

SOCIAL THEORY AT WORK: ANALYZING MULTI-LEVEL POWER RELATIONS IN THE REDEVELOPMENT OF CONCEPCIÓN'S RIVERFRONT, CHILE

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ABSTRACT

While many geographers have focused on the structural conditions influencing the reconfiguration of urban areas in Latin America, the concrete ways in which actors attempt to advance particularistic interests and the relations of cooperation, cooptation, and resistance generated among actors remain largely ignored. This gap in the urban literature can be explained by the lack of an analytical framework to study how power is executed in particular social contexts. Based on theoretical elements derived from the work of Anthony Giddens and Michel Foucault, I suggest and apply a framework to disentangle power relations at work in the redevelopment of Concepción's riverfront.

KEY-WORDS: Social theory. Power. Urban redevelopment. Chile.

A PRÁTICA DA TEORIA SOCIAL: ANALISANDO RELAÇÕES MULTI-ESCALARES DE PODER NA RE-CONFIGURAÇÃO DE UM SETOR RIBEIRINHO EM CONCEPCIÓN, CHILE

RESUMO

Enquanto muitos geógrafos têm centrado a sua atenção analítica nas condições estruturais que estariam influenciando na re-configuração das cidades latino-americanas, os mecanismos concretos pelos quais diferentes atores tentam avançar nos interesses particulares, assim como as relações de cooperação, cooptação e resistência geradas entre eles, permanecem largamente desconhecidas. Esse vazio na literatura pode ser explicado pela ausência de um marco analítico para estudar como o poder é exercido em contextos sociais particulares. Tomando elementos teóricos derivados do trabalho de Anthony Giddens y Michel Foucault, se desenvolve e aplica um marco analítico para desvendar as relações de poder que estão operando na re-configuração de um setor ribeirinho na cidade de Concepción, Chile.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Teoria social. Poder. Re-configuração urbana. Chile.

**LA PRÁCTICA DE LA TEORÍA SOCIAL: ANALIZANDO RELACIONES
MULTI-ESCALARES DE PODER EN LA RECONFIGURACIÓN DE UN SECTOR
RIBERANO EN CONCEPCIÓN, CHILE**

RESUMEN

Mientras que muchos geógrafos han centrado la atención analítica en las condiciones estructurales que estarían influyendo en la reconfiguración de las ciudades latinoamericanas, los mecanismos concretos mediante los cuales distintos actores intentan avanzar en intereses particulares, así como las relaciones de cooperación, cooptación y resistencia generadas entre ellos, permanecen largamente desconocidas. Este vacío en la literatura puede ser explicado por la ausencia de un marco analítico para estudiar como el poder es ejercido en contextos sociales particulares. Tomando elementos teóricos derivados del trabajo de Anthony Giddens y Michel Foucault, se desarrolla y aplica un marco analítico para descifrar las relaciones de poder que están operando en la reconfiguración de un sector riberano en la ciudad de Concepción, Chile.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Teoría social. Poder. Reconfiguración urbana. Chile.

INTRODUCTION

Following the trend of many western cities, in Latin America social actors have deployed a wide range of strategies to realize redevelopment projects, including building aesthetically appealing and glamorous urban artifacts planned to become icons and change the meanings people ascribe to places, in a deliberate effort to make them attractive and lucrative to investors. Despite the optimistic language used in official discourses, urban transformations affect people and their social life in both positive and negative ways. Who is moving the machinery allowing these kinds of urban projects to take shape? What instruments of cooperation, control, domination, and manipulation are social actors deploying to control decision-making processes? What broader conditions are enabling actors to deploy strategies that sometimes restrict the scope of decision making to a narrow segment of politicians, economic leaders, and/or public officials?

In this paper I develop and apply an analytical framework to answer these questions, taking a specific project unfolding in Concepción (Chile), as case study.

Issues of power are rarely considered in the Latin American urban context. As Ward (1996, 54) suggests:

Whichever focus has been used to look at mega-cities, insufficient consideration has been given to the political-administrative structure through which such cities are governed and managed. In the rush to examine their economic basis and international roles, fundamental questions about their form of administration and their governability have rarely been considered in a comparative perspective. How these cities are governed tell us much about the nature of power relations.

Instead, a large number of urban studies have focused on broader socio-economic contexts influencing the socio-spatial reconfiguration of cities (ANGOTTI 1996; CARIOLA and LACABANA 2003; DE MATTOS 1996, 1998, 1999; KEELING 1999; PORTES 1989; TORRES 2001). In particular, Chile's radical neoliberal program implemented since the mid 1970s called the attention of many researchers, who have related changes in the economic sphere to the emergence of such "urban pathologies" as poverty, air pollution, transportation problems, and uncontrolled expansion of urbanized areas (DE MATTOS 1996, 1998, 1999; DOCKEMDORFF, RODRIGUEZ, and WINCHESTER 2000; DUCCI 1998; RODRIGUEZ and WINCHESTER 2001; ROMERO and TOLEDO 1998).¹

In North America and Europe, a relatively large number of studies have placed the attention on issues of power relations in the urban policy arena. Notably, a Foucaultian perspective has been deployed to examine the deployment of power and the construction of particular discourses about the city (ATKINSON 1999; ATKINSON 2002; GÜR 2002; HUBBARD 1996, 2004; MACKINNON 2000; MCGUIRK 2000; PLOGER 2001; RACO 2000, 2002; RACO and IMRIE 2000; SOJA 1989; TAIT and CAMPBELL 2000).

Although this line of research advances our understanding of power configurations at work, more refinement is needed on how power operates across different levels of analysis. The deployment of power is rarely confined to a given decisional arena, it overlaps with broader factors enabling and constraining social performance. This issue is certainly recognized by geographers working under the rubrics social construction of scale and scale politics (see, for example, BRENNER 2000; BRENNER 2001; MACLEOD and GOODWIN 1999B, 1999A; MARSTON 2000; MARSTON and SMITH 2001; MARTIN, MCCANN, and PURCELL 2003; SWYNGEDOUW 1997; SWYNGEDOUW and BAETEN 2001). My point of contention, however, is that the scale literature gives few indications of the concrete mechanisms framing

¹ More developed frameworks to study the performance of actors and power relations generated in urban setting in Latin America can be found in Outtes (2003) and Ward (1993, 1996), although the research questions leading these studies differ from the ones posed here.

action at lower levels, limiting its potential to deliver policy recommendations aimed at disrupting existing power configurations. In this paper I suggest using the notion of social rules as a heuristic device to interpret the mechanisms through which actors "get structured".

This paper is organized as follows. Using insights derived from Giddens' structuration theory and taking a Foucaultian approach to power, in the next section I develop an analytical and conceptual framework to answer the research questions leading my investigation. In section 3 the case study is described. Based on semi-structured interviews conducted by the author during 2002 and 2003 and documentary evidence, in section 4 I interpret the ways in which broader conditions frame the deployment of strategies and tactics at lower levels. In the concluding section (5), I consider the utility of the analytical framework here deployed.

ANALYZING POWER IN URBAN INITIATIVES: A MULTI LEVEL APPROACH

THE STRUCTURATION OF GOVERNANCE

Urban regime theory has become a popular conceptual tool to study urban politics. For Stone (1989, 6), an urban regime can be defined as an informal arrangement by which public bodies and private interests function together in order to be able to make and carry out governing decisions. Although Stone recognizes that regimes vary from context to context, he stresses that regimes are driven by the need of cooperation, emerging from the fact that local governments lack of resources and cannot govern without the collaboration of private economic elites (BURNS 2003; CLARKE and GAILE 1998; COX 1996, 1998; KANTOR, SAVITCH, and HADDOCK 1997).

There is a broad literature that uses this approach to describe and compare the functioning of governing bodies across national contexts (BASSET, GRIFFITHS, and SMITH 2002; DIGAETANO 1997; DIGAETANO and LAWLESS 1999; FELMAN 2000; JACOBS 1998; KANTOR, SAVITCH, and HADDOCK 1997; ZHU 1999). Yet, many analysts have argued that regime theory remains trapped at the level of events, more concerned with the bottom-up construction of networks of relations than a top-down imposition of norms (BURNS 2003; COX 1996, 1998; IMBROSCIO 2003; MOSSBERGER and STOKER 2001; STOKER 1995; KANTOR, SAVITCH, and HADDOCK 1997).

From my perspective, the problem resides in the lacks of theoretical sophistication to understand the structure-agency dynamic; that is to say how

actors operating at local levels are constrained (and enabled) by upper level situations. This limitation reverberates in a limited conceptualization of power. In fact, regime approach overemphasizes the structural side of power: the capacity that the socio-economic and political context opens to certain groups to make a difference, to dominate de policy agenda, and to control urban outcomes (COX 1996; DIGAETANO 1997). To develop an analytical approach to tackle the questions posted in the introductory section, it appears necessary to account for the recursive relation between agents and structures as to acknowledge both sides of power: its structural and agency sides (see CLEGG 1989).

Toward overcoming the structure-agency dualism Giddens (1979, 1984) develops the theory of structuration. Giddens separates conceptually "structure" from "social system". Structures are defined as organized sets of rules (prescriptions) and resources (means to exercise power). Structures are out of time and space, existing, as time-space presence, only through social practices: structures have no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day to day activity (GIDDENS 1984, 26). The social system, in turn, comprises the more durable features of societies; that is, sets of rules and resources continually being reproduced through long time-spans.

An important aspect in Giddens theorization is that human agents are knowledgeable, founded basically on practical and discursive consciousness that can be traced through some kind of description that actors can make about the situation surrounding them. Therefore, the properties of the social systems are transformed or reproduced through social practices of "structured agents", who are more or less aware of the limits and possibilities of action.

This approach offers, at first glance, an opportunity to conceptualize the formation of urban governing bodies at the level of structure, as a result of the process of structuration. I suggest understanding the formation of governing bodies as a product of "moments" in which external and local factors coalesce and set the stage for the formation of distinguishable coalitions that move policy initiatives forward.

Among other points, structuration theory has been criticized for emphasizing practical over discursive knowledge leading to a weak conception of agency (GREGSON 1989; KING 1999; STORPER 1985), for not giving enough weight to social constraints (CLEGG 1989; GREGORY 1980, 1985; STORPER 1985; THOMPSON 1989; THRIFT 1985; WARF 1990), for introducing a non-structural and/or misrepresented conception of power (BOYNE 1991; STORPER 1985), for an inadequate account of spatial

relations (GREGORY, 1985), and for not being an appropriate device to inform empirical research (ADAMS and HASTINGS 2001; DEAR and MOOS 1986; GREGSON 1987, 1989; KELLERMAN 1989; MOOS and DEAR 1986; MOUZELIS 1989; PHILO and PARR 2000; WATERSTONE 1996).

Despite the difficulties to apply structuration theory in empirical settings, I argue that it can deliver results if the notion of rule is specified. Indeed, formal and informal rules in place can become heuristic devices to grasp the ways in which actors get structured: enabled and constrained by the broader system. Giddens (1989, 255) is certainly right that social rules are not "quasi-mathematical", but it does not immediately follow that rules cannot be specified to inform empirical work.

RULES, POWER, AND FUNCTIONAL LEVELS

By placing the analytical attention on the levels at which rules operate and how rules interlock, it will be possible to trace the complex web of prescriptions framing social practices and to identify the strategies actors use to affect policy outcomes. At this point it will be possible to construct a firm base for suggesting ways to challenge existing power configuration via rules changes.

To capture the agency-structure dynamics I will define functional levels on the basis of the scope or the reach of social practices involved in decision-making: a *policy making level* at which actors define broad plot-lines, an *implementation level*, where coordination among a variety of actors takes place, and an *operational level*, where social actors directly intervene in the realization of projects (WANTRUP 1970; WATERSTON).²

Ostrom's approach (1986) captures the framing properties of rules in organizational settings. This researcher considers rules as linguistic entities used to change the structure of incentives and to achieve order and predictability in defined situations, representing the channels through which actors attempt to control outcomes. It is important to note that control is not performed directly or deterministically; it is only possible by changing the rules establishing the context in which decisions are taken. Ostrom suggests that implicit or explicit efforts by individuals to achieve order and predictability entail: setting up a set of *positions* in decision-making bodies (*position rules*);

² Given that my analytical construction draws upon concepts derived from structuration theory and institutional analysis, I use the notion of level and not of scale. This does not imply that I consider levels fixed or pre-given; quite the contrary, the notion of functional levels recognizes explicitly the interconnectedness among analytical levels.

defining how participants enter or leave a position (*boundary rules*); specifying the actions each position is required, permitted or forbidden to take (*authority rules*); specifying the set of outcomes each position is required, prohibited, or permitted to affect (*scope rules*); prescribing how collective decisions are taken (*aggregation rules*); defining channels of communication and the types of information to be used (*information rules*); and prescribing how benefits and costs are to be distributed (*payoff rules*).

The links between rules and power are quite straightforward. Rules do not only allow social performance, but also sanction conduct and inform the utilization of resources to exercise power (PHIPPS 2000). Social rules recognize the rights of groups to speak with authority, defining their capacity to exert power and make their "accounts count". The joint deployment of the notion of social rules and functional levels will allow us to investigate how social action is framed by the social context and how power can be exercised. This entails moving to an approach that recognizes that power does not emanate only from some a broader system of domination and control, but also is deployed in every day practices by structured or situated actors.

In my reading, this understanding appears consistent with a Foucaultian approach to power. Foucault understands power as a ubiquitous, ever present, relationship that acquires concrete expression in the operation of political technologies. Procedures, reflections, calculations, strategies, and tactics constitute "technologies of government" or "governmentalities" through which actors exercise power and produce knowledge and rules making society amenable to rational control (FOUCAULT 1980, 1991). Then, power relations and techniques to control society cannot be accounted solely by a social structure like the system of law nor by the ethical choice of individuals; they must be grasped in their own right, as productive and linked to a whole range of useful effects, which it is their task to support (FOUCAULT 1995, 24).

Foucault's approach allows considering power as a consequence and a necessary condition for structuration to take place: the recursive relation among broader and more stable sets of rules and social practices is a result of power relations that are both preconditions for practices and effects of the application of political technologies. In other words, a knowledgeable and structured agent that is engaged in the business of governing others will face a set of possibilities and constraints originating from broader levels and will decide upon a course of action that will have consequences in terms of creating power relations and reconfiguring his/her basis to exert power.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

Rather than studying large plans or general policies, I was interested in the deployment of power in micro-situations, which reflected my understanding that the construction, destruction and/or reconstruction of urban landscapes are outcomes of power being exerted at different nodes, not the result of a process emanating from a single source. Given its uniqueness in the Chilean context, the array of actors involved, and the impacts of the project on the population, the North Rivera Project proved an adequate study case. Identifying the key actors and distinguishing the level(s) at which they operated constituted a second critical step in the research process. The examination of documentary evidence and semi-structured interviews with individual possessing formal authority, allowed me to identify position and boundary rules giving certain actors the capacity and reach to affect the outcomes.

To interpret the rules in place, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with actors working in the organization coordinating the project and ten non-structured interviews with the affected community. Actors holding positions in decision-making bodies were asked: what procedures/mechanisms are followed to define positions (position rules); how are participants chosen, under what conditions do participants enter/leave a position (boundary rules); what are the main responsibilities/functions of each position and what activities is each position required to perform (authority rules); what aspects of the project is each participant able to modify, what decisions are beyond their reach (scope rules); what specific functions do each have in decision making and how are decisions taken (aggregation rules); what information is considered in decision making, who provides that information, to whom is the information distributed (information rules); how are the benefits and costs of the projects distributed (payoff rules).

To collect and analyze the information I followed a "backward analysis": I began by examining local centers of power to then move on to identify rules that at broader levels were enabling and constraining practices and strategies at lower levels. Given the difficulties involved in arranging meetings with high-ranking politicians and public officials, to identify the rules in place at the policy making level I mainly relied on secondary sources, especially the extensive literature on the social effects of Chile's neoliberal political program. The backward analysis facilitated a more detached examination of interconnections, since it allows confronting events unfolding on the ground with fewer preconceptions about how things should/could be working.

CASE STUDY

The North Rivera Project (NRP, hereafter) is taking place along the Bio Bio riverfront in a sector known as the Costanera, in the city of Concepción, Chile. Concepción is located 600 kilometers south of Santiago, the capital of Chile, and is part of the Bio Bio region. Concepción's metropolitan area is composed of 7 municipal governments, which are elected bodies presided over by a Mayor and a Municipal Council. With a population of nearly 800,000 inhabitants, Concepción is the third largest urban center after Santiago (5,500,000 inhabitants).

The project is located 4 kilometers from Concepción's downtown. Until the year 2001, a large shantytown, old industries, rail facilities and swamps occupied the riverfront, disrupting movements and creating a barrier and a self-contained area. The formal local land use plan in place had limited effects, being ineffective in controlling the illegal settlement of around 1200 poor families. The material appropriation of the area began in the late 1930's continuing until the mid 1980s. Figure 1 shows the situation in the Costanera Area in 1990.



Figure 1: The Costanera Area. Concepción, Chile, 1990.

Source: North Rivera Office. With permission.

To operationalize NRP the central government formed in the mid 1990s the North Rivera Office (NRO, hereafter) headed by a Coordinator. NRO is guiding the development of about 140 hectares; most of them publicly owned. The two main objectives are to allow the expansion of Concepción's central area towards the river, recapturing 80 hectares to attract private investment and to consolidate a new residential neighborhood in the Costanera sector, giving a secure solution to illegal occupants. The project considers an 18.5 kilometers highway, a third bridge on the Bio-Bio River, 15 hectares of urban parks, new buildings for the Regional Government, a convention center, and space for private investment.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s some investors and public officials manifested their intention to clear up the area to open it for urban initiatives. The *pobladores*³ did not remain passive. A community leader who presides over one of the biggest neighborhood associations of the Costanera area illustrates this point:

We were making strong demands for us, the pobladores. I am speaking from 1990 onwards, with all the issues of democratization going on, of representative civil organizations and all that story....up to 1989 there were threats of moving us from the Costanera to distant locations..... we appealed to our moral right to live in the Costanera area....we started to organize neighbors, to make ourselves strong; we organized by sectors in Block Committees, and decided to fight for continuing to live in the Costanera. Finally the regional authorities had to listen to us.⁴

The pobladores intruded in meetings where the political leaders and public officials were discussing plans that contemplated relocation and lobbied with regional and national officials from different State Secretaries. The social pressure finally led the national government to decide on a program that combined moving the pobladores to a different site within the Costanera area and opening up space for private investment.

In the first phase of the project a partnership developed between the pobladores and the Coordinator, downplaying the influence of investors and some politicians. However, in the elaboration of a master plan in 1996 no aggregation rules were in place to make public participation effective in altering outcomes. The Coordinator made use of informal authority rules to relegate both, the pobladores and investors, to consultative roles. To approve the master plan, the informal aggregation rule in place prescribed

³ Chilean expression referring to low income people living in deprived areas.

⁴ Concepción, November 2002. (English translation: author).

that decisions concerning the future of the area should have the support of two strategic positions: the Coordinator and the Minister of Housing (MINVU).

The impacts of NRP on the urban landscape have been drastic. Figure 2 shows the situation in the area in 2001.

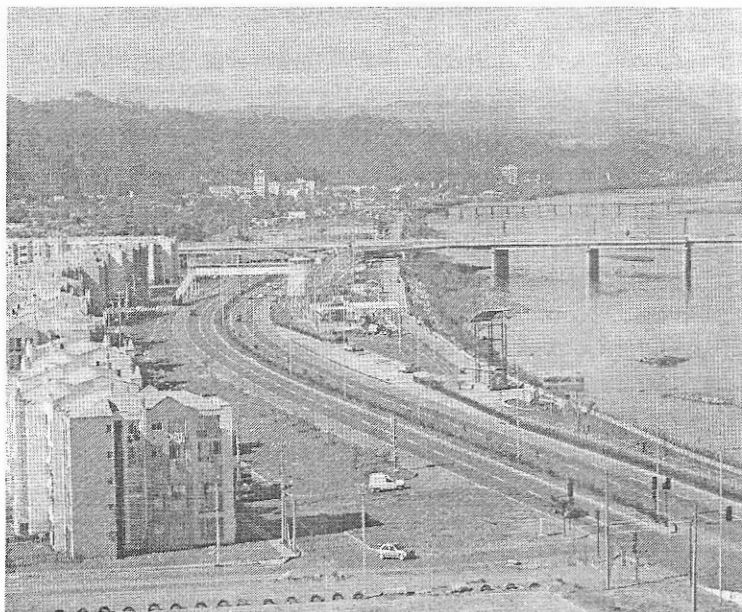


Figure 2: The Costanera Area. Concepción, Chile, 2001

Source: North Rivera Office. With permission.

MULTI-LEVEL EXERCISE OF POWER

THE OPERATIONAL LEVEL

The NRO took on the challenge of assembling public and private parties in an organization to deal with the complexities of the NRP, such as the presence of a politicized organization of pobladores defending “their place” and economic elites eager to “clear-up” the area for private investment. Each of these positions held resources to exert power by relying on a set of informal rules, such as the investors’ capacity to influence at the policy-making level and the pobladores’ capacity to mobilize and protest. To get the project on the move, the

Coordinator made use of informal boundary rules to hire expert consultants and created two offices at the operational level: the Technical and Social Units.

The Head of the Technical Unit had two specific scope rules defining his/her range of action. First, he/she was required to work closely with the Municipality to approve the land use plan for the area. Since the Municipality had the formal authority rule to formulate land use plans, its participation was essential. Moreover, the Municipality was the only elected body engaged in the realization of the project, so integrating this instance was critical to validate NRP. Second, this position had the task to work closely with private investors, assuring their support and negotiating future capital investments.

In the late 1990s, the Head of the Technical Unit made use of informal boundary and authority rules to institute a Technical Committee, which had the scope of coordinating diverse actors and receiving their feedback. The Technical Committee included representatives of the Municipality, entrepreneurs, professionals, and personnel from regional branches of different State Secretaries. The pobladores did not have a position within this instance (position rule). The Committee was an instance to find consensual solutions to be considered by the Coordinator. Two outcomes have marked the action of this unit in the last couple of years: the approval of a formal land use plan in 1998 and the concretization of private initiatives from 2001 onwards.

In relation to the formal aggregation rules to approve land use plans, the legislation contemplates an indirect way of public participation. The plan has to be published in a newspaper and the Municipality must accept observations for 30 days, but there are no aggregation rules prescribing how those observations are to be taken into account. Citizens hold a formal position, but they do not have scope or authority to exert much influence on outcomes. Reflecting on public participation in the process of approval of planning instruments, a professional working for the Municipality of Concepción commented:

The local land use plan needs the approval of the Regional Counselors, who are appointed by the Mayors from all the municipalities of the region....the only thing that the Municipality can do is to lobby regional actors....in relation to public participation, I will be honest. People do not know. We are required by law to make an ample call for participation, but people just come with trivial issues....then, I think, what is most important is to follow the formal procedure: publish the plan in the official newspaper and respond only those observations that are related to what you presented.⁵

⁵ Concepción, March 2003. (English translation: author).

These words reveal the scant capacity of the municipal personnel to influence the approval of plans, although they are the ones who elaborate them. It uncovers, as well, a deep distrust in public participation, insinuating that technicians and professionals are the ones who know the technical, proper solutions for the issues under consideration. In a number of interviews conducted with personnel from the Municipality of Concepción, the predominance of a technical rationale was quite evident as was the frustration with political and bureaucratic structures that precluded a more direct role of local instance in the approval of land use plans.

Although economic elites had a voice and a position within the Technical Committee, they did not exert total control nor could they easily impose their points of view. They perceived that a hard stance might mean bringing the project to an end, losing good business opportunities. Indeed, the possibility always remained that the demands of the pobladores could escalate, causing delays or reconsiderations of decisions taken. After interacting with a number of potential investors I conclude that despite discourses exalting collaboration and dialogue, on a more subtle sphere important degrees of distrust towards NRO still remained.

In regard to the Social Unit, the scope rule in place prescribed that they were to reach agreements with the pobladores. The power that the pobladores could exert gets concrete expression in their participation in negotiations with personnel of the Social Unit. Overall, the pobladores were gradually convinced to move from the area they occupied to a nearby site (see figure 2). An interview conducted with one Head of the Social Unit illustrates the important degrees of manipulation applied:

Look! The first thing to know about participation is that participation has to be clear and must contemplate pre-defined mechanisms for negotiating. That means not thinking of participation in idealistic terms, in the sense that what the masses say is the right way to go. In that case, the technicians would always be subordinated to politics. The first and most important element is to define the stage before conflicts emerge....and there is a trick here, to combine the different interests well in advance, to define what will be in and out of the discussion field.⁶

Discussions, meetings, and public hearings were not improvised; they were carefully planned and several options and outcomes were considered and evaluated. In terms of rules, the Head of the Social Unit put in place scope rules, prescribing what issues were to be in and out of the discussion, and payoff

⁶ Concepción, May 2003. (English translation: author).

rules, prescribing the issues on which NRO was amenable to concessions. The Social Unit availed itself of the weakness of neighborhood associations after the main threat (eradication) was over, opening up overlapping and parallel channels of discussion.

Another strategy applied by the NRO consisted of a drastic separation between the interests of the pobladores and investors. On very few occasions these parties met, the channels for negotiation were completely separated. This systematic maneuver allowed putting in place a set of information rules that opened channels for concentrating tactical information among the Heads of operational units, regulating the flow of information. Only at the implementation level were pieces put together, balancing interests and setting the framework for further negotiations.

THE IMPLEMENTATION LEVEL

The connections between the implementation and operational levels were quite direct and were characterized by top-down relationships. Working teams were selected by the Coordinator, who had the authority to cease the contracts at any time. The Coordinator had ample capacity to exert power, given the fact that this position maintained direct contact with the regional representative of the Ministry of Housing and could count on the support of the Minister.

The Minister of Housing had the authority to constitute a Directory of NRO to resolve pressing issues. This instance was formed by a number of influential Ministers, giving NRO another tool to push its ends and a concrete channel to disentangle situations delaying the progression of the project. It represented, as well, a channel for NRO to bypass regional actors. A former Coordinator explained in the following way the use of informal channels to control decision making:

We always work like that; the North Rivera Office without being legal acts as if it possesses legal status because if we start to wait until things are completely legal and sacramental we would still be waiting. One of the most incredible things is that we have bypassed administrative instances to reach our objectives....regrettably it is the only way to do things. The major backing does not necessarily come from the authorities; it comes from the power that people give us....if the project fails, the problem of the authority will be not with me, it will be with 1000 families.⁷

⁷ Concepción, November 2002. (English translation: author).

This discourse shows that application of informal mechanisms in decision making was a common and widespread practice within NRO. To legitimize this informal organization at the regional level, it was essential to have the political backing of policy-level actors and to count on the people's support. Legitimacy within the region enabled NRO to bypass formal rules redefining the scope of traditional planning bureaucracies.

THE POLICY FORMULATION LEVEL: NEOLIBERAL TECHNOCRACY AND CONSENSUAL POLITICS

The capitalist revolution initiated by General Augusto Pinochet, required a radical transformation of the economic and social structure of the country, not simply the suppression of civil liberties. The goal was to create a new society based on the rule of the market, introducing scientific methodology and rigorous analytical practices and professional ethos (CAVAROZZI 1992). Following Valdés (1995), the return to democracy (1990) did not mean renewed state controls on economic activity, rather the return to democracy has been conducted with strict adherence to macro-economic equilibrium. In contemporary Chile, decision-making is a depoliticized practice, as decisions are conceived as outcomes of rational procedures (see SILVA 1996; SILVA 1998). In terms of rules, the most pervasive effect has been to restrict the type of information to be used in decision making, regarding as valid only information derived from the application of strict technical procedures.

As the technocratic mentality penetrated deeply into public administration, the old bureaucracy was partially replaced by "flexible" public employees: professionals with short-term contracts acting as part-time advisors or consultants. In NRO most of the personnel work under this modality.

For Silva (1995), since the reestablishment of formal democratic ruling political elites are engaged in the business of reaching consensus among parties. Problems are framed in technical ways and a complex social engineering comes into play to find an adequate balance. To avoid conflicts, dialogue instead of confrontation, is part of today's political practices, as illustrated in NRO's functioning.

The use of technocratic knowledge in decision making and a policy making style favoring consensual solutions among elites have acted jointly to reduce the level of engagement of ordinary citizens in projects. As Carruthers (2001) puts it, contemporary politics in Chile is characterized by a

decline in public participation and the reconsolidation of elitisms, both elements defining that policy decisions take place in close negotiated processes between intellectual and political elites. In the reading of Galjart and Silva (1995), the knowledge of economists has led to an oligarchic manner of filling leadership posts, illustrating how technocracy turns out to be a substitute for democracy.

In fact, disregard of public participation was found among many municipal technocrats working within NRO. However, despite restrictions that the social context impose on local communities, they still retain the capacity to construct informal rules and strategically act to further their ends. The pobladores in Concepción could not retain their living space, but they successfully negotiate housing solutions in a nearby site, avoiding a socio-spatial cleansing promoted by segments of the economic and political elites.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Within the context of structuration theory and of a Foucaultian approach to power, governing bodies are here conceived as volatile arrangements constituted by written and unwritten social rules operating at different functional levels and establishing options for social performance at lower levels. It is through these social rules that actors get structured. Since absolute control is not possible (MALPAS and WICKHAM 1995; MILLER and ROSE 1990), governing entities are in a permanent flux of change; each party striving to achieve a certain rule configuration that best advances its ends. As in Harvey's (1982) notion of spatial fix, a final solution in terms of a "rule fix" will never be reached. Contradictions, competing discourses, different ends and different frames of reference will always be propelling us (humans) to modify the rules framing social action.

In Concepción we have a complex web of relations constituting and reproducing the governing arrangement in place. Although there is a clear focal point, the Coordinator, there are a number of entities that can affect the outcomes of the project. The pobladores, in particular, bounded by policy-level rules giving expert understanding predominance to the detriment of non-expert participation, were able to work within these boundaries by deploying a series of strategies like protesting, lobbying, and negotiating. They could have chosen a different course of action, radicalizing their demands or just letting things flow. Instead, they engaged in negotiations and reached a compromise: they accepted a payoff rule prescribing that they were not going to win it all, nor lose it all.

Disentangling the sets of rules framing practices and defining the channels through which power is executed generates strategic knowledge that can be put to work to modify existing power configurations. Putting myself in a position where I must deliver policy recommendations to achieve, for instance, a more balanced power configuration within NRO, I could suggest two general possibilities of rule change: (1) aggregation rules establishing a participatory panel for decision making and (2) information rules changes.⁸ These rule changes are aimed at breaking down the artificial separation between pobladores and investors constructed by NRO and at disseminating information on more equitable grounds. To achieve a rule consistency across functional level and effectiveness, changes at lower levels should go hand in hand with rule changes at the policy-making level, entailing a challenge to power configurations derived from the deep penetration of neoliberal ideology. What is precluding alternative views to take shape via a distinguishable political platform is the naturalization of market economics. As Foucault claims (1979, 86), power is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself.

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⁸ The reader must bear in mind that this paper is not focused on delivering specific policy recommendation.

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