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NOTES FOR A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH
ON SELF-HELP HOUSING POLICIES IN
LATIN AMERICA

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NOTES FOR A COMPARATIVE RESEARCH ON SELF-HELP
HOUSING POLICIES IN LATIN AMERICA

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1. Habitação, América Latina 2. Habitação, Política e Governo

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1. The aim of this research is to contribute to the assessment of self-help housing policies in developing countries. Despite the fact that these policies have been very much in evidence for over twenty years — becoming the predominant if not the only form of low-cost housing provision in many countries — they still define an area of great uncertainty and there is not enough work available in terms of detailed evaluation of their long-term impact.

2. The research inserts itself within the debate on the variations between spontaneous and aided self-help housing. Even though we go along with many of the main criticisms of self-help housing as presented by authors such as E. Pradilla (1976 and 1982) and R. Burgess (1978, 1985 and 1987), we believe, nevertheless, that the intervention by the state introduces important new dimensions to the situation. Some of the critics have argued that aided self-help has all the vices of spontaneous self-help and none of its merits: it accentuates the presence of market mechanisms increasing the costs to the users and reproducing the problems it is supposed to solve while, at the same time, being an instrument of political cooptation and manipulation of the urban poor and of reproduction of the bourgeois ideology of private property. Our view is that further research and analysis is required on this issue and that we cannot preclude other developments within self-help housing policies.

3. Self-help housing policies have been accompanied by controversy from their inception. Support and criticism have come from housing experts, scholars, political groups and the homeless themselves, in a continuous debate which is ultimately concerned with the long-term and widest social implications of apparently effective short-term policies. It is clear, however, that policies, whatever their short-term effectiveness, should not be adopted independently of their long-term consequences in society as a whole. At the same time, it is also true that critical analysis of these consequences should advance into the area of policy, not necessarily proposing policies but at least developing strategies and scenarios that may open the way for policies to be proposed.

This question is particularly relevant for progressive planners who find that the body of critical theoretical analysis available on this subject is of such radicality that it leaves almost no space for policy action within the existing social structures. The way out of this apparent cul-de-sac becomes only too often a schizophrenic exercise of attempting to embrace the critical perspective while justifying on moral grounds that it is "better to do something than to do nothing".

In our view, today as before, academics, planners, policy-makers and political groups are all still facing a very old challenge: how to provide urgent solutions to the desperate housing needs of workers and other low-income groups, creating at the same time conditions that might, in the long term, help to change the social context from which those needs originate,

or at least not to contribute to consolidate that context. It is our belief that we cannot preclude self-help housing policies-being, under certain circumstances, a useful instrument in the confrontation of such a challenge.

4. The increasing adoption since the 60's of self-help housing policies in developing countries is not without historical precedent. Already in the middle of the last century the issue of mutual self-help was central in the debate about working class housing in Germany. A well documented article by H. Harms (1982) reviews the experiences of aided self-help in Germany from the late 19th Century to the 30's, as well as those of the USA in the 30's and of Puerto Rico in the 40's, and suggests that these policies have always emerged in situations of economic and political crises within capitalism. The experience of Chile in the 50's would be another illustration of the same.

The more recent adoption of these policies in several developing countries seems to have taken place, as well, in the confluence of a series of critical factors: chaotic and speedy growth of urban centres, models of accumulation and growth that exclude large sectors of the urban population from regular employment and income, failure of conventional urban and housing policies to provide for those in need and, very importantly, political situations that require new state responses so as to ensure a certain degree of social legitimacy and the stability of particular social alliances. The

understanding of the circumstances that make it necessary for the state to intervene in the form of non-conventional self-help housing policies seems to us to be of crucial relevance if we want to grasp the specificity of these policies and assess their potential and limitations.

5. The meaning of self-help housing policies has been enlarged considerably in the last few decades: from an almost exclusive emphasis on state organized self-building of houses — more and more the exception nowadays — to an embracing of projects that emphasize the provision of basic infrastructure and services, with increasing flexibility on the forms of organization of housing construction and the progressive retreat of the state from direct involvement at the level.

These changes are not accidental nor irrelevant and are open to many different interpretations: some would interpret them as an expression of the state will to devolve the initiative to the users and to get out of what has proven to be a long, costly and inefficient way of promoting user's participation; others would see them as the expression of the permanent search by the state to reduce the costs of its intervention and transfer them to the users, to limit collective activity by the community and to privatize housing production. At the same time, important as well in this evolution, has been the frequent rejection by the users themselves to participate in organized self-building, especially in circumstances when this form of housing construction is very backward vis-a-vis the existing forms of popular housing production.

Beyond interpretations, though, the fact is that self-help housing policy, in moving away from the narrow meaning of state organized self-building, has increasingly acquired the wider connotation of an open-ended process of improvement by stages of housing and the habitat — a process of "progressive development" — which presupposes, either explicitly or implicitly, the participation of the users, be it individually or collectively, at some level or combination of levels: construction, administration or even planning. In this way self-help housing policies became synonymous with non-conventional solutions and embraced the two main kinds of non-conventional programmes: site-and-services and upgrading. The variations between and within these programmes are nevertheless considerable: from almost conventional housing with unpaid users' labour — exceptional but still existent — to the provision of basic infrastructure and services without any kind of state involvement in the production of housing itself, by way of programmes with core houses, embryo units, etc. There are variations in terms of land solutions, finance, private sector involvement, technical assistance, levels of subsidy, labour process, forms of user participation, criteria of selection, etc. The varied impact of different forms of state intervention constitutes the wider field of the research. The objective is to help map out the relevance of these variations.

6. The research project will be carried out in three countries — Venezuela, Brazil and Chile — and has been

conceived in two phases. The three countries show considerable housing problems, together with significant state intervention in the form of self-help housing policies. They offer, at the same time, variations and similarities in economic, social and political conditions as to provide grounds for relevant comparisons. The project will attempt to document and analyse the evolution of a selected number of low-income settlements — especially at the household level — in Caracas, Rio de Janeiro and Santiago, which have been created or have been the target of self-help housing policies — mainly in the form of site-and-services or upgrading. The first phase of the research is taking place in Caracas and should serve as a pilot project of a mainly exploratory and descriptive character.

Some Conceptual Questions

Our intention here is to raise some of the more general questions that are at the background of the research. Without attempting a review of the main arguments in favour and against the promotion of self-help housing — something that has already been extensively done by a series of people, ourselves included (1982 and 1983) — we will just outline very schematically some of the limitations of the critique and the reasons for a reassessment of self-help housing policies.

1. The issue of articulation of different forms of production within developing countries is central to the debate

on the nature and specificity of dependent capitalism and far exceeds these notes. It is worth saying, though, that there is an ambiguity on this question perhaps unavoidable — that permeates the whole of the self-help debate and the analysis on the role of the state.

Are non-capitalist forms of production essential to the capitalist accumulation in developing countries, or do they survive only in the fringes of capitalist production? Does state intervention reinforce their continuation or accelerate their dissolution? These questions receive different answers at different moments in the self-help critique. At times, self-help housing is seen as a residual non-capitalist form of production which cannot be promoted in any significant way by the state. Indeed, early criticisms saw self-help housing policies as an impossibility. The capitalist state cannot but impose and consolidate the spreading of capitalist relations (Burgess, 1978; Pradilla, 1976). However, for the same reasons, these policies were later understood as possible but only in as much as they accentuate the logic of the market and of commodity production in areas previously dominated by non-capitalist relations. This line of argument is particularly evident, for instance, in the critique that aided self-help increases the costs to the users when compared with spontaneous popular housing (Burgess, 1985).

More frequently, nevertheless, self-help housing appears as an essential component of capitalist accumulation in developing countries and the policies are viewed, exactly, as

an instrument to reproduce non-capitalist relations so as to reduce the costs of reproduction of labour power in the capitalist sector (Burgess, 1987; Pradilla, 1982). The often used concepts of "over-exploitation", "urban spoliation", etc. are all within this kind of perspective.

What is puzzling, though, but not accidental, is that very often these different lines of approach coexist in the same analysis, even if seldom the ambiguities are acknowledged. The question here is not one of choosing between perspectives that, in the logic of linear arguments, are normally presented as mutually exclusive. The challenge, in our view, is exactly to recognize the ambiguities and the complexities they pose, accepting that generalisations on this issue are impossible. Indeed, if we look, for instance, beyond the state intervention at the housing project level, we can say that both things, reproduction and dissolution of non-capitalist forms of production, most of the time occur simultaneously — even though many authors would argue that this reproduction has little to do with reducing costs of labour power reproduction. It is in this coexistence of forms of production that lies the complexity, as well as the specificity, of a process of accumulation whose full implications, nevertheless, can only be understood in the analysis of concrete situations.

2. It seems to be the case, however, that at least at programme and project level, self-help housing policies tend to accentuate the logic of the market, producing what could be

called a "slow-motion commodification" of housing and opening the way for transformations in the form of housing production. In this way, we are presented with the apparent paradox — never sufficiently analysed — of self-help housing policies reinforcing a logic that conspires against that which is supposed to be one of the main mechanisms of cost reduction: self-help itself. In other words, self-help housing policies accelerating the dissolution of self-help housing.

If indeed there is an accentuation of commodification then we believe that what matters is not so much that cost or expenses have increased — which is almost unavoidable anyway when compared with the spontaneous solutions — but if material conditions have improved, if costs are affordable and, especially, how are they affordable. Are costs mainly affordable at the expense of relying further on self-building, unacceptable standards, over-crowding and sacrifices in other areas of consumption? How much is affordability conditioned as well by other issues such as the use of houses for renting or for business purposes and the increase in productivity resulting from state intervention — either directly (technical assistance, materials, technology, etc.) or indirectly (pressures of the market itself)? To what extent is affordability — often defined as the level of provision users are able to pay for, without direct subsidies — made possible precisely by the presence of open or hidden subsidies? In fact, subsidies, increase of productivity, valorization of land plots in excess of costs to the user, are all things that — beyond what and how people can afford — have also important implications in terms of the

which we referred before.

This politicisation and its potential — the specificity of self-help housing policies in other words — is never sufficiently acknowledged by the self-help critique which, from a rather economic perspective, sees the state as a monolithic entity whose exploitative policies under the direct control of the ruling classes lead to the inexorable cooptation and manipulation of the workers and the urban poor. Despite lip-service to the contrary, we believe that the critics fail to understand the contradictory character of a state which is always ambiguously and tensely immersed between the immediate interests of capital accumulation and the long-term need for social stability; a state which becomes itself the arena of political dispute and struggle. Our argument is that the same conditions that require effective large-scale cooptation and manipulation by the state are the ones that politicise the situation and potentialize other developments.

5. To summarize, we believe that self-help housing policies, at least at the point of intervention, tend to accentuate the commodity character of housing — with the consequent transformations in the form of production — and at the same time generate new conditions for social organization and negotiation between the state and the users. The wider context of policy and the variations in the forms of state intervention have a different impact on the forms of housing production, exchange and consumption on the one hand, and on



the forms of social organization and negotiation on the other, with different effects on the population, at the household and neighbourhood level. In this, we cannot preclude the improvement of material conditions within the limits of affordability and reducing the levels of "over-exploitation" to at least part of the population in need. The analysis of these variations and their effects is the wide field of this research.

6. Do self-help housing policies accentuate the commodity character of housing and accelerate the transformation of the forms of production? What is the impact of that in terms of material conditions and mechanisms of affordability? What happens in terms of transference of resources and subsidies and how does that relate to the forms of negotiation? These are some of the main questions that we think need to be addressed by any empirical research which attempts to bring some new light into the self-help debate. For too long now the theoretical debate has remained purely speculative, at the same time that the exchange and disagreements of the practitioners — especially organized around World Bank activities and proposals — have hardly related to the main theoretical and political issues. Today there is a need for detailed and patient reconstruction of the articulation between the processes of commodification and that of negotiation as the core of the self-help question.

If this sort of "critique of the critique" that we very briefly outlined here has any validity — particularly with reference to the political dimension and the role of the state —

then that would imply the opening of a theoretical space from where to recreate a bridge towards the political discourse and the policy level. It would imply for progressive planners that they can help maximizing the potential for transference and redistribution of resources that exists in self-help housing policies; but it would imply as well that, contrary perhaps to World Bank precepts, state intervention and state subsidies cannot but increase, especially when compared with the "de facto" policy of abstention by the state so far as the very poor are concerned; it would imply, in a word, that replicability of these policies on a large scale is essentially a political question and not a technical one, as many would propose. The idea, for instance, that replicability is insured mainly by the affordability in purely market terms of very low cost projects, is something that does not survive any serious scrutiny when it comes to the very poor. Indeed, if anything, the relation is the otherway around: affordability without subsidies, in contexts of great scarcity of land and housing, would be dependent precisely upon the replicability on a massive scale; upon the ability of the state to flood the market so as to bring land values and housing prices down. This is an unrealistic horizon but one that necessitates, in any case, considerable state resources in the first place.

Unavoidably, therefore, replicability requires political will to redistribute resources and that will is not born out of state generosity but out of conflicting power relations. That self-help housing policies, in turn, should be born incritical conjunctions of those relations is an indication, perhaps, of

their potential to help replicating the political will itself... This is a potential seldom recognized by the critics, albeit for reasons more familiar to their own view than to those of the traditional self-help advocates.

The Research Strategy: The Example of Venezuela

1. The Caracas chapter of the research constituted the first attempt to examine all these questions and issues in terms of real situations. The purpose of the fieldwork in Caracas was to identify and analyse the effects of two different self-help programmes on the processes of housing production, exchange and consumption which took place in two squatter areas, or "barrios", as they are known locally. In Caracas, the self-help housing policies are almost exclusively in the form of upgrading and the two programmes selected are: "Urbanizacion y Equipamiento de Barrios", implemented by the Christian Democratic government of Rafael Caldera in 1969-1974, and "Ordenamiento y Consolidacion de Barrios", carried out by the "Accion Democratica" government of Carlos Andres Perez in 1974-1979. The first was more localized and reduced in scope with more emphasis on community participation. The second was more comprehensive and with the state and the private contractors playing a greater role in the development of integrated projects for the provision of infrastructure and services. The two "barrios" were selected according to their representativeness as examples of implementation of either one or the other programme.

2. The focus of the fieldwork is then on the variations in the process of housing production, exchange and consumption induced by state intervention. In order to be able to examine these variations, housing production, exchange and consumption is considered as a single general process that can be traced through variations of, and relationships between thirteen empirically observable processes that were identified as: 1) housing use value; 2) Housing technical standards; 3) social and economic composition; 4) land provision; 5) building technology; 6) labour process; 7) finance provision; 8) exchange framework; 9) administrative framework; 10) technical assistance; 11) neighbourhood development; 12) community organization; 13) costs, expenses and affordability.

3. The central hypothesis of the research is formulated by means of five propositions to be tested by the fieldwork in Caracas. The first indicates that the development of these thirteen processes is characterised by the increasing domination of commodity forms. The second indicates that this overall commodification process generates gains that accrue to those squatter households that have de facto control over the land they occupy which offset the possible costs demanded of them by the same process. The third indicates that government intervention in the form of self-help policies and programmes accelerates and consolidates the commodification process. The fourth indicates that government intervention by means of self-help policies defines a space of political negotiation, involving the state and the squatters, concerning the allocation of resources in the "barrios". The course and outcome of these

negotiations are determined by both the objectives and forms of government intervention and the level of organization of the squatter community involved. The fifth indicates that self-help policies might benefit those squatter households in control of the occupied land in two ways: indirectly by the acceleration and consolidation of the commodification process, and directly, by the transfer to them of social resources via the state.

4. Two particular points concerning these propositions must be noted. It is obvious that self-help housing policies may take very different forms. It has been assumed here that these forms can be identified and organized typologically. In the particular case of Caracas, however, we are exclusively concerned with the two policies already mentioned. The second point is that neither the indicators of commodification nor the kinds of gains that might accrue to the squatters have been specified in the propositions. This is done at the level of the thirteen particular processes that make up housing production, exchange and consumption.

5. For the operationalisation of the hypothesis we used those thirteen empirically observable process. These have been worked out as simple models that combine theoretical understanding and the results of our preparatory fieldwork in Caracas. Each model defines the form in which commodification might have taken place in each case, proposes the indicators that must be traced and identifies the possible costs and gains for the squatter population. Observations are guided in each case by a number of limited scope hypothesis formulated within the

boundaries of each process. Consistently with the objectives of the research, these observations are focussed on the effects that different self-help housing policies might have produced in each one of the thirteen processes.

A full presentation of these models is, of course, beyond the scope of this short paper. It is possible, however, to introduce some examples such as the following:

HOUSING USE VALUE: It is defined as the evolution in the shelter's ability to satisfy the housing needs of the households. The hypothesis suggests that squatter households improve their shelter by stages — from a shack having one or few multi-purpose rooms, lacking facilities and built out of refuse materials, to a consolidated shelter with all the required specialised rooms and facilities built with industrially produced materials. The indicators include the house total area and the area of each room; household composition; number of floors; use of whole house, of each room and of adjacent land, including the potential to generate income; and the quality of building materials and facilities.

LAND PROVISION: It is defined as the evolution in the forms of access, tenure, values, location, development, use and regulations of the land occupied by each "barrio" under examination. The hypothesis states that these lands originally existed on the city's periphery as potential commodities, that this potential was lost as a consequence of illegal invasions to be recovered again — so that these lands become real commodities —

as a result of developments incorporated by the squatters, a process accelerated and consolidated by state upgrading programmes. The indicators include the forms of access, price, tenure, location, physical conditions, use, development, regulations as well as forms of land exchanges and identification of agents involved.

LABOUR PROCESS: It is defined as the evolution of the division of labour in the building of shelter and the production of the infrastructure of the "barrios". The hypothesis states that the construction of shelter and infrastructure proceed by stages, that in each one labour becomes more divided and specialised, the relationship between users and builders become more formal and no-paid labour tends to disappear. We try to identify, on the one hand, the most significant works required to produce shelter and infrastructure in the "barrios", namely site clearance, foundations, walls, roof, finishings, in-house water pipes and sewage, streets and pavements, stairways, neighbourhood water supply and sewage, drainage and other facilities. On the other hand, the indicators trace the number of workers involved in each of these tasks and their skills, the existence of contracts, the regularity of working hours, costs, supervision and possible participation of household members. Indicators also trace the administration and management of the works, the possible use of designs and the use of budgets.

6. The purpose of these models is to guide the fieldwork towards observing the real form of, and directions adopted by housing production, exchange and consumption in the "barrios".

Whether commodification takes place or not, whether there are gains for the squatters or not, whether there are any effects induced by state policies or not, whether the organized action of the squatter communities might be instrumental in maximising the gains they obtain out of state intervention or not, and the actual time span of all these processes, are all questions to be answered by means of those observations.

7. The general and specific hypothesis of the research define both the nature and the tasks of the fieldwork. These include the examination of more than one government policy of self-help housing carried out in "barrios" where their implementation could be isolated. The observations, on the other hand, cover a considerable time span. If the assumption is that the thirteen processes under examination have been taking place since these settlements' inception, then it becomes necessary to obtain information concerning them before the implementation of the policies, at the time of implementation and, after that, until the present.

While the squatter households are the most important primary source, they cannot provide all the information demanded by the hypothesis. Other primary sources, such as government officials that were in charge of implementing these programmes and community recognised leaders that have been involved in negotiations with government agencies, have also been considered.

Moreover, it is also indispensable to complement the information provided by the fieldwork with other types of

qualitatively different data obtained from secondary sources. These cover subjects such as the evolution of the Venezuelan social formation, the evolution and growth of Caracas and the conjunctures at which self-help housing policies and interventions of the kind under analysis took place in Venezuela.

The selection of the "barrios" in which to carry out the fieldwork posed the first practical problem to solve. If the independent variable of the research is government intervention, of which the effects of two would be examined, then it was necessary to select two "barrios", each one representative of the implementation of one of those policies. Other than this difference, the "barrios" should be as similar to each other at the time of state intervention as real situations allow for: in other words, we tried to make the universe of enquiry as homogeneous as possible in order to isolate the effects of the variable intervention.

For the same methodological reason it was necessary to include a third "barrio" — similar in attributes to the previous ones but where no government intervention has taken place — as control unit. On top of these premises it is necessary to add the material limitations of time and resources which become critical when dealing with a universe of considerable size. All these premises have been translated into three selection criteria as follows:

- 1) It was intended that the fieldwork should be carried out in three sectors — of approximately 500 household units each — of

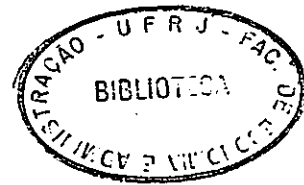
three "barrios": one was a representative case of implementation of the "Urbanización y Equipamiento de Barrios" policy; another one was representative of the implementation of "Reordenamiento y Consolidación de Barrios"; the third one, the control unit, was a case where no self-help housing policy has been implemented or any such intervention has been negligible.

ii) Apart from these differences, the "barrios" should have been as similar as possible at the time the governments intervened in them. In particular, the two "barrios" where self-help housing programmes were implemented must have shared a number of features at the time those programmes were introduced: geographical conditions in terms of location within Caracas, topography and soil quality, social and economic conditions, level of shelter and neighbourhood consolidation and land tenure.

iii) In the case where no policy intervention took place the same features should have been present about 1970, which is the time of our first set of observations.

9. The fieldwork constitutes, obviously, the most important part of the research. It mainly consists of obtaining primary information from squatter households in the selected "barrios", concerning the matters demanded by the hypothesis. Questions seeking that information constitute the core of a survey and a selected number of case studies which were carried out in each "barrio".

The survey included a sample of households living in



each barrio's sector. They were questioned in order to reconstruct the 13 processes mentioned before as they took place. To facilitate that reconstruction the questions were organized in such a way as to establish relevant phases based upon the production of their own homes, imposing on those phases the time when the government intervened with the self-help programme. These phases were: the time when the family — or the household head — gained access to the land presently occupied; the time when the government implemented the self-help programme; the time when they produced the present house, and a full description of the conditions at the time of the survey.

In addition, we attempted to reconstruct from secondary sources — mostly the existent studies related to the selected "barrios" and particularly those studies carried out by the public agencies that implemented the programmes in each case — the situation that existed in the "barrios" at the time of the government intervention.

A selected number of case studies were carried out in each sector in order to examine in depth the same thirteen processes already mentioned. The case studies followed the same structure of analysis than the survey.

Finally, the research was enriched by a number of complementary activities designed to obtain information from both primary and secondary sources, such as government officials that were in charge of implementing the self-help programmes, community leaders and academics.

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