatives created by groups of 'modern' construction companies. In 1953, Corvi changed the planning of the construction and delivery of housing estates, responding to certain conditions which made them properties suitable only for middle class families. The new government was concerned with public investment in infrastructure and to help construction companies which were solely concerned with the production of 'economic housing.' However, housing policies still followed a segregationist logic (Pumarino, 1971, p.127).

‘OCCUPYING’ THEIR SPACES

The principal characteristic of the *callampas* settlements was their complete precariousness, due to the fragility of the dwellings, which often were little more than shacks; the total absence of urbanization, drinking water, electricity, a sewage system, paving, and the lack of basic services, such as education and health. This precariousness was also found in the residences, which were heaped on top of each other, built out of cardboard, old tin, and rags, and constructed on land that had previously been used as rubbish dumps. In general, the entire family was in one room, the kitchen was external, with a wooden fire. There was one water tank for 1500 people, and washing water was obtained in pipes outside of the *población*. One latrine was used by five hundred people (when there was no latrine, the river was used, as in the case of the Población Pino).⁷

The residents dealt with the common infirmities of these environments without basic health and cleaning services, and with frequent floods and fires. In the case of Zanjón de L’Aguada, a misery belt worse than the others in size – some five kilometers long by 100 meters in depth – and also in population, around 35,000 people, divided into ten *poblacionale* sectors, the problem of fire was obviously worsened by the materials used in the construction and the extreme pollution of the waters there.⁸



Figure 1 – Photo of a callampa. Urrutia, 1972, p.42.

In this context of inefficient administrative management and economic crisis, an intensification of the political articulation of the *pobladores* can be

noted, involving the formation of various homeless committees and the organization of a type of municipal administrative meeting open to all residents, the open '*Cabildo*,' with the participation of various *poblaciones*. In that context there occurred the emblematic *Toma de La Victoria*, one of the most important occupations in the *pobladores* movements, and the April 1957 mutiny against the increase in the cost of living, in which *pobladores*, workers, and students joined intense protests in the capital.

In these mobilization, the homeless committees were of great importance and represented a jump forwards in the *pobladores* organization. The committees were especially formed in critical contexts, in which they had to make decisions about an occupation and to bring together the residents for a specific combined action. In addition, to the importance of agents' actions, such as party activists, ties of friendship and work relations constituted the principal means of the existence of committees and the organization of occupations.

These committees extended to various sectors of Santiago and came to be the means of bonding, organization, and articulation among the *pobladores*. Usually, friends invited each other to take part in a committee in the region where they lived, whether it was a *conventillo* or a *callampa*. Increasing numbers of families thereby became involved, holding regular meetings and organizing the occupation of a specific piece of land.

In general, the *pobladores* related the beginning of their organization to when "workers with a political trajectory" had arrived in Zanjón during the 1950s. In this context, block committees and meetings and support from left-wing politicians, especially communists and socialists, began to be organized. Reports from *pobladores* and from Orlando Millas, a Communist Party leader, indicated the important participation of the left in the occupation of La Victoria, on the land of Puente Alto and the former farm La Feria.

In the 1950s there was evidence of dialogue with Corvi, practically from the very foundation of this public agency. This relationship was intensified to the extent that the idea of rights and knowledge of the institutional means to achieve housing began to strengthen among the *pobladores*. As Ida stated:

We began to organize ourselves, the leaders divided the land... Around 1963 a most larger and better structured organization began, we began to pay for the land. This was not charity, we did not want, this was not our objective. Everyone who lived here paid for their land. We began to install electricity, drinking water. Everything was paid by the quotas of the people, until the end it was not easy...

here nothing was begged, everything was bought, each plank of wood, each stake, we never begged for anything...⁹

In the middle of the same decade, these organizations began to acquire different characteristics and better defined functions, including denominations which prevailed and were later institutionalized as *juntas de vecinos* and *centros de madres*. A large part of this work was carried out at the initiative of workers and also due to the actions of external agents, such as clergy, various types of professionals, social leaders, and politicians (Wilson, 1988, p.44).

The struggle for housing, which involved pressurizing the state and the formation of committees and neighborhood organizations, emerged from the recognition of common interests. After the establishment of the *población*, as it expanded its residents felt the need to resolve their problems jointly. Moreover, disordered growth at a certain moment meant that agreements had to be established about various issues, such as the use of water, for example.

The *población callampa* called Colo Colo can be cited as an example of these occupations which acquired an important internal organization at the initiative of its residents. The minute book which contains the records of the meetings contains reports of the problems and the demands discussed by the residents between 1954 and 1956. The book was organized by the resident Ibador Castro, then secretary of the *Pobladores* Committee. In these minutes the characteristics of the internal organization of the *población* can be seen, especially the search for the resolution of internal problems, some collective, such as the installation of electricity and the installation of water tanks, but also individual problems or restricted to certain families, demonstrating the ties of solidarity that had been formed among the *pobladores*.¹⁰ It can also be noted that the conflicts were an important part of the internal organization. Divergences were a constitutive part of this organizational experience lived by the community.¹¹

No matter how simple they were, these experiences got workers used to directing their own activities, in which they learned in practice to use solidarity and collectivism to oppose hierarchies, control, and principally the absence of the public authorities as a guarantor of rights. The rigid control exercised over workers' organizations in work places did not prevent class culture from existing among workers, and from being extended to *poblaciones callampas* and to occupations in the urban space. Furthermore, their specific living conditions, added to their culture based on a rich tradition of working class politics, allowed the emergence of a strong communitarian sense which was fundamental

for the understanding of social life and the political struggle at a local level. A feeling which was intertwined with the creation of a *poblacional* identity, forged in daily life and the experiences of fighting for their basic rights.

The process of gaining housing went through different stages involving self-organization and also the joint action of the state. Before any governmental intervention, residents sought to overcome the deficiencies of the local structure with collective work. In the process of occupying Lo Hermida, the building worker Luiz González actively participated in the entire process of structuring the *población*:

I myself approached the leaders of the building work. I asked, when we arrived here, for the lampposts, because we had no electricity, water, nothing... I asked for the lampposts and with the money of people we bought the wires... And to resolve the water problem, I spoke with the head of the building work, I told him we were in a new *población* ... so he also helped us with the hoses ... and we bought the keys/wrenches and the small things that were missing, the *población* also got water.¹²

1957 was emblematic for social protests, since it marked the popular mobilization which connected *pobladores*, trade unions and students against the effects of the economic policy adopted by Presidente Carlos Ibáñez. The latter had broken with the politics of the Popular Front, which emphasized the intervening role of the state in the economy. After a period of political demobilization of the left, there occurred a return of political parties as mediators of popular demands. In this context, the motto “*trabajar sin transar, hasta la casa conquistar*” began to outline the *toma* as the principal resource for worker action.

This action can be interpreted as the result of a set of initiatives frustrated by the state and unfulfilled promises in the area of housing. In statements stamped on the front-pages of newspapers which reported the occupation, complaints about bureaucracy were constant. They demonstrated anxiety for a radical transformation which adopted a symbolically violent form: the illegal occupation of property.¹³

Internal organization and improvements depended on the level of mobilization and the ties of solidarity among the *pobladores*. As in other neighborhoods, the construction of La Victoria *población*, which began in 1957, was the fruit of an enormous self-organized force of residents based on the improvisation of the campsites; a collective tariff in which it was necessary to joint

together forces and to invent resources, since the government refused to help in the construction of a the new *población*, insisting that it was illegal. The occupation which gave rise to La Victoria is emblematic by its grandiosity and because it exposed the social contradictions, making the *pobladores* visible as social actors for society and for the state. The *pobladores* movement was thus converted into the most dynamic urban actor in the city of Santiago, especially when they joint to their struggle for housing proposals for change and social justice which mobilized society as a whole, especially after the 1960s. It was at this stage that the majority of the workers left the tenements and *callampas* behind to live in stable and definitive *poblaciones*, while others later would form the campsites.

STATE, PARTIES AND *POBLADORES*

Under popular pressure for the right for places to live, the parliamentary debate about the housing *deficit* opened up a further chasm between left and right at the end of the 1950s. The right believed it was necessary to generate conditions through the state to stimulate investment in the construction of housing (credit, savings, liberty of prices, etc.), while the left insisted on the protection of workers who, due to their low wages, could only use a tiny part of their income for housing. For this reason the state had to develop housing plans according to the real acquisitive power of workers and not to produce profit for construction companies. The argument was that housing should not be considered a merchandise, but a social right, and as a result a responsibility of the state.

The difficult conditions of urban structure conflicted with many of the expectations of the workers themselves, and created space for the operation of various political currents which sought to form relations with this new contingent of workers. It was through this reality that the participation of institutional agents began to change among the *pobladores* '*frentes*,' or organizations. This, as we can note, took place in a dialectic form, marked by consensus and conflict, and assume various characteristics over the years. Among these agents were the Church, political parties, and the state.

Leftwing political parties represented in FRAP¹⁴ constantly demonstrated their support in parliamentary statements, demanding government action, and also giving legal aid to the *pobladores* (Espinoza, 1988, p.257). However, their connection to popular organizations had an important particularity. This is due to the fact that this group was not only composed of industrial workers

and, principally, because the questions which involved their struggles were not directly associated with the space of production and trade union questions, central aspect of the leftwing party ideology at the time.

Although the dominant leftwing discourse of that time tended to limit the comprehension of popular practices in relation to the ‘working class’ in the strict sense, glimpsing the worker of modern industry as the sole revolutionary historical subject, it was already apparent that the workers’ movement was much broader and diverse than just trade union or party activities.

The central argument of this leftwing posture was that the principal confrontation with that structure had to be where the principal contradiction of the capitalist system occurred, in other words, in the sphere of production. Housing demands thereby fitted into the demands for consumption, since it derived from a secondary contradiction, and could not generate a strategic confrontation with the system. For the left, the *pobladores* did not know how to identify the principal enemy of the working class (Pastrana; Threlfal, 1974, p.42).

The Communist Party and the Socialist Party exercised a strong influence among the *pobladores* and had actively participated in occupation mobilizations and in the organization of campsites and *poblaciones*, especially through the work of their activists. This denotes an important divergence that existed between the practices of those involved in the popular movements and the theoretical preparation and political proposals developed by the parties (Garcés, 2002, p.147).

In the 1950s the Communist Party recognized that new actors had begun to participate in social and political struggles, due to the changes in the Chilean population. Changes which were related to the reduction of the rural population and the growth of cities with bourgeois, proletarian, and ‘semi-proletarian’ populations. Many of these young workers participated in the street struggles, workers who, according to the party, were politically backwards and without either sufficient clarity or orientation (Collao, 1957, p.12).

The parties interpreted the political actions “of the politically backward masses” in function of their own established theoretical concepts and strategies, according to which popular and workers’ parties had to “educate and direct along the right path these new mass which erupted in social life.” It was during the Alessandri administration that the practices of communists were delineated among the *pobladores*, principally after the ‘*Toma de Santa Adriana*,’ in which legal and illegal struggles were combined, in other words occupations and the resort to institutional means.

During the 1960s the combination of actions expanded massively and expanded the foundation of both parties. This involved linking of grassroots movements and party actions. In the formation of homeless committees, the organization of meetings, and occupation activities, the role of party activists was fundamental, even though these did not belong to the *poblaciones* in which they were active.¹⁵

Many of these activists were involved in the organization and articulation of workers to carry out occupations. Eliana Parra, a communist activist since the age of 15, reported that she had participated in the occupation which gave rise to the 1º de Mayo *población*, after a two year period participating in homeless committees and unsuccessfully trying to acquire housing through legal means. The links between the different committees had fundamental importance during the process:

On the second day we were placing the *fonolas* they had given us and the wind was roaring. It was so strong. Then came the rain. The news of the *toma* spread quickly. People began to come from everywhere, from other land occupations. They brought us trucks, food, they brought everything... they came from the Violeta Parra *población*, from Barrancas, from Conchalí. They brought us coal, *fonolas*, clothes, food, everything. Many senators and deputies appeared, Gladys Marín, Mireya Baltra, Jorge Montes, all from the left ... Who occupied the land was the Communist Party, no one else. For this reason, when the priests began to interfere, we removed them...¹⁶

During the formation of neighborhoods, the work continued through party committees set up in the *poblaciones*, and through the activities of groups such as the youth wings of political parties. Eugenio Cabrera, who lived in Villa Francia *población*, spoke of the presence of the Socialist Youth group called 'Cuban Revolution,' and of the importance of adding this political world to his education when he arrived in the neighborhood.¹⁷ As well as their importance in cultural formation and the political identity of young people, another fundamental role exercised by activists and political figures in this relationship with workers was the intermediation in their relations with the state to pass through the bureaucratic procedures, in the quest for judicial protection and in the demands for structural improvements.¹⁸

Somewhat contradictorily the work of activists expanded and the left postponed the linking of the daily struggles of *pobladores* with their broader project of National Liberation, not being able to see them as subjects of collective

action, or as political subjects capable of transforming that social structure. This conception began to change slowly based on the experience of La Victoria, thanks to the significance which this acquired and the approximation of communists to that movement. The most positive effects of this political articulation, however, were the diffusing of the notion of 'social rights' in the world of Chilean workers, stimulated by the left. On the other hand, the *pobladores* movement managed little by little to expand among the left on a national level the concept in relation to class conflict and the struggle against capitalism.

CHRISTIAN DEMOCRACY AMONG THE *POBLADORES*

Despite the actions of leftwing activists, Christian Democracy (CD) became one of the principal political agents among the *pobladores* from the 1960s. It was a relatively new party which grew with the *poblacional* movement, thanks to its existence at the grassroots levels and the specific policy proposals aimed the problems faced by the less advantaged social sectors, adopting an integration based discourse. This took place in a context in which CD had acquired an uncontested legitimacy (due, amongst other things, to the charisma of its leader Eduardo Frei), whom the right supported, fearing the possibility of the left reaching power.

CD organized committees to build grassroots support and to achieve popular participation in housing planes. Due to the increased social mobilizations the party lost political control of the committees which, as we have seen, began to exercise an important role in the urban land occupations. The center party formed these groups in *conventillos* in particular with those who were *agregados* in *poblaciones*, while the leftwing parties and workers' organizations mostly started in factories and trade unions.

At the core of the CD project was 'Popular Promotion,' which aimed to "integrate the marginalized sectors of the Chilean population" in society. The originality of this proposal lay in the attempt to resolve the problem of the immense housing deficit experienced by the city of Santiago by linking public authority actions with this sector of the population, in a clear demonstration of the recognition of popular demands by the state. During the Eduardo Frei administration (1964-1970), 'Popular Promotion' developed mechanisms which channeled the struggles of the *pobladores* into institutional means. For this organizations were created, or those which already existed were simply institutionalized, such as *Clubes de Madres* and *Juntas de Vecinos*. These acted as centers for the linking and debate of *pobladores* and to carry out various

activities, “as the means to overcome marginality and a form of incorporation” (Vanderschueren, 1971, p.69).

This population, which historically had as forms of organization the Residents Associations (*Juntas de Moradores*) and Homeless Committees, actively participated in governmental projects. However, during the process, CD not only failed to resolve the question of the housing deficit, but also began to face numerous conflicts with *pobladores*. Many occurred due to the organizational question in campsites and *poblaciones* (which even when neighborhoods already had public housing, faced the problem of the lack of resources, such as water, sanitation, and energy), differences between the autonomous methods followed by the residents or in partnership with the left and the inability and intransigence of a government which – due to the concepts of the ‘Theory of Marginality’ which guided the actions of CD in relation to the *pobladores* – saw them as a disorganized mass.¹⁹ Especially when the *pobladores* resorted to direct practices of struggle against the slowness of institutions, and against actions seen as merely welfarist by the population.²⁰

CD housing programs, such as *Operación Sitio*, appeared as the great possibility for the resolution of the problem of homeless families in Chile. Nevertheless, during the two years when they were in force, the project only covered a little over 10% of the families inscribed, showing the gap between the initial offers by the government and social expectations. This project came to be ironically called *Operación Tiza* by the *pobladores*, in reference to the land provided without the minimum infrastructure, consisting solely of lots demarcated with chalk. As a result the complaints of *pobladores* about the bureaucracy of Corvi and the slowness of the state to resolve the question of popular housing expanded.²¹

At the end of the 1960s the social dynamics took their own direction, that of the widespread mobilization of workers to obtain land and housing in the city, altering not only the government’s housing plans, but also its forecasts about the “integration of the poor in the city.” In the context of the growing mobilization of the homeless in the period 1969-1970, the popular logic of direct action was rekindled, and it mattered little if this was organized according to the law as in the *Juntas de Vecinos*. More efficient were the ‘committees’ and ‘commands’ of the homeless *pobladores*.

To have an idea of the intensity acquired by the mobilization of the *pobladores*, in 1967 13 occupations of urban land were recorded in Santiago, while in 1970, 103 were recorded in the city.²² An expression this was the ‘*Toma Violeta Parra*’ in which around 5000 people were involved in 1968. The

response of the Christian Democratic integration policy to this context of strong popular pressure was strong repression, lasting until the end of the administration, and which culminated, for example, in the 1969 Puerto Montt massacre, which left eight dead and numerous wounded. The reaction of the left and social movements against the government was immediate.²³

Most *pobladores* participated in institutional channels expanded by the Popular Promotion Program, without, however, having abdicated from their own forms of action. At the end of the Frei administration (1968-1970), less advantaged sectors experienced a process of increased mobilizations which went beyond this institutionality, in a demonstration of confrontation with the logic of property, imposing direct action as the bearer of the legitimacy of the need and the right to housing (Salazar, 2006). In this way, they responded to the various stimuli received from the state and the political parties, adding them to their own learning, developing multiple experiences of organization and politicization, from the grassroots up.

The gap between the governmental social integration policy and the real demands and popular expectation made its mark in 1967, in '*toma* Herminda de la Victoria,' considered to be an important step in the return to land occupations and a new means of local organization, after the great mobilization of the 1950s. The occupation of La Herminda was not the only important *toma*, but it revealed an organizational and mobilization capacity which demonstrated the strength of the *pobladores* movement.

According to Vicente Espinoza, *toma* La Herminda marked the breaking point of the hegemony which the CD had exercised over the *pobladores* (Espinoza, 1988, p.282). The increased use of *tomas* in the final three years of the Frei administration demonstrated this. The organization promoted by the state now represented such a great demand that it could not be absorbed and it was there that the left found more space. The heterogeneity of forms of action with a predominance of collaboration at the beginning, gave rise to heterogeneity with an emphasis on conflict, a scenario which marked the beginning of the 1970s (Cofré S., 2007, p.36).

With the dynamic popular struggles acquired in relation to the demand for housing, the question of urban occupation came to be one of the principal axes of social struggle in Chile in the period which preceded the 1970 presidential elections. A reorientation occurred in the behavior of the principal party organizations which resulted in the this theme becoming a central question in their programs and political practices.

For the *pobladores*, paths were opened for the occupation and conquest of their spaces. The initiative then moved from the control of the state to the *pobladores* themselves and leftwing politics, which pressurized or imposed on the state their own housing policy: the extensive occupation of the city through “*tomas* of land.” However, the intensification of urban conflict did not occur in a vacuum, but rather in a context of increasing politicization, which, as Garcés stated, democratized in a conflictual manner society to the extent that the *status quo* was questioned, as well as the ways of constructing the society of the future.

In this scenario, a strong mobilizing tendency of workers emerged, who came not only to occupy urban space, giving a new order to it, based on their initiative and organization and the pressure they came to exert on institutional political actors, but also highlighted an important transformation in their attitudes and relations. This change was expressed both in the initiatives addressed to administrating social, political, and economic changes, and in the sphere of identity, or of their forms of organization. It should be understood as organized social pressure on the state and as changes in the forms of life of this sector (Garcés, 2002, p.337).

This process, which Mario Garcés and Julio Pinto appropriately interpret as a stage of politicization (Garcés, 2002; Pinto; Valdivia, 2001), outlined many of the elements which would guide the actions of workers during the Popular Unity government. This politicization was based on a classist vision of society, exacerbating the class struggle as a condition for the establishment of new projects and linked to the left in the 1970-1973 period, in a relationship of mutual influence.

Since the 1940s at least, the parties of the left, particularly the Communist Party and the Socialist Party, had participated to some extent in these organizational dynamics. What was seen at the end of the 1960s though was the emergence of strong connection between *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario* (MIR – Revolutionary Left Movement) and the *pobladores* organizations. MIR grew out of the student movement in Concepción and started to work with popular groups in 1969. It adopted methods of action which converged more on pressure and confrontation than negotiating with the authorities.

The experiences of politicization which they gave to workers’ movements stimulated the germination of an alternative and popular power. Although the influence of MIR was not hegemonic in the campsites, the movement did exert strong influence on these sectors. The form of organization adopted by MIR

with the grassroots, its direct actions and, possibly, the manner of directing activities at workers, thereby opening a clear perspective of conquest from its own actions, were elements which contributed to attract a large contingent to their ranks. The formation and development of campsites was the principal expression of the new phase of the popular urban struggle among Chilean workers. Campsites were the results of massive and concerted occupations of large plots of land, by a group organized in advance in agreements between various homeless committees.

In 1971 the *Campamentos*, as these new residential units came to be called, contained a total of 300,000 people. Formed in open and permanent conflict with the law and closely organized by political activists, they marked a qualitative leap forward in the *pobladores* movement. This occurred to the extent that they allowed the development of collective forms of direction, organization of political actions, and principally of communitarian work, which decisively influenced other settlements. Based on this new urban phenomenon, the *pobladores* made important advances in their form of life, organization, relations, identities, and at the same time in their relationship with the state.

The Nueva La Habana campsite, which figured as the greatest example of organization under the influence of MIR, used its Cultural Front to provide education for children and adults in the campsite, applying the Paulo Freire method. The level of internal organization was evident in the basic structuration of the locality, which counted on the installation of electricity, through clandestine connections, with a medical clinic and with a cultural center; the distribution of around one thousand collective meals per day, the so called *ollas comunes*, which counted on the support of local street markets.²⁴ In the sphere of education, the experience of self-management in school was also an instrument of pressure to attract the attention of the state to the educational problem. Of importance were campsite experiences where literacy classes were used as an instrument in political education.

However, the great innovation of these campsite was the organization of Popular Militias, which emerged out of the practice of appointing security guards in the *tomas* to protect the land that had been occupied. These militias played a discursive and material role in the campsites, applying rules and enforcing sanctions on *pobladores* who infringed community rules.

Since they were connected with projects of structural transformation of society, these changes had a revolutionary nature, and tended to favor the strengthen the collective identity of the *pobladores*. Relations of solidarity between them were stimulated to the extent that it led to the development of a

permanent community organization which sought to collectively resolve their immediate problems (Cofré S., 2007, p.13).

The statements of workers who experienced the formation of these campsites and who lived in them, portrayed the significance of this experience:

I took part because I committed myself to it. The experience in Nueva La Habana was so beautiful, I do not know... we had suffered so much before reaching here; we learned so many things and the most beautiful was that the organization of the campsite meant all the *pobladores* were like a single family ... we were all together for the same thing ... We all defended the *población* as if we were all.²⁵

According to Laura, who had participated in homeless committees before coming to live in Nueva La Habana, the changes in identity and in the form of perceiving the daily struggle could be observed. In the latter the housing question came to be seen as part of an unequal system, and the struggle was understood in a collective form. In the discourse of residents *We* was a significant element of this identification, fruit of a strong sense of communitarian identity.

The 1960s were marked by the dispute between these different political proposals, in the context of the dominance of the Christian Democratic project, which proposed to make great efforts to help the *pobladores* become, through the state, socially recognized subjects. At the same time the 1960s sealed the learning of the *pobladores* in relation to the organization of the demands from the state and the social legitimation of their right to housing.

State and Church actions contributed significantly to expanding and strengthening the organization dynamics of the *pobladores*. Nevertheless, historically, as well as this institutional effort to organize the *pobladores*, the latter had been rehearsing their own organizational practices long before the law sanctioned their legal existence, and the organization practices created or expanded in the campsites demonstrated the strength of the movement through the experience gained.

POPULAR STRUGGLES AND THEIR MEANING

The analysis of the nuances of these collective actions, their consolidation, and the organization resulting from these experiences allows us to understand that the *pobladores* movement managed to explain to Chilean society and principally to the political parties that it was not a secondary movement in a

context of resistance to the impacts of a system designed to be increasingly exclusive.

The *poblaciones* were not characterized as being the residence of sectors with an uncertain relationship with the productive process, rather, to the contrary, as having a much higher proportion of workers than the average in Greater Santiago. According to Castells (1974, p.255), their social composition was fundamentally working class, or industrial working class with a low level of income.²⁶ It is important to highlight this factor, since it determined different interpretations by the political groups in the country, who understood that the population of the *poblaciones* was composed of lumpen proletariat. This conception led to the exclusion of these sectors from their political projects for a long time, reproducing the mistake of a fragmentation of the working class that was more theoretical than practical through the specificities of their insertion in the productive process.

A large part of the textile workers in the Yarur and Sumar factories, which played a fundamental role in the industrial belts during the Popular Unity government, lived in Zanjón de la Aguada, a sector formed by *callampas*. In addition to the industrial workers, almost all the civil construction workers of the city lived in *poblaciones callampas* (Garcés, 2002, p.103). However, the composition of this working class was heterogeneous, since a large part were involved in activities which went beyond the industrial sector, with women whose occupations were washing and ironing, working as domestic employees or cooks. The young, those older than 12, although they worked as apprentices in factories – textiles, footwear, or construction – also worked as street vendors.

This question involved an essential difference between the connection with parties from the traditional left, whether Communist or Socialist, and the connection established by MIR with the *pobladores*. It lay in the conception that these two different movements had of the movements and, consequently, in the model of political practice adopted. We can say that, even when taking part in land occupations and supporting the formation of campsites, the Communist and Socialist parties played a limited role in relation to the conquest of housing for the ‘poor population,’ seeking to pressurize and negotiate with the government, especially the Christian Democrats.

By distinguishing a totalizing revolutionary discourse about the working class applied to the trade unions and factories, and a type of mediating social action in the *poblacional* field, this vision to an extent corroborated the Christian Democratic reading, which saw the *pobladores* as a ‘marginal’ sector.

From the point of view of the diffusion of a conception of the struggle for rights, these actions are unquestionable. Nevertheless, they imposed limits on the insertion of this conflict in the general framework of the anti-capitalist struggle waged by these parties.

On the other hand, MIR innovatively made part of its relationship with the *pobladores* an understanding of the homeless movement which saw them as a collective political subject that was part of the foundations of the formation of a new society. It saw in this movement a struggle to overcome the precarious living conditions to which the working class was subjected, and the core of a broader political movement of this class. Direct relations were established between the discourse and practice of a housing movement, which was placed as a structural question, and the construction of new and more egalitarian social relations.²⁷

Evidentially, the contribution of Christian Democracy was to recognize and legitimize the *pobladores* movement and to propose political actions aimed at integration and guaranteeing rights. At the same time it played an important role in increasing self-confidence in relation to the organizational capacity of workers to expand the dynamics and the constitution of spaces of sociability, and principally the practice of dialogue with public authorities to win their rights, albeit under a model controlled from 'above.' Nevertheless, given the administrative incapacity of the government in relation to a problem which it had actually presented as a priority, an increase in popular pressure was witnessed in relation to the demand for collective services around which they had been organized.

What can be inferred from these questions is that urban workers who lives in the same neighborhoods, associating with each other at work and at home, or during their leisure time, were more liable to develop a common perspective and recognize the community of interests that they shared with each other, in opposition to the interests of other classes. Workers who are formed with their experiences under the impact of their common situation, in turn, reinforce the feeling of belonging to a class, with its own interests distinct from others.

It is actually in this case where the contrast between their class condition and the lives of people from other classes is most revealed. As Zeitlin and Petras (1970, pp.16-29) state, the city is the symbol of the reality of modern industrial civilization. It concentrates people who come together for nothing other than work and the need to earn a living in industry or services. The conditions of overcrowding, the absence of privacy, the visible contrasts of hundreds of thousands of people, between wealth and poverty, on the one

hand, and the protection conferred by authority for the rich and privileged, on the other, are in themselves lessons from the class struggle.²⁸

Understanding the relationship between the social being and social conscience allows us comprehend the way, when confronted with the needs of their existence, men and women form their values and create their culture, intrinsic to their way of life (Thompson, 2001, p.261). Seeking strategies to deal with the uncertainties of daily life, workers sought various tactics to resolve the problems that afflicted them, such as the struggle against their employers, the demand for state support and the strengthening of the support fabric in their neighborhoods. Focusing on the *pobladores* movement allows aspects of daily life to be seen as one of the central elements of social class in the struggle to conquer their spaces.

What is important to highlight is that this was a process of mutual influence between a political and social movement. In the same way that the importance of the politicization of the workers involved in the *poblacional* was central, the reorientation of party projects and the possibility of the insertion of a new political directive among these subjects, as occurred with the MIR proposal, had the result of a stage of increasing the potential of social mobilizations with a collective and class-based nature, and principally the political learning for all the actors involved.

The experience gained during the trajectory of the *pobladores* organization, especially after its connection with leftwing parties, allowed the workers to develop and that the manner of conceiving their position in the system and significance of their struggle would be differentiated. At the same time the parties inserted themselves in the organizational and mobilization logic which resulted from almost two decades of experience. Conviviality, therefore, established mutual learning, which involved the legitimation of the actions of the *pobladores* activists and leaders, who in a recurrent manner stated that they had learned much from party members. The transformation of the party discourse was also notable.

In relation to this aspect, it is important to observe that the resort to legal and illegal actions also became a practice of the left, as can be noted in the participation of Francisco Pizarro, from the Socialist Party, and National Secretary of the Housing Department, who stated in 1968: "We guided this movement, answering a request of the *pobladores* themselves, and in accordance with what was approved in the PS Congress of Chillán, in relation to not respecting the traditional norms of the bourgeois constitution and trusting in

the creative power of the working class” (Pizarro, 1968, p.26, Author’s translation).

The importance of the urban land occupation process was precisely found in its relationship with the question of power and confronting the economic and political system, in other words the limits of state actions and private property. Most significant was the direct political role of these actions and, reciprocally, the delimitation of their content by the special context in which they developed. Over decades, workers adopted the strategy of insisting on institutional participation and negotiation with representatives as the most adequate mechanism to improve their living conditions.

Permanently, they demanded laws, mechanisms and organizations aimed at guaranteeing rights, a repertoire which varied in accordance with the context. What can be noted is that these actions transcended individual anxieties and raised collective questions, pressurizing the state to implement public policies which could result in the greater democratization of that society.

During this process the strength of collective action within its own organization logic for the conquest of rights was demonstrated, as well as for the maintenance of its forms of local organization, establishing a relationship with the public authorities involving negotiation and conflict, with the latter prevailing in the final days of the Eduardo Frei administration in a context that was favorable given the possibility of the victory of the socialist proposal of Popular Unity. Moreover, politicization came into effect, giving workers a predisposition to assume the defense of popular liberties, challenging authorities in social protest movements which established new foundation for the relationship between the popular movement and institutions.

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NOTES

¹ The *pobladores* movement brought together workers in a fight for housing and the improvement of the *poblaciones*, peripheral neighborhoods in Santiago.

² As in other political and social themes, the historiography has highlighted the period of dictatorial regime, including the leading role of *pobladores* for the redemocratization has

been analyzed by various authors, such as Alison J. Bruey and Elizabeth Hutchinson. The social history approach of the Popular Unity period and previous to it, including the question of the *pobladores*, has been highlighted in sociological analyzes in recent decades, and has been carried in more recent works in the historiography by Peter Winn, Gabriel Salazar, Julio Pinto and Mario Garcés, cited in this present text.

³ There exist different versions for why *callampas* (mushrooms) was used for this newborn *poblaciones*. One is related to the fact that they were generally located very humid areas. Another explanation is related to how they were set up and grew, one by one, by aggregation, rapidly and in abundance. Cf. ESPINOZA, 1988, p.246.

⁴ Basically *fonolas* were sheets of cardboard with a coat of a type of pitch used to cover the shacks.

⁵ Statement by Guillermina Farías. In: GARCÉS, 2002, p.122. Author's translation.

⁶ Social tension was permanent, in particular linked to the sphere of work, derived from low wages, working conditions, the breaching of labor laws, or unemployment, which threatened different sectors of production. The increase of unemployment reached various production sectors, such as saltpeter, in which 15,000 people were affected in Antofagasta and Tarapacá, having to migrate to the Southern region. The coal region of Lota and Coronel, where there were approximately 20,000 workers also underwent a serious crisis. Moreover, the government prohibited street vendors, something which guaranteed income for many unemployed people in the city. Cf. MILOS, 2007, p.59. Also of significance was the halting of civil construction. Its depression had social implications for the population of the large cities, both in terms of the loss of work, as well as the impact which the decline of construction had on the already serious problem of lack of housing. Cf. GARCÉS, 2002, p.118.

⁷ Latrines were holes dug in the ground, such as ditches, which had wooden walls built around them at the height of an adult. The film *Machuca* portrays this environment in the scene when the boy from the rich neighborhood visits the boy Machuca in the campsite where he lives, and after asking to use the toilet he gets sick when he sees the latrine.

⁸ Between 1947 and September 1957, a total of nine fires were registered which affected around six hundred houses. ESPINOZA, 1988, p.249.

⁹ Interview no. 29, Ida. In: SEGUEL-BOCCARA, 1997, p.88. Author's translation.

¹⁰ Among these acts of collaboration were the list of *pobladores* who needed building materials, the collection of money among the residents to help families in the case of death or the serious illness of some of its members. *Livro de Atas*, Población Nueva Colo Colo. Santiago, 1954-1956. Archivo del siglo XX, Fondo de Historias Locales.

¹¹ By way of illustration, the event which happened in the same *población* referring to the use of funds which had been raised by the residents can be mentioned. The controversy occurred due to the use of a sum of money collected by them, and which was kept in the Santiago intendency.

¹² Statement of Luiz González to the author. Santiago do Chile, 18 July. 2010. Author's translation.

¹³ “Violento desalojo de pobladores en Barrancas”. *Las Noticias de Ultima Hora*, Santiago, 9 febrero 1969, p.16. “La ocupación de terrenos de primero de mayo. 1200 familias resuelven su problema habitacional en Renca”. *Las Noticias de Ultima Hora*, 2 mayo 1969, p.3. “Nació la población Pablo Neruda. Años de tramitaciones lós enpujaron a ocupar terrenos”. *El Siglo*, Santiago, 27 octubre 1969, p.6.

¹⁴ *Frente de Ação Popular* (FRAP – Popular Action Front). A coalition of leftwing parties created in the 1950s.

¹⁵ Inocente Santo told me that, in addition to helping create other *poblaciones*, he took part in the ‘taking’ of La Victoria, where he would later live.

¹⁶ Statement of Eliana Parra. Cf. MURPHY, 2004, p.31. Opposition to the participation of clergy occurred, according to statements, because unlike the religious leaders linked to Liberation Theology, who participated in the organization and intervened favorably in the *pobladores*, the others were associated with the Christian Democrats and the actions of Caritas, a charity linked to the Church, which aimed to obtain something less expensive for the government, which ended up delaying the process. “Caritas. Monopolio de la miséria”. *Punto Final*. Año I, n.13, octubre 1966, p.16. Author’s translation.

¹⁷ Statement of Eugenio Cabrera to the author. Santiago, 21 Sept. 2011.

¹⁸ A very significant example of the last aspect was La Granja commune, where four hundred ‘homeless’ families out of the five thousand existing in the area occupied land beside a road, called Santa Rosa. These families, which belonged to the ‘2 de julio’ *población callampa* participated in an occupation organized by a committee of *pobladores* supported by representatives of the commune and parliamentarians from FRAP. The mayor of the commune of La Granja was communist, and the majority of the councilors were members of the leftwing front.

¹⁹ The concept which gave support to the Christian Democrat project was the ‘Theory of Marginality,’ which visualized an intrinsic lack of connection between the poor of the city, basically the *pobladores*, and workers in the countryside. In Chile, this theory gained force through DESAL (*Centro de Estudos do Desenvolvimento da América Latina* – Center of Studies for the Development of Latin America), closely linked to the US Alliance for Progress.

²⁰ In relation to this divergence, it is worth citing the self-construction of a school in La Victoria, which also had the symbolic function of demonstrating the collective efforts of residents, as a response to the generalized idea of what constituted a marginal and disorganized population. For an important reflection on the La Victoria *población*: CORTÉS, 2014, pp.239-260.

²¹ “Se inició traslado de callampas a sitios sin urbanización alguna”. *El Siglo*, Santiago, 27 diciembre 1968, p.4. “Denuncian condiciones de vida de nivel sub-humano”. *Las Noticias de Ultima Hora*, Santiago, 10 marzo 1969, p.5. “800 familias dejadas a su suerte en ‘operación sitio’”. *Las Noticias de Ultima Hora*, Santiago, 11 noviembre 1969, p.15. “2200 familias entregadas a su suerte en Conchalí: empezaron enfermedades”. *Las Noticias de Ultima Hora*, Santiago, 16 noviembre 1969, p.4.

²² The number of occupations in urban properties, which was 26 throughout the country in 1969, reached the mark of 352 the following year. Cf. PASTRANA; THREFALL, 1974.

²³ “Sangriento desalojo policial en Puerto Montt: seis muertos”. *Las Noticias de Ultima Hora*, Santiago, 9 marzo 1969, p.1. “La matanza de Puerto Montt”. *Punto Final*. Suplemento de la edición n.77, Santiago, 25 marzo 1969.

²⁴ “Acción directa de los sin casa”. *Punto Final*, Año IV, n.98, 17 febrero 1970, p.31.

²⁵ Statement of Laura. In: *La organización...*, 1986. Author’s translation.

²⁶ In the campsites, industrial workers represented 41% of residents, whilst in the other *poblaciones* they reached the mark of 30%. At the same time, these settlements had higher percentages of building and low paid workers in relation to the *poblaciones*; and the percentage of unemployed was even higher. Almost half the women who had paid employment were domestic employees. The level of unionization was the equivalent in all *poblacionales* sectors, around 30%. Cf. PASTRANA; THREFALL, 1974, p.49.

²⁷ This analysis and the critique made by MIR leaders was published in the first three numbers of the journal *Punto Final*. Chapter IX. *Punto Final*, n.5, noviembre 1965.

²⁸ According to data from the journal *Empresa*, each well-off family from Las Condes commune (one of the richest in the city), living in the so-called Bairro Alto, consumed 23 times more than a typical family from La Granja. While 82% of the houses in Bairro Alto had a fridge, 84% a television, and 65% a washing machine, in La Granja, not one in a thousand houses had any of these artifacts. Moreover, 82% of the residents in La Granja did not receive even the minimum food diet indicated by the National Health Service, leading 136 in each thousand children born to die before reaching one year of life. GIUSTI, 1968, pp.60-61.