Public space as border space: social contention and street art in Santiago post-18/O

Vicherat Mattar, D.A.

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Daniela Vicherat Mattar

Abstract

In October 2019, massive demonstrations took place in the streets of Santiago, Chile. The demands were varied, addressing several aspects of the acute social inequalities that characterise Chilean society. Protests were met with a brutally violent response by the police forces deployed to control them. What was more difficult to regulate was the explosion of graffiti and street art that accompanied the social unrest. These mobilisations speak of the repolitisation of the civil sphere through the occupation of public spaces. In this article, I propose to look at the role public spaces have played in these events not only from the perspective of public spaces as sites of political encounter and counter-hegemonic mobilisations, but mostly as borders. I contend that public spaces act as material and symbolic borders where the struggles over practices of ordering and othering take place. By looking at the history of a square in Santiago's city center—Plaza de la Dignidad—and a selection of the graffiti in its surroundings, I explore how the square acts as a border and, in doing so, enables an alternative spatial imagination that feeds new possible political and social orders.

Things have changed in Chile since 18 Oct. 2019 (18/O). That day, what seemed an ordinary protest against the increase in the price of metro tickets—an increase of $30 (thirty Chilean pesos)—became the largest contentious movement since the country's return to democracy in 1990.[1] The mobilisations catalysed a deeper discontent with the neoliberal model that, although imposed by the military dictatorship during Augusto Pinochet's rule, has been further consolidated during the last thirty years of liberal democratic regimes. As a consequence, during the past three decades, the country has witnessed the intensification of various forms of inequality—socio-economic, cultural, legal, territorial, ecological. This was rapidly and brilliantly summarized in one of the slogans imprinted on Santiago's walls after the 18/O: *No son $30, son 30 años* (It's not $30, it's 30 years).[2] This message, together with thousands of others, has been written, removed and re-written in the streets of Santiago, radically transforming the visual landscape of the city. Since the 18/O, Santiago, and especially its city-centre, became a public canvas where people expressed their frustration and discontent with the current situation, but also their hopes for change. Politically, these ideas have been translated into the demand for a new constitution, designed through a Constitutional Assembly process, which itself crystallised in another urban slogan—*Asamblea Constituyente ya!!!* (Constitutional Assembly Now!!!).[3]

During this time, the city's streets, walls, facades, doorways, window frames, lamp posts, became the stage of a constantly recreated scenography done partly by street artists (see the work of ECOS in image 2), but mostly by ordinary citizens as the two images here included show. Through countless messages, imprinted on different types of surfaces and following various techniques, people have manifested their

[1] In Santiago, the estimated monthly expenditure of public transport is on average $33.200 (€42 approx.). In a context where roughly half of the population live on a minimum wage (around $301.000, that is €376 approx.), the rise of $30 (€0,04 approx.) was a high increase in the life cost (Castiglioni). For further discussion on the extent of the country inequalities and current indignation see the works of Alberto Mayol (2019) and Gabriel Salazar (2019).

[2] Image 1, text in yellow letters.

[3] Image 1, text in white letters.

indignation with anger, irony and humour.[4] Many anonymous Chileans have appropriated the city's surfaces, transforming them into an open-air museum. The two central messages in yellow and white depicted in image 1 are among the most frequent ones. Others, also visible in this image, have a rather transnational character—like "*ACAB*, *1312*, *Resiste*" (All cops are bastards, 1312, Resist). These multiple expressions connect the mobilisations that sparked in Chile after 18/O with larger trends of social mobilisation and unrest across the world, from Hong Kong to Bolivia, attesting to the deep crisis affecting current representative (neo) liberal democracies and their capitalist economic organization.

The graffiti illustrated in the photos are located in what has been described as the conflict's ground zero, the epicentre of the weekly confrontations and massive demonstrations taking place between October 2019 and March 2020. At the core of ground zero, there is a square. This article is about that square, the contentions that took place there since the 18/O and their expression through the graffiti present in the square's surroundings.[5] I examine the square as a public space, not only in terms of the encounters and counter-hegemonic politics that have taken place there (Iveson 26-27; Mitchell 507), but especially in its constitution as a border space. I argue that public spaces are always border spaces where practices of ordering and othering are performed and contested, in constant tension and negotiation. The practices of ordering and othering manifested violently during events like the mobilisations occurred after the 18/O, though they are also the result of long processes and dynamics of slow violence rooted in structural and systemic forms of injustice that are normalized in the city through, among

[4] There are already several publications trying to capture the richness of these street art expressions. See Lucía Echeverría et al. (2019); Olivari (2019). Obviously, social media have been fundamental in spreading and circulating this multiplicity of the expressions. For updated accounts check the hashtag #chiledesperto on Twitter and Instagram, as well as www.museoabierto.cl; www.instagram.com/museodeladignidad/?hl=en; and the developing site www.museodelestallidosocial.cl/.

[5] While this article focuses mostly on the visual messages manifested through various techniques in the walls surrounding the square, there have been several other expressive forms. It is worth noting the influence of popular music and two of the many chants that have accompanied the movement since its beginning. One of those chants acknowledges the awakening of Chilean civil society—*Chile despertó* (Chile woke up). Another one highlights the people's demand for dignity—*El pueblo está en la calle pidiendo dignidad* (The people are on the street asking for dignity).

others, public spaces. Understood as borders, I argue public spaces afford opportunities to read the repoliticisation of the civil sphere.

The argument in this paper develops in three parts. It begins with a brief historical description of the square, explaining why and how it has become a central public space as well as key border in Santiago. Secondly, I will unpack the two core dimensions of the square as a border, examining it as a site where practices of *ordering* and *othering* take place and are contested. This can be visualised through the graffiti produced during the recent mobilisations (images 1 and 2). Finally, I will conclude this essay by suggesting that thinking about public spaces as border spaces can advance our spatial imagination of the political dimensions of public spaces and street art. I contend that thinking public spaces as border spaces, that is, exploring the synergies between border and urban studies is a refreshing way to decode current forms of urban inequalities and unrest, contributing to advance the democratic potential of both public spaces and street art.

Image 1. Daniela Vicherat Mattar. Section of panels fencing the Telefonica building on the northern edge of the square. 22 Dec. 2019.

From the Edges to the Core: The Historical Centrality of Plaza de la Dignidad

The square I am writing about is a site of contradictions, material and symbolic. On the one hand, looking at its material form, this is a square that is not actually a square. To be precise, the site is a roundabout, one of intense traffic; a transport node in Santiago. On the other hand, looking at its symbolical dimension, the name through which this place is known is not its official name. Popularly and controversially known today as Plaza de la Dignidad (Square of Dignity), before the 18/O it was known as Plaza Italia. However, neither is its official name, which is Plaza Baquedano. In other words, the square I am writing about is a central public space in Santiago, but it is neither a square nor one with a univocal name. In this section, I will describe how these elements have been produced historically, aiding to the centrality of this location in the city, as well as its symbolic power to perform as one crucial imaginary border for its residents.

Public squares are vital urban forms granting dynamism to the city. Generally, it can be argued that the meaning of public squares depends on various factors: their design, their location in the urban fabric, their projected function vis-á-vis their actual function, their history, and the way in which frequenters appropriate it and recreate it anew. Squares become public spaces as a result of the sedimented interactions that, through time, afford them with a public character (Vigneswaran et al. 498). In Santiago, it is through the historical developments of the city that Plaza de la Dignidad has acquired its centrality.

During Santiago's foundational times, almost five-hundred years ago, the square's location emerged in what was the eastern edge of the natural triangle that gave form to the colonial city. Defined spontaneously as one of the early city limits, the square is placed in a natural angle formed by the conjunction of the two main lines along which the city grew: the Mapocho river and the main avenue, Alameda. This location was ideal for the city's water distributors, which naturally generated an opening space that would later be occupied by the square (De Ramón 173).

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Santiago has experienced a rapid and unplanned expansion that, together with urban reforms carried out by Vicuña Mackenna, has progressively situated the square in the geographical centre of the city (Retamal & Retamal). One of the greatest deficiencies affecting Santiago at the time was the absence of public squares and parks. Thus, in 1875, Plaza La Serena—the first name given to this location—was one of the first public squares to be officially founded in the empty area at the intersection of Camino de Cintura (today Vicuña Mackenna Avenue) in junction with Alameda and its continuation along the Mapocho river towards the east. The project was exceptionally financed by donations of the elite, built by a workforce made up of prisoners who not only constructed the square, but also worked on the subsequent canalisation of the river and development of the water system (De Ramón 172). By law, in 1892, the land located within the first hundred metres from the riverbank was designated for public use, allowing not only the consolidation of the square, but also of the three parks located in its immediate surroundings (Municipalidad de Providencia 31-32).

At once, the square became a centre of transport, exchange, circulation, and leisure activities. The centrality of this location has been emphasised by public infrastructures, such as the presence of a train station (Estación Pirque) by the southern side of the square. This material centrality was paired with symbolic importance in demarcating social limits and hierarchies in the city: a poor South, a then still rural East occupied mostly by manor houses, religious orders, hospitals, and aristocratic areas surrounding the foundational administrative colonial centre. The square allowed these different segments access to the administrative city centre while still maintaining a clear social distinction based on residential segregation (De Ramón 188, 255; Rodríguez and Winchester 122-129). Given the centrality of this square, it is of no surprise that historical records suggest that one of the first popular revolts in Santiago took place there. In October 1888, masses of people gathered in Plaza La Serena to complain about a rise of the electric tram fares (De Ramón 270). The square was the meeting point from which the protestors congregated to walk towards the central transport

terminal in Alameda Avenue, closer to the core of the administrative city. One hundred and thirty-two years later, history repeated itself and masses of people gathered in the same location to protest for the rise on the metro fares, triggering the largest social mobilisation in contemporary democratic Chile.

Like the history that gave physical and material centrality to this square, the trajectory of its name reveals the symbolic importance it has had to shape a socio-political imagination of the city. Initially named Plaza La Serena, in 1892 the square changed its name to Plaza Colón (Columbus Square) as part of the commemoration of the "discovery of the Americas."[6] The name was not to last, since in 1910 the square was renamed Plaza Italia in honour of a monument given by the Italian community to the city to celebrate the centenary of its independence: a lion freeing itself from its chains, guided by an angel, titled *El Genio de la Libertad* (The Genius of Freedom). The sculpture was centrally placed in front of the Pirque train station. However, the monument's centrality did not last long, the esplanade where it was located was changed again in 1928, when a statue of General Baquedano, one of the national heroes of the Pacific War, replaced the independence monument and gave the square its official name: Plaza Baquedano (Retamal and Retamal). Baquedano's monument was placed at the centre of a newly created roundabout, displacing El Genio de la Libertad. Despite this displacement, and in spite of its official name being Plaza Baquedano—valid until nowadays—the square retained the name Plaza Italia in the popular and collective imaginary of the city residents.[7]

Even though the monument of Baquedano remained central to the roundabout, El Genio de la Libertad monument granted the square its more permanent name, Plaza Italia, a name that endured almost a century of political and urban reforms. Consistent with its tradition of being a central place where celebrations and political protests take

[6] It would be more historically accurate to speak of the "invention of America" by European colonizers, as it was suggested by the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman in 1958, an idea recently popularized by current decolonial scholars like Walter Mignolo (2003).

[7] Not only laypeople, but also official policies use Plaza Italia as name. For instance, Plaza Italia was the name given to the bus stops located at this intersection during the 2007 public transport reforms carried out in the city.

place, since the last 18/O Plaza Italia has concentrated thousands of people gathering weekly to demand changes to tackle the multiple forms of inequality experienced in the country. The constant mobilisation struggles and confrontations with the police have decimated the place. Since the early days of the movement, the police have reacted with no restraint in applying repressive mechanisms of control. One of the tragic outcomes of their abuses has been the rapidly increasing number of ocular mutilations and violence inflicted upon the protestors.[8] As a response, in early November, a group of protestors took the initiative to rename the square by carrying a large white canvas with a new name, "Plaza de la Dignidad, ex-Plaza Italia".[9] Three days later, a new bronze plaque with the new name was placed on the square and on the Baquedano monument. Even if the name has not (yet) been officially recognized, the act of renaming was so intensively appropriated that it even managed to change the name of the square on Google Maps for one day on November 11.[10]

If *freedom* was the underpinning value embedded in the obstinate popular act of retaining the name Plaza Italia for almost a century, a call for *dignity* underpins the current name change. Plaza de la Dignidad is not only a material urban form (a square), it is also a space endowed with symbolic and ritual meaning able to make visible the contradictions experienced by society (Iveson 173). The capacity to perform these ritual functions not only affords centrality to the square, but it also grants it its character as border, a site where practices of (dis)order and othering are displayed and challenged.

[8] According to the latest's figures provided by the National Institute of Human Rights, by 18 February 2020, there were 445 registered cases of ocular damage (www.indh.cl/). The police abuses have been recognized by international observers from the Interamerican Court of Human Rights and the UN Human Rights High Commissioner.

[9] The canvas was carried out during the November 8 demonstration. Since then, the name has been seeding in the collective imaginary of the city residents (Retamal y Retamal).

[10] "Adiós Plaza Baquedano: Google cambia el nombre del lugar a Plaza de la Dignidad". *El Mostrador.* 11 Nov. 2019. At the time of this writing the name was still active to signal the geographical location of the square in Santiago.

The Square as a Border: Visualizing (Dis)*Order* and *Othering* Practices through Street Art

"Street artists inscribe social justice in, on, and around the streets" (Ulmer 491). In Santiago, since the 18/O, this task has been taken up not only by street artists, but by laypeople, who have appropriated the street's surfaces to manifest their discontent with the current system, and their hopes for change. I have established in the previous section how Plaza de la Dignidad acquired its centrality in Santiago's fabric from the edges of the foundational city. In what follows, I will explain how this centrality is acting as a border that fundamentally articulates contending forms of claiming rights to the city (Lefebvre 158; Harvey 37, 39).

Following Simmel, I understand borders as sociological facts that take spatial forms (139). A border transforms an abstract idea about difference into a factual reality. Agnew suggests border practices function in two ways: on the one hand, borders can limit and/or allow the movement of people, money, or things. On the other hand, borders trap the habits of thinking about and acting in the world in territorial terms (176). Both functions are clearly visible in international geopolitical terms, though both could also inform how we understand public spaces in their potential to mobilise established forms of order in the city. Borders work in material and symbolic terms to define and establish clear parameters of order; "[t]he b/order is always an active verb" (Van Houtum et al. 3). Once set, these parameters of order define as 'other' all those deemed inappropriate, those individuals that are part and cause of dis-order. In doing so, the dynamics of ordering and othering go hand in hand. I argue that both are being imposed and contested in and through public spaces.

In Santiago, the recent dynamics in Plaza de la Dignidad function to shape and contest the existing socio-political order in the city. To do so, the square works as a border in material and symbolic terms. Materially, since its inception, the square has demarcated the socioeconomic divisions exiting in the city. Residents in Santiago are familiarized with the popular expression *"de Plaza Italia pa'rriba o pa'bajo,"* literally meaning 'moving up or down from Plaza Italia.' This is both a

physical reference to the geographical practice of moving up towards the north and the mountains on the east, or down towards the south and the west; it is also a concrete reference to the stark socio-economic segregation demarcated by the square when moving to the wealthier districts in the north-east or the poorer south-west. This socio-economic order has clear implications associated to othering dynamics.

Symbolically, the square works as a border by ordering the city and othering its residents. Dominant forms of order in the city result from othering discourses that segregate peoples and practices, such as graffiti and street art, from the ordinary doing of politics. [11] Since the 18/O, ordering has been traditionally and hegemonically displayed on the square by the deployment of the state police and their repressive mechanisms to contain social unrest. Meanwhile, othering has taken place in discourses like those by the president, who described the situation as a state of war against a "powerful enemy," or those of his wife describing the protestors as "aliens."[12] The various forms of creative expression and graffiti produced since the 18/O have reacted against these dominant forms of ordering and othering, for instance, by denouncing the slow violence manifest in the multifaceted forms of inequality experienced in the country (image 1, "No son $30 son 30 años"). These inequalities speak of systematic discriminatory government actions, rather than inactions, legally reproducing these discriminatory structures, hence the call to democratically change the country's through a participatory process (image 1, "Asamblea Constituyente ya!!!").

Taking control over public spaces is a form of reverting order and its meaning-making in the city.[13] In periods of social unrest, like the one experienced since the 18/O in Santiago, the contention between

[11] In his 2018 public national account on the country, president Sebastián Piñera spoke little about culture; however, he managed to empathically condemn graffiti and street art as forms of "incivility" against the "social order" (El Mostrador Cultura).

[12] According to Mayol, the authorities read the movement in a securitizing cue: what needed to be preserved was "public order," without realizing that precisely the problem was/is people questioning the normative underpinnings of that public order (113).

[13] At the time of revising this essay, Plaza de la Dignidad has been cleaned up: demonstrations are not allowed, and many forms of street art have been painted over or removed by the authorities under the excuse of the Coronavirus state of exception (El Desconcierto). Another example where order in the square is imposed by othering those expressions not in alignment with the current state authority.

dominant forms of order and the movements' disorder through occupation, street art, and other tactics, serves the purpose of destabilising dominant and normalized forms of meaning-making. The state practices of ordering and othering manifest in the square through the presence of police control and repression, as well as the vilification of the movement through traditional press, have attempted to conceal the alternative forms of order which have emerged as result of this movement, like the endorsement of democratic participation by the proliferation of *cabildos* (town councils) or spontaneous constitutional dialogues in different public spaces across the country (Marquez).

The red heart in image 1, with the word "*Resiste*" (Resist) inside, shows how image-making in public spaces signals practices of political contestation and their power to install alternative forms of meaning-making. These forms of image-making trigger our political imagination, which, as Jaffe suggests, works in analytical, normative and affective terms:

> Analytically they guide us in our understanding of how power works, and where and in whose hands it is concentrated—our attention is drawn to specific locations of power and responsibility, and not others. Normatively, the political imagination shapes our perceptions of the workings of power as just or unjust, and affectively, it imbues our responses to these workings with anger or pride, with sadness or excitement (4).

Image 2. Daniela Vicherat Mattar. Section of panels fencing the Telefonica building on the northern edge of the square. 22 Dec. 2019.

The graffiti and street art in the square can be read through these three dimensions as a reaction to the dynamics of ordering and othering imposed by the state. Analytically, the mural and graffiti in image 2 serve as a guide to identify, express, and defy the (repressive) forms of order and political power expressed by police abuses and human rights

violations, as it is represented in the mural of a policeman dragging a protestor claiming for "Dignidad." In normative terms, the mural denounces a system that is perceived as unjust and violent by defending structural forms of othering that position the question of dignity as a crucial civil demand. This is also evident for instance in the third poster at the top left of the image, where three people banging pots chant *"Hasta que la dignidad se haga costumbre"* (Until dignity becomes customary). Finally, the affective dimension is present in the various references to others, like the presence of an iconic figure of the mobilisation and protests, the dog *Negro mata pacos* (Black police-killer), a street dog which used to join social protests barking against police.[14] There is also an affective evocation of the anger and the pain caused by the memory of those whose death remains unanswered by the state—an unresponsive order—while there is trust and hope in other possible orders that the collective mobilisation can bring out, as expressed in the first poster at the top from left "*No abandonamos la calle"* (We won't leave the streets).

In images 1 and 2 it is clearly visible how new forms of political imagination are expressed in and through street art by appropriating and making visible social justice struggles as struggles for dignity, mobilizing the limits of what formal politics conceives as *possible*. Through massive occupation of the streets and of other city surfaces, what has emerged are new framings of the existing order—for instance by demanding accountability of police repression—and othering—by reframing who and what is violent in contemporary Chile. It is telling that neither in the graffiti expressions (images 1 and 2) nor in the new name given to the square are the protestors demanding *inclusion*. The claims are not to be included in the existing order, but rather to create a new one with dignity as its core value. In words of ECOS, the maker of the central mural in image 2, the mural reflects "*Por lo que somos y por lo que no quieren que seamos*" (What we are and what they don't want us to be).

Like all borders, the practices and dynamics of ordering and othering embedded in the square and its history are not permanent. In fact, the changes in the square show how contested these practices are, either when imposed by the force of order as the actions of the state police

[14] First poster at the top right.

have done, or by contesting that order, as the weekly manifestations and multiple street art expressions have demonstrated. The result has not been mere contention. The movement, in its multiple expressions, has challenged political, socio-economic, and legal forms of order that were taken for granted in the country. In fact, almost a month after the 18/O, there was a broad political consensus to initiate an electoral process to change the country's constitution. The procedure contemplated a referendum in April 2020, when Chilean citizens were to decide two matters: whether or not they want to change the Constitution and, if so, what would be the preferred mechanism to draft the new one, a constitutive convention—in practice a constitutional assembly of 100% elected members—or a mixed convention—a group composed by 50% parliamentarians and 50% elected members.[15] Coincidentally, April 2020 was also the date for the municipality with the local jurisdiction over the square to decide on its change of name. In the meantime, the new name, Plaza de la Dignidad, is becoming more and more present in the imaginary of the city. The othering dynamics in the square reflect how it performs as a border between orders: one existing, the other possible.

Public Space as Border Spaces: Re-defining the Public.

In a 2018 article, Rivke Jaffe asks "[h]ow might urban studies engage with new forms of politics outside of established sites of research such as those associated with representative democracy or collective mobilisations?" (2). While her answer is to further explore the intersections between humanities and social sciences in the study of urban forms of cultural expression, my suggestion in this article is to further the political understanding of public spaces by exploring the connections between border and urban studies. I contend that borders, understood as logics and practices of ordering and othering, contribute to further decoding the complex claims over the right to the city in public spaces.

[15] Given the state of exception declared under the Corona emergency, the referendum was postponed from April to October 2020.

New connections between border studies and urban studies help to visualize how the ordering of the city space, and its underpinning dynamics of othering, are contested through alternative forms of political imagination represented through street art and graffiti. Around the square and on the Baquedano monument these forms have shaken the political status quo in Chile, offering counter-narratives to imagine new possible forms of order—legal, political, socio-economic, cultural. In the square, Dignidad (image 2) is not merely a word depicted on a wall, it points to a new political imagination, socially and materially embedded in the new name granted to the square.

Imagining the square as a border affords the possibility to identify and challenge the conditions that define what counts as public, and how it is recognised as such. Vigneswaran et al. assert "public spaces do not pre-exist the diverse and contested practices of public-making though the urban" (498). What the Plaza de la Dignidad and the graffiti manifestations around it represent are alternative political narratives to those established and normalized through official discourses, as well as alternative practices of public making. Conceiving the square as a border neither fixes its political character nor determines a specific outcome of the mobilisation. Rather, conceiving the square as border helps opening up the space to the political imagination expressed in popular movements and street art. The history of the Plaza de la Dignidad, and the current expressions of graffiti surrounding it, offer a cue to see how the spatial imagination of what is public, who counts as public, and how it is made available and visible, express ongoing struggles over different rights to the city. These struggles, demanded in the square and through the city's walls, imagine another city as possible.

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Biography

Daniela Vicherat Mattar is a sociologist, working at the Global Challenges Programme in Leiden University College, The Hague. Her research interests are in the interplay between cities and citizenship, particularly in relation to the multiple practices of border making that are echoed in the politics of space.