

RESEARCH HANDBOOK ON **Urban Sociology**

Edited by
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19. Use and abuse of the ghetto concept in Chilean urban sociology

Nicolás Angelcos

The return to democracy in 1990 faced one of its most significant challenges in the housing deficit, inherited after 17 years of military dictatorship (1973–1989).¹ To address illegal land occupations, the government developed a policy of social housing construction on a mass scale, which completely transformed the urban landscape of Chile's major cities. In the mid-1980s nearly half the population of the Metropolitan Region lived in informal settlements (Tironi 2003). By 2002, more than 97% of the urban poor lived in legally recognized housing (Murphy 2013).

Initially, this policy was well-received, to the extent that it was exported to other countries of the Global South, such as Brazil, Costa Rica, Colombia, and South Africa (Gilbert 2004). However, in the early 2000s, Chilean urban sociology began to denounce the negative effects of the segregation experienced by the urban poor in the periphery of the city. Unlike the informal settlements described by Castells (1973)—characterized by a high level of organization and connection to left-wing political parties—the neighborhoods built by the state are characterized by the presence of various social pathologies, such as crime, drug addiction, alcoholism, teenage pregnancy, and the presence of young people who neither work nor study (Sabatini et al. 2013c).

To frame these so-called pathologies, urban sociologists imported the concept of the ghetto that Wilson (1987) had employed to describe the new urban poverty in the United States. From this perspective, housing policies developed by the state, focused on lower-income families, socially isolate the poor, resulting in a series of behaviors that deviate from middle-class norms and values. Although this school of sociology recognizes the existence of community organization in some neighborhoods, it tends to describe it as a vanishing subculture, increasingly displaced by 'ghettoized poverty' and drug trafficking (Salcedo & Rasse 2010, Sabatini et al. 2013c).

This negative view of low-income neighborhoods, synthesized in the ghetto notion, has become a widely disseminated label in the media, to the degree that it is currently used descriptively to refer to low-income neighborhoods, especially social housing complexes built by the state during the 1990s. In a report entitled *Guetos en Chile* (Atisba 2010), they are defined based on four criteria: 1) high social homogeneity, 2) high density, 3) low service coverage, and 4) low connectivity with the rest of the city. Approximately 10% of the population of the country resides in 64 areas identified as ghettos.

In this chapter, we explore how the concept of the ghetto represents an epistemological obstacle, not only because it associates urban poverty with disorganization (Wacquant 1997) but also because it limits the understanding of the forms of collective action that contribute to the production of low-income neighborhoods (Martínez 2019). As Kokoreff (2009) points out, regarding the use of the concept of the ghetto in France, it creates a homogeneous image of the urban periphery with almost no acknowledgment of any positive forms of relating to