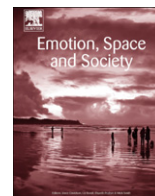




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Territories of schooling and schooling territories in contexts of extreme urban poverty in Argentina: Between management and abjection

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ABSTRACT

We are living in a time when large masses of workers have become large masses of the unemployed and, to borrow Butler's term, their bodies constitute an army of bodies that don't matter. This is probably one of the greatest dilemmas in our society, in the globalized world and in regions like Latin America in particular. In the framework of governmentality studies, this paper presents advances in research geared towards characterizing schooling practices in contexts of extreme urban poverty, specifically in an area on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (Argentina) with one of the highest concentrations of shantytowns. Starting in the late 1960s with the crisis in Fordism and the closing of factories, a dense population has come to inhabit these urban spaces in the midst of a process of extreme decay. I will focus, in this work, on the characteristics that I understand to distinguish the pedagogical devices and processes of subjectivation bound to the configuration of these abject territories.

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1. Introduction

For the last four years, I have been conducting an ethnographic research project in three schools in Argentina that operate in contexts of extreme urban poverty. In this article, I focus on the characteristics of pedagogical devices evident in these schools after years of educational reform and a series of social and economic crises that, in Latin America in general and Argentina in particular, have meant a steady impoverishment of the population and the steady growth of neighborhoods that are often called "shantytowns." The questions I explore about these pedagogical devices revolve around their relationship to the processes of subjectivation in these urban territories. I suggest that there is a continuum between the school territory and the neighborhood territory, both of which are marked by a management logic that has left a large portion of the population to its own devices. Here, I discuss the nature and forms of schooling in times when biopolitics no longer takes the form of *making live and letting die* (Grinberg, 2008; Rabinow and Rose, 2006; Rose, 2007).

In the relevant literature, the nineties are often identified as key years in relation to a number of aspects of social life: the crisis of rationality, the crisis of the accumulation model, of the State, of political parties, of representation, of meta-stories, of institutions, of the family, among others. In this context, the school was, and still

is, one of the target institutions of both the crises and the neo-liberal reforms that set out, among other things, to modify an educational system that these reform policies believed was no longer in keeping with social and economic demands. I am speaking, here, of the constitution of a new discursive formation (Foucault, 1999, 2007) which, in the field of education, has emphasized decentralization as key to a democratic and participatory practice. Concepts like management, project, innovation, reflection, autonomy, the new school, change, participation/democracy and self-management became the keys to a new discursive landscape (Ball, 1994, 2007; Da Silva, 1998; Grinberg, 2008; Popkewitz, 1996; Whitty et al., 1999; Youldell, 2006).

Educational research projects have attempted to describe both crisis processes and neo-liberal educational reform. Nonetheless, specific studies on the changes in pedagogical devices in everyday schooling in general and, specifically, in contexts of urban poverty in Latin America and in Argentina, are few (Grinberg, 2005; Orlando, 2008). Such studies are indispensable both for the production of knowledge and for a political intervention that manages to improve, if only slightly, the current state of schools.

Using field notes, in this paper I attempt to describe the particularities of pedagogical devices tightly bound to the dynamics of the territorial placement of schools: that is, the power relations, the specific forms of schooling and the way in which educational policies are experienced in a certain territory. In the following pages, I present first a conceptual and methodological approach to the project and then delve into the field notes, which

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are organized in two tightly bound parts, one that describes the neighborhood, and a second that discusses school life and its relations to the former.

2. Pedagogical devices and territory

The reflections presented here offer a description of territory and school life in light of the concept of pedagogical devices. Through Foucault (1983), I use the term “pedagogical devices”¹ to refer to the meanings, norms, temporal and spatial distributions that shape schooling at a determined historical place and time. Pedagogical devices presuppose a certain organization and use of space (including the arrangement of furniture and equipment) and of time (including the organization of a school schedule, the sequence of school tasks, etc.). The term also entails notions of appropriate school clothing, the use of certain words and means of communicating, textbooks, curricular contexts, school rules and means of punishment, monitoring attendance, grading systems, school routines and rituals. That is, it refers to a battery of details that constitute techniques and procedures connected to the production of subjectivity (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999). In this paper, I describe some of these aspects, focusing specifically on two of the basic coordinates of the life of schools and the subjects in them: the organization and distribution of time and space.

Initially, sociology dealt with the tight connections between urban space, social groups and/or social identities (Tonkiss, 2005). According to Simmel, spatial divisions are not only simply physical facts but also social products that, in and of themselves, constitute spatiality. In his study of the State’s governmentalization processes, Foucault (2006) finds a close connection between the problem of government and the configuration of urban life which, he says, must reconcile the existence of the city and the legitimacy of sovereignty. The logics of discipline and of security devices ceaselessly articulate the problem of how to frame, establish, protect or broaden territory. In the field of problems linked to governmentality (Dean, 1999; O’Malley, 2007; Rose, 1999; Rose et al., 2006), the question revolves around how conduct is handled in school life and its dynamics in the context of management societies and abject urban spaces.

The notion of territory is important insofar as it allows us to understand the school as a material location where the meaning, constellation, and inclusive and exclusive nature of space are significant (Youdell, 2006; Helfenbein and Gonzalez Velez, 2007). The construction of school space entails the intersection of local, national, regional as well as global spatialities. This is the context for a discussion of how objects become technological and are incorporated into discourses. In other words, the discourses and technologies of government are spatial: they are inextricably located in other spatial relations. As Gulson and Symes (2007: 2) point out, this perspective allows for a greater understanding, “of the competing rationalities underlying educational policy change, social inequality and cultural practices”.

At present, this perspective is particularly important given the dynamic of social and territorial segregation that increasingly characterizes urban life (Wacquant, 2001, 2007). Fearnley (2005: 2) points out that health and security – and I believe the same holds true for education – are being resituated “in a new social geography

in which disease is thinkable and visible. By organizing and breaking up the world in new ways, this technical rationality displaces and re-inscribes the populations and territories that underpin the practices of war and health.”

Here, the markings of place and territorial configuration operate according to a double dynamic: on the one hand, in relation to how schools – and, in the contexts discussed here, the neighborhoods in which they are located – produce these markings and, on the other, how they express them. The meanings of place inscribe persons, urban spaces and institutions in particular ways. “They are codes underpinned by local knowledge, or what we will frame as discourse, that index racial and classed meanings of people as well as construct places within institutional and city spaces.” (Buendia and Ares, 2006: 1).

The dynamic of urban segmentation constitutes one of the ruptures in pedagogical devices in the management age (Grinberg, 2007; Grinberg, 2008). In keeping with Foucault, disciplinary devices entailed the enclosure of childhood by grouping differences in a single establishment and effecting their normalization. Until the 1980s, many studies in the field of the sociology of education evidenced the mechanisms used to effect the homogenization of childhood as well as processes of educational selection and segmentation. Among the most important investigations along these lines are works by Bourdieu and Passeron (1985), Bowles and Gintis (1981), Baudelot and Establet (1971) and, in Argentina, Braslavsky (1984). The problem discussed here is related to the new dynamics that have been taking hold in the production and reproduction of social and educational inequality in this region starting in the late 20th century (Kessler, 2002; Tiramonti, 2004). Fieldwork suggests that we are now operating under another logic, one that does not revolve around learning to work (Apple and King, 1983), but rather around learning to make time go by.

In this paper, I suggest that school is ceasing to be a space for grouping and/or differentiating identities, subjects and social groups. More and more schools, like the neighborhoods they are in, partake of the logics of territorial and social fragmentation. As discussed below, these schools are placed in neighborhoods where there is no public transportation. It is, therefore, difficult for those who live in such neighborhoods not only to get out, but also to get in, to circulate, to come and go every day; this is even more difficult for those who do not live in these areas.

In the context of workfare policies that shift responsibility to communities and subjects, the contents of schools and neighborhoods vary according to how they manage themselves and the situations in which their lives unfold. I believe that these logics of transferring management responsibility to the community and to subjects (Ball, 1994, 2007) are central to understanding current school processes.

It is in this context that this research has come across emerging ways of feeling, thinking, fantasizing and dreaming. When I speak of the production of subjectivity in these abject spaces, I do so understanding that these are not abstract processes but rather specific ways that subjects constitute forms of living, of inhabiting, of taking pleasure and of imagining their existence.

3. Methodology

By working at the level of educational institutions themselves, it is possible to heed the ways in which policies and actions planned and implemented from and by centralized agencies (indeed, sometimes international and global agencies) are experienced, contested and/or reconstructed at the level of school life. This often produces contradictory logics, as well as power relations, struggles and lines of flight. By means of an ethnographic study, it was possible to explore the multiplicities and nuances of daily

¹ The notion of pedagogical devices was developed by Bernstein (1998) to evidence processes different from those described here. His work deals with the general principles that underlie the transformation of knowledge in the framework of pedagogical communication. Given the particularities of the research project discussed here, I use the notion of device as it is defined and used by Foucault, among others, in works like *Discipline and Punish*.

practices, of the ways that the dynamics of social life are experienced and constructed (Rudolph and Jacobsen, 2006); that is, the workings of the subjects and relations are constitutive of, and implicit to, these institutions. It was also possible to consider the relationships specific to the territories in which this school reality is produced and reproduced every day. This last point is particularly important since, as I will formulate later, neighborhood reality cannot be conceived as foreign to the ways in which school life is politically produced in these urban spaces.

Indeed, the object in question and my methodological approach are both characterized by nuances, juxtapositions, fragmentations and ruptures as well as continuities, hegemonies and crystallizations. In this sense, in keeping with Ortiz (2000: 64), the study of territory “would be the intersection of different lines of force in the context of a situation without falling into the error of ethno-methodology for which social relations are solely derived from the interaction of individuals. A situation is, rather, objectively defined by the social forces that legitimate inequality...”. As points out Youdell (2006), the meaning of spaces may be multiple; it is in time and space that individuals and groups navigate, avoid, boycott or are barred from certain spaces, and these spaces, in turn, mediate their subjectivities.

From a critical perspective, then, I engaged in an ethnographic study. Ethnography promises multiple opportunities for exploring not only modes of domination but also resistances, dissonances, ambiguities and lines of flight. I outline events, interactions and activities that have enabled the development of categories and relationships that make the interpretation of this information possible (Goetz and LeCompte, 1988).

Through the analysis of episodes (Darnton, 2005), I try to explore and understand everyday life and its contradictions. I set out to “underline and expose the complex, contextual, interactive and ongoing nature of discursive practices. [...] We attempt to] facilitate detailed analysis of the deployment of multiple discourses as well as their intersections and contradictions” (Youdell, 2006: 72).

The fieldwork discussed here started in 2004.² It was carried out in schools located in one of the vast and growing areas in the Buenos Aires metropolitan area that displays the different shades of poverty. There are many such neighborhood, commonly called *shantytowns*, and – despite the particularities that inform the different ways we have of inhabiting space – any of them might be the example offered in this study. That is why names are changed. The two elementary schools and the only day-shift high school³ in the area where this fieldwork took place (see Fig. 1). This region is located at the edge of the officially defined and recognized urban space. These maps, as well as the photographs taken in the neighborhood, illustrate some of the descriptions offered.

A comparison of the official map and the satellite image reveals that the two elementary schools are on the limits of the areas that are officially uninhabited. Yet, since the end of the 20th century, these areas have grown at a pace as steady as it is traumatic. Just twenty years ago, these once almost empty, swampy, reed-laden spaces housed milking sheds. In the lifetime of neighbors, these places of recreation, fishing, etc. have entered a state of extreme decay with unbearable levels of pollution (Curutchet et al., 2007). Indeed, many of the young people who live in them were born with diseases resulting from the air that they breathe (Tasat et al., 2008).

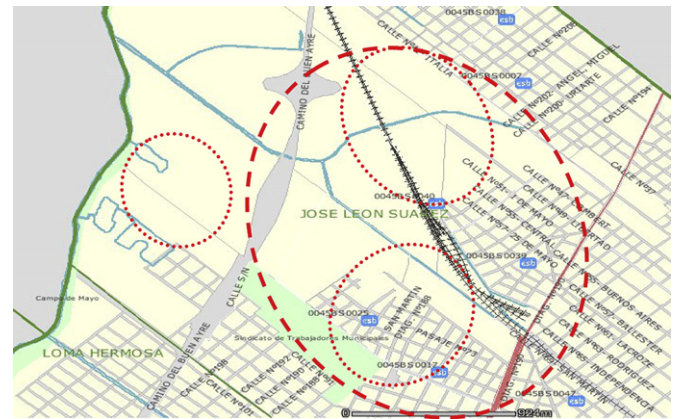


Fig. 1. Official map of the area.

The research techniques used mainly consisted of observation, flash and/or in-depth interviews that register the interactions between subjects in the classroom, at recess and in the formal and informal encounters that school and classroom life entail. The work also includes interviews with neighbors living both in and outside the shantytown. In keeping with Williams (2000), it is important to capture lived culture as it is experienced by subjects and in institutions.

4. Abject spaces and schooling

4.1. About the abject

I make use of the notion of abjection (Kristeva, 1988; Butler, 1993) to speak of shameful and densely populated territories as well as people who will not find a job and who serves as the boundary that circumscribes and defines the territory of schooling. Following Butler (1993: 3)

the abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. This zone of uninhabitability will constitute the defining limit of the subject’s domain; it will constitute that site of dreaded identification which – and by virtue of which – the domain of the subject will circumscribe its own claim to autonomy of life. In this sense, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation.

I suggest here that an abject space is constituted; an excluded site, a zone of uninhabitability and, therefore, a specter that is threatening to the production of subjectivity in that it gives shape to what Bauman (2001) calls the political economy of uncertainty. These unlivable spaces, these abject modes of existence, these shameful zones and territories house egos that are neither employable nor educable but that do serve as a boundary to circumscribe and define the territory of subjectivity.

It is important to clarify that these feelings of shame and denial are not necessarily experienced by those who live in the shantytown. The notion of abjection as employed here refers to the possibility of evidencing a connection between the positions of those who live in the shantytown and those who live outside it. The abject refers to the relation between the inside and the outside of the shantytown; following Deleuze and Guattari (1995), the abject fear produced by such poverty and its attendant negation and exclusion comes from

² The project was developed with a research team from UNSAM (National University of San Martin) and from UNPA (National University of the Patagonia Austral).

³ In Argentina, starting at pre-school, students can attend school in the morning or the afternoon. Night school is often for young people and adults, and implies a return to school after having dropped out or repeated a year.

those who are outside the weak border around the shantytowns. As is evident in the fragments of the interview reproduced below, there is a direct relation between abjection and the threat imagined to lurk in these spaces.

Thus, returning to [Gulson and Symes \(2007: 2\)](#), if the space “is more generic, more amorphous and porous, hard to pin down, it is more subjective, more quotidian” Through the notion of abject territory, it is possible to evidence the experience of space in these urban territories. This is because, once again citing those authors, space as it is understood here is “more of a verb than a noun”.

Speaking of the abject entails speaking of a relative position that refers to the ways that subjects produce and are produced in these urban territories. Thus, the question at hand is twofold: often, if you live in an abject space you must conceal your address to get a job, regardless of how informal that job might be; that act of concealment does not necessarily entail a feeling of shame on the part of those who live there but, rather for those “on the outside” who experience the territory as a source of fear, a threat.

If, as claims [Foucault \(2000a,b\)](#), 19th-century biopolitics entailed making live and letting die, I suggest that these new abject zones entail a different operation that can be expressed as *let live and let die*. Life, now, is understood as the result of decisions, constructions and choices that we must make if we want to stay in the world of life or, more precisely, if we want to keep our life in this world ([Dean, 1999](#); [Foucault, 2007](#); [Rose, 1999](#)). The question here, then, is studying schooling practices in contexts where, left to their own devices, subjects and institutions struggle for survival every day.

4.2. Abject territories: from colony to colonized

Studies on the urban grid are nothing new and it could perhaps be said that they were born with modern urban life. From Haussmann's concern with the organization of space in 19th-century Paris to the increasingly important interdisciplinary studies of urban life and territory, much research has been done on this matter. Such studies often exceed the limits of the disciplines from which they are produced, such as geography and architecture. From this place of new disciplinary intersections, it is possible to understand some of the dynamics that characterize and frame the most degraded urban spaces in Buenos Aires and its outskirts.

The history of the territory in which I have carried out this study goes back to colonial times. It was in those years that much of this area, as well as the avenues of the city and its surroundings, was mapped out. The border of the small farms in what is now Suárez was the “road on the way to the city of Santa Fe,” currently Márquez Avenue,⁴ the straight line on [Fig. 2](#). From there to the River de las Conchas (now the Reconquista River) was swampland that once, before filled with waste, provided a protective shield against flooding. According to [Morello \(1974: 21–22\)](#), this is where the Indians would hide to avoid being enslaved and forced to farm the lands:

There were gorges and grasslands whose mud absorbed men [...] There the Indian was on the prowl [...] there the struggle over the inner border began.

On one side lay the small farms, on the other the marshlands, where Guaraní, Querandí and Araucano Indians hid from colonial authority ([Moreira, 2006](#)). For centuries, then, this zone – which is currently called the Reconquista River region – has been both a place to escape to and one to be cornered in. The colonial authority

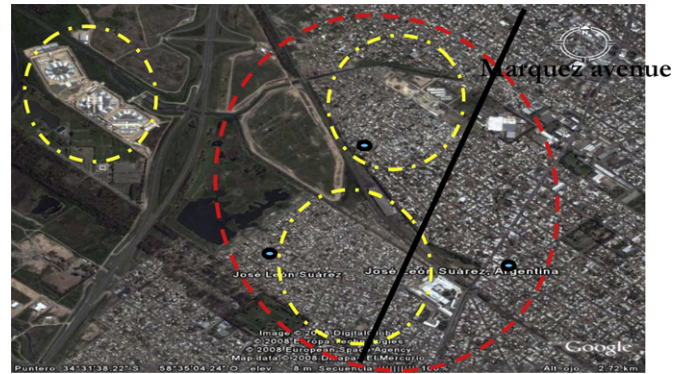


Fig. 2. Satellite map of the area.

did not enter this marshy area because their horses would sink, so it was a good place to hide. At the same time, the colonized could not get out of the area or, rather, if they did they could be trapped by the colonial authority. So it was a hiding place with no way out.

4.2.1. The occupation of the neighborhood in the 20th century

At the beginning of the 20th century, the process by which the zone – which is now what is commonly called a shantytown – was occupied reflects the country's economic evolution. In General San Martín, this is particularly true since, until the late 1970s, it was one of the industrial epicenters of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. Indeed, even today at the entrance to General San Martín there is a large sign that says *Welcome to the Capital of Industry*.

The occupation of this zone entailed a parallel movement involving, on the one hand, the growing number of people who arrived in the area to live and, on the other, the closing of the factories. Thus, in this zone there is a stark contrast between the overpopulation of one space and the desertion of another.

The movement of the zone's population reflects the various economic moments that the country has experienced. Each one of these moments has had a different impact on the life of the neighborhood. It is worth pointing out in passing – a more in-depth analysis would exceed the scope of this work – that these constant migratory movements are increasingly disjointed and, therefore, it is harder and harder to effect any sort of territorial organization.

The first migration to the area in the 20th century – in the 1930s, at the height of import-substitution economic policies – was connected to the construction of a neighborhood for workers. At that point, as one neighbor recalls, people arrived either by truck or train thanks to State-run relocation policies; in recent years, people have been arriving on their own. A ceaseless movement of subjects arriving, one at a time. Every day, every week there are new shacks and new passageways. The occupation of the lands, which is individual in nature, is called *hormiga*.⁵ There is no urban organization; there are no streets, just passageways. The lands are occupied illegally. The growth of this sort of space has been constant since the seventies and intensified since the nineties. In this context, the possibility of uprisings and *piquetes*⁶ is always present; hence, social policy, through clientelism in the distribution of welfare plans, anticipates these uprisings, reducing the margins of discontent and, hence, the risk of social unrest.

As is shown in [Figs. 1 and 2](#), these zones, though densely populated, are officially uninhabited. With its open-air trash dumps, the

⁴ This is an avenue that runs through the periphery of the City of Buenos Aires. This zone on the outskirts of the city has one of the highest poverty rates in Argentina as well as the highest population density. See [Figs. 1 and 2](#).

⁵ Literally “ant,” this term refers to constant individual arrivals to these areas.

⁶ This is one of the new social movements that arose in the nineties. It involves groups of newly organized unemployed people blocking traffic on major highways and streets.

area from Márquez Avenue to the Reconquista River is a zone of urban decay and poverty. Since the 1990s, this territory has become one of the areas with the worst living conditions in Greater Buenos Aires. Each resident has only a minimal amount of spatial capital. There are no sewers, potable water, electricity or trash collection. The housing is tremendously precarious, and there is no urban grid, no recreational or green space, no drainage pipes or any of the other elements found in the other parts of San Martín.

These days, the position of the subjects in this area is not much different. In terms of real estate interests, this is worthless terrain (Davies, 2007); it is a hiding place for many urban tribes; the once colonial, now police authority rarely ventures into these zones and when it does it often means confrontation. The inhabitants still speak of the marshy lands, but in their 20th century form, as described by one resident:

Nothing with wheels would come in here. They would get buried up to their necks.... The first supplier had built a sort of tin boat and two horses would tug it along to be able to supply the grocers. Those poor horses...

One of the most frequently told anecdotes is

...The Monsignor⁷ came and [a gesture of blessing], that same day... it rained and, a few days later, brother... hail this big [he holds together his index finger and thumb to form a circle] was falling. A few precarious shacks were torn to bits... They made plenty of money with tin, with mattresses, you name it... That same year, on October 10, there was a flood that covered a whole block of Márquez Avenue... and then the Monsignor came back. "These lands do not flood," is what that bastard said, that atheist, apostate and anti-clerical bishop. We made his life impossible with that Liberation Theology priest who used to come round here, Mario Monpenti... He used to give us Marx for Beginners to read... they disappeared him...

This anecdote, which is frequently told by the residents, ends with the bishop being forced to leave by canoe. The 16th-century marshlands have become an "ecological belt," a euphemism for a trash dump, that is, an area filled with the city's trash. This explains why, when you walk through the zone's streets/passageways, many windows have become doors, and many houses ditches. Additional soil is placed on top of houses that have been previously removed.

Much of the population, especially the young people who attend the school, are undocumented. They have no civil existence or citizenship; they are "no names." Thus, it is common to present dental certificates as proof that a child has turned six and is, hence, eligible for admission to elementary school.⁸

The school, of course, closes from time to time due to the stagnant waters that periodically collect in and around the building. And, for school festivities, the students bring food they have found in CEAMSE's "ecological belt."⁹ Such scenes are watched on television by those who live outside the shantytown. Below is part of an interview that students from the school did on the street with a neighbor who lives outside the shantytown:

Interviewer: Do you live in the area?

Answer: Yes.

I: Have you lived here for long?

A: Yes.

I: What do you know about, Carcova,¹⁰ about CEAMSE

A: About what?

I: About the burning?... Can you tell us what you know?

A: What I know? Well, I know the basics: it is where they dump trash. But... what else do you want to know? I don't know.

I: What else? Have you heard anything about the burning?. About people rummaging through the trash?

A: Yes, I have seen them on television. I know that CEAMSE is an organism dedicated to... Let's say to gathering all the trash in trucks, and they have to throw it over there. Now, I have also heard speak of or seen on television people who go rummaging through it.

I: And what do you think of that?

A: What do you mean what do I think? I think it's bad, but wellit's bad but....sometimes poor people don't have other options, that's all.

How can this person speak of a reality only seen on television when every day people go by the front door of his house pulling carts bearing the trash they have collected and that they sell to make a living? Although, or more likely because, this is an immediate reality, this neighbor speaks as if he were referring to something at such a remove that he only learned about it on the television screen.

According to Kristeva (1988), the abject is something rejected; a reality from which we cannot separate ourselves but whose recognition necessitates our annihilation. As stated above, for those who inhabit these spaces, the need to hide where you live is a two-way issue: in looking for work, mentioning that you live in a shantytown radically reduces your chances of being hired. Many different methods are used to provide a false address. Certainly, the most common one is to "borrow" the address of a relative or friend who has managed to get out and live elsewhere. At the same time, people who live in the officially recognized adjacent areas (see Figs. 1 and 2), are adamant in their denial of the proximity of their homes to the shantytowns. Here is a fragment of a scene where a teacher from the school (I will call her María) accompanies me and a group of students as we walk in the Carcova:

Interviewer: You know the neighborhood really well. Are you from around here? How long have you lived nearby?

María: I was born here, but on the other side...

A few minutes later, a student from the school who lives in the Carcova tells me:

Look, over there's where María lives...

This same logic applies to conversations about schools:

Interviewer: Do you know anything about the zanjón?

Grandmother: No

I: and about the burning? Do you have relatives?

Grandmother: No..., no

I: ...from the Carcova?

Grandmother: No. No, no....that area....

⁷ This refers to the bishop in the region in which the neighborhood is located.

⁸ I have been told that given the lack of official documentation, this suffices as verification of the age of students.

⁹ This is the area in which CEAMSE operates; CEAMSE is a solid urban waste management company that uses a sanitation landfill system and implements reduction, minimalization and recycling policies for waste from the Buenos Aires metropolitan area. The population that lives in the areas where CEAMSE operates goes to the "quemá" ("burning," the name that has been given to these dumps because trash was once burned there) to look for food, mostly from the trucks that are taking away from supermarkets products whose expiration date has passed.

¹⁰ Carcova is the name of one of the many shantytowns in this vast area. This name refers to a very important Argentine painter. One of his famous paintings, *sin pan y sin trabajo* (Without Bread and Without Work, 1892) deals with the working class and its life in the then-incipient shantytowns.

I: And you don't have any classmates that live in the Carcova?
 Grandson: No, he goes to school....
 ...in the shantytown by the buildings is where he lives...
 Grandmother: Oh... Who?
 Grandson: Franco
 Grandmother: Oh, just him

These fragments evidence that the abject refers directly to the ways that these relegated spaces are constructed, to the experience of space that involves both those who live in the shantytown and those who live near, or not so near, it.

4.3. Abject forms of schooling: pedagogical devices

Although the geography of the neighborhood mutates gradually such that an unsuspecting visitor would not realize he or she was in the middle of the shantytown until well into it, there are two border markings: the police trucks parked on the outer border, and the sewage and municipal drainage pipes on the inside that, when they reach this area, become a trash-filled *zanjón* (see Figs. 3–5).

We are witnessing at present, then, a mode of letting live in which it would seem that the State no longer ensures or protects life. These neighborhoods are zones of undocumented people who arrive silently and who, like the Guaranes before them, can move through the passageways undisturbed as long as they do not cross the border. On the other side, though, they must be careful because they constitute the group of bodies that don't matter (Butler, 1993).

I do not believe that this phenomenon should be read as the State having abandoned its administrative and social regulatory or educational functions but, rather, as changes to the social contract, alteration to the terms by which these functions are carried out.

The two elementary schools have a similar history: they were built by the neighbors in the 1990s. One of them started operating in the dining room of the house of a local political leader. After years of struggle with the Department of Education, construction began on the building that today houses the school. Both the schools were born of the need, determination and struggle of the neighbors to procure schools to which to send their children. Now these institutions are only attended by the young people who live in the neighborhood, and thus by no means challenge the logic of urban fragmentation. There are many reasons for this, but the main one is the schools' location: it is not only hard to get out of the neighborhood, but also to get into it. But there is little need for students to come in from elsewhere: the further you get from the



Fig. 4. The creek at the heart of the shantytown, rendered what the neighbors call *zanjón*. Note the pipe drainage outlet.

neighborhood, the greater the number of elementary and high schools.

The abject in schools takes on an array of forms. Abject is the area, abject is the school, and abject is the population. Neither the schools nor the houses have sewage systems, running water, or other basic public services. Hence, when drainage pipes and septic tanks are blocked, the schools are often forced to close.

Despite the growing number of teachers who live in the areas surrounding the shantytown, for teachers getting to school entails a long journey on foot from Márquez Avenue, which is as close as public transportation gets. As you walk further into the neighborhood, the streets become passageways, and pavement gives way to dirt roads that are quickly covered with mud and/or flooded due to the rain or houses' drainage pipes. Hence, on rainy days the rate of absenteeism among teachers and students is high.

In these contexts, the school is part of a network of privilege and political clientelism, probably because it is the only public institution that exists in this area. It is, then, the primary way the State makes itself felt in these neighborhoods. This is the case not only because the school is an institution clearly regulated by the State, but also because it is in and through the school that most of the public programs geared towards this population and neighborhood are channeled (programs run not only by the Department of Education but also by the Department of Labor and the Department



Fig. 3. Above and to the left, the border after which the drainage creek turns into the *zanjón*.



Fig. 5. To the left of the police truck begin the dirt roads and the area that, on the map, is labeled uninhabited.

of Social Development). Sneakers, notebooks, sheets of paper and erasers are distributed at schools, along with welfare plans and subsidies. In recent years, school attendance has become the condition for parents to have access to such plans.

Thus, more and more schools are an integral part of the logic and functioning of welfare policies: the unemployed who receive any sort of assistance have to perform some sort of labor, and many of them do so at schools; children have to certify their attendance in order to receive subsidies, and parents have to certify that children are attending school to receive support. Since these efforts entail keeping economically active those who no longer are, attending school or participating in a training course is the most obvious form of “work” for those for whom there is no longer any formal or informal employment. Hence, it is common to see students going to the principal’s office to ask for a certificate of attendance to present at a public office (a court, an unemployment office, etc.) in order to receive a subsidy, which is that student’s contribution to the family income.

Thus, if the biopolitics, the make-live-and-let-die of which Foucault spoke, implied making bodies productive and the school played a crucial role in that process, one must wonder what the function of these schools, of these classrooms, is. In the 21st century, those who attend these schools are members of families in which no one has found work for two or three generations; many of them have never had steady employment. People whose bodies no longer must be docile or, at least, not in the way they were under industrial capitalism. They are often *cartoneros*¹¹ and/or street vendors. As a neighbor (Beatriz), whose children are 17 and 18 years old, put it:

My grandmother brought my mom to live here when she was four years old. It was barren back then... countryside. My grandfather was the first ragpicker; he went around with a wooden cart collecting junk... and my mother is also a cartonera. I was born here. They teased me and my siblings at school, calling us ragpickers. In those years, we were the only ones...

Later, Beatriz’s mother would tell us,

I was practically born here. My father and I would go rummaging. I am and have always been a ragpicker... And I am never leaving. This is my place, this is my home...

People come to the neighborhood, looking for a place to live, to make something of themselves; being a ragpicker, now a *cartonero*, is no cause for shame for Beatriz’s mother; it is a form of subsistence for those who have been left out of formal employment and welfare networks. Indeed, in the face of an outside that holds you in contempt and treats you as the abject, her “I am a ragpicker” is a clear identity.

Coming to the neighborhood, the way Beatriz’s grandmother did, is still common; it is also expressed in ways of inhabiting the school.

4.3.1. Time and space... when students arrive, they sit where they will...

As Kant described, time and space are the *a priori* categories, the two constitutive and structuring aspects of our life. Assigning space and measuring time were crucial modern institutions. The administration of social and urban life entailed a major reorganization of both time and space. Far from exempt from this process,

school life contributes to structuring much of our subjectivity around a precise distribution of bodies in space, both private and public,¹² and the efficient ordering of time. Indeed, the rational use of space and time were key characteristics of modern capitalist life and of the modern capitalist school.

In contexts of extreme urban poverty, the school career is a prolonged moment that students start at the age of six with no clear end in sight: their stays in the system are extremely varied and erratic. Two months before the end of the school year, I had the following conversation with a 16-year-old student who was in 8th grade (theoretically, the age for that grade is 13):

Student: I am going to repeat this year (I have already repeated it several times before).

Researcher: Why? May be you can still take your exams and pass, right?

S: No, it's too late... the thing is, I got off to a bad start this year, so that's that...

R: And, what are you going to do? Are you going to drop out?

S: No, I'm going to keep studying... I plan to finish elementary school and then see... Later, I might go to night school for adults...

This conversation could be seen to indicate this student’s lack of interest in school. But another reading is possible: the student intends to finish high school, but at another pace. He has another experience of time. It is more a question of slowness than lack of interest. What’s the hurry? It’s not a question of not going to school. In fact, this teenager kept going even though he had decided from the start that he was going to repeat the year. In this experience of time, there is no notion of efficiency, no need to get anywhere in a hurry. Indeed, there is no notion of lateness or of a place where one would not want to end up. When one lives in a shantytown and is a member of a third generation of unemployed people, there is no rush. This way of experiencing time is seen throughout school life and its dynamics. Students come and go; the schedule and late arrivals are not monitored by the institution.

I asked another student why he and his classmates were often absent. His responses were confused, and they started and/or ended with phrases like “I don’t know, he was doing odd jobs,” or “She didn’t want to come, she got distracted.” Though explanations might range from drugs to physical abuse, from starting to work to not being interested in school, the reason is often more simple: in these contexts, *time is not money*.

Nonetheless, repeating a year is not the problem; the question is to what extent getting promoted means effective learning. It is a widely accepted “secret” that literacy, when it is obtained, is achieved in 3rd or 4th grade. Not making too much noise is often enough to get a student promoted. As a principal of one of the schools commented while looking at report cards, “I don’t understand what the teachers are grading. Look [he shows me the report chart], judging from this list they are all distinguished athletes who speak perfect English...”

Regardless, in most cases a student who starts elementary school finishes. True, as the student above makes clear, the nine years that elementary school is supposed to take often ends up being eleven or twelve. All that student did was to say aloud a widely accepted truth: a school career takes at least one more year than the official educational program says it should; the norm is repeating at least one year. Since schools are no longer required to produce productive bodies that have to make things happen at a given time, student must simply learn to let time go by.

¹¹ This is one of the most common means of survival in these neighborhoods. *Cartoneros* are people who wander the city with carts, sometimes drawn by horses and sometimes by their own bodies, collecting cardboard, metal and other elements from the city’s trash to later sell.

¹² This does not only entail the rationalization of the city but also of private space, which is, it could be said, rendered functional (Ortiz, 2000).

The classroom is not grid-like: students sit in rows or in a circle; there might be one sitting in the corner, looking at the blackboard, another gazing out the window. Like a shantytown, the space is organized as people arrive and position themselves as best they can in the spaces they find. One day a student arrives and sits somewhere, another day the same student arrives and sits elsewhere, in any old seat. There are no set places. Nor are there seats for everyone: if all the students came to school on a given day, they would have nowhere to sit. This is true not only of the classrooms, but also of the common spaces like the auditorium and the dining hall. In both cases, a large number of students must stand, even to eat. Indeed, due to a rotation system designed to offset a lack of tables and chairs some groups of students do not start lunch until 3 pm.

In classrooms, there are often not enough benches to go around or the benches that there are broken. This means that the space is ordered according to a logic of occupation: students arrive and sit in the available places, wherever they might be. The way the students occupy the space is reminiscent of street protests: the students move the benches or sit around the teacher's table such that his or her desk is blocked off, as if they were engaging in a *piquete* of the sort described above (Roldán, 2009).

Absences do not get you expelled either. In fact, they often go unnoticed: both the lack of benches and their arrangement make it hard to tell if anyone was absence, let alone how many. In a group of students we followed, we could establish that students who didn't attend class were more likely to pass than those who did (Moreira, 2006). Indeed, kids who stayed out of trouble and had minimal contact with the teacher over the course of the year were the ones to get the best grades. In any case, by the middle of the year, especially after winter break, there is a decline in enrollment or an increase in fluctuating enrollment where students continue to attend but do so erratically.

One interpretation of the lack of correlation between attendance and passing is that the institution or the teachers are indifferent to the students. Another reading would point out that (Youdell, 2006), if the institution were to be strict about attendance, by halfway through the year there wouldn't be any students left at school.

What I want to highlight is an operational logic that is no longer concerned with the orderly distribution of subjects; there is, rather, a sort of wandering around in which subjects find places for themselves as they arrive. This is true in the classroom, in the schoolyard, in the cafeteria, at assembly, in the neighborhood. In life.

Similarly, the aesthetic of school space has a very peculiar form: there might be an enviably neat yard alongside another that, by the middle of the school year, is so messy you cannot walk through it; in that neat and freshly painted yard there might be a broken sewer; the electrical installation of a classroom might be so precarious that the walls give off electric shocks, and so forth. And if someone thinks that this is due to an indifferent or irresponsible principal, all we can say is that it is thanks to that principal's efforts that the school is not in worse shape. If the principal knocks on enough doors and doesn't give in to exhaustion, he or she might get the yard fixed a little sooner. This is what the principal of one of the schools tells us about his struggle to get benches:

Interviewer: You have new benches in many of the classrooms. How did you get them to bring them?

Principal: The other day I went to the School Board for the umpteenth time. I was tired of writing notes asking for benches, so I said enough and went in person. Incredibly, they actually had the benches, they were all piled up in their offices, but they hadn't sent them to the school. So I sat down on one of the piles of benches and I told them that until they sent a truck by to take them to the school I was not going to move... That afternoon, the benches were here.



Fig. 6. Images of the classroom.

There are countless such scenes in these schools. Teachers and students painted a mural (Figs. 6–8) on a precarious wall to hide that it has been used to divide a classroom in two is an example of the extreme cynicism of these times in which a “creative” project is also born of institutional neglect. In this case, the dividing wall was the best solution, better than having to reduce the number of days of classes to accommodate several groups since the other classrooms could not be used because the walls were giving off electric shocks and no one came to fix them. While this situation could be read in any number of ways, what I want to emphasize here is a dynamic of occupying or inhabiting the space: just like in the neighborhood when a new family arrives or a family gets bigger and room has to be made for the newcomers, in the schoolyard or classroom a few walls are added and the new space is good to go.

The mural painted by the students and the art teacher (see Figs. 6–8) merits special consideration since it is an image of struggle. It combines the symbols of a soccer team (Chacarita) popular in the area and an image that is identified with freedom or, rather, the struggle for freedom: an illustration by Rocambole (a drawer) of a rock band associated with struggle and resistance (Patricio Rey y Sus Redonditos de Ricota). Painted on the school, in a classroom, through a joint project involving the principal, the art teacher and the students, the mural also shows how the students find, at school, ways of expressing themselves.

Of course, students painting a mural might be – and in fact is – an excellent activity, a creative means of appropriating the space and expressing oneself; nonetheless, that does not exempt the State from its undeniable responsibility of ensuring the proper condition of school buildings.

Certain situations can only be explained by sensations. One sensation experienced by all the members of the fieldwork team is



Fig. 7. Images of the classroom.



Fig. 8. Images of the classroom.

a sense of physical fatigue, of exhaustion. By the middle of the school day, our workday, we even found ourselves annoyed. I am not speaking of the exhaustion that one feels after any workday, but rather a feeling of being worn out, energy-less and, in some cases, even angry. The team has described this feeling in many different ways but it is manifest as a weary wandering of the sort evident in the school actors, especially its adults, who walk around slowly. It is also felt in the classroom. An entire hour of class time, or even the whole school day, might be spent copying an exercise off the blackboard.

This fatigue is born from the feeling that nothing at all is happening, a sensation that overwhelms not only the researchers but also the actors in the school scene. If nothing is happening, there is no rush. As opposed to the expression "Never leave for tomorrow what you can do today," the slogan here might be if not today, then tomorrow, if not tomorrow, then, etc. And, given these dynamics, this also applies to the space, which is *just for wandering through*.

4.3.2. Out of control: syndromic surveillance (notes on power and resistance)

The lesson takes place. Some students never open up their notebooks, others open them up for a while and still others show interest in their work. They are not always the same students: at a certain time a student might be involved and then his or her mind wanders. There are many situations where a student stands up to ask the teacher a question and, if he or she does not receive an answer, sits back down, closes his or her notebook and talks to classmates; these scenes often lead to fights.

When discipline occurs, it is to keep things from getting out of control. Scenes of violence or misbehavior serve to get attention, to get someone to notice you, even if to scold you. And such attention is only given when there is a risk that things get out of hand; if not, then life simply goes on. And so, as a field notes state:

In the schoolyard, a student hits some girls, some boys, then some other boys and some other girls in the cafeteria and during English and music... This happens over the course of several days and weeks until at a certain point the girls complain to the teacher. The teacher doesn't know what to do because he thinks the child behaves well in the classroom. They all go to talk to the principal; she promises them that when her meeting is over she is going to go to the classroom to talk to the boy, to the teachers and to the other students. But before the principal finishes the meeting a group of teachers goes to tell her that they have to talk about what to do with this boy now. Things have gotten out of hand, and the girls and boys have started to defend themselves... In the end, it is decided that the teacher and the principal are going to talk to that boy and later, according to the teachers, the student calmed down.

Something that is often read as violence or misconduct is often a way of getting attention, of getting someone to intervene, to look at you even if to scold you.

Indeed, the school is often a sounding — and listening — board. Of course, that scene is one of the many that happens every day at schools. School life, with its ups-and-downs, goes on and its administration is a balancing act. And hence much of what happens does not really happen unless someone yells loud enough. Since it is impossible to see everything, school life becomes a back-and-forth and, left to their own devices, its subjects must find a way to survive. This image is, I believe, a miniature version of the place and relationship established between the State and these abject zones. As long as nothing explodes and gets out of control, social life goes on *absolutely normally*. And then something, perhaps just a spark, leads to an explosion and the media pay attention to the zone and there is a small (or large) scandal. Then everything goes back to *normal* and pains are taken to keep things under control.

Students confront teachers, administrators and each other; they do not take orders as a matter of course and adults often read this as an expression of apathy or violence. On the other hand, those who keep quiet, even if they don't do their homework, are considered clever. As stated before, a student who does not attend class is more likely to pass than one who was there and, for an array of reasons, challenged the teacher, or "created a stir."

Now, all of this does not go on without a certain trauma that leads to a seemingly contradictory mix of will-power and powerlessness:

What do you expect? You can't work with these kids... Today they seemed very calm but yesterday they left the classroom and cut up the wire fence... [the teacher points to a sort of fence around the schoolyard]. And, at another time, the same teacher says,

Well we have to do something for these kids... something has to be done for them...

Made by the same teacher, these statements express both the desire to do something and the sense of impossibility, lethargy and apathy when it comes to actually doing. But they also express the idea that what can be done is not very much.

Nonetheless, this idea that students do not care at all contrasts with the fact that student participation is greater when the teacher stands in the front of the class to teach; when the task consists of copying exercises off the blackboard, concentration diminishes. As a fourth grader who had had a fight with a classmate said,

They put some math problems for us to do up on the board; I did two and then I got bored and started talking to a friend and then we got into a fight.

This dynamic does not entail silence, which was once so common among the submissive and timid working class. There is no shyness or submission here; students learn, instead, how to get by and keep out of trouble: if they don't feel like doing the homework and, quietly, don't do it, there is no problem.

This going-unnoticed-and-then-shouting-to-be-heard logic is also the modality of the relationship between these social sectors and the State. Just like the students, parents and even teachers wait for someone to take charge. Only when there is a catastrophe or an outbreak does that happen.

A student can pay attention one hour and not the next. At a certain moment a student stands up to ask the teacher to explain the instructions, but the teacher doesn't answer... she is working with another student while yelling at two others who are fighting and another that is simply walking around amongst the desks... The first student goes back to his desk, puts down his notebook and starts walking amongst the desks himself...

The fact that the teacher does not answer is not simply because he/she is not paying attention; the locus of complex layers of activity, the classroom has to be juggled. Thus, just as in the previous scene, learning occurs insofar as the student insists that it does, insofar as on that particular day he or she has mustered the will to make it happen or, perhaps, if he or she has been lucky enough that things worked out that way.

The fate of the school, of those who work there, of their families, depends entirely on individual will and on what the sum of those wills can still enable. Learning operates in the same way: it depends on the energy and will that a student has on a given day.

So, crucially, in the age of management, in these abject and neglected territories, the material and symbolic reproduction of life wholly depends on each person. And this is, very likely, what is taught and learned every day in school life: left to one's own devices, the question is making oneself live, taking care of oneself, saving oneself, protecting oneself to survive.

Student conduct involves two apparently contradictory strategies. First, learning to go unnoticed and not "cause trouble." In school, just like outside of school, the important thing is not to be seen and not to let them *catch* you. Second, in the struggle to survive, it is sometimes necessary to yell to be heard, as in the *piquetes*. Governing this population, as Fearnley (2005: 32) points out, does not entail a dynamic of disciplining the future; instead, "it assumes the incomprehensibility of the future [...] Rather than attempting to calculate the probability... syndromic surveillance claims only to be able to identify (but not to define) the improbable when it occurs". And, in keeping with this logic, when school punishment does occur, it does not so much discipline conducts unacceptable per se, but rather detect those conducts that might get out of hand.

5. Discussion

Throughout this essay I have tried to describe the complex processes and dynamics of pedagogical devices in contexts of extreme urban poverty after years of crisis and educational reform at the intersection of school and neighborhood. In the framework of governmentality studies, the concern has centered on specific mechanisms to handle conducts while heeding, on the one hand, the management logic that characterizes the present and, on the other, the ways of administrating the life of that population that Foucault (2007) so aptly called liminary.

I have referred to management logic as the current episteme for the governing of populations as opposed to a logic of discipline of the sort Foucault describes. Management makes itself present in the form of the narrative of the non-narrative; that is, fragmented stories that abandon the population, expecting it to manage itself by means of the configuration of a no longer overly *sui generis* ethic of individual responsibility for success and failure. In this context, my work has been based on the assumption that urban life not only expresses this logic but also very likely constitutes one of its clearest crystallizations. Indeed, in recent years we have witnessed an ever growing fragmentation of urban life. These are times of "selective" metropolization (Prevot Schapira, 2001) characterized by the participation of cities in excellence and worldwide chains of command, on the one hand, and a heightening of inner ruptures at the heart of urban spaces, on the other. This tension furthers discourses based on the empowerment of communities as a "solution." Thus, in the face of non-planned urban growth and the predominance of market logic in the social production of the city (i.e. the Buenos Aires metropolitan area) we face more and more processes that generate and deepen socio-territorial, and of course educational, segmentation (Pírez, 2001). I have argued that, in this context, education has ceased to be a space for the normalization of behavior and is, instead, a space for grouping and homogenizing

differences to the point of becoming the key social space for selective metropolization.

The notion of the abject has been employed in order to describe the way that subjects experience and inhabit the territories of both the neighborhood and the school in context of extreme urban poverty. I have used this notion to refer to the relative position occupied by subjects in social life; that is, the relationship between the inside and the outside of areas often called *shantytowns*. As I have formulated throughout this essay, the abject refers less to how the subjects who live in these neighborhoods see themselves than to how these areas are seen and conceived by those who do not live there. The closer one lives to these areas, the greater the abject fear of them. We find abject fear not only among the people who live in the adjacent areas but also at school, among the teachers who interact with the neighborhood, the families and their students. Thus, the experience of space also entails that inside-outside relationship in terms of neighborhood and school.

The area in which this research was carried out, a zone that dates back to colonial times, evidences the different social and economic moments experienced by Argentina. Indeed, the constant population growth that has characterized this vast area over the last three decades is a tragic example of the ways that the successive crises of capitalism are manifest in counties like Argentina and, indeed, throughout Latin America.

In this context, I have used the term *abject spaces and schooling* to speak of the processes and dynamics that characterize educational devices in contexts of extreme urban poverty in the management age. I have suggested that the school environment is a central place for the production and reproduction of these logics; thus, in an age when subjects and institutions are called upon to constitute themselves, the school, now understood as an institution of the community, spins on no axis and is expected to manage itself. Along the way, the school became a cornerstone of social policy in at least two ways: access to welfare plans depends on school attendance; school is where one learns to be the beneficiary of such policies. At school, one learns to wait and to receive "things" (subsidies, notebooks, pencils, sneakers, benches, food, etc.), as well as to demonstrate that one is worthy of a welfare plan. In sum, in schools in these urban spaces one learns to be the object of social policy.

In the age of flexible capitalism, education in these schools, no longer revolves around the making of productive bodies; in a context where 20% of the population is outside the formal employment market, these schools no longer need to educate and train workers. Thus, the organization of school space and time, from the precariousness of the buildings to the extended way that time is experienced, entails new logics and their attendant pedagogy. It is no longer a question of learning how to work and, hence, learning the efficacious and adequate use of time. There is no hurry. This means that students graduate at least one year later than they were initially expected to. That is not only because students are not promoted, but also because in the middle of the year many students stop attending school and don't come back until the following year. Students do plan to graduate, but at a slower pace.

The administration and/or enrollment in these schools manifest this slow pace. The fluctuating enrollment that describes this passage through schooling has given rise to a new category, *absent in attendance*, to refer to a way of inhabiting school space. It refers to a situation where a student arrives at school late and is marked absent but is, nonetheless, at school. If there is no schedule, being on time doesn't matter, just as there are no set seats; but then again, there are rarely enough chairs for all the students enrolled. If, as Massey (1993: 155) states, "spatiality and temporality are different from each other but neither can be conceptualized as the absence of the other", I have shown how, in fact, time and space are made up along the way.

Along these lines, I have spoken of the dynamics of control that, in the form of syndromic vigilance, consist of keeping things from getting out of control. Thus, it is no longer a question of acting on deviation; since there is nothing to normalize, the issue is being aware of possible excesses to keep disorder from turning into chaos. For instance, students can spend a whole hour without opening their notebooks, often listening to music on their cell phones or mp3 players. Only when one of these students stands up, walks around and/or speaks too loudly will there be any reprimand.

For students, it is as important to learn to go unnoticed as it is to shout if you want to be heard. Thus, new modes of making and inhabiting the school have replaced the shyness that once characterized poorer sectors. Students occupy the space of the schoolyard as well as the classroom. If they do not speak, it is not out of shyness but because, though in class, they are doing something else and they have learned that if they do not “bother anyone” they can spend the whole day doing nothing. Nonetheless, when faced with a situation that, for any number of reasons, they find of interest, they do speak and make themselves heard.

At the same time, the school is a place of resonance, tensions and power relations; many things happen at school every day. If studying power, as I have attempted to here, means evidencing a relation, that is, a relation of power and of struggle, then it is worth speaking briefly of these relations in terms of resistance. Though there is still much work to be done along these lines, I do believe that the analysis of modes of exercising power has made it possible to trace some of the dynamics of resistance at these schools. Despite the contradictions that it entails, this is even the case with the mural painting in the classroom. In shantytowns, school is the only place where youth is given the opportunity to think and, when a class is found interesting (for whatever combination of reasons) student participation is active, especially when the students are asked to think about the world and, on rare occasions, the conditions in which they live. When this happens in the classroom, students take interest and listen. It is likely that a critical school practice would entail generating more such spaces.

School is a space valued by students. They look to school as a place to be and to converse not only with classmates but also with adults. To some extent, the modern notion, perhaps the modern promise, of education linked to personal growth and development is still operative for young people and their families, even if as a distant hope. I once asked a student what it was that brought her to school. She made an expression that seemed to say “I don’t understand the question,” looked at me and said “to study...” In these terms, I think it is possible to understand why young people go to school even when they know they are going to repeat the year or that the teacher is going to be absent: because, in times when educational policy has left institutions and students to their own devices, resisting means occupying the space, working to finish school, studying and even struggling alongside teachers to improve conditions on the school premises, for instance.

In this framework, I understand that resistance in these times and these urban spaces takes many different forms. As Holston (2009) points out, insurgence on the urban outskirts of Latin American cities often consists of the organization of movements or actions that tend to oppose the regimes of inequality that characterize current urban segmentation. Education is by no means foreign to this logic: at its core lies the tension integral to both the production and reproduction of that inequality and the search for actions that might afford transformation and resistance. At present, especially for the poorer sectors who have been excluded from many public spaces by segmentation, it is no longer a question of dropping out of school, of leaving, but of staying, of being there making or attempting to make something of that educational promise come true. Improving the conditions of the buildings,

participating in activities, attending school every day is, I believe, part of that struggle. In the age of management and abjection – where it would seem that nothing is possible for these social sectors – perhaps insisting is resisting.

6. Some final reflections: aimlessness

Though in Latin America there has been much research on the educational policy implemented in the nineties, less work has been done on how these dynamics are lived out in everyday school life (Grinberg, 2008). We approach the school as a crossroad that brings together modes of educational inequality and social exclusion, a place where the teaching and learning of those social forms take place.

Thus, after years of having spoken of the absence of the State, this paper has attempted to read the effects of its policies on the life of institutions and subjects; that is, to understand school policies in relation to modes of governing the populations of these territories of abjection in management societies. In contexts where the life of institutions and subjects seems privately tragic, understanding them and conceiving them politically means returning them to history. In other words, it means understanding that nothing about this is inexorable or inevitable. It is, rather, a question of action and, following Arendt (1996), of politics, the sphere where we are called to act and create ourselves. If not, the social and educational production of inequality becomes a question of individual responsibility – whether understood in terms of each school or of each subject – as we have been made to believe by the discourses of management.

Thus, I have tried to demonstrate schools as spaces where multiple and contradictory practices, including practices of the making of the self, take place. As I have said, neighborhood, school and classroom contexts involve a constant back-and-forth, and managing them is a juggling act. And so, if there is no fire, if no one screams, life just goes on. From the government’s standpoint, it becomes a question of controlling disorder, of keeping things from getting out of hand and that, according to Fearnley (2005), is syndromic surveillance.

Like for those who have lost their jobs, time in school goes by in slow motion. The pace is no longer that of the unstopping machine, the body that must submit to the rhythm of the conveyor belt. Pace, time is simply what goes by, and one must learn to make it go by, to watch it go by. Time and space are not administered or exploited to useful ends.

As in these schools, in shantytowns the material and symbolic reproduction of life depends entirely on the individual. For the marginal masses learning has two apparently contradictory forms: (a) to survive and be successful at school and in life, you must not draw attention to yourself or bother anyone; (b) if you want someone to do something, you have to shout, and loud. Thus, you learn that, left to your own devices, it is necessary to stay alive, take care of yourself, to protect yourself, fight and resist. These are the dynamics of the territory of the abject, of the denied that also insists on appearing, on becoming visible.

In the management age, school life has become part of a logic that calls on us to make our own fates, a logic that in abject urban territories entails an aimlessness that means very diverse institutional and subjective practices on a daily basis. It means, for instance, that teachers go from apathy and a denial of any possibility of working with these students to the hope and interest deposited in any project that might offer the possibility of actually doing something.

It is in this context, then, that I insist that the school must be conceived in relation to the contradictions implicit to the possibility of acting in a world riddled by impossibility and denial. This because

the school does different things. Thus, I believe that the task of this research is, in part, to continue working within the contradictions and tensions that inevitably form part of acting in and inhabiting these territories and institutions.

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