Evocation of memory and everyday life in Parla (Madrid): an approach to the sense of place in the dormitory city

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Abstract: The idea of *non-place* or *placeless places* has enjoyed – and still enjoys, although its enunciation is softened – a wide recognition within the theoretical approach to the circumstance of the dormitory cities that nourish the metropolitan areas of large global cities. The purpose of this article lies in the foundation of a critical glance at this type of approach from a case study: that of Parla, an urban settlement inhabited by around 130,000 citizens and located twenty kilometres away from Madrid. We work on the analysis of the discourse held by a large group of neighbours who lend themselves to participate in the research. The memories and daily experiences of these people allow us to identify three milestones on which to articulate a shared story – although always provisionally – and to tag the physical space on which events unfold. The arrival, the conflict and the awakening of a progressive political and/or social commitment leads to the emergence of a certain feeling of identification with the lived place, inherent to its daily experience. Ultimately, the text aims to account for the complex relationship among History, Memory, and Space.

Key words: non-place, rootedness, orality, community, history

IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. El adjetivo "dormitorio" sitúa a la ciudad, al espacio habitado, en la posición del *no-lugar*.

2. La historia y sus métodos (la historiografía) revelan el vínculo entre territorio e identidad.

3. La memoria (histórica) no es sólo fuente, sino que se torna propiamente objeto de estudio.

4. La ciudad (dormitorio) deviene parte de nuestro legado social, un producto cultural que heredamos.

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1. The adjective "dormitory" situates the city, the inhabited space, in the position of non-place.

2. History and its methods (historiography) reveal the link between territory and identity

3. The (historical) memory is not only a source, but also becomes an object of study

4. The (dormitory) city becomes part of our social legacy, a cultural product that we inherited

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT[1]

This article addresses the reality of a specific city, but representative of a broader phenomenon typical of our time. Parla (Madrid) certainly resembles the anodyne and insubstantial cities portrayed by Italo Calvino (2000) in one of his masterpieces. Thus, we find ourselves within the factual scenario that shapes that particular context, the conglomerate of sprawling yet repetitive cities located within the southern periphery of the Community of Madrid. Getafe, Fuenlabrada, Parla, Leganés, Móstoles, or Alcorcón are just some of them. For those who have not had the opportunity to experience them firsthand, these places may appear entirely sordid, mere products of that metamorphosis of inhabited spaces (Santos, 1996) that has been continuously unfolding since the mid-20th century.

Regarding the theoretical justification underlying the research project, it is worth emphasizing how the specificity of these cities almost automatically leads us to the critical and pernicious definition of *non-places* proposed by the French anthropologist Marc Augé in the 1990s. Under this category, elaborated from the approach to places of "supermodernity" effectively devoid of inhabitants, all those spaces planned according to certain purposes are comprised. These are also constitutive of a certain type of relationship and bond—between individuals but also with the spatial context in which their lives are embedded—that are inevitably linked to feelings of loneliness and similarity.

The aforementioned localities are also commonly presented under the theme of dormitory cities —although occupational and experiential dynamics do not correspond anymore to what this category eventually implied. In these terms, and always from a distance that exceeds what is prudent, several authors could well define these bedroom cities, including the one that has been the subject of our study, directly as stations for the provisioning of workers whose relationships are inevitably framed by the uprooting imposed by remoteness and loss of the mythical place. The same disruption happens for those who remain in place, as environmental and relational dynamics are subject to continuous transformation.

The fiction of unlimited spatial mobility, so typical of the globalization era and discourse, reveals to be unreal. The relevance of place as a social marker of experience becomes apparent, so it gets pressing to understand the territorial matter that inevitably shapes our experience. What are our boundaries made of? How can we decipher the places to which we are not only compelled to transit but also inhabit? What does the idea of *non-place* truly imply for everyday experience, memory, and emotional attachment to the territory for all those who not only occupy it, but who, whether for decades or just for a few years, inhabit it? Can some form of resistance be exercised precisely through everyday and/or remembered experience against approaches that directly negate the possibility of identifying and identifying ourselves with the spaces that inevitably situate us in the world?

Our initial hypothesis could be summarized as it follows: the everyday experience constituted through narrative memories of individual identity —which always incorporates fragments of others' memories— and collective identity —formed in

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dialogue with others— leads to the potential identification of a shared *sense of place* in the case of a city like Parla. The shadow of the non-place always looms over the burgeoning community. Narrating in a local key the social history shaped by the experiences and memories of three generations (parents, children, grandchildren...) coexisting in the space of the dormitory may be understood as an act of resistance that allows a deeper understanding of the meanings attributed to the experience in and of the city from within, shaping an endogenous perspective on the significance urban experiences acquire for its inhabitants.

With the aim of validating the hypothesis and thus offering a basis for a critical view of such approaches, we work on the testimonies provided by 32 informants who agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview following the Life History methodology during the months of June and July 2022. In order to write down a comprehensive and illustrative narrative, the sample is divided into three equally represented age groups, and the impact of gender and place of origin on experience and discourse is also considered. This allows us to confirm the existence of ruptures and continuities not only in the ways in which neighbours have lived or are living in the city, but also in the narrative that both sides weave around the common experience. We have been able to identify three discursive axes, three themes that repeat themselves—arrival, conflict, commitment—and that articulate feasible meanings to unravel the significance attributed to the experience in and of the city.

How do both sides perceive the continuous arrival of new neighbours? What problems arise from a growth such that, over the last fifty years, has been only driven by the arrival of migrant people? What experiences break up with the banality implied by the idea of dormitory cities? The non-elective nature of settlement in the city, observed in a generalized manner, does not imply the absence of a constructive projection towards the environment and the community. This factor operates rather in the opposite direction.

The lack of many basic goods and services inevitably motivated the mobilization of residents from the mid-1970s onwards. The interviewees—older, middle-aged, and youngsters—emphasize the persistence of a sense of comparative grievance regarding the attention that institutions lavish on municipalities with similar characteristics, as they consider that many of their former problems (especially the lack of facilities) still persist. Again, this is a factor that arouses passions and feeds a certain sense of belonging to the city. The older ones acknowledged a certain *sense of having built a city* in which they find firm sources of identity without losing sight of that other identitarian feeling provided by the mythical place of origin. They also believe that the vindication of all lost pasts is also a possibility for residents of migrant origin, as it was for them in their day. On the other hand, the memory of a positive experience despite the scarcity of resources and/or leisure alternatives during the childhood-youth period is a constant. Therefore, a sense of identification that is not absolute but shared is identified throughout the research process.

If we return to the initial concept of *non-place*, its very creator refers to *anthropological places* as containing a certain historicity that is nothing but the materialization, the spatial condensation, of daily experience and memory (Augé, 2000). We find in the conceptualization of the term itself a gap that invites us to signify the *non-place* through listening and reconstructing a story that deserves to be written; that of the inhabitants who since the 1960s, 70s, 80s, 90s, and 2000s have built with their practices a possible city, those who could no longer leave and await those who are yet to arrive. The threat of

deidentification, *desocialization*, and *delocalization*, that is, the threat of the non-place and present uprooting, guides us in this same direction. This research is born with the aim of elaborating a coherent narrative based on the personal experiences and memories of residents that could eventually be incorporated into popular knowledge, culture, and urban identity within cities like Parla. This paper also seeks to highlight the complex links that operate among History, Memory, and Space.