

Facing Nature: Political Practices Towards Floods In Buenos Aires Metropolis

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Buenos Aires metropolitan area had grown with different intensity since its foundation, fourth hundreds years ago. Its pattern of urbanisation was almost similar to other Latin-American cities but with a significant difference. The first part of the XXs century it was dominated by foreign migrants coming from Italy and Spain, and the second one by internal migrants coming from Argentine's provinces. In a way it has defined metropolitan population distribution and segregation in the Metropolitan area: the more segregated the land, the more socially segregated were the people who settle in it. In Buenos Aires, urban segregation has been usually attached to vulnerability, mainly to floods and the huge range of environmental deterioration it causes. Actually the city has 12 million people living in it, where 9 million are located in Greater Buenos Aires and 3 million in Buenos Aires Capital City. Segregated lands in Buenos Aires Metropolis are flooded, low levelled lands close to the river side. Actually Buenos Aires is what is called "a flood plain", where more than one third of its land is at risk of floods, as Ameghino, first Argentine's naturalist, had said in 1883. During the XXs century the most dramatic floods took place in 1905, 1966, 1977, 1985, 1990, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2002. In the last two decades floods frequency has been the result of a significant increase in precipitation rate.

Four relevant consequences and a question could be taken from this process: 1) In the last 50 years, floods are a significant part of Buenos Aires urban environment, bringing enormous health risks to inundated people due to their expose and prolonged contact with polluted waters, and also losses to the population and consequently to the government; 2) Floods have become more and more regular up to turn into at least in an annually threat but they are still being seen as an "emergency"; 3) These panorama shows that deciders have not faced the problem in an effective way, and this would increase population's risk and vulnerability in the following decades; 4) Floods regularity make them an environmental problem no more well defined as a "natural disaster", nor even as a "climatic emergence", because floods are, in Buenos Aires Metropolis, a regular and almost predictable well known phenomena.

The main question is, why deciders elite: politicians, officials, engineers, scientists, have not developed effective policies? How their perception of floods as a climatic "emergency" or as a "natural disaster", underlie their political practices?

There is mainly one approach that tries to give answer to this problem, and could be defined as institutional. In its view, state offices fragmentation does not allow managing with a non district environmental problem. This could be true if we look at the case of Buenos Aires Metropolis, where we have at least: four federal offices managing the problem, two sub-national in Buenos Aires province, and the municipalities whose territories are flooded. In Latino-American countries clientelism patron client relationships has been the most common way of explaining most of this "irrationality" (Herzer 2001). Briefly each politician creates its own office and tries to get as much financing to distribute it among his followers. Instead of working together, each one works for their own group. But as there are also examples of successful policies taken by the same fragmented offices we should be able to explain when and why we get to different results. In a similar way, there are several intuitive and common sense arguments that without analysis tend to hidden deciders "particular rationality" with arguments such as: corruption, ignorance, and lack of financial support. When I say that they hidden its particular rationality, I mean that they tend to give us a view of deciders attitude and behaviour as "irrational" without thinking about the structural reproduction of those practices.

I will refer to the above mentioned problem of irrationality and rationality, from an anthropological point of view. One of my suggestions is that institutional fragmentation, lack of financial support, and corruption, are very different issues and there should be explain to what extent are the causes or the consequences of deciders “inefficiency”, deciders distance with the problem, and lack of accountability. **This mean that there is still to be explain How deciders wider comprehension of floods as “natural force” underlie political practices and the increasingly reproduction of “inefficacy”, further “environmental deterioration”, and “social vulnerability”?**

The goal of this research is to understand the relationship between symbols and values introduced in deciders’ practices toward floods as “natural disasters”, and population’s vulnerability and risk; analysing the Mainly Programme for Floods supported by the World Bank, Export-Import Bank from Japan, and manage by Argentine’s Federal Government, between 1997-2003.

The research will have two particular goals (PG):

- 1) To explore climatologists research about the significant increment of floods in the area, trying to understand the particular influence of Global Environmental Change.
- 2) To identify deciders understanding of the problem, in terms of “emergency”, “natural disaster”, “urban environmental problem”, among others; through their political practices towards floods.

Main tasks related with particular goals are: to determine scientific knowledge about floods recurrence and global environmental change (PG 1), to establish differences between deciders understanding and prospecting about floods (PG 1, 2), to correlate their perspective and practices with their institutional and their actual role (PG 2), to determine deciders consideration and accountability of flooded people. As I analyse in my thesis during the first part of 90s villeros may be the most affected by foods, were taken their citizenship. In a way I assume that environmental problems are natural problems and they become politically relevant when population affected are social politically relevant (PG 2), to map changes in vulnerable areas in Greater Buenos Aires (it has already done for Buenos Aires city) from 1966, the first greater flood in XXs century to 2004 (research end). Using several sources: newspaper, satellite images, and aerial photographs (PG 1), to analyse the way global politics imported through the World Bank makes sense among domestic deciders (PG 2).

The ethnographic method is the one I would used for the research. It considers the empirical referent by the centrality of the native perspective on the explanation. In anthropology the procedures to produce knowledge, are inseparable from the studied subjects context of relation. The participant observation and the non - structured interviews in depth, in addition to the investigation of official archives, statistical sources and reports relative to the problem studied are the research techniques to be used, in order to get ethnographic data. Fieldwork would take place wherever deciders build significant settings. Probably these would be regular and secular, extraordinary and ceremonial meetings, work sessions, etc..

This research would contribute to understand deciders cultural and social constrains coping with a historical “natural” phenomena in the main Argentine’s metropolis, for the development of more effective ways of solving this, as well as other “natural” environmental problems.