

PARALLEL CITIES: BUENOS AIRES' VILLAS MISERIA

Buenos Aires is a city with many faces, and its shantytowns, villas de emergencia (emergency villages) – euphemistically also called asentamientos (settlements) or villas miseria (villages of misery) – represent, for the rest of the society, the most scary and impenetrable face of them all. Collecting data, or even knowing the number of its inhabitants, is in this area very difficult. According to the census conducted in 2010, there are in Buenos Aires Capital, without considering its surrounding provinces, about 23 villas and a total of 170,000 residents. Over the last four years the number has increased to 225,000. This however seems to be an approximation, as in 2006 the inhabitants of the 796 villas in the capital and surrounding provinces were calculated to exceed one million.



According to multiple sources the villas miseria were created after 1930. Over the years they have not only survived violent evictions by the military dictatorship, but even grown, both in number and in size, thanks in part to the political agendas of the various parties. One of the greatest periods of growth of these veritable cities within the city was in the 90s, during the Menem government whose neo-liberal policies widened the gap between the rich and the poor people in the Argentine society. The recent vertical housing development further contributed to the high density of population and increased the number of people living in precarious conditions. Due to the fact that relevant infrastructures were not developed in parallel to the population growth, basic services such as electricity, gas, and water for example, are insufficient, often makeshift, and thereby unsafe and insecure. In many cases these services do not cover the entire villa and many families do not even have access to them.

Villas are usually perceived as places abandoned by the state, urban areas where the state presence is minimal or non-existent, strongholds controlled by criminals and drug traffickers. They are equated to situations where violence of any kind has an easy life and state control is questionable, this despite a strong state presence. The problem lies instead in that its presence is considered ambiguous. Police corruption and political patronage are perceived as the villas' most serious problems. Consequently they nullify the efforts aimed at improving residents' living conditions and instead contribute to exacerbate the situation. Further, it is not uncommon to see people selling drugs in public spaces and there is a general perception that the police are involved in the business with drug traffickers. In fact, one of the main problems in the villas' daily lives is the trafficking of paco or pasta base, a low quality drug obtained by mixing the waste product created through the synthesis of cocaine, with other substances such as amphetamines, talcum, glass powder, rat poison and kerosene. It is highly addictive and toxic, and causes devastating physical and neurological

damages. Being cheap, yet producing strong and instantaneous effects, paco is heavily addictive, and heavily addicted consumers can smoke up to one hundred doses per day, to prevent the ensuing depression.

Paco has thus been defined as the poor people's drug, as a dose costs just around 10 pesos. However, the costs add up due to the consumers of paco, in extreme cases, having to smoke constantly, resulting in the consumer spending far more than one would imagine. The deep poverty of the villas miseria often leads to consumers starting a criminal career and so there are three options for obtaining paco: stealing whatever they can get their hands on, selling drugs, or organizing thefts for drug traffickers. All of it with the purpose of obtaining paco in exchange of doses.

Paco is very often produced in the villas' laboratories. This is why this drug is so strongly rooted in and commonly associated with the villas miseria and its inhabitants. Some families, the so called narcofamilias, are totally devoted to drug trafficking, to the point that each member of the family has a specifically defined role and responsibility.

Paco has devastating effects on individuals and a violent impact on the entire community. This drug is a plague: it started invading the streets few years ago, after the country collapsed due to the financial crisis. Since then, it has dramatically changed the daily life of the villas, wiping out unwritten codes, deteriorating social solidarity and mutual aid ties. Paco generated a "war among the poor". People are scared of retaliation and avoid intervening unless a situation directly affects them. The old values, such as respecting mothers and keeping children away from crime have been erased due to paco. The community's traditional rules and good practices are just a memory and now children start smoking paco as early as 6-7 years old. Before the spread of paco, the chorros (thieves) who lived in the villa targeted the wealthier neighborhoods. Today's zombies steal, pickpocket and snatch where they live, terrorizing neighbors, family members and friends. People under the influence of paco are capable of anything; they are unpredictable and fearless, even in the prospect of their own death.

The alienation caused by paco is all-encompassing: after smoking it, consumers are no longer aware of their own bodies or actions, get short-tempered and over-excited, resulting in the entire community getting terrorized. Today the problem of paco addiction is out of control, and with a soaring numbers of young people using it, it is a trend that appears to be on the rise. In the villas it is really common to find families with the following problems: the father who is in jail, alcoholic, affected by HIV or even dead, an underaged pregnant daughter and a son addicted to pasta base who often sells drugs. Mothers usually stay "clean", and many of them organize themselves in order to try saving their children from drug addiction. They are called madres del paco.

Paco makes surviving difficult, so it is no coincidence that in villas 31 and 31bis, the median age of its inhabitants is 23 years, compared to the median age of Buenos Aires' population, which is 39 years. The villa "animalize", as it obliges many people to fight for the few belongings they have, at any cost and by any means. Given the extreme poverty, many use the only thing they have: their own bodies.

This drug has become the symbol of a crisis deeply rooted in the history of Argentina. It is not the drug of the poor people, it is the symbol of the villas miseria. Paco answers the desire of "a boy to 'crack his own head' as he lives in socially, culturally, politically and economically unsustainable and unacceptable conditions. The young people of the villas do not see any way out, and just look for an end. The question is: how can a child born in a villa find a meaning for his or her existence? What can they do to overcome discrimination, while living an existence of violence, and little or no resources?" For those lacking hope and any form of future prospects, paco is very often the answer.

Poverty, drug trafficking, early initiation into drug use, violence, and especially the lack of future prospects create an explosive mixture which feeds the many thieves in Buenos Aires. Often armed and violent, the thieves consider stealing a job and a life style that they can be proud of.

A study conducted in the Province of Buenos Aires shows that 60.3% of paco consumers have been involved in illegal activities in order to buy drugs. 38% smoke more than once a day, 29% smoke more than fifty doses

a day, and 32.9% have problems related to paco consumption.

This drug and its implications have contributed to the negative labels given to the inhabitants of villas miseria. The villero (inhabitants of the villas) are considered to be criminals, parasitic, inept, drug addicted, alcoholics, etc. This long list of labels, originated from the period of military dictatorship, is now consolidated into the Argentinean society. This stigma associated to the villas' inhabitants tangibly affects their daily life. Looking for a job they very often have to lie about their place of residence out of fear of being discriminated against and being considered inadequate. Although comparable to an urban society, the difference is that the problems in the villas are more intense and concentrated.

However, just like in any metropolitan, there will be honest people as well. These often suffer from defamatory accusations and discrimination due to the villas' more "colorful" inhabitants. One of the interviewees, a mother of Villa 31 in Retiro stated: "Living in the villa does not mean you are a villero. We must show people outside that even the boys in the villa study and work; that we are like those living outside the villa. We know how to behave. Respect generates respect. But there are many [in the villa] who do not understand, they think that because we live in the villa we have backbone and power. They think that fighting and screaming make people respect us... No, I believe that if I do the right thing people will respect me. This is what we have to prove to the people outside the villa."

Unfortunately, for the many people who manage to find an honest job, there are many more that cannot, and so decide to turn to, or are forced into turning to, a life of crime. Moreover, some (especially the youngest) end up accepting the villas' labels and start behaving accordingly, excluding themselves from a system that encourages them to give up.

The author:

Carlo Francardo is graduated in International Sciences at the University of Turin with a master's degree thesis on "Globalisation and poverty: the case of Buenos Aires' villas miseria." He studied at the Universidad Tres de Febrero in Buenos Aires and undertook the post-graduate course on "Integración Latinoamericana y dilemas de Insertion internacional de la región".