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Authors Meet Critics

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Participants

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Marzorati, Roberta
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Rousseau, Max
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Thompson, James
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Vianello, Michele
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Moderators

Torresi Giovanni
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<Torrise, Giovanni> Welcome to everybody. Today we are going to discuss with Ryan Centner about Microcitizenships: Fractious Forms of Urban Belonging after Argentine Neoliberalism. Welcome to Professor Centner.

<Centner, Ryan> Hi from Boston, everyone.

<Kazepov, Yuri> Hi Ryan, good to see you online. Not easy in Boston at the moment.

<Centner, Ryan> Yes, it's been quite a week and a half since the Marathon. But the city is doing well, with "Boston Strong" visible everywhere.

<Torrise, Giovanni> While we wait for our participants to pile up some questions, I would like to ask you about the socio-economic situation in Argentina.

<Centner, Ryan> Giovanni, your question is: what are Argentina's socioeconomic characteristics?

<Torrise, Giovanni> More precisely: Do you think that the Argentinean economic crisis is of the same type the world is experiencing in these days, and thus Argentina can be considered a socio-economical "laboratory" for the future?

<Centner, Ryan> OK, I see. The Argentine economic crisis in the early 2000s has some characteristics similar to wealthier countries in recent years, but some very different. Here are some examples: I think it is fair to see much of what has happened in Greece in recent years as similar to Argentina's experience with austerity. And also speculative investment in Argentina in the 1990s mirrored some of what happened in Greece and elsewhere in the mid-2000s, before their crises. But not all the speculation that happened in, say, Spain and the US is the same as what happened in Argentina 10-15 years prior. The real estate, or mortgage, factor was much less significant in Argentina, for example. But I think the experience of austerity-driven crisis, and the deepened polarization of an already unequal socioeconomic structure is similar across these cases.

Also remember that Argentina's 2001-2002 crisis was one of the last in a long series of neoliberal economic busts in "emerging economies" in the 1990s that had closely followed IMF and other international financial institutions' suggestions (or requirements): Brazil, Russia, and we could even include some of the Asian financial crisis of 1997-1998 in this.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Thanks a lot. Let us now give the floor to Michele Vianello:

<Vianello, Michele> Hello Ryan Centner, thank you for being here. I have an initial, maybe banal, question. How are the Buenos Aires local markets you describe regulated? Sellers have to pay taxes? Or is it more an informal activity that is tolerated, and partially organised in terms of public space occupation? In case the second is true, is it the City Government of Buenos Aires (CGBA; *Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*) that grants this people the right to operate informally?

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks for the question, Michele: The answer is that it's complicated, and is subject to change. Some of the vendors are licensed to be present, for which they do pay fees. Others are

informal vendors. Before the crisis, there were already these markets (or "*ferias*") in Buenos Aires, but vending became a much more widespread and unregulated activity after the crisis.

The CGBA did organize and regulate some, but tolerated the emergency presence of others. In some cases, the vendors' fees are collected by one organization that is then regulated by the CGBA. Sometimes the key authorities are of a different jurisdiction -- such as naval or coast guard authorities if it's done on riverbanks (which the CGBA technically does not control, as it falls under federal jurisdiction, as do a few other types of territories within the city, such as railroads).

It seems that, now, the *ferias*/markets are much more regulated than they were a few years ago, and that while they are still large and widespread, it is much rarer to have vendors who pay no fees to participate.

<Vianello, Michele> So there is no comprehensive strategy of the city administration to allow segments of space to be used in this way? All these *ferias* are episodic local tactics put in place each time by different actors?

<Centner, Ryan> Michele: what you're describing could characterize a number of phenomena in Buenos Aires -- at least as they manifest in practice, compared to plans. I am not aware of a current comprehensive plan related to *ferias* for the entire city, but it would not surprise me if one existed. There have been comprehensive studies (censuses of the *ferias*, essentially), which have informed CGBA plans for the *ferias*, but each administration tends to re-create many plans or studies in order to leave a particular signature on the city. Admittedly, I am much less familiar with the current Macri city administration than his forebears, but I do not believe there is a particular city strategy related to *ferias*. Macri is known to be more imposing with regulations on informal activity, however.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Our discussion continues with a comment by Gwyneth Lonergan:

<Lonergan, Gwyneth> Dr. Centner, thanks for a fascinating article. I am wondering to what extent you have explored the gendered and racialised dimensions of microcitizenship? For example, it seems significant that for your informant João, it is a female slum dweller that is held as representative of stallholders at the weekend *feria*.

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks, Gwyneth. This is an important question, especially in Argentina where racialized questions are sometimes set aside by scholars because there is not as robust of an analytic tradition or discourse related to race (which can be considered an imported concept from the US and UK). Indeed, the racialized aspects are striking across all these cases, even if Argentines (or people in Argentina) seldom understand them in the register of race. In Puerto Madero, it's about "Europe" versus "Latin America," but this is understood in terms of levels of development and order; in La Boca, race would seem to be clearly present in the imagination of a "popular" Argentine culture that embraces indigeneity (or a highly fantastical version of it, such as Argentine cartoon *Patoruzito*), but this falls into more of a traditional/modern binary; in Abasto and later Villa Soldati, race can be more explicit, but is again elided by class and nation, or gradations of class among the poor, who imagine some as truly "Argentine" and "of Buenos Aires," but others as interlopers from nearby countries. All of that is to say that racialized aspects are present, but microcitizenships as a concept is possible

because race is not really central in the terms of discussion. It is these other scales and registers of belonging that become important, and on which people stake claims of belonging.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Gwyneth, would you like to answer to that?

<Loneragan, Gwyneth> Yes, please. What about gender? Because feminist theorists have long discussed the extent to which gender is significant at the household scale, for example, so it would seem relevant at the microcitizenship scale as well.

<Centner, Ryan> As for gender, this is really key in a number of social dynamics in Buenos Aires (as is so, of course, practically everywhere in the world), but I cannot quite say that gender shapes particular notions of belonging. I would say gendered features are used more, if only sometimes, in marking off "others" -- often in derogatory ways, but that is commonly part of boundary-making in general.

<Loneragan, Gwyneth> Why would the 'typical stallholder' be a woman, then? Are women overrepresented in the *feria*?

<Centner, Ryan> I agree that gender is quite formative at many scales, and certainly it can be key in particular imaginings of nation, culture, etc., but I am not sure that a single kind of gender analysis could be applicable across these cases I've looked at.

I think that in the case of the *ferias*, as something that "excessive citizens" were rejecting as unbecoming in their neighbourhood, that the key signs of classed production -- in this case, baked goods -- is assumed to be made by women. But certainly there are many men involved in *ferias*. Gendered stereotypes conflated with classed stereotypes in this instance.

<Loneragan Gwyneth> Thanks.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Nate Millington asks about a relationship between Professor Centner's article and recent work about the topological nature of power:

<Millington, Nate> Professor Centner - I really appreciated your insight into how discourses of citizenship and belonging were wielded by specifically positioned groups. Could you discuss how the state (whether local or national) responds to these concerns? Do you see similar conceptions of citizenship being marshalled by those in power in order to justify particular policies or (uneven) service provisioning (as in the case of Holston's model of differentiated citizenship)? I wonder too if there might be some overlap between your article and recent work that stresses the topological nature of power (i.e. as networked, relational, and multi-scalar)?

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks for your question, Nate: Yes, I do think that power-holders in the state, and powerful groups generally, also marshal differentiated conceptions of citizenship and belonging. In part, this is what Aihwa Ong has looked at in her work on flexible citizenship that I cite. But I think a key difference between my work and hers, in this regard, is that there are particular scales to how the powerful, and the state, position their legitimacy. And this shifts with different

administrations. For example, more recently Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's administration tends to frame many policies within a sense of Latin Americanness, or union among like-minded South American neighbours. The explicit referencing, or sometimes mimicking, of policies or logics from other South American nations with political affinities is common. As for others with social and/or economic power, beyond the state, I think the case of "excessive citizenship" is really pertinent, and not just in Puerto Madero.

The idea of microcitizenships is that there is some particular claim to urban space being made, but that the justifications come from a particular scale -- so maybe we're talking about a different middle-class or wealthy neighbourhood, or prominent public space in the city. Powerful groups can lay claim to these by framing their legitimacy in planning or intervening in them as connected to "correct" policies that have been carried out elsewhere. Whether the invocation is something executed (or imagined) in Barcelona, or Miami, or London, or Caracas, or São Paulo, will depend on the particular orientation of the powerful group, or part of the state.

So Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is likely to use a Caracas imprint, whereas Macri (center-right city governor) is likely to use a New York imprint as a justification for spatialized interventions in the city. In fact, each of these has occurred.

And yes, I definitely see a connection with the recent work on networked, relational, multi-scalar topologies overall. My most recent publication (in 2012) forges some of these links explicitly.

<Millington, Nate> Thanks!

<Torrìsi, Giovanni> Very good. Let us go on with a question by Jacob Lederman.

<Lederman, Jacob> Hi Ryan. I'm actually sitting at a cafe here in Buenos Aires blocks away from one of your field sites. Since you and I have discussed this article before I want to ask a more general question about the analytical and rhetorical value of the term citizenship. What in particular makes the concept useful for talking about broader political-economic formations such as neoliberalism or post-neoliberalism as you describe in Buenos Aires? Why do we tend to speak of citizenship in the global south rather than exclusion or belonging as is often the case in global north contexts?

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks for your insightful question, Jacob. I'll take the last part first. Citizenship has become a much more common part of the political vocabulary of the Global South (not just among analysts, but many, many laypeople) in the wake of so many authoritarian regimes that characterized Latin America as well as much of Africa and Southeast Asia before the end of the Cold War (especially late 1960s-late 1980s). Holston does a particularly excellent job of tracing this trajectory in Brazil following the end of military dictatorship there in the 1980s.

Of course, Argentina also had very formative experiences in the same period with military dictatorships that essentially obliterated any meaning of citizenship connected to rights. In the wake of this, as new constitutions were being drafted, and broad social mobilization became common in Argentina and other post-authoritarian contexts, the vocabulary of citizenship became meaningful for the first time in decades -- arguably with the first real freedom to discuss rights ever.

Even if those rights are not delivered, this entered public consciousness and -- I'd assert -- really shifted the way that different groups think about their belonging.

That's to say exclusion was the norm in discourse in the Global South for a long time, but citizenship gained currency in the late 1980s and 1990s. Of course this is ironic because this happened as the real bases of social citizenship tended to be eroded as part of neoliberal regimes. And that's why I think it's useful to dissect citizenship (and its various formulations) in the context of neoliberalism. Or post-neoliberalism.

Part of my aim in this article is to point out that post-neoliberalism is not actually very "post" at all. Instead, there is much jockeying over belonging that ends of excluding different groups -- it's just that the terms are different. It's not that there's just a powerful state and/or elite excluding the underprivileged, but that all groups in fact discuss "citizenship" at some scale, with some geographic reference, as the justification of their actions on urban space, often with quite exclusionary results, despite "post-neoliberal" talk of renewed inclusion.

<Lederman, Jacob> Thanks! This part of the story indeed explains much the historical value of citizenship as a discourse. I'd just mention that it seemed that many of the claims we see in Buenos Aires and elsewhere in the region understand citizenship not as a set of legal-formal rights connected to membership in a political community but as a kind of normative project of inclusion. I wonder if there are ways to connect these projects rhetorically at least to struggles in other geographies where the stakes are similar but the discourse has tended to be quite different.

<Centner, Ryan> Very good point. Yes, the normative aspect here is key. It's often not descriptive but normative, or aspirational. In that way, I think it could connect analytically to the formative aspirations (even with different vocabularies) that shape senses of belonging and terms of inclusion/exclusion in other parts of the world.

I think the core here is about various scales of imagined belonging, and how these get articulated in claims on urban space by different groups.

<Lederman, Jacob> Thanks, Ryan

<Torrise, Giovanni> Now a question by Roberta Marzorati:

<Marzorati, Roberta> Thank you for your very inspiring article. I particularly appreciated the concept of "microcitizenship" to refer to a field of contentious dynamics that are not inherently "good" or progressive but can entail forms of exclusion towards "others". I appreciate this because I see the tendency in urban studies (in the Global North?) to neglect forms of mobilization that are not progressive, and to speak of "practices of citizenship" for a quite limited set of initiatives and forms of participation. I wonder if this is a consequence of the different role that "citizenship" plays in discourses of contestations in the Global North, which differently from Latin America seems not to be the "the vocabulary of contestation for all"? I hope it is clear, and I wonder what you think about this.

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks, Roberta. I think this connects to Jacob's question well. It is true that

"citizenship" is often accorded some intrinsically positive content, which I believe is unwarranted. As I've try to show in the article. I think this happens in the Global North as well as the Global South, but you're right that "citizenship" is not necessarily how people discuss these issues in the North. For example, the Occupy movement was not very focused on "citizenship" per se. I think this may have something to do with the vacuousness of the American political imagination around the word "citizenship," which has become such a singular referent to immigration and foreignness in the USA -- as in, whether someone is a US citizen, or not.

As Jacob was mentioning, in order to travel analytically, my idea of microcitizenships may need to be used differently for different local discourses.

So, to use the Occupy example again, we could think about what were the particularly scaled imaginings of aspirational belonging used in these cases? Surely there are differences across cities, as well as countries where Occupy took hold. I also think this could apply to cases of the Arab Spring -- varied as they are. Different groups may not exactly be talking about "citizenship," but they do refer to notions of legitimacy and belonging that are particularly scaled.

In some cases, such as Cairo, very differently pitched imaginations of belonging came together for a time. But after Mubarak's ouster, those have become much more fractious. And there I think we could analyse fractious forms of belonging in Egypt today.

<Marzorati, Roberta> Thank you very much, I think you open to very interesting paths of research with your analytical tools.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Perfect thanks to you all for the interesting discussion. Let us continue with a question by Lawrence Bird:

<Bird, Lawrence> Thank you for your provocative portrayal of Argentinean cities at this exciting time. It's interesting that you identify urban space as the "privileged locus of belonging" for micro-citizenship. Writers like David Harvey and Mike Davis have demonstrated how urban space and design have supported earlier forms of the city and citizenship. I'm asking here as an architectural and urban designer: does the microcitizenship condition call for a specific kind of enabling/contestable space, a specific kind of urban design? Can designers of space contribute to or engage with this condition in an emancipatory way?

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks for bringing in the built environment, Lawrence.

<Bird, Lawrence> No worries... It's a preoccupation for me.

<Centner, Ryan> I think that microcitizenships apply more to a critical analysis of urban interventions than to informing design practice, ex ante. However, it's possible that the idea of microcitizenships could be used as a cautionary insight for architects, planners, and designers. That is, to think about how a particular intervention is being legitimized, and what are its potential exclusions. That might apply more in a symbolic than a material sense in many cases, but clearly the symbolic aspects of design practice are pivotal.

In other words, it could be important for practitioners to consider how to avoid a very narrow (or "micro"), fractious project that caters to one group while militating against another. I hope that offers some insight, but admittedly I'm no architect or planner. I just hang out with a lot of them.

<Bird, Lawrence> Yes, it's interesting -- but doesn't your work suggest that fractiousness has value? Might not the built environment support that?

<Centner, Ryan> I see. I think fractiousness has value to the extent that it involves an airing of difference. But overall fractiousness tends to undermine, setting up quarrelsome cities where difference is artificially trumped up and self-justified in ways that involve one-upmanship rather than mutual understanding. So, no, I don't think fractiousness in itself should be our aim. I would love to see cities (and I'm not sure what this would look like) that foster greater understanding and some kind of genuine inclusion, rather than greater fractiousness.

In the article, one of the things I'm trying to show is that fractiousness is an unfortunate by-product of alleged "post-neoliberalism."

<Bird, Lawrence> So it's a means or a path to an end which is a shared society.

<Torrì, Giovanni> Davide Caselli:

<Caselli, Davide> Hello Professor Centner and thanks for being with us. If I got your point correctly, you invite us to read the actual fractious socio-spatial relations in Argentina and especially BA, both as rupture and continuity with the neoliberal era. And in the conclusion you suggest that other political culture and perspective (you mentioned Pino Solinas good electoral results) from the actual post-neoliberal one, can push to more social and urban justice in Argentina. Can you give some examples of possible alternative political action referring to the three case-studies you exposed in your article? Especially maybe in the case of La Boca?

In the case of La Boca you stress the battle around markets, but I would like to know a little more about (urban?) social policies there, and the relation between local government and agrupaciones.

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks for your question, Davide. Indeed, fractious socio-spatial relations represent both rupture and continuity with the neoliberal era.

My mention of Pino Solinas was intended to indicate that the Kirchners did not represent the only possible left or progressive political imagination in Buenos Aires in recent years. However, I would say that in the time since I finished revising the article content (which was in 2010, despite publication in 2012), there has been a consolidation of Kirchnerista hegemony in progressive circles. There are various factors that may account for that, and I can't say that it's complete dominance at all, but my sense is that it's greater than in 2010. But your question was especially about La Boca.

<Caselli, Davide> Yes, in terms of examples of the limits (and unexplored possibilities) of state intervention in that context.

<Centner, Ryan> In La Boca, the relationship between agrupaciones and local or national government is somewhat organization-specific. Agrupaciones have very different stated rationales, but in La Boca and similarly underprivileged neighborhoods, they tend to be about social justice and caring for neighbourhoods.

Nonetheless, there are agrupaciones with these missions that also embrace more rightist politicians. And this is a classic story of clientelism in many ways. What's relevant in terms of alternative political imaginations and state intervention, however, is that in La Boca you have several projects now related to housing justice.

I have a lot of skepticism about how this will all play out in the end. But there are new projects to create housing in empty or underutilized space that is intended to be for poor families, but with good quality housing. Some of this is going into place in the fields near the Bombonera stadium (home of the Boca Juniors), which used to be a rail yard, also near the Casa Amarilla. This is a national state intervention, rather than local, as far as I know, but I believe it is intended to replicate some of the successes of the MOI housing in Parque Patricios. It does seem, however, that there is more of a top-down dynamic in the La Boca cases though. Whereas we could see the MOI initiative as essentially growing out of what were once agrupaciones, but then were bolstered by the state.

This is getting somewhat beyond my expertise, though, so I should probably stop there.

<Caselli, Davide> Thank you very much.

<Torrì, Giovanni> An interesting observation by James Thomson about the impact of tourism:

<Thompson, James> Professor Centner, I was curious to what degree you think tourism impacts, or is impacted by, each of the place-based manifestations of microcitizenship you describe. I recently travelled to Buenos Aires, and I was struck by how these diverse neighbourhoods that you researched were depicted in tourism literature. For instance, there was a clear sense of where one "had" to go and where one is "not welcome"--a sort of inclusionary/exclusionary binary. With all the recent intermixing going on across neighbourhoods, how is tourism spatially and experientially superimposed over this complex map of the city?

<Centner, Ryan> Great question, James. Certainly tourism is relevant here. In many cases (especially Abasto and La Boca), tourism is at the core of much local economic activity since the Argentine economic crisis, and thus is formative in how these places are not only marketed, but how people in them stake their claims of belonging -- or sense that they cannot belong any longer.

In La Boca, it is very clear that tourism has led to a bolstering of a central, highly caricatured area of the neighbourhood that contrasts with the "real" residential spaces of La Boca, where police and other security staff increasingly prevent (or try to dissuade) tourists from entering. This was already happening during the course of my research, it formed the basis of my argument that we were seeing "weekend citizenship" in La Boca -- meaning that La Boca residents could enjoy the fruits of citizenship on those days of the week when tourism was especially booming, either because they could vend their wares then, or benefit from some greater sense of protection (rather than a more

adversarial relationship with the police) at that time.

Now, tourism is abundant on more than weekends, but it is still very, very territorially circumscribed around that central part of La Boca (Caminito, etc.). It seems that fruits of citizenship are also circumscribed in La Boca to that same territory. In other words, and beyond La Boca, tourism is really fundamental in a post-crisis re-imagining of Argentina and Buenos Aires specifically. Not just because there's more tourism than ever before, so there's a much larger tourism-based economy, but also because tourism requires a certain kind of performance. And that performance, which some participants may really believe is authentic, is always somehow scaled and yet informs one's sense of legitimacy in acting on urban space in ways that affects (sometimes excludes) others.

<Thompson, James> Almost like, if one is invisible to tourists, one might lose one's sense of being a porteno or Argentine. Thanks!

<Centner, Ryan> Not exactly losing a sense of being a porteño but perhaps losing a stake in a particular urban space.

<Torrise, Giovanni> Very well, now our time is up!

<Centner, Ryan> OK, shall I take the rest of the questions and email responses later today/tomorrow, if we're about to end?

<Torrise, Giovanni> That would be a very good idea...

<Centner, Ryan> I think that would work well. Sorry that I've been too longwinded!

<Kazepov, Yuri> No, you gave very good and clear answers... and the fact that there were many questions means interest has been high. For this I thank you very much.

<Centner, Ryan> Thank you to all of you. It's been very thought-provoking for me!

<Kazepov, Yuri> Indeed, thanks also to all participants for their usual high quality questions, and to Giovanni for moderating.

<Torrise, Giovanni> It's always a pleasure to moderate such interesting debates.

<Centner, Ryan> I'd be happy to take those other questions in whatever format works best for you, and will respond soon.

<Kazepov, Yuri> See you next time on May 8th for the last "Author meets Critics" event...

<Centner, Ryan> Alright then, best to all of you from Boston, and look forward to crossing paths at urban studies conferences in the future. Please do say hi.

<Kazepov, Yuri> Thanks Ryan, really well done! Bye to everybody.

Additional question

<Skodra Julita > Thank you very much for this interesting article. Related to fragmentation, Castells (for example) also makes a strong differentiation between local people and cosmopolitan elites as evidence of double standards and fragmentation in society. These cosmopolitan elites, or in this case Puerto Madero elites, are not interested in local community values. However, in the case of BA it seems that not only elites but other social groups as well want to exclude the poorest ones from their urban space. It seems that these microcitizenships in a very superficial way allow for some accessibility of urban spaces but there is no real attempt to support social cohesion and social integration. How realistic is to expect such a significant changes? And is that, in the first place, a goal of the government?

<Centner, Ryan> Thanks for connecting this discussion to earlier, important contributions in urban sociology, Julita. In line with Castells, I would assert that elites have different values that connect to more global, or at least non-local concerns. However, in contrast to Castells, I would make two further, distinct assertions based on the idea of microcitizenships:

(1) Elite concerns can also be quite specifically “local” even if they are tied to ideas or priorities that originate elsewhere – as with Puerto Madero residents (or people in Palermo or Belgrano) who are very interested in making pointed changes in their neighborhoods, but are often inspired by what they have witnessed (or what they imagine) happening in other places in the world – especially in cities of Europe and the United States that they hold in some kind of higher esteem.

(2) There is no need to heroize – or to cast as somehow more altruistic or considerate – the concerns of groups with fewer socioeconomic resources; what I have found is that all groups are striving toward relatively narrow, self-concerned goals that have a self-legitimizing logic, or projected habitus. Those who don’t fit that habitus are seen as not belonging, and this happens among the less privileged too, not just the upper-middle class and elite. So people who are poor, but at least have formal housing, can also become vehicles of displacement against those who are more destitute (homeless or living in informal housing) if that more destitute presence somehow mars the conception of belonging, of place, of legitimacy that is crafted by the slightly more advantaged poor.

As for how much social cohesion is actually support by the current Argentine national government, I would say this is a tricky situation to judge. Certainly cohesion matters in the current *kirchnerista* discourse, which emphasizes “social access,” various forms of inclusion, and especially recently the acceptance of “the other” (*el otro*) in society. But practice – compared to discourse – can be very, very different. Many middle class concerns related to savings, international commerce, larger-scale entrepreneurship, and higher-end consumption, for example, appear to have simply been judged as unimportant in the current *kirchnerista* political calculus. Clearly this leads to much division, especially in a city (and a country in general, to some extent) where the middle class has been so historically formative in politics and economy. This shapes a political situation in the city where class differences become more marked – not just as people have distinct lifestyles based on resources and accumulated dispositions, but as they imagine entirely different modes and sites of belonging in the city. And this is where we see (regarding Castells), that it’s not just about disconnected urban elites versus some kind of more authentic grassroots. Instead there are multiple (“micro”) authenticities jostling each other, with different sources of legitimation for their vision of the city.

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